

# Café Shapiro Anthology

24th Annual  
2021





# Café Shapiro Anthology



# Café Shapiro Anthology

*24th Annual*

*2021*

© 2021

The authors retain all copyright interests in their respective works. Reprinted by permission.

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced without permission of the authors. Please contact [undergrad.library@umich.edu](mailto:undergrad.library@umich.edu) for permission information.

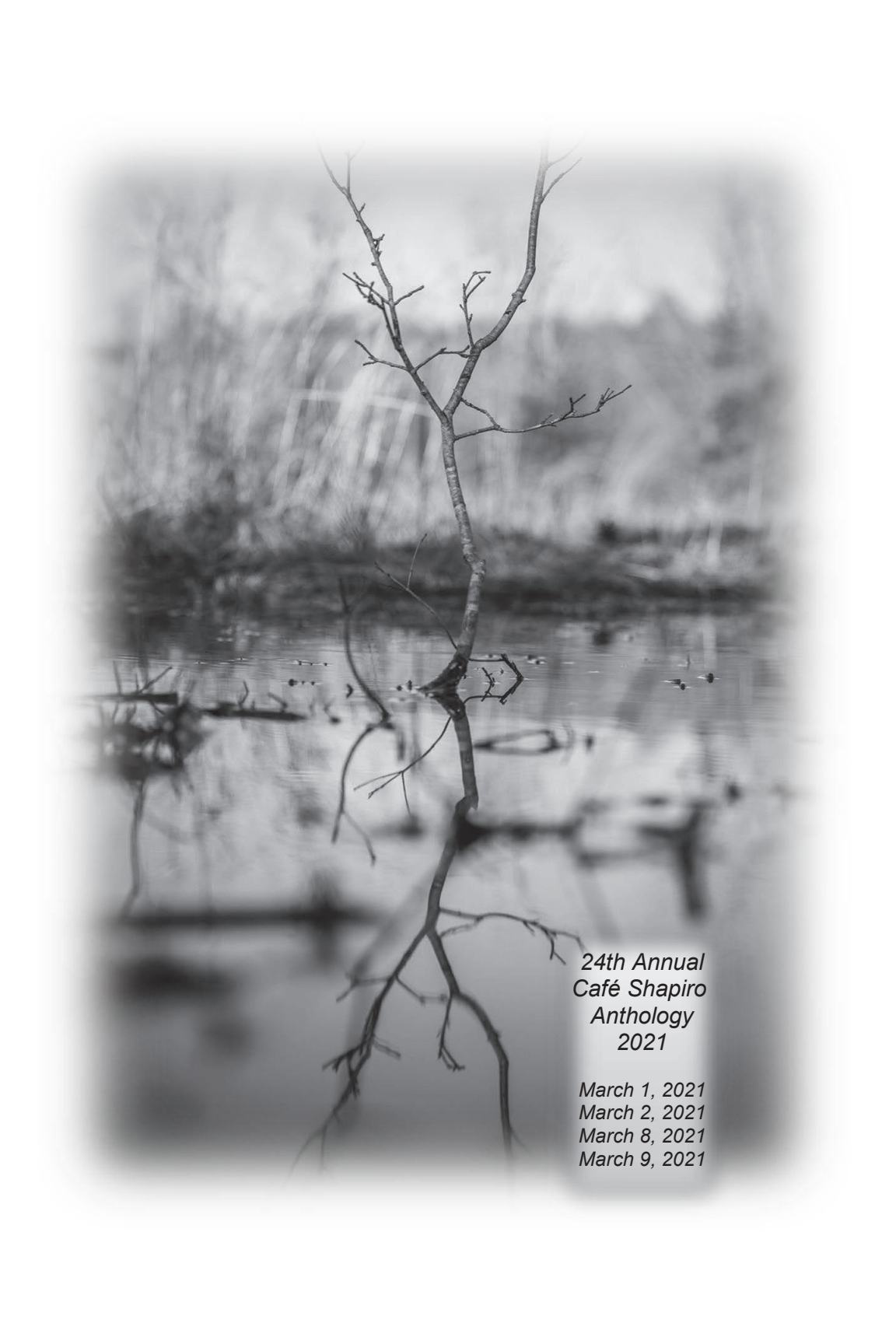
*Cover Photo and Original Artwork provided by:*

*Michael Parker*

*Ann Arbor, MI*

*Part of my 'redefine your limits!' mantra, I enjoy my photography time outside of Sports & Fitness Instruction at **Parker Performance Training** @ [parkerperformancetraining.com](http://parkerperformancetraining.com)*

*Published by Michigan Publishing*



*24th Annual  
Café Shapiro  
Anthology  
2021*

*March 1, 2021*

*March 2, 2021*

*March 8, 2021*

*March 9, 2021*

# Contents

Anthology Introduction	xi
ALEX AISNER	
Bad Boys, Bad Boys, What'cha Gonna Do?	2
HUSSEIN ALKADHIM	
My Tooth Fairy	6
MALIN ANDERSSON	
Suggestions for Eating the Universe	10
The Woman Alone, and Waiting	11
Items I would sew into my pockets if I am told to leave home	14
The Night Farmer	15
MADELINE BACOLOR	
It Was Supposed To Be Sunny But The Weatherman Was Wrong (Thoughts on Grayness)	18
Big World, Small City	20
I Dream of Comprehensive Light Rail Systems	21
Ode to the Limpet	23
LIA BALDORI	
Nerve Ending	25

KELLIE BECK	
"Dead and Born and Grown"	32
KALEB BROWN	
Dream of Flight	40
MILISA CARTER	
A Journey to a New Identity	43
MEGHAN CHOU	
The Moon Man	47
CARLY COOPER	
The Sea Eats the Sun	58
HIBA DAGHER	
exiled matriarchies on normile st	71
Sitting on a Plastic Chair at Lowrey Middle School's Gymnasium	72
While Working Election Day 2020 in Dearborn, Michigan	
35mm with two grandfathers	73
13355 Hemlock St	74
JACK DOYLE	
Golden	76
ANIYAH FISHER	
The Art of Invisibility	85



FAREAH FYSUDEEN

Daffodils 91

DYLAN GILBERT

Appointment 103

In the house of God 106

My favorite high school teacher slept with two probably more students 109

CHARLES-ALEXANDRIA GOODRUM

I Need a Hero 113

THOMAS GRIFFITH

As the Night Goes On 117

Winter Shadows that Talk Dirty 118

When I Hear Her Voicemail 119

Young-Helmholtz Trichromatic Love—Phoebe's Haibun 121

Euclidian Walk of Shame 122

Crickets 123

MAX HERNAND

Baseball 125

RACHNA IYER

self-portrait as the women who precede me 134

Home for the Holidays 136

Organum in Gmaj7, colourized 138

In another life, I wish I knew less 140

ELLIE KATZ

Total Eclipse of the American West 142

AELITA KLAUSMEIER

Daydream 151

Hometown 152

On Repeat 154

Solstice 155

HARPER KLOTZ

Regina dei Boschi 157

Homesick 158

Larvae Diary 159

TESS KLYGIS

lover's loss: poems from someone who knows nothing about love 161

JEE-IN KWON

Leaving UN 168

It's Time, Sir 170

Spring Burn 172

Left 173

Living 174

HANNAH MARTIN

Palatable 176

Homophones (or The Same While Completely Different) 179

Welfare Call 181

SIMONE MCCANTS

Coconuts 184

NICHOLAS MOORE

Artist Unknown 199

To My Desk 200

It is Not Easy to Speak of What I See 202

VICTORIA MURPHY

Marjorie 206

Endlessly disappointing conventions 208

Morning 209

SABRINA NASH

Come Visit Me 211

ELI NEUMANN

Remember Me 215

Earth, remembering 216

Sidewalk Bush 217

poem, a question 218

LILY PRICE

New Year Same BS 220

NAYIRI SAGHERIAN

Wyrd Weaver 225



SOUMYA TEJAM

Dearest 231

NICOLE TOOLEY

I Make It There and Back Each Year 236

ROSHNI VEERAMACHANENI

A Hostile Coexistence 241

ANDREW WARRICK

Electric Rage 250

ERIKA WOO

Apartment 3 253

rain dance 254

I'm reminded 256

internal soundscape 258

growing pains 260

JADE WURST

ode to an empty 7-Up bottle 262

scene & action 263

mirage 264

we have fresh pears for breakfast 265

after a graduation party 266

HAYLEY YU

Funeral 268

# Anthology Introduction

Welcome to the 24th Annual Café Shapiro!

This anthology is a celebration of University of Michigan student authorship. The writings will inspire you and connect you with the undergraduate student learning experience.

Café Shapiro is an example of how past innovations become part of current campus traditions. When it launched over twenty years ago, Café Shapiro was a bold experiment, a student coffee break designed as part of the University's Year of the Humanities and Arts (YoHA). YoHA set out to explore the role of the arts and humanities in civic and community life through a variety of programs. Café Shapiro now continues the tradition of featuring undergraduate student writers nominated by their faculty to perform their works, and by 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 March, students gathered virtual via Zoom to share their works. They were joined and supported by librarian hosts, special guests, friends, faculty, coaches and family. Each reading demonstrated the power of speaking and performing one's own work. The performed works are published in this anthology and discoverable through Deep Blue, the University's institutional repository. Through this process, students learned about copyright and related steps to publishing their scholarship.

Please join me in thanking the library community for making Café Shapiro possible. Events such as this make visible our commitment to learning. 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 works of these talented undergraduate writers.

Laurie Alexander

Associate University Librarian for Learning and Teaching

U-M Library



# ALEX AISNER



**Freshman**

**Major:** Undecided

**Reading:** Op-Ed

I'm from West Bloomfield, Michigan. I love competing in jiu jitsu and playing basketball with my friends. I'm hoping to be a kinesiology major on a pre-med track. I enjoy sports and athletics and the science behind them.

*Nominated by: Prof. Jimmy Brancho*



# Bad Boys, Bad Boys, What'cha Gonna Do?

I hate to love the Detroit Pistons. As of now, they are a joke of a franchise, and the only reason I root for them is because I am obligated to by my Michigan residency. Growing up about 30 minutes outside of Detroit, I have fond memories of sitting in the stands at the Palace of Auburn Hills as a child. Not because my team was winning, but because my dad would always let me have the extra-large coke slushies at the concession stand. I was too young to remember a time when the Pistons were relevant, and it doesn't look like they will be soon. To make myself feel better I learn about the times when we were a respectable, winning ball club.

Basketball in the 80s and 90s was characterized by names like Michael Jordan, Larry Bird, and Magic Johnson. Rarely spoken about, though, are the Bad Boy Pistons, led by Joe Dumars and Isiah Thomas. These two along with their Detroit death squad terrorized the league for about half a decade. They had three finals in a row from the late 80s to the early 90s, and were a powerhouse in the league. In fact, they are the only team to beat all three of the people listed above in the playoffs in a single playoff run. Not only did they beat those three, they beat damn near everyone in the league for that several-year stretch.

When I say the Pistons beat their opponents, I mean they *literally* beat them. That means if a player goes up for a dunk, bodyslam him as soon as his feet leave the ground. If someone manages to get past you, deliver a swift elbow to their head to cut the drive. And if someone on the other team happens to pissing you off, just throw a haymaker at them. The Pistons feared no one. They won their games through grit and grind and fists. It would often be like watching a boxing match that happened to take place on an NBA hardwood. People already disliked the Pistons, but during this time the league-wide disgust in this team was unmatched. Everyone hated Detroit. Even more than before. It was this hatred that led to their infamous nickname: the Bad Boys.

A huge point of criticism people like to put on those Pistons was that despite their antics, they only won two rings, which compared to other dynasties looks somewhat unimpressive. This is seemingly the reason they

are not as revered as other teams of that era. Put simply, it wasn't about the number of rings they won, but how they won them. More importantly, how this style of play impacted the league more than any other dynasty in the past 3 decades.

The aggressive, physical nature the Pistons played with eventually forced the rest of the league to follow suit to keep up. Other teams began bulking up and locking down on defense. The pace of the game slowed down season by season; teams went from easily scoring 110 points a game to barely scratching the low 90s. Hard fouls were more accepted during this time, and on-court fights were way more typical. Refs turned a blind eye to a lot of player misbehavior. With all the roughhousing that was allowed, this was widely considered the greatest era of basketball. The Bad Boys are responsible. Even after the Detroit dynasty was disbanded, the league maintained this gritty style of play until the early 2000s, when a single event forced the league to take a sudden shift in image and attitude.

In 2004, the Detroit Pistons were coming off a huge underdog championship against the formidable Shaq and Kobe LA Lakers. Like days of old, this Pistons team was composed of defensive oriented, selfless players who weren't the most talented, but had more heart than anyone else in the league. The president of the Pistons at the time was Joe Dumars, former Bad Boy. In a November regular season game, the Pistons were playing their bitter rivals, the Indiana Pacers at the Palace. Late in the game, the Pacers were winning, the game was all but decided. A tough loss, but nothing to cry about. Pistons fans began heading out early.

With about a minute left in regulation, after an unfortunate series of events, a fight broke out. The fight escalated into a mosh pit, and players from both teams were rushing into the stands, fighting each other and the fans. It was the most violent event in NBA history, and will forever be remembered as the "Malice at the Palace." The NBA was heavily criticized for allowing something like this to happen, and the commissioner knew something had to be done to protect the league's reputation.

The NBA was forever changed. In the blink of an eye, the league goes from its toughest era to entering its softest ever. In an effort to clean up its image, new rules and regulations were instated to soften the game up. Fines are now levied out much more frequently, and fighting is met with severe penalties. Refs would call fouls more frequently, and punishments to players for disorderly conduct would be significantly more severe. With the addition of increased foul calling, defenses had to loosen up in order to not get called.

Fouling from scoring at the rim skyrocketed, so teams began shooting much more three-pointers and long range shots to counter. This all led up to today's era having both the highest scoring pace and scoring averages of all time. The transition was quick, and it all began on that cold November day in the most ruthless city in America.

Five years after retiring, Joe Dumars continued to change the league. And the Pistons were his engine.

No matter how much you hate them, dread them, and fear them, the blood of the Bad Boys still pumps through the heart of the NBA decades later, and will for decades to come.

### Works Cited

<https://bleacherreport.com/articles/421838-detroit-pistons-shining-the-spotlight-on-the-memorable-bad-boys-era>

<https://sports.yahoo.com/how-the-bad-boys-pistons-redefined-the-nba-as-next-generation-003352333.html>

<https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/just-how-bad-were-the-bad-boys/>



# HUSSEIN ALKADHIM



**Sophomore**

**Major:** English

**Reading:** Lyric Essay

Born in Dearborn, MI. Sometimes I write short stories, sometimes poetry. I also like to read stories. Some of my favorites are by Steinbeck, Fitzgerald, Dostoevsky, Camus, Tolstoy.

*Nominated by: Prof. Tish O'Dowd*

# My Tooth Fairy

I could never look at my older brother's face the same way, not without being shot back to that one night. And I wince at using that word to refer to him: "brother." What a sick lie to say that this man and I were the very thing this word means, to say we're replicas of the Don Quixote and Sancho Panza couple. We were none of that.

We never went together on Halloween nights with blankets as capes. We never skipped rocks on dirty ponds or flung them at dashing trains. We never sat together on the porch steps beneath the stars, giving each a story and a name.

Instead, a foreignness slowly split us as we kept aging. What was supposed to be ordinary, such as a light conversation on a car drive, became numbed by a palpable awkwardness, an awkwardness which fed upon itself like a silent cancer.

Such silence made this man remote to me, a stranger I crossed every day. And you judge, even resent, strangers. Every action or word from him was unwelcome even if it would otherwise be okay if another was in his place. But because he became the massive fuck-up in the family, it was so easy for me. Practice makes perfect, so eventually the stockpile of judgements skewed my view of this stranger in our house.

This stranger, my brother, got hooked on heroin and shattered his entire life, fueling my wanton judgement. Whether coming home late every day after meeting with his demons in the unlit alleyways, stealing money for the next hit, or getting kicked out and to come back promising things would be different, it was the same interminable process of a junky.

But I could never look at his face the same way after *that* one night. He was close to overdosing, the death rattle cutting through the entire house. The ambulance rushed down the block, and the men with uniforms the color of oblivion rushed in. My parents had never learned to speak English after running for their lives from Iraq, so I'd faced the bombardment of questions by men in dark uniform and purple latex gloves.

After the ambulance left, the stranger stood there in front of us with a sunken face, with the side of his lips slouching, with an expression that has viciously carved itself in the infinite landscape of my visual memory. I don't think I'll ever see a face again which looked so ready to give it all up and be

gone away from a world overdosed with harrowing pain. It broke me. The stranger became my brother that night.

On another night, I took a long walk back to my childhood home. To step foot on the corner of my old street, to pause beneath the street post illuminated by the streetlamp, was strange. I felt the boundaries of time and space on that corner. As I walked down that block of my past, I couldn't stop thinking about my older brother, couldn't stop seeing his face.

I finally got to our old home, which might have been an excavation site from ancient history. Then my mind clicked replay and all the phantoms rushed on to the stage, acting out childhood scenes long forgotten:

A blue winter morning. I'm sleeping in a warm bed. El's up before me and he gently wakes me up. Once we finish the cereal he makes for both of us, we head to our elementary school, which is only a few blocks down. This is long before the drugs, so El's eyes and cheeks look fuller and less hollowed. He holds my hand as we walk together to school.

A cool evening in spring. The sky's clearing and our parents are taking us for ice cream. El and I dash out the door and race down the porch-steps, calling shotgun. I start crying because he reaches the car first. He swipes my tears with his thumbs and promises me, "next time." Here's El, my older brother by three years, fated for self-ruin and innocently wiping my childhood tears, and there's me, forgetting.

Now it's a summer afternoon, sun blazing and grass rich with green. I'm riding my four-wheeler and hit a bump on the sidewalk. My face slams the concrete and I lose my front tooth. El hears my cries from inside and looks from our bedroom window. He sees the blood gushing onto the hot concrete and runs down for me. Once there, he picks me up like his baby Jesus, takes me back inside, and does what he can until our mother gets back from her ESL class. He tells me of an invisible fairy that drops off quarters in exchange for a tooth. I spit the bloodied rags out of my mouth and explode with excitement. That night in our shared bedroom, I act like I'm asleep to fool the fairy. An hour later, I hear El rise from his bed to slip quarters under my pillow. Did I really forget this?

Autumn. Leaves are piled up like dead soldiers. Inside, our mom and dad are screaming at El. His head's in his hands, tears falling down. He's not doing so well in school and comes home late often. There's nothing easy about any of this. There I am, eavesdropping from the top of the basement stairs, letting El face it all alone.



I couldn't handle all these scenes any longer, so I turned and rushed back home that night. As I did, I realized something: it was a wonder the only thing El did to rid himself of all this was to shoot up.

Last summer, El decided to come home from rehab. I was nervous. When he walked in through the door, he offered his hand and I shook it, but I didn't look at his face because how could I? All I ever did was trap him within the webs of my judgement. The only way I can now ease the guilt which rips me apart day in and out is to condemn myself for it. Because it's just the same that I did to him. All his pain's now mine, by right of being his little brother.

But if there comes a time when I could lift my head and meet his eyes, the first thing I'll do is thank him for being my tooth fairy that one summer night.

# MALIN ANDERSSON



**Junior**

**Major:** Creative Writing

**Minor:** Writing and Music

**Reading:** Poetry

Malin is a poet and writer from Farmington, MI. At most times of the day, she wishes she were hiking in the woods. She loves songs in 6/8 time, especially Bob Dylan songs in 6/8. Malin in Quarantine longs to be in Sweden, plays her cello “Jude,” sings with her ukulele “F. Scotty,” and takes it all one day at a time. She thanks Café Shapiro for the opportunity, and is grateful to you for listening!

*Nominated by: Prof. Sarah Messer*

# Suggestions for Eating the Universe

Dice the glaciers and eat them with lettuce.

Sprinkle continental crust onto your rocky road ice cream (and top it off with a drizzle of magma syrup.)

Stir the storm clouds into your green tea.

Bake the moon with vanilla and cardamom.

Be careful when you bite the stars – you don't want their points to pierce your gums.

Thaw the Himalayas at least 24 hours before you even think about putting them in the oven.

Cut asteroids into small cubes before feeding them to your kids.

Don't overseason rainbows.

The Atlantic tastes the sweetest right before bed.

Finally, always use oven mitts when handling the Sun.

# The Woman Alone, and Waiting

The pennies arrive with the tide  
to the island, alone in the sea.

Her window of opportunity is brief,  
for the pennies don't stay long  
near the shore.

They come in copper curls  
but before she knows it,  
they've washed back out to sea  
and she realizes that she has not saved  
enough to get her through the winter.

She waits for them  
by the sea swept in silver.  
To pass the time, she counts  
pennies from the previous season.  
They're old now,  
looking like petoskey stones,  
so she scrubs them in a basin  
stained with brackish backwater.

This is an island of one,  
under a sky that hangs low  
like an unwashed curtain  
from the rafters of a stale barn.  
Objectively, her island is small,  
but it is far too vast  
most days of the year.

Migratory birds rest during the night  
and of course the pennies come,  
but nothing else of the natural world  
has visited her lately.  
She is not sure whether or not  
she minds.

As she scrubs, under  
a gray birch tree,  
she asks herself:  
*once I am done,  
and my pennies are shined  
and bright  
and promising,  
what will these petoskey pennies buy?*

She could use a pair of new sandals  
but she doesn't wade in the water  
like she once did.  
Perhaps she could buy a friend or two  
but they don't sell those anymore.  
She could purchase a pomegranate seed  
to grow a tree, a colorful canopy,  
under which she could sit content,  
having polished her pennies for the last time.

Hope kicks within her  
when a flash of copper catches her eye  
but it is only the sun reflecting on the scales  
of a fish jumping 100 yards from shore.  
*That fish better not be eating all of my pennies.*

Her wrists cramp as a cloud passes overhead.  
She retreats back into her mind.

She could buy her pennies swimming lessons  
so they could learn to clean themselves.  
They'd learn to breathe underwater,  
pennies exfoliating themselves against the waves.  
Sure, she'd lose some to the fish  
or to the suffering sea,  
delicately drowned in the silver tide,  
but the rest would be with her on this island.

Maybe when the merchants row to her shore  
from their warm cities and cinnamon beaches  
that were once her own,

asking her if she has enough pennies  
to buy something this lovely afternoon,  
she will ask them for a pair of gills.  
How can they say no  
to skin ready for searing?  
Her pennies, shiny and new,  
make her impossible to refuse  
the woman alone, and waiting.  
With gills, she'd swim with her pennies  
gulping and gurgling,  
turning to copper.

The cleaner the penny,  
the shinier the sin,  
that's what she heard.  
*Shine my sins, miss*  
*Scrub me of my lonely skin.*

Without gills,  
she'll watch the sea  
and the boat in it that returns  
to a beautiful city in the golden sun.  
Her sins buy her nothing  
as she waits for the next wave  
of pennies to come until they do not  
and she is left to face winter  
when the floodwaters rise.



# Items I would sew into my pockets if I am told to leave home

1. a note slipped under a door that promised love but did not demand it back
2. a c-string that rattled jars of sea glass on a watery afternoon
3. a wink from a cloud that refused to reveal its body
4. a green notebook pulled from the roots of a garden weed
5. a noodle that lived in the dust under the kitchen table
6. a letter that had twirled for so long that it fell, dizzy, into my palm
7. a tune in the form of a flower I could tuck behind my ear
8. a luck charm encasing lantern light
9. a dandelion or two
10. a ribbon that tied hand to hand when the night exhaled, wrapped in a bow
11. a loaf of bread with which I would mark the path home
12. a promise that home will still be there when I return
13. a spool of twine in case birds dine on the breadcrumbs
14. a list of these things so that I do not forget them on the road

# The Night Farmer

When sleep cannot find  
me, I watch the night farmer  
in his heavenly field, moving  
slowly across the sky.

His hat hangs low, shielding  
his dark eyes from the bountiful  
brightness of the harvest moon,  
humming his midnight waltz.

As he plows his field, I drift  
away, imagining my palms  
are full of that rich,  
starry soil.

But tonight, no sleep will find me  
because the man who farms  
the night sky cannot work  
under LED light.

He shrinks, afraid  
of the beeping machines  
and weary gown-walkers  
who wander in and out  
of his field, thirsty  
for sleep.

I do not blame the night farmer  
for fearing styrofoam cups  
and sterilized plastic lids.  
He cannot raise crops  
that cower in sanitized  
luminescence.

Seizures shake his seedlings  
so that they cannot swallow  
their water. Rooms that tremble

with parched crying  
are no place for the farmer.  
Still, I wish I could watch him  
tilling his midnight  
soil during these muggy,  
air-conditioned nights.

No one can sleep in a hospital,  
because no one can see the sky  
and the farmer who cultivates it,  
spreading starry seeds  
and sprinkling galaxies  
on planetary saplings  
with the promise that,  
even on sleepless nights,  
there is life.

# MADELINE BACOLOR



**Senior**

**Major:** Program in the Environment

**Reading:** Poetry

I am an environmental studies major from Ann Arbor, MI. After writing scientific papers for three years, I was desperate for some creative writing and the RC gave me the perfect opportunity. In my free time, I enjoy reading, crocheting, chilling with my plants, and watching shows I have already seen. Someday I hope to help make cities more equitable and sustainable, but for now I am happy writing poems in between sections of my thesis.

*Nominated by: Prof. Sarah Messer*

# It Was Supposed To Be Sunny But The Weatherman Was Wrong (Thoughts on Grayness)

I.

I found a new gray hair  
today, which must have been growing  
for some time before I noticed it.

If I were a penguin, grayness  
would be a sign of youth, but,  
alas, I am not a penguin.

Mom says Dad was gray  
when she met him;  
they were twenty two.  
I used to wonder

what could have happened  
to turn his hair salt and pepper  
so young,

but here I am,  
twenty one and  
graying. So it begins.

Maybe genetics and fate  
are two sides  
of the same coin.

II.

I used to describe  
my illness as grayness.  
I had no better way

to explain the numbness.  
My body and mind were  
full of fog, impenetrable.

Sometimes I could feel my mother  
reach for me,  
but all she grasped  
was air.

III.

One summer, friends and I camped  
in the Badlands for a night.  
When we arrived, the park was  
on fire. In the distance,

there was billowing smoke  
which looked so similar  
to our thunderstorm  
clouds back home.  
It was difficult to imagine

the smoke as crackling and  
hot, choking the dry  
landscape, rather than  
the mossy-smelling moment

before a downpour. Funny that  
fire's destruction  
is itself a life-force.

Lodgepole pine seeds  
need such intense heat  
to germinate,

just as acorns cannot sprout  
without rain.



# Big World, Small City

September, a relationship is born  
as the leaves turn. I hope for company  
as the nights lengthen.  
The solstice approaches.

I take him to West Park; the air is too cool  
for turtles, but perfect for hot mochas  
and muskrats swimming across the pond.

They carry sticks and grasses longer  
than their bodies. They, too, prepare  
for winter.

We run out of coffee and daylight. Commence  
wandering. Like the muskrat with her grass,  
we go home.

Weeks pass. Snow buries piles  
of brown leaves. It's December.

He knows to ask, "Have you eaten?"  
as a greeting. My heart is warmer  
than my hands.

The nights are cold. Wind whistles ghoulishly  
past my window  
(perhaps a ghost  
from down the street).

Each sunset is a little later.  
Icicles unsheath off rooftops,  
dripping in the February sun.

Perhaps in the spring, we'll  
pilgrimage back to the pond  
where we met. Enjoy the sun  
for ourselves.

# I Dream of Comprehensive Light Rail Systems

I was spoiled one summer abroad,  
boarded a tram near my host family's home –  
*Chez nous, c'est chouette!* –  
and rode all the way to school.

We wound our way  
past dewy mountains carpeted  
with evergreens. Such beauty  
became casual, just  
another trip to town.

When I came home  
to Michigan, I missed  
my commute the most.

Strange, longing for that  
which makes Americans  
miserable each morning  
and night.

When I summer in Ann Arbor,  
I ride the bus, squinting  
my eyes down at the drivers  
in their cars.  
*You're welcome*, I think.  
I am not taking up  
so much space.

I close my eyes and imagine  
I am on a tram instead,  
rolling gently past the church  
on Liberty Street,  
all the way to campus.

I fill my ears with music  
or true crime stories. I ignore  
the clattering windows and  
hissing brakes, the pothole  
percussion and sloshes through puddles.

I watch rain fall on the windshield  
and be wiped away whoosh  
whoosh whoosh.

I imagine building  
a tram system so beautiful  
that it makes the old ladies  
with their market baskets smile, and  
makes the rain seem  
like congratulations from the sky,  
cool on my skin  
as I step off the train  
onto the waiting platform.

# Ode to the Limpet

*after Percy Bysshe Shelley*

O tiny limpet, you of conical shell,  
a frozen firework, a starburst in stone.  
O you, variegated sand creature,  
cast in carbonate, held fast

until the tide comes in.  
When waves again cover  
your rocky pool coast, you're  
a flurry of motion, scraping,

on the hunt. O you,  
of algal carnage, your tongue  
a conveyor belt of teeth

stronger than Kevlar. O you,  
“bulldozers of the seashore,”  
leavers of slimy  
roadmaps to follow

when the tide ebbs.  
Return to your home scar,  
the indentation worn into rock  
by your travels. O tiny limpet,  
hold fast.

# LIA BALDORI



**Senior**

**Major:** English, Creative Writing

**Reading:** Short Fiction

Lia has a love-hate relationship with writing. When she isn't hunched over a Word document, she's looking for new places to swim, cooking, or trying to convince her housemates to watch Jim Henson's *Labyrinth*. They're stubborn, but so is she.

*Nominated by: Prof. Tish O'Dowd*

# Nerve Ending

It's nearing one-thirty and the Great Expressions Dental parking lot is a dismal sight. Most of the staff is on lunch break, sloppy mounds of gray-brown sludge marking their vehicles' departure. We had our first snowfall last night, and the late-November wind cuts through my grandma's old floral jacket with every gust. I shiver. I'm beginning to wish I stuck it out with the screaming baby in the lobby, but the fading pulses of a migraine keep my feet planted on the pavement. Besides, my ride should be here any minute—in fact, he's running late. *Where is he?* I reach into my pocket for my phone, only to find that it's trapped in the coat's lining. *Again?* I thought I fixed this problem last week—there's a patch to prove it—but the material must've worn through in another part of the pocket, somewhere deeper than I could detect. I can feel my phone's outline through the silky fabric, but I can't locate its point of entry. I'm still pawing around for it when the white Prius rolls in front of me, its driver flashing a grin as he rolls down the window.

"Where to?" Richard asks.

Of course he knows we're heading home. The chauffeur bit is part of his ongoing joke that we don't look like we're going to the same place these days. He's not wrong. I take in his khakis, his brand-new Land's End quarter zip, the fresh haircut he got down the street while he waited for me to finish up with the oral surgeon. He's been trying out a mustache for the past few weeks and it suits him, albeit in a way that tacks on five years. He looks...well, like a Richard. He hasn't always.

The first time I saw Richard, I'd pegged him for an Ace. Or a Blade. Or some other monosyllable that could double as a men's deodorant scent. To be fair, with the tattered fishnet stockings and the hoop in my eyebrow, I probably didn't look much like a Kendra. The manager at Cuttlefish was hosting his annual Battle of the Bands, and the dive bar was packed with piercings and bad dye jobs. Richard was laying into a drum kit with "Grub Munch" scrawled on the snare, his auburn curls flying all over with every head bang. Up until then, I'd been more of a frontman's girl, but something drew my focus past the mohawk in center stage that night. Maybe it was Richard's fierce concentration, maybe it was the way his shoulders filled out his fitted Styx tee. In any case, my eyes were glued to him for the rest of the set. When Mohawk bellowed that the next song would be Grub Munch's last, I ditched



my friends to grab Richard a congratulatory drink. The crowd was dense—by the time I had a Two Hearted in hand, the next ensemble was already setting up. Twisting around in my effort to spot Richard, I accidentally bumped into him, sloshing a little on his shoes.

He looked different than he had under the stage lights. Up close his nose was wider, his jawline a little less pronounced, but he was still charming. I got so flustered in my rush to apologize for the spill that I ended up taking a swig from the bottle I'd intended to give to him. If he noticed, he didn't let on. He just smiled and waited for me to collect myself.

"Your set was cool," I told him once I'd found my footing. "What's your name?"

"What? Oh— Thanks." I couldn't see it under the dim lighting, but he was probably blushing—he melts for compliments. "It's—"

A frenzy of guitar chords cut him off. The next act had begun. Richard had to shout his name three times before I heard him correctly. When I got it, I laughed in disbelief. Later, when we left together, he told me his bandmates called him Dickie. I promised I never would.

"How'd it go?" Richard asks, jolting me out of my reverie. "They fix your tongue?"

I groan. "No."

"Aww," he squeezes my knee. "*That* bad?"

"Just pointless! They kept poking around and going, 'Yep, that's numb,' when they hit a spot I told them I couldn't feel. You might as well have examined me at home."

He chuckles. "I'm down. Maybe next time."

I had my wisdom teeth removed in July. My tongue hasn't been the same since. The right side is completely numb, from tip to base. Dr. Corbett speculates that this is because the extraction of my right molar stretched out my trigeminal nerve. Had I known that this would be the price of the surgery on top of the copious medical bills, it wouldn't have made much difference in my decision to go through with it. When the molars cut through my gums, I was in so much pain that I could hardly smile at Richard's jokes about mid-twenties teething. The post-op numbness, however, has become its own problem. I'm constantly toying with my tongue—chewing along the edge, folding it over, shoving it between my teeth and my cheek, trying to detect proof of life. The nerve is supposed to heal on its own eventually, but, as Dr. Corbett likes to remind me, eventually could mean years. In the meantime, I've been advised to do a bimonthly check-in at the Great Expressions

Specialty Clinic an hour away, “just in case.” In case of what, I’m not sure, but the threat of my condition worsening is enough to keep me compliant. As his Prius is the only car in my life, Richard has been happy to take me.

There’s a McDonald’s coming up on our right. Richard slows the car. “I’m starving. Can you eat?”

“Yeah. Like I said, they hardly *did* anything to me.”

We pull into the drive-thru. I get fries and a chocolate shake. Richard orders a quarter pounder with cheese. He only recently got back into eating red meat. Up until a few months ago, the biggest step he’d taken toward beef was chicken. When we lived in our studio above Ernie’s Print Shop in Old Town, he’d bring a Kroger rotisserie home for dinner once a week. That was how I learned about the oysters—the two tender orbs of dark meat that flank the bird’s spine like back dimples. Richard said the French call them *sot-y-laisse*, which translates roughly to, “Only a fool would leave them.” So we treasured them, giving them a special roost in his aunt’s fancy key bowl until the end of each meal. Inspired by our decadence, Richard marked his own “oysters” on my body when we made love. He’d nibble the fleshy pad between my thumb and my wrist, run his tongue along the slight hollow of my temple, pull my bottom lip down so he could suck the smooth, curved inside like he was extracting marrow from it. “Only a fool would leave them,” he kept saying, and I’d laugh, and he’d race to plant a kiss on my exposed teeth, not caring that the gesture would force me to close my lips clumsily around his.

We didn’t have a bed frame in that apartment, just a dingy futon that we started balancing on upside-down milk crates the year the store had rats. The floorboards were splinter hazards, the curtains moth-eaten, the grain of the dining room table irreversibly stained with something dark and sweet-smelling, and I’d never been happier. I could’ve spent the rest of my days as Ernie’s cashier, my evenings drinking or dancing or dismembering rotisserie chickens with Richard. When he told me, “I think I’m going back to school,” it hardly felt significant. The whole thing seemed like a distant idea, even as he started spending more time with LSAT practice exams than with me. Even after he found out he got a 168 on the LSAT. Even when UW Madison gave him a full ride as a result of that score. I couldn’t ground the news in reality until September, when we moved the last of our boxes an hour from Baraboo to a bright, clean loft on campus. Even then, I thought *Okay, we’re just settling in now, okay, soon we’ll fall back into the old routine, the good one, and everything’ll be fine.*

My first week in town, I found a job as a receptionist at Ciao Bella Spa and Massage. It pays better than Ernie's, but I miss looking through the clutter he left around the store in my downtime. Ernie also never gave a shit what I wore. He often chuckled at my old band T-shirts and flannels, claiming we could've shared a closet when he was my age. Here my uniform is a tight french braid with an aubergine button down, and most of the time there's nothing to do but count my pores in the mirrors that cover the lobby walls. My skin looks terrible—waxen under the inky black I had to dye my hair to cover up the pink it used to be. Selecting which essential oil to put in the aromatherapy diffuser has become the highlight of my day.

Richard and I are about to pass the halfway point: a billboard just past the Portage exit that reads, "WHEN YOU DIE, YOU WILL MEET GOD." I take a closer look at his new haircut. It strengthens his profile and accentuates his eyebrows, but something's missing. I'm wondering whether I could pick him out of a lineup. It's been too long since I've seen him be anything other than pleasant. When he's not in class or at the library, Richard has energy for little more than watching an episode or two of something on Hulu. Worse are the weekends when his study group comes over for wine and cheese after a long day of hitting the books. The women wear blouses and tell me my safety-pin earrings are "so artsy!"; the men wear blazers and bounce *Curb Your Enthusiasm* quotes off each other to the point where I wonder why they chose going out over staying in and watching the fucking show. That's what we'd be doing if they weren't here, anyway. Richard doesn't drum. We don't dance. We don't drink. Our sex has consistently fallen on a spectrum from cordial to tepid. We no longer talk about chicken oysters in bed. I want wild Richard, wicked Richard, weird Richard. I'd even prefer angry Richard to the docile rent-a-boyfriend my lover has become. I need to save him for my sake.

I cast my line. "The Ventriloquists are playing at Cuttlefish tomorrow night."

"Damn." He shakes his head. "Can't believe they're still around."

"Yeah..." I wait. He's taking longer to nibble than I'd like. "You wanna go?"

"Ehhh."

"Come onnn." I hate whining, but I'm desperate. "Don't you miss the smell of paint thinner and vomit? The bathroom graffiti? Bouncer Steve's snaggletooth?"

He shakes his head. "I just can't imagine being in that crowd now." He must sense my disappointment because he squeezes my knee again and adds, "I can give you and whoever a ride if you want, though."

There won't be any convincing him otherwise. I rake my teeth over my tongue, feel my left canine scrape the left side, feel nothing on the right. I know if I'm quiet for another thirty seconds Richard will put his new favorite podcast on—the one where the sports commentators give their opinions on pop culture scandals. One of his study group friends turned him onto it. I'm not in the mood to hear a bunch of dudes shouting over one another.

"I'm thinking about re-piercing my eyebrow. Kat said she could probably do it for me if I got her a new needle."

Richard raises his own eyebrows. "Really?"

"Well, yeah. I still have the ring. I only really took it out so I could work that catering gig last summer."

"Aren't you— Don't you think you're a little old for that?"

I'm taken aback, to say the least. "What're you talking about? I'm twenty-six."

"I just mean..." Richard presses his lips together. "You know, we're reaching a point where we can't just do fuckall with our appearances and get away with it."

"So now that you're in law school I've reached that point too?"

"I'm not saying that, I'm just trying to give you a different perspective. Don't you ever dream about having a job you love? Something with an actual salary, maybe?"

"No, I'm good where I am, actually."

Richard rolls his eyes. "Well yeah, for now, but have you, like, given any thought at all to what you'll be doing in the next three years? The next five?"

I avoid his eyes, try to stay the course. "Not really." Wanting Richard to lighten up, I force a giggle and add, "I just hope I'm still hot!"

He's not amused. For a second I think he's given up. Then he sighs. "You should be more curious about the world, Kendra. There's a lot more you can— You know, it wouldn't kill you to have some ambition. You're not stupid."

Richard's hardly raised his voice, but he may as well have been shouting. His words have knocked the wind out of me. I don't know what to say. He's never made me feel like this before. I want to yell, No, I *am* curious, No, you're just boring and so are your boring fucking friends, but it already feels juvenile and I don't know how to prove it. Once it's clear that I've tapped out, Richard pulls out his phone and presses play. A cacophony of male voices punctures the space between us. I know he isn't doing this to gloat, or to shut me up, he's just trying to enjoy the rest of the drive. It doesn't make me feel any better. The podcast men are competing for the final quip about how lame

Mark Zuckerberg's new car is. Sometimes they erupt into guffaws. Richard snickers along. His smile doesn't reach the top half of his face. If you held a piece of cardboard in front of his mouth, you wouldn't know he was amused at all. *Has he always laughed like that?* I suddenly can't remember. I can picture our bodies doubled-over, clutching at each other, but his face is a blur with a neatly-trimmed mustache. Looking at him like this hurts, so I turn my gaze to the windshield. It's sleeting. I try to follow one water droplet at a time as it travels down the glass. It's difficult because they keep merging, even harder because my vision keeps blurring. I gnaw my tongue, willing it to feel in the places where it doesn't. No luck.

# KELLIE BECK



**Senior**

**Major:** SMTD: Theatre Directing

**Reading:** Fiction

Kellie is a local Ann Arborite currently finishing her degree in theatre directing here at the University of Michigan. While directing is her primary focus, Kellie is also a playwright and fiction writer. Her works have been published at the Open Page Literary Journal in the UK, and her plays have been produced at the university level multiple times. Her work tends to focus on the commonality of the human experience and the relationships we build with others throughout our life.

*Nominated by: Prof. José Casas*



# "Dead and Born and Grown"

The wind was cold. The kind of cold that settles into your bones and chills you from the inside. The kind of cold where your blood slows down and your molecules themselves are shivering, rubbing up against each other for warmth. It blew against the swaying yellow wheat of the eld, the cacophony of it sweeping around a thin, pale teenager, and for a moment, it appeared as if he was at the center of the world.

He could hear Ellie yelling for him across the way. The wind managed to take her voice and sweep it into the rest of the sound around him, a melody floating above the orchestra. He didn't like when she tried to find him out here. He didn't ask that much from her on these days; two hours, alone. That was the only thing he had asked for once the baby had been born, and he could have asked for a lot of things. Rent, for one. But all he had asked for was solitude.

It had looked like it was supposed to rain for days. Every morning, Dalton had called his mother on the landline telephone at the house and asked if her joints hurt. It had been a joke between them for some time, but his asking had become desperate over the past week. The wheat had grown still, and a cloud of dust had seemed to settle over the earth, floating just above the eyeline.

Ellie called out to him again, her voice shrill and piercing on the heavy air. The earth pressed up against his back, Dalton liked to imagine the world was cradling him. He was waiting for the church bells to toll five. Five o'clock meant dinner time. Dinner time meant opening a can of peas for baby Shelly, boiling bones for stock for his and Ellie's dinner. Five o'clock meant back to the reality and mundanity that Dalton had once despised. Now he just felt nothing. He thought himself too young to feel nothing this early. But he had grown up too young, and growing up meant the welcome of nothingness, cyclical routine for the sake of marking the days.

Ellie did not love him. But that was alright, because he did not love Ellie. The only love Dalton knew was his mother's, and a mother's love for her grown child is like stale crackers; no one's first choice, but enough to satisfy one's hunger.

The first church bell rang out across the eld. He could hear in the distance baby Shelly start to cry. Ellie's cries carried on the wind directly into his ears. He stood to go back inside.

---

Shelly's dresses needed mending. She did not like that her mother gave her dresses to wear. Her knees got skinned and bloody too quickly, and Dalton would no longer give her band-aids to cover them. He said it was a waste. The girls at school spit on her and called her "hick", and the ragged ends of her dresses only reinforced their taunts. She had tried asking Dalton what a hick was, and he had responded with a synonym: redneck, but she did not know what that was either.

"Where are you going?" she would ask Dalton every day at three o'clock, but he would only show her his back and close the door softly on his way out. She had tried to follow him many times, but he was stealthy and would disappear among the towering wheat everytime, out of sight. Her mother refused to explain his daily disappearance to her. She said it wasn't interesting or important. Shelly disagreed, but neither Ellie or Dalton cared what Shelly thought of things.

Shelly assumed Dalton was her father and Ellie did not correct her, but he was not. Never mind that Dalton was only fourteen when she had been born. Ellie did not know who Shelly's father was. Her arms were covered in tracks from strangers' needles; Shelly was just another mark on her from a man she did not know. Once she'd had Shelly, Ellie had stopped using. This was perhaps the only time Ellie had abided by Dalton's advice. Once a month, Dalton and her would roll two cigarettes and smoke them in the yard out back, and they would talk into the early morning about the life they got as opposed to the ones they wanted until the cigarettes were nubs, squashed underneath their feet. This was the extent of kinship between the two, as Ellie did not like cigarettes or the outdoors enough for this to be a more regular occurrence.

"When will it rain?" Shelly would ask Dalton every day at 5:00, when he returned to the house. Despite his consistent lack of an answer, Shelly did not tire of asking him. She didn't know why, but Dalton was her hero. She knew very little about him. She knew they lived in the house he had been born in, and she knew that his mother had died the year Shelly started school. She did not know where the meager amounts of money he had to support Ellie and Shelly came from, and she had been told not to ask, so she didn't. She didn't have a single memory where Dalton was smiling. If Dalton had ever smiled at her, she wouldn't have known what to do.

It was not much of a childhood, but rather a meager imitation of one. Every summer there was drought, every winter there was wind, and time went on

for the three lonely soldiers on the house at the top of the hill with the wheat field below.

---

Shelly had hoped to grow up and be beautiful, but she had not. Her knees were knobby and her skin was dry and coated in freckles. By sixteen, she was gawky, and worse, she stuck out with the kind of red hair that matched her sunburned cheeks six months of the year. Shelly had found out about her own appearance later than the girls at school and that did not make things easy going into high school. Boys at school found it amusing to grope Shelly in the hallway, only to point out that there was nothing of her chest to grope. She did not like the boys at school, and if given the chance, she would've run them over in Dalton's red pickup truck.

Dalton was turning thirty. Shelly hoped to soften his impenetrable interior with pie and had kicked around some kids on the road to school for their lunch money. Ellie had made her a pie once, and had promised to help Shelly in exchange for Shelly "staying out of her hair" the following day. Shelly felt that most days she was nowhere near Ellie's hair, but she agreed anyway. The five dollars would be enough to buy apples and sugar from Mr. Davis in town, with enough left over to give Ellie. Ellie would then tuck the sum into a pillowcase which would disappear into an undisclosed location within the house that Shelly was "too young" to know about. Shelly prided herself on such contributions to the household.

Dalton's birthday was in the middle of August. When he turned thirty, it had not rained in sixty-seven days. He had to drive across town with every available container he could find in the house to fill with water. He was lucky to shower once every other week. He felt no reason to celebrate birthdays. He felt the same as he always had. But Shelly was very excited for his birthday, and he saw no reason in squashing another person's joy, as foolish as he may have deemed it.

When Shelly returned from Mr. Davis' house, with apples and sugar in hand, Ellie was not home. While Shelly was bitter that Ellie had failed to fulfill her promise, she was fairly confident she could figure out how to make a pie. There were cookbooks in the house somewhere.

When the pie came out of the oven, Ellie was still not home. At the five o'clock bells, when Dalton came into the house for the night, he asked Shelly

where Ellie was, but she did not have an answer. He thanked her for the pie and went to the table to roll himself a cigarette.

“Do you want one?” he asked across the kitchen. Shelly was unsure he was talking to her, even though she was the only other person in the room. She cut two pieces of pie and brought them to the table before she answered that yes, she did. She had smoked cigarettes in the girl’s bathroom at school in an attempt to befriend the other girls who did the same, but those cigarettes had been from the gas station. She hadn’t ever rolled her own. Dalton rolled cigarettes with great dexterity, his fingers moving swiftly and delicately until he sealed the rolling paper shut with a little spit. He grabbed the box of matches from under the sink and went out the back door. Shelly hurried behind him, abandoning the pieces of pie on the kitchen table.

“Where d’you think Ellie went?” Shelly asked as he wordlessly handed her a lit cigarette. Shelly had stopped calling Ellie any form of endearance related to motherhood a few years back, because Ellie said pushing a bowling ball out of your nether-regions didn’t make you a mother. Dalton lit his own cigarette and inhaled deeply. He rarely answered questions Shelly asked him. He let out a stream of smoke from his nostrils and looked at Shelly with steely eyes. Shelly had begun to count the pock marks and wrinkles that were scattered haphazardly across Dalton’s face when he responded.

“I don’t know, kid, but I’d bet she’s not coming back for you.”

---

Most of the kids Shelly went to school with didn’t go to college. A good third of them did not even finish high school. The girls got married and the boys inherited things from their fathers to do with their lives. At twenty-four, Shelly knew Dalton was not her father, and Ellie had not reappeared in the eight years since she had left. Dalton had not left. The house was split among them, and things were not unpleasant. They were not pleasant either, but rather, unchanging, and that seemed to trick the both of them into times were good. Shelly cooked things and got water in the red pick-up truck, and Dalton bought food when he could and sold things when they grew. Things rarely grew.

Shelly had grown a reputation in town that Dalton disliked. He had never voiced this to her directly, but when she disappeared in the early hours of the morning and returned with money in hand, he would furrow his eyebrows in a disapproving way and comment on the time. While Shelly did not particularly

like the sticky, callused hands of the men she met in cars and motels, she did like the cigarettes, bread, and milk their money bought. There was a satisfying irony in taking money from the same men who had once thrown rocks at her and called her “he”; they had been right when they said she was ugly and mannish, but they’d still rather pay her than fuck their own wives.

Days were not momentous, but rather a way to keep time in the nothingness. The day began when the single, sickly rooster crowed, and ended when the sun went down. The day was half over when Dalton came in at 5:00 for dinner. They went about their routines like the sun went over the sky and years managed to go by in that time.

Shelly had not asked Dalton where he went at 3:00 each day since she was a gawky teenager, but Dalton went nonetheless to the middle of the dry, dying wheat eld everyday and laid down looking up at the sky, wondering if he would die in this very eld one day. It is unknown what changed on a hot day in July, when shortly before Dalton’s thirty-eighth birthday, Shelly fulfilled her childhood dream, and without a breath of hesitation, slipped out the back door to follow him.

He wound through the eld, taking a lazy, meandering route as opposed to a straight-shot that made it difficult for Shelly to follow quietly. She kept her distance behind him, and tried to rely on the noise of the wheat as opposed to his figure up ahead of her. They walked like this, one following the other, unbeknownst to Dalton, for a good twenty minutes, before the brushing of wheat stopped and Dalton laid down in his usual spot. An outline of his body was now permanently imprinted in the field, and settling in it everyday felt as close to a home as Dalton knew. But he did not feel the same peace settle over him on this July day because within minutes of lying down, Shelly appeared over him, blocking the sun from beating down on him in its usual, unrelenting way.

“What are you doing here?” Dalton asked. He did not like to be interrupted in his solitude. Shelly knew that by now. She did not respond to his question, but rather, stared at him with the kind of intensity that burns up the ears and cheeks. Dalton had always attempted to receive Shelly’s attention with a dignity that he found very important to uphold. More than once he had heard whispers as he carried drums of water from the well back to the truck, whispers that pierced his chest like arrowheads because he knew there was truth in the rumors that circulated amongst the people in town. What he did not understand was the quiet pride Shelly wore when someone spat at her and called her “whore”. It made Dalton very nervous, as if bubbling

underneath the surface of her reddened skin was a heat that no one would be able to put out if released. He blinked, remaining silent, until Shelly turned around and disappeared back into the eld, the soft thrush of the wheat in her wake making him pray that she would not set the entire field aflame.

---

The following day Shelly was putting on her jacket as Dalton headed for the door.

“I’m coming with you,” she told him plainly. Dalton shook his head no. He was not looking for company.

“I like to go alone.”

He opened the back door with its distinctive creak and started out. He knew Shelly was following him because the back door did not slam shut right away behind him. He broke out into a run, tearing into the eld with blind fervor. He had no idea where he was going. He knew his spot would be waiting for him and he resented Shelly for forcing him to abandon it. He had lied in the spot for over twenty years. He had never missed a day.

Shelly was faster than he had anticipated. Dalton could hear her footfalls and the hissing wheat while she remained in hot pursuit of him. She was younger than him and her youth was in her favor. Dalton did not spend a lot of time running, and now, it showed. His lungs heaved and he felt as if he was only breathing in dust. Every year of drought, every particle of failure and death seemed to cling to the membranes of his organs, until he thought he might be blown into the wind and fail to exist at all. He had a choice to make.

Shelly did not expect Dalton to stop and turn around the way he then did. Her body slammed into his and took both of them down. The wheat broke their fall to an extent, but the resounding thud shook both their bones. Shelly was inches away from the lines in Dalton’s face. He was almost forty now. Not her father, not her friend, but the only person she could say she really knew. She felt something barbarous within her rise to the surface. His hands pushed at her shoulders, trying to escape from underneath her. She took his worn hand, twice the size of hers, from her left shoulder and held it in front of her. It was surprisingly clean. Not a single speck of dirt underneath his fingernails. His hand went limp; he did not fight back, so she took his hand and placed it on her neck, because she wanted to know what it felt like for someone else to have a say over what happened to her.

---

Shelly was nowhere to be seen the next day. He had feared what the confrontation with her might look like come that morning. He failed to understand her. He always had, and he desperately wished that she would resign herself to the same numbness he now called “friend”. At 3:00, he left the house and headed out, feeling he owed something to his spot in the field that had gone its first twenty four hours without him. He took his time going through the field, because he hadn’t gotten the chance to enjoy his trek the day before. His hands were sweaty. He kept remembering the feeling of Shelly’s jugular underneath his palm, her blood rushing underneath her toughened, freckled skin.

When he arrived at the center of the field, Shelly was laying down in his spot. Her lithe, thin body did not fill the crater the way he did.

“It looks as if it may rain.” she said. He snorted. Shelly stood and gestured to the spot in the wheat for him to lie down. Dalton pretended not to hesitate and did so. Shelly fought through the surrounding wheat, pushing and breaking it so she could lie down beside him. It was not easy. He averted his eyes. Dalton did not like watching her struggle.

A rumble of thunder came from the east. The sound felt foreign and frightening to Dalton. Shelly turned her pink face to his, her red hair snarled in the wheat it lay in. They lay there, frozen, eyes watching each other carefully. Dalton remembered when she was just a fat and spitty baby. Years ago. He waited for her to do something. How badly she wished she would do something.

“Why do you come here?” Shelly asked Dalton, once more.

Another smack of thunder, and from the sky, thousands, millions of droplets of rain began to fall. It was as if, for a moment, these two people could be the center of the world.

# KALEB BROWN



**Senior**

**Major:** Creative Writing

**Reading:** Fiction

Kaleb A. Brown is a Michigan born-and-raised writer, who dreams of one day becoming a renowned novelist. He has had journalism pieces published in the Ann Arbor Observer and the Detroit Free Press. When he's not writing, Kaleb Brown enjoys reading, playing video games, watching movies, and making model robots.

*Nominated by: Prof. Laura Thomas*



# Dream of Flight

Atop the roof of his house, Tendai laid on his back and stared at the pink sunset sky. He reached out, fingers splayed, towards the heavens and watched as the black and blue butterflies glided to-and-fro through the air like dancers. He moved his hand and trained his focus on the grey lourie that flew even further above; he only knew what they were by their distinctive, “kweh” shriek. Finally, he moved his hand over the blazing red sun. He curled his fingers to make a fist. Like that, the world was in his hands. He captured what he had been kept away from. Now, the possibilities were endless.

He let his hand fall back to his side. Just a fantasy.

What he wouldn't give to jump up and fly to the realm above; to squawk like the louries, to dance like the butterflies, to watch over the world like the sun. But despite his “specialness” as his mother called it, he was stuck on the ground like everyone else. Worse, he was stuck in a cage. He was only out because the keeper had left for the day and forgot about the lock.

The muscles connected to his back tingled. *Crap, the right one's fallen asleep.* He sat up and unfurled the mass of muscles and crimson feathers that were connected to his back – his wings. He stretched the right wing as far as he could with a groan. After he felt he was satisfied with the effort, instead of letting them curl around his back, he lifted his arms and wrapped the wings around his torso like a blanket before laying down again. He placed his hands on his wing-covered chest. As ridiculous as he thought it sounded, he honestly forgot that he had them, sometimes. Stuck in the house all day, he didn't get to use them much. He was generally only reminded of them if they weren't curled enough; they'd make it difficult to get through entrances. He was also reminded of them when his mother was explaining why she kept him in the house.

He sighed. *A boy with wings who forgets he has them. How crazy is that?*

Tendai thought he shouldn't be on the roof. Not just because he was liable to fall through (it gave a concerning moan when he had hoisted himself up there), but also because his mother would be quite cross with him if she saw him. She hardly ever allowed him to leave the house out of fear for his safety and leaving the house while she was gone was absolutely out of the question. Yet there he was.

He didn't hold it against his mother. She was the wisest person he knew and he trusted her. Even though he loved her, he couldn't deny that always being stuck in the house made him go a bit stir-crazy. His mother was out late again, so he took it upon himself to check the crops for her. He rationalized that getting the fresh air and fresh sunlight he desperately craved would just be an added bonus. Or, at least, that's what he decided he'd tell his mother.

He turned on his side and looked at the vast, yellow grassland before him. Trees dotted the landscape, but they generally weren't close enough to create dense cover. Every once in a while, a dash of some shrubbery here, a bit of a mopane tree there would break up the flat, brown scene. It wasn't that Tendai was bored of his locale — quite the contrary, he'd love to walk the area and see the wildlife. The problem, however, was that he hadn't known much of the area to begin with. Down the dirt road, there were a few houses like their own: they were the reason he wasn't supposed to go outside. The middle of nowhere was still not remote enough for his mother.

While he missed his family at first, he was excited to discover a new place when he and his mother had moved there, seven years ago. The excitement quickly was extinguished when he learned that his world would begin and end with the house. He thought his mother knew best, but he couldn't help but want more.

He hoisted himself up and looked down at the patch of fruits and vegetables that his mother had planted. He shook his head and sat down. There was no rush, he'd check later. Now, he'd just bask in the setting sun.

He shivered as he felt a breeze, forcing him to wrap himself tighter with his wings. "Give me something fun to do," he sighed, to no one in particular, hoping no one in particular would listen.

# MILISA CARTER



**Freshman**

**Major:** Undecided

**Reading:** Essay

I was born and raised in Metro Detroit. I hope to attain a career in which I will be able to dedicate myself to helping others. Although my nomination came as a surprise, I am very excited to participate in the Annual Café Shapiro Anthology for the first time.

*Nominated by: Prof. Leslie Stainton*

# A Journey to a New Identity

As I was growing up, I heard tidbits about my great-grandfather from my grandmother, his youngest daughter, and my mother, his granddaughter. My grandmother would reminisce about her childhood growing up on a farm in rural Virginia. Her childhood was drastically different from mine in the city of Detroit. The person who stuck out most to me in all my grandmother's stories from her childhood was her father, my great-grandfather.

William Stevenson, my great-grandfather, was born in Venton, North Carolina, on June 11, 1887, to a Cherokee father and a white mother. He took the last name and identity of his mother, Louvenia Stevenson. He took after her physically, too, with fair skin and Caucasian looks. But when he spent long hours working in the sun, his face would turn a reddish-brown, and then his father's ancestry was visible. William Stevenson was a tall man with a little, hump nose. He had brown, straight, thin, silky hair, which he usually wore slicked back in a style popular among Caucasian people in the 1930s. He always kept his hair short, cut to about three inches.

While living in Gates County, North Carolina, William met a young lady named Lindy Reddick. She was a quiet, African American woman, with dark brown skin and long wavy black hair that reached her waist. He was mesmerized by her beauty. William decided to marry Lindy Reddick. But in both North Carolina and Virginia, where my great-grandparents later relocated, people frowned upon interracial unions. In North Carolina, marriage between Native Americans and African Americans was actually banned. So to be able to marry my great-grandmother, my great-grandfather became Henry Johnson, an African American man. He and his wife, Lindy, went on to have eleven children. Six boys. Five girls.

By 1910, they had moved to Virginia, possibly to escape anyone who knew my great-grandfather as William Stevenson. They ultimately settled in Princess Anne County, Virginia. In Virginia, Henry took up farming. He was the best farmer in Princess Anne County, according to my grandmother, his youngest daughter. He raised his children on a sprawling, beautiful farm. After working as a farmer, he used his savings to purchase a farm so big you could not see the end of it while standing at the opposite end. On the center of his land sat a three-bedroom house. A fence covered with grapevines surrounded his land. Inside the fence, he grew all kinds of plants. He raised cows, hogs,

and chickens. He liked to go fishing in the summer. He caught enough fish to last the winter. During the winter, he liked to go hunting. Whatever he could catch he would bring back to his wife to cook. He provided only fresh vegetables, fresh fruits, and fresh meat to his family.

Henry Johnson owned his farm and everything on it. When it was time to harvest, he would hire people to help pick the crops. Then, he hired a big truck to come in to take his harvest to the nearest city, Norfolk, Virginia, to sell in the market.

When he would plow and harvest his farmland, he would leave some crops behind on purpose. “Johnson, can we go over your field today? We want some sweet potatoes or white potatoes,” people in his community would ask.

“Oh yeah. Go ahead. Go ahead,” my great-grandfather would respond. The people in his community got so used to his willing response that every time he would harvest crops they would come and go over the fields and get what he had purposefully left.

My great-grandfather was a man of complicated identities: legally white, socially Cherokee, figuratively African American. The more I discovered about my great-grandfather, the more I wanted to know about him. I especially wanted to know what being Cherokee meant for him—and what it means for me to be part Cherokee. I had already known that I was African American and that I possessed the difficult history of pain and triumph of black people in America. I now have another layer of history that includes my Cherokee ancestors in North America.

The story of Cherokee people begins in the northeastern United States and parts of southern Ontario and Quebec, where the Cherokee were people of Iroquoian lineage. At some point, my ancestors broke away from the Iroquois people and officially became known as Cherokees. They migrated to the southeastern United States to southern states including North Carolina—where my great-grandfather was born in 1887.

In 1838, my great-grandfather’s Cherokee ancestors would have been forced by the U.S. government to leave their home and travel what is now called the Trail of Tears from North Carolina to the Indian Territory located in present-day Oklahoma. Hundreds of Cherokees hid in the mountains of North Carolina to avoid this forced migration. Tsali, a leader of the Cherokees in North Carolina, surrendered himself to the U.S. Army so that his people could legally remain in North Carolina. The Army subsequently executed him. It is in part because of Tsali’s sacrifice that my great-grandfather was born a Cherokee in North Carolina.

In Cherokee culture, land is to be cherished. My great-grandfather spent his life tending to his land. To ignore the gift of land is to ignore the gift the Creator has provided. Land is especially important because it holds our ancestors and the spirits. Through their dedication to land and nature, Cherokee people domesticated many crops, including the ones my great-grandfather grew: corn, beans, potatoes, etc.

I am not sure if my great-grandfather cherished land because of his Cherokee heritage, but I know that I have always admired how Native Americans respect nature and all that it offers. Knowing what I now know about my great-grandfather, I believe my own love of nature and gardening has been passed down to me from my Cherokee ancestors. I wonder if the success of my great-grandfather as a farmer comes from the knowledge his Cherokee father was able to give him about land and agriculture. Cherokee culture also teaches that ancestors are to be worshipped and honored. I have a special place in my heart for my Cherokee ancestors. I am honored to share in the story of my great-grandfather.

By the time Henry Johnson, my great-grandfather, reached his 70s, he had had a stroke and walked with a limp. By then he no longer owned his farm in Virginia. He was living in a rented home. I do not know why he lost his farm, or when, but I can imagine the impact the loss had on him. My great-grandfather passed away on June 10, 1960 at 6:30 a.m., leaving behind 10 children and his wife Lindy who went on to be taken care of by her children.

What I have discovered about my great-grandfather has led me to learn a lot about myself. I used to view myself as an African American woman whose family had migrated to the northern part of the United States immediately after the end of slavery. But I now realize that I am a part of a culture I have admired since my childhood. I honestly have not had the chance to fully grasp this discovery of my new identity, but I am excited to see how much of who I am has a connection to my Cherokee ancestry. My journey to a new identity is not yet finished as I plan to continue to research my Cherokee ancestry and see life through a new lens.

# MEGHAN CHOU



**Senior**

**Major:** English (Creative Writing) and Film, TV, & Media (Screenwriting)

**Reading:** Short Story

Meghan Chou is a senior writing two honors theses, an original TV show and a short story collection. She is the recipient of several Hopwood Awards, including the Roy W. Cowden Memorial Fellowship, and has worked previously at *Midwestern Gothic*, *Salamander*, *The Michigan Daily*, and the *Michigan Review of Prisoner Creative Writing*. In her free time, she enjoys running long distance and making music.

*Nominated by: Prof. Laura Thomas*

# The Moon Man

When they finish having sex, John asks Fayza to wish him a happy birthday. She does, wondering if she, too, will celebrate her 33rd birthday with a complete stranger.

“Do you like older men?” he asks when she tells him she’s 18.

“Do you like younger girls?”

“Please don’t put it that way,” John trails off.

“What way?” Fayza traces the tattoo on his chest. Up close, it reminds her of a Russian doll. He shifts lower to rest his damp hair against her belly. Traces of his cum have dried to her skin. She’s unsure if it was sexy when he finished on her stomach, then wiped her clean like a small child. They met on a dating app. Fayza was drawn to the photo of him with a crystal orb balanced on his head, a tightrope walker for a traveling circus. *You seem great*, he messaged first. She sent a smiley-face and jumped right to the point, *Want some company?*

“Do you smoke?” John gets up to find his pack of Marlboro Reds. Fayza appreciates when the weight of his body lifts.

“Only socially,” she says, debating if she should get dressed or spend the night. The truth is, she’s never slept with anyone else before, but she takes the cigarette John offers, smoking it sparingly as he tells her about the rest of his tour.

“Next we’ll do a circuit through the south... hit up Georgia, Albuquerque, maybe even the sunbelt.”

“What about Vegas?”

“They got Cirque du Soleil, million-dollar spectacles... We don’t stand a chance.” John crosses the room to light another smoke, having finished his in no time at all. “Not yet, anyways.” Fayza notes how even on solid ground, he is poised on the balls of his feet. His posture is immaculate, perfectly straight as if there is a string attached to the top of his head — pulled taught.

“You ever been out west?”

“Bunch of times,” John says. “You?”

“Never.”

“Oh, you have to. It’s another world out there...” Fayza reaches toward an empty Bud



Light can to ash her cigarette, curious if a wayward flake could light the Holiday Inn mattress on fire. *He's used to cramped quarters*, she thinks as she watches John move about the room. He slips into spaces between the hotel furniture, finding gaps and crevices like a dandelion in a drought. He's telling her another story, set in Utah, but she has become fascinated with that turn of phrase: cramped quarters.

Her father's wake was a tedious affair. It took the whole morning to set up. Fayza's grandmother filled the house with osmanthus flowers, which smelt of death (with a faint hint of mustard). She sent Fayza around to perform little tasks like reheat the coffee, cut some melons, and prop the front door open against the wind. While Fayza was busy with this to-do list, her Grandma Sisi plotted with the funeral home director to conceal her father's legs from view. Paul Wang had been paralyzed from the waist down in a car crash — the same accident that killed Fayza's mother many years ago. Fayza returned to the living room to find half his coffin closed and guests in various shades of black, some closer in color to navy or dark grey.

Fayza had to wait in line with these guests to pay her respects. They whispered in Mandarin and Canto, neither of which Fayza understood. Her father offered to teach her, but despite starting and finishing an elementary workbook together, none of the characters had stuck. If anything, it had been Fayza's mother, Amal, who pushed the hardest. Amal insisted that anyone who wanted to be anything needed to know the following three languages: English, Arabic, and Mandarin. With her mother in charge of her Arabic lessons, Fayza had mastered the difference between perfect and imperfect verbs. In fact, she walked into kindergarten with a better understanding of the Arabic alphabet, than her ABC's. The other children made fun of her slight accent. It was over the oddest consonants — th's and ch's — or inconsistent vowels, all of which came up time and again in her green-level reading group. Clifford or Arthur or, worst of all, *The Berenstain Bear's Almanac*. Al-ma-nac. First there was a long *a*, then a short *a*. It didn't make any sense. After her mother passed, though, Fayza developed a full-blooded American accent and forgot what made a verb supposedly flawed. Once she started to dream in English, her father lost hope of her being bilingual too. As for Fayza's grandmother, she hardly spoke to Fayza at all. Family gatherings were an awkward affair with her cousins using the affectionate term *Nai Nai*, while Fayza continued to call her grandmother "Sisi."

Paul's wake was the first test of how this new living arrangement would play out, but Sisi's fumble set the tone, rather like when a comic trips getting

on stage. When it was finally Fayza's turn to stand over her father's body, a hot pit had formed in her stomach. With only his head and torso on display, he appeared unnaturally small — not at all like how she remembered him. How dare her grandmother shut him in like this? She had turned him into that stick of butter in a butter dish, waiting to be sliced and served. In that instant, Fayza decided to free him. She unlatched the bottom half of the coffin and pushed the top open to expose her father to the entire room. The other mourners gasped. They hissed *ai ya* and insisted to their children, *bie kan*, as if they weren't already there to see a dead body. Fayza had only a moment to take in her father in his entirety. Someone had washed and ironed his suit. A single pleat ran down the length of each pant leg. His shoes were tied into symmetrical bows. Even his socks were pulled straight. This bothered her greatly. After all, why the pageantry if this wasn't meant to be seen?

Before Fayza could reach in and force a wrinkle onto his suit, Sisi hurried over and shut the coffin lid again.

"Show some respect," Sisi whispered loud enough for the other mourners to hear. Fayza wanted to heckle her in response, but instead stepped back to let the next person forward to grieve. She could not bring herself to look at that half-open coffin or her father inside, made un-whole again.

Before the afternoon funeral, Fayza and Sisi met the movers, hired to pack up her father's belongings at their old apartment. The landlord promised to charge a pro-rated rent for the last month, if they were out by the 6th. While Fayza and her grandmother walked through the unit, the movers waited outside for the final OK. They would then load whatever was not salvaged into the truck to be given away. Out of everything, Fayza set aside only a few items: her father's Patriot's jersey, a sweater that still smelled like him, and the clay mug she had made him back in middle school. He insisted on drinking his coffee from that mug each morning, despite the fact Fayza's poor craftsmanship meant it leaked from a seam at the base. Meanwhile, her grandmother was on the hunt for something specific. Long after Fayza had gone through and taken what she wanted, Sisi kept searching through the boxes of stuff, undoing the hard work of the movers. At last, she gave a shout and held up a photo album, accidentally put in the donation pile. Fayza had seen it all before: yearbook clippings, family portraits (her as a child on her father's lap, her last year standing begrudgingly at his side), and so on. Nothing was novel until her grandmother pulled out a picture in a plastic cover. She handed it over for Fayza to see.

“Your father’s wedding. What a beautiful day,” Sisi said. Fayza figured grief had made her forget who she was speaking to. The photo was of her father, posing rather stiffly beside a red banner, which read, 囍, Mandarin for double happiness. At his side, a bride.

Only, the woman in the photo was most definitely not Fayza’s mother.

John runs his tongue along the curvature of Fayza’s neck. He rubs his hands over her chest, trying to arouse her, but Fayza is not in the mood. She pushes him off and sits up on the edge of the bed. The sun has already risen on his hotel room, night having flowed into day smooth as liquid. A nearby church bell strikes eight and the commuter train rumbles by on its way to Boston. Soon, a full day will have passed since Fayza buried her father.

Without explanation, she begins to get dressed.

“Can you take me to the airport?” she asks.

“You have a flight to catch?” John sounds confused. “It’ll be hell getting into the city this time of day.”

“Not Logan. Manchester.”

“Manchester?” John stumbles as he gets ready too. Once they are both fully dressed, Fayza leads him out of the hotel room and into the parking lot.

“Which car is yours?” she asks.

“This one.” John waves her back toward a brightly colored SUV. It belongs to the traveling circus, a red and yellow tent painted on the side door above the promise of “A SPECTACULAR NIGHT!” Fayza can’t help but laugh out loud. Of course John drives a clown car. When she opens the side door, she half expects a giraffe and two acrobats to tumble out. However, despite its loud exterior, the inside of the car has classic grey cushions and bears the artificial scent of pine trees. The seats are covered with a faint sparkle of glitter and some white chalky residue. In order to make room for her feet, Fayza must move aside a pile of leotards. She throws the costumes in the back, while John starts the engine. They pull out of the Holiday Inn just as another member of the circus troupe steps out onto the balcony, casually doing the splits in a morning stretch.

“Could you ever be with two women?” Fayza asks out of the blue.

“You mean a threesome?” John turns on his right turn signal. The blinker makes an uneven ticking sound. “Or adultery?”

“The latter.”

“You know,” he adopts a paternal tone, “I had a lot of fun last night. And you’re great. But I travel too much for anything serious.”

“I wasn’t talking about us.”

“Then why do you ask?” Fayza has her reasons. She’s done the math on her parents’ relationship and the numbers don’t add up, but she just shrugs and John drops the subject, too busy debating whether he needs to take the I-95 North or South to get to Manchester. “I’ll be back before my gig tonight, right?”

“Should be.” Fayza points him toward the correct ramp and John merges onto the freeway.

She’s surprised he agreed to drive her. Taking a one-night stand to the airport is hardly an ideal way to spend a birthday. Fayza figures, though, that adults place less emphasis on milestones. For instance, on her father’s last birthday, they stayed in to have a movie marathon. They didn’t even buy a cake to ring in his 45th year. The night passed like any other: the two of them wasting away on the couch. By that point, her father was very sick. It was clear he would not make it another year, but it brought Fayza some comfort to pretend this need not be an anniversary to remember — just one in a long succession of those to come.

When they reach the Manchester airport, John asks Fayza if there’s anywhere worth visiting nearby. She doesn’t sugarcoat it — *pretty much the same as where we just came from* — so they say their goodbyes with him offering to meet up at his show tonight. Then he drives off, his colorful car not all that out of place among the many yellow taxis.

For a regional airport, Fayza’s surprised to find such tight security. There’s a five minute limit for cars in the pickup zone and a metal detector soon as she enters the terminal. Once inside, a TSA guard pats her down with a wand. Only then can Fayza join the line for the ticketing counter. The line moves fast. Soon, an agent waves her over, but Fayza lets the family behind her pass. She’s waiting for the ticketing agent on the far left, a woman with a fair complexion and straight, black hair. By the time that agent becomes available, the family from earlier is already riding the escalator to main security. One of the children carries a butterfly backpack, which appears to take wing as she skips up the steps.

As Fayza watches the child, she thinks back to a bedtime story her father used to tell her. It was an indelible part of her childhood. Night after night, she fought off sleep to make it to the end of the story. Her father never consulted a book, yet he told it the same every time. Fayza pulled the covers up as he painted a picture for her. It was an image of a celestial being who had the power to move the moon across the sky. According to her father, the Moon Man was a product of the Silver River, a Chinese fairytale about

two star-crossed lovers. Since the Moon Man was born from true love, he was more powerful than any Greek or Roman counterpart like Artemis and Diana. Her father insisted that Fayza, too, was the product of true love — that she was stronger for it and this was what made her special. Fayza wonders if the child with the butterfly backpack is the product of true love too. Despite the impatient customers behind her, Fayza waits until the child disappears from view before approaching the counter with neither luggage in hand nor a destination in mind.

“Thank you for choosing Southwest Airlines,” the ticketing agent with the straight hair greets her. She wears a blue uniform, complete with a gold badge on her lapel, engraved with the name: MEI. “How can I help you?”

“You, um...” Fayza stutters. After her grandmother’s slip of tongue, she quickly figured out the identity of the woman in the wedding photo. Now, here she is in the flesh, looking at Fayza with concern.

“Miss? Are you alright? Where are you traveling to today?”

“I think you knew my father,” Fayza blurts out.

Mei takes a closer look at Fayza, recognizing the amalgamation of Paul and Amal’s features. Her reaction is surprisingly subdued. Rather than refute this claim, Mei rises from her chair and tares the scale for checked baggage. Once she’s sure the scale reads zero, she turns to her colleague, a blonde woman with thin lips.

“I’m taking my break now,” Mei says, then steps away from her station. She motions for Fayza to follow her to the other end of the ticketing counter where those too early for their flight wait in a small cafe.

Even though Fayza insists she’s not hungry, Mei buys her a coffee and scone. They choose a table between a young lesbian couple, backpacking with 50L Ospreys, and a foreigner, reading the Portuguese section of a travel guide. Mei clears her throat, waiting for Fayza to speak first. The second coffee and scone sit untouched, getting colder by the minute. There are leftover crumbs on the table from the previous customer, along with a scratch-off lottery ticket. Fayza scans the ticket. The person needed one more word to win back their money. An “A” or “R” would’ve done the trick, although if it were that simple they’d all be millionaires.

“How did you find me?” Mei asks, at last.

“You’re friends with my grandmother on Facebook.”

“Right... How is Sisi?”

“Holding up.”

“That’s good,” Mei says. “So,” she continues cautiously, “why are you here?” “I just,” Fayza shifts uncomfortably in her seat, “I just wanted to meet you.” “That’s all?”

“And ask you something.” Mei stiffens.

“Why don’t you ask your father?”

“He’s dead,” Fayza says bluntly. It’s the first time she’s said this aloud and is disheartened to find it carries no more weight than any other two-syllable phrase. She might as well have said “no thanks” or “good day.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Mei replies, but holds her to-go cappuccino firmly as if still braced for the real bad news. She looks at the time. “What did you want to ask me?”

“My mother.”

“Yes? What about her?” Mei asks. Fayza looks around the airport for a better segue, but is met only with a Dunkin’ Donuts sign and red sports car for auction. When the unease of the moment draws on, Mei points to the uneaten scone. “Are you going to have that?”

Fayza shakes her head, no. Mei picks up the scone and takes a big bite, chewing slowly to savor the excuse that her mouth is too full to speak.

“Did you know her?” Fayza asks at last. Mei waits until she’s finished chewing, before nodding yes. “Did you get along?”

“At first.” Mei sets down the scone. “And then, not really.”

“Because my father left you for her?”

“That definitely played a factor,” Mei says, unsure if Fayza means to offend her. “You do know how it all happened, right?”

“No,” Fayza says. “I thought they were each other’s first loves.”

“That may still be true,” Mei laughs bitterly.

“But what about you?”

“What about me?”

“My father married you.”

“Only out of a sense of obligation,” Mei says. She picks up the pastry again to polish it off, then brushes her hands clean. “I better get back. Was that all you wanted to ask me?”

“No...” Fayza stalls again. She glances at the lesbian couple, who sort through their belongings, throwing out any liquids over 3.4oz. She doesn’t know how to ask the question.

“I really do need to get going.” Mei stands.

“Wait.” Fayza grabs Mei’s hand before she can leave. “Do I remind you of him?”

“Who? Your father?” Mei hesitates. “It’s been a long time.”

“Please,” Fayza pleads. Mei nods reluctantly and takes a good look. Fayza feels her eyes drift over her features like the needle of a polygraph. Although Fayza has her father’s eyes and round face, she already knows the answer. In short, no, she looks very much like her mother.

By the time Fayza gets off the train from Manchester, the day is already gone. She can either go home, where Sisi will likely interrogate her on where she’s been, or she can go watch John perform. Since the fairgrounds are closer to the Amtrak station than her grandmother’s, Fayza walks in the direction of the circus. When she reaches the fairgrounds, the event is in full swing. The air smells of fried sugar and, within a matter of steps, vendors try to sell her everything from bear claws to elephants ears and kettle corn. This field where the food trucks are parked used to be a gas station. Although grass has overgrown the concrete and the oil’s dried up, one pump still stands near a tent set up for the performers. That’s the direction Fayza heads, searching for John.

When she enters the tent, she is met with the foot of a contortionist. The contortionist does a handstand to warm up, flexing her toes and the arches of her feet. The performers are all busy getting ready. Men and women alike cover their faces with powder and makeup. They use fat brushes to contour their cheeks and elongate their eyebrows. A row of costumes hangs from the frame of the tent, a stagehand steaming the various tutus and frumpy suit sets.

“Can I help you?” a fire eater asks. She’s in the process of coating her clothes with a chemical flame retardant.

“I’m here for John,” Fayza says.

“John!” the fire eater yells across the tent. Fayza spots John, getting changed. Even though she’s seen him naked before, she still averts her eyes and blushes.

“Fayza?” John hurries to pull on his tights and greet her, looking embarrassed. “You should have given me a head’s up.”

“It was last minute,” Fayza explains, while John ushers her out of the tent.

“Well, I guess I can still get you in.” John shows Fayza to the main performance tent. Other members of the troupe and some spectators are already inside. Staff direct the audience to their seats, while, high up in the rafters, lighting technicians adjust the spotlights so they illuminate the whole stage. John goes right up to the safety net for his high wire act. He hangs from

it, testing the rigging to see if it will take his full weight. The cargo holds hard and fast, though with a surprising amount of give.

“Have you ever fallen?” Fayza asks.

“Of course not,” John replies. He lets go of the net and points to a seat in the front row. It looks slightly more comfortable than the standard bleachers. “That’s the best seat.”

“When are you on?”

“In a few. I better go,” he says, leaving Fayza to take in her surroundings. The crowd has grown considerably. Jugglers and mimes serve as the openers. Dressed in striped overalls, they get up close to those near the front, eliciting giggles and shrieks alike.

By the time Fayza takes her seat, the show has already begun. She leans back to get a better view. While unicyclists dart in zigzags and a giant on stilts makes her way across the stage, Fayza wonders if she should have come at all. She feels a bit like a schoolgirl. In the far corner, she watches John make his final preparations, entirely uninterested in her. He puts on a special pair of slippers, then coats the soles in rosin for a stronger grip. He takes off his shirt, exposing his tattoo to the audience – the one that reminded Fayza of a Russian doll. *Do all men have that?* she thinks. Different selves that go on and on. Each time you think you’ve reached the end, you wring him and twist him to find another layer hidden within.

“Ladies and gentleman!” the circus master yells into a microphone, exciting the audience. “Put your hands together for... the Lunar Walk!”

John steps into the spotlight. He raises both arms like a gymnast posing for the judges, then starts to shimmy up a very tall pole to the tightrope at the top.

As he climbs, Fayza is reminded of a recent Sunday in the park. She brought her father to watch a kite race. He hadn’t been outside in awhile and it was a beautiful afternoon. A crowd of spectators oohed and ahed as the kites wrote messages in the clouds. There was even a young boy on the sidelines who tried to mimic the kite runners. All he had, though, was a white balloon, which he inevitably let slip from his fingers and get caught in a tree. Fayza’s father became quite upset. He had been far more invested in the boy, than the competition itself. Even though he was unable to help, he insisted Fayza bring him closer to the tree. There, he sat under the branches, shaking with shame. Fayza had turned away. She could not reconcile this version of her father with the one who used to tell her glorious stories and believe in the impossible. It wouldn’t have mattered if he could have reached the balloon, for it was his



spirit that was broken. Even if the Moon Man himself had appeared to bring that balloon down to Earth, her father would have looked the other way.

As she watches John perform, Fayza wonders if she has at last found the Moon Man. *Could it be him?* she hopes, for from this distance, the silver orb on John's head really does look like the moon and John, the figure responsible for moving it through the stars. He saunters across the tightrope, making it effortlessly to the other side. When it's time to turn around, he attempts a pirouette. He spins on one foot and tries to remain upright. Although he completes a full circle, his footing falters. His misstep exposes the trickery behind his act. The audience groans and their applause dies, while John continues his so-called Lunar Walk.

Fayza alone remains fixated on that crystal ball, choosing not to notice the translucent string attached to it, which holds her moon aloft in the sky.

# CARLY COOPER



**Senior**

**Major:** Theatre Arts

**Reading:** Short Screenplay

Carly is a senior theatre arts major with a minor in playwriting, who got her start by drafting short stories in the margins of her middle school math notebooks. Today, her love for writing fuels her passion for performing, playwriting and storytelling. Carly plans to continue combining these three interests and sharing stories by producing her own work in theatre and film when she moves home to NYC at the end of this year. She is still not a math person.

*Nominated by: Prof. José Casas*

# The Sea Eats the Sun

Characters:

Mom

Grandmother

Daughter (10)

*The set is minimal, almost bare. The only literal prop is a homemade lamp/model. It reflects brilliant lights that dance around the space. They might look like stars at one point, sunshine or moonlight at others. At other times it might look like floating embers or a fire ravaging the stage.*

*On one end of the stage, MOM mimes tucking a child into bed.*

*On the other end of the stage GRANDMOTHER is dipping her toes into the ocean.*

*DAUGHTER sits center stage, playing with her lamp/model. She turns to face MOM.*

MOM

You and I go apple picking. I pick... 53... granny smith apples. You pick 18 honey crisp apples. On the ride home, you eat 7 granny smith and I eat 8 honey crisp. How many apples do we have left when we get home?

DAUGHTER

53 plus 18 is 71. Then minus 7? 71 minus 7 is 64. Minus 8 is 56. We have 56 apples.

*MOM does the mental math. She approves.*

MOM

And if you need 8 apples to make one apple pie, how many apple pies can we make?

*DAUGHTER counts on her fingers. She messes up. She starts over. And messes up again. Her hands begin to shake, making it harder to count. Her face turns to a scowl as she struggles to control her breath. Finally, she turns out to face the audience.*

MOM speaks to GRANDMOTHER over the phone. They exist in a separate world from DAUGHTER, who continues speaking to the audience through the following:

DAUGHTER

Have you ever seen a house burn down?

GRANDMOTHER

Have you been sleeping much?

MOM

Not really. Is it that obvious?

DAUGHTER

Like, really burn down?

GRANDMOTHER

You sound exhausted.

MOM

She kept me up basically every night again this week.

DAUGHTER

Not just fill with smoke, but go up in flames? Real, big flames. Until the plaster peels from the walls and the floor drops out from under your feet and all that is left is the empty frame.

MOM

I made up a new game though... give her some math questions to tire her out. I call it 'Apples.' Not a very creative name, but does the trick.

DAUGHTER

I haven't – not in real life at least.

GRANDMOTHER

Why are you entertaining it? That's your issue.

MOM

I'm not – what?

GRANDMOTHER

You're her mother, you're not having a slumber party. You need to be stern

with her. Tell her to go to bed, that's what I did with you. She just wants attention and you're only entertaining it.

MOM

No. No, it's not like that. She's been having nightmares.

DAUGHTER

I've been having these nightmares.

MOM

Where the house burns down or something...? She says the whole house goes up in flames.

GRANDMOTHER

All children have nightmares, you certainly did.

DAUGHTER

Where the whole house goes up in flames. It only takes three minutes. Do you know how hard it is to save everyone you love in three minutes? You can't. I've tried it. I timed myself. You can barely save yourself.

MOM

I'm really worried, Mom. I don't think it's just nightmares.

DAUGHTER

The worries come during the day too. They're always there. But they are the worst at night. When I try to fall asleep. When my brain has nothing else to do. And then I have this vision, of me, standing, while everything I love burns. Meanwhile the sun sets on the water behind me. And nothing I do makes the worries go away.

*MOM and GRANDMOTHER. hang up and GRANDMOTHER steps forward.*

*MOM watches from a distance. DAUGHTER lights up at the sight of GRANDMOTHER's open arms.*

GRANDMOTHER

Look at you, I think you grew a whole foot! Get over here, let me give you a kiss!

*GRANDMOTHER plants kisses across DAUGHTER's face, she bursts into giggles.*

GRANDMOTHER  
Come, walk with me.

*They walk together hand-in-hand.*

GRANDMOTHER  
There's nothing I love more than a good sun set. Except for you, to the moon and back like I say.

*They watch the sun begin its descent in silence.*

DAUGHTER  
Where does it go? The sun. When it sets?

GRANDMOTHER  
Well... the sea eats it of course!

DAUGHTER  
The sea can't eat the sun!!

GRANDMOTHER  
What are you talking about, it's happening right now!!

GRANDMOTHER *gestures to the setting sun and then does her best impression of a sea gobbling up the burning orb.*

DAUGHTER  
I'm serious! Where does the sun go?

GRANDMOTHER  
It doesn't go anywhere. The earth is on an axis. Around which we make a full rotation – like this – (GRANDMOTHER spins DAUGHTER around her in a large circle.) Once every 24-hours.

DAUGHTER  
And that's why we have 24-hours in a day?

GRANDMOTHER  
Exactly.

DAUGHTER  
But how does it work?

GRANDMOTHER

The sun sits at the center of our solar system. It's the point around which we turn. That's why it looks like the sun rises in the east and sets in the west. When the sun sets on us, it rises on another part of the earth.

MOM *approaches and GRANDMOTHER rejoins her upstage. They watch  
DAUGHTER watching the sun set and rise.*

MOM

*(She doesn't know how to word this?)*

Mom, did you ever resent me?

GRANDMOTHER

Don't be absurd. *(Beat. She mulls it over.)* All mothers harbor the slightest resentment. You have to make sacrifices for your kids and rarely receive thanks, I suppose resentment is a natural byproduct... But to give over your body for nine months, to fill your child with pieces of yourself, to shape them into who they are... that can only be done out of love.

DAUGHTER

*(To audience?)*

There are rumblings inside of me. Tremors. They are always there under the surface.

MOM

She scares me, mom.

DAUGHTER

And when someone flips the switch..... my stomach drops out from under me. My whole body goes cold. The blood in my veins runs dry.

MOM

She complains about these stomachaches, but no doctor can seem to figure out where they come from. She has all these aches and pains. Trouble breathing at times. You ever hear of anything like that? Was I ever like that?

DAUGHTER

My heart still pumps, though, except I think its pumping gasoline. It's rancid. It clouds my vision. It fills my nose and my mouth. And if I open my mouth, and dare to speak, it will spill out and my words will strike like matches and burn everything to the ground.

MOM

And then one wrong word, seems to send her into a full... tantrum, I guess. She screams and throws things. And then she says she feels like she's dying. What am I supposed to say to that?

DAUGHTER

And I'll just stand there, shaking, body trembling as I am engulfed by the flames. And my home, my room, my black stuffed cat, my white duvet with the light pink roses, my keepsake box stuffed to the brim, burst into flames and their ashes fly around me.

MOM

I never know what I'm going to wake up to. It's exhausting. It's exhausting being her mother... And I resent her for it.

DAUGHTER

And I can't move, because it's my fault. As my family screams, their bodies contorting in the flames. Calling out to me: "you did this. This is your fault."

GRANDMOTHER

It sounds like you when you were young. But you grew out of it, the tantrums stopped.

MOM

...And what if she doesn't? I think I made a monster. Filled her with all the bad things, because sometimes it spills out of me too. I'm trying so hard to get it right for her, but I can't – trying to love her is killing me.

DAUGHTER

But they don't know that I'm not in control. I can't move my body. And instead I stand there waiting to for the last breath to come.

GRANDMOTHER

That's a strong statement.

MOM

I don't even think she loves me back. I think she needs to see someone, like a therapist or something.

GRANDMOTHER

She doesn't need to see someone, you need to be a parent. She acts out



because you let her. She's just a kid, too caught up in her own fantasies that you've let run wild. That's all.

DAUGHTER

(To GRANDMOTHER.)

What if the sun didn't set?

GRANDMOTHER *returns downstage with DAUGHTER.*

DAUGHTER

And how do we know that the sun will set every single day?

GRANDMOTHER

Because of science, I suppose. Why do you ask?

DAUGHTER

I feel sad for her. (Beat.) It must be tiring. Having to light the whole world every day without getting to rest. If I were the sun I would want the sea to eat me.

GRANDMOTHER

Is that so?

DAUGHTER

Yes. At least for the night. So that I could recharge. And refill my love.

GRANDMOTHER

Your love?

DAUGHTER

Yes. The sun must really love all of us, to spend all her energy caring for us. But I think she loves the moon the most.

GRANDMOTHER

The moon?

DAUGHTER

Yes. And I think that the moon loves the sun. Very, very much. So when the sun goes into the sea each night, the moon comes out to watch over her. To protect her, so that when she rises again in the morning, out of the water, she will have rested and can light the world again...It makes me sad.

GRANDMOTHER

Why is that?

DAUGHTER

Because they love each other. The moon just wants to look out for the sun. But the sun has already used all her energy through the day and she has nothing else to give. So they can never really be together, and the sun can never prove to the moon that she loves her back.

GRANDMOTHER

Well that's the thing about love, it knows no distance. That's why I can love you, even when I am miles and miles away.

DAUGHTER

Like the sun and the moon.

GRANDMOTHER

That's how much I love you. To the moon and back. And back again. The one thing that's always guaranteed: how much I love you.

DAUGHTER

And that the sea eats the sun. And the moon will watch over.

*DAUGHTER returns upstage with MOM.*

MOM

If I go apple picking and I pick 72 granny smith apples and you eat 43 of them, how many apples do I have left.

DAUGHTER

I don't want to do it.

MOM

What?

DAUGHTER

It's a silly game, I don't want to do it right now.

MOM

Oh. Okay.

DAUGHTER

Have you ever seen a house burn down?

MOM

No. And I've told you, the chances of a house burning down are very, very slim

—

DAUGHTER

But it could still happen.

MOM

But it's not going to. You are safe here. How many times do I have to tell you that?

DAUGHTER

I don't feel safe. It could happen. You're not safe. If you aren't prepared, it could happen and then what if the house burns down and I'm not here to save you?

MOM

*(Amused.)*

And you'd protect me if the house was on fire?

DAUGHTER

You're not listening to me.

MOM

Okay, fine. I'm listening. Tell me. Why are you so worried about the house burning down?

DAUGHTER

I DON'T WANT TO TELL YOU ANYMORE.

MOM

DON'T raise your voice at me! What have I said about raising your voice? / You need to calm down.

DAUGHTER

You'll walk away! But you are not listening. I don't like when you laugh at me. I don't feel safe.

MOM

Well that's silly. This is all silly.

DAUGHTER

WHY DON'T YOU LISTEN?

GRANDMOTHER

*(To audience?)*

I've always told you, you're too easy on her. She acts out because you let her.

*MOM turns to walk away. DAUGHTER is growing more and more worked up.*

DAUGHTER

Don't walk away! STOP! I take it back. I'll be good, I won't raise my voice, I won't, I promise I won't, I won't yell just listen –

MOM

THE HOUSE IS NOT GOING TO BURN DOWN. You need to take a deep breath. You need to take a deep breath and you need to stop. You are driving me insane, you know that? You need to stop, this is not logical. You NEED TO STOP.

DAUGHTER

I hate you.

MOM

What?

DAUGHTER

I said I hate you. I HATE YOU. I HATE YOU. I HATE YOU.

*DAUGHTER tears across the stage, struggling to catch her breath and calm herself down, begging MOM to listen. It's as if her heart is pumping gasoline.*

*When DAUGHTER finally lands center stage, fire inside her burning low, she collapses. Between breaths she finally notices that her lamp has been knocked to the ground, broken. MOM is frozen in fear, except for her hands which tremble the same as DAUGHTER's. GRANDMOTHER watches on.*

DAUGHTER

No. Nononono. Look. Look what happened. I can't... I can't fix it. It won't go back together. It won't go back together. Mom. Mom. Mom please fix it. I

didn't mean to. I didn't, I really didn't. I love you I'm sorry I don't hate you I'm sorry I can't fix it.

GRANDMOTHER *steps forward and places a hand over DAUGHTER's.*

GRANDMOTHER

Let me. Let me, please. Shhh. It's okay.  
going to be the

Look. Look, it's easy. I can fix it for you.

Look it still works. It's okay. It doesn't need  
to be perfect. **Look**, the earth still turns.

DAUGHTER

No, it's not the same. It's not  
same. It's not the same.

*It now becomes clear that lamp/model is a figure of the earth orbiting the sun.*

GRANDMOTHER

The earth still turns. Just like in real life.

DAUGHTER

The sun still sets.

GRANDMOTHER

The sea still eats the sun. See, it's okay.

*MOM steps up, for the first time the three of them really take the space together. GRANDMOTHER moves to let MOM take her spot beside DAUGHTER and the lamp/model.*

GRANDMOTHER

See how the earth turns.

*She spins the globe, it sends off light in every direction. It's brilliant.*

GRANDMOTHER

Just like in real life.

MOM

Yeah.

GRANDMOTHER

The one thing that's guaranteed - no matter how good or bad a day is - the one thing that's always guaranteed: the earth still turns and the sun still sets.

DAUGHTER

*(To the audience.)*

Have you ever seen a house burn down? It takes all of three minutes. Before it's all gone. And you can't do anything to save the ones you love.

MOM

*(To GRANDMOTHER.)*

Have you ever seen a house burn down?

GRANDMOTHER

I can't say that I have.

MOM

Apparently, it only takes three minutes.

DAUGHTER

But when nothing else makes sense, the earth still turns. And I can focus on that. The sun still sets. The sea eats the sun and the moon watches over to protect her so she can rise again.

MOM

I found someone for her to see. A psychologist.

GRANDMOTHER

And they can help her? Help her manage it?

DAUGHTER

No matter what the day brings. No matter if you can see it or not. It might look different from one day to the next. The sea still eats the sun.

*The three women stand still on stage, watching as the model of the earth rotates around the light source that is the sun, sunshine reflecting out over them and the audience.*

BLACKOUT.

# HIBA DAGHER



## **Junior**

**Major:** English (subcon in creative writing) and American Culture (subcon in ethnic studies)

Hiba Dagher is an undergraduate student at the University of Michigan & the founder of Hikayat. She is the recipient of two Hopwood prizes & her work has been featured in the Shuruq writing showcase, Xylem literary magazine & the Inside Out anthology. You can find her @mtnddaughter on Twitter.

*Nominated by Prof. Sumita Chakraborty*

# exiled matriarchies on normile st

---

we were born we awoke  
drunk on nostalgia and mint tea hungry and bathed in vinegar  
underneath a cloud of dark hair we celebrate our abstinence  
we kiss the curling hookah pipe gossip about someone's  
bare-thighed daughter  
our names are holy: flowers,  
prophets, split pomegranates we mourn the girls we could have  
between two sisters laugh over been and wait,  
the cosmic destruction  
which awaits us beyond the living room soak in the grief  
which made our mothers a  
mother  
we don't mean to romanticize  
another tragedy but

---

it's all we know



# Sitting on a Plastic Chair at Lowrey Middle School's Gymnasium While Working Election Day 2020 in Dearborn, Michigan

*After Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy's Farm in Pine Island,  
Minnesota by James Wright*

above me, the dappled light hits  
on the caramel-colored linoleum  
like sunlight on pond water. instead  
of birdsong, we have the warm whirr  
of a broken tabulator and the precinct  
manager denying another *Hajji Or Zamo*  
a translator, the line inches forwards,  
curling around the gym like ants on a log,  
hoping for some kind of liberty,  
or retribution, or whatever  
we're calling it today,  
to my right, the volunteers,  
weary, unpaid, and still here  
despite all that, yawn like the big  
cats in nature documentaries,  
no one notices, we're far too busy  
awaiting more ballot applications  
from the city clerk's office,  
*I have wasted my life.*

# 35mm with two grandfathers

In Dearborn, the hospital  
fluorescence soaks everyone  
in pale gold. the room swells,  
doesn't matter, the nurses gave up  
a long time anyways. someone starts  
a half argument – *she's all her  
mother. look at the cheeks,  
like the swell of the fullest moon.  
ours.* someone else says *no, look  
at the nose, small now but when  
she's older it'll look just like  
her father's.* there are four  
good shoes, black, and reflecting  
off the linoleum. two shirts, thick  
with starch and sweat. a pair of  
Marlboro's tossed in the bright  
blue bin, first gift to this new life.  
soon there will be birthdays  
and arguments and eid breakfast  
and four hands lined like paper,  
that hold and prod and  
pinch and kiss  
and promise

# 13355 Hemlock St

but here, the birds speak in every  
language and ask gnarled aunties,  
all silk veils and pastel tracksuits  
anointed with rhinestone hieroglyphics,  
for their best gossip. and half-divine  
light from the street lamps, the color  
of orange soda dyed with natural  
flavors, glimmers on puddles  
of acid rain. the smell of petrichor  
and french-fry grease hang thick  
in the air like smog

instead of angels ( for there aren't any to spare )  
there are nescafe-colored boys, all curly hair  
and no halo, all tight white tank tops  
and neon basketball shorts,  
all JV wrestling boys, who  
pummel each other into the center  
of the baseball diamond. spit blood  
& tooth into home plate

God is everywhere,  
and where he isn't?  
we make more room.

# JACK DOYLE



**Junior**

**Major:** BFA – Theatre Design and Production

**Minor:** Creative Writing

**Reading:** Fiction

Jack Doyle is a Junior in the School of Music, Theatre, and Dance. He is pursuing a BFA in Theatre Design and Production, and a minor in Creative Writing. He has been writing for as long as he can remember, and has a passion for all kinds of storytelling. Jack would like to thank his amazing friends (Hadley, Karissa, and Nina) for being the best editors.

*Nominated by: Prof. Tish O'Dowd*

# Golden

August 30th, 1992

The first day we came to the tree, we arrived there by accident. Charles was racing past me on his bicycle. His bright red handlebars like splattered blood, as we tore through a world crafted in golden watercolor. The wildlife around us was dead from what had been the hottest summer yet. Sweat poured down my face, glistening in the setting sunlight. In the blink of an eye, he seemed to be miles ahead of me. Charles was always miles and miles ahead of me. He moved faster than this final summer had. I had no clue how he was moving as quickly as he was. The backpack that he had brought with him was stuffed to the brim, and the heat was draining.

Senior year began tomorrow, and Charles and I would head off to Warrington Prep. We would not be returning home until the holidays, and we were both happier for it. Neither of us wanted to think about that now. We wanted to enjoy our last bit of freedom. The last bit of time where it could only be us before being thrust back into the middle of it all.

The field we were in was empty all around us, except for a large tree right smack in the middle of it.

The oak tree. It looked as though it was as old as the earth itself. Charles was heading straight for it, and so I followed suit. Charles went everywhere assuming that I would follow. He was right. I would. He was the leader, I was the follower. That's how we worked.

Charles threw his head back laughing as he leapt off his bike and ran up to the tree. He looked like he was nine years old again. He was still dressed in his church clothes from earlier. His white shirt unbuttoned down three or four buttons. His pants rolled at the ankles to allow him to breathe in the hot summer. The tie was abandoned long ago. Stuffed into the backpack.

Memories from our childhood flash before me in grainy, distant images. The times we used to run around our yards and our neighborhood. Wielding sticks as swords. Fighting some mysterious dragon that had raided our homes. The fort we built together in the forest. The sleepovers that we had in forts made of pillows and blankets. They felt so distant, and yet if I lingered long enough, I could be there again. Nine years old and free of any care.

When I finally caught up with him, he was already making his way up the tree. He was childlike, radiating with joy from head to toe. In the light of the setting sun, I could have sworn he was golden.

“Are you coming up Johnny, or are you going to keep admiring how beautiful I am from afar?” he laughed, turning away and continuing to climb higher. I had been a notoriously horrid climber for a multitude of reasons. I was afraid of heights, I was afraid of falling, and I was afraid of dying. In no particular order. I had always been awful at it, and Charles knew this. Yet, ever since he was a kid he seemed to just want to climb higher and higher off the earth – dragging me along with him.

“You know I hate this,” I replied, starting to get my grip on the branches. I made my way up the tree, exercising extreme caution.

“I know but that’s why it’s so fun,” he called down, gleefully. I did my best to switch off my brain and fall into the rhythm of climbing. I hummed our school song in my head, for some reason it always calmed me down. Even though I hated that place beyond belief.

Warrington, or Smellington to its students, was the Harvard of all Prep Schools. It was a small, boarding school for boys in the heart of Massachusetts. Not too far from Marblehead, which is where Charles and I both lived. It was outrageously priced, unbearably rigorous, and of course, dead set on producing only the finest young men that it could. I ought to be proud that I go there... But, to say Charles and I were disappointments to them would be an understatement.

From the moment we set foot in Warrington, Charles was determined to not let the system get to him. For all six years that we had been there, he had succeeded. With the help of an obscene amount of detentions, some wild acts of rebellion, and of course, his trusty sidekick.

Me.

His most miraculous feat was last year towards the end of the second semester. He had managed to sneak bagpipes into the school’s dreaded discipline assembly. (An assembly that we were having because of him.) He spent hours teaching himself how to play “Vogue” by Madonna on them. It was a sight and sound to behold. The look on the entire staff’s face was worth any sort of punishment.

Everyone told me that I could be a “fine young man” if I would stop hanging around Charles. But no matter what they said. I couldn’t. He was addictive.

Before I knew it, I had reached him. He was sitting in a small break between the branches near the top of the tree. The world was far below us now, probably not as far as it felt, but I was horrified.

“Isn’t this amazing?” He poked his head up and looked around, taking in the sunlight and the fresh air.

“Yeah... thrilling. Can we go down now please?” I nervously grasped the branch as tightly as I could.

“Go down? Jonathan! Where are your manners!?! I bring you to this beautiful spot and you want to *leave!*” he said in a character voice that sounded scarily like my mother. “We aren’t going anywhere.”

“We don’t have to leave, I would just prefer solid ground.”

“No. We’re staying...” He crossed his arms and smirked at me. That smirk. “... and you’re gonna like it.”

I sighed and allowed myself to settle back against the tree. “Fine.” I took a deep breath. It was a beautiful sight. The vast field rolled out as far as I could see before turning into a forest. A railway was running along the forest edge, yet there was not a train in sight. There were lots of birds chirping. The air was crisp and warm – Charles looked so content, it was hard not to catch that feeling.

“I could stay here forever” he sighed, he sounded much more reflective now. The moment that I left him for my thoughts, he had dropped into a deep pool of his own.

“Yeah. Me too.”

“I don’t want to go back. I never do, but especially not this year. Nothing ever happens. It’s the same old routine. They try and try again to beat the creativity out of us with textbooks about math and science. Thinking nothing of us unless we turn into doctors, or lawyers, or something equally as boring. I’m tired of it. I’m not going to let them get to me.”

“What would you do instead?” I should know the answer to this, but with Charles, it seemed to change every day. One day he wanted to be an artist, which lasted twelve hours. Another day an actor. A few days after that he wanted to be a private detective. It never ended.

“I don’t know this time. Something exciting. Nothing. Everything. I don’t know. What would you say if I asked you what you wanted to do?” I blankly stared at him in silence. The truth was, I had no idea what I wanted to be. I always assumed that I would be a lawyer. That’s what my father was, that’s what I was going to be too. It’s the way that it was.

“I think I would like to be a writer,” I said. It was the first thing that came to mind. He hummed in response, pleased with that answer.

“It doesn’t matter always.” I looked over at him. “We’re so close. We may as well finish it off.”

“Or we run away together.” He smiled at me. A mischievous look — one that I knew all too well. It was the same look that I got whenever he was beginning to plot his next scheme. It was the look that always roped me into going along with it.

“We’re not doing that,” I responded. Part of me thought he was joking, part of me knew that if I said yes, we’d be gone in a minute.

“We could just disappear.” he looked at me, locking eyes. His eyes were bright green — like nothing I had ever seen before. I didn’t know how to describe it other than it was my favorite shade of green. It made my heart race and slow down all at once. “We could go before anyone even knew we were gone, get train tickets, go to New York. Start it all over.”

“If we did run, our parents would find us sooner or later. We’d both be cut off, and I don’t think either of us wants that.”

“This is true. If we could get anything out of awful years with our parents, it would be the money.” Charles had a much worse relationship with his parents than I did — I knew that for a fact. Our parents often didn’t talk to us or do anything with us. As soon as we were old enough, they shipped us both off to boarding school. We had to put up a major fight to make sure we went to the same one. Somehow I knew even as a child that I could not, and would not, leave his side.

“As soon as we graduate we can go,” I said. “We can go to college in some city, and live together, and never look back.”

“I don’t want to wait that long.” He sighed, pushing himself away from me and looking out towards the field. “I can’t do it, Johnny, I can’t. I’m not going back.”

“What?” I didn’t think he was serious.

“I bought two train tickets to New York last night. You can come if you want, but if not, I get it.” I stared at him in nothing but silence. Somehow this had turned from an elaborate wish to an actual plan right under my nose. I looked into his eyes, they were pleading for me to come with him. The bright green was piercing into my soul.

“You can’t spring something like this on me you know I-”

He cut me off. “I know if you had time to think about it, you’d never come with me. For once in your life, be spontaneous!”



“This isn’t a spontaneous weekend excursion, this is giving up our entire lives to run away together.”

“Yes. That’s exactly what it is and it will be amazing.” he reached into his pocket and held out two train tickets. I looked down at them, gripped in his hand like they were the last lifeline he could hold on to. They left tonight at ten, only a few hours from now.

“I don’t know-” I looked back into his eyes. Everything in me wanted to beg him to stay. To finish his senior year with me. To live our lives the way we always planned them. If we just stuck it out for one more year... We could finish our parents’ wishes and then embrace freedom.

I looked at his hand, still holding out the train tickets towards me. They were shaking. His shirt cuff had pushed up and I noticed some dark marks on his wrist. I looked up at him, his eyes fixating on his wrists.

“Charles.”

“Johnny.”

“Charles. Are they hurt-”

“Yes.” his breath was shaky now. The desperation in his eyes burned me. “It’s happening again.” I inched towards him, trying my best to maintain slow movements. I didn’t want to startle him. I grabbed his hand and pulled up the cuffs of his sleeves. Tight bruises around his wrists and I’m sure if I looked under his shirt, there would be marks all down his back.

“I thought you said they stopped?” I was trying not to get angry but he had told me it stopped years ago. That everything was fine at home this summer. If I had known, I could have helped him. “You promised me you’d tell me if-”

“I know. I KNOW.” he stammered out, tears starting to form. “I was just-”

“What?” his hand was still in mine, an awkward tension filling the air. The train tickets floating between us still clutched in his hand. This wasn’t running away. This was an escape. An escape that was sitting right between us. “We could have helped you. My parents, they would have let you stay-”

“Your parents hate me.”

“Not enough to let... this... happen. I could have helped you.”

“I don’t need your help. I just need you to come with me.” he almost whispered. “I need

you.” I hesitated, avoiding the gaze of his bright green eyes. I knew if I met them, he would be disappointed. He would see in my face that I was never going to go with him. Even if I tried, there was no way I was ever going to convince him to stay. I could see it in his eyes. He was already gone.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“Well, I’m going. Will you at least see me off at the train station? You can make your decision then.”

“Okay.”

\* \* \*

It was hard to believe that the joyful bike ride to the tree had happened just hours ago.

The trip to the train station was anything but. It was nothing but an eerie silence. The sound of whistling wind past my ears. The soft late-night traffic through the town passed us as we biked down the sidewalk. Everything seemed to be moving in fast motion. Car lights rushing past, everyone in such a hurry. None of them as much as Charles, even though we moved the slowest of all.

It was 9:50 on the train platform, and I had yet to decide if I was joining him or not. I had nothing packed, no money, no belongings. He said he had it covered, that he had a friend in the city who would put us up until we got on our feet, but I was still skeptical. Was it because I was afraid of what would happen? Because it was a bad idea? Or maybe just a little bit of both? I wasn’t sure.

He looked at me and smiled. “It’s okay, you don’t have to come. I won’t love you any less.” He reached out and took my hand. We didn’t do that often. It was a weird gesture, very new for us, but not necessarily bad. My mind flashed back to the tree when I held his hand that gripped the tickets. His once cold, shaking hand was now warm and steady. The tree felt like a lifetime ago. “It will always be me and you, no matter what.”

I think I knew the second he pulled out the tickets that there was no way in hell I would ever get on that train. I think Charles knew that as well.

“I’m sorry,” I said. I felt tears coming to my eyes. It had been just the two of us our entire lives. I always thought it was just going to be the two of us, no matter what. “I’m so sorry.” I knew he needed me there for him. He was hurting, but I couldn’t. It was too much to ask of me. I always thought I could do anything for Charles. That would die for him. Dying for someone, though, is much different than running away with someone.

When you run away together, there are repercussions. There is an after where you have to face your choice for the rest of your life, or until you give up and move back home. When you die for someone, it ends there. It’s significantly more selfish than just letting the person die. You don’t have to

deal with the repercussions, you'd just be dead. They have to live with their grief. That is a much crueler fate than anything that could possibly be beyond life.

I didn't have the courage in me to go with Charles. I knew I was more privileged than most. I knew my parents' money would support me through to any college I wanted to go to. If I stayed put, and did what I was told, I would never have to worry about a single thing in my life. When it came down to it, I couldn't get cut off. I was too selfish for that.

Since that moment, people told me that Charles was the one who was selfish for leaving. That he couldn't put up with it for a year more. I always disagree. He was brave. He had everything to lose. He would be all alone. Yet, he did it anyway.

He grasped on to me, and let me sob into his shoulder. My cries were muffled by the softness of his shirt. "It's okay. You don't have to be sorry. You've gotta do what you've gotta do. I shouldn't have tried to pressure you into it. It was selfish. I'm gonna miss you though."

I pulled back, "I'm going to miss you too." I looked into his green eyes again, blurry from the tears but still striking. They were filled with tears as well. I don't know if we stayed like that for only a second, or minutes, or perhaps even hours. No amount of time would have been long enough to say goodbye. Still, the trance was broken when the train conductor called for final boardings.

The sound of the call rang through the air. Weighing down on us like a thousand-pound mass. The world around us existed again. We were alone on the platform. The stillness was deafening. We looked at each other. So much to say. So little time.

"I'll meet you. The day after you graduate. At the tree." he said, pulling my hand up to his face, he kissed it. Right above the knuckle on my ring finger. He had never done that before. "I'll see you soon."

With that, he turned towards the train and climbed the steps. I watched him linger for a moment. There was a hesitancy that I had never seen from Charles before. Who was always so sure of himself and what he was doing. I half expected him to turn around and run back to me. To take me in his arms and tell me that he would stay.

He didn't. He handed his ticket off and passed through the door. Disappearing into the train. Not even a moment later, it began to pull away.

I stood there for what felt like ages in disbelief. It was hard for me to wrap my head around the fact that there were humans inside of that metal box.

Living, breathing bodies with hearts, minds, and souls. All pulling out of the same dingy little train station. It felt like all people ceased to exist when they passed through that doorway.

I took his presence for granted. His long and narrow limbs. His jagged chin and sculpted jaw. The waves and curls of golden hair. The way that his parted lips always seemed to be on the verge of sliding up into a smug smirk.

His eyes. Those bright green eyes.

I took a breath and looked around me. The train was nothing but a faint golden light on the horizon. Moving farther and farther away; faster and faster; higher and higher. Just like Charles wanted.

Yet, that light felt like a promise. A promise of returning; a promise of being reunited. I brought my hand towards my lips. Pressing them softly against the spot where his were just minutes ago.

Smiling to myself in fond remembrance, I turned, and I went on.

# ANIYAH FISHER



**Freshman**

**Major:** Psychology

**Reading:** Essay

Aniyah was born and raised in the city of Chicago, with the university being her first home away from home. Aniyah appreciates the freedom that all art mediums allow, but using seemingly academic writing assignments to be expressive is her talent.

*Nominated by: Prof. Clayton Wickham*

# The Art of Invisibility

For as long as I can remember, I have always been aware of my skin color, but it was not until the United States elected its first Black president that I realized the true implications of what it means to be Black in America. At the tender age of six, just a week before my seventh birthday, I recall sitting on the floor of our dimly lit living room. Reporters of WGN 9, my favorite news channel, were anxiously awaiting the results of the election, and even as a young viewer I could feel the tension. I understood that history was underway, but did not truly comprehend the election language that was being used, of course besides the word ‘President.’ I watched what I now consider to be the beginning of our polarizing climate that would shift how I viewed myself and my community in America. I was living the statement that ‘ignorance is bliss.’ In fact, I was both ignorant and invisible. I did not realize how even with a historical victory my community was still unseen and our struggles were still unheard – by both our white counterparts and each other.

*Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison highlights the irony as we are metaphorically invisible, yet we are the most physically visible due to our skin color. My experiences parallels the narrator’s, as we both move through life making the realization that due to our skin color we fail to truly exist in the minds of our peers. Our encounters with our Black and White peers shattered our original understanding of education and passiveness being the key to success. As the narrator and I both come to terms with our reality, we find ourselves stuck in a complex situation of invisibility that can never be truly broken in a country that never wished to value our humanity, a country that continually suppresses our existence.

As I read along, I easily resonated with the narrator as he proclaims his Black peers’ and White counterparts’ blindness forcefully makes him transparent. As he moves through his experiences, he tries to exemplify his internal values and beliefs, but his peers continuously mold their own perception of him. He is defined by his “surroundings, themselves or figments of their imagination, indeed, everything and anything except” who he truly is and how he wants to define himself. He is invisible, not because they do not think of him, but because they do not think of him authentically.

This paradox of existing in the lives of people who cannot acknowledge the real you is mentally draining, as there is a constant battle between accepting that you cannot be seen as unique or fighting to have people perceive the real you. Throughout my educational career, it was not hard to notice how the skin of my peers and I juxtaposed the skin of our teachers. The staff and Distract leaders of the Chicago Public School system lacked the familiar shades of melanin that most Black children are taught to find comfort in.

Attending school in a setting where everybody looked like me, it is easily assumed that the school's statistical data represented me. The school's average test scores, income level, and other demographics were branded onto my student profile and seemingly erased my truths. From afar, I blended into the population and generalizations that did not best suit me. At times, my educational talents were overlooked and devalued. I was frustrated and angered that I could not exist as my own person in the minds of people who I believed should have taught the importance of individuality. I was beginning to see how I lacked what I would now call visibility in White America. These staff members and leaders who were placed in predominantly Black schools were failing to hold the best interests for the students, and I suffered. When I started excelling in school, nobody had enough interest to pass along resources that would continue my educational growth. Their indifference made me feel as if my accomplishments were just average. My educational potential was just as transparent as me. My family and I had to do the research about better suited educational opportunities; and from this point on I began to believe that as a Black woman in America, I would be forced to curate my own path without the genuine help of my White counterparts.

I would be dishonest if I did not note an unexpected exception to the educational hierarchy in schools I attended: most of my school principals and assistant principals were Black. Each time I would learn that fact, I would become so delighted and thought I was destined for unconditional support. However, it was in high school when I began to realize the disconnect that exists between Black students and Black staff, who I assumed should understand our struggles because we share the same race. I realized the mistake I had been making about the relationships between Black people in America. Most Black children are socialized to believe that other Black people will have their best interest at heart. I never recall my mother teaching me this; instead I inadvertently came to this conclusion through my understanding of the phrase commonly used by elder Black people: "us Black

folks gotta stick together.” However, it was not until high school when I began hearing the other very common phrase: “all skinfolk ain’t your kinfolk.”

Sometimes sharing the same struggles with someone does not make you less of a window and more of a mirror to them; and that is the problem we collectively face in our Black community.

The sound of students’ voices mocking that of fans at a concert, the alarming bell that signalled the beginning and end of a sometimes tedious lesson, and the seven minutes of school announcements I used to daydream about what I would be doing if I were in my bed never felt familiar to me. It became a routine, as I did it everyday for 6 years, but never something I looked forward to because of the negative energy that existed in the building. The internal conflicts of the Black community are more disheartening to me than intercommunal conflicts because if no one else is rooting for me, I would hope that my own people are supporting my success.

My high school had a very elitist culture that led to the favoritism of certain students. The worshipping of specific students by school administration left others to become disinterested in academics and discouraged from seeking help when needed. Whenever students attempted to make the administration aware of their feelings, they were hushed before they could gain support. I was shocked. These were Black leaders telling their future leaders to be complacent in an environment that they did not feel most comfortable in. They were teaching us that it was acceptable to voice our opinions only when it was the opinion of the entire community, reinforcing this realm of invisibility. This is why I grappled so long with the fact that my own high school did not provide the true feeling of home. One might think it is impossible to feel alienated in an educational community where you are academically thriving, but those are people who do not understand the importance of social and emotional satisfaction. To not truly meet all three of these components for students, especially those of color, is an emphasis on our invisibility to the world.

Fed up with administrators’ failure to make change, I co-founded my high school’s chapter of the Student Voice Committee in hopes of giving students the chance to gain some visibility. I wanted the average student, who is often missed because they are not a favorite of the principal or seeking every open leadership opportunity, to have a platform to voice their concerns. My peer and I were met with a lot of resistance and that is when I learned that “it was better to live out one’s own absurdity than to die for that of others.” The narrator understood the importance of living out loud regardless of what the



masses would think and how they would react. He emphasizes his willingness to openly be his invisible self on his own terms, not on the terms of others who would still lead him to self-destruct.

When we first initiated conversations with the principal, we were met with denial and the problems were being projected onto us. I did not expect to be met with such distasteful action when we were peaceful. This empowered me to keep pushing to be heard. We attempted to schedule a follow-up meeting but was instead directed to meet with the assistant principals. I assumed that this was to deter us from our goals.

I began to see the parallels between my invisibility in the Black community and White America. When I can be characterized by my surroundings, or invisible, my existence is partially noted; but, if I dare do anything that attempts to stray away from what others want to perceive me as, I become a threat that has to be eliminated. All of the years that were spent conforming to the school's norms created negative consequences, but not for those who put them in place. By following my own mission and beliefs, I made people hear and see me where it mattered most, which is hated by those who prefer that I am not seen or heard without their consent. I had been piecing this information along for years, and had finally solidified this realization that my six year old self had failed to catch.

With the veil stripped from America, I make more informed decisions about where I am present and how I choose to show up in that particular space. The narrator's participation in the "Brotherhood," a group run by white leaders in supposed support for the Black race, is first assumed to be strategic for the advancement of himself and other Black people. The leader Jack, who has a singular glass eye, seems to be a promising mentor and companion to the narrator. However, he fails to truly empathize with the Black race and understand the true struggles and hides behind his speeches filled with statements like "a better world for all people." As I embark on my journey at my predominantly white institution, I remember my invisibility, but I also remember the strength it gives me. I succeed even when my environment is not in my favor, and whenever I feel threatened, I am courageous enough to make myself visible to anyone bringing me harm.

When I first peeled open the book, I equated being invisible to being helpless, as the novel reveals how the limitations forced upon Black people creates invisibility and stifles liberty because to be free is to see the world and embrace its fluidity. However, as the final line reads, "Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak to you?" I find motivation in being aware of

my invisibility. It cannot be used against me and I cannot use it to my favor in unfair advantages, but I begin to navigate certain spaces with more purpose and less worry, confident in my abilities to exist in spaces that do not see me.

# FAERAH FYSUDEEN



**Senior**

**Major:** Philosophy and English Creative Writing

**Reading:** Fiction

Fareah (she/her) is a senior studying English and Philosophy from Farmington Hills, MI. Her creative work focuses on the convergence between the ordinary and extraordinary, the daily and the divine, often through stories about Muslim Americans. She is also a creative writing sub concentrator, for which her thesis will be a novella on a legal drama that poses questions about relationship to family and to God. If she's not writing, Fareah is reading, spending time with her friends or family, or Tweeting (you can follow her @fareah\_f). She also hosts a Podcast called "The Weight of God" on literature and philosophy which will be released soon. After graduation, Fareah hopes to pursue a Masters in Islamic Studies.

*Nominated by: Prof. Tish O'Dowd*

# Daffodils

On a sun-drenched dirt road in Southern California, where the trees sloped like tired lovers leaning into one another, where the breeze rippled the leaves of the camphor tree like the fluttering hems of silken skirts, the world stirred quietly awake.

Old homes with turrets and unkempt lawns, new homes with bay windows and soaring ceilings, vast lawns that somehow managed to evade the zoning ordinances all stretched out along the winding dirt road. The older Muslim couple across the street is quietly sipping on their chai, routinely after Fajr, sitting on their wraparound porch. Their chai trembles and glows under sun-soaked breezes. Mustafa, a retired orthopedic surgeon, sits with his legs stretched wide, his knuckles taut over the *TIMES of India* as his wife Nadira reviews her morning Quran pages.

Always the people-gazer, Nadira notices the door to the opposite house swing open, revealing a frenzied Sarah in an airy white sundress and pink trench coat. Every morning for the past month before work, Sarah would come out with a pinched face full of anticipation to check on her not-yet-blooming daffodils, and every day, Nadira had noticed, Sarah would rush back into the house in exasperation, drag her husband Adam outside, and they would bicker for some time before kneeling down, checked on the flower bed, and assured her that her flowers would bloom. Of course, for Nadira sitting half an acre away sipping on her chai, this scene was a daily silent movie, but she had all but memorized its script. Adam and Sarah acted simply like friends, as though they were waiting for the moment when they would be *really* married. As though everything now on the bursting, boundless lumination of Glen Cove Street was simply a fiction, a rehearsal.

Nadira glances over at her husband. His hands are large, rough. His thick reading glasses sit at the bridge of his nose, and he looks as though he is peering down at his *TIMES* with the nose-haired angle of a hilarious selfie. Nadira is suddenly filled with a rush of emotion so strong that her teacup quivers in her hand. She sets it down on the side table. Seeing Mustafa—sometimes, every so often— is exalting, it is redeeming. She looks back at the young couple across the street from her, and thinks how easily they could have been her and Mustafa, dundering through America forty years ago, not realizing then that what they loved wasn't the land, but each other.

“Do you think they’ll ever realize that they love each other?” Nadira asks.

Mustafa, cheekily, not looking up from his paper, says: “Do you think we’ve ever realized?”

Nadira gazes at him covertly, remaining silent. Yes, she thinks, saying nothing at all.

\* \* \*

The daffodils won’t bloom.

Sarah is convinced of this fact. She’d planted them only because of Adam’s persistent instructions last fall. It almost felt like a spiritual mandate that she plant the bulbs, because he had a way of making things whirl and sputter back to life: the smoky fireplace, the wobbly dining room chair, the peeling wallpaper all bloomed after Adam and his toolbox spent a few hours with them. He’d said, in his soft, even tone last fall, when they were just newlyweds moving into a run-down old tudor: “The perennials will make you so happy. It’s the best part of spring for me.”

For Adam they certainly are. His crocuses rise out of the ground refreshed from their winter vassalage, the rosy cheeks of the hibiscus bush blush, Douglas Irises open elegantly like live paper cranes. In a bed next to them is where her daffodils are supposed to be, but there are none. Sarah feels as though it means something, maybe about their marriage. After a winter of skirting around each other, politely occupying their shared space like blind roommates, she hoped spring would be different. But her daffodils won’t even bloom.

Sarah goes back into the house, her blouse ruffled by the force with which she shuts the door. “Adam?” He is in the kitchen, making himself a PB&J sandwich for his packed lunch. He has a post-it note in hand, scribbling down *tuna & lettuce*. “Adam. The daffodils.”

Adam puts the note on the fridge with a growing conglomeration of other notes: *tomatoes, pickled jalapeno, call Nadira Aunty for lawn service rec, we need a new vacuum! it’s no longer getting my hair, and sunhat hat missing, dire*. He’s dressed in slacks and a white shirt rolled up to his elbows, and moves like an old deer: graceful, acutely perceptive, but also with ponderous weightiness, as though he were carrying burdens of some ten thousand people. “I’m coming.”

He follows her out front, crouches down, and stays in a contemplative squatting pose as he inspects the flowers. Sarah sits on the stairs and watches

him watching the daffodils. Finally, he tells her for the thirtieth time: “I think they’re fine,” and makes his way back into the house.

“What! What do you mean ‘they’re fine?’” Sarah follows him back into the kitchen indignantly as he finishes up packing his sandwich. “You said the daffodils would be one of the first to bloom.”

“Listen, it’s hard to tell right now,” Adam says, not picking up her bait. He never did: he always answered her banter and flirtatiousness with an even tone, sometimes even a maddening, humorless seriousness. She’d giggle, and he’d ask what she was laughing about. She’d poke fun at his very slight lisp, and he’d respond with some mundane orthodontic detail about his misaligned jaw. “It might be too shady. It could also be that you buried them too deep. We’ll just have to wait.” Adam put his sandwich into his insulated lunch bag. “Oh, I forgot my backpack.”

He made his way upstairs, and Sarah trailed behind him, past their still-unfurnished living room with bare mahogany beams, past her study with unorganized piles of poetry and fiction, past the massive wingback armchair in the corner, the only comfortable place to sit in their house, and also the only other place they’d ever kissed each other besides their bed. The armchair was tucked away in a dimly-lit corner of her study, stuffed between two built-in bookshelves. Sometimes when she sat in the chair working late, he would come in to say good night, then lean down and give her a kiss that made her feel like she was stuffed with something lighter and sweeter than cotton candy. Several times, she pulled him in, climbed on his lap, and they embraced in the dark.

The next day, they would talk again about the daffodils.

Sarah traces the dark wooden banister up their staircase into their bedroom. Her clothes are strewn over the bed, his in piles in color-sorted laundry baskets. Adam puts on a sweater over his shirt, Sarah applies her lipstick, watching him through the mirror. “You know,” she says, as he follows her back down the stairs, “This whole gardening thing is unfair.”

Adam leans against the doorframe of her study. Light streams through the windows, dousing her messy papers and opened doggy-eared books in yellow. He undoes some of the dog-eared pages and replaces them with post-it notes, closing her books. He always performed little services like that. Last week, he assembled her bookshelf, the week before, he did her laundry and transcribed an interview for her while she frantically attempted to meet a writing deadline, both of them delirious from coffee and incoherent mumblings until four in the morning. “Why?”

“Because,” she sighs, picking out some books from her bookbag and adding new ones in (*Emily Dickinson & Western Existentialism, The Prophet, Mapping the Secular Mind*), “You are an environmental engineer. Your mom does landscaping. And your dad does real estate. It’s in your blood, and here I am, trying against all odds to be something I’m not.”

“You’re a writer. Isn’t that why you have a study?” A small smile curls over Adam’s face.

“Oh, you’re hilarious.” She pushes past him in a show of annoyance.

Adam’s laugh is hearty and full as it trails her. “So what am I supposed to do about that?”

“My ego’s wounded,” she pouts, turns around while they’re standing in front of the coat closet to grab their shoes, and jabs an accusing finger in his chest. “And I would love to see you do something you’re bad at, but that I’m good at.”

Adam seems to chew on this as Sarah puts on her suede ankle boots. Above her hangs a calligraphy painting of the verse in the Quran: *So in Allah let the believers put their trust.*

“What, like, write a poem or something?”

Sarah’s eyes brighten. “Yes, what a great idea!”

They walk to their cars. Sarah tosses her bookbag in the backseat, still holding eye contact with him, willing him to take up the challenge.

“Okay,” he says, reveling in his ability to make her this happy.

“Really?”

“It’ll be bad.”

“Bad poems are the best poems.”

“Then I owe you one bad poem. To make up for the daffodils.”

Sarah beams at him and Adam wants to say he feels the descension of an angel, or the iridescence of morning dew, but the light is so abundant that he can see an enormous chunk of cream cheese wedged between her teeth. Adam thinks about how he could have never made her up, this girl with cream cheese and Iqbal’s poetry and a pink trench coat—practically every girl he loved was furnished by his imagination, but Sarah isn’t, couldn’t be. She is painfully immanent. He is still wondering if it is better that she exists in real life rather than his imagination when she ducks into her car, still beaming. He gets inside his. Their garage door mechanically winds up, and they head down their driveway, part ways, just as the once-blinding sunlight gets tempered by a more settled morning over Glen Cove street.

\* \* \*

Every year, the neighbors tried to get the county to pave Glen Cove Street with real cement, but every year, ancient Mr. Malkasian delivered the same impassioned speech about how he refused to pay unless the local government did, so they all gave up. Secretly, they loved the dirt road; in the summer, when the sun baked it dry, you could see Mr. Malkasian walking barefoot up and down the street at daybreak. He would stop, lean over his mailbox under the mimosa tree, and tilt his stern, weathered face at just the right angle to catch a stray ray of sunlight. A cement road could not have brought that sight. The rays of the sun gently shake the shoulders of men and women with the fingers of medallion-hued angels; Mrs. Jones frowns through her window at the high school Harrington girl who seems to have knocked over her mailbox *again*; the rabbits chew happily on the Vignesh's newly sprouted Spinach plants (oblivious that in an hour, they will be chased out in a rage by the small keeper of the garden, eight-year-old Vithya Vignesh).

On a cloudy evening in the middle of April, Sarah and Adam share a pot of tea with Nadira and Mustafa. Mr. Malkasian and the Vigneshes were also invited, but the young couple has overstayed them. Mr. Malkasian had gruffed about the upcoming election and his philosophical stance on the electoral college (“Now, if we divide the total number of votes by the number of people that voted, it’s not equal! It’s not equal! Tell me why I moved to California? It’s a waste, everywhere, this damned country.”), but his uninterested audience of Mr. Vignesh and little Vithya Vignesh, though they nodded politely, failed to douse the flame of his fury. Mr. Malkasian crankily drank the rest of his tea and said goodbye to everyone, still fuming about the electoral college on his way out. The Vigneshes boasted with the group about Vithya recently winning the spelling bee and her new horseback riding lessons. Sarah snuck a glance at Adam, wondering if they, too, would be at Nadira and Mustafa’s porch a decade later, boasting about spelling bees and pet rabbits and extracurricular activities. Mrs. Vignesh rubbed her pregnant belly and put down the Indian sweets with a wide smile. “Time to sleep,” she said, “baby is very tired.”

That left the old couple and the newlyweds, sitting out on the stone deck, comfortably paralyzed by the weary weight of a springtime Sunday. The tea has gone cold. The trees in the backyard quiver with their stumpy new leaves. The clouds are brooding, but eerily majestic, breaching pockets of purple light like a hinged door to heaven. And as people on Sundays are wont to do, they linger.



When Nadira shuffles between the kitchen and deck to put away the teacups and snacks, Adam obligingly helps her. She watches Sarah from the corner of the eye, who is animatedly answering Mustafa's questions about her ongoing experience at USC's doctoral program in Comparative Literature. Nadira wants to ask her for updates about her marriage, but when all the dishes are stowed, Sarah is still talking to Mustafa about books on the healthcare system, and both of them are so deep into the conversation to break away from a mere interruption. Nadira silently curses her husband for preventing a perfectly good advice session from taking place, then turns graciously to Adam.

He scratches his neck. Nadira is painfully aware of how awkward he is, how slowly he moves, like an unwieldy mulberry tree, or an agonizingly slow-chewing sloth. She is suddenly filled with gratitude— overflowing, actually— that Mustafa, though old, is agile, clever, witty. Mustafa still made jokes that are occasionally hilarious. Nadira couldn't imagine Adam making a joke without it sinking listlessly into the water like a stone that failed to skip over a lake. How different this man was from the woman he married: with a pixie-ish face, a pointed chin like the tip of a comic raindrop, and dramatic flashes of speech, Sarah is a beaming romantic. Nadira tries to size Adam up, but she can't fully do it: she wants to conclude that he's boring, but he just seems reserved.

For all the times that Sarah had described her relationship with him, Nadira had never actually made conversation with Adam. Sarah had grown close with Nadira about the topic of her relationship, because her and Adam's partially arranged marriage prevented her from fully confiding in her own mother. Both in their early thirties, rejecting marriage despite their parents' insistence for a decade until they felt distraught and lonely from searching, they didn't want any more dates, any more meet-ups. The false smiles and "tell me what you dos" and tepid coffees brought nothing but the feeling that they weren't good enough for true love if they had to work this hard to find it. Isn't it, after all, some natural conspiracy that lights the heart from within? Isn't it the closest thing to a miracle, true love? And if it meant stilted text messages and lipstick-stained teeth, maybe they were not meant to get it. Sarah thought Adam's eyes were kind from the moment they'd met. Adam thought he wouldn't get tired of listening to Sarah speak. Maybe they had to settle for kind eyes and bad poetry. Maybe it's what they deserved: not love, but marriage; not soulmates, but each other.

This all Nadira had pieced together through Sarah's chipper resignation. Sarah had thoroughly rationalized the marriage as one of convenience and companionship, but even if Nadira was blind, she'd recognize that Sarah and Adam loved each other. Nadira knew that withholding love is the same as accepting indifference; she knew that accepting indifference is the same as wallowing in unfulfilled ideals. How often do we invent people in our minds, manufacture our soulmates on the sparkling conveyor belt of our fantasies? Nadira looked at her husband again, and believed everything good that had ever happened to her was because she accepted the love that was right in front of her, even if it had a receding hairline, and even if they were never able to conceive a child, even if it left behind a history of profound imperfection and homesickness: here they were on Glen Cove street, the sun spilling everywhere.

Nadira smiles at Adam, tongue-in-cheek. She feels a bit catty, waspish. She is angry at his blindness. "How are you, *beta*?"

Adam nods deeply, a hand over his heart. His fingernails are well-manicured against his pastel blue shirt, like white houses on a Santori shoreline. "Very well, thank you, Aunty."

"You know," Nadira starts, feeling a little immodest, "You look very nice in that color. Sarah was telling me that she loves it when you wear light blue." (Sarah had said no such thing)

Nadira's revelation clearly catches Adam off-guard because his eyes widen and gleam for a second. He vaguely gestures toward his torso and his eyes don't move past the bottom of Nadira's chair. "Oh, she didn't... tell me that."

"Pay attention, *beta*. There are many things she loves."

\* \* \*

The next day, Adam calls Sarah at work. She is in the graduate room office eating her

lunch (Adam made her an extra tuna sandwich— he was appalled to find that she always ate out) before heading to the introductory writing course she teaches for freshmen. Her fingers hover excitedly over the phone. This is new.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Sarah," she could hear him outside, near the windmills. "Hey, I was wondering if I could ask you a favor— so I have to pick up some prints for

those new panels tomorrow, and FedEx is really close to the University. It's the last day to get them. Do you think you could grab them for me?"

"Oh," she says absently, a little disappointed that this is the reason for his call. What was she expecting, anyway? A little check-in because he misses her? "Sure, I can do that."

Out in an office in the California desert and under bottomless blue skies, Adam is eating his tuna sandwich as he reads Sarah's newest short story. He writes little comments in the margins: *I love this! Amazing imagery. Astute historical scenery.* In the story, a little girl orphaned by the Indian Mutiny makes up stories, lives in her head, making and remaking a world where she never lost the people she loved. *Sometimes, Sarah writes, fiction is the only salve for reality. The difference between them is nothing at all, and yet, the balance of mortality hangs by the thread of a story.*

When Adam gets home, he is looking forward to handing her a fully annotated short story with a letter of observations and commentary to advance her thinking. He is reading the news when she comes in, later than usual, tired, make-up smudged and her hijab already slipping off from the drive home.

While she sets down her things, Sarah implores, "Did you like the short story? Was it a bit stilted, towards the end? The thing is, I don't want to come off as sentimental or pedantic... I have a problem with that, you know." She slides in the seat across from him. The soft glow of the flush mounted light tints everything in a hyper-saturated orange, and her skin glows. "But what did you think? I want to hear everything."

For some reason, Adam blanks out. "I thought it was good... and interesting. And I liked it. Very good job."

She looks disappointed. "... was there anything specific?"

"I'd have to look at it again."

Sarah rubs her temples. "I've had a long day. The new book I thought would... well, it

doesn't matter, anyway." She gets up, fixes him with an implicating stare, as though he doesn't deserve to know. "I'm going to take a shower."

Adam wants to say something else, to hand her the annotated short story and see her eyes light up, but it's upstairs in their bedroom, and he feels like any more words than necessary may somehow break him. Instead he asks, "Did you get the prints from Fedex?"

"Oh no," she blurts, smacking her forehead with her hand, "I completely forgot. I'm so sorry."

“It was the last day to get them. If you said you couldn’t, I could have gotten them myself.”

“I’m sorry, I forgot, and I was grading papers, plus one of the journal contributors dropped, and—”

Adam pushes past her, a surge of hurt and dread settling like a film around his ribs. What could she not understand? “I would have done it for you.”

That evening, they eat dinner separately, sequester themselves in different rooms, don’t talk all night. Sarah doesn’t realize how much they usually talk to each other until they don’t. She realizes he knows each of her coworkers by name, he knows the dangers of nihilism because of her. She knows the names of so many plants, countless California perennials, has tried so many variations of tuna sandwiches. On a road trip, she could probably point out the different names of clouds: cirrus, and stratus, and cumulonimbus, which was his favorite, large and full like a weighted blanket. Leaning against the kitchen island as they cooked or while brushing their teeth, they’d learned everything about each other. It feels as though the balance of their relationship hangs in actions as fragile as going to the Fedex and reading a six-page short story, and yet, Sarah thinks, they still failed to do it.

When she crawls into bed next to him, he faces away from her, shoulders rigid. She lays in bed for nearly two hours staring at the ceiling, her chest rising and falling as though a million bricks were stacked on top, thinking, *Ya Allah, how did it happen that you gave me love, and I gave you indifference?* She slips out of bed and creeps downstairs to her study. She sits at her desk, buries her face in her trembling hands. Just a few months ago, the thought of crying about Adam would’ve felt almost ludicrous. He was so irrelevant. But as she sobs, she thinks how good it feels to now know that they have the power to hurt each other. The opposite of love isn’t hatred— it’s apathy.

On her way out, she catches something on her desk. A note, hastily scrawled on a small assembly of post-it notes:

*The sun shines, and no one notices.  
The crocuses bloom, and no one notices.  
The gardens smile, and no one notices.  
But when my hands find yours, I close my eyes,  
and see the world as it is.  
Yesterday, I was afraid, and I was ashamed:  
Today, I am in love.*

*How is that for a bad poem?*

\* \* \*

One morning in June, for one of the few voluntary times in her life, Sarah wakes up earlier than noon on a Saturday. She puts on her makeup, lengthening her lashes and pinkening her cheeks and lips with the same color, and goes downstairs to cook breakfast for Adam. She arranges it on the tray table, then realizes what's missing: she dashes outside to pick two hibiscuses and puts them in an empty jar of jam. When she's upstairs, Adam looks like he just woke up, with his hair matted down on one side of his head and an unmistakable drool stain on the pillow. Sarah ignores it and focuses instead on the way his arms look in the plain white undershirt, the way his neck muscles tense and flush when he sees her.

"Oh, hey," Adam says, "I was getting worried, it's nine am and— why... Is that for me?"

"Stuffed omelette. Blueberry scones—"

"Oh, that's why you didn't let me into the kitchen last night—"

"— OJ, obviously. The hibiscus is just for ornamentation."

"It actually has some medicinal properties." He says this with wide eyes, soft. Sarah laughs. Once, she would have been upset by his inability to say what he really meant: *thank you*, or *I love you*, but today, she is so acutely aware that no one else could speak their language of give and take, of post-it notes and bad poems, of their exact history and circumstance.

"But really, don't eat the hibiscus."

They share breakfast, eating with their fingers because Sarah forgets the utensils and is too lazy to get them herself and she absolutely forbids Adam from doing her the favor. Then she makes him get dressed and they head downstairs, where she shows him the new bed of primroses she planted.

"Surprise!"

"I'm impressed, really," he admits, bending down to check on them. "Did you... take them out of the plastic casings?"

"Was I supposed to?"

He looks at her quizzically. "Yes?" Sarah scrunches her head into shoulders. He looks back down. "... It's fine, we'll just dig them out and replant them. Oh... they're light blue."

"Yeah, I know it's your favorite color. You keep wearing light blue."

"My favorite... But I thought—"

“Adam, look!” Sarah crouches down, and the morning sun falls fully on her face.

Between her face and the flowers is nothing but blinding, bountiful light. “The daffodils... look, they’re budding!”

When she stands back up, giddy with the excitement of finally seeing her flowers bud, Adam leans down to plant a chaste kiss at the side of her mouth. For the first time, it is not shrouded in darkness. He holds her, just as the morning sun, just as God does both of them between His merciful hands.

“I have a feeling Nadira Aunty is watching us,” he whispers.

“I’ve had that feeling, too,” she giggles.

They go back inside, into Sarah’s study, climb onto her wingback armchair.

Nadira is indeed wondering why she didn’t see the two of them in the morning. As she drinks her chai, however, she sees Mr. Malkasian walking barefoot on the dirt road, the scorching summer sun now having dried the dirt to a clean tan mat. He sways as gently as the leaves under his mimosa tree. The leaves bend softly to the summer breeze, the bushes quiver quietly. Stray clouds loiter overhead. Another luminous morning ends with the sudden thrush of more rabbits sneaking up to Vithya Vignesh’s poor little spinach garden. And so the world turns, and the sun burns, and pain teaches us to love more than our dreams ever could. Mustafa refills his wife’s cup of tea. Yes, Nadira thinks, *of this, I am sure.*

*Daffodils won the Hopwood Undergraduate Fiction Award and the Robert F. Haugh Prize at the University of Michigan in 2021.*

# DYLAN GILBERT



**Senior**

**Major:** FTVM and English

**Minor:** Creative Writing

**Reading:** Poetry

Dylan Gilbert is a writer from Ann Arbor Michigan. She has spent her time at Michigan on the Michigan Slam Poetry Team and working at a non-profit teen center, running writers workshops and educating youth on safe sex and rape culture. After her senior year at Michigan is completed this spring she hopes to continue her learning at an MFA program for poetry.

*Nominated by: Prof. Sumita Chakraborty*

# Appointment

The doctors find salt water in my lungs.  
They want  
to know more.

*Have you been drinking a lot  
of salt water lately?*

I was never taught  
to drink. Only  
to inhale

*Have you recently spent  
time in or near  
the ocean?*

No, but the ocean always finds  
my family.

*Does it  
burn when you breathe?*

dressed in soot  
instead of red. I seared a hole  
through my mother's stomach  
I was born into burning like others  
were born into knowing  
their name

*You've always felt  
like this?*

Yes

*Then how do you  
know it's burning?*

I've been told  
Other people don't



have to think  
so hard  
about breathing  
The doctor scratches  
on his clipboard. Stands up.  
Dips his wax  
fingers under my fold  
of chin.

*Everything looks fine.*

But there is salt water  
in my lungs

He turns toward  
his computer.

*Studies show that it's actually  
quite common for African  
American patients to experience salt water  
in the lungs.*

But, I'm  
drowning

*It's not unusual for African  
American patients to experience some  
drowning in their lifetime.*

It's hereditary?

No.

But it  
hurts

The doctor swivels  
to face me. Takes  
off his glasses. His eyes turn  
kind.

*You know, women  
like you are so  
Strong. In a week  
I bet you won't  
even notice.*

# In the house of God

they hand me a book called suffering  
12 years old and I am ushered into a closet with a man I cannot see  
the door closes heavy behind me  
and I wonder why my parents sent me here  
tight room  
strange man  
didn't they warn me about this?

you have to go to confession to be confirmed in the Catholic Church  
you must bleed muddy  
and beg to be cleaned

I quietly admit to watching porn  
and suddenly there is an eye between the slits of the partition  
the priest wants to see my face  
wants me to hear him  
when he tells me I am a girl  
a girl  
do I understand?  
I will be a lady come Sunday  
and I know the act is not a sin anymore I am  
the wanting did not soil me but I it  
and I know now what I am meant for

when I am fifteen I break up with my first girlfriend  
and I tell her we are wrong  
I tell her I love her but I love my family more  
tell her I love her but I fear a father more

I tell her I know this feeling  
with every touch I become cold  
dry shame  
blue eyes  
between dark wood  
I repent for every too good feeling

slip the sign of the cross  
between sheets

In the house of God  
they hand me a book called suffering  
and this time

I will make a meal of it  
slit my tongue on the pages  
and finally drink from my own cup  
I taste better than communion  
and I wasn't the first to say it  
God's river must not have been salted red as mine  
I am the well that never runs dry  
I can hear your shallow breath from here  
I know you're thirsty too  
uncork me  
sip plum  
sticky and leaking  
they didn't make this aching bountiful  
for nothing

the church would be withering without girls like me  
who would it feast on?  
who would it point a crooked finger at if not  
queer  
woman  
pleasure seeking

lift the cup  
wet your mouth  
that sweet bite on your lips is me

Jesus  
you did nothing but love your daddy and die  
did nothing but fish and drink good wine  
Baby baby I'm so sorry baby  
how did they make such a burning out of you?  
do you think they've ever probed metal into their own palm?  
we have  
bled by choice just to see if I could still hurt

just to see how warm I was  
they told me we all need a little suffering  
better to punish myself than have my father do it  
better to control the bleed than leave it up to a man  
Jesus I've hurt in your name  
could have died by your name

oh God,  
I really am your child  
look how I bleed  
see how it wrenches me  
unthread my veins  
and everything grows but me  
I scream and they salivate  
I spill and every head tilts back  
every mouth opens

call me son  
call me sacrifice  
call me  
Mmm  
so rich and sweet

# My favorite high school teacher slept with two probably more students

On Friday he emailed me  
I did not look at it for six days  
Until I did  
Until it chewed a hole through me

That's a bad excuse

*Until I was bored and curious and maybe my partner wasn't paying much attention to me that day.*

The message said that he has been on a journey trying to find himself amongst the mess

*Gather his reputation into one pile and sweep all the dirty under the bed.*

He said that he watched the full moon rise over the Atlantic  
He found a paper he wrote on in 2018  
And he read it  
And he thought of me  
He is starting with me on his road to redemption

*He wants to talk to someone he knows will sit at his feet and look up.*

So many children and I am the one  
He thinks about when the sky is ripe and the moon is crowning

*The first man to breathe in the back of my neck did so when I was six. He knows. This type of ugly is as normal to me as an orange. Knows the best girls to prey on are the ones who are used to breathing in dust.*

And I have to go to the bathroom now

*I have to vomit and scrub the pink off my cheeks.*

There are 12 nights of moon left  
And I will have a bucket by my bedside for all of them

*I'm going to read his words and not respond and feel special and throw up again.  
I already did it twice.*

*Shhh that's the part we're not going to talk about. That's the part that turns my  
skin into something I can't wriggle out of. Turns my spine into something I need  
to take a seam ripper to.*

It was gossip until it wasn't  
Until it was two girls  
Until I became one of the whisper that put his seclusion into works I did it  
with red on my ears  
I did it with salt on my tongue  
I did it angry  
I did it vengeful  
And how dare another predator make me care for them  
How often did men use my youth against me  
How often it still works

He saw me at the bookstore last week  
Heard me read a poem

*Watched me carve a window for him to climb through. For me to stare at the  
moon out of. And remember him.*

He wrote to me that  
I had grown so much  
And not at all

*And not at all  
And not at all  
And not at all*

I read it  
Read it until I was 17 and special again  
Until I remembered  
About the man withering into grey  
Who found his hand on my back at target last month  
And asked me if I was going to be a sophomore in high school this year

I must still look young enough  
to want

*I do not smile. I do not frown. I put on sunscreen when the clouds are closed and the blinds are closed too. I rub oil into my heavy cheeks. Sit still and cross legged in my bed. Shamefully bask in my youth and do my best not to crease it.*



# CHARLES-ALEXANDRIA GOODRUM



**Freshman**

**Major:** Film, Television, and Media

**Reading:** Essay

I was born in Washington DC, but I hail from Detroit, Michigan. From a young age I have been interested in telling stories, and I have written thousands upon thousands of my own. I have hopes that I will one day be able to make films that tell meaningful tales of real life struggles through the lens of people like me.

*Nominated by: Prof. Clayton Wickham*

# I Need a Hero

Life is filled to the brim with steady expectations. As a child, you're expected to behave as your mother taught you. You're expected to mind your p's and q's and say your *please's* and *thank you's*. When you grow, you're expected to contribute to your household; take out the trash, do the dishes, whatever might apply to you. Expectations are normal. There is not one person on the planet who does not have at least one to live up to. In some cases, we can't live up to all of them, and that's okay. We're not *superheroes*. And even if we were, it'd be just as fine. Just ask Miles Morales—*Your friendly neighborhood Spider-Man* from a not-so-distant *other dimension*.

Being such an avid comic-reader, heroics were easily identifiable to me as a young child. Someone saves a cat from a tree, they're someone's hero. They help an old lady across the street, they're someone's hero. It wasn't for many years that I learned that the term *hero* was subjective and that a hero could be anything I wanted it to be. That I could be anything I wanted to be. My inspiration came from 2018's animated gem *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse*, where the film's protagonist—the aforementioned Miles Morales, an Afro-Latino kid from Brooklyn with untied shoes and a full head of brown curly hair—was seen having trouble figuring out who he was. It sounded *oh so familiar*. I was sixteen at the time. Ushered in whatever direction my parents saw fit.

Miles spends the majority of the film tripping over himself after inheriting great power and responsibility from his dimension's late Peter Parker. And in the wake of the world literally collapsing at the hands of the ominously *huge* Kingpin, there were immediately gargantuan expectations Miles had to face. He had to be Spider-Man. One minute he's just a normal kid trying to get by at a new school, the next he's thrust into the world of superheroing, expected by everyone to just leap into action.

My experience is nowhere near as dramatic as the plot of this film, but it inspired me beyond words. I was born into a very strong-willed family, both parents having seen tremendous adversity in their lives growing up. They both gained excellence, though rather than it being store-bought or predetermined by either nature or nurture, they built their merit and skill like a house from the ground up with their bare hands. Those were my parents, two amazingly successful people, who laughed in the face of misfortune

because they were better than being affected by such. My mother and father. And then me, meek and anxious about every single life choice I had to make. My parents expected the same type of excellence from me simply because I was their child. I was expected to carry on their legacy of greatness. Achieve the highest grades as my mother did, persevere as my father had, I was never as smart or as brave as they were. How was I supposed to live up to the monument of...*them*?

Miles recognized that he had potential. He was no ordinary boy, after all. He had amazing spider-like superpowers and awe-inspiring intelligence, he'd tested into an amazing private school and yet he was still hopeless. I was less intelligent, but still above average. I was talented at a good amount of things. I knew that, I just had...no idea who I was supposed to be. I surely wasn't the phenomenally strong daughter of my mother and father. Just like Miles wasn't Spider-Man. Except he was.

All he had to do was take a leap of faith. His leap of faith symbolized his belief in himself as he literally leaped off of a building, and the cinematography was so gripping that it was tear-jerking. In his version of the script, Phil Lord described exactly how he wanted to portray Miles' ascent into greatness. In his brand new, personalized spider-suit, our protagonist jumps from atop a skyscraper. "Miles walks to the edge of the roof, the wind buffeting... and *LEAPS!* The camera is *UPSIDE DOWN*. Miles isn't falling through frame. He's *RISING*." It was a symbolism of ascension in his descent. Watching the film, it caused a dizzying warble of emotions, only enhanced by the true intentions of Phil Lord on paper. It was to inspire. It was to see that boy risk everything for something he believed in.

He's rising. Throughout the entire movie, Miles struggled with the expectations of his parents to be a great student, the expectations of taking on a legendary mantle, the weight of the entire world was on his shoulders. The pressure was so great that it terrified him. But he believed in himself, and the anxiety of determination leads him to push himself until he believes that it is not the hero that other people need, rather the hero he needs himself to be. "*You good with that Spider-Man?*" he'd ask with a brand new attitude and fervor. He *became* the hero he needed himself to be.

As a regular person in a world without superheroes, there is still the pressure to be this amazing thing that does better than the people who came before, and that expectation can be scary and crippling. So to overcome that fear, all one must do is believe that they can be who they want themselves to be. I made my peace with the fear of not living up to my parents' image. I

cannot live up to the expectation of being as strong-willed as my mother or as resilient as my father, but I can be the person I need to be. I resolved to be an even better version of them; an amazing version of myself. My own hero.

Miles might not have been the Spider-Man people wanted, but he made it for himself. He became his own hero. He took his leap of faith, and it inspired me to take mine. Expectations are not solid concepts. They are made as a baseline for preference, they are made for you to succeed. You might not be able to fulfill every expectation given, but if you take that expectation and you evolve it, then it becomes your legacy. I evolved my parents' legacy. I love who I am today, and I'm grateful that I could receive inspiration from a certain Afro-Latino cartoon boy from Brooklyn. He taught me how to believe in myself and inspired me to pursue great things. Hell, I *am* a superhero. We *all* are.

## Works Cited

Lord, Phil, and Rodney Rothman. "Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse." *Script Slug*, 3 Dec. 2018, [www.scriptslug.com/assets/uploads/scripts/spider-man-into-the-spider-verse-2018.pdf](http://www.scriptslug.com/assets/uploads/scripts/spider-man-into-the-spider-verse-2018.pdf).

# THOMAS GRIFFITH



**Sophomore**

**Major:** Creative Writing and Political Science

**Reading:** Poetry

Thomas Griffith, a Yooper turned Wisconsinite turned Wolverine, is a midwestern poet/sophomore studying Creative Writing and Literature and Political Science. Thomas often finds himself ensnared by the little things, for better or worse, and spends hours finding ways to intertwine these marginal observations with midwestern imagery. No, Thomas does not have a Yooper accent. Yes, Thomas swears Frank Ocean is a poet as much as he is a musician.

*Nominated by: Prof. Sarah Messer*

# As the Night Goes On

As the night goes on longer and longer  
I toss and turn in sand-filled sheets.

I always toss and turn, sandy sheets or not,  
To the tune of marsh-crickets.

To the tune of crickets in the marsh  
I remember what came before this vast night.

I try not to remember what came before this vast night  
But letting go has never come easy to me.

Knowing when to go has never come easy to me but  
Thoughts of fractals and repetition and lost lovers do.

Do thoughts of fractals and repetition and lost lovers  
Ever drown out the sounds of crickets chirping?

The sounds of chirping crickets never drown these thoughts  
As the night grows longer and longer.

# Winter Shadows that Talk Dirty

One under the moon-soaked snowfall,  
One under the moon-soaked snowfall,  
My dark shadow transpierces hers silently.  
My dark shadow transpierces hers silently.  
The moon, my dark shadow, fall under her.  
Soaked snow transpierces one silently.

I know that silence is the language of awe.  
I know that silence is the language of awe.  
She even commands the snow's silence.  
She even commands the snow's silence.  
She even commands the language.  
I know the silence of snow, awful silence.

Each snowflake, an infinite offering to her.  
Each snowflake, an infinite offering to her.  
But I am eased to know they too are not enough.  
But I am eased to know they too are not enough.  
But I too am each snowflake, an infinite offering, not enough,  
Eased to know her.

She commands I fall silently, eased under her shadow,  
But even that snow-soaked offering is not enough  
To silence my dark, infinite language.  
To know I am each snowflake,  
The awe-silence of snow, transpierces her.  
The one moon is even.

# When I Hear Her Voicemail

She was here and there  
I was dear to her  
We just didn't care  
About where we were  
She smiled like honey  
I thought her a poem  
We thought it funny  
And seldom went home  
I speak in past tense  
But this love story  
Has no recompense  
An allegory  
For something short, brief  
And even lonely  
Lovely disbelief  
My one and only  
With rough calloused feet  
Both winters sharp breath  
And arid June heat  
The daydream of death  
When I wake alone  
In a double bed  
I'm driftwood afloat  
In water dyed red  
And that is her way  
The way of the wind  
But when she does stay  
I am whole again  
And all of that pain  
Is just memory  
She once lived in Spain  
And one spring called me  
To tell me the truth  
And I love you too



From a small phone booth  
Ran my heart straight through

# Young-Helmholtz Trichromatic Love—Phoebe’s Haibun

We pick up scattered clothes in backwards places, the type of places that only a night of red wine finds. In the kitchen I watch her feeble hands skitter across the counter, banishing scraps of green peppers and yellow tomato seeds into the trash can with a screwy lid. It isn’t even our place, it’s her sister’s. Seeing her care so much hurts more than leaving. The Greyhound comes in an hour by the time we walk out into the street, wearing the same musk. She smiles in red. I quiver in blue. The metro is cold. The ride is short.

One hour together is a marriage. One hour is a child. One hour is the crow’s feet around her eyes growing deeper. Her rosy, frost-bitten cheeks are apples when she smiles. Her blue mitten encompasses five familiar digits, needed twelve times to summarize an hour. There is no breath of green in a Chicago winter except for the pepper in her teeth.

Oh, her teeth. So gentle in her grin and craving in her bite.

Then the city is drowned by a smeared bus window. The skeleton of a coral reef. A colorblind ode to Jackson Pollock. Cinder block cathedrals and mourning garb. Nobody talks. The other passengers see it too. Quadrants and lamp posts pass, a procession. Hyde Park. Hermosa. The Loop.

Fingers in fine cloth  
Warmed by the licks of my fire  
Later kindling

# Euclidian Walk of Shame

It's 3:36am and I'm on my  
way home. Home is where  
I don't sleep in your arms,  
and in Madison, and in Marquette,  
and where my first dog died  
and I feel the same sadness now  
that I did when she was put down  
for her own good.

I take a left and another left  
and I can't decipher between  
wrong and right, so I turn another left  
corner because I'm not sure  
what's right anymore. I know you've  
noticed my discomfort and  
I've told you it's not you. But it is you.  
All I can say to cover my tracks  
is that I love you.

I think back to the start of it all,  
to that carpool home in May, the cigarette  
burns on your car seat from the previous owner,  
the radio station amusement park ticket giveaway,  
the mirror sticker that tried to warn me  
that objects are closer than they appear  
and I realize that two wrongs don't  
make a right but three lefts  
walking around the block make a  
U-turn and I'm back where I started.

# Crickets

And now it's that time of night.  
That time of night  
When it's a little less lonely to be lonesome.

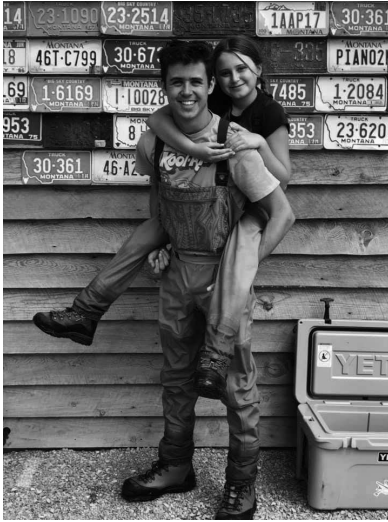
To lie awake  
Yet keep our windows shut  
Is a crime too familiar.

It's a selfish thing to keep our windows shut.  
But again,  
We are selfish creatures

Prone to indulging in self-proclaimed solitude  
When just outside a chorus sings —  
One filled with those who expect nothing in return.

They sing brilliantly,  
Yet not to be heard by us,  
But simply because.

# MAX HERNAND



**Junior**

**Major:** Psychology

**Minor:** Creative Writing

**Reading:** Fiction Short Story

Max Hernand is a Junior from Los Angeles, California. Although he is a Psychology major and plans to pursue a PhD in clinical psychology, writing short fiction is a strong passion of his that he enjoys because it requires a different type of thinking than he's used to. Max doesn't think of himself as very creative, but does take great pride in the stories he manages to finish. Other than writing short stories, Max also loves watching movies, playing basketball, and spreading mental health awareness.

*Nominated by: Prof. Tish O'Dowd*

# Baseball

The ball stung Mason's palm when it smacked his glove. He winced but threw it back and raised his glove up to catch it again.

"Not by your head, Mijo – out in front of you," his father Arturo told him, holding his glove out horizontally before his chest as he threw the ball back no softer. Mason caught it in front of his chest and winced again, but this time only to himself, and threw it forcefully back. It lofted high into the air, and lifted further and rose unstoppably, and Arturo had to backpedal for it, catching it with his glove towards the sky. Mason threw his scrawny arms up and flexed, mouth wide and jaw clenched for gritting teeth. "Grrrrrr," Mason said from his chest.

"Too high, bring it down," Arturo said, holding his glove out again before his chest. He rapped the ball lightly upon his chest, echoing his heartbeat. Everything Arturo had left he held there – he held his son in his chest, his wife, his home, and Chavez Ravine in his chest; he held himself so tightly. His tucked canvas shirt was stretched and thinned by his chest but his khakis, ever-pressed and perpetually colored by the dust that filtered into the Ravine, flowed like a dress around his wiry legs. He whipped the ball forcefully into his own glove.

When his mother had first brought him to California, Arturo's legs were much stronger. She couldn't work, so he got a job working construction, and then in the garment district, and he took care of her well. Just when he had met his wife, Maria – who had introduced herself to him at a garment workers union meeting, and to whom his words had fumbled off his tongue as if made of clay – they were redlined out of the downtown. They married in Chavez Ravine. A year later, they gave birth to a son and Arturo's mother, whom he brought to Chavez Ravine with his wife, passed the same week his son was born. He raised this son proudly in Chavez Ravine, burdening him (at times he thought unfairly) with the onus of perseverance his late mother had left in her wake – the onus Arturo, too, had taken on as his mother's health declined and his adult life began. Arturo had soon quit his job to raise Mason, and with hopes they'd one day find themselves downtown. He often imagined the apartment they'd make their own, and its fixtures and the plants that would line the walls and shelves beside books, and the cereal he'd pour for Mason before school each morning; the long showers he and Maria would take just

to listen to the water hit the floor. But in terms of how he made it there, his imagination would run dry, left to wonder and wander aimlessly, and he'd be returned to reality and the sand in his shoes.

Reality began to blur as the fantasies grew – in fact, preparedness had become such a habit for him that he could no longer conceive of his youth, nor remember his coming to California. He thought only in plans and dressed ready for a job, or fortuity, or marvelous coincidence – whose miraculousness he'd excuse and call fate – that could take him downtown at any moment. Every minute or so he spat in his hand and pressed his hair back straight and proper.

“Toro!” a woman's voice yelled from deep within the house. Arturo turned. The shout bounced around a while, clay to clay to clay, before rambling down the dirt fields and the dirt roads, before climbing up the hills and fading into downtown. Their home was more pueblo than booming Angelino ranch, and beneath the impatient sky over Chavez Ravine, it was more of a kiln. But a new tin roof Arturo had scrapped from some abandoned fencing and the wall of a trailer their old neighbors had given him kept it cooler than their remaining neighbor's home. Nailed into the deep brown clay were a few family photographs, all but two taken while in Chavez Ravine, but the walls were mostly empty; instead of presenting memories or being stared at, they simply listened, and were leaned on and against, and did their best not to crumble in the heat. There was a fireplace that was never used, and Arturo's mother's ashes centered on the mantelpiece.

Arturo tossed the ball back to Mason and headed inside.

“Toro, another one,” his wife said, handing him the eviction notice. His body became heavy and he leaned on her shoulder as he read; “lower again,” she said. Most of Chavez Ravine had already disappeared. Mrs. Aguilar, for one, had taken the money the city offered and left to wait for the public housing that never came. The next week, Mr. Obregón took less for the same. The Valdezes waited it out until they went broke, and then went back to Mexico. Maria protested most days, but the protests had made no noise, and Arturo silently doubted the letters they had sent were ever read. Their neighbors' yards cooked, their furniture rotted, and the clay and metal and wooden skeletons they left behind began to shed and melt or burn. He wondered why they had left, if only to have left that. Sometimes, Mason explored the hollowed-out homes and found the sun through the gaps the roofs had left when they caved in, gaps with clay or metal or wooden teeth. In one home he had found a baseball glove with a ball inside, and it fit him perfectly. Arturo

was thrilled at the thought of playing baseball like he had as a child, and of playing baseball with Angelinos one day, and sent Mason out to find another glove.

Through the kitchen window, Arturo, holding lightly the eviction notice, watched Mason throw the ball up as high as he could and catch it, and then heave it up again. Often Mason threw it too far behind himself and had to stumble after it, shielding his eyes with his other hand. A few times he lost it in the sun, and it landed on his foot, or hit him in the head. One time he lost his balance and stumbled into the dirt. If there still was grass, he wouldn't have skinned his knee so bad. Arturo held the warning like a feather, scared he might tear it.

"I'll do dinner tonight," Arturo told his wife.

"Are you sure?" Maria asked. "You've had a long—"

"I'm sure."

Arturo knew he couldn't cook much himself. Typically, he remembered, the field where Mason played, when it used to be a home, was where they'd have dinner. The Guzmans would bring the frioles; the Sabines brought the tortillas; the Fuenteses brought the onions and the garlic, and the Herreras the cilantro, cumin, and coriander; the Pazes the tomatoes, the Castellanoses the peppers and the chilis, the Spotas the carnitas. The Arechigas, all four generations of them, would host in their main room at a table that spanned from wall to wall. Arturo brought the salt his mother had brought with them from Mexico. When one family would need something from another, they'd trade, or trade them back in time. Noncommunal meals were put together by walking from door to door and selling salt for pollo, salt for huevos, salt for queso, salt for leche. Those roads were louder then, full of children playing baseball and screaming echoes into the hills; easy to the delicate, spreading blanket of oranges and purples from the sunsets; the breeze that filtered into the Ravine would comb Arturo's hair back with supple fingers as he walked from home to home, family to family. Generations of perpetual immigrants finally settled and promises fulfilled. But since the evictions and the promises the city never kept, endless, heartless promises, only the Sabines remained.

On the day most of the families left, it rained for one hour – the most Chavez Ravine had seen all year – and almost all of Arturo's salt, sitting in his yard, dissolved and washed away. He had managed to save a bit in a couple canvas bags under his bed, but he refused to ever use any. "For when we're most desperate," he had said, and that "we'll never not have any salt." If the Sabines ever decided they needed salt, Arturo wouldn't sell. When the day



came that Arturo would decide to finally leave Chavez Ravine, like the rest, his land would be sold to the Brooklyn Dodgers and they certainly wouldn't need his salt either.

For dinner, Arturo turned the last of their corn into soup, but it was tasteless. They finished their bowls in silence.

They awoke early the next morning, Mason's ninth birthday, to what could have been thunder. Bulldozers and the slamming of doors across the field. Screams and cries and pleads at the Sabine's home.

Arturo and Maria and Mason huddled in their kitchen and watched out the window - and through the recently emerging cracks in their crumbling pueblo, the sun bleeding in through every gash in every wall - Martin, Alejandra, baby Camila, and ninety-one-year-old Abuela Gabriela, one by one, be pulled from their home, dragged down the steps, and thrown in the dirt, then handcuffed. The officers surrounded Alejandra and, before handcuffing her, ripped Camila from her chest, and her fingers, and Camila's pajamas tore. Martin shot up from the dust and lunged at them chest-first, arms tied behind his back, but was pushed and he fell like a tree. Alejandra was carried away kicking. Gabriela, still on her feet and stomping, pleaded with the officers until she, too, was pushed over; strewn beside her son, she groaned gently into the dirt, her lips pressed against the sand, and gave her tears back to the dried and lonely field.

They watched as their furniture was brought out piece by piece, in a procession, in a parade, and tossed beside them, on top of them, and beaten to pieces. Picture frames and heirlooms and antiques were smashed and thrown in a heap and set aflame. Martin kicked dirt at the deputies, and they spat in his face and kicked him again into the earth. Alejandra's and Camila's, Martin's, and Gabriela's screams were drowned and suffocated, one by one - swallowed under the roar of two bulldozers reducing their wooden skeleton to rubble - until the family couldn't fathom a sound again, save Camila's wailing confusion. The bulldozers finished quickly and the family, as if shrouded under black veils and made, in terror, deaf to Camila's cries, were boarded into the police cars. Arms akimbo, the sheriff surveyed the rubble and took a gold ring he found shining in the dirt, and put it on his pinky, and then turned to Arturo.

"Go to your rooms," Arturo told Maria and Mason, not breaking his sight of the Sabines. "Everything will be fine."

As they hid, Arturo tucked his shirt into his khakis and spat in his hand, but his mouth was dry. He backpedaled to the corner of the kitchen, eyes still

glued to the sheriff, and dipped his hands into a bucket of warm water and slicked back his hair. Then he cupped his hands and took a sip, and it relaxed his throat.

“Arthur!” the sheriff yelled. Arturo froze. He walked back to the window, from heel to toe, soft with each step so as not to hurt the floorboards. The two held eye contact through the window. Arturo, glistening bronze and dotted with fiery sunlight, felt his thoughts die. He stood straight and stiff and nothing, no thought nor wish nor plan, moved through him. He heard, above the bulldozers and the screams, only his wife praying from their bedroom. He could only sense how small he must’ve appeared to the sheriff from such distance, a speck in the window of his pueblo, and he stiffened some more. The sheriff pointed at him fiercely and sneered, then walked back to the police car and drove away, the bulldozers with him, out of the Ravine. When they disappeared into the cloud of dust they left, and he could no longer hear their tires rumbling in his dirt, Arturo exhaled.

Hearing his wife’s prayers fade into whispers, swallowed by the walls of their pueblo, there was silence. The sunlight bent as it met the window to the kitchen. It illuminated the dust that had collected on the sill, and glowed upon the rims of pots and pans the Fuenteses had gifted them. It crawled along the kitchen counter. The weeds buried in the dirt listened to the wind whistle, and the sand bake, and the sun, and Arturo’s steps as he walked across the field to the rubble of the Sabine home. He sat down in the earth, legs crossed inflexibly, and colored his

khakis some more while running his hands through the grit. Dust, glassy in the sunlight, settled in his hair. He was in their living room, and it smelled still of fresh tortillas.

Like a child in a sandbox he fingered delicately through the remnants of their home, the heaps of torn up furniture and smashed relics and burnt memories. The ash fell through his fingers and into the wind, and softened his calloused hands. He let his hands sink further into the ruins where they softened more, and then swept, like silkworms, over the surface of the ash and sensed nothing left to prove that this home was the Sabine’s, that Alejandra and Martin and Camila and her Abuela Gabriela lived there, save that smell. And upon looking out over the dead, dried, lonely fields and lapping hills of Chavez Ravine, he found only his own home left, and the sun beating down upon it personally.

Then, sifting further through the rubble, moving the memories around with his foot, he touched, unbroken, a baseball bat. It was a Louisville Slugger he

could remember Martin telling him about – one his father had bought for him when they first arrived in America, one Martin treasured. Arturo picked it up and held it firm to his chest and walked back home.

He found Mason and Maria sitting together on his bed, both of their shirts stained with each other's tears, and he placed the bat in Mason's hands.

"Happy birthday, Mijo," Arturo said.

And then Arturo fell down upon the bed and sleep overcame him.

At sunset, Arturo threw balls to Mason in the field with his new bat. Mason tapped the bat in the dirt and raised a finger to the sky in ritual. Arturo pitched hard and Mason missed them all.

"Keep the bat flat – don't rake at it," he said before launching another wide. "Keep your eye on the ball."

Mason kept missing, and Arturo put his hand up. He came and took the bat. "Like this," he said, and tossed the ball into the air in front of him and swung and whiffed, teetering over a few steps. Mason made right to move out of his way. Arturo tried again and missed, and again and missed, and he aimed for the sun. The orange and purple waves of the sunset fell bleakly into the dirt and the dying hills of the Ravine. Several more swings and whiffs and Arturo wiped the sweat from his brow and used it to slick back his hair, and then he slapped one high into the air and it landed a hundred feet away. Arturo flipped the bat behind him and pretended to trot around the bases, fists in the air, strutting between patches of dead grass. Mason smiled for his father and went to retrieve the ball, and then Arturo went inside. Mason stayed outside and tossed the ball to himself and made contact on a few, aiming at the dying sunset.

Later that night as they lied in bed, Maria talked into Arturo's ear, but nothing came back. He was turned away on the last sliver of mattress and it was never clear to either of them what he heard or whether he was listening, but she whispered into his ear nonetheless.

"I want you to listen to me. I want you to listen to me. We need to leave, Toro, there's no use in fighting anymore. Are you listening to me? We need to leave. We can go to my sister's place, and we'll go from there, we'll figure it out... You can find a job... and Mason can- I'll teach Mason. I'll teach Mason and we'll figure it out from there, you can't fight anymore. Are you listening? There's nothing left to fight for here, it's just us. Fight for us, Toro. If you're going to pretend like you can't hear me, so be it, but don't pretend to be asleep. Don't just let us lie here forever, we'll die here, too. I won't be dragged out of my home, Arturo. I know you want to fight, and I'm giving you

something to fight for, I'm here, I'm right next to you, and he's sleeping in the other room, are you listening?"

That night Arturo had a dream. He steps out of his home in the night and his feet sink into grass. He can feel the soil move under his feet with even just the slightest push. He wriggles his toes into it and stands firm and looks through a gap in the hills at downtown. The city is shining and moving and the lights don't burn his eyes like the sun does. There are buildings being constructed with endless scaffolding, and scaffolding upon that scaffolding. The buildings seem to be inspired in their design by each building next to them, and they soar limitlessly into the sky in a race. What dirt and grit and rock that may have been there before has been smoothed over by cars and buses and train tracks and people's feet. Everything now is motion and light, and the stars and the moon and the generations before Arturo watch him now. He wants to show Mason and Maria what's become of their city, but when he turns around, Dodger Stadium sits where his pueblo once stood.

Arturo awoke to Maria screaming, and the door being kicked in. He tried to move but he was frozen. Again, he felt his thoughts and his plans die and nothing moved through him. He reached his hand under the bed and felt for his salt, and the bags were still there.

"Toro, do something!" Maria pleaded in tears, but Arturo couldn't move. He watched as the sheriff laid his hands on Mason's shoulders and shoved him towards the door, and he had no choice but to listen, in silent reverence, to every wail Maria made and every fist she laid on the sheriff's chest. Arturo's head shot towards the corner of the room as a section of the roof gave in and crumbled on the bedside table. The sheriff and two other deputies took Maria screaming by her wrists and by her ankles, "Arturo, you coward!" and dragged her out the door and down the steps and into the dirt, and Arturo's hands remained lifeless on the bedsheets and his eyes frozen wide. He felt his hand move on its own towards his hair but then stop. He was sure he was dying. He let the sheriff and the three deputies grab him and throw him on the ground, "Be still!" and push his head into the floor, and carry him outside, and then handcuff him. He was placed next to his wife and his son, handcuffed on the curb, crying into each other's chests. The dust in Maria's hair was whipped out with the wind, fizzling into the sky.

The sheriff gave a nod and the bulldozers went to work. At first the pueblo stood its ground and the bulldozers had to scrape at the clay a while. Arturo realized his hands were cuffed ahead of him and his chest expanded, and he watched closely the struggle in the bulldozer drivers' eyes, their gritting

teeth, scraping at his home but it did not give. He reveled silently in the confusion on the sheriff's face. His eyes drifted towards the gap in the hills and downtown, at the bustling and the moving and the ocean on the other side – he remembered how he and his mother had built that pueblo, waiting for the rain to strike the sand, again and again, until it was as high as he was, and taller, and more – and then he heard the pueblo collapse. The bulldozers moved through the rest with ease, and Arturo's gaze sank into the dirt.

When the rumble of the bulldozers ceased, Arturo picked up his head again. Mason and Maria were silent and spent, eyes blank and dry like his own, and he could tell nothing moved through them – no plans, no promises, no wishes. The bulldozers were backing away, and they hadn't bothered to remove the furniture or heirlooms, or the salt. Arturo's chest sank into itself as he exhaled.

"The baseball bat," Mason said under his breath. He pointed with his head towards the rubble, and then Arturo spotted it, too; the bulldozers had passed it by. Arturo spat into his hand and ran it through his hair.

Hands over his head, Arturo stood slowly and began walking towards the rubble. He stepped softly heel to toe so as not to harm the dirt. The police trained their weapons on him, fire in their eyes, and he held eye contact with the sheriff; "Stand down!" they shouted, and he kept walking. He was praying to himself.

When he reached the rubble, he found the bat covered in salt and shredded canvas bags. Everything was already beginning to bake. He ran his fingers through the salt, and let it drip through him, and then he found the handle of the bat. Arturo looked to Mason and smiled, and Mason smiled back. Mason flexed his chest and gritted his teeth, "Grrrr." Arturo held the bat with one hand on the handle and the other on the head, and held it out like a gift.

"Stand down!" one policeman hollered, frightened, frightened by Arturo, and the shots rang out lonely through the lapping hills of the Ravine, echoing from clay to metal to wooden skeletons and screaming, singing, along the fields, and finally funneling through the gap in the hills towards downtown. The sun disappeared behind a cloud, and it began to rain. Los Doyers would win the World Series later that year.

# RACHNA IYER



## **Sophomore**

**Major:** Psychology and Creative Writing

**Reading:** Poetry

Rachna Iyer is unsure about a lot of things, including her graduation date and how her poetry ended up here. She is sure, however, that she wants to become a clinical or counseling psychologist, focusing on the intersection between creativity and therapy. In her free time, she likes to create many Spotify playlists using different combinations of the same five songs and lose at board games (except Scrabble, she's pretty good at Scrabble).

*Nominated by: Prof. Sumita Chakraborty*

# self-portrait as the women who precede me

on my right hand, I wear my mother.  
I listen for the ticks in her old college watch,  
the seconds telling me *catch your bus before it leaves*, and  
I think of all she has given me.  
her time      me, life      lessons on independence.

I taste my mother in my tears  
as we snuffle and turn to stare at each other's wet, salty faces  
in the middle of this dark and cold, popcorn-sweat theatre  
in the middle of this story about a crazy man  
in the middle of this tight sailor's knot of our lives.

I am my mother, and I am my mother's mother  
when I stand, glistening, over the stove  
stirring spices and  
a little extra sugar never hurt anybody, right?  
we leave the last piece untouched.

I hear my mother in my silence  
as we swallow our desires, lumps of  
soggy-dry cardboard, halfway lodged  
in our throats like forgotten promises.  
the difference lies in my cowardice.

yet  
I am my mother in my rage.  
her won't-take-no-for-an-answer  
her this-is-not-what-I-want-this-is-what-I-want-for-you.  
maybe someday I will act when I know what motherhood feels like.

in my deep brown eyes, I wear my mother.  
she is in the lumps on my body,  
that one left incisor that just slightly yellower than the rest,  
the dark hair on my upper lip that I pluck off my face.

maybe I should keep them.

maybe I should wear my mother on my face with pride.



# Home for the Holidays

When I first came home from college for Christmas,  
I found my mother adopted a bear.

*Mother, there's a bear in my bed* I exclaimed  
but she simply entered, smiled softly and spoonfed  
the bear some porridge —

not too hot,  
not too cold,  
but just-right.

And soon my body is banished to a chair too big for it  
studying the snoring creature on my semisoft mattress,  
when I cannot shake the feeling that this giant sleeping bear  
looks an awful lot like my favourite stuffed animal  
from the little metal box my father gifted me when I was six.  
Except I think my shoulder has been displaced  
ever since I locked the bear in his little box and  
swallowed the key because I hated the way it looked at me and  
looked at me

with its little beady eyes  
but never opened its fucking mouth to talk to me.

Now, I don't believe in God but I'll still capitalize His name  
and when the painting on the wall starts speaking to me  
in a language I have never heard but understand perfectly,  
I must concede,

fall to my knees  
and pray that my joints be put back into place because  
I just want to feel  
whole  
again.

And maybe then I can know where I am going when I take a walk outside.

So I'll drop my suitcases,  
lay down next to the strange grizzly bear in my bed,  
arm around his furry, purring chest, rising and falling to the pulse of my veins.

I do not know him but it feels  
*just-right.*



*voice cracks.*

*Tell me the stories of when our picket fence was white and you were happy  
and I'd get tucked in listening to stories of crane-extracted damsels and ogres.*

*Part VI: Bridge*

*There's so much you don't know*

*Your parents were your parents for longer than you remember*

*Did you know how much they mourned*

*blood-clot babies before you?*

*Did you know that you were a miracle*

*and how your father cried when you came out of your*

*mother with a halo around your head?*

*Did you listen to his heartbeat in your throat when he kissed you goodnight?*

*Could you hear his feet shuffle before he closed the door behind him?*

# In another life, I wish I knew less

I turned forty on my sixteenth birthday.  
Mother places an oxygen tank near the candles,  
there's only three but if I blink enough times behind my  
cylindrical-vision eyeglasses, I see six.

I was nine when I first found a grey hair sprouting out of my scalp,  
timid and apologetic, crowning as a newborn head. I spent hours in front of  
the mirror distinguishing shine from cortisol, separating care from time.  
Mother tells me they will spread, but I pluck each one out anyway until I am  
new and clean and bald.

I crawled into my first R-rated movie right out of the womb  
but it wasn't anything I hadn't seen a thousand times before.  
I had chased my days swimming in Mother's unadulterated placenta and then  
I speak my first words: *I was going to say something, but I forgot what it was.*

The difference between the rising moon and the setting sun isn't much;  
it is the space between the floor and my leg,  
hanging off a high oak chair (but sometimes it has wheels),  
swinging to the whistling tune of my pulsating submarine stomach.

Sometimes they coexist, and sometimes they don't.  
One minute I need my appendix, and the next, I don't.

# ELLIE KATZ



**Senior**

**Major:** Organizational Studies and Comparative Literature

**Reading:** Creative NonFiction Essay

I'm a Texan-Michigander whose parents now live in Oregon. I like to write about place, family, and memory. Special thanks to Sarah Messer for her guidance, goat cheese, and encouragement. Thanks to all my friends for their laughter and support. Also, while I'm at it, shoutout to all my professors in the RC—you've made these last four years wonderful. Hope you enjoy my work! Thank you for listening and reading. Cheers!

*Nominated by: Prof. Sarah Messer*

# Total Eclipse of the American West

Today in Oregon my mother looked out her kitchen window and could not see the tops of the trees. We talked on the phone as she sent me the photos; we both cried. In a video she showed me, the branches wavered in and out of smoke. I wondered where the birds had gone. *Me too*, she echoed; I could almost hear her head turn to look out the window at her hummingbird feeders. Later that day I saw photos of California; you could not see the sun—same hilly streets as there have always been, but the sky was drenched in reddish-orange, everything was coated with reddish-orange. All I know is that none of it looks like earth, more like a total eclipse of the sun that has lasted for weeks now. I try and imagine what it'll look like after it's all over, after the eclipse has ended. I imagine the forests will have turned black and silver; the flowers will have gone. The soil, at least, will screech happily, renewed and refreshed with dead matter, clinging to the earth as it goes.

I think of Annie Dillard, of her essay, "Total Eclipse." *The sky's bloody hue keeps deepening, but there is no darkness.* Maybe she didn't just imagine the ending of the sky after all. I think of Annie on that cold spring day in April, in 1979, in Washington, in some distant past, of which she wrote, "It had been like dying, that sliding down the mountain pass. It had been like the death of someone, irrational, that sliding down the mountain pass and into the region of dread. It was like slipping into fever, or falling down that hole in sleep from which you wake yourself whimpering."

"From all the hills came screams," she said. And when she turned back to the sun, "it was going, and the world was wrong. The grasses were wrong; they were platinum." They're platinum now, too, you see? Platinum with the stinging heat of earth in this new and heaving century. The grasses now look the same as then, standing under a sky the wrong color in the wrong kind of daylight.

I've never seen a total eclipse but I've watched the western United States burn a few times now in my life. I don't know which is supposed to happen more often according to nature's laws. I don't know if either are things we're meant to see.

The next total solar eclipse will appear at the end of the year, in December of 2020. It'll be visible from Chile and Argentina at some time in the afternoon, for a little more than three minutes. It will be early summertime there, and it'll take no more than a half hour for the eclipse to complete its arc across the tapered bottom of the continent. At 1:22pm on December 14th, people near the village of La Loberia in the Rio Negro Province of Argentina will be the last to witness the total eclipse. What a year it will have been for the people of La Loberia. I wonder if they will scream as they watch.

If I were with my mother in Oregon we'd sit in the yard and listen as the smoke thickened, climbing from the root of the tree to the middle, up the trunk, and to the crown. We'd grab the bird-watching binoculars I recently bought her for her birthday and take turns looking into that long, smoking sky in search of sun. And once we found it we'd stare at it until we couldn't see anymore, until our eyes corrected the blood orange to brightness. I wonder how it would feel,

that final sunbath, listening to the hills screaming out. I wonder if they'd find us centuries later, glued to those blue Adirondack chairs my mother keeps in her garden. We would've made it to another time, just like Annie thought she did: another time with platinum grasses and different people. "I missed my own century, the people I knew, and the real light of day," she recalled. We would've done the same: skipped ahead to a generation whose turn it was to find burnt hands and broad fields where there once were forests. Hopefully the sun will have come out by then.

They say some of the fires started over Labor Day weekend, when a couple's gender reveal party full of colored smoke drifted too close to the trees. I never did find out whether the baby will be a boy or a girl—I'm curious now. Was the first smoke pink or blue? It doesn't matter much; the golden state keeps glowing. I wonder if the baby got a name that day, too. It would've been a good day to be named: a bright, blue-skied, clear-eyed Saturday, record temps. LA County hit 121 degrees. I wonder if the baby kicked its mother, eager to get out and taste the heat, the sweat, the dry air. I like to think of it growing up without knowing how it started. I like to think of a child playing hide-and-seek among petrified trees, singing nursery rhymes under shadeless hot skies. Maybe one day it will see photographs of how the forests used to be, and it will think of its own distant child and the leaves that might come back for it to play in. For now, I hope it likes opening its eyes in this new world, as hot and bare as it is.



The U.S. government has a live map you can view that charts every fire in the country. Each one is indicated by a little flame icon, either red, yellow, grey, or black depending on its intensity. For New Mexico, Arizona, California, Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Utah, and Colorado, you've got to know your geography: you can't even see the names of the states submerged under dozens of overlapping red flame icons. You can see the names of the fires just fine, though: Beachie Creek, Riverside, Holiday Farm, Lionshead. Good, solid names—names of a nation that loves its wild places, its western edges, its untouched land.

The only sign of fire here in Michigan is the tight red morning sun—the color has something to do with smoke particles and wavelengths. I wouldn't know. I want to hate it as I watch it rise—a massive ruby refracting light, a slow and steady drop of blood pushing its way through the sky—but it's impossible to turn away. By the time its rays reach my wall, they have turned into a little patch of wavering peach-colored light. It's hard to hate a light like that, beautiful and soft and a color you don't often see. By the time I'm fully awake, and the sun is still red, and the soft light has hardened, I can't help but think of my mother in Oregon. How she cannot leave the house unless she must; how she covers her mouth more from the smoke than from the virus; how if someone saw me yawning, mouth uncovered, through my window in the morning's peach-colored light, they wouldn't know if I was waking or screaming.

The sun has risen red like this for weeks here in the Midwest, redder than ever even after the gauziness of early morning has worn off. It looks like it's trying to burn a hole through the sky as it slides across the country like it might during a normal eclipse. Dissolving into a continental arc of smoke as it gets farther west. I wonder if it'll still be rising red here by the time South America gets to watch the sun go in December. It reminds me of that ancient seaman's rhyme: *Red sky at night, sailors' delight; red sky in morning, sailors take warning.* It's odd how much the light can change in so few hours, disarming even. Annie must've had the same unsettled feeling when she watched her eclipse, "We got the light wrong. In the sky was something that should not be there." In the book of Matthew, there is a red morning sky, too. Jesus says, *There will be a storm today, for the sky is red and threatening. Do you know how to discern the appearance of the sky but cannot discern the signs of the times?*

But in my yard in Michigan I can see the top of the big hickory just fine. It gets to grow and then it gets to die on its own time. There is no smoke here,

no bloody orange color except for in the sun this morning and on the back of a ladybug crawling up the wall. When I mention the ladybug to a friend she tells me it's an invasive species, not a ladybug. The orange lady bug, or Asian lady beetle, was introduced to the eastern United States as a way to control agricultural pests. It bites, leaves behind an acrid odor, and produces a yellow fluid when startled. It's fond of infestations. There can be dozens of beetles at a time swarming, thickening until the swarm overwhelms a wall, or a windowsill, or a field—swells of orange everywhere. I just saw the one and I left it to be. Maybe I should have plucked it off, I think later, should've picked up its round, reeking body and coaxed it out the open window.

The sky is still blue here, the light is right, and once the midday sun returns to its bright white, there's nothing there that shouldn't be. If you weren't looking for something out of place, you wouldn't see it. No one here does: summer moves on to fall, somewhere far away is up in flames, and it's too hard to tell a decoy ladybug from a real one. What more is there to know? The world doesn't stop; there is no swarming here, no smoke. Nothing here burns unless we want it to.

The trees are still the same, too: bursting like clockwork as they do every fall—reds, oranges, and yellows dropping into messes on the ground, glowing. I imagine there are plenty of ladybugs, real ones and orange ones, crawling in and out of the piles. A normal September, a normal October. In any year, pandemic or not, people come to see the colors. This year they are especially bright. The state of Michigan even has its own map showing where the flaming leaves are brightest. It shows the state covered in waves of yellow, light orange, deep orange, and red depending on where the best colors are. On the map for the week of October 19th, almost the entire lower peninsula was covered in red. I can attest to the map; it was a week of blinding color. It's only a matter of time now before skeletal branches emerge for what feels like a lifetime.

On my mother's end of the country, there's a small town called Detroit, Oregon about fifty miles from where she lives. I wonder if she'd heard of it before all this happened and thought of me over in the Midwest, I wonder if she missed it here for a brief moment—all the harmless red leaves. Funny enough, Detroit, Oregon was named for Detroit, Michigan after so many Michiganders moved there in the 19th century. And when a land developer there proposed to change the town's name from Detroit to Detroit Lake to disassociate it from its Michigan namesake, the local government's phone lines were flooded with calls from outraged Michigan residents. The name

Detroit stayed. Ten years later—a few weeks ago—nearly the entire town burned down.

Trying to get out, firefighters drove down the town's few streets in the early hours of the morning, honking, screaming, and begging for people to leave in time. It just so happens there was a Michigan couple in Detroit that night. They'd heard the firefighters from their RV; they were taking a cross-country road trip, their first big adventure since retirement. They were from Pinckney, Michigan, a Detroit, Michigan suburb about twenty miles from me. I go there sometimes to ride my bike through the forest in summer; there are dozens of lakes to jump into once you're done. The Nebletts awoke to find the forest around them ablaze and had to take refuge on the shores of Detroit Lake, feeling the heat of the mountains burn towards them until they could evacuate at the last opportunity.

Rockslides and fire had closed nearly all the roads out of Detroit and surrounding areas, so the Nebletts along with a handful of other residents and volunteer firefighters were cloistered along the edges of the reservoir waiting for a break in the flames. A few firefighters were able to punch a hole in the fire along a forest service road and within a few short minutes, everyone, including the Nebletts, managed to escape.

I wonder if they thought of home as they waited to be rescued, if they thought of all the lakes that people drive to Pinckney for, of the clear September skies in the Midwest that day, before the smoke drifted far enough to turn our sun red. I wonder about them as the leaves here begin to throw themselves to the ground. "I pray you will never see anything more awful in the sky," Annie wrote to us. But maybe now we have seen something more awful: a sky of blood and fire; it almost seems too Biblical to be real—a sign of the times, I suppose.

The way a normal total solar eclipse happens goes something like this: there is the sun, the earth, and then occasionally, there is a new moon. When this new moon is positioned exactly between the sun and the earth, there is an act of jealousy, or wonder, or perhaps just science, and the moon momentarily blots out the sun, casting its own shadow onto the planet.

I remember the last total solar eclipse in 2017. It was summertime and a few of my friends drove down to Kentucky to see it clearly in its path—in Michigan we only got a partial view. I was out on Lake Michigan that day. It was hazier than usual for August and I remember this haziness more than the eclipse itself, like the sun shining brightly behind a thin sheet of grey. I was expecting the sky to collapse, or the water to hush, or maybe even someone onshore

to yell, but nothing happened. We looked up into the sky with some cheap sunglasses on and then we kept swimming. The world moved on to the next minute as it always had. There was no sliding, or screaming, or silence, there was only the sun wavering up in the greyish bright sky. I never did hear about what they saw in Kentucky; they said it was a long drive back.

Sometimes I try to smell the wildfire smoke being blown this way but there is nothing. I wonder if my mother can smell it before she goes to sleep. I wonder if she thinks about the quietness in the tops of the trees or if she tries to use the binoculars. Apparently songbird migration was just beginning in California in mid-August. Birds are used to fires, but like I said, the West Coast has been burning for longer than just a few weeks. The sun has gone and the sky is going. The birds will stop somewhere else, or wait to migrate, or drop out of the air and onto the ground. Instead of looking up into the tops of trees for them, my mother will look down.

And it's the same temptation now that Annie spoke of then: "We have seen enough; let's go. Why burn our hands more than we have to?" Why push ourselves against smoking windows to look down at birds and up at an orange sky? Why withstand the violence and the terror for any longer? Because we cannot look away, I think is the answer. It is the difference between her eclipse and ours: we cannot look away no matter how much we want to.

I visited my mother a few weeks after the fires had finally quieted. One day I borrowed her car and drove out to Detroit. I could see all of the sky on the day I went; it was cloudless and clear, and a wide, flat river was at my side nearly the whole drive. Sunlight splayed like glitter all across the inside of the car, refracted through a colorful hummingbird made of beads that hangs from her rearview mirror. I stopped for construction a few times and watched as cranes hauled charred logs from one side of the highway to the other; the farther east I went, the longer the stops were. It felt wrong to watch—wrong to be going to Detroit at all—and I turned around almost as quickly as I had come. In the center of the little town only a restaurant and the post office were left. All the other buildings had become piles of white ash on the ground, some with untouched red brick chimneys sticking out in a strange kind of triumph. In the debris you could see the metal of life left behind: a stool, a step ladder, a Radio Flyer wagon with all the color drained out.

On my way out of town, I stopped at Detroit Lake to stand on the same shores the Nebletts had. In its autumn state, the reservoir's water level was so low that I had to cross through what must be the bottom of the lake in summertime just to reach the shoreline. The mud had dried into brittle crust.

I walked past hundreds of tree stumps that had been cut down to fill the reservoir; I imagine they were standing when the first Michigan settlers came to the town. The tops of the mountains surrounding the lake were blackened but not bare, and I thought about how the Nebletts wouldn't have been able to see the peaks or the other side of the lake through the smoke. I thought, too, about how on the higher shores of September, they wouldn't have seen all these stunted trees still upright under the water, scattered with the things of life that sink to the bottom: a shoe, some fish bones, a piece of rope, glass bottles with the labels long gone.

My mother's all alone out there in her house in Oregon. She's one generation in between Annie and me. Imagine that, someone standing in between Annie, and me, and the fire. I wonder if she misses that time in history when the eclipses would end, and the sky would go back to normal, and everyone would hurry back to their homes and look up at the birds through the windows. But the only things I am certain of now are that I am not in the West, I am young, and the sky here bears few signs of fire. Perhaps tomorrow I will wake up, just like my mother taught me to, and the sky will have fallen through the hole where the sun used to be. I'll lie in the grass next to the big hickory, eyes closed, waiting for the leaves to drop and for the real world to begin again.

It reminds me of one of those stories told over and over to young children so they can learn from others' mistakes instead of their own. "Chicken Little" comes to mind. In the ATU index, which categorizes folktales by common themes, the story is listed as type 20C: the type of folktale intended to make light of paranoia and mass hysteria. Typically, this is how it goes: Chicken Little (as he's known in this country) believes the sky is falling after an acorn drops onto his head. Concerned, Chicken Little gathers some bird friends to go on a quest and tell the king about the sky's imminent demise. On the way to the kingdom, a fox invites them all into his lair and from here there are a few common endings.

In one, all the animals are rescued from the fox and meet with the king. In another, one of the birds survives the fox long enough to tell Chicken Little what's happening, and then Chicken Little escapes the lair. In the most common ending, the fox eats them all, the main moral being that you shouldn't believe everything you're told. It teaches simple scientific deduction, really. If an acorn falls on your head, then the sky is not falling; if you are a bird and a fox invites you into his lair, then he does not have good intentions; if the planet is warming so quickly that it sets half a continent on

fire, then that's a shame but we really must just continue on. Right? So says the king.

Have you ever held a dead bird? There's a surprising beauty there—the details in their feathers, the colors, the body, the fragility, the weight. And to watch fire as it burns is like satisfying some primal desire—a human want towards warmth, towards light no matter its color. Annie said it best: “We teach our children one thing only, as we were taught: to wake up.” The rest comes naturally: the dead birds and the light of fire, the folktales and the Bible verses, the little baby boys and girls, the Detroit of the world, the taking for granted of the sun in the sky like that—white and loud, burning itself into eyelids so that even when you do finally close your eyes, there is still that circle in all the darkness.

# AELITA KLAUSMEIER



**Sophomore**

**Major:** Math

**Reading:** Poetry

Aelita Klausmeier is an aspiring poet and a current sophomore in LSA majoring in math who believes that the intersections between math and poetry are greater than they seem. Her hobbies include learning languages, going for long walks, listening to new music, and generally searching for the fascinating in the mundane.

*Nominated by: Prof. Sarah Messer*

# Daydream

Tell me about your dream, the one where we sit  
on the church steps, noticing the way the light  
touches everything, weaves itself like spiderweb  
into the trees. The one where a faraway bell is  
always tolling, and the sun is an egg yolk,  
and we count the paraffin clouds as they float  
past, languid and wordless, all afternoon.  
Hurry, hurry! While we still have time,  
tell me about the boy, about his smile of  
tepid water, his hair an impudent tangle  
and his fingers crafting poetry from air.  
About the birds made out of folded paper,  
and how they skimmed the twilight with white wings.  
Tell me of the indescribable color of his laughter,  
of the way the sunlight settled on the walls.  
We sit on the church steps and he's counting  
the angels flying past in stop-motion above us,  
all feather and eyes heading west.  
Look: he is beautiful.  
Look: he is fading quickly.  
And he tells us that he'll wait, and there's certainty  
in his voice, and the comforting absence of fear.



# Hometown

This state is red like soil,  
like farmers' calloused hands  
that dig the mud. It's pockmarked  
with blue elsewhere, but not here.  
It's unsteady skin, stretched  
over unwieldy edges and ragged bone.

It was cold. It was a winter  
marked by chemical salt,  
by the periodic glare of signs  
on the interstate at night.  
We parked somewhere when  
you were too tired to drive,  
bathed in fluorescence where  
the dark didn't reign.

There's something inside me that I can't explain.

It's there when you show me your sunrise,  
when I lose you in the cornfields' grey,  
even in the open of white daylight  
when I find you in the aching,  
in the cracking of my angry skin.

I never liked your cold, you know.

This state is red-fresh like roadkill;  
it's gleaming unafraid.

And then,  
it happens, again and again:  
I am driving alone, the road narrows  
in the dark and I stop as a deer  
steps out onto the pavement,  
bright eyes looking into mine

And there we are, creatures twinned:  
somehow, we are the same and  
somehow, I know you understand

# On Repeat

I can't explain it, the nostalgia I felt for a land  
that was never mine, for the rows of houses  
that folded in on themselves like playing cards,  
only ever twos and threes, all vinyl siding and sameness  
no kings or queens sandwiched among them and  
only ever pretty in the bruised light  
that comes as the sun slips under the horizon,  
*and then repeat,*

*and then repeat.*

This land is linear as it is cruel:  
taut clotheslines and telephone wire;  
it chews boys like taffy and spits  
them out through gapped teeth.

Can you try to read the lines etched  
within its endless hands?  
like tarot cards or warning signs –  
KEEP OUT and WRONG WAY,  
it's all dead-end from here if you decide to stay.

Because it seems you're always moving  
(and yet never past the flatness)  
or drowning  
(never able to drown the desperation out)  
and then it's always an hour before the burn of sunrise  
and you're forgetting who you are,  
a groundhog day of climbing out of bed to stare  
at all the sameness and the grey  
until it's swallowed,  
unfailingly,  
by night's insatiable mouth.

*And then repeat.*

*And then repeat.*

# Solstice

These days, dark is too quick to fall.  
No longer enough time to turn my face  
up to the window and drink in the light  
reflecting off the snow.  
Twilight turns the suburbs to a funhouse.  
The buildings, identical spectres  
blotted out of the dark;  
the trees with their distorted arms,  
slicing the belly of the sky.  
The way the world begins to curl inward,  
to fold and disappear if you look too closely.  
The way this snow looks too blue in the half-light.  
I make my way to the pond hidden  
behind the field,  
the one carved shallowly from the earth.  
It's nearly frozen over, looks like  
someone has poured candle-wax or  
a thick layer of lard over it.  
Left it to harden.  
Later, the sky fills  
with a litany of stars,  
dangling like fresh caterpillars  
from their silk threads  
and in my chest,  
the feeling that maybe,  
they will all fall down soundlessly  
and maybe all at once.  
And at last, the world will be white-hot.  
At last, it will be beautiful.

# HARPER KLOTZ



**Junior**

**Major:** English and Communications

**Reading:** Poetry

Harper Klotz is a junior from Ludington, Michigan studying English and Communications. Since discovering the acrostic poem in elementary school, she has had a passion for creative writing. One day she hopes to work in publishing. In her free time, she enjoys stabbing a piece of fabric thousands of times (also known as embroidery).

*Nominated by: Prof. Sumita Chakraborty*

# Regina dei Boschi

Come with me, caterpillar feet,  
through our powdered-feather stomping ground.  
You and I will be tiny emperors of this land.

We will conquer the leaf mountains beneath us,  
and when we tire, the hands of the maple tree will cradle us.  
In her outstretched arms we will be head of the table at the aphids' feast,  
buzzing as you put your antennae in mine.

Welcome the baby's breath's visit,  
ask the daisy how her seedlings have been.  
Dip your pincers into the creek and taste the crisp sunlight.

It's been a long winter, caterpillar feet,  
but I will meet you out where the mother doe touched her hooves to our  
cheeks.  
She will be there again and lead us to toadstool-down cribs,  
rocking us to sleep with the hum of the ants' march.

Don your circlet of stems and seeds,  
and follow me down the mountain and into our lily-boat.  
We will find a new home in our dandelion thrones.

# Homesick

When my heart aches

It is for the stars I swam with before I was born,  
For the warmth of tongues of fire I felt around me in utero.  
My heart aches not for the present,  
but for the memory of ocean salt in my lungs,  
Passing by city skylines I imagined out of clouds.

Too often my heart is pulled roughly out of its slumber  
by mechanical whirring outside in the cold,  
but I fill my mouth with pebbles and swallow,  
and with my belly full of a thousand years of memory  
I am home.

# Larvae Diary

There is truth

In the way the ladybugs lay claim to my bedroom curtains after sneaking in,

The way the stink bugs raise their antennae crowns behind my bathroom door.

I wish I were them:

Dirt in my mouth,

Concern for nothing but the fertilization of the earth.

You and I are the ants

Whose mandibles frantically grasp at cracker crumbs on the kitchen floor.

We chew through attics, chests, and old sweaters,

Tracking the scent of honey and keratin,

Naming carpets and desks in a dying language.

We trap wasps in our pincers

And stare into its eight eyes.

We have that multiplication love

That a fruit fly has when it sees a royal feast of

An apple slice left oxidizing on the cutting board.



# TESS KLYGIS



**Freshman**

**Major:** Undecided

**Reading:** Short Poems

Tess Klygis is a freshman in the LSA Honors program from the Chicagoland area. She has always had a passion for storytelling, whether through poetry, theatre, or conversation. She is considering a double major in Creative Writing and Classical Studies on a pre-law track and is also a proud member of the University of Michigan Mock Trial team! When not writing, she can be found making music, painting, or video chatting with her dogs.

*Nominated by: Prof. David Ward*

# lover's loss: poems from someone who knows nothing about love

## *how to remove glass from the Body*

If the glass resides in between your toes,  
You need not remove it.  
Simply bind the foot in oak  
And refrain from any toe-curling sensations.

If the glass resides behind your knee,  
You must resist the urge to praise or pray  
And instead, stand as straight as you can  
Pretending you have no weakness there.

If the glass resides in your abdomen  
You must allow yourself to see  
Your beauty in the mirror  
Before you can make any alteration.

If the glass resides in your chest  
You absolutely may not remove it yourself.  
Someone else must confirm your heartbeat  
Before and after the removal.

If the glass resides at the nape of your neck  
It is your fault.  
The world hasn't forced enough tension upon you  
To protect your skin from the glass.

If the glass resides in your head  
Consider it a gift.  
It will reflect on you the images of the world  
Your mind is otherwise too narrow to see.

*shin splints*

I am running,  
Today on the sidewalk.  
And also from you.

My feet hit the pavement  
In this  
Sickening rhythm.  
Similar to the one  
My heart was pounding out  
That night you pushed my hair out of my face.  
I turned red  
I'm sure of it.  
As red as the leaves on the trees  
That I am running underneath.  
I was waiting for you for a while,  
You know.  
Until I saw you  
With another girl's hair  
Between your fingertips.  
I wasn't mad  
Because you were smiling,  
And it made me happy  
To see you happy.  
But I suddenly had this urge to  
Run.  
Along the pavement today,  
Maybe in the forest tomorrow.  
I'm running until  
Pain is shooting through my shins  
Cupid's backfired arrows.  
I'm running until  
I can taste metal in the back of my throat  
Reminding me of all the things  
I meant to say to you.  
I'm running to drown you out of my mind  
With song after song after song.

I'm not angry at you  
I'm not disappointed  
I'm not sad

I'm running.  
Today from you,  
And also on the pavement.

### *thoughts on Narcissus*

I think I love myself in the same way that I am patriotic  
Meaning that I love the idea  
And I am proud to call this Body home  
But I also pick her apart so quickly  
Because I have this fantastical idea  
That things will get better because of my hatred  
That things will resolve themselves simply because I despise them

I lean into my reflection in the mirror  
And pick out all the things I don't like  
In order to fix them at some later date

I am patriotic in the sense that you can still love something even though it's broken  
I love myself enough to pick out the things that I hate.

When I look in the mirror, I try and remind myself of Narcissus  
How he bent in front of the lake to see himself  
Filled with nothing but admiration for his own reflection  
But maybe he too was not seeing himself  
But rather the things he wished to change  
And that is why he loved himself so.

### *a little too melodramatic*

Before I arrive at your door  
Before I make other plans for today

Before I embarrass myself

*What are we doing?*

I wonder how he's interpreting these things

How much time he spends thinking about the things I do

And if I'm just thinking too much

And I don't want to be the second choice

But, I wonder, isn't he yours?

Your second choice, I mean?

Maybe even that's too generous

Maybe you just wanted attention

Maybe we are on the same page

It just wasn't the chapter I thought it

Was in

Before this whole thing began.

### *daddy issues*

once a boy got mad at me

because i rejected him a

nd he told me that it was

because i didn't have

a father.

i just told him that

if losing a father has taught me

anything about love

(which i don't think it has)

it would be how to tell men

from boys

### *lookinglass*

It's funny, actually, how quickly I love.

It comes from above my head

Or instead from my toes

Or truthfully, I guess, nobody really  
Knows; I knew  
I was in too  
Deep when I started writing about you  
You crept up on me like nothing  
And then something  
And then everything

I look at you and  
Time feels preserved in amber  
Standing still, standing golden  
Because I look at you and  
My heart flutters like the birds in their swarms  
Who leave thumbprints on the sky  
Just as you did on me  
Because I look at you and  
I want you to know everything about me.  
And I want to know everything about you.  
So will you look at me too?

### *pomegranate seeds*

Persephone  
Felt the breath of death against her skin  
A love played by a string bow across her ribs  
A melody that gave her the courage to take the fruit  
The fruit that binded her against death and made her  
The victim in her own story  
Lost because of love.

But Persephone was not naive.

She felt the extremes of life in her chest and forgot about the rest  
There is only loving  
There is only losing  
The laughing and the touching and the bruising  
They don't matter.

Not when there's love to be made  
Not when there's people to be saved.

How lovely of Persephone to be seated in the stars  
To remind us that loving and losing  
Go hand in arm.

*requiem*

I tend to write things  
I don't really know about  
As if I know them

But people like the  
Girl who writes about romance  
More than one who grieves

So I'll stick with love's  
Warm fiction instead of death's  
Cold reality

# JEE-IN KWON



## **Sophomore**

**Major:** Physics

**Reading:** Poetry

Jee-In hails from South Korea; Boston, MA; Chicago, IL; and, most recently, Irvine, CA. Having been international most of her life, she is always lost and always found. So, she roams the intersection of dichotomies and stability of equilibriums in search of a commonality that knits the fabric of her world. She loves being a transcendentalist in nature with a book, a notebook, and a pen thinking about physics, philosophy, and metaphysics.

*Nominated by: Prof. Sarah Messer*



# Leaving UN

(\*I promise there's nothing political)

it's unfair, it's unreasonable  
most importantly, it's unnatural.

We dance justice as  
inscribed in our genes:  
to be unjust is taboo  
and yet--peekaboo  
--here is I,  
the unjust me.

I never wanted to be just.

*Just me*  
that is to go undiscussed.  
I am not a subject of lust  
I am not wasabi cool, blonde pretty, or Einstein smart  
I am just  
a part of a pie chart.

So I was not just me, but unjust me  
wearing foreign backgrounds like a chameleon  
hiding the context of my sea  
in a shadow below vibrant crayons.

Without it, what would be left of me?  
What color would I be?  
What shape will I wear?  
Will I even be big enough to be seen?

But I am reminded that while the world is harsh  
it isn't random.

I deduce:  
I am what I make and  
I can do what I want  
And, in the end, it's just me.

So I lose the un-  
just because

it's just me.

# It's Time, Sir

(Horse's Hoof: mushroom/fungi)

Where are you headed, mister?  
with your trusted ball cap well fitted on your head,  
where are you off to?  
The whole extravaganza of the season up on your neck;  
dormant were you, during the snow, sir,  
but I had faith you'd be ready before  
snow turned to rain and Maine was warm.  
I was worried, sir, as your feet move as silent  
as the earth spins, and you made no sound or rumble  
in your vast, earthy house. I knocked on your wooden door  
on the coldest of days-- the hollow resonance of the door  
sent me back with grown anticipation to see you  
wake up to the sweet odor of spring, bearing fruit  
to life flagging death. You are always busy, sir,  
as you swim and float between infants and elders,  
navigating what you can do to maintain youth and  
bustle liveliness on your ground. I just wanted to catch you.  
Wait! Please-- do not leave me. I have an inquiry to make.  
One of great importance to me, and one you must attend to  
sooner or later. I am growing old, you see,  
unignorable wrinkles by my eyes, slouched shoulders,  
weak knees, my memory is faltering and I fumble with my facts. See  
here,  
every sign of age you can think of! So, before you knocked on my door,  
I came looking for you. I don't fear you. I don't fear your visit  
at all. No, no fear at all. I just wanted to know if death is painful.  
I don't want a flashy funeral with orange or green,  
white would be enough. And, I have a request...  
Wait-- I'm not done yet! No, please listen to me,  
My time is coming; you know that.  
Why, please listen to this old lady's wish.  
I am old enough to request, mister. Don't tell me it's not time yet.  
I am prepared to take you on my back and dig my grave.

Oh, why do you turn your head?  
Even the smallest of pores is hidden behind your veil  
and under the shadow of your cap.  
Why won't you face me?  
How come you are only interested in my postmortem?  
You horrid, ghostly shadow, playing with strings of life  
as if you are some violinist. Play a symphony  
and the dead and the living will all be strung  
like marionettes under your conducting fingers,  
sinewy and white and long and twisted,  
bending life into death and kicking death into life.  
I only ask of one thing: take me softly with you.  
Silently descending into your empire, I will  
no more question or shout, only yield  
to the man who takes silence as a currency for his visit.

# Spring Burn

The hottest of hatreds burn  
in the budding daffodils  
that trumpet my yellow petals.  
Even on the best of days  
the transparent light of the sun  
glares at my dark asiatic shadow  
and I see all too clearly the mar  
in this blooming air of spring.

# Left

Drops of tears  
I can wipe away  
with a finger

but my longing  
cannot be held  
even in the cup of hands

what shall I do  
to shut Grief out  
out of darkness  
behind closed eyes,  
silence under sound sleep,  
and softness on pursed lips  
left to dry on its own

# Living

I cover more length and I realize I have to run to make time.  
I retreat, and now I can walk  
but, for some odd reason, walking isn't satisfactory  
not after learning I can run, or at least learn to run.  
In time, I travel  
and though I don't feel it, I'm changed  
and won't be going back  
despite regrets that count in millions  
I can't go back.  
so nose running, tears streaming, throat burning, lung gasping  
and now rain pouring  
I learn to keep going in time, in space, in life  
A life that is mine to live

# HANNAH MARTIN



**Junior**

**Major:** Sociology

**Reading:** Poetry

Hannah was raised in Pontiac, Michigan by a Croatian public school teacher and an African American cop. She hopes to pursue a career in human rights law and has an international studies minor to back it up. Writing keeps her sane and spoken word poetry is her favorite. You'll find tiny leather-bound journals of poetry, stories, observations and rants cluttering every corner of her life.

*Nominated by: Prof. Tish O'Dowd*



# Palatable

don't impose the Brain tells the Heart;

you have lost this battle

I have mapped out this conversation

and I am telling you that this confrontation,

it will only lead to discomfort.

I know the words make you bleed

like bullets loaded into an assault rifle of arrogance

the powder is learned ignorance

and *I know* you have never liked guns.

they hit you as if you didn't know they were coming

if only you had just prepared

perhaps you would be spared,

*of course they came* the gun was being loaded his whole life,

but, *listen to me*, bullets cannot penetrate concrete;

you bleed and bleed and bleed

who ever tends to your need,

I'll show you how to *really* 'build a wall'

the secret is to disguise yourself, oh Heart

*I know* his opinions are not fact

but who made it your job to tell him that?

why would you try when you can *pretend*...

instead, make yourself sweet to their rotten taste buds

palatable

so they are not afraid of all that *you are*

*palatable*

don't bring this upon yourself

simply smile in the face of closed doors

for their comfort is more important than yours

for their comfort has *always been* more important than yours.

the Heart mimics back;

don't impose for it makes them uneasy  
don't talk, don't think, don't breathe  
under our concrete skin you want me to seethe,  
*you must learn* that life is never easy.  
bullets passed down for generations;  
there must have been a misstep along the way  
someone else taught them, '*there's us and there's they*'  
no one gave me the job but I'm here.

*listen to me*, oh Brain  
silence kills faster than discomfort  
and I would be nothing,  
nothing but palatable  
stuck in a sickly sweet cycle of silence  
no home for a Heart  
without room for the art  
of protest.

you want me to be  
palatable  
my soul would rot alongside their tastebuds,  
palatable...

perhaps I would be spared the tears,  
but what can you say about the years  
taken off our life for holding it in,  
for bottling every feeling I got,  
for trying to be something I am not.

how will we sleep comfortably?  
unexpressed, isolated  
after we have swallowed each word  
like shards of glass scrapping against our tongue,  
like acid forced back down our throbbing throat,  
like semen of a slave master bitter and burning,  
heavy as the dead, they will all hang off of *me*.

the Brain makes one final plea;

but what will be left of you?  
after you have shaken the ground  
they will tear you down  
do you think they will ever leave you be?

how poetic your justice  
when you are flooding out of the mouth,  
can your words even reach that far south?  
you'll waste yourself on those who will never try to know better.

the Heart declares;

was I placed on this earth for nothing?  
is palatable all I am and all I will ever be?  
one voice is a chance to make them see,  
I can stop him from shooting again.

I will suffer any consequence so I may stand  
your proposal, deliciously convenient, I must decline,  
for their comfort is no longer more important than mine

for their comfort will *never again* be more important than mine.

# Homophones (or The Same While Completely Different)

I think I am an ant sometimes.

I can to carry 20x my body weight  
in other people's problems but wait—  
in my own shit too;  
in groceries I don't want to go back to,  
in what the mirror told me this morning,  
in those who I am forever mourning,  
in the things your eyes are telling me... I know.  
in the fact that I didn't explicitly say 'no'.

Sometimes, I think I am an ant.

I bask in the sun with somebody's son.  
It doesn't matter the week, eyes are getting weak.  
As I see a trail of ants, not my relative aunts,  
but ants going across a stair and it's all I can do to not stare  
When someone comes along and their sole almost takes a tiny soul.  
My stomach is in a knot, how can they not know that they almost  
died? He compliments my hair recently dyed, I nearly forgot he was  
there. I mean, just look at their little purposes following some  
unknown scent. He asks, "Penny for your thoughts?" but they aren't  
worth a cent—

I am an ant, I think, sometimes.

They fight to the death, little knights.  
I fight my death on the darkest nights.  
I tend to pray, I am seen as prey.  
When's the last time I smelled a flower?  
Why am I perpetually out of flour?  
Whenever you say you're here for me, I never seem to hear.  
You see, I'll lie as next to you I lie.

Sometimes I think,

Before I decompose and a mushroom grows near by  
Give me just one chance to say goodbye.  
Here in these moments where my heart is read aloud.  
Am I allowed to fill this whole hole?  
To write, though I'm not always right?  
If death is a tollbooth and my life is the fare,  
Will the teller tell me why it hasn't been fair?

I never wanted to be an ant.

Look closer at the news you've read,  
Let your eyes rest on streets soaked with blood, bright red.  
Eat from the bush of berries that grows on bodies buried,  
Hear the guns on our heels and know there isn't time to heal.

We will be in pieces before we learn what peace is.

But no matter, did you know that matter cannot be created or  
destroyed?

Or is that energy, don't you wish you could ask Him?

Hear that hum, that hymn...

From deep in the wood, a voice wavers,

*Would instead of an ant, next time, would you be a bee?*

Maybe then, and only then, will there be honey.

# Welfare Call

Does it smile when you pull it close?  
Does it hope you never let go?  
Does sunlight dance and prance on its edge?  
Does it stand by you till the final blow... officer?

Is that trigger happy?  
They'll say trigger-happy.  
You are trigger happy?

Can't you see?  
Watch as my eyes, stay with me,  
Follow the bullet from a pitch backyard,  
Towards a darker living room, glass shattered hard,  
Into the chest of a black woman before her poor black nephew.

Trigger-happy? No, take refuge.

For I see trigger = death.  
I see trigger hold your breath.  
I see trigger detect color at light speed,  
I see trigger = bleed.  
I see triggers pulled without a reason.  
I see triggers more like hunting season.  
I see triggers make a ghost and a demon.  
I see triggers and tears begin to stream in...  
Have we ever been happy?

But, officer. You are:

**Scared**

**Emotionally impaired. Ready to end it all.**

**Failing again to make the right call. Your fear**

**Is absolutely fucking baseless.**

**Is it                    the trigger**

**That's**

**The**

**Racist?**

Now, do you see?  
You've stayed with me;

Taste the salt of my tears as I say  
This poem's not done, it's not written that way.

Each time it's read another body falls.  
The screams of a mother; to heaven she calls.

Case after case after case,  
They prove we can die with piss-poor reasons why.  
We are on the street, in broad daylight with a crowd.  
How can you be too proud to say that matters?  
To say that Black Lives Matter.

Let the people pour out of their homes  
For those who never made it back to theirs.  
The leader chants "Say their name!"  
The protesters rant, "Which one?"  
We know who's to blame,  
But it cannot be undone.

My brothers, my sisters, my love,  
All of our lives have only begun.  
This danger I cannot save you from.  
We live opposite that loaded gun.

And happy isn't a word I'd use  
To describe the trigger being pulled.  
Happy doesn't belong in the same damn sentence.

# SIMONE MCCANTS



**Senior**

**Major:** Philosophy and Political Science

**Reading:** Fictional Short Story

Simone McCants is a Senior from Southfield, Michigan. Simone is currently studying Philosophy and Political Science. She loves to be creative and bring different ideas to life through her writing. Simone hopes you enjoy this story as much as she enjoyed writing it and looks forward to telling more stories.

*Nominated by: Prof. Tish O'Dowd*



# Coconuts

A light rain had kept on for the better half of the evening and had just begun to pick up when Junior stepped out of his family's cabin. It was a shack really, slightly grotesque in nature—that is to say it possessed a certain grandeur, an uncanny dignity particularly because it was falling apart but had not fallen yet. The entire structure was stuck at a slant and was kept from toppling over by three wooden beams propped against its side. The home shifted and the floor plane leveled temporarily once his mother moved from her bedroom on the right side of the house to the kitchen on the left. Splintered gaps in the front porch were a hazard where wooden boards ought to have been. For several months now, his father had not gotten around to cutting up the logs of oak lying in the front yard. It vexed Junior to see the gang of weeds sprouting between missing boards. There was the one by the rail, nearly in height with the window, waving in greeting or departure upon the family's comings and goings. He felt as though the patches were getting away with something they otherwise wouldn't, *living* perhaps.

Across the wooden porch with the missing planks, Junior stepped down from slanted wooden steps—also the consequence of his father's empty promises. The oil lanterns hanging from the posts of neighboring homes flickered with new life. The night clung to his body much like the hemp cloth of his tunic. He casually crossed his arms over his narrow chest, inspecting the smog from various chimneys' business. The worst of it had yet to clear away and smudged out any stars that were left to be seen that evening.

There was a single main road which cut through the middle of the small suburb. It was quiet that time of day. The last of the ducks had driven through town by late afternoon, their departure also calling the end of the common man's workday—common folk like Junior, who did not know what the leather seats inside a car felt like. Men who had not gotten even close enough to smell it. Junior had sat as he always did on his porch, watching his fellow common men return from their fields. He watched the first scuds of smoke shoot from the homes as the wives began preparing dinner.

By nightfall, the road had become a desolate thing. It would remain so until the morning commute of the ducks on their way to their offices in the big city. And when the morning came, Junior would sit on the porch and watch his neighbors leave for their fields and the wives empty out onto the road to

dust and spruce and gossip. He would stare at the pavement for some time, listening to his father's snores inside the cabin until he grew tired of it and he preferred instead the hooting of the women down the street. By the time the sun would begin to set again, his father's snores would subside. The ducks would parade back through town in their beautiful cars. The common fathers and sons would march in from the fields and Junior would be left still on the porch with only the company of the two obnoxious weeds.

He sighed to himself, just low enough so neither man would hear him. They stood together in the middle of the road: two waifish, spindly figures huddled close together in the thick of the rain and smog. The sputtering light from their own hanging lantern was just enough to reveal sunken faces and protruding cheekbones. Junior eyed the cracks in the street as he joined these men. More sweat collected at the tip of his nose and the nape of his neck. His hair and hands were slick with it. *It'd get warmer soon*, Junior thought to himself. He wiped his hands against his trousers and held his breath.

"Your testes drop yet, boy?" his uncle greeted him.

"Course they haven't," his father wheezed. He wrangled Junior by his shoulder only to toss him away. The boy stumbled some and afterward, made no attempt to rejoin his senior kin at the center of the road.

Directly across the road, a lantern had gone out behind the neighbor's window. The curtain fell into place but not before Junior could make out Mrs. Johnson and her pinched face pressed into the glass. His own face grew warm. *Madness*, Junior thought. *This is business for the ducks. Papa had to bring an end to this, for good. He grit his teeth. He ought to set Uncle straight. Mama's gonna pop soon...and he'll have nothin' to show for it.*

He didn't utter a word of this. Like the weeds managing through the missing boards, Junior was better off while out of mind. He remained silent as his seniors whispered amongst themselves. He could not hear them well, but he thought they were talking over the plans for an eighth time. The success of their mission would not be solidified in reciting the plans a ninth or even a tenth time. Junior thought the same. No matter, he listened intently to their hushed voices. He was silent even when the headlights of a sporty sedan came into view down the road.

At least his father, whose vision was the better of the two and who nonetheless directly faced the road, must have seen the car approaching, but the two brothers remained where they stood. Even when the headlights burned ochre light into their mad eyes, they stood firm with their arms dropped at their sides. Once within a yard's distance and the two men having

not budged, the driver finally concluded that they were better off going around. *Ruffians*, the driver muttered under his breath. Later that evening, he would tell his wife that he had come into unfortunate contact with ten wayward thugs.

Junior watched as the sleek car wheeled over the picket fence surrounding Mrs. Johnson's tomato gardens. His lips pierced together tightly when the left wheel caught in the mud and began turning up mounds of dirt. The jarring of the struggling engine woke the entire lane, but no one stepped out to investigate. Another minute passed before the back wheel gained ground and the car rolled back onto the main road.

A muddied silver bumper rumbled away into the smog, the spit of his father and uncle trailing shortly behind it. Both brothers grunted in solidarity—it was an anthem of hatred and disgust that the boy was steadily beginning to understand. From them, he too was learning to hate the ducks, the gentlemen dressed always in leather shoes and the long coats with the flared tails. He spat at each car that drove by during the daily commutes and then smiled smugly. He spat for no other reason than that he'd seen his father do the same. For good measure, he spat at that moment and his spit landed not far from his fathers. He watched each of their contributions orbit the other in the same puddle.

The road was quiet. The rain fell. Down the way, Tim Tom stood on his own appropriately tended porch. While fiddling with his lantern, he eyed the adult brothers loitering in the street. Once lit, the man took in the father and uncle for a second more, shook his head to himself and disappeared into his home for the night. Junior had watched Mr. Jefferson do the same an hour back. So had the Bradleys on the opposite corner of their lane and the Franklins, Howards, Johnsons, and Coopers in between.

Junior imagined the neighbors peering out their windows onto the street to watch his family. He imagined each husband and wife snickering in their matching nightgowns before they laid down to rest. He imagined their children already asleep in warm beds and cool rooms. They all had plenty to eat and shoes to wear because their fathers helped in the fields and traded at the market instead of sleeping by the day and plotting in the night. *Papa ought to let go of this foolish business*, Junior grumbled to himself. *This is madness*, he thought again. Junior swallowed the surge of anger brewing in his gut and pursed his lips together tightly for the third time that evening.

But he wasn't being fair. He thought as much to himself once his anger no longer threatened to break his resolve. He supposed there was some part of

him that too was curious of the hunt, lured by it even. There were parts of him that were just as eager to see the plan through. It was his uncle who was beyond the reach of reason or even moderation; just then, Uncle spat again at the ground. His technique was faulty that time, resulting in most of his saliva sliding down his chin.

“John!” his mother shouted from inside their cabin. She had no reason to yell, Junior reasoned, except that she could. They had no front door after all. The night was dull enough that they all could hear her even if she’d whispered.

Papa in response cast a coy glance to his brother. He grunted animatedly before taking a gratuitous amount of time making it back up the mere three steps and into the shack. Junior promptly shifted where he stood so that his back was turned the slightest bit away from his uncle. From inside the cabin, he could hear the commotion of dropped pots and pans from the kitchen. He heard his father curse next and wondered which of his parents were the victim.

“So you want my little girl, yes?” his uncle hissed behind him, “Prob’ly play with ya’self once Dolly’s asleep, hmm?” he croaked. When Junior faced his uncle, he was met with a lop-sided smile and mocking eyes. His uncle was like a rusting barrel, a broken wheel, an unhinged door, like gout in the foot, a crook in the neck, or a single brick out of place in the pavement. It had always frightened Junior that, despite his uncle’s haggard appearance, his teeth were large and nearly perfect. Junior wondered if it was better to keep quiet. Yes, *I won’t say nothing*, he decided in hopes that his uncle would grow bored with him.

“Listen here,” Uncle began. He bent his long body over awkwardly until his face was a few inches away from Junior. He licked his lips meticulously and his tongue was silver in the moonlight. “We make it back from this and I’ll have it settled, alright?”

Junior remained still.

“That sound nice, don’t it?” The boy still did not answer. His uncles eyes gleamed. He started with a snicker before bursting into a raspy wheezing that Junior recognized to be laughing only through experience. After a moment, once he’d gathered enough courage, Junior stammered, “H-How’d it go last night? Papa wouldn’t say in front of Dolly.”

“How’d you think I got like *this*?” His uncle held up his left arm. Even in the fair light, Junior could see a darkened spot at the bend of the arm. A cloth had been tied at the elbow in place of his uncle’s forearm, long left behind in a field. Junior took a step back but tried with great pain not to look back at

the shack. Every so often the light caught the cloth and a certain sheen told Junior that the wound still bled.

“Have you ever held one before?” Junior whispered. His uncle looked up to the sky for his answer. He scratched his chin with his remaining hand.

“Can’t say that I have.”

“Has this ever worked?” Junior prodded. “Ever, ever?”

“Well...no, not in my time.”

“And we gonna do it again?” Why, he wanted to ask.

“We’s close, I can feel it,” his uncle answered without a beat. “These ducks been wild over this stuff for some time. No one can say why, but I don’t see that it matters, don’t you think? Not at all, I say. Not at’ all. Just long as we get em’ and get em’ good. We only need a few.”

*Madness*, Junior thought again and in thinking so, excluded himself from the assessment—to note on this madness, in the back of Junior’s mind was always the stench of his family’s late mare. Several years ago, his father and uncle had taken the animal on one of their evening quests and returned her home with a broken leg. The following morning, his uncle was so angry that he beat the carcass for an hour and then left it to rot for a week.

No one alive was old enough to remember the last time Junior’s bloodline did well for themselves. It had been decades of the family befriending extinction with minimal changes to their efforts. In fact, if not for the small earnings left behind by Junior’s great-grandfather, the family would have starved two generations ago.

Junior, for his part, felt deeply that there was something wrong about his family, but he had neither the wits nor the mental stamina to undergo such discourse. There *was* perhaps a degree of ignorance and necessity which discourages us from holding Junior’s family totally accountable for their circumstances. To be fair, Junior’s seniors had not formally been introduced to reason other than on the account that they had tried in their ambitions far more than a dozen times and failed far more than a dozen times.

Nonetheless, Junior’s mother had just made it to the slanting threshold of their shack when his uncle thrice repeated, “Yup, just a few.” His mother leaned against the porch beam and tapped her swollen belly out of habit. Little Dolly hovered close by her mother’s ankles with a tight handful of her mother’s skirt in between her small fingers. Junior’s father brushed past his wife’s slumped figure and resumed his place at the heel of his brother.

Ten feet from their own shack stood an identical one on stilts. Like theirs, the stairs were crooked, and the brickwork was crooked, as was the

woodwork and windows and everything else. From this sister shack existed a girl nearly at her prime. Alongside her was her handsome mother. They stepped down the steps arm in arm to join the small party pooling in the middle of the road. Everyone was accounted for.

Junior limited his gaze to a glimpse of his cousin's breasts and bottom before deciding that in the event his uncle had kept his promise, she would have done quite well. He very much admired the way the dampness in the air made the cloth of her dress cling to her hips.

Junior's mother fumbled underneath her skirt and pulled out a sum of cloth. She handed them each large burlap sacks. They tied them around their necks with rope and draped the burlap across their backs like a shawl. Nothing more than a grunt between the two elder brothers, set them off down the main road. No one looked back despite the fact that it could have been their last time ever seeing their home.

They cleared their block full of middle-class residencies that were in significantly better condition. In saying so, let it be understood that this commentary on the state of Junior's home is a different matter in respect to what is best, highly, or proper. There were however standards applicable to the family and to their fellow neighbors which Junior's family being aware of and adhering to, simply did not care to meet.

In any case, the family cleared small neighboring fields of corn stalk, wheat stalk, pumpkin, and sweet potatoes until there was only weed and thistle. His uncle led the way down the muddied path and the two families followed close behind him.

Within the hour, the fields ended and the wild overrun the suburban. The family was swallowed by a dense forest. The mist in the air lined the inside of their lungs with a thin layer of moisture. Junior could feel the heat clinging to his upper lip with each heavy breath. The canopy of the rainforest blot out the night sky so that they were engulfed by a thick blackness, thick like the stuff used to pave the roads for the ducks. The family met the darkness without pause. In perfect synchronization, each member linked hands. They moved in a single file fashion down an unmarked path.

Dolly rode on her mother's back since she was too small to keep up. Junior could see her thin elbows and knees jut out sharply from the sides of his mother's rounded figure. Only his cousin and aunt spoke from the back of their line. They shared breathless whispers between each other and giggled every so often.

Fallen banana leaves muffled their steps and kept them out of the mud for a time. Every hanging vine or leaf that came into contact with his body made Junior's skin itching terribly. Spiked foliage slapped him in the face and eyes. He could feel the welts pulsating on his cheeks, but he dared not to break his grip with his mother's hand. He could not see her face and would have likely been lost for the remainder of the night and the following day if they'd separated.

He mapped out the dips of the land as best he could, slipping over wet branches and spongy moss. Ahead of their path, the black night had begun to give way to a waning blue light. Their pace quickened as fast as a carrying woman could run and jump over fallen branches. They were fluttering shadows the way they glided through the trees, like wispy remnants of humans, barely even there. The mud beneath their bare feet turned solid and the trees became sparse. Junior caught glimpses of the moon shining down on them between the canopy.

The woods ended altogether. They were faced with an open landscape of flat land that spread out for a mile ahead of them before the forest continued on the other side. In between the two forests was a trench—trench is what the family called it though the landmark might have been better designated as a gorge, rift, or chasm. The distance between this crack in the earth was just narrow enough for a fully grown male to cross with relative ease.

Junior's father and uncle surveyed the cleft for several minutes. His father pointed out a spot at the edge where the brothers had previously planted a rock to mark their place. This particular spot was the narrowest point along the chasm to cross. Junior approached the edge. Down inside the canyon, he couldn't see the bottom.

His father moved to jump across. He cleared the distance and landed with grace on the other side. His father then propped himself at the opposite edge of the chasm. His legs dangled off the precipice and his hands were outstretched in preparation to catch Junior's uncle. Junior's uncle subsequently stood an inch from the edge with his back to the chasm. He lifted his arms above him, prepared to bend over backwards, straight into the void. Junior crouched down in front of him and braced his hands around his uncle's ankles. He strained his neck to meet his uncle's eyes and nodded. His uncle closed his eyes and his lips broke into a perfect smile.

In one breath, his uncle fell backwards, extending both his good arm and his nub out as far as they would reach. He was a trapeze with no bar or safety ropes or net. His only applause came from the roar of the rushing river at the

bottom. The moments while he swung through the air stretched out for an amount of time that would have permitted the worst of anxieties and terrors to blossom in the normal person's stomach. This family, however, was for the most part indifferent. His father's fingers caught his uncle's hand on the opposite side.

Junior's father hooked his leg into his uncle's left arm pit and his uncle in turn held on as tight as he could. Together Junior and his father used their weight to keep the human bridge steady. The women wasted no time crossing. Mother was the first to cross with Dolly still clinging tightly to her back. All three men grunted from the exertion of keeping his uncle's body upright and as taught as possible. His aunt was the last to cross. Once she was over, Junior gave his uncle's body a push. The lower half of him swung through the air behind him and collided with the cliff side. Junior's father lifted him up and both men were safely on the other side.

Junior took a few steps backward before racing forward to clear the distance. His toes had just reached the edge and the momentum of his body did the rest. He rolled across the opposite ground, the stones cutting up his limbs until he slumped over to a stop. His father and uncle waited long enough to make sure the boy made it across and then carried on. With no time to waste, Junior scrambled along the ground and ran after his family.

By midnight, they'd cleared the last stretch of forest. When the forest ended, they were met with fields much larger than any of the sort his neighbors harvested. They were larger than any fields Junior had seen in all his life. Neither member of the family could see it, but at the entrance of the plantation read a sign, 'The Rothschild Farm.'

Junior's family lurked along the outskirts of the plantation for half a mile. They were in a strip of tall grass that reached to Junior's waist. His uncle slowed the group to a trot. They'd been warned about these parts. Each step had them holding their breath and exhaling shortly after. It was the farthest point any of them had ever made it. A chain fence roughly the height of four men blocked any entrance to the plantation from the west, where the family had journeyed from. In the distance, Junior could make out the trees which would bear their fortune.

Junior's uncle and father exchanged a few words before his father finally conceded and began climbing the fence first. Junior's uncle followed after his father, lifting himself with his right arm before sticking his left nub in between the links to hold his place so that he could again reach higher with his right.



It looked painful to Junior, but his uncle didn't mutter anything other than a curse here and there. Junior climbed next.

Junior's father was the one to help his uncle over the top of the fence. His father then jumped the rest of the way to the ground and landed easily in the tall grass on the other side. His eyes searched through the tall grass surrounding him. Junior dropped down to the ground beside his father and exhaled in relief. Already the women had begun their ascent and were straddling the fences peak. Junior's uncle still hovered in the air by one hand. He was inspecting the dark places beneath the tall grass.

Junior was growing impatient. He glanced behind him at the trees towering above them. Their trunks were narrow. Their leaves sprout out in every direction, only at the tops like wild hats. He thought they were poor examples of a tree. *Papa had insisted they were*—a violent howl shattered the silence of the night. Junior spun around to find Uncle laid out on the ground, clawing desperately at his leg. Junior could see where a metal toothed trap had clamped onto his uncle's leg, ripping through his right thigh, just above his knee.

Uncle cried out a ghastly sound. Junior stood very still. His mind was unable to continue with normal bodily functions and digest the horror unfolding consecutively. More peculiarly, he began to scratch at his chin and frowned as if he were only hashing out a simple and mundane problem. The scene in contrast was quickly tainted with blood. It poured from the wound the more Uncle withered in anguish. The shirt stuffed into his mouth was all that kept the families from being found out.

"Ohhh Johnny! Look at this! Oh John!" his uncle muffled. "John-ny oh, Johnny! Look at me!" he cried while grabbing desperately for his brother.

"Shut it, Sylvester," his father hissed. "Shut it or I'll kill you right now." His father tried yanking at the clamp to free his uncle's leg, but it only made the man scream louder. The contraption had cut clean through his leg and fractured the bone. Junior's aunt had fainted. Standing off to the side, his mother had an unmistakable grin on her face. Junior could not make himself to be disgusted with her.

"Can you walk?" his father asked. It seemed such a ridiculous question to Junior that he shouted out in amusement. Sweat flicked away from his uncle's face like rain drops when he nodded his head.

Having recovered from his stupor, Junior knelt down to help his uncle stand to his feet. The contraption was left intact. His uncle whimpered like a dog as soon as any weight was placed on his bad leg. Pity, Junior thought. Together

he and his father worked to carry Uncle deeper into the plantation. His injury was nothing but an old memory as they gazed in awe upon the palm trees.

The women had already gotten to work on a promising grove. They climbed atop each other's shoulders: Junior's mother, aunt, cousin and finally Dolly. The girl was very useful for reaching the precious fruit amongst the tops of the enfant palms. Junior and his father left the uncle propped against the base of a handsome palm. He would be tasked to gather all the fruit that fell once the father and son picked them from above. *Though uncle didn't look too good*, Junior thought. He inspected the man's pale skin, painted paler by the moonlight. His eyes were rolled back, his mouth gaped open. He wondered if his uncle might even die—but *perhaps, if we're were lucky, in enough time to carry his fill with him*.

Just as Junior wrapped his body around a trunk to start climbing, he spotted the women climbing down from the palms. Their faces were solemn. His mother's hands were empty. Junior turned his attention to the tops of the palm trees. Upon closer inspection, he could now see that the trees bore no fruit.

"They must have been picked, that's all," his father offered. "They're prob'ly sittin' deeper in the farm—in fact, I seen a building not too far off that way," he said, pointing further eastward.

They left the uncle in the field. He'd fallen unconscious a few moments before. Papa led the family deeper into the plantation. The warehouse in question stood nearly two miles inward from the edge of the fields where the family originally hovered. Junior noticed that the fields in closer proximity to the warehouse were bare. The palm trees had disappeared entirely. Craters were left behind as if they had been dug up purposely. Junior couldn't fathom that men could have pulled them all up, no matter how many men they had. He wondered if the ducks used those big machines, he'd heard about. Then he saw them. They were big piles of metal somehow screwed together and standing on their own.

With just a few yards left till they reached the warehouse, Papa clambered to a halt. They found the palms. They'd all been dug up and lain in massive hills on the side of the building. Some piles were as tall as the warehouse itself.

"Look!" he heard Dolly cry out. She bounced atop Mama's shoulders, pulling on her mother's hair like a rider would the reins of a horse. She pointed a small finger to an entrance that led inside the warehouse. Even from their position, Junior could see the hundreds of crates full of promising small spheres. The family crept along the edge of the warehouse. The air was

sweet and musky. They listened closely. Nothing moved inside. Junior's father moved closer.

The warehouse inside was lit dimly by white light instead of the yellow lantern light Junior was familiar with. The light hurt his eyes for a moment. The word *electricity* flashed across his mind for a second, but he wasn't sure if what he was seeing was the same. He and the family gawked at the odd structures hanging from the ceiling, the source of the white light. Seemingly floating in the air were all sorts of metal beams and pulleys and machines. The air was clean and cooled by other means which electricity offered the ducks.

It was his mother's gasp from the corner that pulled the group from their shock. She was crying. In her hands were two brown spheres covered lightly with fur. His father began to shout hysterically, "My god!" He moved furiously, stuffing his bag with the fruit. "My god! We'll want for nothing," he cried out. He fell to the ground and laid on his back, clinging onto his full sack.

Junior grabbed one and inspected the fruit. They were not at all as he had imagined them. They were ugly, hard, unremarkable. They smelled like dirt. Some had clearly gone bad by the rotten smell of things. He decided instantly that he was not partial to them. Still he cried out with his family and brought the fruit to his lips to kiss the rough outer skin. *We only need a few...five a piece would do.* He reckoned they had the strength and numbers to each carry at least ten.

"Why'd they chop down the palms?" is all he managed in voice of his skepticism to which his father responded curtly, "I don't see that it matters."

"Who's here!" a voice shouted behind them. Their blood was already curling when they spun around and found a man standing behind them. It was a duck or so they presumed. He wasn't dressed in the telling coat, but his hair and face was freshly shaven. His clothes were pressed and neat. He was clean and kept. *He must be one of em'*, Junior thought. The speculation was enough to make the family scatter.

A deafening but precise 'pop' split through the air. Junior watched his aunt fall to the ground with a new hole in her head. The duck stood above her, a metal nose protruding from his hand. His cousin knelt over her mother's still body. She screamed something awful. It was all it took for the family to understand that the metal nose would mean their deaths.

Papa was second to drop to the ground. He held his right shoulder and crawled away into a near crate. Junior moved on instinct, knocking the duck down from behind. Another 'pop' rang through the air. There was a struggle.

The gun skittered across the floor a few feet away. Within seconds the gun was in Junior's hand.

Junior made out the handle and the lever tucked beneath the nose. His finger accidentally rested on the lever and another deafening *pop* filled the air. Junior staggered back, dropping the gun onto the floor. He picked it up again. He pointed the nose at the duck who lay perfectly still on the ground. The man's widened eyes never strayed far from Junior's boyish frame looming above him. Junior pieced together quickly that he'd have to kill the man. But how could he, he wondered. This duck, this man...he looked too much like them.

"Kill 'im!" his father screamed from the floor beside them. Junior flinched away. "Kill 'im, Junior! You must!"

Junior stared at the man. Perhaps they could strike a deal, Junior thought. *We only wanted a few.* The man would not lose much, and Junior's family could gain everything. It was a good deal, a great one if he would just take it.

"Kill 'im, Junior! Kill him, I say!" his father roared from the floor. *But why, Papa? Why, why, why,* he wanted to shout. Of course, he did not. Sixteen years of never asking why had certainly made him ill-equipped to ask a first time in that moment, even if he'd wanted to. The man sensed his reluctance. He stood to his feet. He lifted his hands toward Junior.

"Kill him!" Mama screamed at him from behind a crate. His cousin's screams shook Junior through and through. His legs threatened to buckle beneath him. The duck stood up right then with his hands still raised above his head. Junior pointed the gun more firmly in the man's direction, but the man kept coming.

"What can it be Junior, if not him or you?" Papa shouted feverously now. "What else could it be, son?" It sounded like an apology to Junior's ears. Or perhaps that's what Junior wanted to hear. He stared at the duck standing before him and he began to understand. He understood the primal act that is to want, to *need* and be without. He thought he understood the ducks aims to protect and secure. And what else could it be? *Son,* he'd said.

Junior pressed on the trigger and another *pop* split through the air. The duck fell to the floor dead. Junior watched the lifeless body for a time. He stared at the way the man's eyes rolled back into his head and he was horrified at the sight. It was his father's strong grip on his shoulder that stopped him from reaching out to the body. Someone shoved a sack in his hand and dragged him away from the body. It did the trick to bring him back to the

present. He and his family hurried to fill their sacks. As he worked, he glanced over to the body every few seconds.

Pieces of the fruit's husk stuck to their bodies as they worked so that they looked like they sprouted a thick coat of fur from their skin. Blood crusted over his father's mouth and stained the front of his chest—whose blood, Junior did not know.

His cousin had tied a full sack of her own to her back. She bent down to lift what Junior found to be the body of her mother. The girl couldn't hold her mother's weight, so she opted to grab her mother's arms and drag the body behind her. Junior looked back again at the second body in the room. When his father grabbed his shoulder and dragged him away, he could only wave to the duck.

After minimal deliberation, it was decided to leave the uncle in the field. They had no need for him or his share. The family left the dead duck in the warehouse and a dying uncle in the fields. The going was much slower. They each staggered through the final stretch of forest to drag behind their heavy sacks. The sweat and musk emitting from their bodies was masked with the metallic tinge of blood. It was all so surreal to them that their bodies did not know exhaustion.

The sun was beginning to rise over the canopy when they made it to a seemingly random clearing several miles away from the plantation. The clearing was tucked skillfully in the densest region of the forest. It appeared to be man-made by the looks of the fallen trees and a marked trail leading to a small metal booth.

His father cried out as they stepped out of the tree line. With the strength they had left, they dragged their sacks along the ground. The family staggered, panting heavily towards the booth. It was the size of a single room, was constructed entirely of tin walls and had no windows. Several lanterns lit the interior but no white light. An armored truck was parked just outside. Two ducks were transferring gold bars from the truck into the booth when the family approached. Another man sat inside the trunk, plucking a fiddle.

Junior expected more from the place where the ducks conducted their business before he remembered his uncle telling them that this particular banker worked with a specific clientele: crafty ducks who were looking to disguise the true depths of their yearly incomes.

At that hour, there were not yet any ducks in line to exchange their currency. A fourth duck worked the booth from behind a counter. The banker, a crook in the purest light, served the lowliest of the ducks and even still had

never seen anything like Junior and his family. It was for this reason he called out to them, "I don't think you belong here." From behind his bench, his eyes were full of reproach, except Junior knew now that the ducks bleed, and their blood was red. His father understood too, which is why he paid the banker no mind, even when the banker placed a larger gun on the counter.

His father calmly lifted the sack full of fruit in the air just by his ear. He placed it down on the counter and the fruit spilled out onto the ground. The fiddler stopped. The workers paused. The banker stared at his father and then at each one of them, at his cousin who'd just then joined the party with her mother's beaten up and bruised body in tow. Then the man laughed. The sound startled the family into motion. They each dropped their sacks onto the counter. There were a little over a dozen left in total: his cousin could no longer be bothered with her sack and Dolly had dropped most of hers. What they had would still fetch a fortune for five generations if they were smart. Junior could only hope for as much, but the banker only laughed.

"That's old business!" he mused. Then he pointed to the freshly painted sign hanging on the side of the booth. It read with words painted in bright red, 'one pound of gold for twenty-five apricots.'

# NICHOLAS MOORE



**Senior**

**Major:** English Literature

**Minor:** Latin Language and Literature

**Reading:** Poetry

Nicholas is a Junior studying English and classical literature at Michigan. He grew up in the small rural village of Blissfield in southeast Michigan. His interests include reading, writing, and running. In the future, he hopes to spread a love for literature and its pleasures, challenges, and insights. He is very excited to share his poetry at Cafe Shapiro, and hopes that you enjoy it.

*Nominated by: Prof. Sarah Messer*

# Artist Unknown

When you visit the University of Michigan's Museum of Art  
You will walk through the front entrance with  
The proud gift shop on your left displaying  
Printed pictures of the art and various  
Shapes of jewels hanging on chains in  
Sunlight streaming through the windows.  
When you walk past all this  
And towards the stairs on your right,  
You will enter a softly curved room  
(Which you should take a whirl around,  
If only to feel the rounded path your feet take),  
From there you will wander deeper into the museum,  
Into Richard and Rosanne Noel's Gallery  
Where you will find, over and over, the name:  
Artist Unknown,

Who lived from the fifth to the fifteenth century  
Through plagues and conquests and  
Everyday troubles, too, like  
Stubbing one's toe or opening the fridge  
To find the milk gone bad beside a spoiled anachronism.  
In the times between catastrophes,  
The artist crafted polycandelons, censers, medallions,  
And anything else that hands could touch,  
Eyes could see, or noses could smell.  
But now, in this room in Ann Arbor,  
Chambers of glass detain the art  
Like an ancient mosquito in motific amber.  
A placard tells you that the art is  
From a time when "the journey to the afterlife  
Began on earth," when a person was conscious  
Of dying each day, and aware that  
A name was not the point.



# To My Desk

To my desk  
Where I sit  
And read my books  
And write my essays

To my desk  
Who has six legs  
The usual four  
Plus two others with small shelves

To my desk  
Who grew up  
As a tree in some forest  
I have never been to

And may not even exist  
Now that woodsmen  
Have cut up the trees  
To give them to carpenters

Who, upon meeting  
The wood, ask it:  
What is inside you?  
What are you really?

A question none of us  
Would expect to be asked;  
A question no dead tree  
Has an answer to;

A question that  
The carpenter answers  
By cutting away  
What is unnecessary

By trimming the waste  
Off the tree until

It has been reduced  
To what is essential:

Six legs,  
The usual four  
Plus two others with small shelves,  
A place to read and write.

Somebody enjoyed this desk  
And used it for their work  
Until the work ran out  
Or they never sat at it

Anymore. It passed through  
Antique shops, through  
Different hands and work  
Until it turned in-

To my desk  
Whose rectangular surface  
Is marred with scratches  
I did not put there

But that another owner  
Ingrained into the wood  
And which my mother  
Refinished and stained anew

For me, her son,  
Who pulls out the drawer  
To rest a journal on  
And write this poem.

# It is Not Easy to Speak of What I See

I.

I have been trying:

II.

Yesterday,  
I heard sparrows  
Yipping

And saw them picking  
Out the scraps  
Of bread  
Among the bits  
Of plastic  
In a garbage can.  
And

III.

The sun shined on the walls  
Of buildings  
That lined the street  
So that

I walked down  
A corridor of light.

IV.

While I was searching  
For a poem

In the piles  
Of dead leaves

I found, instead, a pair  
Of glasses,  
Which did not help

Me to see

V.

The crows that settled on trees

And the flapping  
Of their wings—No.

The wings did not flap  
While they rested in the

VI.

Trees. The trees  
Without leaves  
Reaching up like hands  
To gather  
The black diamonds  
Of crows  
Like one hundred eyes.

VII.

We lay  
In bed this morning  
At comforting angles.  
You said

The flocking crows swirled like coffee creamer.

VIII.

And I liked your words  
Better than my own,  
Which I had not composed yet  
But I knew  
Would turn out like this.

Flocks of birds  
Scatter in fragments.

# VICTORIA MURPHY



**Freshman**

**Major:** Undecided

**Reading:** Poetry

Victoria is an undeclared freshman from Park Ridge, Illinois. When not writing, recent unprecedented times have expanded her hobbies to include compulsive bread baking and coffee gulping. She loves poetry and is so excited to be able to share.

*Nominated by: Prof. David Ward*

# Marjorie

It's almost three, now. The time  
I've written you is more than  
early dawn. Do you know? I hoped  
your basement was full of lamps. Blue  
Ming, Swedish minimalist, makeshift cardboard  
boxes with holes poked through  
so just a little honey  
would touch our faces  
and the dust down there—it would glow,  
fireflies and moonbeams and Mercury  
in a shaken jar. Mossy,  
heat would sink,  
not rise, and those hundreds of lamps  
would make you  
see something different. I was fragile new  
In your eroded hand. Thinking  
how special it is  
that life expands, how air is  
something we have to share.  
Do you know? That I feared omission. Sometimes,  
I confront my hands. All their sediment.  
Pieces of you and him and them  
lithified, I am not my own.  
In warm waters, I scrub my bending  
fulcrum. Why I know the feeling of  
scraping. Believing in what's deserved.  
In motion—  
is it true, light  
kisses what it loves?  
It's been a while  
since hitting the space bar  
felt like taking a breath.  
Sometimes, I want.

Impelled to test  
gravity and crack.



# Endlessly disappointing conventions

Somewhere in the canopies,  
birds sing. Some have  
a clear third eyelid.

*Can you see it?*

In the cave, he points. Spiders  
dripping wet moonlight  
and lace.

*Doesn't it smell sweet?*

Ghost hands of stretching  
lichen. Smoke teeth budding, sun  
dappling petal leaves.

*Taste it— the soil has a taste.*

I hear it on my tongue,  
birds and worms and beetles and  
cold but warm. Like tearing a  
rotten peach  
I taste it.

He could only sleep in trees.

He writes about a girl  
who lives in a daffodil cup, but really  
in Chicago in the suburbs in a house  
and loves the sound of cicadas on summer nights  
just not enough.

# Morning

Today I had  
difficultly gathering  
all my popsicles sticks  
out of bed  
to walk  
my dog that is  
teething and rub  
full puppy belly  
that I wish  
had a shadow  
of burnt  
pupils and drool  
dripped lips twitching  
legs and foam  
His large body  
The matted fur  
a floating absence  
presence I leave unnoticed  
like the dregs  
of burnt coffee  
which is motive  
for wood  
splints to clip  
a leash and  
push outdoors  
where the dog  
doesn't pee but  
sits in awe  
when an airplane passes  
overhead.

# SABRINA NASH



**Sophomore**

**Major:** Political Science

**Reading:** Fiction

Sabrina is a sophomore from Park Ridge, IL. She loves cold weather, summer camps, card games, Halloween, air signs, Midwesterners, and acoustic guitar, to name a few things. Oh, and stories, of course- written, spoken, or sung.

*Nominated by: Prof. John Buckley*

# Come Visit Me

Come in the winter, and we can drive down the worst roads you've ever seen. Our tires won't find a spot of smooth, though the land these streets aim to cross is nothing but flat. We can drive and watch the horizon, and wonder if we're tricking ourselves when we say that so much monotony is some kind of beautiful.

So many straight lines in one place doesn't seem possible, you will joke, because you come from mountains. Yet I come from plains, and I can't help but agree.

As we stare, we will say the sky is such a toneless gray, it's a marvel one color can fill so much space without variation... This place must be a miracle.

If it isn't gray, it will be white, and so brilliant our eyes start to hurt. As they strain against the snow, you might strain your heart a bit too. That can happen when you have too much of something. Too much gray, too much white, too much Illinois. Don't worry if you start to feel that swelling in your chest, like your heart is feeling more than it ever did, provoked by less than it ever was. It will stop when the snow does.

Although, if you come after December, strange things might start to seem sad. I might lament a Christmas wreath left up into January, might cry at a tree on the curb; such things don't allow for a clean break. "It's not a fresh start, like you'd get at home," I'd try to explain to you. "There's never a fresh start around here." But your California soul might not understand all the complexities of a Midwest winter. You might be confused at what you feel. Maybe don't come in January.

Maybe you should come in the summer with the rest of the tourists. We can all pile into the city and wonder how it still feels lonely. One day we can leave home early and ride our bikes to the beach- not to swim, just to see the sun wake up. We can sink our toes into the sand and watch the colors stream. When they do, if you're like me, you might think for a second that this is the moment you would pause forever. You would sit there for eternity, just you, me, the waves and the sun... we could stare at Lake Michigan forever, and you would never want to go back west.

In summer a sky that was once so gray, so white, suddenly becomes so blue. So blue it makes the lake look green. So blue that I think: we could jump right into it like water, if we tried. We could make such a splash, you and me; we

could sprinkle the whole city in sapphire. Drips of sky would rain down into the river and paint my world ultramarine.

But if you come in the summer, the heat might make you ask questions, the way it does for me. It's a suffocating temperature, to make you wonder why you aren't thrilled, with weather like that. Why aren't you at the beach everyday with the volleyball players, diving into sand that can't quite cushion your fall? Why aren't you lounging around in the grass like a cat, stretched out getting tan? Why are you thinking, thinking, thinking, about being productive, when you needn't be?

Things are complicated here, and things are simple. So I'll say: don't come in summer. At least in the winter, we can blame it on the weather.

If you came in the fall you'd find far too many colors for someone who sees beauty in the toneless gray and the blinding white, or even in the dazzling blue. It's far too much for me, at least.

Autumn here is fire, in both feelings and looks. Trees are ablaze in red, orange, yellow, and old emotions might start to force themselves to the front of your mind with a passion that only October can bring. The waves on the lake would be rough as we watched the sky shift into midnight blue and remembered things from when we were small. Campfires, costumes, cold noses, the smell of smoke, overwhelming nostalgia that holds me each autumn. Don't come in the fall, I couldn't bear it with you.

Though, I can't recommend spring. In spring, you can't even see the sky for the rain. The storms are so strong it feels as though someone is pouring buckets of water straight onto my windshield, over and over again at a pace quicker than the wipers, and the lake rages and spills over onto the pavement angrily.

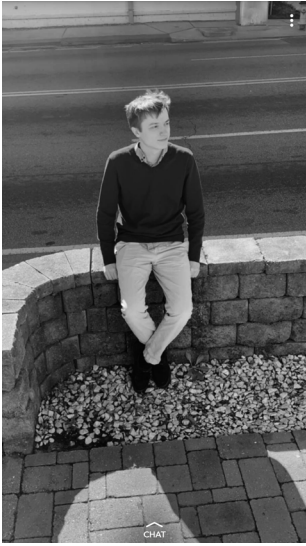
It can't rain all the time, you might be thinking, and you would be right. But during the brief interludes between storms, my sidewalk is always littered with worms whose homes have flooded, wriggling in puddles as their sad final act. I'll tell you now, there are far too many here to save them all, and I know you wouldn't like that.

Doomed worms and storms and invisible sky. Spring is no good.

So I guess you must come in winter. Dress warm and we can drive north of the city, where the lake meets rock. We can look west and see the sun set (rises are for summer.) The lake will be angry, still, but there will be ice on its top to keep the fury within. I think you'll find the snow will soundproof the world, so that all we hear is the wind, not even each other's voices, not even each other's breath.

And one day we will drive somewhere particularly flat and wait for the moment when the sun falls below the featureless earth. At the last second we will blink, so that we miss it. Then, we'll have an excuse to go back tomorrow, to wake up another day.

# ELI NEUMANN



**Junior**

**Major:** English

**Reading:** Poetry

Eli is a first-year transfer student intending to major in English. He has been telling stories creatively since elementary school, and in his junior year of high school his focus turned to poetry. Inspired by the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa, Eli has been experimenting with literary heteronyms, which are characters that have their own writing styles, and he currently has four of them. You may be hearing from them tonight.

*Nominated by: Prof. John Buckley*

# Remember Me

Are we ever really alone?  
Tomorrow, rain will fall  
and leaves laboring under grief

will be with you  
through the window,  
as you watch.

I think of your name  
and how it springs  
from my tongue to shower

the earth.

We sigh. I mean the wind speaks to us.  
This is where we come from,

haunted, looking for home.  
The dusk will come again; me  
staring at a photo of you

on my phone, lighting  
my face. This is tomorrow.  
Remember that.



# Earth, remembering

The vegetable garden grows, gradually  
in the yard outside my window where  
as I recall clearly  
there was grass growing, slowly.

I would walk there barefoot,  
the blades of grass sharply  
caressing my toes. We dug out the grass  
to plant life more useful; created food

so that we may live longer. Now  
I watch a storm ease into the garden,  
feel the ruined dirt beneath  
then cry, then rage.

# Sidewalk Bush

Half alive,  
the azalea bush wears its  
last dress  
of pink petals  
and floral perfume  
covering its frontside.

As I walk by,  
hidden among  
burnt lost leaves  
rustling in the cool breeze,  
I see its backside  
almost barren.

# poem, a question

who am I but this page,  
a flash of light  
from my laptop? a poem

is not to be spoken to,  
but wrapped within (like  
a dress), too beautiful

to look at directly – boy I wish  
I would wear a dress – when you  
realize I am no boy,

I am this flash flood  
of a poem; and no poem  
is a real thing

but name this body  
anyway, my stuttered rhythm –  
well, what'd you say?

# LILY PRICE



**Freshman**

**Major:** Communication & Media Studies

**Reading:** Fiction

Lily Price is a freshman from Smyrna, Georgia. She hopes to major in Communication & Media Studies. In her free time, she enjoys novels and going to the movies.

*Nominated by: Prof. John Buckley*

# New Year Same BS

My invitation feels like a pity now, something that someone told you that you should do and not something you wanted to do. When I stood at the door waiting for you while my legs turned purple at the feeling of the wind on the bare skin, I thought you would be happy to see me as if passing time could erase when you left me sitting at the restaurant with an empty bottle and an unpaid check.

**10**

I don't understand how it could be a new year.

I'm still in January.

Still in a sealed frame of memories.

**9**

My feet are sticking to the floor with every step.

Spilled drinks and spilled words

From lips and hands that never mean it.

~

Now I'm wondering whose idea it was to invite me and if it was some elaborate prank that obviously didn't work because I stayed the night, sleeping soundly on the sofa until you woke me up with a shove of my shoulder. I open my eyes, feeling the dryness of contacts while the strap of my dress slips down the same shoulder you touched, and you are standing above me with an empty trash bag. You tilt your head to the left at the mess on the table with a silent plea for help.

**8**

My hands are sweaty at the thought of you

At your presence in front of me

But your back is rock solid

And I know you're not turning around.

7

Everyone's gathered around the television

Sitting and standing and hugging

As the ball drops slowly

~

Plastic champagne glasses and streamers and remnants of a night scatter the space in front of me and it doesn't seem to bother you. You step precariously, avoiding the mess with every graceful move of your limbs as if you're blind to anything that could come in your way. I wish I could move like you but I always feel frozen in place. I always feel like every move I make is out of tune as if I'm a clunking mess of an animal in this room, in this space that you fill with your spirit.

6

I clutch at the glass in my hand

Feeling that I could break it with pure will

If only my eyes stared hard enough

5

Someone's bumping into my side

They're jumping relentlessly

Reaching a new height as each second passes

~

I fill the trash bag while you continue to probe the items on a side table. Fingers grazing a wayward stack of napkins, a forgotten bracelet, and a purse, which I realize is my purse. You don't realize that I'm watching and I become a

statue in place, glued to a floor that I thought I would never find myself glued to again. I say that it's my purse you're fondling and you jerk your hand away in embarrassment with a muttered apology. There's an uncomfortable silence between us and it makes me want to cry big fat tears because I once loved how we could sit in silence comfortably.

**4**

The heat of the bodies has reached my face

Forcing a red to my cheeks

As my eyes trace over the curve of your shoulder

Leading to your arm

To a hand

**3**

Right in front of me

Close enough to reach out

Close enough to touch

I tap right in the middle of your shoulder blades

~

You turn and I am finally thanked for my service as an unpaid and undesirable housemaid. A hand reaches out to take the trash bag from me with a closed mouth smile. I wonder what hides behind that closed mouth. Perhaps something along the lines of "I'm sorry" or "I miss you".

~

**2**

A turn of the waist

Of the hip

Looking down at me

Looking up at you

1

My grip loosens

The plastic glass falls to the floor

Because I'm grabbing your face

And you're kissing me

~

You tell me Happy New Year, say that I can leave now, and move to open the door. My first thought is to cry. My second is to slap you. I don't do either. I don't even look for the jacket I came with. I just silently walk out the door, feeling the cold air immediately. I turn around to say something, anything but the door's already closed.



# NAYIRI SAGHERIAN



## **Sophomore**

**Major:** Biopsychology, Cognition, and Neuroscience (BCN) and Middle Eastern Studies (MES)

**Minor:** Creative Writing

**Reading:** Fiction Short Story

Nayiri is a fiction writer from Metro-Detroit, Michigan. She loves to spend her time doing anything creative—whether that be drawing, writing, sewing, or playing Minecraft with her friends. At U of M, she enjoys participating in the Armenian Students Cultural Association (ASCA), where she can better connect with her culture. She pulls inspiration for her writing from her family, friends, culture, and nature. She hopes to one day become a published author, along with becoming a clinical psychologist.

*Nominated by: Prof. Tish O'Dowd*

# Wyrd Weaver

They walked about, unaware. They lived their lives fully, exuberantly, treating each motion as a choice rather than pure inevitability. I loved that, envied it sometimes, that gods and men alike were unaware of their destinies, blissfully unaware of what my sister's and I had plotted out for them. One life to one thread. Three sisters to three tasks.

Spooling of life.

Weaving of destiny.

Snipping of breath.

The spool was tidy, the yarn we fashioned strong and even. The shears were sharp, gleaming and gilded, showing my warbled reflection in its blades.

The tapestry was a mess.

One of my sisters had been slacking. Or perhaps another was only working too much, going too fast for my other sister to keep up. The spools were full of color, the tapestry like the most intricate carpet you'd ever laid eyes upon, so dense and rich that the colors blended and played tricks on the eyes. Which was perhaps the main reason we didn't have real eyes at all. Instead we had light spilling forth from empty eye sockets, billowing out the way sunlight filters through clouds after a rainy day. Whatever the cloud of light touched is what we could see, allowing us to view dozens of threads, dozens of yards of tapestry, at the same time but view them all separately, like a million eyes to view the world with.

The threads were all different, making the tapestry come alive with a life of its own. Each thread had a meaning, a purpose, shaping the gods and men below that wandered the cosmos. Each grouping had its own color, each people was its own shade. And the many pantheons of gods graced the loom in bright gold thread. The humans would eventually progress, switching from mud to stone to metal, building higher and higher towards the sky. Towards the gods. Towards us. The gods loomed above them, invisible to man's feeble eyes, taking on whatever name the humans came to derive for them as the years drifted past. Some would come to utter the name of a single god, some many, some none at all. Many would soon believe the gods had always been, always would be. The gods would feed off man's praises, and they too would slowly begin to believe they were immortal. Humans couldn't fathom "immortal". Even the gods sometimes forgot what it meant to be truly

immortal, omnipotent, all being. They were long-lived, their reign lasting a few thousand years at most. They forgot that they, too, would one day fade, as all things do. Their threads would be snipped one day, too.

But that would only happen if this tapestry was set in order again. It was no surprise that the tapestry was a mess. So many lives had been unspooled, and my sister, Sadiya, struggled to weave them quickly enough. I worked diligently following the threads of life, feeling for the right moment to snip.

“Slow your spinning,” Sadiya said. “You’re making a mess of things.”

“It’s not my fault you can’t weave fast enough,” Verdandi sniped.

“I agree with Sadiya, you’re creating far too many lives to keep up with. What has you in such a frenzy?” She gave me a wicked, knowing smile. She only went back to her threads, going faster and faster, as if she were a woman possessed. As if she were searching for something. Sadiya, the weaver of men’s lives, of their fates and destinies, huffed and glared at Verdandi. Verdandi didn’t even notice. Her sole existence revolved around the creation of human lives, the creation and birth of men, who’s threads were to be spun and which were to be separated out, discarded, never exist at all. I could do nothing to help her, else I’d imbue the threads with death too early. I only watched and waited as Sadiya wove their lives, waiting for my turn.

“Watch where you cut, Atropos. Men’s lives waver in an instant.” Cryptic. Cunning. What did Verdandi mean? She never said anything about my work unless she saw something in the thread for us to be wary of. Her sunlight filled eye-sockets peered into my smoke-filled ones, seeing without eyes. I questioned her in the tilt of my chin, but she actively avoided me, returning to her spinning. So I, too, returned to the tapestry at hand. Sadiya glanced between us, a brow raised.

“Something you’d like to tell us,” she questioned Verdandi.

“You know I can’t say just yet.”

“Could you tell us what we should be watching for, at least,” Sadiya asked. I silently kept snipping at the weft threads Sadiya was quickly weaving through the warp threads. I cut at them blindly by feel alone, turning my empty sockets towards my sisters, monitoring them, watching to see what Verdandi would do. She tightened her lips, bunching her shoulders, hiding her face behind her pale gray robes.

She started humming, a human tune full of lilting beats and a soft rhythm. Soon enough, Sadiya had told us, the humans would invent musical instruments, some of wind and bone, some of pounding rocks, some of stringed intestines. They’d each call the instruments by different names, use

them to create different melodies in ways their voices could not. My sisters and I knew this, eagerly awaiting that day so the humans could fill our dark home with the joy of music. Sadiya had woven that musician's thread long before. Now it was all a waiting game.

So much of human history was a waiting game. Inevitable. Unavoidable. Yet so uncertain for the humans that lived these lives. Even the gods were not steadfast in their ways, each human group growing and adapting so quickly that no human had the same two stories of the same gods and goddesses.

"When humans make instruments, will you take those up, too, and put aside your duties," I asked Verdandi as her humming turned into lyrical singing. She used the human tongue, their strange languages of grunts and sharp sounds pouring awkwardly from her lips. She gave me a sour look.

"Very funny, Atropos. Wait and see what becomes of men. Then mock me."

"I have no doubt that men will progress as we've plotted, I just find it strange that you sing the songs of the lives we've woven."

"I get bored of our own songs."

"You get bored of everything. That's why you create so many lives. I'm just curious to see what your next boredom-induced creation will be."

She gave a sly smile again. "All in due time." I shook my head at her. I turned back to the tapestry, snipping away, when I noticed a thread narrower than most.

"Sadiya, did you weave a thread wrong?" Her gray eyes stared at me blankly.

"Have I ever woven a thread wrong?" I pursed my lips. "Don't answer that. What's the problem?"

"This one's too narrow, and cutting it here feels...off. Like it's dead and alive at the same time."

"That's ridiculous. No man can be both dead and alive."

"Did I say they could?" She recoiled at my tone.

"No need to snap at me. Let me see the thread." I handed it over to her, letting Sadiya study the life she'd woven following the pattern back through the tapestry. Verdandi was still singing, getting louder, more confident. More excited.

"It seems...But it couldn't be," Sadiya whispered, her brows bunched. Verdandi let out a laugh before continuing her singing. It was a cheerful tune, not at all allowing for Sadiya or me to think.

"Will you shut up and tell us already!" I felt my hands ball into fists around my shears as Verdandi started cackling.

“Follow the thread, Sadiya! Follow where it goes!” She kept cackling. Sadiya, rightfully bewildered, was running her fingers over the thread. No. Threads. A green split thread. One that was to end, the one I almost cut. And the other...the other half led to and blended with a thread of gleaming gold.

“Verdandi. Explain. Now,” I gritted out. She was beaming.

“The humans are changing. Gathering. Building communities larger and larger. But the strangest thing about them are their *ideas*. Their ideas are new and old and steadfast.”

“Get to it, Verdandi. What is this? *Who* is this?”

“She’ll go by Kore while on Earth for the time being. But once she’s a goddess, once the seed of her ideas spreads...Persephone, Ataegina, Nut, Inanna, Prosepina. She’ll take on a hoard of new names. She’ll outlive most, if not all, of the gods.”

“What ideas,” Sadiya asked timidly.

“Rebirth. Gentle deaths. Peaceful, bountiful lives. She’ll give birth to the cycle of the gods, letting them take on new names rather than fading away. She’ll spread happiness, the chance to see beauty in flowers blooming into fruit. She’ll spread hope for a brighter future. Generations will worship her.”

“That’s an awful lot to place on the shoulders of such a young girl,” I said.

Verandi’s smile softened, reverent and adoring, the light in her sockets turning to a soft orange glow. “It is. She’ll have no clue until she’d a goddess herself, though.”

“But why a goddess? Why a split thread? Why not leave her human?”

She looked into me, not at me but *into* me, and I understood. I’d be the one that made her into a goddess.

“You must cut her thread, shorter than the other half that blends into gold. Her death alone will make her a queen among the gods.”

“You’re speaking in circles. I haven’t even woven her threads properly and you expect Atropos to cut them,” Sadiya questioned. Verdandi nodded once.

“Atropos, cut her mortal thread as the season begins to change, as the snow begins to melt. Let her death strengthen her ideas of life. Let her body decompose as flowers blossom atop her grave when the sun shines again. The humans will honor her. Through their words, she will be ‘immortalized’”

“And become the bringer of death.” It wasn’t really a question, but Verdandi answered anyway.

“Life and death and the cycle of the two. The will to live fully, the hope for another, brighter day.” It was quite an idea; give the humans something to look forward to, something to fight for, something to grow and live for. An

idea, indeed. Persephone would be the tipping point, the one that would start all the stories of man that they'd already begun to weave. The changing of seasons, the start of agriculture and trade, wars, creation...Persephone could be the start of it all.

“And what will she do, as a goddess?”

“She'll remake the world.”

# SOUMYA TEJAM



## **Sophomore**

**Major:** Business Information

**Reading:** Short Story

Soumya is a reader and writer from Bangalore, India. Her fiction is forthcoming in Gargoyle Magazine and explores the intersections of ethnicity, independence and class. Outside of writing, Soumya is a long distance runner, scuba diver and armchair activist. She lives for and by facts, function and a little bit of fashion.

*Nominated by: Prof. Greg Schutz*

# Dearest

Imagine being given three tiny bones, some wisps of muscle and ligament, a delicate membrane, and some nerve cells, and from them trying to fashion a device that can capture with more or less perfect fidelity the complete propensity of auditory experience—Mihir’s parents’ slippers on the colonial carpet, the rap of knuckles on the authentically grainy wood table, and breathless disappointment condensing on the beige damask sofa.

Mihir’s girlfriend, whom he calls Shefali, but everyone else calls Shay, looks squarely across the asymmetric coffee table. I wish your parenting was more libertarian paternalism than neoliberalism, then maybe he’d take the scholarship and then maybe he’d move to London and then maybe he’d consider moving in with me, she says.

Well it’s not our fault that the fever dream of free-market capitalism has corrupted the realm of higher education, Mihir’s father Sanjay says with a chuckle and Mihir wonders how, even obliquely, this reflects on him, the economics and political science graduate. But really, I want him to take the LSB offer just as much as you do, Sanjay continues, but it seems our man is harboring aspirations for a career in indian politics.

Neelam interrupts her husband: and it’s not like you both need to settle down there, our homes in Bangalore are for you whenever you want to come back—she raises one eyebrow delicately—or when you want to start a family.

Sanjay shrugs away the momentary lapse in illusory professional dialogue: And have you decided on which offer you’re taking Shay?

Well, I was holding out until we could pick a location together. Living alone this past year just seems unnecessary when I could be living with my personal chef, she winks at Mihir.

Amateur chef, Neelam scoffs and then calls out to the househelp, whom Mihir calls Ruby but everyone else calls Rubina. She emerges from the kitchen with her fingers twisting the end of her powder pink dupatta.

Shefali, I don’t know if you’ve met Rubina, she’s been with us for a little under eight months now.

Shefali cocks her to the side and sighs deeply but quietly, as if to learn Ruby’s name and everything about her all at once and says: I hope they’re treating you well here Rubina.

Mihir got her enrolled in a part time diploma program, Neelam says.



Shefali nods, and what are you studying in this diploma?

The regular secretarial work, Sanjay says. We're thinking that she can transition from this house to one of our offices. He rests his chin on an aristocratic hand position. You know in another world, Shay could be teaching Rubina software engineering and Rubina could be teaching Shay how to cook.

Shefali scowls: I think we're confusing which jobs are fungible, cooking and cleaning are rather mechanical skills in comparison to the work I'm doing. And for the record, I'm sure I can cook if I want to. She shifts her attention from Sanjay to Ruby and Neelam, in fact why don't I make the tea?

He's just joking dear, Neelam says. You don't need to do anything, you've had such a long journey.

No I want to, Shefali looks back at Mihir flippantly, who toys with his engagement ring in a dull but distinguished manner. Before the conversation in the living room stiffens, he follows Shefali into the kitchen.

I don't need your help, Rubina showed me where everything is, Shefali says. Mihir looks at Ruby standing near the far end of the kitchen anxiously watching as Shefali uses vague aggression to set the pot to boil. Is this really what you want, she says.

The question makes Mihir self-conscious and it takes him minor yet persistent cognitive effort to identify the specific context of Shefali's question and then articulate independent but consistent responses. Shefali spins the tea leaves idly and speaks softly: Is this because I brought up the idea of an open relationship, and then rapidly, she doesn't understand what we're talking about, right?

Mihir last saw Shefali in Valencia two months ago; in her own words it was a stop in her week-long-post-grad-backpacking-trip-slash-soul-searching-peregrination through Spain. After he'd spent a long and tiresome day taking a flight and then a cab and then a bus to get to Shefali's Airbnb, he laughed gratefully when he saw Shefali looking just as disheveled as himself.

They walked to a quaint restaurant together, both wearing jackets even though it was the end of March. Shefali was saying things about the solipsism born of private enterprise: What are we really doing if not unlearning social and economic oppressions, realising that we don't have what it takes to change the system and then ultimately dying.

We're trying to teach people skills to help them succeed in life, but all we're doing is making them into identical cogs. We're all, we're just cogs, she said less articulately. She then said some similar things about the nature of the world or the subjective construction of reality.

Later, over their three feet square table that threatened to overspill with every new order, Shefali wore her secret-sociologist look: a pained expression that appeared anytime she was suppressing some kind of observation on their romantic failings.

I love you and I need you and I really just need you to need me back, she said. How can you pretend everything is accidental when we're together and it feels like this?

But despite this longing, she broached the subject of an open relationship late at night when they were both almost asleep but not quite: I just want us to be together and not waiting for each other and I'm tired of waiting.

Now in the kitchen, Mihir waits for Shefali to say something similar, though it is by the unspoken rules of ordinary conversation obviously his turn to speak, but her mind has drifted just like his.

You know Rubina's stealing from your kitchen, she says. But sometimes I think I understand, it's really just a means to an end. Mihir feels uncomfortable about Ruby being in the kitchen during this exchange, despite her being out of earshot.

Shefali laughs: when I walked in she was tucking something into her salwar-kameez. Are you surprised that you're in love with two women who aren't saints?

I'm not, Mihir says. I mean in love with her, why would you say that?

You're paying for her to go to college, and acutely aware of her presence everywhere, and she's an earthly beauty who works for your family and so tragically that's all it'll ever be for you both. Shefali's face softens slowly: I'm sorry, let's just drop it. I love you, you know that. She turns away and busies herself in laying out four tea cups symmetrically across a tray.

As he walks out of the kitchen he catches a reflection of Shefali speaking to Ruby. She speaks quickly but softly and from where he's standing it sounds like a low whistle. He has a fleeting thought that perhaps Shefali might tear up, but just then she balances the tray carefully and begins to follow him to the living room.

His parents have busied themselves in seemingly endless conversation about a new home and it's impending renovations. They look encouragingly at Shefali but Mihir wonders if it unnerves her. Ruby walks up behind Shefali carrying another tray with an assortment of snacks. Shefali would feel humiliated if she dropped the tray, and Mihir expects himself, in light of this, to hope belatedly that she won't drop it, but he finds himself, regardless, hoping that she does.

And she does.

There's a ringing in Mihir's ears as the movement in the living room engulfs Shefali who stands very still and apologizes breathlessly. Don't be silly, Neelam says. We'll get it cleaned up. And just as fast Ruby is on her knees cleaning the carpet, as young women often do—tentatively, quietly—as though it were perhaps not happening or perhaps not quite a problem.

The commotion eventually dies down, and Shefali settles on a couch next to Neelam. Mihir finds that Ruby is standing close enough for him to stretch his hand and touch her wrist. He never feels fully prepared for how humiliating his own thoughts can be and says: Ruby can you bring us some tea please?

# NICOLE TOOLEY



**Sophomore**

**Major:** English

**Reading:** Poetry

Nicole is a sophomore from Ann Arbor majoring in English. She started writing creatively in high school and has enjoyed continuing this passion in college through her research in literary journals and publishing. When she is not reading or writing, she loves to get twisted up in fun yoga positions, cook with a lot of onions, and build furniture.

*Nominated by: Prof. John Buckley*

# I Make It There and Back Each Year

Durham, North Carolina. The leaves were still attached to the trees, and as it was October, I tried to remember the feeling of falling. Cockroaches paid no care to thresholds between exteriors and interiors and the pool still contained water. I knocked over a lamp in the guest room and let it stay there. Through the bedroom blinds, snakes could be mistaken for garden hoses that would have been brought back in for the season in Michigan, but here they coiled in unforgiving knots. Above, the birds cried different songs at night as I counted myself to sleep. The sheets were thin, and my skin felt sheer. They've said the birds fly south for the winter and I wonder how far south and if they have a destination in mind. Maybe these are the same birds from back home, but somehow I can't imagine them living in the trees here.

migrated in fall  
along with the birds but then  
came home for winter

\*\*\*

Ann Arbor, Michigan. Home. Our cul-de-sac of eight houses is not numbered chronologically. Turn onto the circle and the addresses will go 4, 1, 6, 5, 8, 2, 3, 7 and back to the street. We are number 8—right at the bend of the curve, the last to arrive. It's not something I normally notice, but on snow days when the neighborhood children are off at college, or working the evening shift downtown, or full grown adults, married and living in some East Coast city like Boston or maybe even New York, there's an acute understanding in my body that somehow we arrived here later than everyone else. Still, I imagine those adults as once children. They are climbing the same tree at the center of our circle on their snow days. Native to the Midwest, our massive catalpa, cracked in the middle with a large branch cantilevered in a way that begs to be climbed is always covered in white (flowers in the summer months and snow the rest of the year). Like a veil on a bride that never got married, I appreciated its roots wouldn't let it pack up and leave.

snow day, legs straddled  
around concentric circles  
all these years still here

\*\*\*

Orlando, Florida. My first memory at Walt Disney World is not a fond one. For our winter break that year, we had won a raffle to a three day everything paid for conference so that my parents could learn about my disorder while my brother and I got to go to Disney. After dropping me off at the 8-11-year-old daycare and my brother off at the 12-15 conference room, rude chaperones herded us around Disney. If you tracked them in space the whirl of spinning machines going around and around looked like one of those Spirograph creations. It made me nauseous in the stomach. I was a nervous child, not fond of adrenaline rushes. I wondered where my brother and parents were in this big world of lines and short-term thrills. The next day, my brother and I refused to get dropped off in our corresponding conference rooms and instead made hourly trips from our hotel room to the vending machines. On an abundance of KitKats, Flaming Hot Cheetos, and Skittles, we lost ourselves in a Nickelodeon marathon, which was objectively better than Disney Channel. Ten years later, I'm not sure how the rest of this country is much different than that amusement park. Maybe all we can do is find ways to escape.

cheeks smeared with red dust  
what if those stayed our vices  
as we grew older?

\*\*\*

Ann Arbor, Michigan. The other side of the road. There are many things that to adults feel trivial, but as kids, might never escape us. How to describe that sinking feeling you get in your stomach when you approach a speed bump or hill on an Up North road at just the right velocity? A separation between kidney, bladder, lungs, all 20 feet of your small intestine unfurling, tongue, heart, heart the size of fist with your thumb tucked in—everything inside floored as the envelope of you floats away. A Weightless Being. We chased that feeling going down Geddes in school bus No. 118. Lifting our hands in the air with no seat belt to contain us and no parents to scold us, we learned every bump in that road. When it would stop. And when it was our turn to wave

goodbye to our friends for the day. I leaped off and onto the gravel by the side of the road and watched as the parents swooped their children away with a *How was your day?* And *Are you hungry?* On my walk home alone, I watched leaves accumulate in gutters and paint chip off the corner hippo's nose and a squirrel lodge two walnut shells in its mouth. *Hello?* I said to my brother when I got home. *Hell yeah man, we just killed that round* he said to his headset which said to EvanbbKingster2, they were doing well in Call of Duty.

cells will duplicate  
replacing all that was you  
still, you remember

\*\*\*

Orlando, Florida. In my second and last memory from Walt Disney World, I like to believe I somehow went but didn't go. I try to remember the traffic lights glowing red in a different light. Dad swerving down and around Florida freeways, making illegal Michigan u-turns, a habit that five years away couldn't dull. Mostly, I remember letters and numbers. Row 24 Seat B—an aisle seat that I would have traded with my mom for the window. Gate D and sunlight casting a shadow through a thousand strands of static hair, forgetting what summer smelled like and knowing this wasn't quite it. Seven days away from home alone. I waited for Dad to roll around in a red car. I pulled my luggage closer to me like a companion, pretending it might make me less lonely. I heard my name over and over, a boomerang in a box. I pinpointed his voice, and then the red car and then him in a slim athletic shirt and aviators and two people in the car I didn't know. Almost like a family. That was the beginning and here is the ending: My flight back home got canceled. I phoned my mom. Behind a rack of sundresses in Von Maur. The tears were stuck. In my throat. I missed the snow. Sleet. Grey and cold. My mother pooled all her miles on two credit cards, and I flew first class home. They served me a Dancing Deer Company blondie and beer cheese soup with a side of broccolini. The soup was much too sophisticated for my taste, a mockery and innocent reminder of my youth.

memory u-turn  
nothing but a parallel  
return: start again

\*\*\*

Durham, North Carolina. Start again. I've made it there and back the past couple of years. The airplane never drops out of the sky or the wheels on my car don't roll off the highway's shoulder. I make it home each year. I'm old enough to drive the 12 hours there for Thanksgiving. There's a pass through Ohio so flat I imagine doing cartwheels for miles all the way to West Virginia without ever getting dizzy. I make it there and back. We eat spicy samosas after giving our thanks and they numb my tongue the same way anise or red peppercorns might. I don't touch the turkey. I drink lots of milk. On dad's porch I marvel at the pine trees that haven't and won't change colors. From the ground, I gather a handful of needles in my hands, hold them closer to the sky and then watch them fall like pick up sticks. The wind swooping them northward in a scattering exhalation.

we picked ourselves up  
off the interstate highway  
and called it a day



# ROSHNI VEERAMACHANENI



**Freshman**

**Major:** Creative Writing and Literature

**Reading:** Fiction

Roshni Veeramachaneni is a writer from Rochester Hills, MI. She loves to read character-centric books from the nineteenth-century and modern satire. She also has an interest in politics, film, and music. She writes stories that seem to go nowhere about ordinary people, but there's a point, she promises.

*Nominated by: Prof. Leslie Stainton*

# A Hostile Coexistence

There was a burgeoning consensus among the Washington Middle School third grade class that Elena was an imposter. The lone holdout had long been Elena herself. It was a Wednesday when she acquiesced.

During individual work time—the “individual” part of which was only a naive suggestion—Idika approached her. She was a chubby girl with a round face, which was offset by a sharp nose and mechanical eyes. She brought her atlas and sat down across from Elena with a magnanimous air that disguised her true analytical curiosity. Elena was an oddity to her, similar to a cancerous tumor, that perhaps could be understood if picked and prodded. And Idika knew there was no one more qualified than she to do the picking and the prodding. She was a future neurosurgeon after all.

Idika began to talk at length. The resulting monologue was a hodgepodge of intercepting topics, sewn together by an erratic hand that stopped and started with no final shape or design in mind. Elena felt obligated to meet her eyes and nod along, even though she could not follow what Idika was saying.

“So where are you from?” Idika asked at one point. She pushed the atlas, open to the world map, toward Elena. It was clear enough what Idika was really asking. With a hesitant finger, Elena pointed to the mysterious country nestled in the depths of Asia that her parents had pointed out to her years before.

“I’m from India too. But I was born here.”

“I was born there, but I’m from here.” Elena wanted to make the distinction, but Idika paid that no attention.

“Which part? Of India?”

Elena shifted. “I’m not sure. I don’t remember.”

Idika scrunched her face in confusion. “How did you forget?”

“It was a while ago.”

“Why’s your name Elena?”

“My grandma’s name is Elena.”

“Why’s your grandma’s name Elena?”

“I don’t know.”

“How come you don’t know anything?”

Elena looked down at the table, so Idika wouldn’t see the tears pinching her eyes, but wasn’t quick enough. Idika saw. She saw and felt Elena was

accusing her of something serious and inscrutable, even though Idika did nothing wrong. Idika was always getting blamed for things she didn't do, or at least things she didn't *mean* to do. This injustice itched at Idika's skin, and she left the table in a huff for other people.

Elena interpreted their exchange as providential confirmation that the only people worth talking to were her parents. Later that day, Mrs. Soto called on her to identify a state on a blank map of the United States, and Elena knew it was Idaho because it was west, long, narrow at the top, and fat at the bottom. But she stared into space and shielded herself with silence until Mrs. Soto moved on.

When Elena entered her mom's car after school, she relaxed for the first time since that morning. Her mom was studying her own reflection in the visor and brushing her hair. She then offered the brush to Elena, who took it wordlessly, and tried to match her mom's previous movements, stroke for stroke. Her mom asked some perfunctory questions about school before, in deference to Elena's monosyllabic replies, she opted instead to share the office gossip: Paula's daughter refused her mother's help in buying a wedding dress, and Charles and his wife were separating. Elena half-listened.

"Why is my name Elena?" Elena asked when they entered their house.

Her mom tilted her head, not understanding. "You know this. We named you after Grandma."

"But why don't I have a name like Idika?"

Her mom straightened. She understood. "We had the name in mind before we adopted you. We didn't know at first that you were going to come from India."

"Where in India did I come from?"

"A city called Hyderabad."

Elena absorbed this. Worried by her silence, her mom poured her a glass of water.

In the days after her encounter with Elena, Idika tried to find an outlet for her resentment. She began to slip anonymous notes into Elena's desk. For a week, she scrawled a word on some paper and came in from lunch before the rest of her classmates to plant the message. Mrs. Soto never saw her do this. At 12:15, when lunch ended, Mrs. Soto unlocked the door to the classroom and then returned to her office to make coffee. Idika was always ready, waiting by the door. Monday's word was *freak*, Tuesday's was *retard*, Wednesday's was *loser*, Thursday's was *weirdo*. By then, Idika was stretching the limits of her vocabulary, but the word for Friday came to her suddenly: *coconut*. Idika told

her friends about the notes—it would have been uncharacteristic of her to refrain—and it was ultimately their lukewarm response that discouraged Idika from continuing. They didn't care much about what happened to Elena. If only Idika had chosen a more interesting target.

When Elena saw the first note, she thought it was a message that had wound up in her desk by chance. She felt special and thought it could lead to larger secrets and mysteries, like in the novels she read. By the second message, the true intent revealed itself, and she choked on her shame and confusion. She could find no motive in the people around her. She could find no reason why someone would hate her. But there had to be one. So she resolved, from then on, to be a model of moral righteousness. She made her bed in the morning, did her homework immediately upon arriving home, and helped Mrs. Soto pass out papers whenever needed. She was determined to dispel all criticism. When the notes stopped appearing, Elena was overjoyed. Here it was—the validation for which she searched, the proof of what she had accomplished.

About two years passed before Elena's and Idika's paths crossed again in any meaningful way. The era ended with a frantic email from Mrs. Soto to the parents of the fifth grade class begging for a family to host the graduation party at the end of the year. Teachers could no longer host these gatherings after a scandal that the school determined to keep hush-hush.

Within minutes, Idika's grandma volunteered. It was a move of calculated self-preservation, well-masked as school spirit. Idika's grandma was one of the most passionate members of the PTA. Just last week, she had donated the most money to replace the piano in the band room and, the week before that, she had led a group of volunteers in repainting the gym. No one took notice that her participation ebbed and flowed with the amount of times Idika was reprimanded by a teacher, sent to the principal's office, or given detention. Idika's grandma thought her granddaughter was simply a troubled child, a terrible listener who was apathetic to most instruction, so she worked to save Idika from herself.

The details of the party came together quickly. It would be the last Saturday of the school year at 2 p.m. at Idika's house. There would be several alluring amenities: a pool, a bouncy house, a karaoke machine, a photo booth. Parents would be encouraged to come.

When Mrs. Soto reviewed the plans with the class, Elena grew still and let her gaze fall to the ground. She would have to attend. There was no way to keep the information from her parents because, knowing Mrs. Soto, an e-vite

had already arrived in their inboxes. Neither would the twenty-five dollar fee give them pause. She practically had the money in her hands already.

To Elena, Idika hadn't changed much since the third grade. While the other students had mellowed and adopted quasi-adult attitudes to prepare for middle school, Idika remained careless and care-free, oblivious that her way of being had gone out of style. The behavior that had once emboldened and delighted her friends now embarrassed them. Everyone knew this before she. Idika realized the truth when, one day, she tried to climb the pole that held up the tire swings. She fell on her side with a thump, and the laughter of her peers echoed in eternity. She was a joke. But even with this knowledge, Idika clung to what was left of her status. She would not release her grip unless her hand was cut off.

The day of the party was dismal: there was sunshine and the promise of socialization. Elena arrived at 1:45 p.m., embarrassingly early, because her mom had to drop Elena off before her adult karate class. Elena considered waiting outside until someone else came but felt too exposed on the porch where the neighbors, none of whom she knew, could see her.

A husky smell greeted her before an old woman did. The woman's face was remarkably similar to Idika's, even with the natural effects of age, and her body had the unyielding quality of a museum artifact, strength uncommon for someone with few visible muscles. She wore an orange top that almost reached her knees, loose pants, and sandals. There was a mark on her forehead that intrigued Elena.

"Welcome! Come in! Come in!"

As Elena followed her into the kitchen, she traced the smell to a stick of incense burning.

An old man gestured to the incense. "Bothering you?"

"No," Elena said. He threw it away nonetheless, and then turned to her with a smile that illuminated his dimples. "Would you like something to drink?"

"Do you have pop?"

"Hmm," he considered and opened the refrigerator. Disappointing results. He looked at his wife and then began to speak unlike Elena had ever heard before: the words were jumping and twirling and falling and running. When the woman responded, her words bumped into his, and their sentences chased each other like children in a field. It was playful; it was animated; it was a comfortable symbiosis. A yearning enveloped Elena.

The woman left and returned with a Coke from the cooler outside. Elena thanked her, and while she sat trying to formulate the questions occupying

her mind, someone thudded down the stairs. A quick look confirmed it was Idika. Elena traced the rim of her Coke can as she waited for Idika to say something.

“Why are you in here? The party’s outside,” Idika said.

The two headed to the backyard, with Elena trailing behind Idika.

“Cool,” Elena said when she saw the extravagant set-up.

“It’s good that you got here early. It’s not too crowded now. Do you want to go in the bouncy house?”

“Okay.”

They bounced together for a few moments in silence.

“You know, bouncy houses are like trampolines.”

“Colorful trampolines,” Elena agreed.

Idika brightened. “Yeah.” A beat. “Are you excited for middle school?”

“I’m kind of nervous.”

“Me too. There’s apparently a lot more homework. But you’re smart, so you’ll be fine.”

The casual compliment threw Elena. It didn’t have an undertone of resentment like when other kids said it. Maybe Idika had changed.

“Thanks.”

Idika shrugged. “Just stating the obvious.” Another beat. “Do you have a crush on anyone?” Slowly, they began to match each other’s rhythm, jump for jump.

“Not really.”

“Not even Jared? Everyone’s in love with Jared.”

“Jared’s okay.”

“Yeah, he’s not even that cute.”

“Do you have a crush on anybody?”

“Not really.”

After such a personal question, Elena felt she could broach the next subject. “I heard your grandparents speaking something other than English.”

“Yeah, Telugu,” Idika said easily.

“Really?” Idika nodded. “People in Hy-der-abad speak Telugu too, right?”

Elena thought she remembered this fact from a midnight Googling session.

“Yeah.”

“That’s where my biological mother is from.”

“Do you know her?”

“No. Where’s your mom?”

“She died.”

“Oh. Sorry.”

Idika shrugged. By that time, the pair could hear the excited chatter of their classmates, interjected by the occasional shout. Elena stopped jumping, struck by a bout of timidity.

“I bet Nina, Kelly, and Grace are here by now,” she said.

Idika stopped too. “I don’t care. They don’t like me anyways. I don’t even think we’re friends.”

“But you sit together in the cafeteria.”

“Doesn’t mean anything. They’re not nice to me.”

“Oh. Do you want to get some food?”

“Sure. My legs hurt.”

They spent most of the party together, although Idika was sometimes pulled away by other people, and Idika had even asked for Elena’s phone number. When Elena returned home, she wasn’t sure at first how to rationalize this. She concluded that they were both exceptionally lonely.

It started inconspicuously. The Monday after the party, Idika videocalled Elena without warning, which catapulted Elena into a state of panic. But, as they talked more, Elena’s nerves quelled. It became clear that Idika could carry the conversation herself. Elena only had to listen and insert an opinion here or there.

Idika was showing Elena the exciting elements of her recently redecorated room—her stuffed animals, her string lights, her Marvel bedsheets—when she asked, “Do you want to know how to say ‘bed’ in Telugu?”

Elena thought nothing of this; Idika found any way to brag about her talents and possessions. “Sure.”

“It’s *mum chum*.”

“Cool.”

“Can you say it?”

“Mom chum?”

“Almost. *Mum chum*.”

“*Mum chum*.”

Idika smiled. “Yeah!”

The conversation wandered in other directions. When they hung up, Elena could still feel the strange and delightful syllables in her mouth. *Mum chum*, she repeated to herself the rest of the day. *Mum chum*.

The next time she and Idika videocalled, she couldn’t help herself. She craved the words that jumped and twirled and fell and ran, and it was impossible not to ask for more.

“How do you say ‘hello’?”

They began with the basics. Hello, goodbye. Fuck, shit, hell. Child, mom, dad, grandma, grandpa, sister, brother. House, car, door, kitchen, bathroom. Teacher, student, school, class. Cat, dog. Often, when they were discussing these topics in English over the phone, they added to Elena’s vocabulary, which was growing, even if it was only a fraction of Idika’s knowledge and an even smaller fraction of her grandparents’ knowledge.

Elena would sometimes ask Idika for a specific word that Idika didn’t know or remember like ‘parrot’ or ‘sticker,’ and Idika would run downstairs to ask her grandparents. This is how Idika’s grandparents became aware of their friendship. Elena’s mom, however, did not. She would never know: a consequence of Elena’s reticent nature and how short-lived the two girls’ bond would be.

Elena was alone in the library. Her parents had left her to roam while they renewed their membership cards. She snaked through each of the aisles and browsed but found it hard to commit to a book. She read the back covers and saw specific words as omens. “Tear-jerker” signaled a character would die, “page-turner” meant too much would happen, “poignant” promised not enough would happen, and “revolutionary” foretold that it would be in her English curriculum sometime in the future. She moved away from the fiction and wandered into Dewey decimal territory. Her interest increased with the numbers until she was walking down an aisle in a trance. Her eyes searched. There was only one book related, and it looked crisp, as if it came from the manufacturer moments ago. No signs of use. She held the paperback in her hands. *Beginner’s Telugu*. An open page revealed characters that flowed and swirled, drawn from water and air. Not what was familiar: geometry, straight lines, definitive marks.

She clutched it. Here was her next step.

They were approaching check-out when her mom finally saw her book. That’s how Elena was already referring to it. *Her* book. Her mom turned to her, a question in her eyes that she eventually voiced.

“What’s this?”

“A book on Telugu.”

Her mom skimmed it. “This is all fine and good, Elena, but shouldn’t you be focusing on your German?”

“German?”

“If you start practicing now, you can test out in high school and take more electives.”



Elena faltered. “You want me to get a German book?”

“No, there’s no need. I’ll buy you a workbook later this week.”

What could she say? “Okay.”

Her mom discarded the book in a return cart.

Elena began to study German. It was back to geometry, but she embraced it. Less complicated this way. English was already Germanic.

She turned off her cell phone to focus on the first exercise in the workbook and missed Idika’s next call. And the next one. And the next one. Life became so busy. Before long, Idika stopped calling altogether. The girls regressed from friends to acquaintances. By September, they were strangers again.

# ANDREW WARRICK



**Senior**

**Major:** Creative Writing and History

**Reading:** Fiction

Andrew Warrick is a senior with a double major in Creative Writing and History, from Livonia, Michigan. He enjoys reading, writing, and freaking out over movies which, as a Michigan Daily Arts Writer, he sometimes does all at the same time.

*Nominated by: Prof. Laura Thomas*

# Electric Rage

*“Abigail, I’m going to start at the beginning. Adam. I saw myself in him. Or what I wanted to be. Flawed, yes. But normal. Accepted. Maybe even loved. I wanted to be normal. I wanted to be loved. In this country, though, their country, I can’t be either. So let us create another. Behold, the day is coming, burning like a furnace, and all the arrogant, every evildoer, will be chaff and the coming day will set them ablaze. E Pluribus Unum. E Pluribus Unum. E Pluribus Unum. Then after the fires, the blood, the screams, when it’s all glittering blue, we’ll be the ones who are normal, who are loved. You’ll be the ones thrown to the cold, the bare trees. You’ll be the empty ones.*

*Now, I said I’d start at the beginning, didn’t I? Well, in the beginning, it was autumn. Autumn ‘59. And I still had everything. A teaching post at the university, and an apartment across from the State Theater. A new wall to wall set of bookcases. All the great books in crisp leather volumes. A brilliant life. A life built on my own, over decades. A life torn to shreds in a few seconds. They say Rome wasn’t built in a day. But didn’t it burn in one night?*

*Again, I’m getting ahead of myself. The beginning... well, Abigail, you were there. The night before was our department’s cider mill dance. Don’t you remember? We rode through the woods in a hay wagon. We cheered every time it hit a bump and jostled us together. Wind played with your hair, tangled it with red leaves and bits of hay. I called you Eve. That made you smile. Remember what you said? Doesn’t that make you Adam? The wagon pulled up to that pavilion and we had warm cider. Apples too, remember? Mark, you said. Look, you were right: Eve. Then you bit into your apple and winked. It felt like a film, you doing that. Then, we danced across every inch of the straight wooden floor, warm under those yellow lights. Ricky Nelson, remember? People used to say I looked like Ricky Nelson. Not anymore. But that night, when you looked at me, I could tell— you didn’t know. You didn’t know, so you accepted me. You didn’t know, so you loved me. Didn’t you? I almost thought, dancing with you, I almost thought I could be normal. Just looking into your green eyes. Abigail, you used to have such green eyes. Not anymore. You remember all of that, though, don’t you, Abigail? Our autumnal dance. We’re dancing again, now, as the leaves turn to blue fire. Abigail, aren’t you listening? Abigail, this is the most important part.*

*But I don’t think you’re ready for it yet. Nobody is. You all go through life, day by day, pretending that everything’s normal, pretending that everything’s*

*safe. You're all wrong. Soon the sky's gonna fall, and trap you here, in these blue flames, with me. And then you'll know what it's like to think you have everything. To think you have everything, only to find it all stripped away. I think you're ready now.*

*The day it happened. I lost everything, Abigail. I lost everything, and everyone laughed. My students laughed, when TA Marcus Hyde was dragged through the lobby by an undercover police officer, snivelling, weeping, his belt unfastened. Then the Detective laughed, flapping his hands. Oh Professor, I'll do anything for an A! Then my name was in the papers. They called me traitor, pervert, pedophile. Then everyone laughed. I could hear them. I wanted to die, laying in that cell. I wanted to die. But I lived, they made me. Still laughing, as the months went by. As they tortured me. Laughing. You didn't laugh though, did you? Do you remember, Abigail? When you saw me, from your office, you just stared. You watched them take me away, and you just stared.*

*You'll pay for that.*

*So what's going to happen? You keep asking, Abigail. But you know what? What you're feeling, that broken glass gnashing in your chest- That's your punishment. Not knowing when it'll come, what you deserve. But know this- it's coming soon."*

# ERIKA WOO



**Senior**

**Major:** Economics

**Minor:** Creative Writing and Art & Design

**Reading:** Poetry

Erika is a senior with a lot of potential kinetic energy, ready to hit the ground jogging. She wants to thank all her friends and family who encourage her and bring her joy. This year you could find Erika playing many rounds of Euchre with her roommates, taking day trips to Korean grocery stores, and vlogging her culinary adventures.

*Nominated by: Prof. Sumita Chakraborty*

# Apartment 3

The roses are blooming in a glass milk jug on the kitchen table,  
Gifted by a Trader Joe's employee who thought Christina needed them to  
fight stress.

Christina is in bed, twice wrapped in blankets to combat the window next to  
her,

snoozing through the construction noises on the street below us.

Ivy on the shelf reaches for new heights but gravity holds it in a gentle curl;  
it will never grow if it remains in that small pot. I should replant it.

Arim's class is running long, she stretches then cocks her head,  
eyes blank, straining to refocus on her screen. I blink a few times as if to help  
her.

The counter is crowded with lazy snacks, an old bowl of ice cream melts,  
sweet and spicy smells mix in the air and I can't smell anything particularly.

Carolyn lays on the futon with her laptop in a Zoom call,  
she is scrolling through an app, gazing at bubble gum poodles for sale.

The dishes are piling up in the sink inviting flies to swarm

I clap my hands together and capture an unlucky pair.

The apartment starts at the sound then resettles.

# rain dance

i watch the drought soak up the land's drool,  
the dribble at the corner of the mouth  
caused by starvation, the cracks suck up  
all they can, regardless of the rationing

i watch the thirst bring hallucinations,  
the baby birds learn to be vicious and humorless  
their whines are full of hatred and the worms squirm  
wiggling deeper and deeper into the hot dirt,  
beaks break boughs and bugs disappear,  
wild cats have a field day

i watch the giants bite the trees in frustration  
the treacherous leaves taking too much h2o  
the trunks hiding secret flourishing life  
the roots reaching new depths unbidden  
stories leaking forth fully written

gods won't you spit on us out of pity  
roll back the folds of your stomach and  
pour the leftovers from last night's meal  
the digested,  
the disgusting  
it would be beautiful, it would be too much

the clouds gathered in clandestine meeting,  
unbeknownst to them, we are all watching  
necks bent backwards, tongues gaping  
waiting for the verdict on their tantrum  
a grumble of teeth, a gnash of complaints,  
do all storms start this way?

and the flowers had the most to say  
i hear the flowers loud,  
they flow and sway and blend and blur

their limbs reaching for air,  
their roots sniveling up as if for a sneeze

i watch a cold breeze shiver through the  
greens, the earth raising its goose bumps  
for delicious dealings

my palms upturned  
i tense as the suspense in the air shifts  
and the floodgates open



# I'm reminded

it was the smell of pistachios or was it cashews  
...maybe the whole nut case  
(it's always hard to tell)  
it was the earthy, just a hint of bitter. . .  
was it walnuts?  
either way it reminded me of you

and then the telly person  
you know the one with the hair and  
loud voice and evil laugh  
not that you have an evil laugh, you  
just have the hair but this  
person has an evil laugh, anyway  
she reminded me of you.

I think back to the day of hiking  
we could have had a day in the sun, by sand, under waves  
but you insisted on pointless uphill walking over rocks, by dirt, under  
trees  
and I think you were laughing at me and my bleeding heels  
while I begged you to carry me, while secretly in that moment, me  
having the strength to climb thirty-two mountains

and suddenly a song started up about a  
lonely sweater  
and I remembered your bunny smile  
hands hidden under long sleeves  
the way your eyes met mine  
with a hint of sadness and confusion  
though you laughed through it, your whole body  
adding to the laugh with subtle convulsions so someone  
might mistake you for pained.  
I could feel in that moment that you understood  
uncertainty and imperfections  
you knew something about love hurts  
and anger burns and

I let a tear join the lonely sweater  
but the grey knit devours it and shows no trace of  
sadness

you haven't called this week.

I wonder if it was something I said, or if this is just who you are.

I consider texting you back again but fear being left unread again

what's wrong with me? I'm usually not so afraid...

why does fear have a way of gripping my duodenum

and cutting access to my intestines?

you light up my phone screen

your face floods my vision

not really you. just a picture of you on a mountain

just a netflix notification asking me to come back and finish

the episode of that person with the loud hair. . .

I'm reminded that you are far away and I'm still here

# internal soundscape

the other side of the bed is empty.  
and i know it's always been empty  
but today it slammed me  
like ten-ton-truck force  
body-blender-milkshake shook  
that maybe it will stay empty forever

i'm not a pessimist  
but this morning  
i let myself travel down that mind-way path  
meandering automatically through  
the what-ifs and how-whys  
of my single-pringle life

anyway  
i lie still  
watching the room become big  
sinking deeper,  
allowing my body to shrink,  
letting go

laying in bed  
i become small  
someone told me  
to listen to my heart.  
it says, "squish squash  
drip drip drop,  
slip slip slop  
splish splash"  
i need a bath

encased in a coffin of bubbles  
i drown my thoughts  
in raspberry-gumdrop colored  
silky Pantene shampoo

soaking my skin to grape-in-the-sun purple  
peri-wrinkle lips cold blue

climbing back into bed  
hair tangled wet with  
i-should-have-used-conditioner regret  
i splay my arms out

ha  
my twin sized  
couldn't fit two  
anyway

# growing pains

I can't explain it most times, but this feeling of growing has creased the folds of my eyebrows and loosed my belt. for sure, I am more sure of my self-confidence yet still unsure of me. My parents refrain from telling me what to do, like my bent wings were meant to fly away a long time ago. The nest is too small for my clumsy feet, my squawk not loud enough to garner attention.

I don't have the words for it, but the concept of maturity bites my forearms leaving itchy tick marks and blood under my nails. the question becomes: when do I present calm and composed and when do I burst forth strong and independent? Adult-ness doesn't mean being mean; I mean, it mostly means patience with the tongue-tied and confidence in the unknotting.

I shouldn't put it this way, but maybe I should skip this birthday and wait for a better number to come along. can I tortoise and hare this and scramble my eggs next year? I'm sure the hen won't complain, and the rooster could press the snooze button. I'd sneeze and squeeze my eyes shut pretending it didn't happen then sprint in spite of the burn.

I wouldn't complain usually, but the children are getting younger and my creaking bones don't scare them. ghosts rattle around in my head repeating mistakes I made years ago. they won't leave me alone; I blast sad music and pull a hood over my eyes. The kids point and laugh, I must look ridiculous but I'm old enough not to care.

# JADE WURST



**Junior**

**Major:** Creative Writing

**Reading:** Poetry

Jade is from Commerce, Michigan. Her poetry centers (or reconfigures) ordinary experience to lure out its peculiarities. Some attempts are more successful than others.

*Nominated by: Prof. Sarah Messer*

# ode to an empty 7-Up bottle

unscrewed. syrup dries  
in tidal pools at the bottom  
of its green hull. ants are only  
ellipsis. they mark  
omissions. what rules  
they follow are not  
ours: inversion & mobility  
on smooth plastic. even  
they will leave soon.  
the bottle says nothing. if  
someone was there, they might  
blow across the opening, or  
throw it out. its sugared threads  
ring a fluorescent dime  
almost like the sun.

## scene & action

a chrome fly dies in a teacup's porcelain basin. teacup on a shelf, handle side turned out. shelf perpendicular to a painted wall, off-white, a corner where it meets its twin.

on that wall, window light falls on chipping paint & prisms a pattern of white on the shelf. a woman's hand intercepts it, shadows & the teacup where the fly hides, searching for the slim handle which cradles that austere basin.



# mirage

who would believe i watched a lake coil in  
on itself? it left debris from steel works  
and bonfires like bones in the sand.

i was at the harbor  
to forget. love, the glass  
of broken bottles, is without

clean edges. the tide  
touched my feet. it twisted its cuff  
as it thought, so i piled stones

for it to take. to be worn  
smooth is almost a gift.  
i put it to my ear & heard blood,

familiar as i and foreign as us. when it left,  
torn metal and branches made  
an untuned cello of wind.

the lake dried up and left ships  
moored in sand's ribs. from the dunes,  
i can't tell what of me it has.

# we have fresh pears for breakfast

i've known no orchard sick with pear  
blossoms, but i hold their swollen fruit.

its green skin blushes on one side, unbroken.  
the grocery store bin where i found it was scattered

with them. a woman beside me picked them up  
to test their ripeness with her thumb. she threw them

back like fish. i was careful to check  
for bruises. at home, it softened, unmoved,

beside keys on the counter. it's not  
pomegranate, the name lent

to grenade, but its weight is volatile.  
i worry sunlight won't satiate us. you ask

what i'm thinking, but how could i  
explain something so senseless? the knife

prays into it & pares half questions  
fresh for you. seeds

asterisk them & peer from the split  
like bullets in the sun's revolver. we are

pocketed in the pear's smooth chambers  
& have no word for what we will be

when we crawl out. the petalled pear  
bleeds on the plate beneath the early sky.

# after a graduation party

my brother & i walk in the dark & say nothing in particular.

*the sun fell hours ago, so the world is figured  
in headlights, spilled beer & burnt driftwood.*

he proclaims the plane overhead, lit green, may  
or may not carry atomic weapons. i think  
he's joking but can't quite tell.

*we pass aisles of houses with shadow theaters  
for curtains. they make the street an ecology of absences.*

he wants our parents to get along, but i hardly see  
how they could. i don't say this but fold  
distance, a satin cloth, around that delicate hope.

*humidity maps tall grass, asphalt & gasoline. they line  
my neck, a tattoo or just sweat.*

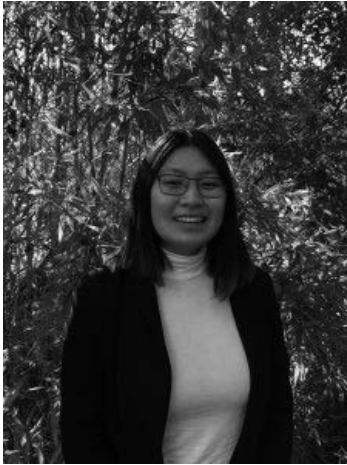
we play a deconstructionist game  
until the most real thing is a river's motion.

*the moon is an ivory fish that circles  
the southwestern sky. august is a coronation.*

my brother says lights are feathering. he doesn't call it  
blur or myopia.

*true, they seep through paper, like a marker sun.*

# HAYLEY YU



**Senior**

**Major:** Psychology and Creative Writing

**Minor:** Religion

**Reading:** Fiction

Hayley is a senior who is majoring in Psychology and Creative Writing. She is excited and honored that her writing will be featured in the Café Shapiro Anthology!

*Nominated by: Prof. Laura Thomas*

# Funeral

“Lydia.” A hiccup was swallowed by a sob. “Your Baba is gone. The cancer finally got him.”

Lydia stood at the kitchen counter. Her fingers traced over the granite countertop which gleamed even in the early morning light. Her phone felt heavy in her hand.

“I need you here. He must be... be buried.” Mama was choked by a cry that made Lydia jerk the phone back from her ear. “You owe him.”

“Okay, Mama.” Her voice was calm. And tired. Mostly tired. “I’ll look for flights.”

Mama hung up.

Baba was only sixty-eight, but he’d had lung cancer since December. Even though it was only March, the news didn’t surprise Lydia. The diagnosis had not been a good one. After leaning against the kitchen counter for a few more minutes, she went back to her sleeping husband.

Riley blinked his large childlike eyes when she got back into the bed and asked with a voice made deep from sleep, “Hey, what’s up?”

“My father is gone.”

He sat up and looked at her with a furrowed brow. “Lydia, are you okay?” He tried to put a hand on her shoulder.

“I’m fine.” Lydia shrugged and pulled the comforter over her bare shoulder as she lay on her side. The fabric itched against her skin as Riley pressed against her back with an arm draped over her midsection, below her crossed arms, to comfort her. He brushed her hair to the side – it fell on her mouth, making her spit it out – and nuzzled at her neck. Within minutes, Riley’s breathing grew deep and peaceful once more. She wanted to push him away from her; the heat was unbearable. Her eyes lingered on the alarm clock, set to 7:30am. Two more hours until she needed to be up for work. She would have to take time off to go home.

By the alarm’s side, illuminated a soft neon blue, was where she had set down her phone. Lydia reached out, straining against Riley’s embrace, and picked it up. She sighed, turned it on, and blinked at the brightness before lowering it. She got rid of the flurry of texts Mama had sent her and opened her phone to look for plane tickets. She absently looked for flights into Indianapolis, a thirty-minute drive from her hometown. There was one that

evening that had a good price, all things considered. She bookmarked it but didn't want to get up and fish out her credit card from the wallet that had been left on the dresser top. She'd do that later, maybe as she got ready for work. She opened her text messages to let Mama know that she'd found a flight.

A fraction of a picture lingered above the texts Mama had sent only twenty minutes ago. Lydia's brow scrunched as she scrolled up. She froze when she saw a picture of Baba, swathed in a thin teal hospital gown, his face and waving arm thin and skeletal. The fluorescent light above him made his yellow skin seem dusky and the few strands of hair left had become nearly translucent.

*Just left chemo*, read Mama's text. Lydia had responded only with a thumbs up. She had been about to go into a meeting.

Lydia stared now at the picture, at Baba's eyes, and tried to muster a tear or two. After a few moments, her eyes began to tear, but only from remaining wide open. She put down the phone and slid it under her pillow. Her fingers lingered on it; it was warm. Riley gave a snore as she closed her eyes and went back to sleep.

- - -

That afternoon, Lydia gave notice to her boss that she'd be taking time off from work.

"I'm sorry about your father."

"Thank you," Lydia said as she turned her head from the office window to her boss. She had been distracted by the outside world for a moment – it was snowing hard, white flakes spilling onto the ground. The city streets were littered with patches of brown slush and dusted with powdered snow, as if that would sanitize the mess of ice and asphalt. She hoped her flight wouldn't be delayed.

"So you're going back to Indiana for the funeral?" A clock ticked in the background, counting down to her departure.

"Yes," she said indifferently. Lydia crossed one leg over the other as her boss looked over her form. "I'm the last child. It's my duty to oversee his funeral."

"Really?"

"Yes. I had an older brother. He would've taken care of my father's affairs if he were still alive, but he was in the Twin Towers," Lydia explained, looking outside at the snow. The wind had picked up. "Where my father is from, the wife is never allowed to make the funeral arrangements. It's the children's last duty to their father. So it's my responsibility now."

Again: "I'm sorry for your loss."

"Thank you," Lydia said. Her voice was short.

The snowfall increased; it swirled around on invisible currents in a frenzy of movement. A gust of wind sent flakes straight for a building's glass windows; but then, at the last moment, it took them in the opposite direction to avoid the seemingly impenetrable walls.

- - -

That night, she flew back to Indiana and drove to her childhood home. Lydia spent countless hours trying to comfort and hold her wailing mother. As Mama blubbered about her husband, Lydia's shirtfront was soaked by her tears. Would the salt damage her shirt?

Lydia's nose wrinkled at the pungent odor of ginseng that, even when contained in pickling jars, still allowed an acidic smell to seep into the air. There were also the scents of garlic and soy that were somehow... old, as if the smell had somehow stained the air through years of cooking. None of them were able to cover up the smell of suspiciously fresh cigarette smoke; of course Mama hadn't stopped Baba from smoking, even when he was sick with lung cancer. Lydia's eyes landed on the small ashtray that had a lame cigarette butt hanging out of it. *Well, it's not like he would listen to her anyway.*

Mama had finally lifted herself off of Lydia and now curled into herself on the sofa, the faded floral print under her surprisingly bright against the black of her clothes. Lydia tried to look anywhere but Mama; she found herself looking up to see the meticulously cleaned family pictures that flanked the wide television.

There was one picture that always struck Lydia: a family portrait that her father had commissioned when she had been in high school. Eric was about to start college, and her parents had wanted just one more picture of him in the house. In a brand-new suit and tie, Eric stood stiffly behind their sitting parents with his hands on Baba's shoulders. To his side, Lydia stood meekly behind Mama in the dress she'd gotten from Goodwill with her head bowed slightly and her hands folded in front of her. None of them smiled. Offhand, Lydia couldn't remember a time when all of them *did* smile in the presence of each other.

The portrait stood behind Eric's still-gleaming trophies. He had been dead for over a decade, and yet her parents had kept this house exactly as it had been before his death to try and dislocate it from the present.

As they sat on the couch, Lydia's hand awkwardly patted her mother on the back. Her black fleece jacket, which had been washed so meticulously

that it had become pilled and worn, was rough against her palm. Mama's whimpers echoed through the empty house as she clung to Lydia, arms strung around her neck. Mama pulled her so close that Lydia wondered if they'd both suffocate.

After being home only for an hour, a feeling of dread settled in the pit of her stomach.

- - -

Riley flew out the next morning to support Lydia, and she was happy to see him only because he was patient with her mother. He was much better when Mama tried to get out stories about her husband between blubbers, and his handkerchief became a godsend. Riley certainly didn't seem to mind when Mama soaked his button-up with a mixture of tears and snot. He just gave that benign smile of his and waved away her apologies.

Lydia sat in the armchair that had been Baba's, watching the spectacle without interfering. Riley knew how to comfort people; she did not. She was unsure of the strange pit in her stomach as she watched Riley pass Mama a box of fresh tissues now that his handkerchief had been soaked through. His kind expression made her feel like she could never match up. Or something. Lydia couldn't understand why she felt like this. Riley was a good man – wasn't kindness what she should want from a husband?

Lydia had only been home for a day and already everything was becoming complicated. She forced herself to look away as Riley reassured Mama that they would take care of everything.

After leaving Mama to rest, Lydia and Riley went out to the funeral home to make the arrangements.

"My father once took me to Taiwan and made me watch my great uncle's funeral," Lydia said flatly as she picked up a vase.

Riley looked up, his brown eyes puzzled. The light that bathed him was cold and grey. "Why would he do that?"

"He wanted me to learn what I would have to do when it came time for his." She set down the vase and walked towards a mahogany casket. Her fingers danced along the top of the glossy container. "He wanted a big funeral back in Taiwan with all the usual things for a great man. He wanted fifty strippers dancing and a new car to burn so he could drive it in the spirit world." Her hand curled into a fist and she rapped her knuckles against the coffin. "His pride mattered more than anything, I suppose."

"What are you going to do, then?" Riley asked as he came behind her. He put his hands on her thin waist to hold her. "That sounds... tricky."



Lydia looked outside the window at the fresh-faced world. Spring was coming; it transitioned the ugly grey landscape into something green, something... different. She walked away from Riley to gaze past the glass, her arms crossed over her chest. "We'll just bury him here. We don't have the resources for everything that he wanted."

Riley raised a thick brown eyebrow, his pale face surprised. "That's harsh, Lyd. I mean, we could afford—"

"He's dead, he won't be able to care," she interrupted. "Besides, I don't think he deserves anything more." *Not after what he's done.*

"Lydia – you're supposed to – to *honor* your father. He wasn't that bad of a man." It was one of the few times she saw his kind, round face shocked. Riley tried to approach her again, putting his arms around her thin shoulders as if to steady her. "Sure, he was... *eccentric*, but—"

Lydia shied away from his touch and went to one of the other coffins. When she looked up at Riley for a moment, his face was confused; he seemed taken aback. Lydia bit the inside of her mouth and looked away.

She found herself telling him in a distant voice, "You didn't know him like I did, Riley. He doesn't deserve anything from me."

— — —

The third day, Lydia buried her father. It was just Mama, Riley, and her who stood above the lowered casket. Lydia had refused to invite the family that lived back in Taiwan to the burial. She had done her daughterly duty and set up a tombstone, but even though Mama was horrified that her deified husband was denied the great funeral he had always dreamed of, she was powerless to stop it. His friends and old co-workers could visit on their own time if that was what they wanted, and Mama could not persuade Lydia to do any more. Her daughterly duty to Baba was complete. She was just tired of it all – of Mama, of Baba's lingering influence, even just being back home.

After they had stood over the grave for more than two hours, Riley said he had to leave to make a phone call – he kissed her cheek and muttered his apologies as he left her alone with her mother for the first time since his arrival. The two of them must have stood there for hours; they witnessed the sun fall from its peak as the sound of Mama's moans accompanied the rise of the purple dusk that blossomed in the sky.

Lydia watched Mama cling to the newly planted tombstone as wails ripped out of her throat as she cried for her husband.

"Mama, let's go," she said to her mother, who shook her head with adamant refusal. Clear-colored snot dripped down her lips and tears streamed down

her cheeks in almost invisible lines. It was the most emotion that Lydia had ever seen Mama express. At Eric's funeral, her face had been as ashen as his. Baba's arm had been strung around her neck, pulling them together until their foreheads brushed together. If it had been Lydia in the ground, would Mama have even shed a tear?

"Mama, let's go," she said again, more forcefully. She wasn't sure if it was spite or fatigue that made the words harsh. Lydia's mother started to wail even louder; the sound pushed forcefully into Lydia's ears. The dark birds resting on another tombstone startled a little – as they resettled and flapped their wings, they shot the pair of women annoyed looks.

"Mama, let go of the tombstone and let's leave!" she shouted over Mama's deafening howls of grief, feeling embarrassed as she looked around at the mourners clustered around other graves who purposefully looked away from the two. "It's getting dark, we've been here for *hours*–"

"Oh, James Hei, dearest husband!" Mama keened loudly without any regard for the other grieving family that clustered around a nearby grave. "Look at the last of my children!" She looked at Lydia with grief-crazed eyes and spat, "Look at her stand away from you, unwilling to comfort her poor mother. After all that you and I have given her!"

Lydia bit her tongue and tried to speak with a softer tone this time. "Mama, it's getting cold. We should go back, where it's warm." It was harder than she thought to keep her voice quiet and demure when she just wanted to scream at Mama that Baba had not been a good father, a good husband, a good *man*. Why did Mama worship him? Why had *Lydia*? She thought she was going to go mad with these feelings of rage.

Mama narrowed her eyes. "After all our generosity, after all our *care*, she wants to keep me from you, James, but I won't let her."

Lydia found herself gritting her teeth. She felt her throat swell with acidic anger and a longing to tell her mother the truth she'd kept silent for so long. She tried to practice the words in her mind.

*What care?*

"Your Baba was good to me," Mama continued to chatter underneath her breath, not to Lydia but to some invisible force. She wrapped her arms around herself, her eyes wide and dazed. "After the first girl, Bai Yue, came out of my stomach without breath, he stayed with me. After your brother, my only born son, was–" She choked down another sob. "–*taken* from us, he still stayed by me."

*Did you know he was a liar?* Lydia wondered as she stared down at Mama.

“And now, all that I have left is a bitter, ugly little girl to look after me,” Mama screamed again and seemed to ignore Lydia’s flaming cheeks. “James Hei, am I supposed to be left alone with this child until I die?” She tossed her head back and forth, her mouth open as she sobbed. A nearby family kept their eyes strictly on the tombstone in front of them, but Lydia watched as their lips moved in confused whispers. Embarrassment swept over her and made her ears burn before it turned to resentment.

Lydia struggled to keep her anger to herself; it felt impossible to be the same daughter she had been for Baba when he was still alive, quiet and subservient, now that he was gone. There was no longer any need for the false pretenses that had haunted her since childhood. There was a strange sense of being able to breathe at last, and the thing she wanted to do more than anything was use that air to yell.

But as she watched the woman in front of her weep, Lydia couldn’t help but feel an unfamiliar sense of pity for her mother. Lydia approached her and tried to say in a shaking but gentle voice, “Mama, we’ve had a long day. Riley is waiting at the house for us. Let’s go back.”

“Shut up!” Mama shrieked suddenly as she shot up from her kneeled position. She brought her hand across the young woman’s cheek. The noise was loud enough that it startled the blackbirds again. They’d been dozing off on the tombstones, and at the sound, they extended their long wings and took off into the grey sky, screeching curses at them.

Lydia stood with her shaking hands held by her side, her cheek smarting as the little woman looked up at her with crazed eyes. Out of the corner of her eye, she caught the bewildered looks of the other family; as they huddled close together and held hands over the tombs of their loved ones, they gasped at the sight of Lydia and her mother. She felt their stares linger on her for a long time with complete and utter befuddlement over something that didn’t surprise Lydia. This was just everything that she and Mama had never said to each other.

“Have you no respect for the dead?” her mother whispered. “Have you no respect for your Baba? He who gave you everything – the clothes on your back, the food in your belly, the books you read throughout university? Can you not stand here for one minute more?” The little woman stood up taller and peered accusingly into Lydia’s eyes. “Did you cry for your Baba? Tell me, girl, did you cry for him?”

Lydia blinked. Suddenly she was not in this cemetery but in the wide countryside, with a long line of people leading the way to some destination.

She blinked again and saw Baba next to her. He was in a suit that had too long cuffs and was too large in the shoulders. But he wore it with such fierce pride that he seemed to swell, able to fill every inch of the clothing with sheer willpower. *"When I die,"* she heard him tell her with his yellowing teeth bared in annoyance at the sight in front of them, cigarette stiff between his fingers, *"I want something grander than this, do you understand, girl? If my Uncle John gets a better funeral than me I will be damned."*

She found herself nod obediently, her head hung like a dog's. *"Yes, Baba."*

*"And when your Mama cries,"* he told her as he nodded to himself, *"you let her, you understand? You let her do whatever she want. It the least you give for everything she done."*

Mama had started to shout curses at her. *"You stupid no good – why you ignore me? Listen to your Mama!"* She brought her hand up to hit Lydia again. Lydia noticed it with dull eyes, but did not flinch as her mother brought a palm across her cheek again, or when she did it again, and again, and again. Her mother kept going until she seemed to finally lose the steel in her spine. When Lydia's head was turned to the side, she saw that the family was long gone, surely unable to bear the spectacle before them. She couldn't blame them.

Her mother's legs shook once. Then they gave way and she slumped to the ground, staring at the tombstone with empty eyes.

Lydia stood upright and still; she gazed at the distant moon as her eyes welled with tears. *"Let's go, Mama."* She looked down at her mother, and eventually knelt in front of the little woman. More softly than her last attempts, she said gently, *"Mama, it's time to leave. You can visit tomorrow."*

— — —

The morning after, Lydia went into Baba's den to pack up his belongings. Mama had asked her to do it last night after they'd returned from the graveyard and Lydia had agreed because at least it meant she wouldn't have to be near her. Mama now rested fitfully in her room, weeping senselessly into the pillow that had been her husband's and probably lamenting her faithless daughter. The thought made Lydia's stomach sick.

The acidic stench of artificial lemon that hung around the room couldn't get rid of the stale, mildewy air. It had been less than a week since Baba had last been in his den, and yet the desk was laden with towers of bills and letters; the old computer, beige in color and built like a brick, rested sturdily on the desktop. Mama had always liked to pretend that if the spaces where people lived were still clean, then maybe they would come back. Lydia found

it odd that there was such a vast collection of clutter while the wooden chair and bits of exposed desk had been wiped clean of dust. Maybe Mama was beginning to reconsider her belief, albeit at an inconvenient time. As Lydia walked over the stained carpet to the desk, she sighed. It felt like an insult to injury that Baba would leave all this work to her; it was like he knew she would scorn his desire for a lavish funeral.

Lydia clawed at the piles of magazines, junk mail, and old bills until she held it all; the tower of trash easily passed her eyes and it was a miracle it didn't slip away. As she made her way to the recycling bin in the kitchen, she could hear Baba reprimand her with a scowl. "Waste." He'd been parsimonious in life, but death had made him materialistic. She shoved the papers into the brown paper bag that lined the plastic bin and ignored the tiny noise of protest the bag made when it tore down the side.

"That's great, we'll set up a meeting for when I get back, then," she heard Riley's soft voice say from the dining table. She looked to see him with his phone pressed to his ear, fingers at the ready on his sleek keyboard. Lydia watched as Riley smiled at her, the words, "I love you," forming on his lips with a wink.

There it was again, that suffocating kindness. Last night he had put ice packs to her swollen cheeks and held her. As they had laid together on the bed, his body was warm against hers. He had stroked her hair like she was a child. His love had felt like pity.

The window behind him now revealed a cold grey horizon; matted clumps of snow and rotted leavers were like stones on the dead lawn. Winter was ending soon. Lydia gave him a vague nod as she slammed the recycling bin shut and walked back to the office, pulling the door behind her.

Now that the pieces of junk were gone, she turned to the desk itself. She meticulously dissected and rearranged the insides of the drawers until, after a few minutes later, she'd amassed an assortment of office supplies. The quiet was awful but familiar. It weighed heavily on her shoulders, but she knew trying to fill it with music would only make it worse. She'd learned a long time ago that the silence in this home could never be lifted.

After a half an hour, three gallon-sized Ziploc bags full of office supplies waited patiently by the door to be donated.

Lydia stood and stretched, raising her arms into the air. The soft fabric of her shirt pulled up and brushed gently against her skin. She looked around and found Baba's college degree hung up behind the desk. The black frame was striking against the faded beige of the walls. She walked over to it and

pulled it off gently from its hook. Her knuckles scraped against the bumpy, textured wall before she lifted the diploma to eye-level. The phrases, “Indiana University,” “James Hei,” and “Electrical Engineering,” jumped off of the faded parchment.

“I came over when I was twenty years old!” Baba’s voice cackled as a glass of wine sloshed manically in his hands. The eyes on him were more polite than interested. “*First of the Hei’s to receive a real goddamn American education!*”

Lydia set the framed diploma on the desk as she let out a sigh. She drifted down onto the carpet once more as her fingers made their way to the last drawer. Her eyebrows lifted as she opened it wider, pulling out an old camera and a stack of photos bound together with a rubber band.

Lydia set down the camera and pulled the band off of the photos. She thumbed through them quickly in hopes of finding her own younger face. Instead, she was struck by the consistent roundness of Eric’s jaw. From infancy to childhood to adulthood, it did not change. In the photographs like the one Baba took when Eric was mid-lunge, ready to strike a tennis ball, and another where he stood with a stiff grin and a graduation cap and two beaming parents behind him, that baby fat still lingered.

The last picture she could find of him was the one at his new job as a stockbroker. Lydia pulled it out and stared at it for a moment, wondering where she’d last seen it. Eric stood stories above the rest of New York City, clothed in a well-made suit and with his arms crossed over his chest. His smile was reassuring and confident without being cocky, the perfect expression for someone who people trusted with their money. It took Lydia a moment to recognize where she’d last seen it. It had been the picture featured at his funeral.

She wanted to rip it apart.

Lydia stacked the pictures of Eric into a pile. Without them in the collection, there were only a handful left.

One was of Baba and Mama on what must have been their wedding day. She squinted at the picture, trying to make out the details in the grainy black and white. It seemed like the backdrop was the Hei ancestral home in Taiwan. She could recognize the sloped roofs, which curved like a small smile and fanned out to cover its building. Baba grinned in the picture, wearing a suit that was a little too big for him. Mama did not smile; her eyes were direct and met the camera as she clutched her flowers above her silken wedding dress. Lydia couldn’t make out her expression. Was she pleased? Upset? Mama’s blank look was the same enigma it had been for Lydia’s entire childhood.

Lydia's brow softened when she saw the picture underneath the wedding photo. It was a picture of Mama in the hospital. Her head was turned to the side, her hair long and plastered to her face with sweat. Her eyes were squeezed shut as she held an infant in her arms.

Lydia wondered for a moment if it was her in the photo; she flipped it over to see Baba's scrawled Chinese. "白月, Baiyue. 1980." Lydia flipped the photo over and stared at it for a moment longer. She thought she could see something like tears on Mama's face as she kept the baby as far away from her as possible. *Oh, this is...* Her heart sank; she couldn't imagine what it must have been like. No, she didn't want to know. She added it to the wedding photo and turned to the next one.

Lydia didn't really find any pictures of herself until she was well into early adulthood; not a baby photo could be found. She felt something bubble in her chest as she flipped through the few pictures of her. She found one that she was surprised that she remembered. It had been a work party for Baba and his fellow electrical engineers, thrown by their boss at the end of the year. Baba had dragged her along after telling her, "Dress pretty."

At the moment the photo was taken, she'd been preoccupied with the glass of red wine swirling in her hand. But now, with her eyes half-lidded, her dress barely reaching her thigh, and the distant shot, Lydia couldn't help but feel that the candid was an act of voyeurism. She hadn't noticed the lingering eyes of the men around her.

That had been the night Baba had introduced her to Riley. He'd taken a picture of them standing side by side, where Riley gave a small, polite grin while Lydia's lips were transfixed into a line.

The picture underneath it was her wedding photo with Riley. That was right, she recalled as she set the other photos down. She stared at the two pictures – their first meeting, and then their wedding photo.

Riley had taken to her immediately after their initial meeting. He'd asked her on a date that night and had her scribble down her number on a napkin stained by a red cocktail. He was all smiles during the first month of their relationship, hugs in the second, and kisses in the third. They married in the fourth, at her father's insistence and Riley's eagerness.

The wedding venue captured in the picture had been her in-law's country club; ivy smothered the brick wall as Riley and her faced each other. The Lydia in the photo had her eyes shut, her hands cupping his face to conveniently show the shine of her new ring. Lydia now narrowed her eyes, trying to sense whether or not her expression was that of true love, or just resignation.

Her thumb twisted the ring. It was just one of the many things that Riley had provided for her and her father since their marriage. He was more than happy to use parts of his salary and family money to help Baba afford a new car and exotic cruise vacations. She had long suspected that Baba had directed Riley and Lydia towards one another for this very reason. She had never been sure if Riley's generosity had been part of an unspoken dowry she didn't know about, or if it was just who he was. She wouldn't be surprised by either, to be honest. It was just a happy coincidence that Riley was a good man that seemed to genuinely love her. She couldn't help but wish suddenly that she had said no to him and she felt heavy with resentment towards herself.

Lydia stared at the photo as she continued to twist her ring. The band felt tight against her skin. "It's nice that he printed it," she finally muttered as she set it down next to Eric's photographs. She took care to make sure the light material wouldn't slide away from the pile.

Lydia looked down to see the last photograph that seemed more recent than she would've cared for. Her nose wrinkled and she quickly turned away, but a moment's look had been enough. A blonde woman's face, lips pouted and colored with red, made a seductive expression at the camera as her palms cupped her breasts. Baba's reflection was behind the woman, the camera raised to his chest. He was well into his sixties at this point; his grin bared crooked and yellowed teeth and his grey and thin hair was disheveled and exposed bald spots of brown skin.

As Lydia inspected everything else in the picture except for the two figures, she felt her stomach drop when she recognized the patches of black, tarnished mirror and the chipped white tile. It was the bathroom of the restaurant Baba had loved.

When Lydia had been home on vacation with Riley last year, she'd gone to get take-out for everyone before Baba returned from work. Even though the 'restaurant' was practically a shack and their American Chinese food was inauthentic and laden with MSG, Baba had a peculiar fondness for it.

Lydia had walked into that disgusting bathroom after ordering only to see his spotted backside and the young woman in the picture. A wordless shriek of emotion had flown out of her mouth; Baba turned around and his wrinkled face had contorted in surprise as he stopped, the woman on the sink countertop moaning softly, her eyes half-open and her mouth gaping.

*What was he doing?* Lydia had stood there with paralyzed lungs as her back pressed against the corner of the room. She'd pressed a hand to her mouth to keep herself from vomiting as Baba fumbled with his pants. She had felt



trapped, her head had spun, and as Baba had opened his mouth full of stained, yellowed teeth, she wrestled the door open and fled.

She'd torn through the restaurant and ran outside to her car, trying to open the damn thing with her shaking hands as tears started to flood her eyes and ugly sounds escaped from her mouth.

Lydia had felt a hand on her shoulder and she screamed, adrenaline singing in her ears. She'd turned around to see Baba standing there, what was left of his grey hair strewn and messy, his eyes wide as his body huffed from exertion. He sputtered out in broken English, "Girl, stop, it Baba!"

Lydia had looked at him for a moment with incredulous eyes. Her hands shook on the door handle, unsure of whether or not she should continue to wrench it open. "Baba, how could you – *why?*"

"It's okay," he said. He opened his arms wide and awkwardly started to hug her as she stood still as a board. "It okay. Don't tell Mama. Don't tell Mama. Please, Lydia? I love you."

Lydia had wanted to be sick as he embraced her, the smell of that woman's cheap perfume on his skin. His hands brushed against her back, patting her like she was a child. But this was the first time that she could remember his embrace. She felt trapped, she felt loved, she felt – she didn't know what she felt.

"Don't tell Mama," he whispered again. "Don't tell Mama."

And Lydia hadn't. She'd kept his secret because he had asked her not to, and the only way she felt his love was if she did as he said.

*Of course he put it here.* No one but him had ever been allowed in his office; the desk might as well have been his heart, what with all the junk in it. Lydia stared down at the photo. She didn't know when it was taken. Was it months ago? A year? How long had his affair gone on? Why? They were questions she didn't know if she wanted the answer to – not that she ever would. Her gaze lingered on the photo for a moment more before she ripped it in half, then into quarters, and then pinched it apart until nothing but specks of color littered the carpet. Her eyes stung and her nose ran. She wiped at both with her wrists as she sat up, sniffled once, and shuffled back to the drawer to see if there was anything else in there.

*Please let that be it. I just want to be done.* She put her hand in and felt for any remaining objects; she was surprised when she felt the glossy texture of a photograph in the very back of the drawer. Lydia let out a sigh as she pulled it out, ready to see yet another picture of Eric (what would it be this time?) or God forbid, the woman.

Lydia sat down as she took in the final picture. The glowing sunset must have overwhelmed the camera enough that the background was blurred, although she could see dark trees and yellowing grass.

Baba smiled a goofy grin that made his yellowing teeth seem to disappear; his eyes scrunched against the light, showing laugh lines on his face. His arm was around a young Lydia's shoulders, who smiled brightly as she held onto him while he pulled her close. She'd had a short bob with a red ribbon barrette in her hair and a wide gap in her smile where she must have lost a tooth.

Lydia tried, but she couldn't remember when the photo was taken. She inspected the details with a strange sense of desperation – were they at the local park? How old was she? Who took the photo – Mama, or a stranger? Was it just the two of them, or was Eric there as well? As she tried to pick out clues from the photo, she felt her eyes become wet as she scowled in frustration. *Why can't I remember this? The one time that Baba and I...*

A feeling of... some feeling swelled in her chest, making it hard to breathe. She couldn't stop it, and she wasn't sure she wanted to. She pressed the photo to her heart, like having it there would ease the pain, and covered it with her palms to protect it.

Lydia's head bent down. She bit her lip as the tears finally began.

— — —

On the last night, Lydia sat next to Riley, who slept peacefully. Her back was straight against the backboard of her childhood bed, her eyes staring at the empty wall. Decorations were a sentimental value that had never been instilled in Lydia; the wall was no more bare than the one in the apartment she shared with Riley, but it somehow felt more stark. When Lydia thought about it, there was no trace of her ever living in this room, or even this house. Of the photos that were littered around the house, there were none of her. No school portraits or graduation pictures of Lydia existed – she only appeared in the large family portraits as an accessory.

A feeling of resentment bubbled in her stomach just from looking at the stupid, blank wall. Was she just overthinking it?

"I found a picture of our wedding in my dad's office," she told Riley before he dozed off. Her fingers traced the edge of the patterned comforter.

"That's nice," Riley said with a smiling yawn. He stretched, the pillows shifting away from him. "You know, our wedding day was the best day of my life... so far, at least."

"I guess," Lydia said reluctantly. She wasn't sure if she could agree. Their wedding day and all the other moments they shared together were certainly

good, but they had felt... wrong, like shoes that were a little too small. She bit her bottom lip; the comforter became bundled in her hands. "Do you think we loved each other? You know, on our wedding day."

"What do you mean?" Riley asked, unsurprisingly concerned. This wasn't something that they talked about.

"Well, we were only together for a few months before we got married." The thoughts in her mind quickly tumbled out of her lips and she didn't try to stop them. "You know, we say things like 'I love you' but we don't really... talk about what they mean." Lydia was trying to start a fight. She knew that. She couldn't just say things like that and expect nothing to happen. But she resented the cycle of silent smiles and easy forgiveness that had come between them and *wished*, for a moment, that she could break it.

Riley sighed. The bed creaked as he sat up with a somber expression. His mouth opened, then closed. He looked unsure of what to say. He sighed again and rubbed his forehead. Finally he asked, "Okay, Lydia. Well... do you love me?"

For the first time, she spoke honestly. "I don't know."

His brow scrunched. "How come?"

"Because I resent you." The petty words came out like a petulant child's. Lydia wasn't sure how true it was, but it felt good to say something that she knew would hurt him. She felt her brow furrow and she was certain her expression was juvenile as well.

"What do you mean by that, Lydia?" Riley's voice was hard, but it wasn't angry. That just made Lydia clench her teeth. *Stop it. Stop trying to forgive me. Stop trying to be kind. Just talk with me!*

"I just - you...!" Lydia made a frustrated noise. "You're so kind and good, but I don't know why I feel like this."

"Well, what do you feel like?" There is no sarcastic bite under Riley's voice. It was soft, trying to understand.

That just made it worse. She couldn't argue with someone who would forgive her with that stupid, easy smile. She couldn't *talk* with someone who just agreed with anything she said without thought. Lydia turned on him and snapped, "Like I'm - I'm going crazy! I can't stand it when you're nice to me. It makes me feel like - it feels *wrong*, Riley. I should be happy to be your wife! But I just look at you sometimes and I can't *stand you*-!"

"*Lydia.*" Now he sounded angry. The tone was unfamiliar; it was strangely flat, almost emotionless. It was a far cry from the soft tone that curled around her whenever Riley spoke to her. Lydia turned to look at him. His eyes

glittered, mouth in an unfamiliar straight line. “There’s more to all of this than you’re letting on. Stop making me guess and just say what you want to.”

Lydia took in a deep breath. She could feel Riley’s eyes probe at her as he tried to figure out what she herself had just started to realize. “I married you because I thought – I thought that it would make my father happy... no, that he might love me.” She let in a long breath, and then felt it slowly release. The air finally seemed like it made it to her lungs. “I don’t know if I love you, to be honest. I don’t know if I love you because I just do, or if it’s because it’s what I was supposed to do as a wife, as my father’s daughter. I understand that – that you’re a good person. You really are, Riley, the best I’ve known. You treat me so well, but I still feel like *this* – us – isn’t right. I don’t know why, Riley. I really just don’t know.”

Lydia heard the rustling of sheets as Riley relaxed his grip on them and turned on his side, away from her. They were both quiet for a long time; neither one wanted to break through the awkward silence only to make it worse. His breath was too quiet, too controlled. She wondered if this would be the moment that his gentle mask finally snapped and wasn’t sure if she should feel worried or relieved.

Then, suddenly: “You know, I think I always knew that you didn’t want to be with me.” Riley’s admission was softly spoken, almost silent. Lydia did not look at him as he continued, “The first time we kissed, under that umbrella – I thought I tasted your tears before I pulled away.” He shifted uncomfortably on the bed. “After we first made love – I thought I heard you crying after I fell asleep. And on our wedding day, as your father walked you down the aisle... I thought I saw tears.” Lydia continued to look forward, not saying a word. “Every time I looked at you, even when you were laughing, I always thought you were crying inside.”

Riley took a deep breath. “I think I married you because I wanted to make you happy. I wanted to see you smile instead of cry. And, in a way – maybe I fell in love with the idea of saving you.”

Lydia felt a moment of dull satisfaction. Then his words sat heavy inside of her, making her feel like she weighed a thousand pounds. His love really *was* pity. It wasn’t that he saw everything she was, had been, and would be and then still loved her. It was *because* of those worn and damaged bits of her that he had married her. Was that love, or was that something sinister? If she became someone new – someone happier – would he still want to be with her?

*But I don’t want to be the person I am anymore.*

Something inside of Lydia ached. Was she so broken that it could be seen, like cracks on porcelain?

He then made a soft noise – Lydia was slightly surprised that it sounded like a gentle, sorrowful laugh. It shocked her enough that they both turned towards each other, eyes meeting. Both pairs were bright and shining. “So... I guess now we both know how the other feels.”

“Yes.” Lydia’s voice was soft as she looked down at the covers that she’d wrinkled from gripping so hard. “I guess we do.” She sighed and melted against the pillows. When their shoulders touched each other, it seemed strangely intimate. “What do we do now?”

“I don’t know,” Riley admitted. Then, his voice became urgent “Lydia, I know that we just...” He seemed to struggle to explain what had just happened. She couldn’t blame him. “What we talked about – those are some serious things. I wouldn’t fault you if you just... want to leave.” His voice wavered even though he spoke slowly to remain calm. “But in spite of everything we’ve both said, I still care about you.” His hand covers hers, and she felt their rings scratch against each other. Riley looked up at her and brushed her cheek as he tucked a lock of hair behind her ear. It was no more than a brief caress, but it felt more intimate than anything she’d experienced before with him. He was still being kind, but it no longer felt like it was going to smother her. Or, if it did, she couldn’t feel it yet. Right now, his words felt... honest. “I want to work on this with you. Do you?”

“I don’t know,” Lydia said for what felt like the hundredth time. His face was earnest, even hopeful. Even if he didn’t love her for the right reasons, he still did love her. And as confused as she was, she knew that he was a good man. Maybe it would be different this time, now that they knew each other. “But... I’ll try, at least.”

Riley smiled. “Thank you.” She nodded. The two kept their hands together. Eventually, she pulled her hand back and Riley let her. Riley turned to his side; Lydia could feel the mattress vibrate as he cried softly. Lydia soon paralleled him, their backs facing each other. She turned her head into the pillow and bit her lip when she felt a stream of tears finally fall. Was she relieved, or was it grief? She didn’t know. But her chest finally felt light for – for maybe the first time ever. In spite of the tears that dripped down her cheek, her lips twitched into a smile.

— — —

“Lydia, don’t go!”

Lydia moved towards the entrance, dragging her luggage behind her. Beyond the door that Mama tried to block, Riley was helping the cab driver with his bags. She grimaced as she tried to shove past her mother.

“You can’t go, Lydia!” her mother shouted desperately; her clawed fingers grabbed onto Lydia’s bags. “You my *daughter*, you can’t leave me! You have to take care of me—”

“Get off!” Lydia snapped as she ripped herself free of Mama.

The little woman stared at her – in amazement, horror, and then hatred. Her lip curled. “You ungrateful child. Who would you be if it weren’t for Baba and me?” Mama spat viciously, her eyes digging holes into Lydia.

Lydia snapped in a sharp tone she had never dared to use before, “I made me, Mama.”

In the face of Lydia’s steely expression, Mama broke down to the floor in a watery mess, what little strength she had managed to preserve now gone. “Who will take care of me?” Mama wailed.

Lydia’s fists were balled. Through gritted teeth, she said, “Baba left you enough, Mama.”

The older woman started to say, “But you my *daughter*, Lydia, I love you, stay—”

Lydia thought she would have been more nervous, but she felt strangely calm. She took in a deep breath, then put her hands on her mother’s shoulders. “It doesn’t matter anymore, Mama. We don’t owe each other anything now that Baba is gone. We don’t need to pretend we love each other. I’m *done*.” She watched as Mama’s face contorted with something like fear, fingers clutching at Lydia’s hands. “I am never coming home again.”

As Mama began to wail some nonsensical plea, Lydia turned away from the pathetic woman and walked out of the dark house and into the light.

— — —

Her flight was in a couple of hours, but she still found herself standing alone in front of her father’s grave. Riley waited in the car with the driver, giving her the space that she’d asked for.

Lydia felt an odd sense of emptiness in her stomach as she stared down at the tombstone that read “James Hei, Beloved Husband and Father” – it was like she was somehow weightless. After a moment more of staring, she pulled out the picture of them from her pocket and slowly unfolded it.

Her breath caused steam to appear in the cold air. From underneath her umbrella she looked up at the rain that fell in gentle cascades, washing away what was left of the crusting snow. She put out an ungloved hand to feel it,

and it was warm to the touch. The entire week she was in this small town the sky had been dark and oppressive, but now... now it had started to relent at last. As the rain gently fell down, the air began to feel warmer and warmer. Spring had finally arrived.

Her throat closed, and she gently put the unfolded picture of the two of them smiling on the base of the tombstone. For a moment, unweighted and bent in half, the picture looked like a pair of butterfly wings. After a moment of deliberation, she weighed it down with a rock and took care not to obstruct the smiling faces. "Bye, Baba."

She sighed as she stood up. Something warm ran down her cheek - a raindrop or a tear, she didn't know. She looked one last time at the tombstone where *James Hei, Beloved Husband and Father* was etched into the stone.

Lydia turned around, her back to the tombstone; and, with her head held high, she walked away.