

Café Shapiro Anthology

Café Shapiro Anthology

26th Annual

2023

UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN LIBRARY

© 2023

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 for permission information.

ISBN 978-1-60785-863-8 (paperback)

ISBN 978-1-60785-864-5 (OA)

Published by Michigan Publishing

Contents

Introduction	1
Jiayou Shen	
The Kings Casino and Hotel	3
Erin Knape	
Evangeline	7
MacKenzie Mollison	
THE GOOD MORNING CIRCLE	12
Lola D'Onofrio	
Confessions	16
Emilia Ferrante	
Credo of Belief	24
The Grapefruit	27
Ode to Red Nail Polish	28
Mermaid Tears	30
a diner in linden	32
What I would write to you if I were Emily Dickinson	33
The erotic	34
Mushroom	35

Rachel Grabow	
The Ocean	37
Chinwe Onwere	
Where I Belong	40
Cecelia-Therese Dore	
Letter To Blue Spruce	43
February Reflection	44
To Anticipate The Best	45
Laine Kibler	
Surreality	47
Ally Choi	
This Time, Last Year	54
Jessica Hsu	
the point of poetry	59
Webbed	60
Above Forty Percent of Oxygen is Toxic	61
Kewpie	63
Swan Lake Suite, Op. 20a	65
Melissa Oz	
mama, that's what this is, right?	68
iceberg extremities	71

Kathleen Quail

Til Death Do Us Part 74

Jenna Lynn Good

BLACK SWALLOWTAIL 91

SAYING GOODBYE 92

THE DRIVE-IN 93

LEAVING ON A MOTORCYCLE 95

ANGEL 97

BUTTERFLY STAMP 98

OPHELIA 99

THE ACTRESS 100

Audrey Lee

Adrian 102

Umana Ahmed

IN THE MORNING AFTER DYING 106

Sarah Bellovich

Real Stars Don't Stick 110

Our Echoes Never End 111

My Midnight in Paris 112

One More Thing 113

But We are More than Bone 115

Jacqueline Giessler

Untitled 118

Kieran Grossman

Dance, Energy, Inclusion 123

Giselle Mills

Earthly Matter 140

In Reverse 141

Split-Pairs from Ireland 142

altered nature 143

Self-Portrait While I Dream 144

Haley Brosnan

Deep Dark Fears 146

Returning 147

Every time I look up at the ceiling I notice something new, and I
feel like that's a metaphor. 149

Taylor Burnham

Tick...Tock 152

Elina Schnaper

Hail! to the heroes valiant 157

Love Letters of Language 159

Melina Schaefer

Different Lights 163

Booker Cross

The Robbery

174

Nina Smith

Strange Music

182

Telise Clemente

Petra

190

Welcome to the 26th annual Café Shapiro anthology, featuring poems and short stories authored by University of Michigan students. We invite you to engage with these inspiring and thoughtful works. They will draw you into the creative process and connect you with students through their individual expressions. You will find a unique window into the Michigan learning experience.

When Café Shapiro first launched over twenty years ago, it was a bold experiment, a student coffee break designed as part of the University's Year of the Humanities and Arts (YoHA). Café Shapiro is an example of how past innovations become a part of current campus traditions. YoHA set out to explore the role of the arts and humanities in civic and community life through a variety of programs. Café Shapiro continues to celebrate the arts and humanities, with this tradition of featuring undergraduate student writers nominated by their professors to perform their works.

On the evenings of March 13 & 14, 2023, the contributing writers shared their short stories / poems during the virtual Cafe Shapiro event. The act of reading one's work out loud was a new experience for many of our students. With the support of friends, faculty, coaches, and family, the student writers demonstrated the power of speaking and performing. They participated in an authentic act of creation, speaking possibility, expressing beliefs, and imagining the future.

Café Shapiro has become an annual celebration of undergraduate student writers as they think creatively and critically, reason, ask questions, and develop the skills that help them understand and participate in our world. We also publish this anthology of their work, making it available in print and through U-M Deep Blue Repository, the University's institutional repository. Through this process, students have the opportunity to learn about copyright and related steps to publishing their scholarship.

Events such as Café Shapiro make visible the Library's commitment to learning. We provide an engaged space for students to practice, learn and grow their scholarship and advance their learning journey. We hope you enjoy reading the work of these talented writers.

Laurie Alexander
Associate University Librarian for Learning and Teaching
U-M Library

JIAYOU SHEN



Jiayou Shen is a psychology major and writing minor. She likes writing fiction and hopes to complete her novel someday. She enjoys the genres of urban fantasy and dark humor. Jiayou likes to play DnD, drink bubble tea, and eat good food in her free time. She hopes to expand her creative horizons and write more in the future.

The Kings Casino and Hotel

Welcome to The Kings Casino and Hotel, Where Everyone can be Kings for a Day! Please leave your watches and smart devices by the door—we can't have social media ruining your fun, can we?

Fun fact: all visitors get a free chip on entrance, here's yours. What do you desire to use it on?

That slot machine? Good choice. Pull the lever and watch the lights flash and slots spin.

The machine's jingle can and will get stuck in your head. It has gotten stuck in mine many times.

Smell the air. Does the machine not emit a scent of popcorn? Don't worry, if you get hungry, the concession stands provide free food.

Your slots are slowing down! Seven...seven...eight! You almost got it! Just another tilt of the wheel and you could've won big. Do you have expertise or just beginner's luck? How much cash do you have? Don't worry, we also take credit cards.

Oh, and before I forget to ask, how did you find us?

Was it one of the print ads in a local tabloid? A tiny square jammed between anti-cancer mattresses and secret lovechild claims? A square only big enough to fit the name (in bolded Times New Roman) and address? Or one of the pop-up ads you get when clicking a suspicious link on your computer? Its intro is a display of flashing lights and colors. Many a computer has crashed before the title screen.

I bet it was the TV commercial. That's how most find us. It's a kitschy mess. Don't try to be nice and deny it, the staff makes fun of it too. You probably saw it flipping through local channels at 3 am, on an old TV in a basement somewhere, all the lights off. You had nothing better to do, and all the colors on the screen looked pretty, so you kept watching.

The commercial is staticky, and the audio's all wrong. The noise comes just a millisecond after it's supposed to. It was filmed on location – The exterior, which looks like a thousand

castles and skyscrapers jammed together and dipped in glitter, that's all us.

The themed ballrooms lined with slot machines and neon piping, that's all us.

The building-wide lazy river,

that's all us. So I wonder, why does everything look like a cheap green screen

effect? I was there when we filmed the massive bonfire in the volcano room. On-screen, it looks like a bad CGI stock image. And don't get me started on the golden sparkle transitions.

The employees! How can I not mention the employees! They either try too hard or phone it in. Just look at the body disposal squad, look at them! In their black hazmat suits, waving to the audience next to a plastic skeleton. Why did the crew use a plastic skeleton anyway? We have plenty of real ones, just go to the slot machines with the smell. Second to them are the employees in the closing scene. They're meant to spread their arms in sync with the Visit Now!, but it's obvious no one practiced. Someone hit me in the face while we were doing that.

But you didn't come here to listen to me complain about the commercial. No, you remembered the address displayed in those fuzzy yellow subtitles, and you came here to play.

Or escape, or hide, or whatever. You came to the right place. To quote the commercial, we have blackjackspokerrouete (Russian and normal) craps-baccarat slots chess checkers snet monopoly dog-fighting and more! We have rooms for all sorts of games, if you're willing to put something on the line for them. You never know, you might win big!

And win big you might. Those chips don't only represent cash. They can represent houses, cars, salaries, and all sorts of fun stuff. Simply tell an official at one of our many information desks, the ones surrounded by the flatscreens, and we'll give you as many chips as deemed the item's worth. No need for verification or paperwork, we'll sort everything out for you. Don't want to risk your property? Why not exchange your time instead? We have one-minute, five minutes, and one-hour chips, that you can give or gain to others, to an immediate bodily effect. Exchange them in our fabled Fountain of Youth room for the full experience! Free swimsuits will be provided!

Don't want to bet time? Why not cash in your organs? You only need one kidney to live anyways. Besides, you'll get so many chips from just one organ. It'll be inconceivable for you to spend them all! You'll make everything back in no time before you even see a glimpse of a surgeon's scalpel (from our acclaimed attached hospital and surgery center. Yes, everything in there is also covered in glitter and flashing lights).

Don't want to bet any of the above? Go to the information desk and tell a worker, and we'll let you put something very important up for bets. We don't normally do this, but we can strike an arrangement in which you get more

chips than you can ever spend. And, when you finally strike big, you can exchange the chips back for everything you've ever put up and leave with an empire's worth of profit. All you have to do is play our games, for as long as it takes until you hit that jackpot.

Don't forget the amenities. Drinks are free from our hard-working bartenders and waiters, stationed in every room. Everyone who enters, including you, will get a free suite that can be upgraded depending on how much time you spend here and how much you bet. We can't have our valued players sleep on the floor, can we? If you need a break from games, we have plenty of restaurants, shopping malls, golf courses, and movie theaters to keep your mind fresh and energy up. Take a dip in our lazy river and float through all the rooms. See one of our many live shows, performed by our talented employees, from all walks of life! Mingle with your fellow players and laugh about the shitty commercial that called all of you together.

And most importantly, never give up hope that you can win.

ERIN KNAPE



Erin is a sophomore at the University of Michigan majoring in psychology with a prospective creative writing minor. She is an aspiring prose writer who aims to entertain as well as illuminate mental health struggles through her work. In her free time, Erin enjoys photography, binge-watching Netflix, and catching up with friends. Erin is enthusiastic about this upcoming summer, as she hopes to achieve her goal of writing a novella.

Evangeline

“Thank the Lord, I’m out of that miserable shithole,” I announce to the forest. Up and down I go, traversing tree roots with bare feet. My teeth chatter, crunching up the cold which seeps through my skin. The shivering doesn’t work, but I don’t mind. I take in full gulps of winter air, void of urine or feces or the reek of my own clothes. My gown is straight and boxy, meant for everyone and no one. Yellow spots and pink mildew dot it and line the collar like ornamentation. A filthy necklace. If it weren’t for the cold gnawing on my fingertips, I would gladly shed it. Running wild, I would let the moon paint my skin and the breeze flow through me.

I grin at the thought, smiling wide with tarnished teeth. They continue their clattering, shooting welcomed pain into the craters of my gums. I must resist the urge to jump and shout, for I am not out of the woods yet. Each crunch beneath my feet declares my procession into a new life. My audience is the evergreens and oak. They clap with the wind, branches colliding with rapturous pride.

I am at peace in this place before I think of her. About Evangeline, what she’ll think when she wakes in the morning to harsh sun rays bleeding through foggy windows. If she’ll feel

sad when she sees an empty bed next to hers, or if she won’t notice at all. Before my escape, she had that knowing look. It struck me that afternoon while we were reading in the hall. As I looked up from my page, it was as if the whole of her was shimmering.

The warm light streaking through the blinds painted stripes across her face, softening her in some places and enhancing her in others. I told her what I thought my story was about, pointing to the illustrations as I went, and she nodded and grinned as she always did. Though, something was different. Her laugh was tainted by a fresh solemnity, like her tongue dampened the air as it left her lips. It wasn’t a plea but a masked unease. She worried over what might happen to me or what might not. This unrest followed me through the day, and just before stars rose in the night sky, the glint in her eyes told me it was time.

I waited until the sun crawled down the rooftops, then the towers, then the windows.

Dark had settled. I undid my binds as practiced, slipped by the watch, and

made it to the main corridor. It was long and narrow as if it would squeeze any wrongdoers who approached. The air was stagnant after settling from the day, filling my lungs with a suffocating scent that clutched at the walls and wrapped around my flesh.

At the corridor's end was a beacon, a door with a singular window in its center, glimmering with twilight. It was tantalizing freedom. It surprised me how immobile I felt, standing there, facing my future. I could have it, yet Evangeline's laugh ringing in my head made it impossible. It bounced around in my ears, clambering in my skull like a rodent in a cage. It felt wrong. I felt wrong. I wanted to scream, to force it out from between my teeth.

I stood there, battling myself over nothing. Because that's what it was, nothing. And eventually, that awful laughter was overshadowed by the whispers of the door. They were soft at first, but soon my hair stood on end, and a crescendo dug into my ears. The light had lured my eyes, and now the sound pulled me forward. It was calling, screaming, demanding. I obliged.

My palms met the chipped door, reaching for the handle. I took one glimpse behind me to find nothing but the dark. With a twist and a creak, the door was open, and my feet felt the cold Earth. There I was, alone and free. Evangeline's laugh and the door's insistence had left my mind, and I wandered into the woods with newfound purity and a thousand hopes for the infinite paths ahead.

After an hour of curling toes around tree roots and ducking under low branches, I am back to her, to that glint in her eye. On some occasions, the attendants would release us onto the courtyard grounds for fresh air. Although, between you and me, they had other intentions. The attendants always talked of the draining nature of their tasks: verbal beratement of the insane, physical reprimand of the disobedient, and confinement of those they do not like. Letting the crazies run wild now and again allows for a brief respite from their positions. Evangeline and I would talk about that. Perhaps we would organize a revolution, tie them up, shatter the windows, and live without suffocating.

On those days, the two of us would walk side by side, chatting. We had to walk quickly, as we had no shoes and the cement was scorching. On a particular Sunday in July, we circled the fenced perimeter like hamsters on a wheel. We had crossed the front entrance ten times. After the eleventh, I looked over to discover tears running down her face. It was the first time I saw her cry, and it took me aback. Ever since I had known Evangeline, a light radiated from beneath the pores

in her skin. Now she looked tired, weathered, beaten down with a sallow face and cracked lips. She looked at me with that glint in her eye and said, “I don’t want to die a second time.”

The first time we died was passing through that paint-chipped door, putting on our yellowed uniforms, and donning our titles as the untreatable and unbearable. We were taken in

on the same day, close to midday. I didn’t go willingly, of course, but my parents urged the doctors for reasons unknown to me. I never saw them again.

Just left of me, an owl hoots in a great evergreen, yet my mind remains on Evangeline. I hope she wakes and doesn’t despise me for it. Maybe her contempt will be overcome by pride,

imagining my slender body concealed in a maze of trees, feet to dirt, and hands to sky.

I can’t feel my toes anymore. It’s gotten colder within the hour. Each exhale brings a cloud to my lips, and each inhale sends a shiver through me. I hold my hands under my arms, but

all I am is skin and bone, with no flesh to keep the heat in. I wonder if I look as frail and defeated as Evangeline did that day on the grounds. Thin arms, thin legs, concave torso, sunken face.

The wind climbs my spine like a ladder, each vertebra a step. My gown inflates, exposing my chest to the forest air. I shake out my limbs to toss out the icy discomfort. I need

something—a fire. Ducking down in the dark, I brush my hands across pine needles and decaying leaves. Plucking a few sticks, I toss them into a pile.

The only noise apart from the

wind is the sound of twigs scraping twigs. My fingers tremble as I whittle down the wood with no sparks in sight. I sit there, back against a tree, knees to chest, head lowered.

I hear a crunch behind me. It sounds heavy, not like a creature scampering, but like something undeniably human. Evangeline. I whirl my head around, but her countenance is

imperceptible in the shadows. “Evangeline?”

No response. I turn my head back, resting it on the tree. Another crunch.

I stand straight up, facing the direction of the noise, and decide it must be her.

“Evangeline?” I call again.

It runs, the crunching of the leaves scattering with its steps. I run after, hoping it’s her but knowing it’s not. “Evangeline! Wait! It’s me!” I hear her, but I

don't see her. Then, the noise stops, and I stop. My eyes scan only a few feet in front of me, so I listen to the wind, catching grass blades and toying with sparse bushes.

"Go back." The voice is familiar but not hers. "Don't stay here."

My breath halts, holding in clouds of cold air.

The voice speaks again, but louder. "Go back, Evangeline. Go back. You can't stay here."

"What are you talking about? Evangeline, come out. You're scaring me."

"Evangeline, you know you're crazy. Just one of those crazies." The words surround me in all directions, echoing in a mocking cacophony.

"Please stop," I mumble. I move away from the voice but trip on a stump and fall backward on rotting leaves.

"Evangeline, you must come back! You know you belong there. Go back!"

"Go away, go away, go away!" I'm on my feet, sprinting, but the voice lingers in my ears.

"Evangeline. Listen to me. Evangeline, you need to go back."

The dark is blinding, and my bones are stiff. After only a few feet, a root hooks my foot, and I fall, slicing up my hands. I paint the ground the shade of roses.

"Now look what you've done, Evangeline."

I don't look up. My eyes remain on the Earth, crimson and as bitter as pennies. The voice is delicate this time, like it knows me deeply, better than I know myself. "Come back."

I feel her, but her breath doesn't reach my cheek.

She whispers, "Evangeline, I don't want you to die a second time."

MACKENZIE MOLLISON



MacKenzie is a fifth year in the Bachelor of Theatre Arts program studying Arts Management and Administration, Playwriting, and Performance. She has been writing short stories and characters for as long as she can remember, and recently had her first piece performed at the Michigan Tech One Act Festival. She hopes to pursue both writing and performing hand-in-hand to develop new solo and collaborative material. In her free time she loves yoga, singing, golf, improvisation, and swimming. She is honored and excited to be nominated for Cafe Shapiro.

THE GOOD MORNING CIRCLE

LUNA

...

Then... I'm ready. To climb.

BAM

You don't want to climb. You want to go up.

LUNA

Well do you know how?

BAM

Not exactly, I waited for a long time. I just learned how to be comfortable with where we are.

LUNA

But I can't just BE something. You can't just "be" comfortable when you're not.

BAM

Well climbing isn't as simple as you think it is.

LUNA

I think it is simple if you know where to go next. Just tell me where to go.

BAM

Go to your happy place in your mind that makes your body go (a releasing) "Shhhhhhhhhhh"//

LUNA

//But that isn't real! There's gotta be an answer for how to feel better right now but you're making this so complicated!

BAM

Really? And see, to me, it is so simple.

LUNA

Because you don't have to go through every day sad and frustrated and angry over things that don't even matter! I don't care if I climb, or get out, or grow wings and fly away, or lie on the ground and sleep forever; if I didn't have to be in charge of this anymore (referencing the circle) I would be able

to make sense of what I'm supposed to have. There's supposed to be an order to these things, I know this. But here? Every time something goes wrong, it goes wrong a million times over again, even when I feel like I've figured it out before. I know I'm the reason, but I can't figure out the reason I'm the reason. I'm the reason I get to be this... much. And it's not just because things go wrong, it's why they go wrong. Whenever things go wrong it's always for the dumbest reasons. I don't want to care this much about things that aren't real... and it's been pissing me off.

BAM

(sarcastically) Tell me how you really feel.

LUNA

And you. You show up to rob me, but then basically tell me I should be more open to more (mocking) "whimsical" opportunities?

Does that even register for you?! God, to exist in your brain for a day would be so violently freeing, like Vegas//

BAM

//Thank you.//

LUNA

//If anything... (a realization) feelings are what have been holding me back. (an ultimatum) I'd give up my feelings if it meant I could get out.

BAM

Don't say that! How lucky are we to be having the problems we're having here, together, right now? What other problems would you rather be having?

LUNA

A Met Gala fashion crisis! A love triangle with Keanu Reeves and Christian Bale! Having so much money in my bank account that I have to set up a second bank account. And why not? I'd be free and out of here! Then I'd do anything I want.

BAM

We're free now! Let's go. Let's go right now! I don't want you to lose this feeling.

LUNA

We can't! It's impossible! We're stuck and I wouldn't even know how to get there.

BAM

First of all: I'm not stuck! Second: How about we just try to feel all the best feelings we can until we get there?

LUNA

No, you're not listening! I just want to be chill! Do you think it's NORMAL to be stuck like this? I can't chill until I'm free.

BAM

Until you are free or until you feel free?

LUNA

As if there's a difference.

BAM

I feel free with you right now.

LOLA D'ONOFRIO



Lola is a second year Michigan student studying Film, TV & Media. She loves a lot of things, but mostly writing. She's especially passionate about screenplays, movie reviews and poetry. Lola is inspired by bright colors, clever song lyrics and cold weather. She is very excited to share her writing with the world.

Confessions

The chapel had a way of draining things. Sybil knew this.

She didn't flinch when the doors closed behind her, stealing the late summer from the air. She didn't blink.

"Gloria?" she spoke the name softly, fracturing the dim silence.

Footsteps from the far end of the room, by the pulpit.

It was Gloria, plain and solemn. Her only concession to vanity was a limp green hair ribbon.

"I almost thought you wouldn't come,"

Sybil ducked her head. "I'm sorry."

Gloria shrugged. "You're here now. Take a seat,"

Sybil perched herself on the edge of a pew.

Gloria slid in after her with the sort of poise they used to practice together, copying their mothers on faded Sunday mornings.

Gloria smiled thinly. "What brings you here today?"

Sybil studied the hem of her sleeve. "I need to know about love."

Gloria nodded sagely. "What do you care to know?"

"Well," Sybil took a long breath, picked at a scab on her knee. "How much is allowed?"

Gloria pressed her lips together and cast her gaze towards the high ceiling above, hoping it made her look grown up and holy. "It depends on what kind of love you're talking about,"

"The kind you get married with."

Gloria's eyes widened, just briefly.

"I know," Sybil hesitated. "But I can't help it,"

"That's alright. I can." Gloria raised her chin. "My father's taught me,"

Sybil almost thought to joke, something about preacher-fathers and how unexpert their advice on love must be, but the stones were cold under her feet and they made her hold her tongue.

Gloria turned towards Sybil on the pew. "But first tell me," her eyes were bright, "all about this love."

Sybil tucked her head between her shoulders and thought hard.

"It's a boy. He's very kind and he's very nice," Sybil cast a glance up at Gloria, "nice looking, I suppose."

"How long have you known him?"

“Half my life, at least,”

Gloria opened her mouth to say something, thought better of it. “And how do you know you’re in love?”

Sybil sighed, lowered her voice to bare her heart under Gloria’s silent eyes.

“I want to be around him. We always feel the same. I like standing next to him, doing the same things he does. It feels right. He says something and I finish the thought. He used to walk with me to class, before he finished school. We took the long way every time and never even noticed,”

Something flashed in Gloria’s eyes.

“That sounds like a schoolgirl crush. Not love. Not love fit for marriage,”

Sybil laughed then, loud and too sudden. “How would you know?”

Gloria blinked. “I suppose I wouldn’t,” a small smile flickered across her face.

“And still you want my help.”

Sybil pressed her mouth into a thin line. “You’re funny, Gloria.”

Gloria ignored her. “So it’s not a little crush. What makes it love?”

Sybil twisted her hands together, knuckles white. She wished she wasn’t here, spilling out truths in a place where they could echo. “It’s too horrific to be anything else.”

Gloria watched.

Sybil continued. “I feel – when I’m around him – like I’m burning. I can’t speak or look or walk he same. He’s all I think about and the only person I want to talk to and every time he visits I

spend the whole time breathing down his neck and praying he looks my way. And I’ve felt like this for two years. Ever since he left for the city. And it hasn’t wavered once.” She took an unsteady breath. “I figure it must be love. Or illness.”

A moment of silence, the rush of confession ringing in their ears.

“Likely both,” Gloria smiled drily. “But both are curable. Does he know how you feel?”

Sybil inhaled sharply. “No.”

“So you want to stop feeling this way?”

“No, actually.”

“Then tell him. Confess your love. End your –” Gloria gave a vague flourish with her hands,

“– horrific suffering, once and for all.”

Sybil rested her elbows on the pew in front of her.

Her eyes darted between the altar and the stained glass and the relics and the crosses.

“He’s engaged.”

Silence.

Gloria stood up. “Come with me,”

Down the long icy aisle. Past the altar, the dim paintings, the wailing effigies. Gloria cut a drab figure. So drab that it was a wonder even the church wanted her, Sybil thought viciously. Still, she followed.

Then they were through the back alcove and out in the small chapel garden. The sun dazzled them both.

Sybil blinked, prey stunned at the first hint of violence. Gloria shielded her eyes.

There was a small basin of water in the middle of the garden, green and filmy. The girls regarded their warped reflections for a moment.

“Love is a choice,” Gloria said finally. “It must be tended to in order to survive. Your little love for this boy is wild because you spin it out to be that way,”

“I don’t –”

Gloria held up a hand. “Let me finish,”

Sybil ducked her head.

“Watch.” Gloria left Sybil at the basin.

There was a great yawning cottonwood that cast the garden half into shadow. Gloria ran her hands gently down its trunk, fingers tracing grooves in the bark.

Sybil watched flatly.

Gloria’s fingers caught on something. She took it gently and brought it back to Sybil and the water.

It was an ant, small and flailing between two fingers.

“To stop loving, simply stop choosing to love. Let go of your own desire. Let something higher

guide you,”

Gloria placed the ant gently in the basin of water.

“Don’t drown it,” Sybil’s voice was sharp.

“It’s just an ant.”

Sybil licked her lips. “It’s one of God’s creatures,”

Gloria ignored her. “We’re faced with a choice right now,”

The ant struggled, its legs scrambling desperately at the water. Ripples distorted the reflection of the sky above.

“The goodness in our hearts mandates that we save it,” Gloria touched the tip of her finger to the water, lifting the ant up and out of the water for just a moment. “There is a part of us that wants to love, needs to care,” she laid the

ant back into the water. “But it is often safer to leave things as they are,” Sybil kicked at a weed with scuffed brown shoes. Gloria continued. “You really can stop loving this boy whenever you like. Just stop spinning yourself into a panic whenever you see him or think of him. Each time you do,” Gloria lifted the ant out of the water again, “you sustain the longevity of the emotion,” she let it drop again.

The two girls watched the ant struggle against the water for a moment longer.

Suddenly Gloria sighed and flicked it onto the wall of the basin. “Really, it doesn’t matter if you save the ant or let it go. It’s going to be dead soon. It’s prone to a short life. Love is the same. Whether it’s when you find a better interest or when you start to see his flaws or when he actually dies, this love cannot be kept forever. And you forget. Your boy is to be married. So,” Gloria looked up and into Sybil’s eyes, “let it die.”

Sybil held her stare for a long moment.

“I don’t want to,”

Gloria’s nostrils flared. “Then what’s your question?”

Sybil watched the ant run along the basin wall. “I like how he makes me feel. That might fade eventually, but I don’t want to make that day come any sooner. Even though he has a wife. Is that wrong?”

Gloria snorted and flicked the ant back into the water. “If you’ve come to me for answers, you already know it is.”

Sybil watched the ant. “I’d never lay a hand on him. I’d never try to get him to love me. We’d stay cordial.”

Gloria opened her mouth, hesitated, closed it.

Sybil ran a hand through her hair. “I don’t ever want anything to come of it. Not really. I just want to sometimes be around him, and think about him in my head. I know it’s bad, but I’m not certain it’s unforgivable,”

Gloria kept her eyes on the drowning ant. “It doesn’t matter. My advice still stands, especially considering his engagement. Let it die. You must find something else.”

“So I ignore what I feel.”

“Yes.”

Sybil slumped. “Well, thank you. I won’t waste any more of your time.”

Gloria frowned. “Did you want something more?”

“No, no.” Sybil paused for a moment. “It’s the best you can do. I really don’t think there is a right answer.”

“I’m certain there is,” Gloria’s frown deepened. “I just can’t think of it.”

Sybil laughed sharply. "Let me know if you do,"

A silence stretched between them, hot and glinting in the late afternoon light.

"Well," Gloria finally said, shaking her head a little, "let me see you out."

She trailed Sybil back inside.

The chapel was darker than she remembered, warped and endless after the bright outside summer.

The shadows came into focus slowly, hissing around the pale outline of Sybil's dress.

They reached the door.

Sybil heaved it open, spilling hot light across their feet. "Have a good evening, Gloria. I'll see you in class,"

"Wait,"

Sybil turned.

The two girls watched each other closely across the threshold.

Gloria leaned towards Sybil, eyes betraying something raw and unborn. "I know you don't want to lose this love. But if you ignore it long enough, it does go away. I promise." She hesitated.

"It's a relief, really."

Sybil leaned away, out of the door and into the sun. She looked miserable just then, half eaten by the sunlight pouring in behind her.

Gloria retreated, searching for something comforting. "And I don't think it is a total sin. To love someone,"

"I don't know," Sybil cast her eyes up blankly, back into the chapel's empty mouth. "I think it really might be."

Then she was gone, leaving Gloria alone inside to watch the doors fall shut. The flood of light tightened to a line, then disappeared.

She regarded the new darkness mournfully. Then she blinked her eyes as if to clear her head and took herself back out to the garden quickly, head down.

The sunlight was hot on her back.

Gloria found the ant in the basin, lying still.

She dipped it up gently out of the water. She laid it gently on a leaf. She wondered if it was alive.

She wondered if it had felt horrific. To almost or actually drown.

A fierce autumn storm had hit the village on the last night of an unseasonably hot week. It was the kind of blistering autumn that folks called a hag's summer. The livestock had gone silent hours before, lying huddled together under the trees. The chickens made no sounds as a greenish haze appeared

on the horizon and the village bells tolled. Wooden shutters were closed and prayers spoken. Dark clouds had gathered quickly, and before long the wind started to wail. It battered their thatched roofs all night. His mother had stood vigilant and sleepless in the event that their roof did more than just threaten to blow away. Long hours later, the dawn came as a still calm, and the storm was done. But it had left its mark, as Ira soon discovered in the woods. It had been him who had found it. Or, as his mother worried, it had found him. The carving.

The storm had knocked over a century oak in the glade. He'd heard stories that their grandfather's grandfathers had played there when the oaks were young. It was the morrow after the storm and he had been the first of his party there. Andric was going to show them how to hunt cuckoos with a slingshot. As fate would have it, the nest he'd chosen was on the fallen oak. Ira had gone over to investigate, but before he reached the branches, he noticed something under the roots. It had been hard to tell what it was at first. His initial impression had been to confuse it with a rock. Crouching, he had inspected it further, brushing away soil from the smooth surface with the palm of his hand. He'd jerked his hand away. The thing had been warm, like fevered flesh. He remembered realizing he was alone in the forest and wishing Peter, Andric, and Rat — especially bulky Andric — would hurry up and come. He disliked the thing in the damp earth. He had considered waiting for them, but curiosity took hold of him again. He'd never seen anything like it before. It appeared to be a polished dark stone lying precisely in the center of where the oak used to stand. The realization that it wasn't stone, but wood, had only added to his unease. He could tell by the darker accents that ran in rivulets through the ebony material. Carefully, he had avoided touching the wood, using his hands to scoop the soil around it instead. Initially, it had looked like something he could pick up by the fabric of his tunic, but his determination to bring it home quickly faded in the face of the impossible. The dark wood had extended down. It wouldn't end. He'd paused his digging when his fingers had hit a protrusion of the object. He'd recoiled. Warm again. This time he used a stick to push away the earth.

He had stopped and ran. The protrusion had been a nose.

He'd run into Peter on the path leading home. Peter had insisted on seeing it, so he had shown him. Similarly terrified, Peter decided to confide in his father. They had found him in the grain field by their house. It had taken the testimonies of two shaken boys and the promise of a beating if they were lying to coax the man into assessing the object after the day's work. From

there the rumors spread, and soon enough, it seemed like half the village had gathered around the head in the earth.

Ira looked at it now, feeling ripples of disgust. When he looked at it, he felt uncomfortable. Like one of Andric's worms was touching his lips and trying to slither inside his mouth. *Eat me*, the carving seemed to say. The nose he'd found was among the less disturbing features meticulously carved. If he had to say, the carving was of a woman, due to the lumps on her chest which women had, but it felt wrong to name it so. It was no normal woman. Above the slim nose were cheekbones set oddly high, making the face appear gaunt. It was worsened by the fact that it was at least twice as long as a normal face, while seemingly as wide. Thankfully, her eyes were closed. Her brows were furrowed together and her head was inclined slightly forward. She had small lips. Cords of interwoven muscle were depicted in the wood, but no muscle could make up for her eerie slimness. Her spine was a curved comb of protruding bone. They had only dug up her upper body, stopping at the navel. She looked unnaturally under-fed, as skinny as himself, but longer. So much longer. Not only that, but her position was off. Ira imitated what her terribly long limbs were doing by placing his right fist at his breast, while his left arm extended straight down. That part was strange. Wasn't the left arm normally held straight up, two fingers extended? Once, he'd attended a burial for his neighbor's daughter and at the end, everyone had made the gesture, except pointing at the sky. His older sister had told him it was to point the dead girl's soul to the next world. He extended two fingers downward like this statue was probably doing underneath the dirt below her navel. He wondered what world the opposite gesture could possibly point to.

EMILIA FERRANTE



Emilia is a double major in LSA and an avid reader and writer of poetry from Princeton, New Jersey. When she isn't doing classwork, writing her English thesis, or working on her Creative Writing sub concentration, Emilia works at the Michigan Daily on the Arts section reading and reviewing books. She is also Editor-in-Chief of The RC Review, the Residential College's literary magazine, works for the University of Michigan Press, and loves to crochet and watch horror movies. Emilia has loved her time at the University of Michigan and is excited to continue writing after college.

Credo of Belief

I believe in museum dinosaur bones as a mode of time travel.

I could ride those bones back to the age of giant ferns and oversize bugs, to the Cretaceous period before any living thing named the eons.

I believe in soap bubbles as they drift away;

the longer they float the more possible it is that they could float forever.

I believe in holding a rock in my hand and trying to feel its beginning.

(This one started when it broke off a larger rock in ancient Rome. A man — a

gladiator, perhaps — threw it into the sea. It stayed there through the fall, the

death of that gladiator; it tossed in the wake of the first trans-Atlantic voyage; it

looked countless fish in the face, watched them get hauled up in a net it could slip

through. It was submerged for many revolutions, both of countries and the sun. It

was oblivious to two world wars, the invention of the apple corer, and the first

time someone said “Well, that’s the bee’s knees!” until it washed ashore and I

held it flat in my palm.)

I believe in regional accents and humans trying to imitate bird calls.

I believe in two people dancing to street music.

I believe in reverent silence

music both terrible and fantastic

things that glow in the dark

sticky sea-salt skin.

I believe in watching someone watch fireworks,

ignoring the spectacle and getting a better show.

I believe in both shitty kid drawings and shitty adult drawings.

I believe in the color green;

specifically, when the sun is up and shining through a leaf-canopy in a way that

makes the shifting green above glow.

I believe in letting your feet sink into mud up to your ankles.

I believe in mermaids and space aliens, because I don't really know anything.

I believe in the way a word can make you feel and a smell can make you remember.

I believe that the night sky before the Industrial Revolution, before even the dawn of

man, was so full of stars it choked out the darkness.

I believe in the aurora borealis lights, even though I have never seen them.

I believe in stained glass on stone floors, especially in churches.

I believe in the bug on my windshield, holding on for dear life from Pennsylvania rest

stop to Ohio rest stop. I try to show him the map next to the Dunkin Donuts, but

he flies away.

I believe also in the bug that did understand cartography, the one that marched across

Manhattan via the subway map on the R train.

(His bug-legs tiptoed over the Flatiron Building, toed the 2 line, took a trip to

Central Park and Washington Square, terrorized tenants of a highrise on fourth

avenue, tried a bite of pizza from a stand in Times Square, shocking tourists with

his towering spindly legs stretching above skyscrapers, big bug body blacking out

the sun.

They don't see how carefully he steps to avoid the cars, dogs, hot dog stands,

chain stores, fire escapes, and street artists. They don't understand

that he's

trying to make his way upstate, maybe escape to Canada, find some other giant

fugitive bug from Chicago or Colorado Springs or Rockville, Illinois.

When they shoot him down, crushing an apartment building in Washington

Heights, they put his body in a glass case in the Museum of Natural History as a

reminder to all other bugs of the consequences of comprehending cartography.)

I believe in the 250-pack of Crayola crayons with a plastic crayon-sharpener built right

into the back. (I especially believe in the color Purple Mountain's Majesty.)

I believe in both libraries and used book stores;

I believe in explaining myself only some of the time —

I believe in buttercups, beech trees, bluets, and Babybel cheese

The Grapefruit

Here is what I am afraid of:
The grapefruit in my bag
will be pierced by an uncapped pen,
that its juice will squeeze out
seeping into poems and essays
That I will not notice
until it is too late,
words rendered unreadable
by sticky sweet sour liquid
That it will finish with my books
and get started on the bottom of my bag,
That I will feel the dampness
on a dry surface.
I fear that moment of helpless resignation.
I fear the joy,
thrilling,
of being too late,
of realizing that insidious juice
was sweetening and souring
all the while, I unaware,
the pure exhilaration of being powerless.
I fear the grapefruit
but I leave it where it is
secretly hoping that one day,
it will explode.

Ode to Red Nail Polish

two days later chipped
shrinking back

from fingertips
as I use my hands
from nail beds
as I grow.

you are strong fire deep dark
sticky goopy sunset garnet
you are not mine
and every day become less and less so,
chipping off flakes of fall leaves
marking where I've been.
you count the days as they pass
the hours as they recede
the time between that painting on the beach
and now, whenever that is.

here you are:

strawberries vine-sitting
open mouth lipstick kiss
bird mating hue ruffling feathers
wine, ran through an aerator, sipped
angry volcano lava eruption
at the rainbow's very start
shy, blushing,
she
mysterious enigmatic corner girl,
lingered,
cigarette-blue smoke drifting
through neon lights
on rain-slick streets
elementary school valentines
dripping Christmas candle wax
junior high sneaker shade
spilling edit pen fingers

digital-end pomegranates
Eve's fruit, woman's burden, snaking sin –
Puritans would disapprove
(like showing ankle)
un-winter, full summer,
sometimes spring, often autumn
cranberry bog rain boots
 naked except decoration
wrist, rings, knuckles,
terminal rouge.
 manifested internal passion,
burning flames,
or something softer
 her hands end bright, warm, glowing.

Mermaid Tears

According to old sailors' legends, pieces of sea glass are the tears of mermaids.

My Nonni and I pick mermaid tears from the sand.
Half-buried, they sing of watery woes and handsome sailors,
centuries come and gone
each softened shard part of a sprawling mosaic
stretching, glittering, across oceans.
My Nonni kneels in the sand and brushes off a tear, blue.

(She is a collector —
mermaid tears pile up in glass bowls around the house
blue and green, purple and brown.)

I kneel beside her and we listen
to the story crystallized in colored glass;
A mermaid, far away in time,
tells us a sea-tossed epic
with romance and adventures and thunderstorms
and love.

I wait for the part where the mermaid cries,
but it never comes.

I leave the beach holding the blue story in my hand, turning it over.
I hold my Nonni's hand with my other, and
I wonder where the mermaid's pain is.

The grandfather clock in the hall finally tells me the answer, years later.
I hold the mermaid's tear in my palm
and as the clock chimes, deep and slow,
I feel how time imbues an epic story
with a melancholy-sweet nostalgia.
It tastes like boardwalk taffy
and smells like Disney World.
It feels like staring up at a sky of stars
and forgetting for a moment
that your feet are touching solid ground.
It sounds like a soft tune on a piano one room over, played from memory. Her
fingers
dance over the keys, the piano a realization of music that already seems to

be there,
swirling, beautiful, catching the light like a thousand pieces of sea-tossed
glass.

In my hand is a mermaid tear,
blue.

a diner in linden

somewhere between newark and cranbury,
somewhere between sixteen and twenty three
somewhere between coffee and water,
somewhere between new jersey and michigan
somewhere between taylor ham and pork roll,
somewhere between the past and the future
somewhere between twenty five and four hundred miles,
somewhere between this wawa and that one
somewhere between best friends and not even
knowing your roommate's name,
somewhere between two different kinds of tears,
somewhere between one home and another,
somewhere between knowing and feeling
somewhere between the tip of my tongue
and the tucked-away memory

What I would write to you if I were Emily Dickinson

open me carefully, dear one
like a letter made of rice-paper

fold me out, unravel me
but make it gentle,
for I am unused to the oils on your fingertips.

you may find that I am
held together by gossamer thread –

take me apart,
then,
examine each shimmering strand,
tell me if I am still beautiful
when I am in pieces.

put me back
neatly, softly, like you care,
as if I were precious.

The erotic

is the moment between lightning strike and thunder crack
of waiting and knowing
the surprise and suddenness of the bright flash,
the deeply satisfying grumble then yawp of thunder,
the interminable seconds in between.

tangy delicious shadowy
electric-filament-spine
tingling to fingertips

television static on the wind,
fuzzy and sharp.

a time-squasher,
a time-expander,
pulling out seconds into a sort of infinity
until they fizzle and crackle.

Oh!
to live there,
in delectable suspension,
on the tightrope stretched
between flash and clap.

Take me there.

Make the air sizzle, and stand with me in it.

Mushroom

On one part of the stump but everywhere
spilling into crevices and out
tiny circles, now palm-sitting
I am here not for the forage but because
they feel like holding earth in my hands
they taste like glorious decay
waxy waning crescent moon
breaking off the full cheese-wheel
glowing forest eyeballs
baptized in dark and damp
christened in whispered spore-dust
I decay and you decay
pinwheel spinning, turning black
I have hunted, foxlike,
scurrying in and out I have given you
something you cannot return
something that will eat away
at the festering deadness inside you
Mouth-watering inevitability
you, me, we, I
consuming and being consumed.

RACHEL GRABOW



Rachel is a senior pursuing a BFA in Art & Design and a minor in entrepreneurship at UMich. She focuses on graphic design in collaboration with advertising, marketing, apparel design, and activism. She is passionate about art in all forms of expression like drawing, music, reading, and writing. Writing has always been something Rachel has loved doing, and she has taken multiple classes in the creative writing field to expand her talent and interest in the subject. She creates art through visuals and writing to dive into her own identities and emotions.

The Ocean

The ocean is my biggest fear.

Its waves flow through you, calm and sometimes undetected, until one is big enough to throw salt water into your mouth, nose, and eyes.

This temporarily blinds you and sends a shock of pain through your sinuses.

It burns you, yet you stay in its murky embrace.

The stinging sensation lingers inside you as you float into its vast, unknown darkness.

You close your eyes, lean back, and let it carry you wherever it wants to go.

After a little while, you open your eyes and try to reach your foot down to stand up.

You panic as you realize the ocean floor is so far beneath your foot that you cannot see anything below you besides a deep blue shadow.

You start to tread water.

The water rushes in splashing circles around your limbs. You think you are controlling it, using it to stay afloat, but it soon twists around your body uncontrollably.

A weighted rope creeps towards you, grabbing at your fingertips and toes. It crawls up your legs to your stomach as your arms fall numb to its tight grasp.

It reaches your chest and slowly pulls you down underneath the water.

You take a deep inhale before going under. Your eyes stare straight ahead while you sink.

The rope tightens around your torso.

As you sink deeper, you slowly let out hundreds of air bubbles filled with your last emotions, your last cares, your last connection.

You glance up as you watch them float towards the surface to escape.

Your surroundings become darker and colder as you fall deeper. Yet, it feels warmer, peaceful even.

Soon, you cannot see anything around you, not even your own hands when you hold them an inch away from your face.

You begin to close your eyes, unafraid of the enormous, dooming loneliness that surrounds you.

Just as your eyelids come to a close, you breathe in.

You expect to choke on the water and give into the ocean's grip.

But, you don't.
You inhale and feel your lungs fill with air.

CHINWE ONWERE



Chinwe is a first year at the college of LSA, majoring in MCD Biology with a possible minor in Environmental Science. She enjoys creative writing and is currently a part of The Statement of the Michigan Daily! She particularly likes to write more narrative short pieces and also dabble in poetry from time to time. In her free time, she likes to read, explore nature, and be active!

Where I Belong

the breeze gently flows through,
in the hushed night of the forest.

the faint screech of an owl lulls,
slower than the rest. I reflect silently
in its presence for I cannot go home.

home

it is a place that I for so long have dreamed of,
my wishful thinking and wandering thoughts
as evervast as the still ocean that hugs the earth.

however,
perhaps my marvelings haven't been in vain.
because every step I take outside in this present world
reminds me that maybe,
just maybe,

I belong.

and as I journey through the forest floor
there is something so stunning about finding
a semblance of hope even in the midst of my pain,
and a cloak of courage even when I am afraid.

outside,

I feel the brush of the trees,
the quiet surrounded by their company.
I feel heard, unafraid of the silence for I
am surrounded by the midnight glimmer.

my home is here now.

I will stay till I belong,
till I become one with all the nature encompassing me,
and I will meditate with the rustle shaking the air.

I will stay till I cry to the bittersweet songs of the birds

and feel the hum of the earth rock me to an eternal slumber
and listen to the pulse of my finally alive heartbeat.

even when I am alone,

the stars and wild animals accompany me.

in the distance, I hear a loud call.

the path I take is

a floating gentle breeze and I long for
the soothing wake of dawn, till the
owls delicately fly in the morning light.

CECELIA-THERESE DORE



Cecilia is a sophomore from West Bloomfield, Michigan studying film, television and media. From a young age she has enjoyed reading and writing fiction, and she has recently started writing poetry, as well. She loves writing about miniscule details and moments in her everyday life. In general, she enjoys all things creative, and spends her free time crocheting, listening to and playing music, and reading.

Letter To Blue Spruce

The lake behind the neighborhood, next to the roundabout, you hold a magnet to my chest. You're the only place I'd be fine with resting at. When I ride my bike past, I always stop to visit. You're the summer everything fell into place. You're 2003 and my mom has just got pregnant. I wasn't really there yet, but still I'm sure that if I took my digital camera out right now, and captured you, the date at the bottom would end with a small 03, and without the seasons to move you along, you'd never let go. You're the song I heard for the first time, yet I already knew every one of your melodies. You're the perfume of a spirit I swore I could smell, at a hotel in Massachusetts, one that put a pit in my stomach. Perhaps you were from a past life, my ride to you a séance. You're so secluded behind this hill, has anyone ever loved you? Only I could ever know you. And your water, which laps against the grassy access. And your docks, whose only purpose is to rust.

And I knew I shouldn't have brought him to you, I thought he might want to see.

On our bikes we rode back to you, you greeted him so sweet.
He wasn't too delighted, you don't look very unique.
He asked if we could continue our ride, so then we had to leave.

He knows not what he says,
Forgive me

February Reflection

On the calendar there's a heart next to each special day

And it's february third and it seems that it's norman rockwell's birthday,

Who would've thought

Happiness is a Butterfly, and my garden must be working, my cornflower

Coloured duvet must be working

The bouquet on my vanity, as well, it's full of everything but roses, they're a bit assumptious

Don't you think?

Of all of these things or am I the only one who gets worked up like this?

Looking at the heart

and always seeing myself

I tell you this

In confidence

That there's surely always someone else...

Thank goodness

for you

let me know there's always someone else.

To Anticipate The Best

when i awoke

i knew what had been troubling me

can a thousand tiny bandages do the work of stitches?

the baby's breath sits in a makeshift vase

next to the candle i light to feel good

and i've felt good

but will these thousand tiny bandages keep working?

the dish of dark chocolates upon my dresser

the bottle of italian mandarin and brown sugar perfume

the trees adorned with starlight downtown

the notice i received, that told me i was doing this right

hardly seems as though they could mend the wound

yet, i've felt good

so who's to say

Maybe a thousand tiny bandages can do the work of stitches

And I'll keep feeling good

Who's to say.

LAINÉ KIBLER



Laine is a double major and single minor junior in the Residential College at UMich. They are a passionate student of the arts who enjoys combining creative writing and film photography coursework to make mixed-media projects. In their free time, they enjoy drawing, playing guitar, and singing. They are also a Peer Writing Consultant at Sweetland Writing Center, and they have been working on accessibility initiatives for neurodivergent students over the school year. They are really excited to continue working on this initiative and their current creative projects!

Surreality

There was about a decade of my life during which I never once vomited.

It wasn't until one night, when I was around sixteen, that I must have had a stomach bug and I woke up afraid. Like a child, I had no clue what was happening to me – I didn't remember what the sensation felt like, to need to hurl. My mom is a light sleeper; she found me in the bathroom and advised me to sit down, which at first I almost didn't hear since my hearing was going, going, gone and I could feel myself on the brink of passing out.

What had been more strange than the gap of time and the fact that I was sixteen and didn't understand the feeling of nausea was the dreams I'd had prior to waking up. I walked into the

dreams feeling fine, but then I was myself at an older age, as a parent and a partner to someone. I was aging quickly and it was December. It was as if I was a living ghost, for my family and I all understood the situation of my disease, knew that I didn't have much time left. We sat at supper and exchanged gifts but the false joy was so clearly colored with an attempt at ignoring that I likely wouldn't have another holiday with them. Nobody spoke of the grief in the room, that preemptive grief of a loss to come, but I knew it was there. I felt it too.

I woke up in my bedroom, still sixteen, and went to the bathroom to hurl.

I am unacquainted with loss, which has resulted in paralyzing fear and often, preemptive grief of mine where I suddenly become hyper-aware that someday, I will be. That dream played with me, toyed with the idea that my first experience of loss could be of my own life.

When I was sixteen, I was just beginning to write poems, one of which referenced Salvador Dali's famous melting clocks. Surrealism is the art of dreams, and I wrote poetry based off of

mine because I knew they didn't come from nowhere and I had no idea what else to do with them, these vivid false memories. *Our hearts resembled Dali's clock, his ceasing to tick and ours to beat*, I wrote.

Surrealist artists were interested in Freud's ideas of psychoanalysis and they often investigated subjects which were beyond reality. Dali's clock sticks in my mind most particularly because the concept of how time functions in my life is completely surreal.

I completely believe that in some ways, my three-year-old self with colors all

over their hands and intent on painting was wiser than Laine of now.

Rene Margritte. *Time Transfixed*.

1939. Oil on canvas.

There is a clock atop the mantle. The room is drab; the mirror above the fireplace reflects nothing but a shadowy brown. Two candlesticks are naked of any candles on either end of

the mantle as well. No fire at all, not even a log. The fireplace is empty besides a levitating locomotive chugging out of it, small with smoke billowing out its top and up the chimney.

“A mystery that has no meaning,” according to the artist himself.

The clock on the mantle reads roughly quarter to one. I wonder if it’s one with the sun or one without. I wonder what Little Laine would see if they looked at it.

I never painted dreams. I painted my own reality.

Frida Kahlo did not consider herself a surrealist artist. She knew the overlap between reality and the unreal; and, for me, dreams are so incredibly real. My large and exact fears manage to consistently worm their way into my sleeping state.

Frida Kahlo. *The Two Fridas*.

1939. Oil on canvas.

She sits hand in hand with herself, an artery tying together her two hearts. She is European on the left, Mexican on the right. Her identity splits into two, like her name is Laine and I am trying to explain what it means to be multiple genders at once; we can’t help it, all of my selves, being more than one person in one body.

Kahlo called her paintings “unimportant, with the same personal subjects that only appeal to myself and nobody else.” Kahlo felt so she made and I do the same. I look at *The Two Fridas* and think about my dream-self. What do they do when I am awake? I suppose this is when they sleep.

Perhaps this is the way to explain it: when I am a man, the girl in me dreams. When I am a woman, the boy sleeps. And there are times when all of me is utterly awake, times when I am completely asleep. And this is my reality.

I realized my gender fluidity when I was a sophomore in college. I’d known myself to be nonbinary for a while at that point, but then I found myself feeling different ways in the middle

of the day compared to how I’d woken up that morning, or how I’d fallen asleep the night before.

Sometimes getting called “sir” at the coffee shop feels euphoric. Other times,

it makes me want to melt away. Sometimes I wonder why I would ever want to hear anything else. Sometimes I feel nothing altogether.

And it gets exhausting. And it becomes lying in bed for a couple hours because I can't tell what gender I am and I'm scared to find out. And *The Kiss* looks genderless in a way I'll never be, and I yearn to have that beauty somehow but I can't find it.

In the winter of sophomore year, sleep becomes my enemy the way it used to haunt me as a child, taunting my constant inability to master it. I drift off to dreamland (always nightmares, always some dystopian hell) at 2, 4, 6 am. I nightmare through my morning classes or open my eyes just long enough to turn on the video call and drift off again. There is still a pandemic, and clicking a link still counts as attendance.

In the morning, at noon, at 8pm— I can't tell what gender I am. And it's worse than that, because I can't even tell who I am beyond the boyness, the girlness, the noneness, can't tell which Laine is dreaming and which Laine is awake.

The winter of sophomore year, I live in a haze.

Zhuang Zhou. "Zhuang Zhou Dreams of Being a Butterfly" from *Zhuangzi*. c. 3rd century BCE.

Once, Zhuang Zhou dreamed he was a butterfly, a butterfly flitting and fluttering about, happy with himself and doing as he pleased. He didn't know that he was Zhuang Zhou.

Gender reveal parties give the baby two color options: pink or blue. When I was born, I chose yellow. I didn't know I was supposed to pick pink or blue.

Suddenly he woke up and there he was, solid and unmistakable Zhuang Zhou. But he didn't know if he was Zhuang Zhou who had dreamt he was a butterfly, or a butterfly dreaming that he was Zhuang Zhou.

When I walk through life in a haze, how could I possibly be awake? Is this it, is this the dream? I'm in love with someone but I don't know how he could possibly see me through all this smoke, how he could see me if I don't even know whether I am awake or asleep.

Between Zhuang Zhou and the butterfly there must be some distinction! This is called the Transformation of Things.

Between pink and blue and asleep and awake, there must be a yellow way to dream. This winter is called the Saddest State of Being.

It's 2am on a Monday night, a Tuesday morning, and not many people are walking around campus, I write in a thin brown journal. It's Ann Arbor, everyone's awake, they're just inside doing Orgo homework or smoking weed.

I did my route forwards and backwards. The route is my nightly walk through campus. It takes about an hour. Like retracing your steps, sort of. Though I struggle to conceptualize both the passage of time and how I move through it, so it really just felt more like being unable to recognize yourself despite knowing the glass you're seeing is a mirror. Or something like that.

I remember these night walks in flashes: how heavy I felt, always tired, and never able to tell if it's exhaustion or the depression. I procrastinate sleep because it never comes easily and I dread waking up in the morning when my bones feel like lead.

I tried to romanticize the fucked up routine in my head (anything to just get through this winter) but I know, looking back, and I knew even then, that I was terrified of sleep and just so, so sad.

The dorm room didn't feel too big- my life did. Everyone around me was crumbling and I was no exception. The falling-apart had to have been something stronger than "Sophomore Slump."

Fuseli's demon on my chest, life was *The Nightmare*, 1781, oil on canvas. And every night, when I would lay my head on the pillow, the horse with pearly white eyes and its dead mouth agape would peek his head out of my closet. The horse was evil remembering- the demon, my depression. I would lay for so long, needing to sleep but not wanting to dream, my limbs sprawled everywhere in distress because I'm pouring sweat despite the cold outside, inside, everywhere.

I can't explain just how gruesome it feels, walking in loops around campus, listening to songs with questions for titles and eavesdropping on the few passersby. I am but an insomniac student at night. Everyone knows I exist but no one sees me individually. I am not truly witnessed in any of this, only by strangers. Only by the other night people. Sometimes I feel strangely closer to them than anyone else.

Edward Hopper. *Nighthawks*.

1942. Oil on canvas.

One of my favorite paintings.

The street is empty. Four figures in a diner. The light is cinematic, coming from within the place and illuminating the frozen figures. There is barely any suggestion of movement

besides the man behind the bar bent over. With only three customers, there are so many empty stools. The hour is unknown, but it feels so late, like these are the only people in the world who are awake, who are alive. Their white mugs suggest cups of coffee, so perhaps it is more appropriate to assume

that it's very early. But there is crossover between the words early and late – knowing which to use depends on who you ask.

Laine Kibler. *Night walks*.

2022. Oil on canvas.

A figure walks on a concrete footbridge which runs over a wide road. On the left of the bridge is a large gray modern building with many floors and many windows. It is night.

Everything is dark, besides a blue light by the doors of the building and the street lamps along the footbridge and lining the road which stretches into the distance. The figure is relatively indistinct in the darkness, wearing a denim jacket with faux sherpa lining and a red scarf trailing out of their pocket. The figure walks across the footbridge away from the gray building, towards someplace off the canvas.

The image is lonely, yet somehow alive. Perhaps it is the wide gait of the frozen figure, movement suggesting a walk with purpose and not merely a night wandering. Like they know where they are going; like they've walked this a million times.

I have.

Sophomore year of college wasn't the first time in my life that I was perpetually sleepwalking, but never sleeping— living, but never alive.

When I was younger, I made art with the hopes of studying it one day, danced with the understanding that I would always be a dancer. But these things fizzled out as I grew older, when

I was 15 and going through the motions of living. At some point, my art had become about the eyes on it. I stopped dancing because I was searching for what it means to *move* – I danced

because I was searching for what it means to be *seen*. Being seen made me freeze.

And painting was no longer Little Laine, pen scribbles on a page, but the grade I'll get in class, *did I make good enough?* My art career dies in 9th grade, I take a 3-year hiatus, because already, I've burned out. I've spent my whole life making, from the moment I could hold a pen, and I'm a child still when it feels time to quit.

I have eerie documented evidence of the fizzle-out: multicolored pianos. Colored pencil pianos, drawn in complementary shades, the peaceful, easy-on-the-eye horizontals and verticals of ivory keys. I memorized drawing pianos like art was math and I was practicing my times tables. Every art assignment: a believable keyboard.

Because it was safe. Because it was easy to look at and understand. Because I couldn't possibly fail at this.

Piet Mondrian, *Tableau 2*.

1922. Oil on canvas.

Vertical and horizontal lines create rectangles of white, the majority of the canvas taken up by a large, white square. There is a small shape of each primary color, and a black rectangle as well. The thick black lines which outline it all are a signature of Mondrian's work. The art isn't as exact as it seems. Black lines run close to the canvas edge, but don't quite reach it. Mondrian would spend hours staring at his work, only to stand and move a line a few centimeters in one direction. He is attempting a perfect geometric serenity every time. He is in Paris, terrified of bombs, living through war and locked out of his home country like somebody has stolen his house keys. His work became a target of the Nazi party, who labeled most modern art like his as "degenerate." Mondrian eventually moved to New York, where he would engage further with his long-time love for dancing.

My youth was colored with the feeling that everyone was seeing me as a Mondrian they didn't understand. Like the eyes on me were seeing an ant, but on the inside, I was an elephant. Mondrian's work may seem ant-like if you do not know the elephant behind it— war, being locked out of one's own home.

De stijl responds to war with art that's easy on the eye. In 9th grade, I responded to fear with art that's easy on the artist. How many details were in the piano keys I was seeing? Nothing overwhelming, black and white, parallel lines, measured by a ruler, in pencil, always erasable. If I just stay safe, the critical eye will not linger too long. And if I just follow the Rules of Making, recall my drawing-pianos times-tables, I can get an A. This is how my inner elephant sleeps in 9th grade; I shrink to ant-size and get stepped on. Fear has an immeasurable shoe size.

It's not as though I have ballet slippers to save me either, not anymore. I am 15 and afraid of mirrors, so there's no spinning away from this with my perfected piques. The ant cowers and waits for impact.

ALLY CHOI



Ally is a sophomore majoring in Creative Writing and Literature and minoring in Art and Design and the Sweetland Writing Program. She enjoys writing fiction and nonfiction pieces, and hopes to explore multimodal, multilingual, and blurred genre writing in the future!

This Time, Last Year

On the second day of September, the day I turned eighteen, I was interrupted in the middle of class by a phone call.

My mother had ordered a dozen balloons, including two in the shape of a giant one and a giant eight. I had to get back to the climate crisis and syllabus review, but the delivery lady couldn't fit all the balloons in her car and needed my help.

During the second half of class, and then while hustling back to my dorm, this woman had called twice more, trying to get me to choose a number. "Uhh... the one? No, the eight! Yeah, that's fine...the eight," I had picked. More volume, I figured. Bang for my mom's buck.

It all turned out to be in haste; I had to wait for ten more minutes at the curb while she failed to wrestle them out of the car. She ended up managing to bring along the whole 18. This appeased me a little.

As she zoomed away from my dwindling figure, with a cloud over my head, rainbow ribbons in hand, I thought about my choices.

I'd rather swallow the balloons than ride the elevator with them and run into a stranger.

For one, the balloons were like sheep. They were very dumb, and very slow, trailing behind me lazily. And I was a very poor and impatient shepard. They would surely not survive the snap of the elevator doors. And then all the released helium might've taken us to the wrong floor.

Two, it was just too humiliating. So I took all four flights of stairs. The sound of the rubber hitting the railing and rounding the corners echoed louder than my platform Doc Martens.

My room was just at the end of the hallway. Nearing home stretch, I dragged the balloons by the leash. Tongue in cheek, they took joy from the mischievous ruckus they were making, slapping the walls and ceiling as I reached base.

· + * ✨

iii

"One more thing before we go!" I had just spent the last hour or two small talking, doing ice breakers, and playing weirdly hard team games with upperclassmen. Not in a cool way, but in a only freshman who showed up way.

I looked up from my paper plate, weighed down by pizza crusts. In one moment, I made eye contact with several of the MCs.

My stomach sank.

“We just learned from her mom that yesterday was somebody’s birthday! And it’s her big eighteenth, and her first birthday away from home, during her first week of college!!!! Everyone wish Ally a happy birthday!”

I wanted to die. Die.

Then, a single slice pizza-like box that read Insomnia Cookies was presented. Behold, my pity party that piggybacked the last five minutes of the kickoff party. Two birds, one stone. I hesitantly scraped open the cover. People were scooching out of their spots, chairs scraping against the floor, bags zipping, the door swinging open, goodbyes and thank you’s filling the room, but the cardboard creasing open felt loudest. Inside – Was a cookie the size of my face, rimmed with crimped frosting.

“Um.”

The people at my table were getting up and I stood with them, reflex. “Guys, please! Take some!” I desperately stuck my plastic fork into the thing, trying to imitate slices. It was not really working. They shook their heads no, I’m good! It’s for you!

“No for real! There’s no way I can finish all of this.”

“Share it with your friends!”

I don’t have any!! I whined in my head.

I deduced that my mom had somehow dug up the emails of the pastor and student admin just in time for the campus church’s undergraduate kickoff. So she had basically begged them? convinced them? coerced them? into buying me a cake. (Well, a cookie.)

That was it. Confirmed. Real. My mom was trying to kill me. College meant my budding independence, a new life. I was creating space between the two of us, and she immediately infiltrated it. I hadn’t even gotten through the first week, and somehow, her ghost- hand had already burst forth from the dirt and crossed the country, making her mom- magic happen. I felt so violated. Properly unsettled, I accepted defeat upon my deathbed. She must’ve thought, might as well bury her alive with momma! Here we were reunited. Turns out distance did not make the heart grow fonder. Mine floundered beneath the layer of dirt, beneath the gravestone embossed with the same birth and death day. She saw an opening, seized hold of the thumping thing, and squeezed so tight it stopped beating.

Back home (home...) I sat at my desk in the dark. The overhead fluorescents

could be flicked on, but I was in a brood. My roommate had fairy lights, but I didn't know how to turn them on, nor did I think we were on crossing the line down the middle terms. I ate the face cookie and looked out the window. At least our view was pretty nice. We weren't facing the sunset, but creeping edges of purple floated down from the corners if I turned my head right and put my cheek to the glass.

I put my fork down and hunched back. Actually, the fourth floor was pretty great. High enough to people-watch but manageable by stairs. It was definitely by the fifth floor that it just got excessive. And it was high enough that it didn't feel like people could see you.

Right then, a knock.

It was my roommate's boyfriend, whose name I couldn't remember. He brought her dinner and wished me a happy one before leaving. I guess she told him in passing. Proper gentleman. I swung the plastic bag of takeout around so the handles twisted up to my fingers, cutting off circulation. Megan was the type to walk all four flights of stairs, just cause. Maybe he was like that too. I fridged the food and plopped onto my half-loft that was just a little too high for me to have gotten used to yet.

I took in the ceiling and tried to go blank. My train of thought derailed, easy. So he bought her a poke bowl... walked all the way to the other side of campus to our dorm... stood outside the building until someone let him in... walked up four flights of stairs... and remembered our room number... on no occasion at all.

Was it possible to stop thinking for even a minute? I gave up and listened to the train chugga chugga choo choo. It didn't even matter to me that I'd received plenty of well-wishes and gifts, all induced by my mother. Megan was also in her first week of college, but had someone else at the university who was making sure she was eating because she would get back from soccer tryouts late, after all the dining halls closed for the night. Maybe she'd eaten before she left, but he had come by, just to make sure.

The lavish pot of flowers with a note signed from 'mom, grandpa, and charlotte' but written by just Mom (I could tell from tone alone), the post-it note and Starbucks cake pops Megan had left on my desk that morning, my grad student family friend who took me out to dinner that weekend. It was like none of those counted. I wished I had an excuse or something, something credible, like that I was sick, so that's why I wasn't out celebrating.

I wanted to get through that day, as any other normal day, so to not stop and feel the lame- and loneliness of this one. While my mom was trying to

remind me, big eighteen!!!! everywhere I went.

I ended up back at the desk, with the cookie, playing with the huge smear of frosting wetting the cardboard. Later, when Megan got back from tryouts, I offered her some. She laughed kindly and said thanks, maybe later. I stuffed it in the fridge just in case.

I felt a little better when they broke up the next week. But mostly I just felt worse. The cookie sat in the same spot, not a new dent made.

· * * * * *

iii

The balloons ended up staying there for three months, hogging a corner of our room.

During month three, they were half deflated, but still holding up for the most part. Sometimes the air conditioner would be on, and they'd start bobbing up and down, moving through our room while we weren't there.

Once Thanksgiving hit, one by one they'd come down, every other week. They had a good run, but it was time. I'd squeeze them so they squealed, took off from my grip, and whirred around the room for a second or two, before dropping dead to the floor. But not until I had to. I'm sure my roommate despised seeing them, the first thing the eye went to every time one opened the door. Or when the cool air would float them around, and they'd tap her head as she studied. I shuffled the weight a little closer to my side, a little further from the invisible line, each time I noticed her usual silence feeling a little more stonish.

By day, they stood, garishly flecking the light, all metallic against the windows. I even kept my cacti on the sill, tempting them. But they would not die unless I ordered the execution and stabbed them down.

JESSICA HSU



Jessica is a sophomore from San Jose, California, who plans to major in public health and double minor in statistics and the environment. She loves reading and writing poetry (mostly in her Notes app). She also enjoys occasionally writing fiction, though she usually chooses to safely stick to just reading in that area. In her free time, she enjoys playing the flute, going on runs, devouring fantasy novels, and attempting to not mess up baking recipes.

the point of poetry

for my friend

There is no purpose
to these poems,
the way there is no purpose
to squirrels eating.

They clutch the walnuts in tiny fingers, clambering
over every obstacle, every living being, desperately,
to reach the prize. I find

photos of squirrels fascinating.
I find words fascinating.

Webbed

for my flatmates

I hope to become an advocate for the spider I found curled up in a spot suspended in my apartment overdue for an inspection, in the moldy cracks of the porcelain tiles. Impervious to the gaze of my judgement and the indecision sloshing in my gut, the spider awaits my choices, just a self-appointed jury, for who am I to decide the fragility of this creature's life or to wonder at the eloquence of whispering a quick blessing my mother taught me a thousand miles away or how best to memorialize a soul that becomes rapidly overwritten in my tributary archives. I wish the presence of arthropods could erode how glazed ink crumbles off overused ceramic plates in my kitchen, softly, unnoticeably. Dreams of bringing the ferocious weight of fantastical dragons into the ground blur into vague animated hauntings from these beings I used to never feel between my claws. I only see now in the night gossamer threads dangling from the edges of the mountains in Yosemite Park. I once climbed to the peak of Yosemite Falls, tiny feet pattering in the snow covers melting and sinking beneath. I had scooped the ice up between my hands to carry the whole way down, craving the touch of items from a migratory lost-and-found bound to dissipate. I dream of all the creatures crawling on the cliffside, propelled by an ineffable need to move upwards. The spider has disappeared from its spot in my apartment.

Above Forty Percent of Oxygen is Toxic

(according to my environmental class).
see how she suffocates from
oxygen streaming from
your hands, her posture in
prayer or perhaps in
supplication, your hands built for
her to lean gently into
almost as if she didn't know that
half the oxygen running
through the hemoglobin molecules in
your blood can stop hers. again
you measure a careful dose in
a reckless burst of
trust that she will splutter safe and
breathing and forgiving on
this surgical table. she anticipates how
you carefully glance at
her faint smile, an aftereffect of
her body's absorption of
chemicals like those seeping through
hydrophobic membranes
lined in your brain and
mixed in sanguine soil stuck
haphazardly on the bottom of
your bare soles. in a flash of
gratefulness for the same substances in
both your bodies do you
find your fingers around hers in
a half-molded truce, and,
faithfully, she still believes— in
this moment, your face above
hers becomes shrouded, your offering

the camouflage from
your rendering of her truths that
 you know she could not bear.
slowly you pry from
 her your hands (or
the other way around?).
 you take from
her breath the oxygen and
 replace only CO2 you tell
yourself that for
 all the oxygen you exhaled
this never would have sufficed.

Kewpie

mayonnaise, not with the whole eggs thrown in or with the white pungent vinegar, but just the yolks, round and a sunburnt cream color, & vinegar fermented with rice, tanginess running through the mouth. mayonnaise not 蛋黄酱 nor mayonnaise separated like may-o but if the writer's hand

cramps & slips & writes my-yo, my first & before, the monosyllabic change possessing & prioritizing wants. mayonnaise dissolves under heat, language hardens in bones, paradoxical reactions from time. the cherubic baby, imprinted

on the label, cannot safely eat mayonnaise. the newly blessed couple bestows names both Chinese & Japanese, education is the heralded silver spoon feeding loyalty down children's throats, the woman in a kimono with hair in a bun looks into the eyes

of the unseen photographer. in the truck this group does not hear the *profound mourning*¹ or *deep remorse*, & there stands a statue of a girl in Tainan, the memorial²—proof of oil

water emulsions. model student, they anointed, the lines of her body perfectly blended into the background, the witness unable to tell where the edges of the feet meet the land. the Hakka child asks for a memorial after Beipu, a self-assured settler

1. The Murayama Statement was an apology issued in 1995 to Asian countries previously subject to Japanese colonialism. “profound mourning” and “deep remorse” was taken from the apology speech addressing the use of “comfort women” during Japanese occupation, referring to women taken from locations occupied by the Japanese and forced to provide sexual services to Japanese soldiers.
2. Japanese colonial rule of Taiwan lasted from 1895 to 1945. The first public monument to honor “comfort women” was constructed in 2018.

presents a gory & glorious showing of *Seediq Bale*, trees transform into partitioned

rot, money demanded turn into Tapani³ - these words all but hazy approximations. the only

lingering sounds becomes the grandfather humming songs unintelligible to the child sliding

her fingers across the edges of the pages, the only understanding becomes *my-yo*, slippery

abbreviation derived from her mother's *mayonezu*, the ending *-nnaise* uttered firmly

in English for her own child to mimic. hakka meaning 客家, 客 [kè] for guest, & this sandwich, indistinguishable from nearly every American cuisine except

the mother slathers too much *my-yo-nnaise*. the bread absorbs the condiment

like a capitulation to exist as perpetual guests, & the child, mind heady with unknowing, swallows the reminders of the second syllable 家 [jiā]

for family.

3. The Seediq and Saisyat are two indigenous groups (of many) in Taiwan. Hakka is an ethnic subgroup of the Han Chinese. The Beipu Uprising in 1907 was one of the first recorded instances of uprisings against the Japanese, mainly led by Hakka individuals and the Saisyat people. The Tapani rebellion followed in 1915, mostly consisting of Han Chinese. *Seediq Bale* is a historical drama film that portrays the Musha incident, a major uprising by the Seediq people in 1930. All three rebellions were brutally quashed, with thousands killed by the Japanese military.

Swan Lake Suite, Op. 20a

Swan's beak strikes the snow caught in the night's embrace,
the sound of pining woven in a steady beat, the notes wholly
quartered. Watch the prince, the boy, pre-determined to inherit
and clothed so purely for an audience's eager gaze. The boy
follows

feathers

at first sight

maiden innocent by this crowd's eyes

beholden entirely

to a note, the reply ascending,

the cellists humming,

the fall, echoed

then plucking, the violins in the classic waltz, the trumpets
triumphant, the flutes whistling. Dresses blur and ambrosia
slips down throats, this façade of elegance gently molded
for permanence. To the side lie minds lulled, until the cymbals

clash, crashing back

a downbeat

thumping

with slow sighs

at the hints of cold

in waiting. Observe.

In a flock, the bassoons are methodic,
In a sigh, the swans give their answers,
In this union, their feet strike the ground,
In this chain, the belief is slow to crumble,
and

despite the certainty of doom

a rhythm follows,

wings wrapped together,

drifting

fabrics of every nation, draped
on pale bodies. In the accelerating
company, the boy searches for feathers,

not those hanging limply and listlessly
from the unfamiliar crowns. The boy
follows the same call, but in a hurriedness to rectify his mistake, the beauty
scatters,
the apologies become slick on the stage, the brass screams in desperation.
Salvage
this love, pleads the violas, but how do you uncover meaning
in this bird incapable of flight?
The timpani mourns, the harp consoles. Spot the sudden shift
to harmony. In the audience, a girl, slack-jawed,
searches for an ending.

MELISSA OZ



Melissa is a sophomore in the LSA who is currently undeclared but is hoping to be a Philosophy, Politics, and Economics major, with a concentration on environmental issues. She is part of Planet Blue Student Leaders and plans on going to law school after undergrad. She has been writing poetry since she was in high school, and most of her works focus on femininity and relationships. She is thankful for her teachers and professors who have helped her work on her art for the past several years, and is excited to see what will come next for her poetry!

mama, that's what this is, right?

mama, you felt this too, right?
mama tell me it's gonna be okay
tell me there's a different kind of love out there
that it's gonna cure my sickness
tell me i'll grow out of this pain one day
that i'll wise up one day
mama, tell me that i'll get big and strong one day
and that i'll find my home one day
and one day it'll feel like everything fell into place
mama tell me i'll forget
that my body is broken
and someone'll patch the holes in the sky
dirt under my fingernails from the riverbeds i've dug
how good is it, mama
when this is all over?
when it all goes away?

but for now i am so heavy, mama
i am so tired
mama everything is rubble around me and
i think i'm ruins, too
mama, how do i let go?

mama, how do i feed myself?
i swallow and i swallow and i swallow but nothing matters
nothing changes
my heart grumbles like my stomach and i am
empty all over again

all my speeches are too long
i can't make anything make sense in 100 words or less
tell me about a time you faced adversity
how did you overcome it?
mama how did you overcome it?
is this all you've ever wanted, mama?

did it go away for you by now?
tell me
i want to hear you tell me that
this is what's right
this is what's good
this is what god intended, they say
he gave me a blessing when he gave me an egg
and the carnage that comes with it is just a formality

and there's a thousand ways to get your wings, mama
but do you have to be an angel to do it?

mama my skin is covered in colors
embarrassing pinks and wrathful reds and
blacks and blues and the green that comes with healing
and the white that comes with scars.
they don't suit me but i'll wear them anyway
yours and mine and mine and yours
over time i've come to realize that bruises are hereditary.

mama i cannot wish to know all that you have done
but i do wish i was foolish
i wish i could forgive
i wish there was a way to scoop out
all my rotten parts so i can make room
for a daughter
somewhere in me.
mama, that's what you did, right?

mama, when will i have learned everything?
when will i know the answers?
when will i get to shed this guilt
of being a daughter, mama?
how do you do it?
how do you ask your mama for answers
when you know she has none?
how can you stand to ask your mama
how she got through it all

when one look at her proves she's only just begun?
mama, how have i confused girlhood with grief?

iceberg extremities

who i am right now will be the object of my daughter's daughter's
admiration.

my daughter will not share the same sentiment.

i can't tell you i will either.

my body is an ode to a biology i am not too fond of
and my ever-cold fingers despise my lower belly specifically
for stealing all the power my little body could muster—
for making me a shell of a girl for the destiny of a woman
who just wishes she wasn't.

wasn't not in the sense of needing other parts

but needing less

needing more in areas

unknown to evolution

(forget Charles Darwin)

needing more in might

needing more in *maybe*

needing more in ability to give myself anything more

than one meal a day and a few snacks to keep

my hunger at bay while i live in this masculine hell

so march-step, so cold

that my fingers hate my organs

when they should hate my world

hate my eyes hate my skull

hate me for hating me and hating what my mother gave me

and what my daughter will hate me for, too,

for giving her this unbroken body so shattered that

she cannot pick up the pieces in any lifetime known to man

to *man* to woman

to God to the napkin stuck to my shoe

to my chewed-up pen cap to my bank account

(four-thousand six hundred fifty-two dollars and thirty nine cents)

to my bedsheets freshly washed

to his bedsheets not so much
to runs in tights to emails with exclamation points
to the stranger on the street who called me pretty
to the stranger in my bed who did the same
to a girl i haven't seen in eighteen years
to a man i haven't seen in eighteen days
to whoever the fuck is gonna know this lifetime the way i always
wished i could

it's important to know i can never keep a straight face
and that i am also very good at keeping one
that i am a system of inconsistencies
that even i do not know the extent of it
and i will never know the extent of it should i keep going
down this path of no return where i
pour myself onto a petri dish and let her
simmer there
and inspect the pieces one by one to see
which is diseased and which is benign
and which is a complicated mess of teeth and desire
and which one lets her imaginary daughter stain the pages of her
diary.

i am the object of my daughter's daughter's admiration.
and as the daughter of a daughter
i know i can't let it happen like this.

KATHLEEN QUAIL



Kathleen is double majoring in FTVM and BCN. She loves exploring both the creative and scientific sides of both fields. Her future aspirations include working for a National Park and being a showrunner for her own television show. In her free time, she's probably enjoying a Mtn. Dew Baja Blast.

Til Death Do Us Part

INT. BROOKLYN'S LIVING ROOM – DUSK

Self-diagnosed hopeless romantics, high schoolers BROOKLYN, KALLIE, and TALIA, sit on Brooklyn's living room floor in a circle, wearing pajamas. Each of them have two fingers on a Ouija Board. They all look at each other, silently eyebrowing who will speak first.

Brooklyn (17), an independent soul that's succumbed to teenage stubbornness, takes a deep breath.

BROOKLYN

Hey spirits. What's up?

Talia (16), an overly anxious teen with a big heart, giggles.

Kallie (16), a confident counter to Brooklyn's angst, rolls her eyes at Brooklyn.

KALLIE

Brooklyn, no! You've got to do a proper introduction. Here, let me try. Hi spirits. My name is Kallie and this is Brooklyn and Talia.

We're trying to communicate with anyone that is here. If you're here, umm..can you show us a sign?

The game piece starts to move towards the YES on the board.

TALIA

Brooklyn, you're not messing with it right?

BROOKLYN

No, I swear!

KALLIE

I think it's working.

Beat

KALLIE (CONT'D)

(to the board)

Hello there. What's your name?

The piece starts to move around the board, landing on the

letters C-L-A-R-A.

BROOKLYN

C-L-A-R-A

TALIA

Clara. That's a nice name. Hi

Clara.

KALLIE

Thank you, Clara. How old are you?

The piece moves to the numbers 1 and 7.

BROOKLYN

17. Yo, me too! How did you die?

KALLIE

Brook, I don't think we can just
jump in like that and ask about the

D-word.

BROOKLYN

The D-word?

The board piece begins to move. Brooklyn and Kallie are
looking at each other and do not realize that it is moving,
but Talia is attentively watching it as it spells out P-N-EU-M-O-N-I-A.

KALLIE

Death. We should ask general
questions. Sometimes spirits don't
know that they have died.

BROOKLYN

Mmm..I think that's hard to
believe. Like, I think they would
be able to remember one of the most
fundamental life events.

KALLIE

Well, it could've been an accident?

Like the death was really
unexpected or it happened in their
sleep.

The piece starts to move a bit faster to more areas of the
board, but the girls' fingers are still placed on it. Talia
is being pulled every which way.

TALIA

(shaken)

Uh, guys?

BROOKLYN

Bullshit. I think you'd know. Satan
is pretty recognizable if you were
to go to Hell.

(MORE)

BROOKLYN (CONT'D)

Or how the hell can you not realize
that you're talking to St. Peter?

KALLIE

How do we even know if there is a
heaven and a hell? Who's to say
reincarnation is out of the
picture?

Brooklyn and Kallie begin to raise their voices at each
other. Yelling a little bit louder than necessary, Brooklyn's
grandma, VICTORIA (60s), walks into the doorway of the living
room.

VICTORIA

LADIES! What is going on in here?!

All three girls look up and take their hands off the Ouija
Board. They all look stunned, as Victoria is staring directly
into their eyes.

Beat.

Victoria looks to the ground and notices the Ouija Board.

BROOKLYN

Oh shit.

Victoria is moments away from speaking when—
—the lights around the room start to flicker and the
television turns on and off. The three girls start to shriek
but Victoria remains unusually calm. As if she's seen this
happen before.

VICTORIA

The word I am about to have with
EACH of your mothers!

Each of the girls goes into an individual panic as the room
continues to be spookily chaotic.

Brooklyn is trying to reason with her grandma.

BROOKLYN

We didn't—I didn't mean, we didn't
know! There was nothing good on tv
and I've seen you use it before and
it looked like fun—

Kallie is frantically trying to turn off the tv.

KALLIE

(pressing buttons on a tv
remote)

Come on, come on, come on! How does
this thing turn off?!

Talia is rocking back and forth in the fetal position.

TALIA

Oh my god..my mom's going to kill
me. Why did I come tonight? I
should've stayed home..hung out
with mom and dad..worked on my 19th
century feminism paper..watched
TikToks in my room..

The lights and the television continue to flicker on and off.
A window opens and wind begins to flush through the room,
wrapping everyone in it. Victoria runs to close the window
with a loud BANG. Everything stops and returns back to
normal.

Beat.

VICTORIA

I..I don't know where to begin.

Brooklyn, I'm going to have a word
with you tomorrow morning.

Victoria lets out a loud sigh. She's upset but she notices
Talia on the ground, still in the fetal position. Her stern
demeanor softens.

VICTORIA (CONT'D)

Talia, come on baby, let's sit up.

It's all over now.

Victoria helps Talia sit up.

VICTORIA (CONT'D)

Kallie, are you okay?

KALLIE

I'm okay, Mrs. V.

VICTORIA

Good.

There's an impending silence as Victoria shakes her head down at the ground. Brooklyn is more so in shock that Victoria has just scolded her in front of her friends. Kallie is looking solemnly at Victoria and Talia.

VICTORIA (CONT'D)

Let's put this board away.

Kallie starts to help Victoria put away the Ouija Board. Brooklyn has not moved yet. Talia is rubbing her eyes. As she removes her hands, she sees a woman, CLARA (early 20s), dressed in a traditional Victorian dress, not moving but staring straight ahead.

TALIA

(pointing at Clara,
petrified)

Do you guys see that?

Victoria, Kallie, and Brooklyn turn their heads towards Talia, following her finger until their eyes land on Clara.

BROOKLYN

Oh-

VICTORIA

-no.

Victoria walks over to Clara. Victoria tries to tap her, a finger landing on her solid shoulder. Clara awakens and looks around the room.

CLARA

Oh! Hello.. I.. I don't think I
should be here?

VICTORIA

I don't think you should be here
either, sweetheart.

Victoria grabs onto Clara's hand.

VICTORIA (CONT'D)

What's your name?

CLARA

Clara Albright, ma'am.

VICTORIA

Very nice to meet you, Clara. My name is Victoria. That's my granddaughter, Brooklyn, and her friends Kallie and Talia.

Brooklyn and Kallie give a slight wave to Clara. Talia, still in shock, stares with her mouth open.

CLARA

Nice to meet you all.

VICTORIA

Well.. let's see.. I have a book that we can take a look at to figure out how to get you back. Now I have to let you know Clara, I know a lot about Ouija Boards, but I've never met a spirit in your predicament before. Give me one second, I'll go find it in my study.

Victoria starts to head out, when she turns to the girls before leaving the doorway.

VICTORIA (CONT'D)

Girls, make Clara feel at home and keep her company.

Brooklyn and Talia stare blankly back. Kallie's lips start to purse in a slight smile.

KALLIE

You got it, Mrs. V!

Victoria exits the living room. Brooklyn, Talia, and Kallie all look at each other then turn their heads in unison to look at Clara. Clara is smiling at the three girls. Brooklyn cuts in before anyone can say anything.

BROOKLYN

So..how did you die?

KALLIE

Brooklyn!

CLARA

No, it's okay! It makes sense to ask. I got really sick and passed away.

TALIA

You had pneumonia, right?

CLARA

Yes!

KALLIE

How did you know that?

TALIA

She told us earlier on the board. You were saying other stuff too but you went really fast. Sorry Clara.

CLARA

Oh, no need to apologize. I talk a little bit too much at times.

BROOKLYN

Me too! Grandma always gets at me 'cause I talk too much about boys at dinner.

CLARA

Ha! My sister was the same.

TALIA

Really? You could talk about boys back then?

CLARA

Of course you could! We were 19th century girls, not 18th century ones.

TALIA

Wait, really?! Do you mind if I ask you some questions for my paper?

I'm writing about 19th century feminism?

CLARA

No, not at all. What would you like to know?

Before Talia can ask, Victoria rushes into the room. In her arms is a large leather-bound book, covered in a sheet of dust.

VICTORIA

Ladies, I think I may have found
it!

Victoria gathers the girls around her. A shot of the book's page from behind Victoria's back.

CHAPTER 8, SECTION IV: SPIRIT TRAPPED OUTSIDE OF THE BOARD

VICTORIA (V.O.)

“When users do not say ‘Goodbye’ before removing their hands from the board, there’s a risk that the spirit will be trapped outside of their realm and in the user’s reality. If this occurs, the spirit will need to cross over.

(MORE)

VICTORIA (V.O.) (CONT'D)

The only way to help a spirit cross over is to help them finish their ‘unfinished business’ But be quick! You only have until midnight to get the spirit back. If not, their soul will be lost for all eternity.”

The girls all check the grandfather clock. It’s now 7:30pm.

VICTORIA

Okay, well, we have more time than I thought we would have.

BROOKLYN

Do you have unfinished business though, Clara?

CLARA

Well, I think so. Yes, I never got to marry BENJAMIN.

KALLIE

Who’s Benjamin?

CLARA

He was my fiancé.

TALIA

Awww. Could we try reaching out to
him?

CLARA

I would say yes, but he and my
sister were wed a month after my
death.

BROOKLYN

Damn, they had no common sense back
then either?

VICTORIA

I have an idea. I know a spirit
that lives in my old apartment. His
name is AMOS, Clara he's very
sweet, honey, I think you would
really like him, but he does live
about an hour and a half away. So
if I left now, I'd get there at 9
o'clock. We should be able to get
back a bit after 10:30. I think we
should do it. What do you think,
Clara?

CLARA

Well, I do not want to be lost for
all eternity, so..yes. Let's give
it a try. I'll marry Amos if it
means my soul will be safe.

The three girls give a reassuring nod to Clara.

VICTORIA

Alright, well, I'll grab my bag and
hit the road. Now girls, no one
touch my Ouija Board while I'm out.

Got it Brooklyn?

BROOKLYN

(offended)

Huh? Grandma! Why are you singling
me out?

VICTORIA

Brooklyn..

Brooklyn backs down and puts her hands up.

BROOKLYN

I got it, I got it. We-I won't
touch the Ouija Board.

VICTORIA

Good.

Victoria starts to walk out.

VICTORIA (CONT'D)

I'll be back soon!

The younger girls all look at each other in awe as they've
just seen Victoria work her wonders at making up a plan on
the fly.

KALLIE

How does your Grandma know ghosts?

BROOKLYN

She's just really friendly?

Talia looks off to the window as we hear Victoria's car tires
screech and speed away. Clara catches Talia's nervous gaze.

CLARA

What would you like to know, Talia?

Talia breaks out of her trance.

TALIA

Well, I guess, how was it like
dating back then? Did you feel
pressure to get married? Become a
mother?

Clara takes a minute to think, smiling slyly, as she tries to
think about where to start with Talia's question.

FLASHBACK - 19TH CENTURY PARLOR - DAY

Clara and Benjamin are sitting with two other couples,
drinking tea.

CLARA (V.O.)

Well.. back then, it was more so a
courtship. We were chaperoned,
often by our parents, at each
other's houses. We would talk in

the parlor and drink tea. Very
poised and old-fashioned of us, I
know. Benjamin and I were able to
talk at these gatherings, but it
never felt as I imagined.

TALIA (V.O.)

What did you imagine?

FLASHBACK – FIELD IN THE SPRING – DAY

Clara is reading in a field scattered with wildflowers.

CLARA

I imagined it to be natural. In all
the books I ever read, there was a
moment, where the main character
caught her love's eye, and
everything in the world fell into
place. I thought it would happen
with Benjamin and I, but I'm not
sure if it ever truly happened.

Maybe love is different than what
the book's say.

END FLASHBACK

INT. BROOKLYN'S LIVING ROOM – NIGHT

BROOKLYN

Clara, I don't want to ruin your
memory of Benjamin, but it seems to
me you really weren't in love with
him.

Clara looks at Brooklyn with confusion.

BROOKLYN (CONT'D)

I mean..the love that you're
talking about, the one in books, I
always felt like it was the same in
real life too.

KALLIE

Brooklyn, when was the last time
you had a boyfriend?

BROOKLYN

Hey! Ok, maybe my track record

isn't the best, but my crushes have
always felt like the ones I've read
about.

KALLIE

Alright, Miss Love Expert.

TALIA

Clara, what about feeling love in
other ways?

CLARA

How so?

TALIA

Like, did you ever get that same
feeling you did when reading your
books when you did other things?
Clara takes a beat before answering.

CLARA

This might sound selfish, but the
only time I ever felt that kind of
love was when I was truly alone.

FLASHBACK – FIELD IN THE SPRING – SUNSET

Clara is staring out to a scene of hills with the sun setting
on the horizon.

CLARA (V.O.)

When I was alone. I could just
appreciate myself. I was with my
thoughts. I rarely had time to do
that.

FLASHBACK – 19TH CENTURY PARLOR – DAY

Everyone is talking to each other except for Clara. Her
expression is saddened, as she looks out the window, longing
to be outside.

CLARA (V.O.)

I just wanted to be alone. I felt
so much peace being by myself;
getting to enjoy everything on my
own terms.

FLASHBACK – FIELD IN THE SPRING – DAY

Clara smiling while looking out onto the horizon.

CLARA (V.O.)

I never felt rushed by nature. I
could simply exist and be myself
when I was alone.

END FLASHBACK

INT. BROOKLYN'S LIVING ROOM – NIGHT

Clara looks up at the others surrounding her. The group sits
in silence. Talia has a moment of realization.

TALIA

Clara, I think you found it!

CLARA

Found what?

TALIA

Your unfinished business!

CLARA

I don't understand.

TALIA

I don't think you were suppose to
marry Benjamin.

(MORE)

TALIA (CONT'D)

I agree with Brooklyn, even if her
hypothesis lacks experience, but
she's right. Love shouldn't be onesided. You have to experience it
whole-heartedly.

Clara watches Talia in awe as she starts to understand what
Talia is expressing.

TALIA (CONT'D)

I think your unfinished business
was finding love within yourself.

Clara's eyes light up.

TALIA (CONT'D)

I don't think you've been able to
do that because the last thing that
you truly experienced was your
relationship with Benjamin.

Clara approaches Talia and gives her a hug. Tears start to
form in her eyes.

CLARA

Talia, I think you're absolutely
right.

Clara breaks the embrace and takes out a handkerchief and
starts to wipe her eyes.

CLARA (CONT'D)

I loved being with me. I thought I
had to marry to feel complete, but
I've never felt more whole in my
entire existence until now. And I
don't think it's selfish that I
love who I am. I love being me.
Clara looks up to the three girls.

CLARA (CONT'D)

Yes. That's correct. I love myself.

Suddenly, the grandfather clock rings out a dong. A mystical
spotlight appears in-front of the clock. The girls look at
each other in silence and realize they've figured it out.

Kallie squeals and brings in the group for a hug.

KALLIE

Tal, I think you did it!

TALIA

No, Clara did it.

BROOKLYN

Wow, may I just say, was this one
of my best ideas or what?

The girls all look up from the embrace exasperated.

BROOKLYN (CONT'D)

I'm sorry. Clara, I'm sorry we got
you stuck here, but I'm glad we
were able to help you get back. I
think I've learned my lesson. I
won't be touching that Ouija Board
for a while.

Kallie gives Brooklyn an eyebrow raise.

BROOKLYN (CONT'D)

Alright, I will not touch another
Ouija Board for as long as I live.

Okay?

The girls giggle and Clara brings them back in for an embrace.

CLARA

I'm glad you've learned your lesson, Brooklyn.

BROOKLYN

Thanks Clara.

CLARA

I think you should talk to one of your crushes. You never know where it might lead. I think you've faced scarier trials this evening with your Grandma than I have in my entire after-life.

Brooklyn laughs hard. Clara turns to Talia and grabs her shoulders.

CLARA (CONT'D)

Thank you, Talia. You have a brave soul. I hope you continue to share your it with others..and finish that paper done!

Clara brings her in for a hug.

CLARA (CONT'D)

I apologize if my insights aren't helpful. I probably wasn't the norm for my time.

TALIA

You're fine, Clara. I think I'll tell my teacher I found my greataunt's old journal for my source. I don't think 'great-sister' would fly as well.

Clara laughs and faces Kallie.

CLARA

Kallie, will you be able to keep them in check when I'm gone?

KALLIE

Absolutely!

CLARA

Good. I knew I could count on you.

Clara turns to the light in front of the grandfather clock.

CLARA (CONT'D)

Thank you, girls.

The girls all talk over each other, saying their goodbyes, good wishes, and love as Clara walks into the light and fades away. The grandfather clock lets out a dong and the room is silent.

Beat.

BROOKLYN

You guys want to watch, 10 Things I

Hate About You?

KALLIE

Sure.

TALIA

Yeah, I'm down.

LATER

The girls are surrounding the television as 10 Things I Hate About You plays. Victoria rushes into the room with Amos.

VICTORIA

Girls! I made it! Here's Amos!

Victoria looks around the living room. The girls are still watching the movie.

VICTORIA (CONT'D)

Where's Clara?

BROOKLYN

(nonchalantly)

Oh, she crossed over.

VICTORIA

WHAT?!

END.

JENNA LYNN GOOD



Jenna is a senior at the University of Michigan, where she has won two Hopwood awards for her poetry. Her work has appeared in the *New Croton Review*. She enjoys writing in cursive and listening to records, especially Alice in Chains' *MTV Unplugged*.

BLACK SWALLOWTAIL

Velvet wings open in air
and tell me what you see:
a sugar breath, a heart arrhythmia,
rhododendron drums; night velvet
shadow, opaline blue like the
eyes of a stray dog in the dark
on the side of a road somewhere.
My eyes are not blue;
my skin is not velvet.
I wear a blue-beaded anklet;
I write with velvet ink,
but I am not a butterfly—
wings are a mystery to me;
I don't have them materially

SAYING GOODBYE

Necklace in my plastic hands:
the one you gave me yesterday.
Garnet buried in the sand:
necklace in my plastic hands—
you rip the veil and I withstand
the judgments I could never take,
necklace in my plastic hands—
the one you gave me yesterday.

Plastic petals on my ears;
no crown of roses for my head.
I won't let you leave me here,
plastic petals on my ears.
Show me something else to fear:
this part of me you leave for dead,
plastic petals on my ears,
no crown of roses for my head.

My world holds still, forgets to breathe—
I tell my dreams to plastic fish.
Save me from the doubt I bleed—
my world holds still, forgets to breathe.
I cover them so they won't see,
close my eyes and make a wish—
my world holds still, forgets to breathe;
I tell my dreams to plastic fish.

THE DRIVE-IN

open window

open dream

wait for dusk

she lies waiting

appearance of trust

and put this moment

on a pedestal

the blameless girl

how could you wait

for her?

how could you endure

the silences and the

signposts bent by

fast cars

and tigers

prowling on the side of

the highway

paws on your window—

what a girl—

isn't she blameless?

not anymore

the glass turns starless

a natural curtain of

scarlet, blue and

purple

reflecting the blanket

reflecting the invisible

movie at the

abandoned lot.

and you catch your

own eyes in the

colored glass. dreaming,

sleeping eyes. do you

know how you got there?

do you know who brought
you there? whose CD is
twisting and spiraling
inside the dash?
suddenly you're there alone.
where did she go? who knows—
the moment of truth
beyond mouths has fled;
the drive-in is dead.

LEAVING ON A MOTORCYCLE

she always had dark circles under her eyes,
round brown eyes lined with silver glitter
that sparkled when she was keeping a secret
from me. when I was just her regular friend,
I thought the shadows were from staying up all night
watching TV, eating plain popcorn and hard candy.

she spoke words that were milk chocolate candy,
gave knowing smiles, narrowing her eyes.
we gravitated to each other; I was her shy shadow at night.
she taught me how to paint with silver glitter
and told me I was her forever best friend,
blood sister, and could I keep a secret?

she didn't want me to know her big secret
so she never told me—she shared rock candy
with me instead. but she was my best friend.
between strings of caramel hair she stared with shining eyes,
eyes that knew something, smudged silver glitter,
something I didn't, in the middle of the night.

her older sisters slept in detention and disappeared at night.
I figured they both had a cool, mysterious secret
too—a half-empty tub of neon-green body glitter
next to glow-in-the-dark belly-ring body-candy
on the wooden side table. her mom's tired eyes
looked at me like her kid needed a nice friend.

I thought: she didn't know I wasn't a nice friend,
climbing silently through the window at the end of the night,
shrieking with laughter, playing mean tricks with my eyes.
did she know—it's not like she didn't know our secret—

who taught me how to give out lies like candy
with a coy smile, hiding behind them like I hid behind glitter?

one day she packed a duffle with tank tops and glitter
and said she was taking a weekend trip with an old friend.
she wouldn't say where, only that it was far. I gave her candy
for the road, but I was mad that I wasn't invited. that night,
I watched as the motorcycle sped away. I guess that was her secret.
she left her phone on her bed. the screen was a picture of her made-up eyes.

I thought we'd be friends forever, but she was gone after that night.
I stopped eating rock candy and lying, and going out in secret,
but I kept the silver glitter she used to put on my eyes.

ANGEL

I am not an angel;
 you are not a whore—
our hearts don't have to go
 down those streets anymore.

You are not a baby;
 I am still a girl—
tell me why you're waiting
 to steal me from the world.

Give me pretty pictures;
 I'll show you lullabies—
I'd like to watch you figure;
 you can watch me cry.

Paint me as a mystery
 shrouded in blue lace;
speak to me in dreams
 whispers I can't place.

BUTTERFLY STAMP

Your mystic eyes,
swamp impenetrable,
have seen under the material
that covers me, glitters
in black and green
on my dying skin, hides
under my jeans and
my once-faded eyes,
intermittently diaphanous,
have seen under the material
that covers this world, wrapped
around couches and mirrors
and jealousy, mummifying
every surface. I unfold
my naked arms—

OPHELIA

take off all your clothes
and get high on your
 creation—stand on your
 spiny chair and in place of your
anticipated table dance
 puke out your antiquated
 ideation
 and open your mouth to
 new language.
calligraph your arms in mascara
write your fears on your
 thighs
 light your India incense
and put on your Recovery
 Eminem CD
open the door
 and step onto the
 balance beam of a
 concrete
ledge
 wind on your cheeks
 dirt in your mouth
eternity flashes
 the obsession passes
step down dizzy

THE ACTRESS

the proverbial mud's up
to my waist now
I've never had
a problem with wading
mistakes are
the fabric of skin
 if you take me in—
 with my false balance
and liability—
 and I'm not
speculating that you will
 you'll get a lot more
vicissitudes
than you probably wanted
or even estimated
 the oranges hang
from the yarn sky
 glittering like stars
over the sparse stage
 and the dilapidated red barn
the ideals of my existence
shadow fields blanketed with sadness

AUDREY LEE



Audrey is a psychology major interested in adding on a minor in creative writing. She plans on pursuing a graduate degree in clinical psychology in hopes of becoming a clinical psychologist. Audrey really enjoyed the creative writing class she took this past semester and is excited to further explore the world of creative writing. She's looking forward to taking more writing classes in the coming semesters!

Adrian

Each day feels more insipid than the last. I try to make my days exciting by buying things. Today I went on the internet and bought a new pair of ski pants. They are white with thick black stripes going down the sides. Each stripe has five big gold stars spaced out evenly between upper thigh and ankle. The gold stars remind me of the gold star stickers my second grade teacher Mrs. Peterson used to put on our tests. We only got gold star stickers if we got an A. So 27 tests meant 27 gold star stickers for me.

Annette comes into my room to play with me sometimes. She dresses pretty chic for an older person. She always wears all white. Even her shoes. I like the all white. It's super chic of her. I decided to tell Annette what I bought today. She is nice and likes to hear about the things I buy.

"Ski pants?" She asked while handing me some candies. She brings green candies for me every time she comes to play.

"Yes. They are white and have thick black stripes going down the sides with—"

"With five big gold stars spaced out evenly between upper thigh and ankle?"

"Yes."

"Those ski pants aren't coming Adrian."

Annette loves to cut me off. That is the one not so nice thing about her. She thinks she's so smart but she's not. I must have told her about the ski pants already but she's acting like a smartass who can read my mind. Whenever Annette cuts me off, I punish her by throwing away the candies she gives me. I pretend to eat them because she won't leave until I do. Then when she leaves I spit them up and hide them behind my pillow to spite her.

...

It's lunch time now. I know this because Gus knocks on my door to tell me so. Gus is my friend from across the hall. He and I walk to lunch together everyday and keep each other company. We don't talk to the other kids on our hall because they are stupid and not worth our time. When I tell the other kids about the things I buy, they laugh at me and call me "crazy Adri." But they're the crazy ones. Gus on the other hand, always listens to me. He tells me that he'll sit with me in my room when all of my packages come, and he says that we can open them together one by one and laugh and smile and be happy about all of my things.

When Gus and I get to lunch, we sit at our own table on the far right corner of the cafeteria. Some of the other kids have to sit next to Annette's mean friends but we don't.

We're mature enough to sit on our own and gossip. Gus tells me about how he is going to see his boyfriend next weekend. How they are going to go to Hawaii next weekend with his boyfriend's family and how he's going to have candlelit dinners on the beach under a canopy of stars and wake up early to paddle board at sunrise. He said he'll bring me back pretty shells that he collects from the golden beach and maybe make a pretty necklace out of them for me on the plane ride back. I wanted to ask Gus to bring me back a star from the Hawaiian sky, but I thought that'd be too much to ask, even of Gus. Gus is really good at making things but Annette's mean friends always take his creations away from him. One time Gus made a beautiful crown out of spoons and tinfoil he stole from the kitchen. I remember him showing it to me, and me marveling at it, when Annette's mean friend Susanne came and snatched the crown from Gus' head.

Susanne is a loser and a copycat—she wears all white just like Annette. But she doesn't make it look chic like Annette does.

...

After lunch, I go back into my room because I don't feel like talking to anyone much, not even Gus. Each day feels more insipid than the last. I sit in my room and think about the stars above that I can't see. There is a small window in my room, but not big enough to gaze up at the stars through. I can't see the stars out my window, but I like to lay flat on my bed and stare up at my off-white popcorn ceiling and pretend the sporadic specs of gray are twinkling stars. I think of Gus and get jealous because I know he'll get to see great big stars in the Hawaiian sky. But I guess we are all under one big sky. The sky he will be under is the same sky I am under.

...

I must have fallen asleep under my popcorn stars because I awoke to Annette screeching over me. My collection of spit up green candies was spilling out of her hands. She must've uncovered my stash. I'm groggy from sleep but I'm awake enough to feel a tinge of guilt. I like Annette so I feel sad to see her feelings hurt.

"I'm sorry Annette. I know you bring those candies specially for me. But when

you cut me off while I tell you about the things I buy, I need to do something to spite you.”

Annette looks at me in what I think is disbelief. She must be really hurt that I spit up all of her candies because she runs out of the room before I can finish apologizing. I shrug it off and try to go back to sleep, assuming that I can straighten things out with her tomorrow, but she comes charging back in with Dr. Wilson in tow. He’s a tall and slim man with thick black glasses and who’s dark hair always has too much gel in it. I’ve only spoken to Dr. Wilson a couple of times. He is a quiet man who likes to write down everything I say.

“I’m sorry Dr. Wilson—I had no idea she wasn’t ingesting her meds.” Annette says with a shaky voice unlike her usual steady one. “I should’ve realized something was off when

she told me for the fifth day in a row that she bought ski pants off the internet.”

I think Annette is talking about the green candies in her hand. I try to pipe up to correct her, that they are actually green candies and not meds, but Dr. Wilson beats me to the talking.

“Adrian, you like to look up at the stars, right?” He says while crouching beside my bed.

“Yes.”

“If you don’t eat these green candies, you won’t get better. And if you don’t get better, you won’t be able to leave this place and look up at the stars.”

I think about what Dr. Wilson is saying to me and it doesn’t make much sense. He must be crazy if he thinks eating Annette’s green candies will allow me to look up at the stars. But I have empathy for Dr. Wilson, because he doesn’t know any better. He doesn’t know that we only got gold star stickers if we got an A, and Dr. Wilson probably wouldn’t have gotten 27 gold star stickers for 27 tests like I did in Mrs. Peterson’s second grade class.

UMANA AHMED



Umana is a sophomore at UMich, majoring in Economics and minoring in Philosophy and Applied Statistics. She is a lover of the arts in all of its forms, particularly drawn in by literature and theater, and her passion for writing has led her to explore as many aspects of it as possible. She is most fond, however, of poetry. Much of her work is devoted to the subject of rebirth and healing, drawing on both the terrifying and beautiful experiences of living and loving. She spends most of her free time on- or back-stage, doing everything from acting in shows to costuming them. She is excited to be directing her first original full-length musical this semester, and eager to continue pursuing writing and the arts however she can.

brave, blazing things.
we dress up our ghosts and
teach them to dance. we coax out a
melody in chromatics, these
half steps of healing:
 your hands,
the pressed flowers,
the anthologies of poems on the
dresser and the morning light of
absolution and the dining hall coffee,
 all of it bottomless,
all of it beautiful. and

yes—this winter is a canyon's edge,
and my fear has kept me a well-trained
dog on a leash, and
 yes—you and i both know
the bitter taste of cemetery soil
in our throats, and yes—
we are not the first people to fall in love,
or the third,
or the fifth
but maybe we'll be the ones who
 get it right.

so say the end is not an end but a
 caesura,
and when the
music starts again we will
greet the world in our
laurel crowns and our cloaks and the
 names we gave ourselves,
holy & shining with our own
 divinity.
say the end is not an end
because we are
 surviving it.
say the end is not an end but a

renaissance, a revival, a
stubborn trek out of these graves and
up to the light, up to the
kind of beauty we haven't found
a name for yet—
each breath a ladder rung, an
 anthem, a
 hill we climb
 singing.

SARAH BELLOVICH



Sarah is an International Studies major with a dual-minor in the Sweetland Writing program and French at the University of Michigan. She will be graduating in the spring after her fourth year. She has been writing poetry since she learned how to write haikus in second grade. Her writing is often inspired by Abiquiu, New Mexico where she spent some time in the summers growing up when she was not in Michigan, and where she also developed a healthy obsession of Georgia O'Keefe. She hopes to continue pursuing writing while working in the field of public policy and international law in her future.

Real Stars Don't Stick

I wanted to be on a roof
afloat in midnight at 7,000 feet
with air curling into my lungs,
the air I forgot how to breath
at sea level
walking down those paved streets.

I forgot how to live on my feet,
how to chase someone down dirt roads
while my lungs gasp and cry,
but they feel more full.

They flutter at the thrum of hummingbird wings
and breath in the gusts of monsoons
they catch and cascade down cliffs and rocks
and slow at a sunset
swelling around the haze of the moon,
and then my lungs breath in deep
filling with those sparks in the night
that spilling over of stars.

It's endless
that breath.

It feels so good
to live on those pulsing lights.
I wanted it so much

I bought those glow in the dark stars,
and I stuck them to my ceiling.
So they blinked under my lids every night,
but they weren't endless.
The air was so thick and stagnant,
all my lungs could do was sigh.

Our Echoes Never End

We grew up beside ghosts.
Hanging trees and rattling leaves,
Walking alongside artists
In those strange painted hills.

The cattle skulls were stark
against the adobe walls.
Sometimes you can still hear
their lows echo through the canyons.

Echoes answering our own,
Buried deep in bedrock.
We throw our voices against walls
Bouncing, then fading- waiting.

We are also in that stone,
Fossilized under burnt-red layers.
We were fated with those phantoms
To wander forever among myths.

My Midnight in Paris

I place the cigarette between my lips,
we open the windows to the air
and face the ivy trailing up the walls.
You would think we couldn't see the stars,
but I guess anything is possible in the city,
even you walking 3 miles
to light my cigarette.
The smoke swirls into the night,
it slips sweet, molten down my throat
and melds me to that heavy heat.
The moon settles on our shoulders,
Que fais-tu?
Leaning on the railing, talking.
I shake the ash off the end,
you say it was a nice time.
We plan to do it again,
and we both know
how to echo
dainty dreams
that only have a place in midnight.

One More Thing

We are just bodies
 built of bones
parceled enough to feel
the pins of panic behind our ribs,
in a pit deep within us
there's a sharp telling wind

We thought it would happen
and then it does
A chest splinters open,
a grater is pressed against a skull,
it's madness to know
how steady we can speak as we crumble
how much we can forget
when a sore blisters up
on *see-through* skin

But it scabs over
thicker than chalky bone,
starving on a full stomach
compacted like a stone
 acetone-breath
 wheezy-lungs

But fingers
 legs of ballerinas
pirouette and glissade on the
keys of an *out-of-tune* grand piano
notes weaving through tendons
fragile shoulders curved
a spine caving in,
 but the body fluid,
so perfectly composed,
feet on pedals,
delicate hands remember how to dance

Maybe its muscle memory
but isn't all we become bone?

It's only right to recognize
Our dances use up
everything but our bones.

JACQUELINE GIESSLER



Jacqueline is a senior at the University of Michigan studying Economics and Creative Writing. She writes short stories, essays, and the occasional poem. Her favorite writers include Sandra Cisneros, James Baldwin, and Cathy Park Hong. In her free time, she spends time with friends, paints, plays guitar, and pets as many cats as possible.

Untitled

You need to straighten your hair, my mother often tells me, as if her curliness did not cause mine. My hair is a terrible combination of my father's and my mother's—too fine like his to properly curl, too curly like hers to properly lay flat.

She and I spend my high school years fighting about the wave in my long brown hair that makes it “unpresentable.” *Don't you want to look nice and put-together?* Who says I don't look that way now?

My mother is certainly thinks so as she yanks at my strands with a brush to blow-dry it straight for my cousin's engagement party. This is our unspoken agreement, that she will allow me to look as disheveled as I like, except when we go to family events. I know the fight that would ensue is not worth looking how I'd like, so I allow her to straighten it.

My hair hasn't always been frizzy and wavy. When I was younger, my hair was pin-straight—my mother still laments the way it changed. When my hair started to develop a wave in high school, my mother instructed me to straighten it every day before school. I did not tell her that that was bullshit, at least not in those words, but I certainly thought it whenever she pestered me. I'm sure she got the message from the way I ignored her demand, arguing back that I was supposed to be going to school to learn, not participate in a beauty contest. She would sigh and shake her head, but we were both learning how to pick our battles.

I knew her pestering had nothing to do with my happiness, and everything to do with the fact that there were Chaldean girls in my classes, and my mother wanted me to fit in with them. She wanted me to be just like those girls, with their flat-ironed hair and judging eyes. I didn't know how to tell her that my hair was the least of my problems.

In the end, after months and months of arguments, I started letting my mother do my hair for family events if she stopped asking me to straighten it every day. That's why I'm here, with the hot air from the blow dryer burning my ear, getting ready for the dinner celebrating my cousin's engagement.

I'm jealous of him and his brothers sometimes. As men, they are not subject to the same criticism and expectations I am, especially as the oldest girl of my cousins. Today, however, I'm just irritated. His fiancée is exactly the kind of woman my mother wishes I would be, well-mannered and polite, always

with her hair and nails done, a dentist, and—most important—living at her parents' house until after her wedding, just like my mother did. I know that my mother will be silently comparing me to her, the same way I know that my hair will frizz out in protest of the blow-drying within an hour.

Doesn't it look nice? my mother asks when she's done. I walk out of the room without looking in the mirror.

On my mother's side, I am Chaldean. To most, this word means nothing. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines Chaldean as, "a member of an ancient Semitic people that became dominant in Babylonia." And yet, the thriving Chaldean population in Southeast Michigan contradicts this definition of an "ancient" people.

I have spent my life explaining myself, developing a short speech, which I tell in almost the same way every time I'm prompted.

"So, I'm Chaldean," I begin, my tone apologetic, sorry to be wasting another person's time. "It's a very small Middle Eastern ethnicity, so, like, most people haven't heard of it." With this, I reassure the other person in their lack of knowledge. "My grandparents immigrated here from Iraq," I say. "There's a large Chaldean population in Michigan and some in California, but that's basically it."

Everyone reacts to the collapsing of my identity into a few short sentences with delighted surprise.

"Oh wow!" they say. "That's cool!" Then they often begin to explain their own cultural background, how it's much less interesting than mine. Sometimes people say "interesting" when they just mean "novel."

As a kid, I didn't think it was all that interesting myself. This was before I realized how confusing my ethnicity would be to explain and embody. I'm Middle Eastern, but my family is Catholic. I look white. I don't speak anything but English and a little bit of Spanish from school.

I only have a few Chaldean friends. I connect mainly with my culture through the food and the Eurocentric beauty standards that I'm only now beginning to be able to let go of.

I spent the summers of my childhood at my grandparents' house with my

little brother.

Sometimes my cousins were there too, but mostly it was just me and David. At that small age, we were treated the same. No expectations of beauty from me and success from him, just SpongeBob and hide-and-seek.

My grandfather was not always there. He went golfing almost every day and went out to the country club on Tuesday and Saturday nights. But my grandmother always was. I loved going to my grandmother's house, where she made us food and cut up cantaloupe and cucumber and let us watch as much TV as we wanted.

We went there less as we got older, mostly only going when the whole family did on Sunday afternoons. Every Sunday, my grandmother made a big pot of food. My favorite of those Chaldean meals was one with green beans and hunks of beef cooked in a tomato sauce and served over rice. The smell of cardamom, paprika, and black pepper filled the house as the pot bubbled on the stove. Even her rice was the most delicious I'd had—because, I would find out later, of the salt and oil that she added.

All my aunts, uncles, and cousins would cycle through the kitchen, praising the smell of the food as they each took a hefty serving. They piled into her living room with their plates. They argued and laughed and discussed the football game on the TV, and my grandmother sat in her chair quietly until it was time to wash the dishes. No, no, she would tell my mother when she offered her help.

I was twenty when my grandmother died, and I sharply regretted the TV-filled days of my youth when I realized I barely even knew her. I listed off the things I did know: My grandmother immigrated from Iraq at sixteen. She drove a turquoise car until she got married.

She was the star bowler in the ladies' league. She used to take women who had recently arrived in the country out bowling with her, to welcome them into the community. But all these things are second-hand, told to me by great-aunts and family friends, not stories I got from my grandmother herself.

For my grandmother's memorial, my mother tasked me with looking through old photo albums for a picture to use. They were six thick books with colorful covers, all only part filled.

They were pictures I'd never seen before, pictures of my grandmother in her 20s. She was stylish and goofy and grinning and I never saw her like that when she was alive. There was a picture of her in a white dress, laid out and posing in the grass. There was a picture of her in a leopard print shirt, hair

up in a perm, sitting in the front seat of a car. I wondered if this was her car, the turquoise one, but the black-and-white image left me without answers. There was a picture of her grinning with her friends at a pool, her in a black bathing suit, standing on top of a diving board.

There was a picture of her posing with her legs stretched out across the lap of a giant metal statue of a man. These pictures felt like a gift to me, an insight into the life she had long before I knew her. But I also felt even more regret that I didn't talk to her while she was alive.

The last time she smiled in the album was on her wedding day, which was also the first time my grandfather appeared in the album. Those were the last pictures from when she was young, too, the next ones seemingly from many years later. In those shots, the bright grin and carefree poses were gone.

I found several options for my mother, who lamented, *there are no nice pictures of her—see, this is why I always ask you to dress up and do your hair and take nice pictures*. In this moment I hated my mother so much it burned in my throat.

But the next day she would watch her mother's body being lowered into the dirt. So, I stayed quiet and straightened my hair for the funeral before she asked.

My senior year of college begins, and with it my mother's comments change. *Straighten your hair and you should grow your hair out become you're coming back here after you graduate—you know that, right?*

My mother wants me to stay at home until I meet a respectable, appropriate man, preferably a Chaldean one.

But that's not what I want. I think of my grandmother, all smiles and freedom and fun, and how her life turned into one long act of service. I even think of my mother herself, and the way everything she does revolves around my dad, my brother, and me. I think it makes her happy, or at least feel fulfilled, but that's not what I want. And though I don't understand her, I understand the choices she made to get to where she is.

I won't take that same path.

KIERAN GROSSMAN



Kieran (they/he) is a 3rd-year FTVM major and Spanish minor. He writes whatever he wants, but mostly screenplays and songs. They have a Spotify page — check it out! They are also part of the ComCo improv comedy troupe.

Dance, Energy, Inclusion

EXT. GAY NIGHTCLUB – NIGHT

We open on a shot of the line outside the busiest nightclub you've ever seen. This is THE HOLE – the premier spot on campus for queer partying and finding hookups. Everyone's in a long, winding line in front of the BOUNCER, wearing what one might describe as "slut chic." Except for one person, that is...

Towards the very front of the line, we see EDDIE (21), a fairly clean-cut college student in a mobility scooter (think something akin to a Golden Technologies Buzzaround scooter).

He's dressed almost as if to hide in this crowd, wearing a simple button-up and jeans. He has black forearm crutches hugged in between his legs as he reaches the front of the line.

BOUNCER

Uh, hey, sorry man, we have stairs.

EDDIE

(struggling to hear over
the noise of the line)

Sorry, what?!

BOUNCER

We have stairs!

The rest of this exchange is yelled over the din.

EDDIE

Oh... That's fine, I can do stairs!

BOUNCER

We also don't have a place to put
your scooter.

Beat.

EDDIE

Oh.

Beat.

EDDIE (CONT'D)

Well isn't there a parking garage

over that way somewhere?
He vaguely points to his left.

BOUNCER

Yeah, why?

EDDIE

I'll be right back.

Eddie heads in the direction he pointed to earlier. The bouncer pauses to consider for a moment, then goes back to handling the line.

CUT TO:

INT. PARKING GARAGE – MOMENTS LATER

Eddie finds himself a parking spot that is meant for a car and parks there.

Before he turns off the ignition, he notices that his battery is in the red.

EDDIE

(groans)

Shit.

He turns off the ignition, clambers out of the scooter, and stands up using his crutches.

He walks out of the parking garage.

CUT TO:

EXT. GAY NIGHTCLUB – MOMENTS LATER

Eddie's at the front of the line again, this time on crutches. The following lines are just as loud as before.

BOUNCER

(surprised)

You came back.

EDDIE

Yeah.

BOUNCER

Did you-?

EDDIE

Yes.

Beat. Eddie looks at the Bouncer, as if challenging him to say something stupid.

BOUNCER

ID please.

Eddie takes a moment to fish out his ID from his pocket. With his crutches, it's an awkward task, but he manages. He hands it to the Bouncer.

After looking at it, the Bouncer hands it back, apparently satisfied.

BOUNCER (CONT'D)

You're good. Come on in.

Eddie follows his instructions.

CUT TO:

INT. NIGHTCLUB FOYER – CONTINUOUS

Eddie enters a small space with a FRONT DESK and METALLIC STAIRS leading up to the dance floor. There's a FRONT DESK LADY at her post. This place is not accessible. The Bouncer stands in the doorway, seemingly watching over Eddie.

Eddie starts to pull out his credit card, until-

FRONT DESK LADY

You're all good.

EDDIE

What?

FRONT DESK LADY

You're all good. Go ahead.

EDDIE

Isn't there a cover?

FRONT DESK LADY

You're fine. Go.

Eddie is clearly uncomfortable with this, but decides it's best not to question it.

EDDIE

Uh, okay.

The Bouncer steps forward.

BOUNCER

(re: stairs)

Need any help?

EDDIE

Nah, I'm good, thanks.

BOUNCER

You sure?

EDDIE

Look, I don't mean to be rude, but
I got this. I've been doing stairs
my whole life.

BOUNCER

(raises his hands)

Alright.

Eddie begins the process of getting up the stairs. He may have been doing them his whole life, but they certainly aren't his friends. He's struggling, awkwardly holding onto both crutches with one hand and the railing with the other.

Everyone else in the room watches uncomfortably.

EDDIE

(sensing the awkwardness)

I'm good!

CUT TO:

INT. NIGHTCLUB DANCE FLOOR – CONTINUOUS

Eddie gets to the top of the stairs and looks around.

It's amazing. Throngs of people, drinks in hand, dancing and grinding on one another. The music and lights throb in sync. Men kissing men, women kissing women — it's a good time.

But Eddie isn't ready for that level of socialization yet.

He locates the bar and walks over.

CUT TO:

INT. NIGHTCLUB BAR – CONTINUOUS

Eddie sits down at the bar. The STOOLS are just high enough to make the act of sitting down awkward. A BARTENDER (male, late 20s) attends to him.

BARTENDER

What can I get ya?

EDDIE

Double screwdriver, please.

The Bartender smiles a little bit.

BARTENDER

Sure.

As the Bartender makes the drink, we watch as Eddie gets increasingly nervous. His hands begin to shake. His breathing gets heavy. What has he gotten himself into?

The Bartender returns with the SCREWDRIVER DRINK.

BARTENDER (CONT'D)

Here you go.

EDDIE

Uh, thanks.

Eddie slams the drink as fast as he can. The Bartender is taken aback. He notices how nervous Eddie is.

BARTENDER

You good?

EDDIE

Yeah, it's just... I've never been here before. Or to any club.

BARTENDER

Oh. Are you here with anyone?

EDDIE

No. I wanted to come alone. To step out of my comfort zone. Stupid of me.

BARTENDER

(laughing)

Stupid? You know how many people come here alone looking for someone?

EDDIE

Yeah, I guess, but that doesn't make it any less scary.

BARTENDER

Yeah, I get it. Just try to have fun, okay?

EDDIE

Uh-huh.

CUT TO:

INT. NIGHTCLUB DANCE FLOOR – MOMENTS LATER

Eddie is sitting on a leather couch near the dance floor, looking slightly drunk and very nervous. His hands are shaking badly and he has a terrified expression on his face.

EDDIE'S POV:

The lights and sounds are overwhelming, but not as overwhelming as the sound of Eddie's heartbeat. The dancing,

the noise, the colors – it's all too much.
Eddie looks over at the BATHROOM SIGN–
And we see Eddie darting over towards it, almost tripping
over himself to get there.

CUT TO:

INT. BATHROOM STAIRWELL – CONTINUOUS

Once he's there, he sees–

Stairs.

Shit shit shit.

Eddie haphazardly stumbles down the stairs. A swarm of people
are in the bathroom hallway, and they are staring at him. We
can hear people, but they sound far away and muffled.

GIRL #1

Are you okay?

GIRL #2

Do you need help?

But Eddie does not respond, instead continuing to stumble
down the stairs. As he gets towards the bottom–

He trips!

Time seems to slow to a crawl for a moment as he falls–

–people rush forward to help him–

–we hear gasps–

–and time goes back to normal speed as he hits the ground.

Girl #1 and Girl #2 rush forward to help him.

GIRL #1

Oh my God!

GIRL #2

Here, let me help you up–

EDDIE

No!! I'm fine, just– give me
space. I need space right now. I
need to use the bathroom.

GIRL #1

EVERYONE MAKE WAY!

The crowd parts like the Red Sea to let Eddie through. He
quickly stumbles to the men's bathroom and opens it.

CUT TO:

INT. MEN'S BATHROOM – CONTINUOUS

There doesn't seem to be anyone here.
Eddie walks to the SINK and inspects himself in the mirror.
Just a nosebleed, nothing too bad. He quickly turns on the
sink and splashes water on his face, still breathing heavily.

A toilet flushes in the stall behind him.

Still anxious, Eddie smooths out his shirt and breathes
deeply.

The stall door opens—
—and we see WARIS (21), an able-bodied patron. He's dressed
just a tad more boldly than Eddie, but in a similar style—
just more colorful. He steps up to the sink and begins
washing his hands.

WARIS

You good? I heard a lot of noise
out there.

EDDIE

Yeah, I'm fine. I just fell.

Eddie starts washing his hands compulsively.

WARIS

(eyeing the crutches)

You fall a lot?

Waris turns off the water and goes to dry his hands.

EDDIE

Not really. It's just, uh, been a
really rough night.

WARIS

(as he's grabbing paper
towel, with his back to
Eddie)

No kidding. You're the tensest
person I've ever seen.

Waris finishes drying his hands, throws away the paper towel,
and turns around to look at Eddie.

EDDIE

I'm always tense. I have cerebral
palsy.

WARIS

Ah.

Beat.

WARIS (CONT'D)

Did I say something wrong?

EDDIE

No, you're fine.

Eddie turns off the water. They look at each other for a moment.

WARIS

(quietly)

That's good.

Beat. They look at each other.

Eddie breaks away from the sink to grab some paper towels.

WARIS (CONT'D)

You need help with that?

EDDIE

No, I'm fine. Thank you, though!

WARIS

Are you really? You just fell down the stairs in front of a crowd of people.

EDDIE

That happens literally all the time.

Eddie looks in the mirror while he dries his hands. Waris is right.

WARIS

You look like you need a drink.

EDDIE

I don't even know your name.

WARIS

Waris. Hi.

EDDIE

I'm Eddie. Nice to meet you.

WARIS

Cool. Let's go.

Waris beckons towards Eddie.

CUT TO:

INT. NIGHTCLUB BAR – MOMENTS LATER

Eddie and Waris are hanging out at the bar, nursing a couple drinks. BARTENDER is at his post.

WARIS

So do you like... dance?

EDDIE

(laughing)

Not really.

WARIS

Wait, why not?

Eddie gestures to his crutches, which are leaning against a third stool next to the two guys.

WARIS (CONT'D)

(playfully challenging)

I don't see what you mean.

EDDIE

Oh, come on.

WARIS

Seriously! You're telling me you've never tried to bust a move.

EDDIE

(sighs)

Yes. But I get so nervous about the people here.

WARIS

Hey, wanna know a secret?

EDDIE

What?

WARIS

Nobody cares. Everyone is too wrapped up in themselves to notice you, and if they do, they won't judge you for having fun.

EDDIE

I guess you're right.

WARIS

(playfully)

I always am.

Waris sticks out his tongue.

EDDIE

You're such a dork.

WARIS

Yup. Being a dork is kind of the
best.

EDDIE

Why?

WARIS

Because it means I can do things
like this with zero embarrassment.

Suddenly, Waris gets up from his stool and begins to bust a
move. It's the kind of dance move a parent might perform in
front of their child to embarrass them and make them laugh;
that is, dripping with irony and goofiness.

Eddie laughs.

EDDIE

Oh my God, stop.

WARIS

Never!

Waris stops dancing, and extends his hand.

WARIS (CONT'D)

Shall we?

EDDIE

(laughing)

You know I'm not going to be able
to keep holding your hand as we
walk.

WARIS

And? I'll enjoy every second of it
I get then.

Eddie considers, then accepts Waris's hand as he slides off
the stool and to his feet.

EDDIE

Alright. Let's go.

CUT TO:

INT. NIGHTCLUB DANCE FLOOR – MOMENTS LATER

Eddie and Waris are on the outskirts of the dance floor,
watching the crowd.

WARIS
(beckoning to Eddie)

Come on!

EDDIE

What?

WARIS

If we're gonna dance, I'm giving
you the full experience. We're
going to the center.

Eddie looks surprised, but is going with the flow at this
point.

EDDIE

Alright!

We see Eddie and Waris make it to the center of the floor,
bathing in the lights and sounds of club life. Waris starts
tearing it up immediately, but Eddie is a little less sure.
Gradually, Eddie begins to loosen up. He bobs his head to the
music, starts to move his legs in whatever way he can...
People around him have started to notice, and they're gassing
Eddie up.

Soon, Eddie is really having fun for the first time tonight.
He and Waris are enjoying each other, getting pretty close...
And they kiss.

For a while.

When they finish, Eddie is the happiest we've ever seen him.

EDDIE (CONT'D)

So... what are you up to tonight?

WARIS

(trying to sound
nonchalant)

Oh, nothing much, you?

EDDIE

Well, I don't really have much
going on tonight... was just gonna
go home...

WARIS

What are you saying?

EDDIE

What do you think I'm saying?
They kiss again, this one just as passionate but a little shorter.

Afterwards, Waris pokes Eddie in the chest.

WARIS

Dork.

EDDIE

If you want to come with me, let's do my place. It's accessible.

WARIS

Okay!

As they leave, OBNOXIOUS CLUB GIRL (early 20s) comes up to them.

OBNOXIOUS CLUB GIRL

Hey, sorry to interrupt, but like I just gootta say, not only was that like super hot, but also, like, I'm inspired.

(to Eddie)

Good for you for having a good time!

She walks away, leaving both guys uncomfortable.

WARIS

Uh. Anyway.

INT. PARKING GARAGE – MOMENTS LATER

Eddie is in his scooter, Waris standing by.

EDDIE

I knew something like that would happen. "You're so inspirational."

Every time.

WARIS

I don't think she meant it in a bad way.

EDDIE

Nobody ever does. Doesn't mean it doesn't feel weird and fetish-y.

WARIS

Fetish-y? Is that a word?

EDDIE

It should be.

WARIS

You're right. "Fetishistic" sounds
way too long.

They smile at each other. Eddie turns the ignition, and-
Beep. Beep. Beep. The battery indicator blinks red.

EDDIE

Fuck. I forgot. I'm out of battery.

WARIS

I can push you.

EDDIE

I live like a mile away.

WARIS

So?

EDDIE

So I don't want you to tire
yourself out unnecessarily.

WARIS

I'm not tired.

Eddie sighs.

EDDIE

I guess there's no other option.

CUT TO:

EXT. SIDEWALK – LATER

Waris pushes Eddie. The scooter is heavy and the progress is
slow-going. Waris is sweating and slightly out of breath. We
open the scene mid-conversation.

EDDIE

-why I don't like dancing around
people. The weird ones. Like that
girl.

WARIS

That's valid.

EDDIE

And also the fact that our first
kiss was like that too.

Waris raises his eyebrows.

WARIS

First?

EDDIE

(feeling awkward)

Well- I assumed there would be
more. Um.

WARIS

There can definitely be more. I
just wanna finish the task at hand
first.

Suddenly, despite Waris's best efforts to push, the scooter
stops moving.

EDDIE

Oh my God.

WARIS

What's going on?

EDDIE

I think the scooter locked out. It
does this sometimes.

Eddie reaches down and starts jiggling the switch on the side
of the scooter that locks and unlocks it.

EDDIE (CONT'D)

I'm so sorry about all this.

WARIS

Hey, it's no big deal.

EDDIE

Yes it is! You're sacrificing your
fun night in order to help push
some guy in a scooter.

WARIS

Hey, hey. You're not "some guy."

EDDIE

That's not the point.

WARIS

Then what is the point?

Eddie straightens out.

EDDIE

I don't like being dependent on

people!!

WARIS

Ah.

Beat.

WARIS (CONT'D)

You know it's okay to ask for help.

EDDIE

But that's what everyone expects me
to do. And it's embarrassing!

WARIS

Listen. I think you need to stop
caring about what other people
think about them. They're them.
You're you. Don't let other people
get in the way of your best self.

EDDIE

But it's not just other people
getting in the way. It's the world,
which, by the way, isn't designed
for people like me.

WARIS

Which is exactly why you need
people who care about you to help!

Beat.

EDDIE

...You just met me.

WARIS

Doesn't mean I can't already care
about you.

EDDIE

(flustered)

...Thanks. I... care about you too.
I, uh, think you should be able to
push now. I think I fixed it.

Waris begins to push again.

EDDIE (CONT'D)

And thanks for being so helpful.

WARIS

Of course.
Eddie glances back at Waris. They lock eyes and smile at each
other as we...
FADE TO BLACK

GISELLE MILLS



Giselle is a soon-to-be graduating senior from Birmingham, Michigan, who hopes to write for the rest of her life. She is currently writing an honors thesis about sixteenth century peasant clothing and wills. Giselle loves poetry, taking photos with her mom's 1989 Canon film camera, and knitting hats for her loved ones.

Earthly Matter

I tell myself it's magnetism, the way flies circle me like vultures. The flowers next to me wilt more quickly, and boiling water evaporates in giant rain droplets when I watch. It does not make me sad. I take and take and vibrate with new protonic life. The small indent on the top of my head is the north pole and the sole of my left foot is the south. My guts are somehow the tides and my lungs, the moon. I am pulling everything inside of me, subconscious and essential. A supernova is nearing, boiling blue until it reaches me. White dwarf stars are swallowed by the aftermath of Mars in my muddy red dust. I tell myself it's magnetism, the way I am becoming the only existing biomass. I snack on pollinator beetles and I have sown a galaxy's trophic cascade. Dinner will be small—grilled cheese and a bite of nuclear fusion.

In Reverse

Two weeks from now I turned my watch backwards
Counter-clockwise and time moved in reverse
In a few years, I will be a little girl again
With the widow un-maker holding my hand
Swim backstroke through puberty and bullies
But this time, I will only become less wise
Un-knowing and inverted, swinging
In my father's arms, and crying as my mother
Cleaved curls from hairbrush to head
I wish to hold my childhood cat again
Though I will be petting her the wrong way
Night will become evening and then morning
The brown, brittle parchment leaves will rise
And ripen red, and un-bloom
Summer will die as spring blossoms and cools
Perhaps everything will be better backwards
Or, perhaps, as I near the day I was born
It won't matter much anyway

Split-Pairs from Ireland

I left a black feather on a five-foot-tall rock pile
On the edge of a lighthouse cliff in Dingle, Ireland
White birds circled the crag with un-flapping wings
Why I did not choose a rock is a mystery and secret
To leave a more permanent fixture of my existence
But still, my long, dark feather sat alone, bracing the wind.
Most natural things seem to come in pairs:
Seagulls, sheep, socks, and other good sets
I hope that the Greeks were wrong about split-pairs
(Gaelic does not have a word for *soulmate*)
It seems fitting that my feather may rest in rubble
Or may now be floating, waterlogged, drowning in the
Cold Atlantic. Sometimes I dream that I have lost
My other half. Sometimes I wish them burned and buried
And miles away, and then I hope I am enough alone:
Like a hammerhead shark, a snow globe, a seaside lighthouse
Or a single feather among many ancient stones.

Self-Portrait While I Dream

Night tolls, brought by sleep and supper
Pillows are tucked and sheets are fluffed
Children have put their parents to bed

The sun offers breathing black holes
The moon touches my face with her fingertips
And kisses the air around me

The Sandman rests on a low cloud
And I dust his eyes and leave my umbrella
So he may dream, too

I am an astronaut, in my big white envelope
In a great blue house.

HALEY BROSNAN



Haley is a freshman at UMich in the UROP Creative Writing program. She loves to write poetry and short fiction, exploring themes of emotional complexity, empowerment, and loss. When she isn't writing, she likes to go on walks, paint, and listen to music. In the future, she hopes to gain a professorship and publish her own books, with the intent of both creating change and exploring the multiplicities of the human experience.

Deep Dark Fears

I'm afraid that one day, when I die,
the coroner will push his scalpel through my weakened sternum,
sinking deep into my rotting flesh,
like seaweed and sand, like blackened muck,
like the swamps back home in late November,
rimmed with decay and stagnant water, freezing to the touch.

I'm afraid he'll peel back my ribs, one by one,
flesh falling tender off the bone,
divulging a stinking, slimy, wet cavity,
slick with the film of my memories.
A grief I could never scrub away;
defining every crevice of my being, coating my intestines,
choking my nerves,
calcified in my bloated arteries.

I'm afraid that my liver, my lungs,
blackened by the promise of relief, unattainable solace,
will lie naked, exposed on the cool metal table
smelling of poison and pungent sin.
Unsalvageable, no use for a diseased body,
a walking corpse,
cause of death indiscernible.

I'm afraid he'll pull out my heart,
swollen, veins bulging with rot.
Oozing secrets, thick tar dripping down,
staining his gloved fist, its scent sultry, suffocating,
A disgusting display of what I was, what I am—
a hunger, a hatred, a wholeness;
ecstasy, violence, truth, fear;
The skull of a deer I found at the bottom of the swamp, back home;

I'm afraid I'll find out what it's like to drown.

Returning

After all this time,
 there's beauty in the aftermath.
Maybe I'm not supposed to
 say it, yet, it's there:
the calcified remains of Pompeii,
 statuesque and screaming,
playing, loving, fucking, or
 the forests of Chernobyl;
flora and fauna reclaimed
 their rightful place, however damaged by the past.
There's beauty in revisiting
 that house on Willow Street, brick and climbing leaves;
I can still remember my drawings of her,
 next to the vanity, a shrine to herself,
where she cried to me, rewatching her first play,
 talking about God until dawn;
where we spent countless nights, consumed by light
 and love and trust, terrifyingly vulnerable;
where she mauled, Brutus, eyes full of nothing
 alcohol and smoke fouling her breath;
where she called me a whore, slut, crazy bitch
 and where we made music-laughing.
...
Places, people,
 we all contain multitudes.
A crayon drawing for mother on the fridge,
 drunk walks home from the bar,
the subtle barring of a classmate,
 our first kiss, our last,
when we wouldn't meet eyes with the beggar on Jefferson
 while our change chimed in our pockets, a confessional hymn.
Everything that we have been and will be
 sits inside of us, in this room, all at once.

There's no such thing as black or white, good or bad,
it just is.
And maybe I'm not supposed to say it, but
I forgive you for it all.

you fight to win and by god,
you haven't lost yet.

TAYLOR BURNHAM



Taylor is currently a sophomore at the University of Michigan double majoring in psychology and creative writing. She enjoys writing fiction short stories, poetry, and lyrics, delving into themes of romance and mental health. Beyond writing, her interests include crocheting, reading, and exploring herself through musical expression. Taylor aspires to create stories that audiences can empathize with and find comfort in, and she hopes to finish writing her first novel in the coming years.

Tick...Tock

10:20

The waiting room of the corporate office for *Today* magazine was filled with eager applicants.

The hand sewn chairs outlining the room were taken up by women dressed in flattering gowns and red-bottomed high heels. Silver and gold bands embellished their appearances, and the bold lip color on each one of their faces displayed an evident confidence. Leah analyzed the intricate details of each woman's outfit, then sheepishly gazed down at her own attire: black slacks, creased flats, and an obnoxiously floral blouse from Old Navy. The women perfectly imitated the models portrayed on the magazine covers decorating the eggshell walls; Leah had thought it was just an interview for an administrative assistant position.

10:21

As the women around her shuffled papers and looked at themselves in their phone cameras, Leah stared at the glass clock in front of her. The second hand must have been broken because it moved in minutes. She played with her hands, sliding the fingernail of her index finger under her thumb and flicking upwards. The white polish covering her nails chipped with each fidget. She hoped no one would notice. But she was concerned that the woman sitting next to her could hear the clacking of her nails pressing together, so Leah paused. The woman next to her—fashioned in an elegant violet halter dress—was reading her resume, checking to make sure every page was in its proper place. Leah tried to glance over at the blurred font, but she could only imagine what might be inscribed on that document:

MA in Journalism from Northwestern University

Intern at the Chicago Reporter

First place National Writing Champion for the Hearst Journalism Awards Program

Leah felt a pit form in her stomach as she attempted to find ways to twist her accomplishments into something as remotely impressive as her imagination's expectations. But her community college transfer credits, a bachelor's degree in creative writing from a local university, and a third-place award in a school writing competition could hardly compete. Leah imagined that every woman applying for the position had qualifications of a high pres-

tige. She envisioned herself being surrounded by Ivy League graduates who had been taught by the greatest journalists in the world and interned for well-known newspapers. Leah had dreamed of attending an esteemed institution. She spent the entirety of her high school career working towards a desired acceptance, only to be wounded by endless rejections. Leah worried this interview would end the same way. She resumed the action with her fingernails. Her leg decided to join in the movement with its signature shake; her foot bounced almost as fast as the speed of her heart.

10:22

Leah started to wonder about the importance of this position: did it matter if she got it? Did she really want to put herself through the humiliation of being rejected? She could leave now, save herself the embarrassment of sitting through the interview, and return home in time for the afternoon shift at Walmart. But this clerk position could be the long-awaited catalyst to Leah becoming a journalist–assistant to full-time writer at Today magazine–so she chose to stay.

Bagging groceries and dealing with unsatisfied customers could only take her so far; she had to give herself the chance to see what might happen, to see if her dreams were worth pursuing. But that notion failed to cease the dreadful movement of her body.

10:23

The woman next to her continued to check her resume. She sat perfectly still in perfect silence, except for the occasional delicate flipping of the page. She never looked at the clock. Her

tanned, slim legs were crossed in a way that portrayed a sense of maturity and assurance. Leah's legs were tightly twisted around each other in evident discomfort, bouncing with quick repetition.

Her whole being emulated this pattern, and it felt like everyone in the room noticed. Leah felt the woman's eyes next to her shift from the paper to Leah's legs then her hands. She wondered if the woman could see her heart. She sensed a feeling of disgust coming from the woman's side profile. Leah tried to adjust her posture to stop the movement, but the sound and action of her shifting made her even more noticeable. Suddenly, she felt the pressure of dozens of eyes staring at her.

10:24

Leah took a deep breath. She relaxed her muscles and adjusted herself in her seat one last time.

Clumsily crossing her legs and pretending to have perfect posture, she did

her best to imitate the woman next to her. She placed her hands on her knees and closed her eyes. It would be okay. She would get through the interview, and everything would be fine. There was no need to think about the other women and speculate about what schools they attended or how many writing contests they have won; all she needed was to focus on herself and answer the interview questions as best she could. And even if she failed to receive a job offer, she would still be proud of herself for trying. Maybe.

10:25

Leah opened her eyes to the clear, glossy exterior of the waiting room's only clock. Five more minutes until her interview. Five more minutes until she would prove herself in spoken

responses. But there was also the possibility that the hours she spent preparing for any and every question she could possibly be asked were a total waste. She might get in there and shake the interviewer's wrist or blank at the simplest questions:

"Where did you attend university?"

...

"What are your career goals?"

...

Leah dug her fingernails into the cotton fabric of her slacks. Her foot began to bounce.

10:26

Maybe journalism was not the career field for her. Maybe she could move up the corporate ladder at Walmart. Her three years of stocking expertise and kindness behind the counter had already granted her the assistant manager position, and Jose said he was looking for a new job anyways. She could easily take over the manager position and get promoted to something more prestigious in a few years. Sure, maybe Leah had dreamed of being a journalist her whole life and catered her education towards mastering the art of writing and communication, and maybe she pushed herself to continue holding onto her passion, but things change. Maybe the squeaky wheels of broken shopping carts and the itchiness of that blue vest were her forever. Working there was not a dead end. A career at Walmart could be a great opportunity for her to grow and learn essential life skills, right? She would be happy working there for the rest of her life, right?

10:27

Leah felt her fingernails start to indent her skin, so she placed her hands in her lap. Her fingers retreated to the false comfort of playing with her nails;

the nail on her thumb began to rip.

Flames rose in her body, burning her cheeks with a deep red shade and drying up any last traces of saliva. Her shirt stuck to her back as sweat seeped through the material. Her eyes remained focused on the clock. Its ticks echoed louder with each movement, drowning out the hushed voices that filled the room. The lack of numbers made it difficult to discern the time through her now fogged vision. She followed the second hand with deep intensity. It was fucking with her mind.

10:28

There was no way she would ever get this position. She was going to fuck up the interview, and they would tell every other local magazine and newspaper about her and she would never get a job anywhere noteworthy. She would never succeed as a journalist, not even as an administrative assistant. She would probably write things down wrong or spill coffee everywhere. She looked like shit. Her resume was shit. Why did she ever think this was a good idea? She was destined to be rejected. Leah bit her lip to stop herself from crying; she tasted blood. Her efforts did not work. She wanted to ask the woman next to her for a tissue but decided to wipe the evidence of weakness on her sleeve.

10:29

How can a minute take so long? A young lady in a black bodycon dress walked into the waiting room from the opaque glass door that led to the main offices. A cocky smile adorned her face as she looked around at the rest of the women waiting for their interviews. She walked slowly to the entrance of the facility as she took the time to ensure her heels clicked loudly on the hardwood floor. Leah was fucked.

10:30

The clock's hands ticked into position; it was time for her interview. Why had nobody called her back?

10:31

"Leah Melbrook?"

The main entrance door of the facility slammed shut. She was nowhere to be found.

ELINA SCHNAPER



Elina is an exchange student from Germany spending this Academic Year at UM. The study abroad allowed her to finally pursue her oldest passion, writing, in a Creative Writing class. She uses poetry as her main emotional outlet, and often explores the topics she feels most fascinated and shaped by – culture and language – within it. In her free time, she enjoys spending time with friends and good coffee, dancing, or going for walks in the Arb. She hopes that her poems are able to capture and convey her unfiltered thoughts, feelings and persona.

Hail! to the heroes valiant

dedicated to the people in Ukraine

And so
a year has passed.
In my dreams I see a facade of uprising columns,
perfectly parallel they somehow
vanish
into the sky,
color of sand, close to forfeit.

Perhaps the city of my past looks like this picture of my dreams,
grains not only slide through sand clocks but also break off of
crumbling monuments.

There is nothing monumental about breaking
apart or tearing
apart
for that matter.

Some refuse to listen to this wisdom still,
my heart refuses to stop
breaking
while an old man without one
refuses to stop
tearing
apart
a whole sea of hearts,
perhaps more commonly called
a nation.

Perhaps the building of my dreams resembles –
not fear or heartache for the unconsciously known,
or unknown overall,
as I have not once stepped foot onto the land it claims to be placed in –
instead: a very real monument
I might have seen in the background of pictures,
photographs in my parents' living room or
the calendar on my grandmother's kitchen tiles,

dressed in a subtle cover of dust that emerged from broiling water in the
color of blood,
color of beet
root
borschtsch is made from.

Perhaps I still associate the flags and advertisement in this town with
not a *capital* M
but a country whose *capital*
my root grew from, on, forwards.
Perhaps when I stroll these streets I do not think of maize and blue,
but sunflower fields and a cloudless sky pressed onto a flag.
Perhaps I do not want this to be changed,
rather the blue-yellow place in my heart to remain reserved for the Ukrain-
ian emblem
instead of an institution somewhere in the Midwest.
Perhaps I want to refrain from sharing pride,
of a school or a nation,
perhaps I will never join in with songs hailing those fighting
in football games or a war,
for a country I know nothing about, have nothing from, belong in no way to
apart from through
dreams
and roots, long broiled away.
Perhaps all I can make is assumptions,
no pledges nor pleas,
merely try to press the image of a crumbling monument into the minds of
those listening,
the way two colors are pressed onto a sheet to be proudly waived once vic-
tory
finally arrives
and enough sand corns have been wasted.

Love Letters of Language

To: the silenced mind

How strange it is to be estranged through lack of words. My mother told me that I value the purity of language, and her words made me feel steadier as I've come to know myself better through them.

She argued me to be a thinker rather than feeler. I perceive the world through observations packed

in phrases, ready to launch them off into my mind. The mind of a whirlwind. Today it is a whirlwind

itself, effervescent, while not packageable emotions thread themselves in-between. Today, I lack

words in any language, first and foremost in the language of affect. Unreasonable sadness always

ceases to exist within my acknowledgment. When I cannot tie it to any source with my bare hands,

whirlwind's storms pick it up from the ground, elevate it, toss it around. Make it merge with

exhaustion and emptiness. How tiring it is, having to constantly look up words online, translating

feelings into verbal concepts so that they can be grasped by either people or paper. The worst days

are the ones requiring an interpreter between head and Heart. It is those days I come to feel as if I

unlearned everything that makes me human, or myself at least, in whatever relation the first stands

to latter. Knowing how to communicate, not with gestures or tilting sounds but phrases filled with

purity. There is no pure language I learned here, there is not one language worth more than another.

They teach me not just how to speak in another language but how to be just, to understand that

code-switching is a demonstration of high cognitive capacity. Jumping from the iron grammar track of one language to another smoothly. Ironic indeed, in that have I not been taught not to do so my whole life? When like today,

I am forced into, rather than lost in, translation. Between soul and sound. I do not talk when I do not know how to say that I am alas not fine. Instead compressed as interpreter and buffer, between cultures and continents, how tiring it gets to keep multiple vocabulary sets and time stamps in one's head. Or even more tiring: getting tired of the fear of tiring others with your own fears. Today, I am afraid of bringing boredom to them, nevertheless busy tracing feelings, their contours, along the lines, searching between, back to my mind. I suppose whirlwinds are destined to turn into tornados at last.

To: the speaking soul

Your heart is not an eternal well of energy. Somewhere hidden beneath the surface there is everchanging water, whose waves beat in rhythms of unevenness. Little bubbles float towards a blue curtain of mirroring paillettes.

Beneath the surface there is another surface, always, beneath earth there is the ground of a well waiting, within which water waves cluster above, beneath them once again something to dive into.

This is how I see your soul, my dear. Shallow waters, steep springs never settling out of movement.

Once you start writing, you put your pencil on a thin sheet that makes it seem as if your soul can be seen, however deceiving that might be.

Once you start writing, nevertheless, you pour your essence onto the earth, you pump water out of this well, you make liquid drip on grass, tint on parchment, tears on tissues. Out it is. You pour your heart out. You turn your soul inside out. Because it wants out, it screams for the ability to breath and be heard, and while bubbles of air rise to water's surface and water rises out of the well, it greedily gasps for air.

Your essence is yearning for visibility, once it sets foot down on this earth it begins bathing itself in the light of affection, or attention at least. Stretching towards the sun, almost as if they were newborn, your thoughts emerge through being perceived by others. This

nature's ground is bound to tangibility.

So is your essence, so is your soul, for in the shadow it was born, but everything alive aches to

expand, grow, overflow.

And thus, you write, you make your self being witnessed, letters seen, emotions heard, so that your

mind doesn't dwell on its own echo captured within well's walls.

And thus, you continue grasping for the rush of adrenaline that emersion creates, the rush with which fresh air enters your lungs. When dragging your own deepest internalized thoughts towards the surface of your lips, fingertips, this well's stonewall. Forever doomed to wait for the sun to reach the water swaying at its bottom, within you there is rather patiently resting shade. And though it is dark, it does not lack any warmth, as in order for shadow to exist there needs to be sunlight first.

And thus, you write to mediate between them, obscurity and obviousness, tranquility and vibrancy,

quietness and frequency. And though your heart is not an eternal well of energy, and it tires you to

push the pump and drag the water out, and the water's voyage leaves less behind, time does solve it

all. Power returning to your pumping arms, succeeding drops following up to fill the well again.

Do not disrespect time, my dear, do not disrespect the need to rest in quiet, but do trust. For your

heart may not be an eternal well of energy, but the world in which it lies embedded certainly is.

MELINA SCHAEFER



Melina is a 4th year student studying English and Creative Writing with a minor in the History of Art. Melina is especially interested in the way words and images can come together to create meaning, and is passionate about analog forms of photography and media. She's also interested in public art and writing, and the arts as a powerful tool for societal change.

Different Lights

This night presses heavily on us. The streets are flooded with people despite the late hour. The tube is suspended because of a strike, and it seems like the city has regurgitated up every living thing. People swarm at the bus stops, listing towards the street and heaving back again as the bus approaches.

It passes them by without stopping. It's like discovering a rat's nest: a layer has been peeled away to reveal the writhing and twisting bodies, and the stakes of being alive sort of hit you square in the face.

"Let's duck through here," Liam says, already turning down an unlit street. The smell of rotting flowers, fallen from the tree above, mixes with the rain. A carpet of petals softens our footfalls.

"There's something odd about seeing flowers at night," I say, staring up. Liam walks quickly. There's a space between us where all the shattered things we thought were certain lay broken. The space is equal to two reaching hands coming together, two bodies taking a step to connect. It crackles with the impossibility of those things occurring.

Water slicks the roads so they reflect the overhead lights. The rain falls sporadically in fat drops, like something is slowly melting from above. We're in the West End, having just caught a show that we were ten minutes late for because we were busy breaking up. The play was mediocre, but I sobbed. It was the first time I cried at a performance.

"I think if we just take the 406 we should be fine," Liam says, throwing the words behind him. "How does that sound?" This phrase functions more as punctuation than a question.

We're on a busy street now, jostled under the harsh lights as if on stage.

In Soho it was always daytime, so even if it was dark outside you could see the grotesque faces of nighttime people in high definition. Drunk here meant what drunk always meant: smudged eye makeup and heels in your hands and arms taut with the promise of sex around waists swathed in cheap and glimmering fabric. But these things aren't under the cover of darkness but rather shining beneath a spotlight, making them ridiculous and vulgar where they might otherwise have been seductive or vital.

"I wonder what we look like," I say to Liam, who charges ahead of me. I don't know if the words reach his ears.

There are also nights where the sky is infinitely tall, and just beyond the ceiling yawns a gigantic potential for life and living. This was the kind of night that I met Liam, almost a year ago now. The bar was full and dim, with light squeezing in from the streets through the windows. I was on my third drink and the big night was already under my skin. I was itching to dance.

Hana grabbed my hand and pulled me to the center of the room. Hana is delicious, the kind of girl that deserves to lay on a chaise lounge and be fed cherries and expensive cocktails. Her skin is soft and white against her tight black blouse, and even in this dim bar a triangle of light found its way to the cleft between her breasts as we made our space to dance.

Some pop song played overhead, and the crowd latched on to it.

Everyone began to pulsate and bounce from one another like pinballs. I felt the tips of my long hair brushing my naked waist as I moved.

A face swam through the crowd. The light revealed him in pieces, each only visible for a second. Mustache, mole like a teardrop above the cheekbone, thick black brows. Where are the eyes?

Closer and closer it came, light flashing triangles and circles. The eyeless face was almost upon me. I stood still in the jittering crowd. He was there suddenly, taller than me. I had to crane my neck up. A rectangle of light slipped between the blinds and landed on his eyes.

“Can I dance with you?” the face with eyes asked.

Hana disapproved of Liam. She pouted with her rosebud lips at his arrival, like she knew before it happened exactly where he would grab hold of me. She knew how easily it would be for him to drag me into his world. She saw different words written across his face than I did; unreliable where I saw spontaneous, directionless where I saw carefree.

Liam didn't like Hana either, but sometimes I wonder if it was really because they were so similar. They both rode life like a wave, rising and falling on its undulations without concern.

Hana held her hands out and men fell there, men looking to touch her soft skin, fill her appetite for tiny, expensive treats, and keep her clothed in beautiful things (and yes, to unclothe her as well). Liam held out his hands and took hold of what he wanted while discarding what he did not. A couple words of poetry, the rest of the book laid aside, spine up. The plumpest blueberries in the carton. Me, minus my friendship with Hana (that had to go). Hana disliked the violence with which he took, and Liam disliked the passive way Hana got what she wanted. But at the end of the day, I saw two people that didn't think to ask if they should have something or if it could be theirs,

but rather how they would make the world see that this belongs to them and indeed had always belonged to them.

His hand found my waist with a touch so light I couldn't tell what was a brush of my own hair and what was the brush of his fingers. The moment could have been nothing more than this: two people snapping together in the dark like magnets. It could not be the genesis of heartbreak, or a fraught walk through rainy Soho on a heavy night. It could be nothing more than dancing in a bar, electric with the possibilities. The what ifs.

We danced.

"This is the stop!" Liam says.

It's not as busy as most of the bus stops we've seen so far. There isn't room to sit, but there is room to stand under the awning. We're side by side, not touching. I watch the cars roll by. The red tail lights of passing traffic throw a hot glow onto the planes of Liam's face, and the teardrop mole on his cheekbone looks nearly black.

I'm surrounded by strangers who want to get home. I wonder if anyone wants to get home as badly as I do right now. The words leave my mouth without permission: "Liam..."

I sense him go stiff next to me and swivel around. His eyes are big and real for just a second before the shutters relax again. "Yeah?" he asks nonchalantly.

At that moment, the bus approaches and everyone stands up and shuffles forward. It's full, but the driver still lets us on. We're moving up the stairs to the upper level just as the bus lurches forward, and Liam puts his arm behind me as I fall backwards slightly.

I think the only thing more heartbreaking than craving a touch that isn't yours is craving a touch that once meant something different. I jump back from his arm and run up the rest of the stairs. He's not far behind, and we find two open seats at the back of the bus and sit down.

I look at the lap of the woman beside me. The bones of her knee push through the mesh of her black tights, her nervous fingers tapping the hard-cover book she holds. My gaze travels around the bus, looking at all the people packed here, facing forward like a congregation at church. It's like we're worshipping the window at the front, the one which will eventually show us a place close to home.

If I happen to look to my left at Liam's lap, I know I'll see his sandaled feet, comically Californian in the rainy English weather. I'll see his light wash jeans that he never wears except on special occasions, and his legs will most likely

be crossed. The sandal of his right foot will be hanging off, so that the sole of his foot is intimately visible. But I don't look. I wonder how long it will take before I can't paint him so clearly.

"Oh shit," he says. I look up at him. His face cracks open into a great big smile as it tends to do when something goes wrong. He's looking at his phone, at the little blinking bead moving up a line. "We're on the wrong bus."

It was June and it was raining outside, but it was too dark to watch the rivulets bunch together and tumble to the bottom of the window. In fact it was so dark that it seemed like someone had wrapped the whole car in a big swath of velvet.

Liam and I were on our way to Marlow, a town an hour or so from London by car. I had won a small award, something about amateur writing and up-and-coming young authors. There was a dinner to present the award, and Liam had said he could borrow a friend's car to take us there in "style."

A song played in the background that I would come to always associate with delirious nighttime drives. There was a blanket on my lap. He was looking straight ahead, but would sometimes take his hand from the wheel and hold mine for a little while. It made me nervous, him with one hand driving the car very fast.

We were new and fresh, dating just long enough to realize we knew nothing about each other. I had become shy, and he had become talkative in a way where I could just sit and listen.

Sometimes, I would look up at the window and pretend to be marveling at the velvet night, but really I was looking at the watery reflection of him in the driver's seat, projected up into the sky upside down.

"What if I told you," he said, "that the map stopped working half an hour ago and that we're terribly lost?"

Two paths split very clearly in my mind. One was to say what I wanted to say, which was that the award would be given in an hour and that we needed to be there on time. The other was what I knew he wanted, the one that could lead to adventure and discovery and perhaps most important of all, Liam's joy.

"I don't mind at all."

Liam directed the full force of his smile at me. Already, the language between us was developing. We knew without saying anything more that Liam was in control. We would not go to the award ceremony. Liam would craft for us, with his beautiful mind, a memory better than fiction.

We slowed down and turned onto a road. The headlights swung to reveal an alley of trees. The rain came down harder, a gentle hum on the car roof as we inched down the path.

The path eventually spit us out into a clearing. There was a vacant parking lot and a trailhead revealed by the flash of the lights. Liam parked the car and turned the full force of his smile to me. "Come on!" he said brightly.

Stepping out of the warmth of the car, I realized we had been driving through something great and powerful. Rain came down in curtains, but you couldn't so much as see it but hear it. There was a constant sigh of drops on leaves and dirt. The rain was touching me and it was touching the trees and the animals and the trailhead and the car, and it felt as if we were all under the same blanket.

Liam grabbed my hand. He had his phone's flashlight trained on the trailhead's skinny path, which plummeted into wilderness.

The velvet of the night filled your ears and your brain so that it seemed the only thing beyond your thoughts. Liam's hand felt like the anchor which kept us both from flying away.

We walked in silence, following the path cut for us by the flashlight. We came to a place where the path briefly diverged and reconvened around a mound of earth, upon which sat the thickest and tallest pine tree I'd ever seen.

An ancient feeling settled in my chest as we gazed at the spiraling branches.

Liam let go of my hand and approached the tree and reached out to a low branch. He plucked a couple of needles, watching them roll in his hand. Liam had a way of reaching through and grasping things that mattered.

He came back and looked at me very seriously. The light illuminated him in such a way that grotesque blue shadows settled in the hollows of his face.

His eyes were very dark as he solemnly lifted the needles to my nose.

The smell of green spring lit my head on fire. Flowers, earth, dirt, ocean, life and death. A smell that brought me to a new place rather than an old memory. My eyes were closed, but Liam's blue and white face burned bright on the back of my eyelids. I felt fingers skim my bare arm before taking hold of my hand.

It wasn't until later, home in my flat, that I even thought to question why we were there, how he knew about that park, and why we were so far east when Marlow is a clear shot west of the city.

"Liam, I think this is the wrong way..." I say, trailing behind him. We had ended up far east, where the buildings were short and made of brick. It's the

sort of place families might live when the parents worked in the city. They looked like two trains on either side of an empty road, stretching down the bend as a series of identical cars.

“Oh?” Liam says absently, looking in through the curtained windows.

Silhouettes of people sometimes passed across like a shadow puppet show.

“He has no respect for the privacy of others,” Hana had scoffed, back when we were still friends.

“Hey, check this out!” Liam says, pointing up at a tree overhead with clouds of white blossoms.

I look at his profile admiring the flowers. The street light glowed behind his head. It was like being in an eclipse, waiting for color to come back to the world.

Liam turned his head sharply to me. It’s the first time he’s really looked at me all night. I can’t see well with his features blotted by the light behind him, but I do see him smile. He turns around and walks opposite the tree. He faces it, takes a deep breath, and runs full force at it, jumping at the last moment. His fingers splay and grasp for a flower before he comes back down hard on the pavement.

“One more time,” he says, eyes still trained on the tree like it’s an enemy.

Again and again he tries, flinging himself at the tree. I begin to focus on the point of the street that curves into the unknown. Places like this have always made me uneasy; places where the buildings look just the same. I wonder if everyone who lives in these houses is the same too, if they sit down to the same dinner of roast vegetables and salmon at night, if they all leave the water running while they brush their teeth.

I think about Marlow again, and how we never made it there. I think about the rising lump in my throat as I stare at that clef where the street disappears round the bend, and how perhaps beyond it are a hundred or a thousand more streets just like this one. I think about how I want to go home, and how I am scared of this place.

“Here!” Liam says, standing in front of me again with a handful of petals. The wind blows and one petal escapes. “You know, I’ve always felt like there’s something so strange about flowers at night.”

“I haven’t seen you in months,” Hana said flatly. Translation: I miss dancing with you.

“I’m sorry Hana,” I said as I looked down at the smudge of my cappuccino. I was embarrassed to have become the “boyfriend girl”. But I’m not the sort to

make excuses.

We were sitting in what had once been our favorite cafe. Here, fabulous Italian women struggle to use the card machine and think they know your usual order but never get it quite right. The sign on the window says crêpes, but only one woman knows how to make them, and she's only in on sundays. Next time, next time! my favorite Italian woman says, the one that is the most fabulous.

"Yeah, well..." Hana said, looking outside of the window to her left.

Translation: grovel a little more please.

"I've been so busy with work lately, but I promise with things slowing down during the summer I'll be able to hang out more."

"Work?" Hana said, rolling her eyes at me. "Is that your newest pet name for Liam?"

I felt myself blush. Hana knows this will hurt me the most. By "this", I suppose I mean the truth. But Hana always has been good at the truth, as long as it's directed at other people.

"I just don't get it," she said, shaking her head. "How you can give him so much of you."

This translation was a bit tougher. Perhaps: You spend too much time with him, when you should be devoting all of your time to me. But her dark eyes looked earnest.

"It's because I love him," I said, getting a thrill. I felt like a woman when I said them, a woman with a man who she loved and stood by. That cliché felt good in my mouth.

"I see..." Hana said, picking her words carefully. "I see how you look at him. Like, I don't know, like everything he does is poetry to you."

I felt a lump in my throat. "Well, maybe it is Hana. Maybe the way he lives his life is inspiring to me. I can't live like that, but he helps me to try."

"Like what?" Hana said, rolling her eyes. "He's pretentious and egotistical. If that's what you mean, then yeah, you shouldn't live like that."

I didn't like how deeply that jab went. I didn't like that Hana had gone that far, and I especially didn't like the hot, sick tears burning at the back of my eyes all of a sudden.

"At least he doesn't leave me waiting for hours cause he's at some hookup, or forgets to wish me a happy birthday, or ices me out when I go on a date. Cause that's just stuff that you do, right?"

Silence. The Italian baristas had stopped the quiet chit chat, listening instead to our conversation. Hana looked at me in a way she never had before.

“People will want the world from someone like you, since you need someone to give it to,” Hana said, her eyes two periods, one at the end of this conversation and one at the end of this friendship. Translation: you like to be powerless.

It all came apart very simply, so quietly that neither of us knew what was happening until it was too late. It was like pulling a piece of string to undo a bow. The string slid out from under itself so easily it makes you wonder if it held anything in the first place.

We were on a walk in the little pocket of grass across from my flat. Liam was pointing out the different types of birds that rustled the bushes and pecked at the half-frozen ground: the goldfinch, the wood pigeon, the blackbird. The sky was a gray ceiling and we were holding hands. I was listening to the sound of our feet hitting the pavement of the path. It was cold out, but the park was dotted with premature life. Families strolled in their light jackets, and kids with cheeks pink from the March wind rooted around in the dirt looking for

spring. There was a dampness in the air, like something was melting and releasing whatever was locked up in the ice crystals. A sister and brother were playing with a big plastic truck near the edge of the path. It was a dump truck and it was all different colors: reddish-pink, yellow, lime green. The little girl pushed down on it hard with her hand, digging it into the ground as she moved it along.

Liam was still talking about the birds. I was thinking about the truck. I was thinking about a truck I used to have when I was a kid, a truck that my brother and I used to fight over. We would play with it in the sandbox, even when it had just rained and all the sand clumped together. In fact, this was the best time to play in it.

“Are you listening to me?” Liam said, looking down at me in irritation.

“Let’s break up.”

It’s amazing how all words are just words. How let’s break up and I love you are made of the same stuff as let’s have pizza for dinner or have you seen my hat? I didn’t realize I was capable of saying that without the world shattering to pieces. For some reason, I thought someone would stop me. But there we were, in the park, with the brother and sister and their truck, and everything going on the same except just this one little thing, the space between us (which isn’t really a thing but the absence of a thing) taking on new meaning.

“What?” Liam said, turning towards me with a look of shock.

See, where the space between us had once been a promise, or a secret, or very small or very great, it had now become exactly that: a space. As in a space to cross, a space to respect, a space that would not collapse. It was the space equal to two reaching hands coming together, two bodies taking a step to connect. It crackled with the impossibility of those things occurring.

We stopped walking. The rhythm of our footsteps stopped. Our footsteps across shining gallery floors and over carpets of rotting pine needles and barefoot on kitchen tile; all the footsteps of all the things we would never do together trampled me. I started to cry. He continued to hold my hand, staring, silent.

The tall city buildings butt up against the ceiling of the sky. We've gone east where we needed to go west, the bus leaving us somewhere expensive and made of steel and tempered glass.

Where Soho was a bath of light and sound, this place was sharp lines and angles, like it was made of nothing more than layers of paper on top of a black sheet. Liam pushed ahead, hands buried so deep in his pockets that his arms were straight by his sides. He got so far down the street that I couldn't tell the difference between his silhouette and the shadow his figure threw from the street light.

He pulled further and further ahead. His name got stuck in my throat. He was a black blemish, a dead zone against the slick and shining street. He was a sonata subsiding so gently that sound could not be distinguished from silence.

He was the word *fin* at the end of a black and white film, scrawled in cursive across the screen. He wasn't going, he was already gone, even though he had yet to disappear.

Space hurts. But maybe, I'm realizing, closeness hurts too. I'm still holding the petals in my hand, and they're crumpled and nestled in my palm lines.

I told myself that when he finally turned around to look for me, I wouldn't be there. And so I started moving backwards, my eyes never leaving the shape of him. I tell myself lies about how, if he turns around, then we're meant to be together. I break my own heart when I see that he won't. This is the hazard of closeness to insurmountable space: you break your own heart.

My feet move slowly but surely behind me, and I grow to enjoy the sound of my footfalls on the road. I'm approaching the street that I know will take me home. Still, I stare, straining my eyes to see movement in the disappearing

figure. The corner arrives to my left.

“Liam!” I cry. This time, the sound isn’t stuck in my throat. In fact, it’s so loud it cracks the night in half; It blows the top off the suffocating sky. The whole thing breaks open, the buildings and the clouds and the silence. My shout rises from between the raindrops and ricochets off the buildings. I see the black smudge shudder and turn.

“Goodbye!” I say, waving. My hand transverses like I’m tracing a rainbow.

The shadow of Liam remains still against the motion of the rain in the street lights. I’m a smudge of a person to him too. Our smallness to each other was created by a mutual pulling away from the spot where we were once together. I feel the string that connected us quiver.

I turned down the street. The houses were shorter here, and older too.

The streetlights threw a warm light. I look at the curtained window to my left and see the vague shape of my reflection. Her edges are watery, vague. I cannot see her face.

BOOKER CROSS



I've always thought I've been bad at first impressions. I feel I can often fail to dial it back and on the first date, maybe at an Olive Garden, and ask my date if they feel like they are anybody's best friend or if they think anyone knows them better than they know themselves. I think it's important to come out of the gate running, to approach the topic at hand with a fierce intensity. Should that intensity be applied while eating chicken alfredo...maybe not, but it's something I think should be applied to writing. It's one of my favorite reasons to write, as it can force us to feel uncomfortable, and by feeling uncomfortable, I think we become alive.

The Robbery

The museum floor was the color grey. Or was it gray? It was hard to tell. The floor consisted of square tiles, each exactly nineteen-point-one centimeters long. Between the squares, a black grout shimmered during the day, and if it was day, the simple combination of grey/gray tiles, outlined in a black grout, would have been a sight to rival the paintings in this museum. Unfortunately, the museum was in afterhours, so the black was merely an improper luster created by the low hanging tungsten lights.

The artificial lights bask the paintings in an improper heat. In the terrible lighting, a janitor is mopping the floor. It, the janitor, is wearing a grey jumpsuit that is one size too small.

The mop is being swirled in a clock-like motion, the strands sound like falling. The slopping of threads echoes throughout the empty hollow museum. It thinks that if the eyes of the paintings could react to its presence, they would be frozen in a perpetual glare.

For, in the empty museum, with the indiscernible black grout, and the exactly nineteen-point-one centimeters long grey/gray tiles, the reverberation of the mop serves as more than just a reminder that the janitor is, a thing. A thing sloped with a protruding spine that is barely restrained by its skin; a thing that, in the stannic museum light, has a frame with overly wide set shoulders, and hulking arms that results in it having more the silhouette of a hypermasculine door rather than that of an actual human being. Instead, beyond this self-thought grotesqueness, the empty erratic sloshing of filament, highlights the janitor is alone.

The janitor listened to tapes to distance itself from the loneliness. The tapes begin with nothing. For the first thirty seconds or so, there is a vacuous noise, like that of wind sweeping over a barren landscape; the void of sound transports the janitor to this realm. In this moment of escapism, it would be easy to pounce on the procrastinator. Possibly, in this fictitious world where the wind resides, there are creatures that can escape through the cassette tape the janitor is now playing.

In these moments of stillness, one of the cassette creatures could come up behind the janitor, slit the janitor's throat, and splatter blood across the ready-to-be-mopped floor. Before any beasts can end the janitor's life, the tape begins, a voice kicks in, and the janitor returns to its body.

The current tape is about a swing.

The painting is full of muted blues and greens. Colors like the dried-up blood of a horseshoe crab, and the kind of verdigris created when a spool of copper wire is neglectfully left out in the rain. From the upper left corner, a ray of light illuminates the middle of the canvas, there, a woman swings in a salmon dress. It is a comically flouncy dress not made for swinging.

She is wearing a singular kitten heel, as the other has flung off to the left. The woman is smirking; she knows what she's doing. To the bottom left of the pesky swing, a young man, possibly a lover, looks up into the dress. In the bottom right, an old man is enveloped in the leafage. By the old man's feet, there is a mischievous little cloudlike dog.

The first time the janitor had heard this painting, they thought it was about the innate desire to swing, to have that desire to have freedom in the presence of others. It left with a renewed sense to buy a tire swing, and illegally assemble it in the apartment complex park, this desire would fail to come true. The problem wasn't that the janitor would be unable to set up the swing, they had been an engineer in college and their dad was a carpenter, but that they could not stop thinking about one detail of the audio tour. Hidden in descriptions of color and dog barking, there was a mention of baby angel statues. While normal enough, the speaker described the babies as disappointed, and if cherubs were upset something was wrong.

The suspicion filled the janitor become deromanticized entirely to the idea of swinging. It seemed like the painting made one thing clear, that swinging was not for adults.

Of course, it was wrong because what did the janitor know about art? The friend would tell them it was missing vital context to the painting. To get the full story one would have to know that the man below looking up into the dress, and the woman above looking down at him, were siblings.

As the janitor had made another clock-like revolution, the tape came to a stop. Void of air filled the headphones. As the janitor waited for the next painting to be described, it looked up at a painting, it was covered in that artificial light, it looked overly cold. The painting was Saturn Devouring His Son.

A flashlight shined onto the janitor, casting its silhouette onto the piece. "What are you doing Blythe?" a voice said.

The janitor turned around. With its face illuminated, the janitor looked different than its frame would have suggested. The janitor had long straight brown hair that went to its collar bone.

It had brown, almost black eyes that made it look like a deer in a headlight. It had one pierced ear, but no piercing in it. It had long eyelashes, a thin upper lip, and a wide undefined jaw. “Is it time for nightly rounds already?” the janitor said.

“You don’t get paid to stare at the paintings.” The person speaking was the night guard. His name was Jason. He was twenty-nine. He had a receding hairline that he hid beneath a cap from the museum gift shop. There were eight grey/gray tiles between them. Jason shortened the gap to five grey/gray tiles. Jason looked up into the janitor’s eyes. The eyes had the ferocity of someone trying to mimic the incorrect idea of what an alpha wolf’s gaze would be. He had lime-green eyes. They were the same color as the friend’s. The janitor reminisced.

The friend and the janitor were in the janitor’s kitchen. On the table there was a purple vase with baby’s breath. On the friend’s plate, he was picking at a lump of meat. The two of them set at a small semi-circular table. The table didn’t have a tablecloth.

The janitor had invited the friend over for dinner. The janitor had ordered takeout food and was now pretending that the food was its own. Prior to the friend’s arrival, the janitor dirtied several dishes. The friend was into surrealism, and so the janitor had tried to fake a meal that would embody what it thought surrealism meant. It had told the friend that the lump of meat it was picking at was horse.

“I’ve had horse many times,” the friend had said, “And this is one of the best pieces I’ve ever had.” This assertion made the janitor get up and start walking towards the dishes. It took seven grey/gray tiles to reach them, as the janitor walked, the friend’s lime green eyes stared at the back of its head. The faked dishes had been soaking for half an hour. The water was lukewarm. “Why did you buy horse?”

The janitor’s fingers had yet to get pruney, but it could feel the early warnings of wrinkly fingers. It brought its hands out of the water, shook the majority of the water off and tried to pull something out from its pocket. The janitor fumbled with the pocket for ten clumsy seconds before pulling out a folded-up piece of paper. It unwrapped it. It was a painting of a horse. The horse had no eyes, one of its legs was replaced with a bicycle wheel. The tail of the horse was made of metal wires that frayed at the end. It lacked lips showing large decaying teeth. The horse was smiling. “I know that you’re into surrealism and I saw this painting.”

The friend had not been smiling before arriving, but they had been masking a

look of contentedness. At the referral to the horse painting as being “surreal” the friend’s neutral expression transformed into a frown.

The janitor continued. “So I thought wouldn’t it be cool if I made this surrealist—”

“Incorrect,” the friend interrupted.

“I—”

“Very incorrect in fact.” He started to grab his coat.

“Where are you going? I’m sorry? I just wanted to make you a meal to enjoy. Have a fun time with a friend and all—”

“Oh? I’m sorry? Really the janitor? I bet that you don’t even know that what you are trying to present to me right now is really Dada. If you wanted to show me a painting you could have at least been correct.”

The janitor started to speak, but the friend put his finger in the air. The two of them stared at each other. He was like one of those paintings.

The janitor started washing the dishes, breaking the stare. In the soapy reflection the janitor saw an image that it didn’t like.

Instead of an it, what came back through the reflection was something worse. Something that reminded people that it probably wore blue as a baby. The janitor swiped away at the watery reflection.

During all of this, the friend had been frozen, jacket in hand, feet positioned in a way where he could simultaneously leave and stay. The friend was going to stay anyways, he just wanted to hear the janitor say it. The janitor hadn’t yet. Dissatisfied the friend spoke, “You know what? I bet that you don’t even know anything even about surrealism. Do you know that surrealism started out as an anti-art, a kind of thing done by political activists to strike back at the system? The specific system in question was WW1, so not that dream where you were in a giant bathtub should not be made into a painting. But if you have a moment of catharsis, maybe your cat dies because they choke on a hairball, then go ahead and make that a painting. I think a painting of a cat corpse would be a best seller.”

“Once it gets accepted by a museum that will use it to show how Pebbles used to be the best animal and how the cat is really a reflection of our own mortality or some bullshit along those lines, some affluent philanthropist will be visiting the museum of cat corpse and will ask to buy it. Of course, to him it’s just a contemporary image a sweet wittle kitty cat, and he will hang it up in his living room without ever caring to indulge to the guests that the cat in the painting is really him and it is really all of them because that would be a

real downer to say at a house party. And all you will get from the painting will be no money because you decided to donate the painting like some kind of idiot, but at least you get exposure.”

Water sloshed in the sink. Water spilled onto its shoes. The janitor rubbed the folds between its fingers together. It felt like its eyes and lungs had become a singular organ. They burned even though they hadn't cut any onion.

They thought that while many people probably thought washing dishes was the worst part of the night, because: by the end of it your fingers get pruney, there was a definite risk that beneath the soapy bubbles there would be a knife to turn the water red, and the simple fact that a quick clean could often turn into a much longer ordeal, especially on a night like tonight, that wasn't why the janitor disliked washing dishes.

Instead, it was the fact that by washing the dishes it was a confirmation that things were ending. And they would be all alone again. And that was worse than whatever this was.

The friend's voice rose. “Well? Are you going to say you're sorry for making a mockery of surrealism?” He was sitting in the chair again.

The janitor took the plug out of the sink, watched it swirl, spat in it for measure. It grabbed a towel, dried its hands. “When I was a kid I used to have nightmares. You see at night when I was in bed there were scratching sounds coming from underneath the floorboards. While other kids think monsters are in their closet or under their bed, the scratching convinced me that the house was the monster. I was scared that if I got up and stood on the floor it would open and swallow me whole.”

In the bottom of the sink, the janitor saw a rusted knife.

“Things didn't start to matter until I was getting ready to start school and one of the requirements was that I had to be potty trained.” There was so much grey/gray in the rusted edge.

“I cry to my mom saying that I must pee in the bed because if I go to the bathroom I'll have to step on the floor and poof. Dead—” The friend chewed on a piece of kale “—This goes on for weeks of my parents telling me to stop wetting the bed and me saying that I would rather pee myself than die a horrific death. Finally my mom can't take it so she decides to sleep in my room to show me that there is no monster. She sleeps over and for about an hour or two nothing. Then I sabotage myself. I had two choices in front of me, I could either pee the bed with her in it or I could take my chances and step onto the floor. I figure the floor is less terrifying than my mom waking up to

herself being covered in pee. Still, I can't leave the bed myself, so I tug on her shoulder and tell her I must go to the bathroom.

Groggily, she swings her feet over onto the floor and then it happens."

The friend was tapping his fingers against the table. "Did your mom get eaten by the house demon?"

"No, my mom hears a sound."

Tapping increases. "Well is she going to be eaten by the house demon?"

"She hears a sound and the look on her face that her kid was right. One of the best feelings you can have as a child, which of course fades as I realize that my mother is quickly going to be consumed by the floor. I close my eyes and...nothing. Kittens she says. The sound I was apparently hearing was mewling of kittens." The janitor should have cleaned the knife off earlier, instead of letting it rot in the dirty water.

"Okay, but you still haven't said your sorry. You're a real monster sometimes ya'know?" The friend shrugged their shoulders.

"Oh I was more focused on the cat part of the story. We adopted one of those kittens and named it Rosco, which kinda sounds like Rock-so which feels like it would be a close cousin to the cat name Pebbles." The janitor took the lid out of the sink. "My mom would get rid of that cat when I came out as queer in ninth grade. 'If I didn't like pussy, then that meant all pussy.'"

The friend yawned, put his head in his hand. The janitor's eyes were stuck on the blade. The friend's eyes were on the vase.

The friend clicked their tongue to the back of their front teeth.

"The janitor—" the friend took one of the flowers, peeled off the skin, and tied the two together with the gore "—do you know what kind of flowers these are?"

The janitor might not have known many things. It may have not known what their parents were up to. Or what the goal was after this. It didn't know how to define many things. It didn't know to what extent the it had taken on another persona and if it was really a monster.

But it knew that these flowers were baby's breath. They lasted eight to ten days. They were a symbolism of innocence and blooming friendships. The janitor had gotten the flowers on purpose. Most importantly, they were the friend's favorite flowers because, according to him, they died quickly. "No," the janitor said. "What do they mean?"

Jason was now only one-point-three grey/gray tiles away. He took out the janitor's cassette and pressed pause. He asked again, "Well Blythe? What are you doing?" Normally, the janitor would say something like I'm taking a break,

or Just stretching, both answers that would result in Jason cussing it out and telling it to get back to work.

The other half of the time, when the janitor was in a comedic kind of mood would say, "I'm robbing the museum."

"Jesus." The security guard would say and then he would he almost take off his hat before feeling insecure, and then say awkwardly say, "Just get back to work."

As the janitor turned back around it once again saw Saturn Devouring His Son. Unlike the other paintings the friend had told to the janitor, the context was not as clear. The painting was made by a deaf Spanish guy in the 1800s who never got around to giving context to this painting. Originally, it was on a wall in a dark room in the artists house, and it was only discovered after his death. The painting was without interpretation, and so, the janitor thought they could make it have any meaning it wanted it to. The janitor did not have a cassette of the painting.

It approached the painting.

Except for red spewing out from a headless torso in the middle of the piece, the painting is full of greys/grays. There is a man eating the corpse, his eyes are wide. The murderer is long, if he was standing up his body would not be able to fit onto the canvas. However, the man can fit onto the canvas, as he crouches uncomfortably. As if, as he chews on the body that dwarfs in his hands, he is ready to run away. Into the darkness.

Without the tape playing, and more importantly without the constant sloping of mop threads, the museum sounded like that barren landscape. The janitor closed its eyes, hoping the cassette creatures would descend upon it. The black grout did not shimmer, the grey/gray tiles were still nineteen-point-one centimeters long, the metallic light was still a terrible choice of illumination, and the cassette creatures could not come.

They could not come, because they were already here.

NINA SMITH



Nina is a sophomore at UMich studying Creative Writing and Literature with a focus on fiction. In her work, she enjoys exploring her characters' intimacies and emotional depths as well as themes of coming of age at all ages. In her free time, she is also a songwriter, musician, and Arts writer for The Michigan Daily.

Strange Music

Later, he would barely remember it. He'd try, by god, would he try. When the police were questioning him, and again when Angela asked if he'd told them the truth.

"I remember the screaming," he would say. "I remember walking home to the sound of sirens, and that I had a cup of chamomile tea before I went to sleep." Angela had rolled her eyes. "You're always doing this."

She liked to make authoritative statements like that about Douglas's nature, despite the fact they'd only known each other for two years. Douglas found it comforting even when he thought she was wrong. It was nice for somebody to at least pretend to know him.

"Doing what?" he asked.

Angela dumped a packet of sugar into her coffee and stirred it delicately. "Playing dumb.

You know in this situation it's pretty harmful."

"Has it occurred to you that I actually don't remember it? It's pretty common for people to block out traumatic events."

"It wasn't traumatic for you, dumbass," she said.

They were sitting at the cafe down the block from Douglas's apartment. It was the farthest he'd gone from home in nearly a week, and it was only because Angela had dragged him there. With the club closed, he'd been calling in sick at the restaurant and spending every day on the couch in front of House Hunters International, mentally ridiculing the tastes of people whose lives were going to turn out far better than his.

One time he'd mistakenly switched the channel, and for a second caught a glimpse of the news. In a cruel union of circumstance, it was the exact story they were talking about. Douglas

heard the words "murder" and "night club" before he found the remote between the couch cushions and turned it off, but it bothered him for quite a while after that. It was a bit sensationalized, he thought. The Black Cat was a jazz venue, and the police had said they weren't even sure it was foul play.

He had rehashed that night in his mind over and over, retracing his steps down the hallways of his memory in search of some doorway he might have missed. But there was nothing. Screaming, sirens, chamomile. He'd thought,

in a state of delirium, that the tea would calm his nerves. Of course, he hadn't slept that night anyway, and barely since.

"They're saying it's connected to the mafia," Angela said. "Do we even have that here?"

"I think it's everywhere," Douglas said. "Isn't that kind of its whole thing?"

Angela shrugged and sipped her coffee. Douglas's tea sat untouched in front of him. He needed a real drink.

It was 3:16 pm. Light rain was darkening the street outside. Inside the cafe, EDM played quietly. At the table over, a woman in a button-up blouse answered a phone call with an agitated

"Hello?" and shut her laptop. Douglas and Angela tried to guess which barista was controlling the music and decided on the one with neon green hair and round wire-rimmed glasses like John Lennon.

When Angela finished her coffee, they went outside. She was complaining about how her hair frizzed in the rain, which Douglas said was ridiculous because A, she had the most perfect blonde hair he had ever seen, and B, she had willingly moved to Seattle where it rained more than it didn't.

"Hardly willingly," she objected.

Angela's dad was sick. She'd never really told Douglas what exactly he was sick with, only that she'd moved back after college to be closer to him. On this, Douglas oscillated between sympathy and jealousy. He knew it would suck to have a sick parent, but at least they were close enough that Angela would want to take care of her dad, and her dad would want her to take care of him. If either of Douglas's parents were sick, they'd probably ask him to move farther away so as not to make it worse.

"Hey," she said when they got back to his apartment. "Don't fall into a hole again, okay?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Douglas said.

When she left, he let himself into the building and climbed the stairs. Each one creaked with a familiar rhythm and melody. Douglas thought: G flat, B flat, C. He unlocked his door and went to the couch, taking his phone out of his pocket as he lay down. Angela had already sent him a text that said, call me tomorrow pls. He put his phone on the table and looked at the ceiling. The air was stale, the window was shut. In the corner, the piano closed its eyes.

* * *

The next morning Douglas woke to the sound of his phone ringing. Bright light was illuminating the dust in the air. He fumbled to decline the call and

put his arm over his eyes, but it started ringing again.

“Hello?”

“So you’re not at work,” Angela said. In the background, Douglas heard children shouting.

He rubbed his eyes. “Who’s to say I didn’t step out of the kitchen for a moment to answer the long-awaited call of my dearest and most trusted friend?”

“Impressive syntax for someone who just woke up, I’ll give you that.”

“Thank you.” He rolled onto his back. “I don’t work on Fridays.”

“Or any other day apparently,” Angela said. “Did you read the article I sent you?”

“I thought we were in agreement about me having just woken up,” he said.

“Go look at it now.”

He sighed and took the phone away from his ear, navigating to his thread of messages with Angela. She’d sent him a link to an article titled, “Historic downtown jazz club embroiled in murder.”

“I don’t need to read that,” he said, putting the phone back up to his ear. “I was there.”

“You can’t just deal with things by avoiding them,” Angela said, sounding peeved.

“Well this isn’t exactly how I would engage with it anyway,” he replied. “I don’t read the news even when things are normal.”

Her sigh was loud even through the phone. “Fine, I have to go. Promise me you’ll lay eyes on the outside world today.”

“I’ll lay eyes on the outside world,” Douglas said.

“Not through a window.”

“Not through a window,” he repeated.

Angela laughed. “Okay, bye.”

“Bye.”

Angela hadn’t been working that night. Bartending was really her side job—during the week, she worked at one of those hippie preschools where the kids were all named Rhubarb and Aurora and the curriculum directly calls for rock painting. She’d majored in early childhood education, and now claimed she was just working her way up the food chain. Douglas wanted to make fun of her but couldn’t because he’d gone to a music conservatory and considered playing at an almost-bankrupt jazz club his main job. Obviously that wasn’t a very lucrative business, so he’d taken a job as a line cook at Gigi’s last year. He must have been good at it because they kept scheduling him

more shifts until he barely had time to play outside of work. He used to be busy.

It had been just over a week since the murder.

* * *

To keep his promise, he went for a bike ride in the afternoon. The street was slick with rain, hissing as his tires peeled away from the pavement. A runner jogged in place on the corner waiting for the light to turn. On the sidewalk, a woman in leopard print was trying to pull a fluffy white dog away from a pole it was sniffing. Someone honked at a jaywalker with headphones in.

They were like characters in a video game, spontaneously materializing as the product of a complex algorithm, programmed to complete their task and disappear in order to make the world Douglas was visiting seem real. Blissfully unaware of the higher forces that put them there and could take them away at any moment.

After the third turn, Douglas realized where he was going. He considered turning around, imagined the sofa that sat waiting for him, the stairs and their strange music. He was only halfway there—it would take him the same amount of time to get there as it would to get home.

He could turn around. He didn't.

The entire block was closed off, barricaded at the end of the street and filled with cop cars. Wrapped up in caution tape bandages, the dark storefront and the faded iron of the Black Cat stood like an injury. The gutters dripped, the people in uniforms and suits went in and out of the building, speaking inaudibly.

Douglas felt himself leave his body, rise high above the shining wet pavement. Below, the scene played itself out in bleak repetitions—the radio static, the flashing lights, the little black specks swarming like an ant hill. It grew smaller and smaller until Douglas could no longer see the Black Cat's weathered roof, until the street was only a dark thread snaking through the tapestry of the city. Douglas wondered if he was dying. He felt the cool moisture in the air, the bright white of the enveloping clouds.

His phone rang. Charli XCX had stopped playing in his earphones. He was standing down the street from his old workplace, holding his bike by the handlebars. It was late afternoon.

He let go of one hand and took his phone out of his pocket, then pressed the green button.

“Hello?”

“Hi.”

Douglas turned away as if excusing himself from a conversation. “Angela? What’s up?”

There was a slight pause on the other end of the line. “My dad died.”

It was not Douglas’s proudest moment. He said: “Shit.”

“Yeah,” Angela said.

“Jesus, Angela, I’m so sorry. Where are you?”

“I’m at the hospital,” she said. “I don’t know what to do... I’m just standing here.”

He could hear now that she was teary. He swung his leg over the bike and pushed down on the pedal. “Which hospital? Is your car there? I’m coming.”

The sun was setting as he biked, brilliant royal blue sky peering down from behind powdery clouds. In the waiting room, two women held hands over the armrest between them. A toddler hid behind the knees of his father’s paint-stained jeans. The receptionist, regarding him with suspicion, said, “Can I help you?”

Douglas found Angela and hugged her. She was crying.

“There’s a ton to do,” she said, her voice muffled by his shoulder. “How much does a funeral cost?”

“Don’t think about that right now,” Douglas said.

“If the Black Cat doesn’t reopen soon I need to get another job,” she said, wiping her face.

“Shut up,” Douglas said.

* * *

It was the first night in a week he went to sleep without the TV on. Angela’s couch was flowery and hideous, but comfortable, and her apartment smelled clean. He searched “funeral homes near me” on Google Maps before he went to bed. In the morning, he made her the most popular breakfast dish on the menu at Gigi’s and did laundry.

“You’re, like, the perfect man on paper,” Angela said when they were watching TV after dinner. “Shouldn’t you have a girlfriend by now?”

“‘On paper’ being the key words in that sentence,” Douglas said. “I don’t even have a job.”

“With all your marketable skills?”

Douglas laughed. “Like cooking and laundry.”

On the screen, a young couple was touring a penthouse in Madrid. Angela said she hated their taste and that they should just move to Indiana if they

wanted the suburban aesthetic so badly. Douglas said he couldn't even imagine what Indiana looked like.

The next time he glanced over, Angela was asleep. He turned the TV off, stood up, and stretched. He unfolded the blanket that was hanging over the back of the couch and spread it over her, then took their dishes to the sink. Leaning against the counter, he checked his phone. His sister had texted him a link to the same article Angela had sent, with the attached message, is this where u work???

Yeah, he sent back.

His thumb hovered over the screen like it had unfinished business there. The skin of his face felt tight. He thought of Angela, of his sister, of his parents asleep in the Eastern time zone.

A few times in the last week he'd morbidly imagined that it was him who was murdered.

It was one thing he remembered: as he'd crossed the threshold on his way out the door that night, he'd had the distinct feeling his life was ending. Time had finally stopped, he'd thought. This was purgatory. But nothing had stopped. After all, wasn't the greatest tragedy of time that it kept going?

Douglas clicked on the link.

* * *

The funeral was the following Saturday. They'd pulled it together in the afternoons after Douglas's shifts at Gigi's that week and before he went home to practice new pieces. After someone had created an online fundraiser to get it back in business, the Black Cat was set to reopen in two weeks with a fresh coat of paint and a brand new Instagram account.

Douglas wore a suit for the first time in years. He stood next to Angela while a variety of elderly people hugged her and shook her hand, and then they played her dad's favorite song,

"Across the Universe." The polished black wood of the coffin gleamed in the colored light of the stained glass windows. Among the wooden pews, the guests fanned out like fingers on a great hand. "Nothing's gonna change my world," one of the Beatles sang over what Douglas thought sounded like an A7 chord. There were tears on Angela's face as the music echoed through the church. Lit from behind, she looked like a saint.

During the obituary, Douglas wondered about God. He had never been to a real church service before and he'd thought it might make him feel religious.

But rather than otherworldly,

he felt concrete, as if someone had taken two transparent images of him and

overlaid them to create one opaque person. His senses were sharp, the feel of the paper program in his hand distinct from the fabric bunching at the back of his knees.

After the ceremony, he drove Angela back to her apartment.

“Thank you,” she said in the car.

“For what?” he asked.

“Oh, there you go again,” Angela said. “You know for what.”

Douglas flicked his turn signal and made a left. He waved at another driver that waited as he turned. “I read about him.”

“Who?”

“The victim.”

Angela looked at him and she seemed to be surprised. “Of the murder?”

He nodded. He’d combed through online articles on glitching news websites, suddenly desperate for information. Each one was headed with a blurry, zoomed-in picture of the victim.

Douglas was relieved when he didn’t recognize him.

It was a middle-aged man. He owned a hardware store. He had a family. He’d been alone.

Douglas had tried to imagine being at that funeral—whether the light had spilled onto the coffin the same way, whether the man’s kids had been crying in the front row. It wasn’t foggy or far-flung, it had happened to someone. It had happened to Angela.

He flipped the shade down over the windshield and parked, squinting against the morning sun. Angela opened the car door and stuck her leg out.

“Call me, okay?” he said.

She nodded. “Yeah.”

TELISE CLEMENTE



Telise is a first year at Umich. She has been writing since she was 8 years old and hopes to pursue a career in the publishing industry. Aside from writing, she loves snowboarding, fashion, and cooking. Although her pieces are primarily interested in the boundaries between humanity and what exists beyond it, she also enjoys writing nonfiction essays on a variety of topics.

Petra

One

There is a living idea growing steadily behind the bone of my skull. I watch as it evolves, possibilities exploding and fizzling out inside my mind. They take bites out of each other until there is no they, only an it. It cannibalizes the corpses of its littermates, swallowing some bites and puking others out. Globules of dripping possibility slide off its bones and leave behind muscle, tangible connecting threads that hold the skeleton together and keep all the moving parts where they should be. Skin crawls into place on top of the bleeding muscle, eyes sprouting snugly inside sockets as fine hair swarms the crown of its skull. I open my eyes just before the pores appear.

An excited tremor passes through my hands, and then, before I'm ready, my fingers fall on the keyboard like a starving dog on a lame rabbit. Keystrokes slowly unravel the doll in my head, taking her body and posing it on the page. I have to break a few bones to make her fit into the confines of the narrative, but in the end, she's still mostly intact.

It takes a few blinks to erase the image of the computer screen from my burnt retinas. Night has fallen outside the library and the tips of my fingers are bruised from the violence of creation.

Anticipation pulls something thick and heavy over my ears so that all I can hear is the throb of my own blood. This one has to be good. I need it to be good. Objectively good — not the type of good that gets an A then gets forgotten — the type of good that makes whoever gave enough of a crap to sit down and read it go “Wait, you wrote this?” with that little uptick of disbelief in their voice. I read with bated breath.

Of course, It's a disappointment. I'm stupid to have hoped for anything else.

Two

I am meeting Petra tonight, and she's going to drown me. She's going to drown me because I can't write for shit. I can't write for shit, so Petra is going to drown me. Funny, it sounds just the same backward.

I first came to know Petra three months ago in a creative writing class. She is a tall Greek woman with very long eyelashes. She is the best writer I've ever touched. I like to think of the day I met her as D-Day; D as in detonation, detonation as in explosion.

For a long time after I sat down next to her, we didn't speak at all. The class

was a slog. Three hours of writing exercises designed to spark ideas in the barren wastelands of our feeble undergraduate minds. At one point, the professor, an older gentleman in a wheelchair who had apparently come out of retirement to teach us (poor soul), had asked us to share our work.

Petra slid me her notebook. Beneath a doodle of a large cat (labeled “Tommy the Maine Coon,” with a little heart) was a paragraph of the most intricate and developed prose I’d ever read.

I remember twitching involuntarily as I read it. The next thing I remember is introducing myself to her after class.

“I’m June,” an instant of hesitation before the explosion — and then, “I want to read everything you’ve ever written.”

And she let me. Thousands of pages of words, handwritten, typed, printed, crowding her dorm room with the living ideas that I could never coax out of my head. All of it was fascinating. All of it was better than my best.

I spent two days straight in Petra’s dorm, just reading. That was all I could do. When I finally looked up from the last story, a fairytale-like concoction about a snake who wanted to eat until he could wrap himself around the world and squeeze, I found Petra sitting at the end of the bed. She was watching me.

“What do you think?” She asked.

“It’s beautiful,” I told her. My voice was stiff from two days of near silence.

“How do you write like this? Teach me,” the words were little more than a harsh whisper. “Teach me everything.”

Three

I’m waiting for Petra to get dressed so that we can go to the lake and drown me. To distract myself, I see how many books I can count in the disarray of her dorm room. One: *Anna Karenina* face down on her bedside table. I’ve always loved that book. Petra has never read it. Two: *Fight Club* shoved under the leg of an unbalanced chair. Three: a bedraggled paperback copy of *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal* being used as a coaster for three different mugs of some unnamable congealed substance. Four: *The Sound and The Fury* lying crumpled under her desk.

For the first few years after I decided to take writing seriously, I always told people that I wanted to write like Faulkner. There’s something about his prose, the casual way it stabs right through the heart of the human experience, that excites me. When I read Faulkner I have to take breaks to absorb it all. The only other time I feel that alive is when I’m reading Petra’s work. I’ve never created something with that kind of impact. Just page after page that reads like it was strung together by an imitator, a person who has memorized

the correct place to put each word, but doesn't know why they belong there. The dolls in my head have no organs, no hearts. They're masters of looking just like the real thing, and they almost pull it off — until you give them a solid push. Then the illusion collapses and you realize that it was never a person, just a pile of flesh missing all the important pieces. I am a bitter disappointment to myself, but no matter how many times I fail, obsession always brings me back.

Writing like Faulkner or Petra is a pipe dream. I know it. They were both born with something I wasn't. So, because I can't thank him for blessing me with talent, I thank God and my lucky stars for obsession. What a fool I am, expecting the work of a prodigy to be reproducible with the hands of an idiot.

Four

While we wait for the last bus to the nature preserve, I recall our conversation on the night of the reading. This is what she'd said: "June, I'd like for you to know something," she'd taken my left hand in both of hers, "I'm not well. My head, I don't think it was screwed on quite right — and this is the only thing I've ever been able to do." None of this is very surprising. It doesn't take a genius to see that Petra is practically the poster child of unmedicated mental illness. "It's a baby with the bath water type of thing, June. I don't think I'd be a very good writer if I didn't have a few screws loose; and sure, I can do this, but it makes the rest of my life so ugly." We are sitting knee to knee on her bed, my hand resting in her lap, sandwiched between her dry palms. I haven't been this close to someone in a long time. "So what I'm saying is that I can reach in there and loosen a few screws for you, but it'll make you ugly." She squeezes my hand, "And June, you're so wonderfully normal, I just think you should think it over."

I'd told her not to be stupid on purpose. If ugly was the price, I'd pay it ten times over. Something I don't think people understand is that I wouldn't be able to breathe if I couldn't write. The scary part, the part that drove me here to Petra's filthy dorm room, is that soon, just being able to write won't be enough to satisfy me. I need to be able to produce stories that can fill my second stomach, and I'm tired of letting other people do it for me.

Five

Petra had tried to loosen my screws a few different ways. Acid, sleep deprivation, hypnosis — they all failed. Her plan D was this, a near-death experience. After some debate, we'd settled on drowning. It had more pros than cons, I'd reasoned. People who almost drown always talk about how peaceful

it is. So, if somehow the situation was to shift from a near-death experience to an actual death experience, I'd want to go out calm and gentle: floating to the afterlife like a stupid Ophelia.

The walk from the bus stop to Fisher Lake is longer than I'd expected. It's mid-April, but there's still snow in a few places. The contrast of baby plants sprouting through the icy crust of month-old snow has been captured a million times before by writers more talented than me, but I ache to give it one more try. After this, maybe I will.

Standing in front of the lake, Petra and I gaze at the sky. I marvel at how pleasant it is to speak to someone without opening your mouth. There is no discussion of cold feet, although I think we both suspect the other of having them. Instead, I sit down on the rocks of the shoreline and take off my shoes and socks. The stones are cold. The water will be colder. We strip off layers until we both stand shivering in our bathing suits.

She turns to me and I stare at the outline of her body, glowing in the moonlight — If I die, I'll die unabashed.

"June, would you remind me of the plan one more time?"

She knows exactly what I'll say, but I recite it anyways, "You'll hold me under the water until I pass out. Then you drag me out. If I don't start breathing you'll call the police. If I die, the story is that we were going for a cold plunge to reset before finals." That part had been my idea. Funnily enough, Petra is a horrible liar. If I die, I hope the cops believe her.

"Alright," she whispers. "Are you ready?"

I'm not, but I nod anyway. As we walk into the lake the apprehension is replaced by cold so suffocating I feel like it's slapped a hand over my mouth and nose. My teeth start to chatter, and I bite my tongue to keep them still. I stop walking when we're in up to our knees.

"Okay," I say. "Ready."

The cold is even worse beneath the water. After thirty seconds my body begins to burn, and then I'm numb except for my shoulders, where heat still exists at the point of juncture between Petra and me.

Soon even that is gone. Still, the sureness of her grip makes me feel safe. I open my eyes to find I can't see anything, just a dim brightness above me.

This is when I realize that I'm running out of air. I can only suppress the panic for a moment or two before It takes over my brain and forces me to recognize that I don't want to drown. I don't want to die.

Drowning isn't peaceful or gentle or anything like that. It hurts. I claw at Petras's hands, and now

I don't feel safe, I feel like I'm drowning.

I don't remember the moment I took my first breath of water, but I remember the feeling. It was a lungful of icy liquid death.

My mind and body give up after that. When I try to think back on what happened in those moments all I find is a stretch of black. There was no light. No gentle Ophelia to take my hand and lead me to the great beyond. Just fear and cold and death breathing down my neck.

The next thing I see is Petra. I don't really see anything, but I know it's her. She forces my body onto hands and knees and slaps my back. I'm so numb that I don't feel a thing except water as it's ejected from my lungs. Next comes the coughing — so violent I feel like I'm drowning all over again. When it ends, I flop onto the ground and cry.

As I lay panting on the beach, I think of tender green sprouts through the ice. I think of dolls and explosions, and in my mind, I find something that was not there before. It looks like a heart, but not a heart that beats — a heart that breathes.

I know just like a dog knows it is dying that this is the only heart I will get and that there will never be another one. Before I can consider what this means, a shadow falls over my face. It's night, and there's no light to make a shadow, but that doesn't matter because the shadow falls over me anyway. It's Petra. How could it be anyone else?

There is a pause where all I can hear is the rasp of my breathing and the irregular beat of my real heart, and then there is the press of her lips on mine. My first thought, a stupid one, wonders why she's trying to give me CPR when it's obvious that I'm breathing. Petra doesn't know CPR, a fact less embarrassing than my assumption that she was trying to give it to me. She smiles against my mouth and for a second, I forget about the heart. There are plenty of people who know CPR, but I don't think there's anyone but me who knows how Petra's lips feel. I hope there never will be.