



Spring 2017

## The Lantern, 2016-2017

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# The Lantern





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### **Cover Art**

Mona Lisa MMXVI                      Mario Heitman

This piece was made on iridescent poster board with spray paint, oil paint, acrylic paint and resin. It is a modern interpretation of *Mona Lisa*. What makes her modern, aside from her synthetic pink hair, is the musical instrument she holds. In the long history of oil paintings depicting the female, they are designated as objects for the viewers' possession; in this painting, she is the possessor.

## EDITOR'S NOTE

Wait, what? I get an entire page for this? That's stupid.

On second thought, there are people I need to thank:

The initial credit for everything good in my life will always go to my brother.

I'd like to thank Dr. Volkmer for entrusting the position of editor to me—and question his judgement for the exact same reason—and providing guidance the whole way through. While I'm on the topic of faculty, I must mention Professor Hong and Dr. Keita (along with the aforementioned Dr. Grain Elevator) for their Creative Writing presence in my life, as well as the English department and my other professors. The positive influence of the faculty here cannot be understated.

My gratitude also lies with all the staff members (special shout-outs to Sarah Gow and Kara Travis for doing more than was necessitated of them), the readers, the contributors, everyone who has helped me get to this point in time (which would include far too many names to list here), Victor Lardent (creator of Times New Roman), and, most importantly, you, dear reader.

Putting this magazine together has been many things for me, but it has primarily been a reminder of two points: 1) how amazing Ursinus's artistic community is; and 2) the importance of art as a source of comfort, strength, provocation, and resistance to bullshit.

So. Here it is. *The Lantern*. It's got some things in it. On the behalf of everyone whose work went into making this possible, I hope you enjoy our offering.

Yours,  
Albert Hahn

## POETRY PRIZE WINNER

“Our Lady of Perpetual Virginity” by Lauren Toscano

“Our Lady of Perpetual Virginity” is an audacious and courageous take on a somewhat well-worn trope, making it glimmer once again with the shock of the new. The poem’s register shuttles masterfully between naiveté and knowingness, evoking the exhaustion and bafflement of traumatic initiation into sexuality with a radical empathy tempered by carefully-placed spots of wit and tenderness. Precisely the kind of writing 2017 needs—tough, humane, and unflinching.

## RUNNER UP

“meditations from a bunk bed in a home on mount Pocono” by Zooey Cox

“meditations from a bunk bed in a home on mount Pocono” demonstrates the confidence of gaze and attention that, in the best poets, gives that gaze permission to get weird. The poem has the meaning-frustrating, kaleidoscopic allure of an image folding in and out of refraction—suturing little fault-lines of beauty and clarity out of points of fracture.



Christopher Schaeffer received his BA from Ursinus College in 2010, completed his MFA in 2013, and is currently a PhD candidate at Temple University, where he also teaches. He was the Poetry Editor of *TINGE* Magazine from 2012-2016 and is the co-editor of the Donald Food Memorial Library chapbook press. His dissertation concerns Robert Duncan, Abraham Lincoln, and ghosts.



Lauren Toscano

## Our Lady of Perpetual Virginity

Mary gave birth to Jesus Our Lord And Savior  
when she was 12 look it up she was 12  
and Mary was with a carpenter named Joseph  
who was 30 look it up he was 30  
and when Jesus Our Lord And Savior was older  
he washed his friends' feet, he would wash them,  
on the cross, he was crucified, King Of The Jews,  
Our Lord And Savior, The Feet Washer.

When Mary was young she did not wash her hair,  
she waited for it to rain instead and her mother  
would say, Mary You Will Never Find A Suitable  
Husband If You Do Not Wash Your Hair, and  
Joseph who was 30 look it up he was 30  
got lost in the unwashed hair of a young girl,  
pure as the snow, hymen like a closed curtain.

Mary caught crow's feathers on her tongue,  
she should've caught diseases but she didn't  
and her mother would make her buy eggs  
from the market and Mary who was young,  
Mary was 12 look it up she was 12, would dye  
the eggs in a basin of sin, and these eggs  
would be miscarriages, one for every woman in  
the village, each woman was older than Mary,  
in their forties haunted by dead babies and they  
would say, Mary You're So Lucky You Will Have  
Many Babies Each One With A Nose Like Yours.

Mary would powder her nose with knife shavings,  
Mary had a sister also named Mary who had thick  
Cuban cigar thighs and could make the hens tell the truth  
and the hens, ripe with fresh eggs, would call Mary,  
Mary who was 12 look it up she was 12, a slut,  
the hen would call Mary a whore and Mary used to  
touch the spot between her own legs that would make  
her Whimper and Joseph who was 30 look it up he was 30

used to watch the girls down at the bazaar do the same  
and his friends who were also 30 would give the  
whores stale bread and ask them to sit on their laps.

On Mary's 12th birthday, Mary's mother told her  
that she would soon have to find a husband  
she said Mary You Need To Settle Down And Find  
Someone Who Will Love You You Must Be Loved  
and Mary, who had kissed her relative Elizabeth  
(whose age is unknown but maybe she was Mary's  
age or maybe she wasn't but she married a priest),  
did not want to get married so she would say to  
her sister, Make The Hen Talk To Me Again,  
and Mary, the sister Mary, would sigh and she would  
make the hen tell the truth and the hen would call  
Mary a whore over and over again until it went hoarse  
Mary who was 12 look it up she was 12 would listen  
and that night, the night of her 12th birthday,  
Mary had dreams of blood trickling down her legs  
and a man breathing heavy in her ear and when  
Mary woke up she washed her hair.

Joseph who was 30 look it up he was 30 was  
down at the bazaar with his friends watching the  
golden-haired whores lie on their backs and laugh  
and Joseph saw a girl walk by, she was running  
and it was no other than the virgin herself,  
Mary who was 12 look it up she was 12,  
running and her hair was wet and Joseph  
thought she looked like an angel but one of the  
whores wrapped their arms around Joseph's neck  
and said, What Are You Looking At When I'm Here  
and Joseph who was 30 look it up he was 30  
did something that I will not say but you can guess  
and I think if Mary who was 12 look it up she was 12  
knew what Joseph did she would not mind

When Mary met Joseph they married  
and she did not love him but she wanted  
Joseph who was 30 look it up he was 30  
to touch her but Joseph never did and every  
night he went to the bazaar and watched

the whores with his friends, throwing stale bread at them and laughing and the whores ate up the attention because they did not care and while Joseph was gone from the home Mary who was 12 look it up she was 12 would lay on their bed, the one with the sheets of sin stitched together with kitten's milk and she would find that spot that would make her Whimper and she would think of the hen, she hadn't seen the hen in months but would the hen call her a prostitute even now? and Mary who was 12 look it up she was 12 lost herself in a man with a tough face and Mary lay beneath him as she gave him her body and her blood and then he left and Mary lay there, swollen and bleeding just like her dream and she saw her mother the next day, and her mother said to Mary who was 12 look it up she was 12 How Is Joseph Have You Any Plans For Children Mary and Mary said no but she dreamt of an angel who told her she was pregnant and Mary remembered the hen, the hen who called her a whore.

Mary did not tell Joseph but she grew big fat hips and one day he touched her and Mary pushed him away and said, Joseph I Am Going To Have A Baby and Joseph slapped her across the face, shocked, and Mary fell to the ground and said, It's God's Baby I Am Pregnant With The Lord's Baby An Angel Told Me You Have To Believe Me I Am Your Wife and then Joseph held her and said, It Is Alright I Believe You and Mary was 12 and scared and Joseph was 30 and had sex with the whores down at the bazaar and his wife didn't know and they laid down on the sheets of sin, still bloody from a few days prior, and he said, Mary It Is Alright We Will Be Fine Don't Worry and Mary who was 12 look it up she was 12 cried in the arms of a man she barely knew.

Mary's body grew swollen and Joseph did not like to touch her but he held her at night

and touched her unwashed hair and Mary's skin turned pale and they looked for a place for Mary to give birth and they settled in a manger and people came from all over to see the Magical God Baby and Mary gave birth to a boy that looked the closest thing that a baby could look to a god and he was born in December in the bitter cold and Mary who was 12 look it up she was 12 held the God Baby in her arms;

Mary watched her son Jesus Our Lord And Savior grow up to wash feet and turn water into wine and fall in love with a prostitute also named Mary and he was crucified on the cross by a man named Pontius Pilate and when jesus came back he had holes in his wrists and he showed them to Thomas who doubted him but Mary's son Jesus was crucified and he died and this meant everyone could go to heaven because Jesus Our Lord And Savior died for our sins but Mary with unwashed hair and a sharp nose knew no one would be going to heaven and she knew that jesus was not a God Baby but what did she know

she was 12.



## PROSE PRIZE WINNER

“Essential Terms for the Audience” by Kara Travis

Out of so many inventive pieces this year, the most accomplished was “Essential Terms for the Audience,” a story written as a series of glossary entries in the back of a program for a ballet recital. The strict format is used as a tool to dole out information in precise increments. From facts about ballet, to the behind-the-scenes life of a dance corps, to the poignant conclusion, the author does so much with such an economy of words. The story is genuinely funny and surprisingly evocative, and I left it feeling like I was right next to Evelyn as she fumes and types up her assigned notes.

## RUNNER UP

“Sissy” by Lauren Toscano

There is something genuinely heartbreaking about “Sissy”: the story of a fifth-grader in an unkind world populated by mean girls, neo-Nazis, people dying of cancer, and adults who can’t see when someone right in front of them needs help. Sissy is a child, but as the narrator, she’s also a fully realized character. Unflinching, she sponges up all of the ugly things happening around her and tries to make honest sense of them. It makes you a little afraid of her, and it makes you want to reach into the story and help her, damn it.



Marjorie Vujnovich, an Ursinus graduate, is currently a copywriter living in Brooklyn, NY, with her husband and their dog, Watson.

## Essential Terms for the Audience

*arabesque*— a ballet step: the dancer balances on one leg while stretching their free appendage as straight and as high as possible behind them.

ass—the proper term in ballet is *derrière*, and it will always be *derrière*. “Butt,” “behind,” and especially “ass” are forbidden. Monsieur Directeur would never use this term with members of his company—even during late-night rehearsals after four Long Island Ice Teas. He would never even behave in such a way that anyone would call him an ass—such as smacking the *derrières* of female *corps* dancers, followed by implied but absolutely unmistakable promises of casting notifications still one week away if they put in some extra hours.

*barre* — the physical ballet *barre* consists of two wooden rods, approximately a foot apart, mounted to a mirrored wall. At the *barre* is where dancers spend the first half of ballet class warming up. *Barre* exercises can also colloquially be called “*barre*” and have French names that the reader wouldn’t understand. In truth, the reader would demonstrate comprehension equal to Monsieur Directeur, whose thick Brooklyn accent illuminates his non-Francophone heritage.

Because of their identical pronunciation, *barre* is commonly confused with the fun type of “bar,” a place that serves alcoholic beverages. The consumption of alcohol and drugs is forbidden on Academy premises and to members of the company, but if a bottle of chardonnay happened to be dropped by dressing room #209, all incriminating evidence would be swiftly disposed of.

Clara—the female protagonist of *The Nutcracker*, danced by principal ballerina Lucie Godiva this evening. On Christmas Eve, Clara receives a nutcracker from her godfather. When Clara checks on the nutcracker after bedtime, he magically comes to life. The ballet details their adventures together, which include a battle against the evil Mouse King, as well as travels in a snowy forest and a celebration in the Land of Sweets. Watching Clara inspires many little girls in the audience to begin dance training, and the lovely Lucie Godiva is the perfect role model for aspiring ballerinas.

*corps*—French for “body,” the *corps* is a group of the lowest-ranking performing dancers in a dance company. *Corps* members perform in unison

as the background for a soloist. In *The Nutcracker*, the *corps* dances the Waltz of the Snowflakes, as well as the Waltz of the Flowers. These are good parts, but members of the *corps* also get bad parts like fucking toy soldiers who march around and swing plastic swords at civilians wearing rat suits (because starry-eyed fans can be hired for cheap).

Since *corps* dancers are part of the company, they sign contracts with the owner of the Academy which obligate their stay for a minimum of two years. The contract is also meant to protect *corps* dancers from mistreatment by the ballet masters, whose only official power is in casting. Many dancers will never graduate from the *corps* to named roles, but it is apparently possible for former soloists to be returned to *corps* status.

hairspray—the dancer's equivalent of duct tape. Hairspray keeps complicated hairstyles in place, secures glitter to costumes, and prevents small tears in tights from running. On dry days when the wooden stage is slippery, a spritz on the bottom of pointe shoes creates adhesive traction. The scent of some brands mimics expensive perfumes, and can be used to mask sweaty body odor, or whatever that smell is in the studio after Lucie Godiva has spent an hour in private rehearsal with Monsieur Directeur going over notes. Hairspray burns in the eyes of creeps who think it is okay to smack every ass in the *corps* as the ballerinas fix their hair backstage.

notes—verbal or written feedback which ballet masters use to identify weaknesses and suggest improvements. Though multiple ballet masters are in charge of monitoring rehearsals, Monsieur Directeur is the *Nutcracker* expert at the Academy. His brilliant notes never fail to inspire company members, even during stressful casting week. Some overheard recommendations for improvement include “dance better,” and “be blonde.” Indeed, the company is blessed to have his guidance.

Another type of notes: information added to the end of the program with the dual purpose of filling out the pages and entertaining the .2 percent of the audience that actually reads the pamphlet cover-to-cover: those stay-at-home moms who picked *The Nutcracker* for their one night out a year because look, they could have been *that*; the senior citizens with 20/20 vision who want to live vicariously through dancers who move so much more easily; the few remaining, money-grubbing patrons of the Academy deciding whether or not they should continue their subscriptions.

nutcracker—first, a wooden doll whose hinged mouth crushes nutshells to make the seed inside available for eating.

Second, *The Nutcracker*, a ballet featuring this kind of doll, performed for the audience tonight. This production follows the third-



generation retelling and faithfully reproduces George Balanchine's choreography as it first appeared in 1954 to Tchaikovsky's original musical score from 1892.

Third, an accidental kick delivered to a particular location on Monsieur Directeur's body and the reason why an unjustly demoted member of the *corps* has been barred from rehearsal and instead ordered to type a glossary of ballet terms for the very back of the program.

*pointe*—most of the female ballerinas will be wearing *pointe* or “toe” shoes in this evening's performance. *Pointe* shoes are hand-made to fit exactly to an individual's foot. Most of the slipper is composed of leather, cotton, and satin—with the exception of the box and the sole. In the toe portion of the shoe, glued layers of paper and fabric form a solid platform called the “box” for the ballerina to balance on her one or two innermost toes.

Before lacing up her slippers, each dancer has a unique routine arranging plastic spacers, wool, rags, gel pads, and so on to create a cushion between her toes and the box. In contrast to the sturdy box, the sole of a *pointe* shoe is a thick card stock or leather meant to support the arch of the foot. The sole becomes soft as the ballerina dances, and is the main reason why *pointe* shoes are replaced. Soft shoes do not provide safe support. As a result, a professional ballerina can go through more than one pair of *pointe* shoes in a show. At about eighty dollars a pair, *pointe* dancers spend much of their earnings on new shoes. Though these purchases are tax-deductible, an individual's toe shoe budget can exceed yearly apartment rates in the city.

scale—a device that measures, often weight or height.

Alongside résumés and letters of recommendation, part of the application to enter the Academy includes a detailed account of the dancer's body—photos, videos, and measurements. Academy requirements for women are very strict—a woman must be under 5' 7” and a hundred pounds before the interview. A physician will check before each audition. Once hired, dancers are required under Academy contracts to check in with a doctor monthly to ensure that their BMI is not under legal 18. In addition, the seamstress measures everyone weekly. She will never make adjustments to the historic costumes, but she will advise Monsieur Directeur as to who is best for which part depending on their measurements.

*tutu*—a short skirt, usually constructed of tulle, that sticks out perpendicular from the hips. A *tutu* is an article of clothing layered over top of or attached to a skin-tight leotard. The garment's objective is to reveal the maximum amount of a female ballerina's legs. Because every movement is exposed, the dancer's technique must be perfect; therefore, only soloists wear *tutus*.



In *The Nutcracker*, Clara's and the Sugar Plum Fairy's costumes include tutus. Toy soldiers do not wear tutus, rather, the soldier's outfit has more fabric than the average female costume. The red waistcoat is boxier than the bodices for a snowflake, or the flower, or Spanish dancer. The baggy white pants conceal perceived incorrect marching technique.

young—a relative term, applied to those with fewer years attached to their name than someone else.

Ballerinas look young dancing across the floor—the *plié* and straightening of their knees put an elastic spring in their steps. But listen closely and you can hear a hip click, a knee pop. Look, there: a quivering, supporting leg. The average ballet dancer will retire before age thirty due to injury or competition.

The youngest member of the Academy's performing company is eighteen—Lucie Godiva. It's only her second year at the studio and Miss Godiva has the luck of being our Clara for the evening. At twenty-five years, a quarter of a life, Evelyn Marks is the oldest member of our company. She has yet to dance the part of Clara.

*The Academy hopes the clarification of these essential terms will illuminate the inner-workings of tonight's professional performance to its ballet-illiterate audience.*

## CREAGER PRIZE WINNER

“Stories Untold” by Courtney DuChene

“Stories Untold” is an intimate piece displaying a mature and reflective voice. A brooding narrator sorts through her deceased grandmother’s inner life. We are reminded that deciding what stories we keep and what stories clutter (though at times untidy) is always necessary. The writing is careful with a meditative tone and skillfully placed humor.

## RUNNER UP

“Irish Rain” by Paige Szmodis

“Irish Rain” demonstrates a sophisticated and consistent control of language. This imagistic piece was a delightful read.



Tracey Ferdinand holds a bachelor’s degree in English from Ursinus College and a master’s degree in Africana Women’s Studies from Clark Atlanta University. She is also a certified vinyasa yoga teacher with a passion for wellness. Her writing inspires lifestyle transformations guided by self-love and self-care. You can visit her website at [www.TraceyCoretta.com](http://www.TraceyCoretta.com).

Courtney DuChene

## Stories Untold

My grandmother was, in no uncertain terms, a hoarder. Her bookshelves, her counter tops, her end tables—every open space—were covered with wedding announcements, newspaper clippings, old bills. She was a florist, and even though there was always a plethora of fresh flowers in her garden, she would leave dead flowers in her windowsill for months. Growing up, my sister and I were told we could never eat the food at her house because it was all rotten. We couldn't even take the candies she offered us because they were expired. My mom tried her best to curb my grandmother's compulsive saving, but she got tired of cleaning out the moldy refrigerator. Eventually, she let my grandmother's depression era habits consume her childhood home.

After my grandmother died, my mother spent a summer sorting through her house. She dragged my sister, Megan, and I up to the farm with her. It was the summer before I started fifth grade. I had been an odd, quiet elementary schooler who had preferred walking the playground's edge to the noise and hustle of recess tag. My hair was just starting to grow out of the boy's bowl cut my mother had been giving me for years. I wore shirts with sleeves that were too long because I constantly tugged them over my wrists and 80's neon colored gym shorts. I had just started needing bras and I was doing everything I could to hide that fact from my boy cousins. My grandmother's house, with its maze of cardboard boxes and stacks of papers, was a perfect hiding place for my in-between summer. It was a cavernous pit for me to wander. I had never seen the entirety of her house until that summer. In the past, my mom had always kept visits to my grandmother's tightly structured out of fear that, if my sister and I wandered, we would find something to stick in our mouths. We were confined to playing outside in the flower beds or watching Yogi Bear in the living room. My grandmother kept our visits similarly structured. She began each visit with a garden tour and ended each visit with a story.

My grandmother had always been a storyteller. She had a way of weaving the anecdotes of her ordinary farm life into almost fairytales. Megan and I would sit intently in the living room as she told us of the wild animals she had kept as pets and her children's antics. There was an immediacy in her soft, wrinkled voice. It seemed as if she needed her stories to be heard, even if it was only the four walls of her living room that heard them. I was an eager audience for her tales.



As I wandered through her house that summer, I found pieces of her stories. Tucked in a corner was the banana box she had kept one of my aunts in as a baby. Buried under folders and files was the piano her pet raccoon broke. There were hundreds upon hundreds of items, however, that I couldn't connect with a story. I didn't understand why she saved used Christmas wrapping paper or hid coins and dollar bills in every crack.

When I asked why my grandmother had saved such seemingly useless items, my mother always responded, "She grew up in the Depression. They had to save everything back then."

Her answer did little to satisfy my curiosity. I knew that there must have been a story behind everything my grandmother saved. Why would she save items without meaning? I imagined that my grandfather, in a dashing military uniform, had sent her the silver war pennies while he was away. I pretended the wrapping paper was from her first Christmas. It did not matter that my grandfather had never been a soldier, or that my grandmother would have likely been unable to save wrapping paper as an infant. I liked the stories all the same.

My mother used to sit and sort photos in the living room as I wandered in and out with my questions. She was meticulous about labeling the photos with their approximate dates and the names of people in them, but my grandmother had made that task nearly impossible. The gray eyes of strangers watched as my mother tossed their photos into the garbage pile.

"Do you think they like that?" I asked.

"Like what?" My mother answered as she continued tossing photo after photo into their respective piles.

"Do you think they like that you throw their photos away?"

"I don't know, most of them are dead anyway. They can't think about it."

"Do you think Grandma would like it?"

"I don't know. Courtney, would you please let me work?"

I slide out from the living room after she snapped, but not without pointing to one of the rare, colored photos first. "Who's that?"

"Your cousin Stacy. It was taken before she died."

I didn't have any more questions after that, at least not ones my mother would have had answers to. My cousin Stacy committed suicide around the time my sister was born. After Stacy killed herself, my mom would wake up in the middle of the night in cold sweats. She would tip-toe out of bed and hover over Megan's crib. Slowly, she would reach out two fingers and tuck them gently under the tiny, baby nose to make sure that her child was still breathing. Once the tiny, baby breaths graced her fingers, she would carefully remove her hand and crawl back into bed. I don't know if

she slept afterwards or just stared at my tiny, sleeping sister. She was afraid my cousin's ghost would take her baby.

I replayed that story in my brain as I wandered upstairs. I rarely went upstairs; it was too cluttered. Years ago, there had been bedrooms upstairs, but no one had occupied them in years. My grandmother had bad knees and couldn't climb upstairs, so the bedrooms were full of cobwebs and thick, brown sugar-colored dust. They were still painted in bright, seventies era blues, yellows, and greens. My grandmother had left dozens of religious icons on the shelves in the bedrooms. Their empty, pupil-less eyes stared at me as I wandered through the rooms. The bedrooms were filled with the childhoods of my aunts and uncles. There were old varsity jackets and marbles on the floor. In my mom's old room there were still posters of Tommy Kramer on the wall. I walked through the room, lifting up boxes and piles of old toys. I wasn't looking for anything in particular. I was just sifting through more stories. I imagined my mother, growing up in this bedroom. I wondered if she had hung more posters that had fallen off the walls years earlier.

Wind burst through the window, blowing the white muslin curtains inside. Something crashed off of a desk. A naked baby doll with marker streaked across its face fell in front of me. I ran downstairs and outside, the screen door slamming behind me. My sister and my cousin, Sawyer, were sitting on the swing set in the orchard where the crab apples were just beginning to fall off the trees.

"What happened?" Megan asked as I sat down on the slide.

"Nothing." I picked at my fraying sandals. I didn't want to look at either of them.

"What's going on inside?" Megan pressed.

"Nothing."

"She saw a ghost," Sawyer answered.

I looked over at him. He was twisting one of the swings around so it kinked up the chain. He smiled a confident, no teeth grin. "I did not. There's no such thing as ghosts."

"Yes there is," he said. "My mom saw one after Grandma's funeral."

"She did not. You're just trying to scare Megan."

"I'm not scared," Megan announced. She was the youngest and she always had to declare her place amongst the older kids.

"My mom did too see a ghost," Sawyer continued. "She sees it all the time when they clean the house."

"Is it Grandma then?" I asked.

"I don't know."

"Well if your mom's seen it..."

"She hasn't seen *it*, but she saw it do stuff."

“Like what?”

“It moved one of the cars, all by itself. There were no keys inside.”

“Whose car?” I asked.

He thought about this for a moment. “Aunt Joyce’s.”

“Oh yeah? What else did it do?”

“It opened and closed the garage door.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, I saw it.”

“When?”

“I don’t know, a few weeks ago. You weren’t here.”

We were both quiet after that. Sawyer let the swing unwind. He got off and staggered through the orchard, kicking apples as he went.

The August humidity felt tense. After he got off, I sat in his swing and began winding it, just as he had. I watched as he walked through the yard, kicking apples and staining his shoes with their guts.

“I didn’t see a ghost. There are no such things as ghosts.”

He bent down and picked up an apple. He studied the apple’s worm holes and bruises. He carefully weighted it in his hand before he threw it. It split against a tree into neat halves.

“You’re not supposed to throw those,” Megan whined from her seat.

Sawyer picked another apple up and threw it. Then another and another. After a while I hopped off my swing and began throwing them too. We screamed with delight and terror at our apple war. The apples broke against tree trunks and our limbs. Their cannonball guts were too ripe for eating. They exploded on every surface, staining our shirts. Their soft mushy pits splattered across the patchy grass.

As the guts whirled around me, I stopped and squeezed one of the apples in my palm. It felt like I was crushing a skull as its tight skin caved over its insides in my palm. Sawyer and my sister kept throwing the apples and watching them explode against trees, but I took my mushy pit and chucked it directly at Sawyer’s forehead. Its stem cut the corner of his eye. He bled slightly, but laughed.

I walked over to him and wiped the blood with my thumb. “Should I get a Band-Aid?” I asked.

Sawyer considered the dark windows of the house. A light came on upstairs “No,” he said, “they’re busy.” The blood kept trickling down his face. He wiped it away with the back of his dirty hand.

“I should get a Band-Aid,” I repeated.

Sawyer just shook his head. “What would we tell them?”

“It’s lying if we don’t tell.”

“No,” he said, “It’s just not telling.”



I sat down in the grass. He sat beside me. For a second we watched as the wind sucked the muslin curtains. It pulled the ghosts outside. "Sawyer," I said as I watched the curtains dance in the wind. "Grandma's dead."

"I know," he said. The blood kept trickling down his face. I stared forward at the windows. The curtains jerked back inside. They were trapped in the house, the way my voice was caught in my throat. It would never be free, unless it broke loose and confessed. In that moment, I developed an intense distaste for lying.

My mother came out carrying a box of my grandmother's prayer statues. My aunts were several paces behind her. They were sweating as if they were trying to catch her. "Girls, we're leaving," my mom called. Megan and I ran to the car. It was early afternoon; we usually stayed later.

During the car ride home, I asked my mom if what Sawyer said about the ghosts was true. "I don't know," she said. "It does feel awfully cold in there sometimes."

I hunched in my seat. "Can the ghosts see what I do?" I asked. I remembered the apple orchard. Sawyer's forehead was still bleeding a little when we left.

"Maybe," she said. "Why?"

I closed my eyes. "I'm going to sleep now," I announced.

I couldn't sleep. The whole drive home I stayed awake and listened to my mother whisper as she drove. It was as if she was trying to make sense of something—of a story she found in my grandmother's master bedroom. She was trying to make sense of the narrative of her mother's affair when all of a sudden I opened my eyes. She looked at me in the rearview mirror and said, "Don't let this change your opinion of Grandma."

When we got home, I helped my mother unload the box of religious statues she had brought with us. My grandmother had always been a prayerful woman. She would brag that she would chat with the priest at confession because she had nothing to confess. She kept rosary beads in her purse, in her car, and jammed onto every surface in her house. It seemed as though my mother had emptied the house of all of my grandmother's icons. She even brought the Mary and Jesus statues that were as big as two year olds. I stared at the viney snake under Mary's feet as I helped my mother lift the statue from the car. "Do you have any questions," she asked suddenly, "about what you heard?"

I shook my head no.

My mom pulled an obituary from her purse. "Doesn't this look like your uncle David?"

I stared at the man in the photo. He wasn't my grandfather. My grandfather was bald.

My mother pulled the picture away before I could say anything. "They both have so much hair," she muttered to herself.

After that we didn't go back to the house for several weeks. School had started and my mom was busy with buying supplies and meeting teachers. She didn't have time to clean. I tried to forget about the story, but it was nearly impossible. My mom rehashed it over the phone almost nightly to her sisters. The story, which she maintained could be a work of fiction, was about a farm wife who had an affair with one of the hired hands. It could have been merely a fantasy, but my mother was nearly convinced of its truth. My mother believed the story because my grandmother had saved it with the obituary from a hired hand. She left it in a drawer in the master bedroom. The hired hand in the photo strongly resembled my uncle David. The story was dated about a year before his birth. She kept asking people what they thought the story meant. I was certain it had been left by a ghost. A haunting monster with no relation to my grandmother. I knew the ghost had left this garbage there to hurt us.

When we started going back to the farm I began my hunt for this ghost. I looked for him in the window cracks and the dust. I hunted in every crevice that my grandmother had once tucked cash inside. I knew he was leaving footprints in the dust outside. I knew he was moving the boxes after each time we visited. He had forgotten something, but I did not know what.

While I hunted for physical apparitions, my mother searched for emotional ones. For years she had been trying to make sense of why my grandmother spoiled my uncle David while she neglected her other children. Uncle David was nothing remarkable. He was a drunk who drove the farm into debt by wasting my grandmother's money on get-rich-quick schemes and scratcher tickets. He had been divorced and abused his sons. Yet my grandmother always stuck up for him. She couldn't see the bad. My mother had tried so hard to convince my grandmother to stop investing money into him. Their last conversation had been a fight over whether or not my grandmother should bail David out. If David had a different father, it would have explained my grandmother's favoritism. While they cleaned, my mother and my aunt spoke in restricted whispers. They would force Megan, my cousins, and I out of the house. They didn't want any of the other kids to know what they had discovered. My mother's sisters had a variety of opinions about what should be done. My Aunt Kathy wanted to throw the story away. My Aunt Cookie demanded that my mother make everyone get DNA tests. My mother was caught somewhere in between. She wanted to know if David was her half-brother, but she did not want to blow up her grieving family. She used to cry as she called her sisters to talk about it. Her voice was soft and small. It was one of the rare times I'd seen my mother break. Even though she was the youngest, she was the strongest of her six



siblings. She remained strong during my grandfather's stroke, even though she was only in high school. Every day she visited her dad and watched as his eyes sank. She listened as, in slurring speech, he asked her to bring a gun and shot him. Through all that, she never broke. She managed the farm when her mother couldn't. It is ugly when a well-composed woman cries.

I knew this story had in some way altered my mother's perception of my grandmother. Grandma could no longer be the woman who loved to write so much that she saved her essays even after magazines rejected them. She was no longer the woman who kept the church filled with flowers. As I watched my mother's sharp blue eyes turn all red and contorted, I wanted more than ever to find the ghost that did this.

When we reached the farm that next week, my mother pulled me aside. "I need you to do something for me." I nodded and waited for her to explain. She pulled out a drug store blood typing kit from her purse. "I need you to pretend this is for a school project. We're going to test your uncle David and Uncle Steve to compare, okay?"

I wondered if she picked my Uncle Steve for the control because he was the first born and therefore the most likely to my grandfather's.

We went into the shop where David was working. Steve was waiting for us there. My mom explained, "Courtney has a school project. She needs to find the blood type of a few family members. Would you be willing to help?" I just stood beside her and nodded. My uncles agreed. My mother pricked their fingers. I watched as tiny drops of blood bubbled out from the wounds. I could hear Megan and my cousins screaming outside as they played barefoot in the gravel. I wanted to be out there. I shifted from foot to foot as we waited for the test to work. She read the results out loud. Steve had type O blood, their father's blood type. David had B positive, their mother's.

My mother was stagnant after she read the results. She had always blamed David for their mom's death. The morning of my grandmother's heart attack, David told her he was taking out another loan. My mom believed my grandmother's body couldn't handle the stress of the mounting debt. She had the heart attack before lunch. Being able to reveal that David was not her whole sibling would have made Grandma's death easier for my mother.

I didn't see my grandmother immediately after she died, but I imagine what her body looked like, tipped over on the couch. When we started cleaning the house, my mother wanted the couch taken out first, but I sat on it while she was upstairs. I was fascinated by the fact that this couch had seen the end of someone's life. It had been the site of it. After the blood test, I went inside and sat on the couch again. My mom had always told me that my grandmother loved me because she had always wanted a child born

in September. My September 30<sup>th</sup> birthday barely makes the cut, but my grandmother loved that I was the only one in the family born in September. I always sat on this couch when I visited her. She would sit beside me in the plush orange rocking chair. Her story hadn't affected me until now. Before this, she was a stock character to me then. The unnamed narrator of a novel who spouted stories that weren't her own. I had assumed her stories were for me. After the blood test, I hadn't realized that this specific story was hers. She hid it in the master bedroom with a photo so none of her children would happen upon it. She didn't want to share it with them. She had given so much of her life to others, but this story was hers.

I could almost feel her sitting with me as I rocked back and forth on the couch. She was waiting patiently in her rocking chair when I came into the living room. When I sat down she started telling the story of Smiley, her pet raccoon. The story of Smiley was the only one in which she included my grandfather. I imagined her leaning back into her chair and closing her eyes as she told it. The words were familiar to me. I closed my eyes too. As the story played in my brain I imagined my grandfather. In my grandmother's story, he was out trimming dead branches off of trees when he found an abandoned baby raccoon. He brought the little, gray fuzzi-ball back to the house and gave him to my grandma. She fed the baby raccoon and watched him grow. She named him Smiley. He spent his days inside with her. Following her as she cooked meals and cleaned the house. Smiley only went outside once a day. He would walk out to see my grandfather at lunch time. My grandfather would pet his little grey head with rough, working hands. After he petted Smiley, he would reach out and give him a cookie. Smiley would eat the cookie and walk back to the house to be with my grandmother. He did that every day, until one day he didn't come back. He had been getting restless. He would run around the house and rip paper and tip garbage bins. He would run over the piano keys, playing a frustrated melody as my grandparent's and their children tried to sleep. Finally, he went out one day at lunchtime to get his cookie, and afterwards he walked out into the yellow corn field instead of going back to the house. He walked through the endless yellow rows and never came back.

My grandmother told so many stories about herself in her lifetime. I am just now recognizing the woman she was in them. In her stories she was always a successful gardener, an animal lover, or a mother, but she was never a wife. She never told me how she met my grandfather. She didn't talk about their relationship or how she felt after his stroke. I wonder if she ever wished that she could walk out into her flowerbeds, never to return.

Zoey Cox

meditations from a bunk bed in a home on mount Pocono

the day found me contemplating precedence,  
aching, aged muscles slogging up steps  
or disgruntled teenagers ordering coffee drinks—  
you always mentioned the pain of your purity,  
and how beautiful, and how unique, how  
brilliant a statute your being had become,  
though extruded through strainer straws  
like a potent loose-leaf tea—  
I envy production, rigor, spirit  
like the horse envies the rider,  
like the child envies the parent  
until the roles are reversed.

a portrait painted with an assumed intent,  
latte art atop burnt espresso,  
your poems on napkins,  
bookending expensive, otherwise unused notebooks—  
you find this a failure,  
I find it human, beautiful, voluminous.  
a day with far too much indulgence in your mind  
but you enjoy these things and who is to say  
you aren't fully yourself when laying  
prostrate upon a sagging, cum stained mattress  
smoking herbal cigarettes and sipping cutty sark  
til the night takes over and your pleasure peaks?

be your own god,  
exasperated by your people.  
"I haven't been sick in months,"  
you say, nursing anxieties like  
scabbing wounds, pulled muscles.  
your father was a daydreamer too,  
and where has that gotten him? a  
solemn reply from a dogged whisperer  
says nowhere although I've always seen his  
failure as a blessing, a sanctuary for care,  
for blessed parentage, niceties,



half-hearted two dollar bill support,  
anti-capitalist burgeoning, growing  
uncontrollably inward, an astrological progeny  
defined by the moon's blue fire, or perhaps a  
painting of the moon's blue fire, set to canvas by  
a machine, churning out tarot cards for months  
consecutively so that the new generation can explore  
their horrors, those things which will become shrouded,  
spurning self-told lies to avoid truth, mindfulness, progress.  
rip out the pages of your family bible and  
tape them to the fridge like an A paper—  
mark your name in red ink, weep.

Mara Koren

## Small Town Summer

Once at my house, late at night, we played the Google Maps game. The game virtually drops you into an unknown Google Maps location, and you place a pin on a map of the world of where you think you are. We ended up in a small town, summer, brown fields, a few stores burned out like the heat sweated the paint off their sides. Puffy clouds wispy at the edges. Signs in English, it looked like the American West. There were empty lots behind houses growing weeds between cracks. It looked like a place where your car dies and you sigh into the one bar to find people who all know each other by name, a pool table, a slap on the back.

It looked like the summer of someone else's youth, where dogs roamed free and shaggy-haired. I don't know if North Dakota has cicadas and I don't remember the name of that small town, but I think about it from time to time. Small town heat and small town childhoods. Today on a walk I remembered the way my father and brother and I used to slip from shade to shade like salamanders, skimming along the side of the stone church as cicadas ratcheted up and up again. At night in my hot room, cicadas sing me to sleep, a song of chain link fence cutting along the library parking lot, sweating clouds, crunchy grass, as I find myself back in my own small town, and wonder what it would look like on the Google Maps game. I dream of the unknown town in North Dakota I will never remember the name of, where my street runs into theirs and I push into the bar, into shouts of love and tired iced water slumps.

"Do you remember that town?" I ask, and you don't, and that's okay. We're miles apart in tiny corners of the world people might see once and forget, and for some reason I'm consumed with these moments of space that will exist and never exist again.

Our voices carry over more than a hundred miles of air. The cicadas keen through the night.

Juan Lopez

10 Hours in Philadelphia

We feel the beat of the earth underneath our feet as we step on hard concrete. Life flows this way. We hold hands and look up; the passive sky mirrors our gait. We allow ourselves to be carried by the breeze, illuminated by the light of the sun reflected from the pavement below us. The space between us—millimeters—is charged with the energy of a million individuals trudging upon the sidewalk: kinetic energy provided by boots and sneakers and shoes. We feel it on our skin, it passes from fingertip to fingertip, electric currents traveling from me to you: a constant game: volts racing along our pores like children playing tag. Car engines hum and roar their symphony: a perfect harmony between SUVs and sedans. These notes prickle our eardrums. We feel alive within this ecosystem: a stream of sounds and sensations: a stampede of sights and feelings. We relish in our relationship with the air; we walk and let it carry the smells of the city to our nostrils: corrosive and exciting: jolts of petroleum and perfume interspersed with grass and dirt. Suns set and suns rise above our heads as we sit on warm cement porches and let our senses drown in the city wind. Heads rest on shoulders and arms wind around backs: the eighteenth-century pasture adapted to our twenty-first century tastes.

Sarah Gow

## The Second Avenue Schmeer

Everyone knew that Second Avenue was the place to go for a bagel. Leiber's had been sitting pretty on the corner with its wide eyes and steam since the days when ladies wore hats indoors and every man at the counter rolled up the sleeves of his white button-downs to dig into Leiber's signature schmeer.

The sidewalk smelled like sesame and ovens.

Little had changed since newly immigrated Willie Leiber bought the little nook with all the Leiber family had ever had to their name. Cleared the bank right out. He needed to turn over a profit that first week or it was all over. The family ate bagels on the shop floor that first night after they opened shop.

Willie's daughter, Dorothy, who was only two years old at the time, had complained that they didn't have enough cream cheese left to eat her bagel how she liked it. Willie promised that someday Dorothy could eat as much cream cheese as she wanted. "With a spoon if you please," he vowed.

Willie had started his venture after three years living in this country and experience only in baking bagels and being a busboy at the diner two blocks north. With the luck of budding America on his side, Leiber's entered what would become the livelihood of his lineage.

The first week the profits more than broke them even and Leiber even ordered an extra supply of cream cheese to start mixing his own blends, inspired by the demands of his youngest daughter, the only one who had been born on this side of the ocean. His other two children were quieter and often didn't hold opinions on the bagels, other than that they were equivalent to manna. He had an older son, Henry, and a middle son, Joe.

Willie attempted to pass the business off to his effusive daughter, Dorothy Leiber, but Dorothy, of course, fell in love with a boy who danced on big stages on Broadway. Henry and Joe took up the business like they always knew they would. They lived above the shop, and when they both had families, they split the apartment in half. In order to save space, each Leiber only had one child whom they would pass the craft down to naturally. Now, their children only produced one heir to the Leiber dynasty, seeing as Henry Leiber had a daughter and she was afflicted with the stardust-street light eyes of her aunt Dorothy and also ran off with an actor.

Third generation baker Sammy Leiber got up every single morning at four twenty-five on the dot. His alarm clock read "four-thirty" but it was a



Leiber custom to set every clock five minutes fast so you were always stunningly on time.

Leiber's was religious in practice. The shop's order was a ritual. The way they crafted bagels ironically rivaled that of the sequence of the Catholic Mass.

Sammy was newly married to a dainty Italian woman from Little Italy named Francesca. Her father was the heir to a pizza dynasty up two blocks over—the families got along well. Immigrants and kings—laughing in broken pieces of their native tongue passed down through the generations like diamond watches.

Sammy and Maria had not yet succeeded in producing a bagel heir or heiress and were actively worried about it. To add pressure to the situation, the elderly Joe Leiber lived in the tiny apartment as well and was also actively worried about the sacred continuance of the bagel shop and the Leiber name. It was troubling enough to him that Maria had not taken the Leiber name when they got married. She was still Maria Bellarosa, but with a name like that, how could you really part with it to become Marie Leiber?

"Turn off that God damn thing!" Maria shouted at Sammy, who fumbled like he did every morning to shut off the alarm. He was not meant to get up early. He awakened with only enough brain power to think of bagels and ovens. He went to sleep with the recipe stuck on repeat in his mind and started baking in his dreams. He often forgot the lovely woman draped next to him in a scarlet silk slip because he was too deep in thought about bagels.

Maria did not find this endearing.

The shop sold the same six flavors of bagel that it always had and every morning started with a different one to add some variety to the routine. Monday started with the plain, then everything, then sesame, then cinnamon raisin, then poppy seed, then blueberry, then wheat, then onion, and, finally, the week finished up with another batch of plain.

He turned the alarm off.

Sammy shuffled downstairs. Sammy baked and drank coffee constantly until seven, when the doors opened and he was ready and awake. He loved nothing more than the Monday rush—the tradition of coming to Leiber's for businessmen and construction workers was as strong as the tradition of baking the bagels themselves. It was almost uncommon for someone to not bark "the usual, Sammy boy," to Leiber behind the counter.

He opened the door. Something was dreadfully wrong. The rush was meandering at best. They served them slower than usual. There were less of them. Life seemed to move in slow motion. The slight break in routine made Sammy painfully nervous and he began to apologize for just about everything.



Even the morning chatter wasn't loud enough for him. He felt as though he was hearing more than he wanted to hear. He craved the typical calamity.

"Sure is... quiet today," Sammy finally managed.

The older gentlemen shared a look with each other as if there were a secret among them.

"Yes," they collectively mumbled.

"Now look here, I can tell something is wrong. Which one of you is going to tell me who died?" Sammy said, pretending like what he said was a joke when he said it with a tight jaw and clenched fist around a dish rag.

The men were equally as off-put by the scene.

Everyone likes routine.

"It's not my job to deliver the news," the oldest gentleman who worked for Warner Financial said. Warner boys had always come to Leiber's, it was practically in the job description.

"It sure as hell ain't mine," the intern said. He was overdressed and awkwardly wearing a fedora that was slightly too large for his head.

The other man with them from Barkley & Co. Plumbing shook his head and said, "Look outside, you don't have to TELL him anything."

Sammy strode out the front door of the shop to be greeted with the glinting face of a sign that read "Bombastic Bagels."

"What the fuck is that?" Sammy shouted to no one in particular.

The sign was shiny and the handles to the shop were funky blue and green. The place looked like an ice cream parlor to Sammy. He frowned and paced back and forth trying to decide whether or not to enter and huffed back to his own station at Leiber's, seeing as it was still somewhat busy with regulars.

"When the fuck did that happen?" Sammy asked the men still seated at his counter, sleeves rolled, munching perfectly toasted sesame and onion bagels. The business men from Warner were wiping their hands with napkins from the counter and swiping grains and seeds off their laps.

"Caught me off guard this morning," the man with the onion bagel who worked for the plumbing union said.

"Woke me up it did," his buddy said, nudging his arm. His buddy always split the bagel into two halves to savor it. Sammy believed in the perfect bite, so it discomfited him that the man deconstructed his creation.

"I was not informed of this," Sammy said. He rolled up his own sleeves and brushed off stray crumbs from the counter.

Sammy began to nervously stack the bagels in the case for the next little burst of costumers who went into work a tad later.

"Are you worried, Sammy?" onion plumber asked.

“Never,” Sammy retorted and sliced up a cinnamon raisin. “I’ll check it out over lunch when Pop takes over.” Cinnamon raisin bagels always comforted Sammy—they had been his favorite as a boy. He had not felt the impulse to consume a full one alone for years. His wife and he usually split them for celebrations.

Standing over the cinnamon dust on the counter Sammy felt dirty and queasy. The costumers ate the nervousness from the bagels, and, in turn, felt queasy as they left too.

“Was something wrong with the cream cheese today?” one carpenter asked another who covered his mouth like a cough as he burped. Sammy overheard and angrily brushed more crumbs off the counter.

Maria popped in through the back kitchen door. “I smell cinnamon raisin!” she chimed. “Where’s my half and what are we celebrating?”

“Ate the whole thing,” Sammy admitted.

Maria surveyed the disturbingly quiet store. It was as if the costumers were scared to converse like usual. Each hunched over their breakfasts and scarfed down their bagels, making themselves sick.

“Oh Sammy toast me one too,” she said. “Are you okay? Is there something wrong with the ingredients?”

“Never been anything wrong with the ingredients.”

“Of course, sorry dear.”

“There’s another place.”

“Another place.”

He pointed.

“Good God, what’s that?”

“Bagel shop.”

“On Second Avenue? This is our street.”

Sammy fixated on those blue and green door handles.

“Sammy?”

“Oh sorry.”

“Are you alright? You do know that we’re known as the best schmear around. It’s like when the hippy dippy gluten free pizza joint opened near daddy. Nothing happened—just a little hype.”

“Is the other pizza place still open?”

“I think so.”

“There can’t be two bagel shops across from each other, Maria—it’s unfair and unnatural.”

“It won’t be much of a challenge to out-do them, dear,” she said, caressing his forearm.

Just then, also from the kitchen, emerged and very shaken Joe Leiber, who prodded his way into the room with his cane.

“I don’t want to die!” he announced.

"Pop, what are you talking about?" Sammy asked.

"There's something very wrong."

"We've been through this dad, new bagel place. Sammy here is takin' 'em down as we speak," Maria assured him.

"That's unfair and unnatural," he stated.

"Agreed," Sammy said as he prepared his father a cinnamon raisin bagel. They calmed his nerves too.

"Oh! Smell that toasting!" Joe Leiber said sticking his nose far too close to the toaster than would be considered necessary.

Maria and Joe would not say it, but they both felt dreadful after the bagel. Joe contemplated going back upstairs. Maria wanted to throw up—she already was uneasy about eating an entire bagel alone.

The business was still steady at Leiber's through the morning.

"I can't leave dad alone to run the place in his state," Sammy said to Maria. "I need your help. You need to infiltrate Bombastic Bagel for me."

"Infiltrate?" she asked.

"Check it out. Scope out the place. Figure out its deal."

"Oh, exciting! Detective work!"

Maria's only occupation was being effusive about everything she did, no matter how small the task.

She dosed herself in the expensive perfume her father ordered from family still in Andali and pranced out the front door with purpose.

"She's gone now, son," Joey said in a hushed tone. Lunch chatter was light at best, so they had to speak in whispers.

"What?"

"You lost her."

"How do you figure that, Pop?"

"You sent her to the competition. That's man's duty. You're gonna lose a girl like that, especially after those bagels."

"Those bagels?"

"Something's wrong, Samuel."

"Dear God, you too?"

"Something is queasy about them."

Sammy gripped the counter.

"We'll need to bake together tomorrow," he said. "Only hope."

Sammy nodded. While he filled orders he maintained his staring competition with the glass doors of Bombastic Bagel. The art student who used to come around lunch walked out with little pink plastic bags.

Two hours passed and finally Maria returned—red-faced like she looked the first night of their honeymoon. Sammy knew.

She said nothing.

"What's the scoop?"



“It’s nothing much,” she said at the counter.

Leiber’s closed at three every day and the last bagel orders were meandering in and out and Sammy was casually cleaning.

“So it was easy to get every detail in the two hours you were there.”

Maria was trying to suppress a spark that was set inside her by Bombastic Bagel.

“Celeste Babylon is the chef. She’s from France. She was a pastry chef who decided to try her hand at bagels. Interesting enough.”

“So she makes DONUTS?!” Sammy said, trying to keep his voice from raising volume.

“Oh no, no. They’re unique bagels.”

“Unique.”

“Yeah like any flavor you can think of. Oh! And they’re pink. All of them—with different coatings and such but the dough is always pink.”

“Pink? What kind of fucking monster would make a pink bagel?”

“Oh no, Celeste is gorgeous and dainty and wonderful.”

“Dainty bagels!” Sammy shouted. “So, you ate a pink bagel?”

“Oh Sammy there’s nothing wrong with it. It’s just different. It’s NOTHING like your bagels. It was a nice change.” She regretted the last sentence and wanted to stuff it back down her throat. It occurred to her that she never ate bagels from anywhere but Leiber’s just like she never ate pizza from anywhere but her father’s joint.

The clock clicked to three. The store closed.

The next morning Joe creaked out of bed to the same alarm as his son in the room over. The morning was harsh on his bones but it brought a sense of familiarity he had been missing.

Maria cursed the alarm on schedule.

Sammy took comfort in this preserved aspect of the routine.

The kitchen was dimly lit and the father and son worked happily on the everything bagels of Tuesdays.

Tension lingered and they noticed a pink sort of smell in the air. Disgusted, sickeningly pink. Like bubblegum and flamingo pink.

“We’ll bake ‘em out,” Joe said as the dozen were set free into the oven.

They placed them on the racks to cool, both nervous and not saying anything to the other. Neither wanted to acknowledge it.

“They’re pink, aren’t they?” Joe asked finally as the doors to the shop opened for the day. Even the bagels baked the day before in the case were pink—even the cinnamon couldn’t resist the slightly rosy hue. “What are you trying to pull, boy?”

“It’s not me, dad. It’s... it’s out of our hands.”

The prior day repeated only with less regulars and more familiar faces pulling the green and blue door handles of Bombastic Bagel.

Maria made nervous small talk with her husband and said she was going out for a walk.

“Want to come with, dad? It’ll be good to take your mind off things. This tension isn’t good for your blood pressure.”

“You say that like I have health problems. Leibers don’t have any health problems. We eat too many bagels to have health problems.”

“Well, you don’t want to start. Let’s get some air.”

The pinkness of the place made Maria crave another Bombastic Bagel with so much intensity it was pounding in her temples.

“No fresh everything bagel for you, my dear?” Sammy asked, half-heartedly. He knew his father was right. He had lost her for good. Maria was a person to become indoctrinated into things—like when she was obsessed with yoga for two summers in a row. This was worse, though. He could feel the pinkness on everything in the store.

“Oh I’m still a bit nauseous. Thank you my darling—they’re better than usual.”

“They’re fucking pink, Maria.”

“Oh really? That’s the difference, I wasn’t sure what it was.”

“They’re pink like YOU like them now,” he said.

“Oh, oh no. It’s not the pinkness. It’s a bit more than that. You know I could be nauseous for good reasons.”

“Good reasons?”

“We have been trying,” she said, winking at her husband. “I’ll take a test later today.”

Sammy flushed. He was terrified of mentions of sexuality near other humans.

The hint at reproduction had flown entirely over Joe Leiber’s head and they exited.

Sammy knew exactly what was happening and he watched Maria walk his father across the street to the green and blue door handles.

He was alone.

The store was more empty than usual. He didn’t even recognize the patrons who were still there. They seemed more beaten down—war-torn. He tried to remember someone’s name to have a conversation with but all the pinkness in the place was clouding his mind.

He looked across the street again and that was when he saw her.

She was not human. Her hair was like cotton candy, pink with twirls of neon blue. Thick green glasses and a pastry chef uniform whiter than the counters at Leiber’s could ever be bleached.

She stood in the doorway of Bombastic Bagel. Her kingdom. She nodded at him. She had seen him! He ducked under the counter and curled up. He was furious at himself because the only thing that he wanted to eat was one of those pink bagels. Maybe one with Froot Loops and strawberry cream cheese like his wife had described. It was a disgrace. It was disgusting. It was sacrilege. He wanted it so bad. He wanted to sin. He wiped drool from his mouth.

He would not eat anything but his own bagels. He would drive this pinkness out alone if he had to. Sammy gnawed on a plain bagel from the display case. It was dreadfully stale even though it was only from the day before. Sammy forced it down with a glass of tap water and swallowed hard.

Time passed and his wife and father did not return. The costumers dwindled with the day and he flipped the open sign to closed. Bombastic Bagel across the street was still open. They didn't close till midnight and there were people there until Celeste Babylon herself swept them out. He had watched from his window the night before. He didn't know how she could stay up so late and get up so early to start the next day.

She was inhuman.

He stayed up watching everyone come in and out of the place. He sat on the counter like he did as a child and ate stale bagel after stale bagel until the whole showcase was empty. He was determined to get up earlier than Celeste and bake new all night and all morning. He was dreadfully sick and everything—even the green and blue door handles—looked pink to him.

His wife and father came home.

"How was the walk?" Sammy asked as if they had been gone five minutes.

The two shared a look of joy and shame.

"It's fine, I know," Sammy said.

"No," Maria said. "We have something for you," she said, presenting the pink little bag.

"Sammy, it's okay," Joe Leiber said. "It's okay, you know?"

"Get that away from me!" he shouted and drew a bread knife from the drawer.

"It's for your own good son, we need to do this as a family," his father encouraged.

"I'm baking all tonight! You'll see! The street will smell like sesame and ovens all over again! Like onions! Like poppy seeds! Like bagels! Like REAL bagels!"

"These ARE bagels," Maria said.

"Leave me!" Sammy said.

They went upstairs and the man set to work furiously determined to bake every bagel new on the menu. He would do the week in one day.



Somewhere in the clamor between sesame and cinnamon raisin Sammy passed out from exhaustion on the floor of Leiber's. He lay behind the counter—caked in flour, bread crumbs, cream cheese, and an assortment of seed.

He awoke to an eerie sort of calm. It was four-twenty-five. The alarm had come in his head but he could still hear Maria complain about it from the upstairs bedroom.

Wednesdays were meant for sesame bagels and he began like any other morning, only the sesame seeds were rock candy and the dough was a more refined hue of pink. The counters were bleach white and his "New York Mets" T-shirt was exchanged for a chef's coat.

Apprehensively, he worked till the door opened and the place flooded again with familiar personalities all congratulating Sammy on some unknown achievement.

He didn't have to whisper.

And when his wife came downstairs, he made her a chocolate ganache and cheesecake bagel like she had been craving, and they split it in celebration of the positive pregnancy test in the wastebasket of the bathroom.

His father ate a sprinkle and Pop Rocks bagel from the counter next to them.

"I'm going for a walk for lunch. Can you hold down the place?" Sammy asked his father.

"I think I can manage," Joe jeered at his son and winked.

And Sammy Leiber exited through the blue and green doors of the second location of Bombastic Bagel across the street from its mother. He crossed paths with Celeste Babylon, also on lunch break, walking her tea-cup wiener dog.

She complimented his pink and blue hair.

Joe Makuc

To Cut

I

A broken home leads to broken flesh,  
In your experience, and it doesn't matter  
Who breaks and is broken. Everyone deserves it.  
Everyone needs to feel your mother,  
The storm surge pulping cedar cabins;  
Everyone needs to feel your father,  
Splintered by thousands of gallons of hate.  
As for you, you'd like to follow  
Their examples of destruction,  
Kitchen knife your aggressor  
And body your victim.

II

Some days you pretend you are a surgeon.  
You unzip marred flesh to remove the trauma,  
The liposarcoma that must not  
Swell, cannot live on its own terms.  
You can't sleep, so you anesthetize.  
But most days you pretend you are  
A parent, wrapping your present  
In long red ribbons, preparing it to  
Be received by someone grateful;

You're only trying to add smiles.

Serena Schaefer

## Peanut Butter Rhapsody

My eyes have speakers and my ears have paintbrushes. My taste buds are musicians, crafting compositions that no one but me can hear. They wait on my tongue, the orchestra pit, for new flavors. My ears don't have to wait.

"It's always my fault. That's right, isn't it?" My father's anger rings through the house. It rattles up the stairs and through my closed door. Colored shapes hover over my calculus homework. Every word adds a stroke of color, usually orange, to the page. At the same time, the black and white pages provide clashing chords while the worn blue carpet embedded with Pringles crumbs adds a sweet melody. Yet they're not loud enough to mask the feud below.

"I asked you *weeks* ago but of course you still haven't done it. You—"

"Nag, nag, nag," my father cuts my mother off.

I shut my eyes but their furry leaves dark shapes over my eyelids. I throw my pencil down and head across the hall to my sister's room. She's listening to music on her bed. Upon my entrance, she puts her headphones down, wipes her wet cheeks, and smiles. Her soft blue eyes soothe my ears as she sits up. Orange hues fade in and out around her. I sit next to her and take her hand in mine. I lean on her shoulder, my long brown hair touching hers. Though I can't hear it well now, the autumn palette of her room creates a gentle mix of high and low notes.

I dig my toes into the sun on her carpet. She's had this solar system carpet since we were six, to remind her of the quieter times. Dexter, our old tabby, sometimes meows and curls up on Earth, though that wouldn't be my first choice right now. Eve and I sometimes go outside and look at the stars when our parents argue. We stand within view of the windows in case they remember us. Eve would identify any planets or constellations, and then talk about other planets and galaxies, raising her voice to overpower the yelling from the house. But in a few months, I'll be stargazing alone. Eve is a senior now; later this year her bed will be empty except for a sheet and a layer of dust. Boston College will steal the beige of her laughter and the warmth of her smile. Though we will talk on the phone, the colors her voice produces would be tainted by data compression.

"Have you thought about taking a gap year?" I ask. I want her to stay and study astrophysics on her own, at least until I go to college next year. She had other options closer to our home in Michigan, but she wanted to escape our parents' feuds. I should be telling her to save herself, but wherever she goes she will hear the echoes of our parents' anger. The



fighting might have started when my father lost his job, or long before that. Neither of us can remember, and neither of us can forget.

"A little bit." She winces at a sharp yell from my mother, and a burst of gold decorates her bulky bookcase. Her fingers wrap around mine. "I'll miss you and Dexter. But there's still time."

"Think about it," I tell her. I need her to stay. Eve understands my synesthesia, though she doesn't have it. When I was six, I thought everyone experienced what I did, so I never thought to mention it. But during a fire drill in elementary school, an alarm by the staircase covered my vision in color. I tumbled down the stairs, nearly bringing others down with me, and broke my arm. I told my teacher about the colors, and she called my parents. My father told her it was synesthesia, and that each number and letter has a specific color and emotion for him. He said it made tax accounting more exciting, though he's been out of work lately. Some kids at school were mean and started shouting and making other sudden sounds around me. They relished my reactions. I wanted to talk about it with my father, about his experiences, but his increasing anger pushed me away. My mother was always busy, so I turned to Eve. I used to sob into her shoulder, asking why the colors and sounds and bullies and wouldn't let me go. She told me they were jealous of my gift and that I should be proud of it. I've been trying that ever since.

Single notes that are the same produce colored shapes that appear in the same place, but medleys of noises shift the colors all around. My senses are tangled, as if the sensory receptionist in my brain directs sound and sight stimuli in the wrong directions. Some people only hear colors in their minds, but my colors appear in front of me. The sounds get louder the more movement there is and the brighter my environment is, including the colors that my mind projects. Sometimes I can't tell what sounds and colors are from reality or from my mind.

I always recognize the colors of my parent's voices, or at least their angry ones. I try to focus on their beauty and not their cause. But they can't argue forever, and they soon run out of verbal ammo. My father stomps upstairs and slams his bedroom door, which sits at the opposite end of the hallway to my mother's room. The storm of color dissipates, but the tension continues to fester. I squeeze my sister's hand once more before heading to my father's door. I hesitate, wary of his anger. I'm used to transmitting my mother's messages and using the door as a shield to his reactions. He hears the creaking of the hardwood floor beneath my feet. "Olivia? What do you want?"

"Are you okay?" I ask.

"Yes," he says. His voice creates a small brown circle on his door, but I don't need synesthesia to tell me that he is lying.

I want to say more, anything more, but I turn from his door and retreat to my comfortable world of color and sound in my room. Dexter rubs my leg on my way back. I reach down to pet him. He swats at me, and I return to my room alone.

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The next morning, I start making two peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. Keys jingle and pink dabbles the sandwich bread as my mother prepares to leave.

“Good morning,” I say, lathering the velvety peanut butter on the bread.

“Tell your father to pay the credit card bill.” She heads outside.

“Wait!” I call out, but the door slams in my face before I can hug her.

I turn to see Eve finishing our sandwiches. She bags them and hands me one. Eve and I leave just as my mother’s Toyota pulls away. The rising sun creates bright chimes while the plump pumpkins and crumbling mountains of leaves each add their own notes. I stand in our weed-infested driveway a few feet away from Eve. She gazes at the sky, and I wish she could hear its music.

The jazzy mango school bus soon rolls up. We enter and pass by rows of kids with earbuds in. Eve always lets me take the window seat so I can listen to the neighborhood. The world is my iPod; all I have to do is open my eyes.

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At school, I hop off the bus and wait for my sister. A girl emerges from a car in front of the bus. Her dad pops out and hugs her. A sensation forms on my chest and arms upon seeing them touching. She gives him a quick kiss. Warmth tickles part of my cheek and I quickly look away and head inside. I pretend it’s because my parents are hugging me, or each other. With mirror-touch synesthesia, my body mirrors sensations I see people feel.

Eve and I follow the mob through a pair of squeaky doors into the school. The low murmur throughout the herd produces some small shapes that brighten the gray walls. Tan lockers skinnier than me line the walls. People brush against each other and I feel as if they are all brushing against me. Teachers flee the herd and enter the front office guarded by two tall dracaenas. Eve heads for the science area while I head to art class, weaving through the backpacks and smartphones.

Students cluster around a pair of tables dabbled with paint spots and crusted in old clay. There are no open stools, so the remaining students share a table near the battered sinks and drying rack. Monochromes and gouaches cover peeling plaster and produce light background noise. As a warm-up, I take out my sketchbook and pencil. Eric, a boy with neat black hair and a sports jersey across from me, waves. “Hey Olivia.”



“Hi, Eric,” I say. More words eagerly wait for deployment, yet my tongue hesitates. My eyes can compose wondrous sounds, yet my vocal cords create nothing.

Eric looks down at his art again, so I return to mine. The shapes I draw are incoherent, creating new tunes. Thin lines are tiny voices unsure of themselves while bold lines are powerful chords. I wish I could record my sounds and colors and show them to my art teacher. Yet, if I recorded what’s in front of me, the camera would ignore my reality.

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For lunch, I head to a quiet corner of the history wing. A cat hangs off a branch, telling me to hang in there. Other platitudinous posters cover the spaces between classroom doors. A lonely water fountain protrudes from the wall further down. I sit down, lean against the wall, and retrieve my sandwich from my bag. The first bite of the sandwich, a thick layer of peanut butter with a hint of jelly, douses my mind in a vibrant rhapsody. Cheerful notes combine with deeper and sadder notes underneath. I’ve added different ingredients to play with the sound; three years of high school is a long time to practice. I close my eyes to savor it and increase the purity of the sound, increasing my isolation at the same time.

I remember when I used to sit in the cafeterias. Rows of gray tables and food lines rivaled the ride lines at Disney World. But within seconds, the chorus of utensils clinking, cash registers popping open, bodies shuffling, and teenage angst boiling would submerge my vision in a restless rainbow. The colors would blast my ears with even more sounds. All the noise together would resemble those metal songs my grandmother despises. Covering my eyes would reduce the shapes to shadows resting on my eyelids and minimize my music, but then I couldn’t see my surroundings. I would try to suppress the noise and color, but only the sight of my sister had any effect.

So my sister and I found a place where no one else was sitting. And we’ve sat here ever since. But Eve does math tutoring at lunch every Monday, including today. I stretch out my legs, taking advantage of the silence and space.

Sound eviscerates the silence and drenches my world in a sickly green. Other fire alarms at different distances add more shapes to the pulsing mass of color. Each blares intermittently, but together they form an acoustic flood. Every alarm shriek strikes my ears like lightning, though there is no thunder to warn me. Strobe lights burn my eyes. I sling my backpack over my shoulder and flee to find an exit. The sounds and colors are a part of me, tissue draped in flames singing in my mind. I feel caged by them, caged by my own perceptions. I stumble around a corner. Several bits of reality peek through the colors, teasing me.



A secretary or teacher normally informs me beforehand of fire drills, and I get to leave and get well away from the building before they start. But there hasn't been one at lunch before. This might not even be a drill. I dig my knuckles into my ears and the mass of colors shrinks slightly. I start running. My knee slams into a wall I did not know was there. But that pain pales in comparison to my burning ears and eyes. I rush limping down the hallway, squinting through what chunks of reality I can see.

I spot two boys no older than five, kids the Child Development students were supposed to be watching. They are looking around, frozen in place with fear. One boy's face is soaked in tears. His terror becomes mine. I need to escape. But I can't. His face looks like mine did when my parents fought. He mouths something, but I can't hear it, so I release my hands. Sound gushes in and shapes cloud my vision. But I can still see his eyes widen as I take his hand. He pulls it away as if my touch is fire. I bend down, pain searing my knee and my ears. His eyes dart away from my gaze.

"We need to leave," I say, scooping him up gently.

"Where is Lucia?" the other, taller boy yells.

Lucia must be one of the Child Development students. I force myself to smile despite the agony. "I'll take you to her. Follow me." I release one hand from the other boy and take his hand. His touch is cold, yet soft.

We head through the maze of hallways together. My shoulder aches slightly, but I don't let the boys see my pain. I hear a noise to the right and familiar colored shapes appear. They match the squeaky doors I head through each day. I lead the boys towards the noise and spot the two plants by the front office. We turn towards the doors and I walk as straight as possible to avoid bumping into anything.

Outside, I can still hear the alarm, but my vision isn't as blocked. The sound still claws at my ears, so I keep walking. As we near the baseball field, the taller boy stops. "Who's that?"

I turn to see Eve rushing towards me. "I was looking everywhere for you," she says. She smiles and waits for me to place the boy down before hugging me. She kneels and asks the boys, "Are you guys okay?" She doesn't need to ask me. The tan of her voice battles the bits of green from the alarms as she soothes the boys.

The boys nod, and with Eve's hand in mine, we head to the nearest group of people. After we explain what happened, a teacher thanks me and confirms the boys' presence over a walkie-talkie. I look at the boys and say, "You'll see Lucia soon." Hope has replaced the boys' fear. They both smile and my muscles relax.

A minute or two later the alarms stop. It's as if my parents had finally stopped arguing. A security guard gives the signal to go inside. My ears are still ringing, but with Eve's help, I lead the boys to the daycare room. A girl

who must be Lucia waits by the entrance next to Eric from art class.  
“Thanks, Olivia. That was awesome,” Eric says. Yellow twinkles happily.  
“I’ll see you tomorrow,” he says before they guide the boys inside.

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The rest of the school day speeds by, and I make sure to check in with the two boys again before heading out. I meet Eve by the squeaky doors. Eve volunteers at the animal shelter after school on Mondays, both out of passion and as an excuse to stay out of my parent’s arguments.

“Good luck,” she says. “I think today will be different.” I say goodbye and turn to leave, but she grabs my shoulder. She leans in and says, “I’m proud of you.”

My parents are home when the bus pulls up to my driveway. I run inside to tell them about how I was kind of a hero.

My mother wrenches a piece of paper out of my father’s hands. “Eve’s going to college soon. Or did you forget that, too? I mean, you’re always *so* busy, right?”

Neither say hello as I keep running and tear past their argument. I start up the stairs, but hesitate this time.

“Hell, why don’t you do it? What about you, Carla? Want me to list everything you’ve done wrong?”

Colors dance as I turn and rush downstairs.

“Shut up! Shut up! I-” My mother sees me come in and pauses. The two were used to Eve and me avoiding their arguments. I just stare at them until their argument fades. She looks away as tears form in her eyes. My own eyes grow wet.

“I have an interview on Thursday,” my father mutters. My mother nods slightly, and my father retreats to his room.

“I’m sorry,” she says. “I just don’t... I’m sorry.”

I step forward and hug her. Her hot, agitated breath slows. She steps back and wipes her tears away. Dexter enters the kitchen, content now that the yelling is over. He waddles past the fridge and down the hallway, but my mom beats him to his food bowl. She bends down and strokes his glossy fur. He chortles and rubs her hand. Specks of purple decorate their love.

“I’ve got to pick up Eve and make dinner,” she says.

She slides her purse over her shoulder and heads out the door. I head upstairs to my father’s door and push it open, the creaking inducing a wisp of turquoise.

My father is hunched over his keyboard at his desk in the corner. The computer monitor illuminates his face. Plates, cups, and old Oreo boxes rest in his shadow. I don’t have to look to know that stacks of dog-eared job interview books and dry-cleaning receipts surround his bed. He never cleans

up because no one visits. He's like those boys earlier, lost, looking around for answers and someone to help.

I turn the light on and the music of his life flows through my mind. My dad, his scuffed cherry dresser, his Villanova hat, and his small cubic television all add to the rhapsody. I look around and new notes are added to the mix. No one outside sees his life and his music, but I think he wants to keep it that way; I know from experience.

He looks up from his keyboard. "Hi," he whispers, his energy nearly gone from him.

"Hi, Dad. Are you okay?" I ask.

He starts to nod out of habit, a habit the whole family shares, but then shakes his head and looks down at his hands. "I thought I had the last one for sure."

I reach down to hug him, and then bring his dishes downstairs. I start cooking lasagna, Eve's favorite. It might not convince her to stay, but it might bring my family back to the dinner table. I then log onto a job site to look for accountant listings. The screen creates a rippling hum.



Eden Angelina Patrick

Mixed...Just like Me

My earliest memory of being told who I was, rather, *what* I was, came around the age of seven. I was at my aunt's house and the adults were discussing a music video with Mariah Carey. I heard my grandmother say "*Child, she's black,*" with her signature loud, booming voice. It was confusing to me at the time. I thought Mariah Carey was mixed—not black...just like me.

I interjected in my innocence and said, "*No! She's mixed...just like me.*" I clearly remember my aunt, uncle, and grandmother stopping, looking at me, and laughing.

My uncle put his arm around me, held me tight and said, "*You are black, you have black in you...YOU ARE BLACK.*" His warm reassuring embrace made me feel comfortable, it made me feel proud.

Go back a few years, my aunt had bought my cousin two puppies, Kensington and Chelsea. Kensington was a darker color, and Chelsea was white. My cousin, who was probably four or five at the time, told me that Chelsea was my dog because she was white, just like me, and Kensington was hers because she was dark...just like her. I distinctly remember feeling so overwhelmingly angered at this. Why was I given the white dog? I'm not white, I'm mixed.

Still to this day, it infuriates me when people joke with me and call me the white girl. I hate it.

My mom never openly had a discussion with me on issues of having this mixed identity, nor did she prep me for this new world that forces you to pick a side...because ya'know, you can't just be mixed. My grandmother is mixed white and black and married my grandfather who is full blooded black Caribbean. My mom never called herself mixed, or sat me down to explain the percentages (which is what so many people ask me for...no, like they really want a Punnett square of my racial makeup). I remember she would always get frustrated with forms that required race to be filled out and all that available to her was "other." I remember she always would say, "*Other what? Other shoe? Other fork? What does this mean?*" I adopted this mentality of getting angered about being forced into identifying with a category that could mean anything. I know she never ever would've called herself a white European, nor did she identify with that side at all. One thing I am clear about was that she never favored the white in her. I always questioned her feelings and how in the world she ended up marrying into the whitest family in England, who were complete racists, by the way. She

always told me about the fights she would get into growing up in England. She told me about kids that would call her nigger or kaffir, and that she was excluded from birthday parties because she was black.

I can't exactly pinpoint a moment in my life where I first developed a complex with being forced to identify with whiteness. I always remember the black side of my family joking with me and telling me that I was going to end up with a white man because I had a crush on David Beckham. My mom still to this day jokes with me and tells me I better not drain the color out of the family. Although they were jokes, I always detected a presence of seriousness in them.

My next educational milestone was around the 5<sup>th</sup> grade. I remember I was bullied by a group of girls for having this mixed background. I found written notes from these girls calling me zebra, Oreo... the list went on. I was told by a lot of adults that I was bullied because I was lightskinned and that means, to some, that I thought I was better than anyone darker than me. This wasn't the case at all, in fact these slurs made me very embarrassed and ashamed to be mixed. I came to a sort of fork in the road, I sure as hell didn't want to be white, all I wanted was for my friends who were black to accept and embrace me.

There was a time during my afterschool program where we had just spent an eventful and fruitful day learning about the Civil Rights Era, when a girl leaned over to me and told me, "*If there ever were race wars, they'd take you to the middle and shoot you first.*" This further developed my complex. I didn't want to be mixed anymore; I wanted to be anything but that, and I took measures to rid myself of that identity.

In high school, I slowly started gaining pride in being a woman of color. I began loving myself and who I was, I took an unshakeable pride in being raised around an army of black women, who are some of the strongest women I've ever met. I developed the idea that I would never accept or represent a side of myself that wouldn't accept me. I began to hate my white side. I always had issue with what whiteness represented—this is something I will never be proud of. And I took issue with those who are proud to be white and what it represents. I verbally began identifying myself as a mixed black woman. It was always something that was internal, but I never found my comfort to be bold about it. I wasn't ashamed to be black, I was ashamed to be white.

Call me ignorant, call me naïve, but I never knew I was white passing. I always figured I looked Latina or mixed. The first thing people ask me when they meet me is, "*What are you?*" and when I answer I get, "*Wow, really? I thought you were Spanish.*" To see their confusion and bewilderment when I inform them that I am in fact mixed and not Spanish is something that still bothers the fuck out of me.

I never knew about white passing privilege, and if I was told in high school that I could possibly identify with this privilege, I would have laughed in your face and told you that you were severely mistaken. I never thought that when people looked at me they would see white. I always thought and believed they would see Spanish or mixed. I'd never been asked if I was white, and no one had ever assumed I was.

Fast-forward to the present, attending a PWI. Studying at this school has taught me a lot about who I am and what I should be proud of as a WOC. I'm not quite sure what clicked with me that changed me and made me so comfortable with myself. I guess because growing up in diverse environments in New York never forced me to stand strong in my identity of what I was and who I felt more inclined to identify with. This was something I always answered internally but never was forced to open my mouth and utter the words. It was only at a PWI where I felt like I had to push myself to be firm in my beliefs and thick-skinned. I believe, as a person of a mixed background, that it is so easy to just be drowned out in the background and not be forced to identify with what we are—another privilege. Although, that journey of being ambiguous did beat down my confidence to a pulp.

*"It's like you're too black for the white side, and too white for the black side."*

I've been told this countless times, but the thing is, I never searched for acceptance from my white side, only from the black side. I feel as though this was a big part of my own personal image struggle growing up.

Of course, I hear a lot of backwards thinking and micro-aggressions, and although it frustrates the hell out of me it makes me even more proud to be a WOC. I'm still searching for my exact written statement on what changed me and why I became more comfortable, but I haven't found it yet. For now I will say it was growth and maturation. The most important lesson I've learned thus far while attending a PWI is that, as a minority in general, you have to stand so firm in your identity so that even the strongest storm can't shake you.



Paige Szmodis

## Irish Rain

We scrape up soaking gravel beneath  
our shoe soles down an abandoned  
single lane road—your favorite post-  
apocalyptic route, winding through  
hills crumbling under the weight of  
their own gray-brown stones. Parallel,  
train tracks run rusted. Guard rails bent,  
succumbing to gravity gracefully,  
clinging to the collapsing concrete.

It has been raining spottily for several  
days. You say it reminds you of Ireland.  
Past the lonely tracks, muddy tides  
rise and tug on trees, trunks slanted,  
roots sinking into the riverbed,  
leaning into the constant currents  
the way I wish I could lean into you.  
We follow the waters, slowly, chugging  
along as if we too run on rusty tracks.

We pretend like this road isn't  
dangerous, doesn't need to be fixed,  
skirting past caution signs on newly  
poured cement, past crashed trees  
on dangling phone wires, somehow  
enjoying the feeling of isolation

after destruction because  
at least we're walking this road  
together. I find myself bending  
like solid tree trunks stuck  
in a flood towards  
you again.

Through all of the haze,  
the rust, the crunching  
gravel beneath our feet—

I love you like an Irish rain:  
too light to be a drizzle, but  
too heavy to be just a mist.

Matt Dwyer

Twilight's Palette

Peach smoothie spills,  
Surges through blue cracks  
In puffy midday's  
Padded room.  
Single candle flick waves  
Like a blinding, blood-stained  
White flag over the horizon,  
Retreating ever westward.  
Endless sheets engulf,  
Their shades of obsidian  
Hoisting canary colored speckles,  
Little moth holes  
Chewed through  
Cosmic chasm.  
Passing winds  
Make windows moan.  
All the while we tangle together,  
Embryos embracing Gemini's  
Moonblood sector of the sky.



Emily Shue

## How Sweet the Sound

We were halfway through the third verse of Amazing Grace when she folded, practically in half, over the pew in front of her.

At that point in my life, I had only ever seen one person faint. In the movies, when people faint, they always manage to fall backwards, sparing their face and teeth from catching the full weight of their bodies. So I was mildly shocked at the spray of blood and teeth that hit pew, floor, and toddler in the row in front of her, in that specific order.

It was the hottest day of the summer, which I remember because two other people, both also over the age of seventy, fainted over their respective pews in a span of twenty minutes after the first faint. So that was how a small, conservative church, where a majority of members sincerely believed that Halloween was the Devil's day, was a catalyst in my life. In less than 24 hours, the church broke with tradition and decided to splurge on central air. Sometimes, Pastor Tim said the next Sunday, we don't always agree with God's methods of communication.

Such as, I don't know, giving a ninety year old woman heatstroke at 11:00 on a Sunday morning when he really could have just called.

This particular Sunday was the first church service I had attended at the Carlisle Alliance Church, where my brother went every Sunday morning and every Wednesday night with his girlfriend, Bethany. He first started going back when we still lived with my father, and I was surprised. Peter was annoyingly intellectual and a steadfast believer in nothing. He also never left the house. He scheduled his shifts around my father's state job, gave up the various extracurricular activities he always insisted were "Boring anyways," and he never had friends over anymore. At that point, neither of us did.

I remember the year I realized Peter wasn't applying to any colleges. He wasn't looking to move out or leave. He was seventeen years old, a sophomore in high school, and he planned on staying in our horror of a house with my mother and I, until we left for good. Something we both knew would never happen. When I asked him why, he stared determinedly at some fixed point over my shoulder and said, "I can't just leave, Em. Can you imagine what it would be like if I weren't here?"

So my brother went to church. And by the time old people were dropping like flies in the pews, we had left my father. First, me, packing my bags a few days after Christmas, walking past the crater in our front yard dusted with snow, leaving it all behind, I told myself, for good. And then Mom and Peter, a few months later. That was the year everything that was

never really together in the first place fell apart. We were afraid, still. Even away from him. Broke as all hell. I was tired of living, my mother was tired of never having enough money, and Peter, I think, was tired of us. Leaving an abusive household isn't as easy as it sounds, and it doesn't sound that easy. We took most of it with us. I was angry more times than not, and in many ways I took my father's place. Ironic. But I liked the way it made me feel, breaking things. Screaming, crying, getting high in the alley by the deli after school and trying to forget. My therapist told me that it was a normal reaction. After my dad, after what happened that one day in August, after everything, I had never fully allowed myself to be angry, or sad, or frightened. It wasn't safe.

I'm still like that. Sometimes I am afraid of what I would do if I let myself. Some days I am so angry I want to rip the entire world apart with my bare hands and scream into whatever's left. One of the many things that survivors never tell you is that, most days, escaping is just the same fear in a different room.

We sat in the middle of a pew covered in worn blue carpet, on the left side of the sanctuary. It was hot. The backs of my knees were slippery and there was sweat beading on my chin.

At this point in my life, I didn't exactly not believe in God. I had been going to church every Sunday for as long as I could remember, at the demand of my mother. There were several instances, over the years, when my faith was overwhelming. I would return from a weekend retreat with the firm, shining belief that God was not only my holy father, but that he loved me, truly and deeply, and would never let any harm come to me. That glow was always extinguished at the hands of my real father, who hated us in ways I can't even explain and delivered harm on an almost daily basis. But I kept it, the belief, for some odd reason. And the first time I sat in the sanctuary of the Carlisle Alliance Church, it was the first summer since.

It was the first time I had sat in a church pew without thinking of all the ways I wanted to bleed God dry, and yes, I knew. I had known for a while my life would never be the same. Ever since that day, I knew. But it was the first time since then I found myself sitting in a church pew not choking on anger. It was the first time since then I believed in anything other than crushed metal and breaking glass. I got back from church camp that summer, head filled with hope that I thought might someday replace the screaming.

So we were halfway through the third verse of Amazing Grace when she folded, practically in half. The initial panic and confusion was punctuated by the other two members fainting shortly afterwards, and a quiet but frenzied rush to find them water, check vitals, make sure nobody was badly injured. We were all asked to stay seated. After a few minutes,

Melinda, Bethany's mother, leaned across the pews to my mother and whispered something in her ear before hurrying off again.

My brother tilted his head down to my mother and spoke quietly, as if he might somehow disturb someone more than they already were.

"What was that?"

"She said we might want to leave."

"Why." When Peter asked a question, there was very rarely a question mark.

"There are ambulances coming."

It was the first summer since. I stayed with them, that summer. Not always, but sometimes. Most days, I took the kids to the pool, to the crick, on walks around the neighborhood that somehow always ended with one or two or all three of them in the little plastic wagon and me, dripping sweat and dragging us all home. And I loved them. I loved them more than I thought was possible.

She knew. Joanne knew, like we all expect a mother to know everything intrinsically. And she didn't know everything, but she knew when I was lying. And I lied plenty. She asked me, one day, driving me home.

"What's it like, at home?"

I didn't answer.

"Does he hurt you?"

"Yes."

And so I stayed with them, that summer. Not always, but sometimes. And I loved them. And I didn't know how lucky I was, I didn't know how to appreciate what I had, I didn't know anything other than being fifteen and angry and so very, very small.

It was hot. I was staring hard at the wood grain in front of me, following the waves and whorls. It was hot, there was a lot going on, and even without my numerous, unpredictable reactions to stressful situations in which someone is in danger, what my mother and my brother said simply made sense. If someone is injured, you call 911. They send help.

And they sent help, that day in August. Four ambulances. When my mother first dialed she told them it was three, four, five of us in the car. Didn't know. Just saw the tree fall. Heard the horn. Called, so they could send help.

Melinda was back, wiping her hands on her dress. It was blue and green and white and she was wearing tan sandals that I could tell pinched her feet. My mother was gathering up her purse, my purse; Peter had his hand firm on my shoulder, ready for whatever might have happened next.



“Donna, Donna, I—I’m sorry. They don’t want anyone leaving, they want to get in and out as quickly as possible.”

“But—wait—she’s never been—“

Melinda sighed and took my mother’s hand, held it tightly for a brief second, and then looked at me.

“I finally don’t have to fight with her over the seatbelt, she just started—”

“I know, Donna. I’m so sorry. But they need to be able to get out.”

And I couldn’t get out. I ripped the seatbelt from the cushion after struggling, angry red burns already faint on my breasts. There was the car horn and the body and the silence from the body and the deafening noise from the tree and the car and the screaming, screaming.

Melinda handed my mother a bottle of water, already ripe with condensation, and looked at me in the way they always looked at me when they were talking about it or thinking about it or being told about it. Still do.

We could hear the sirens now, close. I suddenly realized that I was having trouble breathing.

“They should be here any second. Maybe she can just...Sit? On the floor?”

My mother took the bottle and sat back down. Peter, still standing, hovered over us.

“Em, honey.”

The voice. The way they always talked to me when they were talking about it or thinking about it or being told about it. Still do.

And she told me, in a voice I had never heard before, sitting on the sidewalk, two hours of firetrucks and sirens and Jo’s husband, Dan, arriving, falling to his knees in the grass of our front yard, chainsaws and radio static and phone calls to family that he couldn’t make. She told me, in that voice, and I was gone. Air. Stood up. Sat back down. Laid my head in the grass and dripped tears.

I hunched down in the pew, still sitting, and put my head between my knees. My mother gathered my hair up and rested the water bottle, now dripping in earnest, on the back of my neck. I closed my eyes. And then the ambulances came.

I felt grey leather, sticking to my thighs. I heard laughter. I saw summer. I could hear, faintly, my mother’s voice in my ear. As if from a great distance.

“Em, Em, honey. Em you’re right here, you’re right here. It’s okay, you’re right here.”

And I was right there. In the backseat of blue Ford Explorer, laughing.

And then the tree fell.

Eighty feet of wood and branches uprooted. There was the sound of ancient rings splitting and roots groaning. Bark exploding away. The swift air. There were the preliminary squeaks across the window, skittering twigs turned branches turned trunk.

And I pushed Olivia down into my lap, the little girl I hauled around in a plastic wagon, little girl I saw so much of myself in, seven years old, tentatively squinting onstage at her last ballet recital.

And she was in the front seat. Joanne, the mother who noticed, who asked, who I will always see when I smell blueberry muffins and chlorine and pink icing.

And the tree fell.

And the mother sideways, and the daughter screaming, and me, somehow, me.

And I ripped off my seatbelt. Kicked out the window. Ran around the car, willow switches whipping my face.

And she was screaming but I had her in my arms.

And there was all of the noise in the world in those seconds, every sound imagined except the voice of a mother to a seven-year-old, screaming.

And I set her down and looked into her eyes and kissed her face and hair and cheeks.

And I promised.

“Everything is gonna be alright.”

And I was wrong.

My mother’s voice was still whispering in my ear.

“You’re right here, honey. Right here. Em?”

And I could hear sirens, and I could see blue and red lights and I could hear radio static and I could taste the sweat on my upper lip and I was starting to blur, I could see, starting to crack in all the places I kept together in any way I could, didn’t matter, the EMS saying what a miracle, didn’t matter, two backseat both out safe alive miracle didn’t matter miracle and didn’t matter her red hair, didn’t matter, the blood coming through, didn’t matter, the congregation pulling on my hair, seven year old pulling on my hair thighs sticking to seats that

were blue carpet or grey leather, chainsaws buzzing through the wood because they couldn't figure out how to get her body out, chainsaws to the tune of Amazing Grace, sweet sound, how sweet this sound all the noise and her, silent, me, sobbing in a church pew, me, dry-eyed in our living room, Liv clinging to my shirt, me, lying, everything is gonna be alright, everything is gonna be alright, me, guilty me, cool on the back of my neck me, chainsaw singing amazing, grace amazing, how sweet amazing me, so sorry me, so sorry, so sorry, so sorry, so sorry, red blue blue and brown and red, screaming

And screaming

And screaming

And screaming.

I could hear the sirens and the branches and the brutal noise and I could feel August and taste terror and underneath I could hear myself, over and over again into my knees until the words lost all meaning like a prayer in red and blue flashing church pews *I'm so sorry please I'm so sorry so sorry so sorry so sorry so sorry so sorry so sorry so sorry*

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It was over eventually. I don't know how long it lasted and I don't know when they led me out of the sanctuary and into a Sunday school room downstairs where I sat with my mother and my brother and my ghosts. It was the first summer since, the first of many panicked, breathless guilt-soaked hours spent remembering.

It was the first summer since. It was the second time the ambulances came. And I told my mother, in a dark Sunday school room, on the hottest day of summer, that this time, at least they weren't too late.

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As I write this, I am looking back on my seventh summer since.

And it has not left. I no longer attend church or believe. I have tried, so many times, to leave. I am disappointed in myself for my lack of healing.

And I visit the place we buried her each year on her birthday and I don't talk about it anymore. I write, mostly. I write her letters that are lists of every reason I am still here and every reason I am still trying and every reason I don't want to be anymore.

And I still remember.

And I still stuff my fingers into my ears at the slightest hint of sirens.

And I still flinch at breaking glass.

And I still hear the screaming.

And I still can't eat blueberry muffins, and I still can't drive a car, and I still love them more than I ever thought was possible.



And I am still trying.

And sometimes, when my mother is cleaning, she will hum, loud and off-tune, the notes to Amazing Grace.

And sometimes, I sing along.

Kara Travis

The roses

spring from my mouth, of all places.  
Taprooted in my stomach walls,  
their thick stalks push between my teeth.  
Thorns slice my lips, and no one seems

to find anything amiss.  
Perhaps I have finally  
given them what they wanted.  
Sweet things and more silence—that's

all they wanted. It's all as it's  
supposed to be. Most of us are  
like this—a hydrangea plugs a  
barista's mouth—but scraggly Queen

Anne's Lace drips out from under a  
saleswoman's skirt; three softball  
players have poppies twined through their  
belt loops. One day I meet a young

mother—looped around her neck, a  
morning glory tendril—she says,  
“I thought I was the only one.”  
Her little girl in the stroller

has a pansy peeking out from  
between her crooked two front teeth.  
I don't know who started the  
tradition of bestowing

women with flowers when  
we already have our own.  
The roses have me,  
and they won't let go.

Solana Warner

## Melting Wings

*The overheads cracked on and spilled light upon Ike. He could hear them simmering in their sockets, beating out each moment of artificial life like a heart. In the distance, he could hear the crackling spatter of C.A.P.A.R. bullets tearing through college walls, but he was far more concerned with the ones aimed at him.*

*Nine shivering fingers licked at their triggers like flames. Ike counted them slowly, watched their wavering aim, wavering only because those nine shivering fingers had never killed steel before now. And he sighed. Because he was built to be human, and it would take less than nine shivering fingers to end his whole life.*

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Click. Ike opened his eyes a second before the alarm went off. He had timed it that way, so that his nightly reboot would coincide with this irksome beeping everyone was expected to wake up to. He swiped the screen to snooze and feigned sleepiness as Dan rummaged around the room for clothes.

“Can I borrow your TI-720 calculator, man? Mine doesn’t have Halo on it.” Dan grabbed it from his desk before Ike could respond, and shoved it deep into the folds of his Nike Xtreme backpack. Lazer pens rolled towards the edge of the desk, and Ike resisted the urge to grab them as they fell. The average human couldn’t boot up from sleep mode as fast as he did—it would be suspicious. “Later, man.” The door swung shut with a wump.

Ike allowed himself to exhale a facsimile of a sigh. He rolled his shoulders, feeling lubrication fluid rushing in his veins to accommodate the metal socket. Thankfully, after the first week of college last year, Dan had stopped feeling obligated to ask him to breakfast. The more he could minimize his food intake, the better. Ike cringed every time he felt the pancake and egg slushie swirling around his stomach blender. How could humans eat so much?

He swung himself out of bed, smiling at the electricity thrumming through his body after a fresh reboot. Ike remembered a spattering of dreams from last night, but couldn’t recall anything longer than a snippet of conversation with Dr. Nishida. Had it really been two years? He felt a pressure in his head as he tried to compile his memories of her. Though he could never know for certain, perhaps a creator was similar to a mother.

*Good luck, Icarus. This is where we part ways.*



Ike fell still as her words replayed in his mind. He let a moment slip into a minute, dwelling on how she was not here with him now. It was understandable to send your creation off into the world to “make a difference” and all that, but it didn’t stop him from missing her sometimes. Perhaps she was building another of his kind right now.

Irritated, Ike dressed himself in jeans and a sweatshirt—a fashion his programmed memories told him had been popular for close to fifty years. It was always safer to stick to the classics. And regardless, he enjoyed the depth of the pockets that more modern clothes had eliminated in order to be the most form-fitting.

Clunk, clunk. Ike opened the ill-fitted wooden door of his dorm room for Charlene. The rest of the room, solid concrete, fit today’s Plexiglas design standards even less.

“Ready for class?” Charlene asked, glancing around nervously. His neighbors on this floor weren’t exactly the nicest people, least of all to her.

“Sure.” Ike scrambled his unbrushed hair into a loose ponytail and grabbed his messenger bag.

As they walked across the AstroTurf lawn, he felt the familiar burning of others’ gazes. Not focused on him, of course, but on Charlene. In a world with hyper-dieting and 30 Second Liposuction, it was rare to see a college-aged girl with full-bodied curves. All his programming screamed at him to leave, to find someone “normal” to walk with, to not draw attention. However, Ike knew what it was like to be different; he couldn’t ignore his friend just because everyone else would.

“What’s today’s lesson, Charlie?”

She smiled, excitement creasing her lime green lips. “Artificial intelligence! It should be a good discussion of whether it’s right or wrong, or if robots will take over the world.” The sci-fi buff within her was stirring, and she pawed her GigaLavender bangs out of the way. “Especially since we’re so close to creating it. I mean, what if some scientist is on the verge today, and their android or supercomputer or whatever has the capability to destroy us all?”

“What indeed,” replied Ike. He stared at the wooden tree sculptures lining the pathway, trying to focus on their irony rather than his own.

“Ugh, doesn’t it interest you at all? I mean, after the scare three years ago?” asked Charlene.

“No, it does interest me,” said Ike. He didn’t elaborate, though the familiar hum of fear sought its way through his circuits. The disaster in Osaka had undoubtedly prompted both his creation and the danger he would be in if anyone knew the true nature of his existence. The Japanese military, reestablished during the rapid technological advances in the 2020s, had attempted to redirect android advancements for military usage. When

several lab workers were killed by their android subjects in an uncalibrated weapons test, countries all over the world demanded treaties forbidding android creation and experimentation.

Dr. Nishida's project was to contradict her country's mistakes in proving that nonviolent droids could exist. Of course, the fact that she was conducting illegal research merely by making him, on top of her unlawful immigration, undermined this already desperate attempt.

They walked into the classroom. The SMARTBoards lining all the walls clicked and hummed to life as other students started filing in. Natural light had to be compromised to provide amphitheater screens for the class to write on all at once - not that they ever did.

Professor Yorgle swooped into the room with the dramatic precision of every disciple of philosophy. "Let us commence with our discussion! Open your Civilization Issues ebook to screen 256!"

Ike noted, while scrolling on his laptop-touch, how all U.S. Environmental classes had been changed to "Civilization Issues" back in the 2020s. Talking about the environment as something humans caused put too much guilt and stress on students, so the focus had to shift to a more reparative approach to a post-damage world. Dr. Nishida had warned him incessantly about this approach as well.

*Just because you're mimicking humans doesn't mean you have to make the same stupid mistakes as us.*

"I believe that AI's should be made illegal before some dumbfuck makes an evil supercomputer!"

Ike snapped back from his reverie. His fingers pressed against his desk with such ferocity that the sensors began alerting his processor to send pain. He should have skipped this class.

"While I don't appreciate that sort of language in this higher learning facility Garrett, that is a good point. Many would not have AI created for fear of what it would mean for humans. What are some of those possible effects?" Professor Yorgle's eyes flashed like a hover drone, luring in prey.

"Oh, I know!" said Charlene. "I read this book once, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, and it was scary because the androids were so realistic you couldn't tell them from normal people! But! The issue was that droids can't feel emotions, so they'll never act with the same compassion a human would. Even if they tried, it wouldn't be genuine."

Ike, even with his face down to hide a grimace, could feel the change in pressure as the Professor's eyes landed on him.

"Ike, you haven't contributed yet. What are some other adverse possibilities?"

He gritted his teeth and watched the blinking bottom light of the SMARTBoard. Not answering such a simple question would be suspicious.



Answering in favor of androids over human safety would also be suspicious. “There...there is the fear that AIs will want to eliminate humans in order to take over as a superior race.”

The pressure melted as the Professor let out a “Very good!” and moved his gaze to another student. Ike felt a war of humiliation and exhaustion rampage in the circuits just under his skin. His purpose for existence was the only thing sedating him. Dr. Nishida’s voice reminded him, as always, why he was here, why it was worth it.

*I created you as proof that androids are harmless and can fit into society. That is your goal - to fit into society. That way, someday, the people you befriend might not give into the fear and chaos. You’re building a future for others of your kind.*

He watched the SMARTBoard light blink on and off and on and off. The Osaka tragedy was discussed in cruel detail: how nonhumans should not be given weapons, how the Japanese formed a soulless society, how the droids probably killed the men on purpose. After the discussion, the students were given a half hour to collect their belongings before the class trip.

“The zoo should be fun!” chirped Charlene. She bounced by his side, neon earrings flickering. “We can see the new GenMod section too. I haven’t been in the past few months, so I haven’t gotten the chance!”

“I don’t think that was what the book was about,” Ike muttered.

“Huh?”

“The one you were talking about in class—*Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* I think it was definitely more about blurring the line between humans and machines.”

She pursed her lips. “Well, okay. But why’re you bringing that up now? Why didn’t you say that in class?”

A thousand reasons tangled before him like knotted wires. “Didn’t feel like it.”

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When they boarded the skumper bus, the pop pop metal rain of C.A.P.A.R.s reverberated throughout the campus. It was beginning to become a problem—Ike had heard several teachers discussing the damage caused by the supposed “sport.” Everyone knew that they made a game of shooting the Film Department’s photo-drones out of the sky with their new “toys.” As the bus skipped and thumped along, he saw a blur of activity by the front gate they passed through. Perhaps the gate was getting maintenance on its chip detector. He let it all slip by, pondering why the administration enforced certain rules like dress code so militantly, yet made little effort to keep the C.A.P.A.R.s away.

He had never been to a zoo since his creation, but the decaying wooden sign with tigers and monkeys filled Ike with a sense of satisfaction.



There was a sense of forlornness about the empty entrance, as if personifying humanity's introversion, its lack of involvement with other creatures; it was what he had always envisioned a zoo would be like.

The perfect image was, however, altered by the enormous cardboard sign screaming "GENMOD EXHIBIT NOW OPEN!" next to the ticket stand. A poorly drawn whale cringed upon the sign.

"Alright, class. Feel free to explore as you like, but make sure to visit the GenMod exhibit. Our next discussion will center around the GenMod creatures and if they are truly their own beings after being cloned, modified, and displaced in time."

Garrett whooped and, smirking, said, "Can't wait to see those nasty bitches. I hope one breathes fire."

Ike entered and rushed ahead to the birds of prey exhibit in order to leave his frustration behind him. Why *wouldn't* they be their own beings? Whether they wanted to or not, they existed.

"Ike, wait up!" yelled Charlene. As she huffed her way toward him, clouds of vapor rose from her lips into the crisp Colorado air. "Why are you so pissy today?"

He let his fist rest upon a memorial sign for the Crowned Solitary Eagle, extinct: 2024. It had been less than a year since he had stood up for her in front of his liposuctioned neighbors. How couldn't she see the parallels? "I just don't agree with the way everyone views nonhumans."

"Why, you a droid?" It was a joke, but Charlene saw Ike's spine snap to attention.

"No, obviously not," he replied. "But...I met one once." He glanced at her out of the corner of his eye, sorting the reasonable lies from the wayward.

"You didn't! Where? How did you know?" Charlene clutched at the birdcage wire with excitement. She dropped her voice to a whisper. "Did it run super fast?"

Ike started laughing in spite of himself. "Hah, no. He just walked like a normal person. In fact, he was coming out of the department store back home. I helped him carry a new set of chairs to his autocar."

Charlene's eyes widened similarly to the Great Horned Owl that watched her unblinkingly. "But how did you know he was an *android*?"

"He told me so. As simple as that. 'I wish people would stop giving me that reaction, son,' he'd said. 'It's not like I can fly.' But apparently, the neighborhood he lives in accepts him for who he is, and they all live peacefully." Ike smiled wistfully, intoxicated by fantasy.

"Anyway, let's check out the other exhibits," he said before she could question the logistics of his story and turned to go.

They paced between the cages, as all people do, fascinated by the diversity and vivacity of life - all discoveries that faded with each forward step. The ill-maintained pastures boasted small clumps of grass, but the animals were too accustomed to their supplement tablets to chew on them. A giraffe swung its head around to look at them from atop a wiry neck. They passed the alligators - the only animals looking healthy and content - and with time, they reached the only unexplored part: the GenMod exhibit.

The entrance was significantly newer than anything else in the retro park. Sliding doors glistened wetly in the afternoon sun before swallowing them into the atrium. The lobby was adorned with scientific formulas and future hopes. Small lizard-rodents pawed softly at their cages, but the arrows on the floor directed them towards the new whale.

“-cloned from current whales and CRISPR genes to formulate the legs you see. This mimics the prehistoric whales of roughly 45 million years. With our current plans, we hope to create and release several hundred of these whales into the ocean in the next ten years, repopulating and replacing the many extinct species of cetaceans. With legs, they will be better adapted to escape our marine environments under pressure of sonar or acidification-”

Ike passed through the doors to the outside exhibit, leaving the robotic monologue behind him.

He pushed his way through the blurred crowd, more people than he had seen that day. Each cotton candy *ooh* and popcorn crushing *ahh* made him more desperate to see what lay in the tank. Ike shouldered past a new mother cooing to her child the wonders of modern technology. What he saw froze his metallic insides.

On a rocky outcrop of land lay a bedraggled monstrosity. Brown expanses of liver-spotted flesh shriveled in the sun's hot rays. Its mouth creaked open and closed with each panting breath, revealing saw-flattened teeth in place of a once carnivorous set. The legs, if you could call them so, jutted like enlarged frog legs from its side, like crumpled wings that failed to open. The whale, impossibly sensing his gaze, flicked its saucer eye towards Ike.

He sucked in a breath and stepped back, stung by the glare, the hollow pupils devouring his guilt. A shaky second breath. “But where's the water...” With horror, Ike saw the ten foot puddle on the far side of the enclosure, not even enough for the beast to submerge itself in. “Where's the water?” he dumbly repeated.

Overhearing him, a friendly exhibit guide responded, “Oh, silly! Don't you see the legs? He's a prehistoric whale, not a modern whale. They can go on land.” She tapped a finger to her plastic lips. “And to be honest, if we had a bigger water tank, you'd hardly ever see the thing! People come



from all over the country to see our GenMod whale, not a sheet of cloudy glass.”

Ike experienced a feeling he had previously not thought possible. Nausea. He felt pressure and pain writhing in his stomach and head, electrical pulses skittering down his wired veins in stress.

*Back in my country, we have a legend about whales.* He recalled Dr. Nishida’s story. *In Japan, they were fished nearly to extinction. Now, there’s a legend about a ghastly apparition called a bakekujira. It appears as a whale’s skeleton, swimming through the ocean and showing itself to whaling boats. Some say it brings misfortune, but I’ve always believed it bears a warning.*

Ike looked back at the whale, startled to see its eye still focused on him. But the second he met its gaze, the mighty eye fell, dull and disinterested, back to the rock beneath it. It didn’t even have the strength of a half-formed ghost. Ike ran to the exit.

He slowed to a stop by the elephant enclosure. Sweet, gentle mammoths—he wondered what the world would have been like under the elephants’ control. Surely they wouldn’t lock up and disdain their own creations. One looked at him with pity and waved its trunk in condolence before returning to a fruit supplement in its trough.

Ike trudged towards the park exit, pausing at the dozens of extinction memorials along the way. He ignored the shrieks and giggles until they were almost upon him.

“Oh Ike! *There* you are!” He looked up to see Charlene and Garrett and several other boys from his class crouching next to a derelict trash robot. One boy held its crude metal arm, severed at the joint. “We were playing around with this outdated thing!”

Ike watched with horror as Garrett kicked another dent in the bot, as Charlene drew eyes on its mangled shoulder in lazer marker. She smiled at him, undoubtedly excited to be included in her classmates’ game without disdain. He clenched his fist, crushing back the urge to punch the boy.

*You can’t ever use physical violence.* Dr. Nishida whispered through his memories. *Don’t give them any reason to fear you.*

He walked around them, counting slowly.

“Ike, what’s up with you?” Charlene called after him. “They had to replace it soon anyway. It was malfunctioning when we found it!”

He got on the skumper bus, counting seats, counting dirt, and waited for the class to join him in an hour.

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Charlene jabbed at his back a few times between the skipping and thumping of the auto-bus’s rough gait. He thought he heard her hiss at him once before retreating behind her GigaLavender bangs. She switched her



headphones to outward speakers. Ike leaned his chin on his palm and faced the window.

The lands blurred from a fractal of gunmetal gray to beige as they passed the declining cityscape. Telephone poles, long outdated, tangled their cords into nests for nonexistent birds, and the small sprouts of grass stretched towards the freeze-dried sun. The occasional gas station stood sentry, frowning at where the fossil fuels used to splash into tanks. Alone in the sky, the possibility of a bird whistled by.

This too passed, as the terrain crumbled into the approaching AstroTurf lawns and concrete buildings of the campus. The skumper bus stopped in front of the gate. As the moment drew on, Ike became curious. The gatekeeper merely needed to scan the bus's ID number for them to be allowed entrance. With a startling hiss, the bus door sprang open.

"What's going on?" Ike said. "We usually just drive through."

Charlene glowered at him before replying. "It's the new security system. Didn't you hear they were improving their gate tech to stop people from bringing C.A.P.A.R.s in? Finally."

Ike fumbled his hand through his unkempt hair. "When was this announced?"

She pursed her lime green lips. "I don't know, a few days ago? Why weren't you paying attention, if you care so much?" Charlene grabbed her solar system patterned bag and stomped off the bus.

Ike stepped quietly down the stairs, footsteps falling like dry leaves. The installation must have caused the crowd he saw earlier. He was jostled by his classmates into a loose-forming line by the gate. He tried to see over their heads, bobbing and stepping closer. In the space of a moment, a student dipped down to pick up a fallen pen, and he saw the black imposing arch of the metal detectors.

"Everyone, line up and proceed one by one through the gate. If you have Compact Air Pressure Assault Rifles, or 'C.A.P.A.R.s,' please turn them in when you reach the gate. They are against school policy and will no longer be tolerated. If you try to sneak them onto the campus--"

Ike broke from his frozen stance, electrical impulses rippling up his wired veins. He staggered backwards, knocking into Dan, his roommate, who flashed him a look of confusion before shoving him forwards again. The machine was too close. He had come too close in curiosity.

Bam. Someone had slammed into him. "Charlie—" he whispered, not even sure why he said it, turning, twisting, falling. Then, he saw her. He saw Charlene's eyes widening, the frown slipping from her face into shock into confusion into-

A man stepped in front of her, blocking his view. Ike belatedly heard the ear-splitting buzz of the detector.

“Holy shit, look at this scan! He’s metal all over! We’ve got a droid!”

Ike scuttled back across the ground, hands numb and slow.

“The *fuck*’d you say?”

“Shit shit shit shit, someone grab a C.A.P.A.R. and get it!” Garrett’s voice cut through the confusion. He grabbed his own recently surrendered C.A.P.A.R. from the pile and began loading.

To Ike’s horror, the security officer and other students followed suit. He couldn’t stay. He didn’t belong. Now, they *knew* he didn’t belong.

Ike scrambled to his feet, taking one step, then another. He glanced back just once to see Charlene, hand out and taking a step before stopping. Her favorite headphones knocked to the ground, that mint color she loved so much. Crying.

“Here, everyone grab a gun, the thing’s starting to run!”

He sprinted, feeling smaller wires snap in his calves.

“It’s heading for the gym! Somebody shoot that thing!”

Ike tripped, missing a bullet as he fell. He threw himself back onto jumbled feet.

“Shit, shit! What the hell’s it doing here?”

The voices echoed in his head like the bullet’s ricochet.

“Aim better, dammit! You almost had it.”

“Where’d it go? Somebody get the lights!”

“Behind the track equipment, I found it!”

The overheads cracked on and spilled light upon Ike. He could hear them simmering in their sockets, beating out each moment of artificial life like a heart. In the distance, he could hear the crackling spatter of C.A.P.A.R. bullets tearing through college walls, but he was far more concerned with the ones aimed at him.

Nine shivering fingers licked at their triggers like flames. Ike counted them slowly, watched their wavering aim, wavering only because those nine shivering fingers had never killed steel before now. And he sighed. Because he was built to be human, and it would take less than nine shivering fingers to end his whole life.

Ike quivered a subconscious step back, and that was all that it took. A bullet smashed through his thigh, wires ripping oil dripping screaming as it tore-

Down. He lay on his face, light shining down on him like a merry exhibit, and he realized all at once that he was the whale. Tremors shot through his useless leg, jutting out like a crippled frog, like crumpled wings he could no longer open. There was no water to hide in, no human taking responsibility for their own damned creation, no break in the spotlight sucking him dry.

*Icarus. You know why I named you that? It's a warning. Don't overstep the boundaries I built for you. Align yourself with humanity's limits. When you break them, that's when humans begin to fear science. It happened in Osaka, and inevitably, it'll happen again. I know it's unfair, but you of all people cannot afford to make a mistake.*

Ike levered himself up on his arm. *Crack.* A second bullet quaked through his bicep, steel shrieking as it folded and collapsed imploding pain sensors leaking all over the floor and-

Down. He opened his mouth in mute agony that no human would ever believe he could feel. He was the trash robot, armless and scorned and replaceable in a way they would never view themselves.

*Dearest Icarus, I want you to find what makes you special on your own. I did not give you enhanced strength or speed or wings, because I made you to be human. We all need to find our reasons within that prescription.*

He was the whale and the robot and the oil and the lights and every forgotten invention that reminded him how he never got to fly. She was right. He didn't have wings or weapons or powers, and he would plummet from the sky without even soaring up.

*Remember Icarus, you must never fly too high.*

Those last, cruel words Dr. Nishida, dear Shiori, had said to him burned in his mind as his body burned out.



Megan Sear

Bavarian Wave Swinger

Sometimes you have to hit hard  
pavement to soar.  
Like in those wicker  
swings slushing  
through thin air, breeze  
among branches of  
olive trees.

Once I sat near my mother  
in a yellow wicker, she chose  
blue and her hands shook  
nervously, rattling  
chains.  
I used to think,  
“What if I  
fell out?”

What if in mid-air,  
the tossing swing juttied  
me into the  
Wild Mouse?  
Kissing my glasses  
goodbye and clean knees  
a slice.

My ride is so tempting...  
the hard pavement contrasting  
olive branches and flying  
past the wild mice  
that giggle and grin  
at my baby ride.

Brian Thomas

## Traffic

Jonathan Rivers had been sitting in traffic for 45 minutes on I-76 when, after resting his temples on the leather steering wheel, the radio began to recite his most embarrassing memories.

“This is WJRE, coming to you live from Philadelphia. When Jonathan Rivers was 4 years old, he walked in on his dad as he towed down outside of the shower. Jonathan remained frozen while his naked father cursed and closed the door. Now for traffic.”

Jonathan stared at the volume knob for a few moments before the angry horn of the car behind him refocused his attention. He eased off the brakes and let the car roll forward, stopped again, repeated. Such is traffic. The memory of his father, naked and wet, came back to him. The image was vague, like a message carved into a picnic table that’s been painted over. His father had died when he was 12, and he didn’t remember much.

“After the death of Harris Rivers, age 50, the family had a funeral.”

The radio was broadcasting crystal clear.

“12 year old Jonathan cried so much that he urinated in his new suit. All of the neighborhood kids saw it, but they understood. It was a brilliant and precocious display of empathy.”

Jonathan nearly choked on his own saliva. Until this moment, he had totally forgotten that he had pissed his pants. Without being told to, his hand moved to his crotch to check. Dry. He remembered it all. He remembered how Elise Peterson had been there with her older sister Bernadette. He had a simultaneous crush on both of them, and had hoped that their condolence hugs would last long enough that he could pretend they were married. They lived three houses down and rode the same bus to school as Jonathan. He urinated before they reached him and didn’t want to hug them with wet pants.

He felt a little dizzy at this point, nauseous and frantic. The sky was not totally sunless, but it wasn’t overcast either. It was hot and muggy and mosquitos were landing on his windshield, trying to suck through the glass. He took a deep breath, ripped his tie off, tried to look out the window. He could see the Philadelphia skyline in his rearview mirror, so he focused on that. The buildings looked like the tongs of a mangled fork, carving into the sky. The driver of the car behind him honked and flipped him the bird. He inched up another five feet and then stopped again. “Maybe I could call Val,” he thought. She was waiting for him at home. If he called her though,

he would have to tell her that he'd been fired. There was no real way around that.

"Don't touch that dial, we're about to get to high school."

Jonathan froze.

"In eleventh grade, he lost his virginity to Elise Peterson in his van. They were parked by a field off of Old School Road. He did poorly, and the cops showed up before they could finish. The cop was friends with Elise's dad, and he saw her topless, scrambling to find her clothes. They got off with a warning, and Elise dumped him the next day."

He moved his car under a bridge, and the radio started to crackle. The pink slip from his boss sat in the passenger's seat, unflinching and menacing. He inched the car forward a little bit. The clock hit 6:30. He had to get home. Val's parents were visiting their apartment for the first time. Jonathan's breathing was quick and short. On his left, an ugly SUV swerved around him. An anonymous looking man in a black t-shirt and hat leaned out the window and yelled "You fucked up, dude!" As the man laughed and high-fived the driver, the car sped off, darted over to the right lane and exited the highway.

Jonathan covered his ears with his clammy hands. His face was contorted like a bad painting. He thought about a diary entry that he had made a week ago, a detailed rendition of a fantasy that he had always had. He thought so hard about it that it became real to him:

Jonathan Rivers is walking down Avenida Mariposa in Mexico City, a street he made up since he's never been there. He has been living in a cozy room on the roof of a bar. It isn't much, but it's clean, cheap and private. He has a mattress on the floor, a recliner, a table, a kitchenette, some bookcases and a lamp. He doesn't need anything else.

Jonathan is on his way to his first poetry reading as a headliner. He has published in a number of English language journals since moving here, and recently released a collection through a big publishing house. He writes abstract but accessible poems with rich imagery and precise language. He even dabbles in formal verse sometimes, writing so slyly that casual readers think it's free verse. Every morning at six on the dot, no matter how late he was up the night before, Jonathan wakes up, gulps down a cup of coffee and writes a poem. He has been doing this since he moved here, and he has never been happier.

Jonathan arrives at the local biblioteca, where he will read in an hour. People are already milling about, carrying his book, *Crisscrossing the Sun*. Some nervously ask for an autograph. Some tell him that the poems saved their life. He humbly says thank you, *gracias*, makes a pleasant note in the book and adds his signature. A man in a denim jacket buys him coffee from the café.



Jonathan takes the stage five minutes after he was supposed to, but nobody minds. The introduction is in English, and is delivered by a local university professor who had taught a seminar on contemporary American expatriate literature. Several students had written their papers on one of Jonathan's poems. Jonathan thanks the professor and reads for 45 minutes. He is calm, professional, and engaging. He signs more books after the reading and collects his honorarium.

He calls a friend, Annabella, on his walk home and they meet for dinner. After dinner, they walk for a few hours, stopping at bars along the way and drinking the best beer on the menus. The city is familiar and exploding with life. They end up at Jonathan's room, where they drink a bottle of red wine and fall asleep, her head resting on his shoulder. Looking out the window above his mattress, he can see a lamppost that looks like the moon. Two red birds have a nest on top of it, and they're sleeping a beautiful sleep, both perfectly nestled in the other like praying hands. At six, Jonathan writes poetry at the table while Annabella sleeps.

He goes out to fetch some food and coffee for the two of them. As he passes the alley outside of his house, he smells marijuana and hears teenagers talking with glee. The sun feels warm and he pulls one of Annabella's long black hairs off his shoulder. He gets to the corner store and stands in line. The man in front of him turns around, and Jonathan recognizes him instantly as the man who bought him coffee at the reading last night. He's wearing the same suit that Jonathan's boss wore.

"Your poems aren't good enough for this to become real," he says.

"I'm sorry?" says Jonathan. He looks down and sees that he is wearing his work clothes.

"Your poems aren't good enough for this to become real. And you're probably romanticizing poverty. It's a very real issue with real consequences, not something you can adopt to live the life you think a writer should live."

"I—how did—I'm sorry, I just need to get here and order my coffee."

The man hands him a steering wheel, and when Jonathan looks back up he is back in his car. Traffic had cleared and he had been driving on autopilot for the past few minutes. He felt calmer, for some reason.

"Coming up next: college memories. Stay tuned to hear about the phase when Jonathan intentionally spilled coffee on a copy of *Ulysses* and carried it around with him so people would think that was smart."

Jonathan let out a little yelp. There were no more cars around. He eased his car off at the exit, stopped at the light and turned left on Norman Street. He was home.

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He pulled into his driveway and parked next to his father-in-law's car. It was already beginning to get dark. He left his briefcase under the seat

with the pink slip on it. He went into the garage and stood there for a little, listening to the bugs hum around the ceiling. He stared at the wall for a little, thinking about why he felt the way he did. Like a record that is done spitting out music and is just spinning around in static.

After a few minutes he went inside. Val stayed seated, twirling her pasta while her parents stood up and went over to Jonathan. Her father was wearing a tweed jacket and shook his hand without too much pressure.

"It's so good to see you again," said Val's mom. She wore a cross around her neck.

"Absolutely, I'm so sorry that I was late. Traffic was insane."

"Oh no worries, I understand," said Val's father, winking.

They sat down at the cheap wooden table. Val and Jonathan had bought it off Craigslist, and the previous owners had left a number of scratches on the surface. As Jonathan sat down, he scanned the surface, expecting some vague and dismal message to be carved into the wood. He saw a message near his plate that read "fuck you," but that had always been there. He let out a sigh of relief, and moved his plate to cover it up.

Nothing particularly strange happened at dinner. There was small talk. Jonathan lied that his job was going well and that he was expecting a promotion. Val was uncharacteristically quiet. They had some wine, and then coffee and strawberry shortcake for dessert. After they left, Jonathan and Val did the dishes. Normally they would have listened to the radio, but Jonathan told her that he didn't want to.

"I lost my job," said Jonathan, wiping dry a mug with a torn dish rag.

"I know," said Val. Her green eyes were focused on the drain of the sink, and she tried to get some day-old rice unstuck.

"How do you know?"

"I could just tell. We can't make rent without it."

"I know."

They finished putting away the dishes and sat on the couch for a little. Jonathan refused to turn on the television. Val was reading when he finally spoke up.

"I've had a weird day. The radio started talking to me, and people were yelling at me on the street, and everything was mocking me." Val put down her book and looked straight ahead. She didn't dog-ear the page she was on or anything. The first drops of rain began to fall outside.

"That's a thing that happens sometimes," she said. She ran her fingers through his hair. "Sometimes that happens. Were you afraid?"

"Yes, I was."

"Are you afraid now?"

"No." The rain started to pick up rapidly, and thunder reverberated in the distance. "Has it ever happened to you?"

“Yes, a few times.”

“What do you do?”

“Oh, I just sit there and listen. I try to learn from it, or laugh it off, but mostly just sit with it. Then I keep driving.”

Outside they heard a loud yelp and saw a flash. They ran outside into the rain without shoes on. They saw their neighbor's dog lying on its back on the sidewalk next to a fallen telephone pole, the live wires tangled around its neck and shooting streams of sparks into the wind and rain. The dog's fur was burned, its legs stiffened by the rushing electricity. Its eyes were open and its tongue hung out.

Jonathan and Val looked at it for a long time. Their feet were submerged in puddles, shriveled and spongy. Jonathan's white shirt was soaked through, and it clung to his fragile body. Val grabbed his hand, and they both started laughing. They laughed for minutes, looking up at the clouds and each other. As they made their way inside, the dog's glow dimmed, and their fingers became tangled like electric eels.



I've always been soft in the middle like a Boston cream doughnut but  
When I was five my mother told me that an extra serving was too many  
calories so

I cut myself in half to save her a heart attack.

I've always been a little droopy like a Jell-O sculpture  
With fruit in the middle but

She said it was too sweet so I put in just a little more water  
To dilute the sugar.

I've always been shamed for being stupid so

I let my mother tutor me and for our first lesson

She showed me the numeric value of skipping lunch

Because I ate one too many potato chips.

She showed me it's better to hear the crunch

Of my nails breaking under my teeth

Because they won't make my thighs any bigger

Even though I know she hates that sound too.

I hold hands with hunger pangs,

Chew ice cubes when they start to squeeze.

I speak in grams of fat, I think in calories;

My idea of comfort food is a lemon with my water and

When I find solace in a jar of peanut butter

I feel my mother's eyes trained on my Boston cream belly

Melted like ice cream over my waistband.

I've always been soft in the middle

Like a doughnut rolled in peanut butter.

My mother once told me to throw away all my spoons

Because I can't control them if I leave them home alone so

I will lay alone,

I will become skin and bones and soiled meat;

My naked cheekbones will make my mother proud.

## Tommy Armstrong

### Goodnight, Halfmoon

I put my pills behind my teeth,  
unbutton shirt, unbutton jeans,  
unzip. Tomorrow's Friday. Say:  
"Uh wake me up at eight o'clock."  
My phone confirms. I fall and roll  
right into bed, the bottom bunk.  
But slinking into sleep, I fidget.  
I forgot my meeting today.  
Fuck. Goddamn, I said I wouldn't  
Not the first time; won't be the last.  
What's wrong with me?  
My tongue is jabbing pills behind  
my teeth, the pills descending toward my throat,  
but jutted up in rhythm quick  
each time my heart decides to pulse.  
I never swallowed them,  
I never do.  
I see the water bottle sitting there  
Above my drawers, which spit out shirtsleeves.  
I see the water bottle, the sleeves,  
And the letter I keep meaning to send you.  
Of course, the light's still on.

Ria Malones

Thanks, Alice

I remember the sight of blood. It was red. Red everywhere. Her hair, her forehead, splattered on the sheets beneath her.

*It's all your fault. It's all-*

Those words flashed in my mind as I heard a loud banging on the door. "Gemma Belle!" A familiar voice scattered my thoughts.

I was suddenly drawn back to reality. Where was I?

It was dark in the room. The blinds were closed and the crooked lamp in the corner wasn't on. A mound of blankets were tucked around me and my eyes felt heavy. A digital clock blinked red numbers at me from the corner.

"Gemma Belle, open the door!"

Whose voice was that again?

"Gemma! It's Asher!"

Oh, yea.

I wasn't in any mood to leave the safety of my blanket fort but the images I just had were still in my mind, stored there for good, so I slowly got up and cracked the door open just enough to look out with one eye.

"What?" I blinked at the half Asian boy standing in the hallway.

He rubbed the bridge of his nose just above his glasses and sighed.

"Gemma Belle, I understand it is dark and cold outside but your melatonin levels will continue to be disrupted if you don't attempt to get sunlight."

"You're disrupting me." Despite what I said, I opened the door wider.

Asher ignored me. "Besides, it's only three in the afternoon. You can't be sleeping at this hour."

"I wasn't sleeping." I'm pretty sure my eyes were huge and my voice was hoarse. "I haven't been able to sleep for the past day."

"That's not good." He said and opened the door wider for me. "Come on, the social workers are here to check in on us. We have to get Levi, though."

I groaned and stepped into the hallway with him.

As we walked down the dull, gray hallway of Miss Hattie's Home for Troubled Teens, Asher talked about the experiment he'd been involved with for the past three years.

You see, everyone here at Miss Hattie's Home for Troubled Teens is a little, well...special. I mean, it's in the title of the house we live in. I have Seasonal Affective Disorder. It's a form of mood disorder that also affects my circadian rhythm, or biological clock. Basically, I start showing symptoms of depression around the winter time.



Asher Levay has a completely different problem than mine. But, it's still a problem all the same. Ever since he was fourteen he had been what they call an "experiment child". With consent from his parents, he was given over to a few researchers studying homosexuality in males.

"So the results of the most recent test came back." Asher said. "They found out I have a smaller than average hypothalamus."

"You have a smaller than average hippocampus?" I blinked.

"*Hypothalamus*. It's a structure in the brain that produces hormones."

"How did they find out about your small hippocampus?"

He rolled his eyes. "They used an MRI scan."

"Doesn't that damage brain cells?"

Before he got the chance to answer we heard a muffled scream.

We had reached the end of the hall. The door to the room we stood in front of was locked and frantic conversation was audible through it.

Asher raised his arm and knocked on the door. It swung open so fast I blinked and missed it.

The person at the door was a middle aged man in a suit. He held a binder full of papers under his arm and he wore a look of fear on his face. He was one of the social workers.

"No!" Someone from inside the room screamed. "Don't do it! Please!"

"Thank goodness." The man at the door said to us. "Please help me."

Asher and I pushed past the social worker and stepped into the room. It was a nightmare. Clothes were all over the floor, the window was wide open letting in December wind, the desk pushed in the corner looked like it threw up an endless amount of papers, and there was a broken wall clock on the floor.

Cowering in the corner of the room was an even bigger mess. His name is Levi Gazzaniga. I feel bad for the kid, he's three years younger than me and he has an extreme case of schizophrenia. They said he gained the disorder because of prenatal factors. It was believed that his mother could have had a case with schizophrenia and that was why she couldn't provide for him anymore. After his mother gave him up, Levi was adopted by an abusive man. The abuse was harder on Levi's condition and his schizophrenia worsened.

"Levi, we're-"

"No, don't!" He screamed, cutting Asher off.

"Levi, it's okay. That man is not your adoptive father."

"Please!" Levi screeched. "I haven't done anything wrong! Please don't hurt me!"

"Levi, no one is here to hurt you." Asher was keeping a level head despite this being the millionth time we have gone through one of Levi's episodes. "Your adoptive father isn't here."

"Get me out of this basement!" Levi thrashed around. He was crying now. "I want to go home! I hate it here!"

"Levi, you're not in a basement. You are home. No one is here to hurt you."

"Don't hurt me! Please don't use your belt!"

I was starting to get restless. For one, the room was freezing. Levi was really starting to get on my nerves. He would always scream about how he didn't want people to hurt him and how he wanted to go home.

"Come on, Levi." Asher had approached Levi now. "We have to go see Miss Hattie."

"No! I don't want to get hurt!" Levi picked up the nearest thing to him, which happened to be a full bottle of Thorazine tablets, Levi's antipsychotic medication, and he chucked them at Asher.

Fortunately Asher dodged the flying medicine. Unfortunately the bottle smacked me in the face and set off my bitter mood.

"Shut up!" I screamed at Levi, startling everyone, even myself. My head hurt from the impact of the bottle. "Shut up!" I yelled again. "Levi, do you want to know why you have schizophrenia? You let it get to you! You believe your abusive adoptive father is in this room but he is not! He's gone! This is your home now! So get those delusions out of your head! Stop avoiding your medicine!" I chucked the bottle of antipsychotics back into his lap. "Stop stressing yourself out because it just makes your condition worse! You're also stressing everyone else out! Take a day off for once!" I was breathing heavy now. I turned around and ran out of the room.

I sprinted down the hall and then up a flight of stairs. When I turned the hall I smacked into another person sending both of us to the ground.

"Gemma Belle!" It was Miss Hattie. "What's wrong? What happened?"

I didn't realize it but I was crying. I felt awful.

We sat on the ground in silence for a moment before Miss Hattie asked, "Did you lose your temper?"

I sniffled and nodded.

After another moment, Miss Hattie hauled me to my feet and dragged me after her towards the dining room, where we would be meeting with our social workers.

I saw that everyone else was already there, including Asher and Levi.

Having just yelled at Levi, it would be assumed that he was my least favorite person in the house. He was actually my second favorite.

My least favorite person looked up at me and smiled. "Well." He chuckled. "Did someone's Seasonal Affective Disorder act up again?"

I glared at the boy.

"That's enough, Simon." Miss Hattie gave him a harsh look before sitting down in an empty chair.

Simon shrugged and pulled out two pieces of paper and two pencils. He began to draw a picture with his right hand on one of the papers.

"Well now that we're all gathered here, let's get started." One of the social workers said. He turned to the girl next to him. "Selena? Selena, how are you feeling?"

The girl was chewing on her dyed red hair. "I'm not fine."

"And why is that?" Her social worker started writing.

"I can't remember anything." She looked around the room frantically.

"Do you remember waking up this morning?"

"No."

"What do you remember?"

"I can play the piano."

"Do you remember ever getting hurt?"

"Don't hurt me!" Levi shouted. Miss Hattie went over to calm him down as I shot him death glares.

Selena twirled her red hair around her finger. "No."

"What do you remember?"

"I can play the piano."

Selena's social worker visits were always like this. Selena Wearing has a drastic case of short term memory loss. A little over a year ago, Selena got into a car accident and impaired the hippocampus in her brain. The damage was so bad she developed a memory system that lasts for only seconds at a time.

"She obviously will never remember that accident." Simon spoke up. He was now using both hands and both pieces of paper. While his right hand kept drawing, his left hand was writing down words. "Or any other incident that will happen in her life."

"Mr. Gazzaniga, please." Selena's social worker hushed him.

"Simon, you seem to be mastering your split brain capabilities." His social worker noted.

Simon was a "split brain" patient. He used to have frequent epilepsy. In order to cure it, he had surgery to sever his corpus callosum and to have the two halves of his brain function separately. His ability to do two different tasks with his hands at the same time proves that each half of the brain has different functions.

"Don't tell him that," said the teenage girl with long blonde hair. "You'll just give him a bigger head."



Amber Watson was a stuck up rich girl. Well, a former rich girl. She didn't have anything extremely wrong about her. I'd say her attitude was worse than her condition.

"At least I'm not scared of bunnies." Simon smirked.

"I'm not scared of bunnies." Amber pouted.

"Oh yea?" Simon pulled out a white, fuzzy stuffed rabbit and threw it at Amber.

Amber jumped out of her chair so fast she backed into her social worker. Her scream hurt my ears and I glowered at her. Amber's condition was her fear of fuzzy, white things. When she was little, she underwent an experiment where every time she saw a white, fuzzy object, a loud noise was made to scare her. This experiment led to her family's wealth. Now every time she sees a white, fuzzy object, she becomes afraid.

Simon was laughing now. He was so annoying. "You're just like a dog that perks up every time a bell is rung."

"Simon, enough," Miss Hattie sternly instructed.

"So, Ms. Rosenthal, I heard you acted out today." My social worker looked at me. She wore too much blue eye shadow and it made me cringe.

"I may have yelled." I kept a straight face.

"Yelled?" Simon laughed. "I could hear you screaming at the top of your lungs and I was on the other side of the house."

"Shut up, Simon." I was ready to kick him in the face.

My social worker ignored him. "So is there any reason to that? I know it's winter and your circadian rhythm is causing you to lack sleep."

I sighed. "I had these bad memories, okay?"

"About what?"

"My sister. A year ago she committed suicide."

The room was absolutely silent. Not even Selena's normal muttering was audible.

Finally, Simon broke the silence. "That's it? You're ticked off because of Alice?"

"Don't say her name." I spat at him.

Simon laughed. "Wow, Gemma Belle. I mean, I knew you had sleeping trouble because of your Seasonal Affective Disorder, but now *this*?" His hands kept moving on the papers. "You're so weak. I can't believe-"

"SHUT UP!" I leaped out of my chair and drove my fist into his mouth. I felt a scrape of metal on my fist and I know his braces had cut me. I was pulling on his messy brown hair when Miss Hattie and three of the social workers tried to pry me off.

I cursed at him once more and then ran out of the dining room all the way to the bathroom. I slammed the door shut and yanked open the medicine cabinet. I grabbed the razor and uncapped it.

"Gemma Belle, open the door this instant!" It was Miss Hattie.

Tears were rolling down my face and my hands were trembling.

"Gemma Belle, you know as well as I do that whatever comes out of Simon's mouth is never fully processed," Miss Hattie said. "Listen to me. On that day you found your sister, you were scared. But it's not your fault."

"Yes it is!" I threw the razor at the door. "Yes it is!" And so then I crumpled to the bathroom floor and confessed everything to Miss Hattie. "My sister killed herself because of my family! She shut us out! My parents never got along and they were always hard on us and there was never a day when one of us wasn't upset. And then she just left me. She left me all alone. Why am I always alone?"

There was silence on the other side of the door. I realized Miss Hattie was crying too.

"Gemma Belle, where you come from is not your fault. You may have a traumatizing past that leaves you with emotionally draining memories, but don't view yourself any less than what you are. Don't fit the self schema of someone who has suffered depression. I know you're stronger than that."

"Gemma Belle, remember what you told Levi." It was Asher. "Don't let it get to you."

"Don't let your Seasonal Affective Disorder be the reason why you feel alone," Miss Hattie said.

"You're not alone," Asher said. "I'm here."

I wiped my eyes. Alice was gone, I can't change that past. But on the other side of this door was a boy who had been just like Alice. Strong but neglected, and always there for me.

I opened the door and flew into Asher's arms. He wrapped his arms around me and said, "It's okay. Over time, your memories won't become as bad anymore. Your brain will recover and change over time, just like your heart will. It's called brain plasticity."

I rolled my eyes but smiled. "Shut up."

\*\*\*

It's ten years later and I can't believe I could actually recall this story.

I know my memories aren't exact after writing this down. I don't really know for sure if I screamed at Levi and just left. I might have hurt him too, I can't really remember.

I definitely remember punching Simon though. I'd never forget that.

I've relived this event plenty of times in my head over the past ten years, and each time it seems to have changed a little.

It kind of reminds me of a study Simon told me about once. How a story was told, and as time went on, the story got shorter and the words grew more accustomed to time. Ugh, Simon.

All is well, now. I've left Hattie's to live independently. Well, not so independently. I live with Asher now. He's turned into my weird younger brother in a way.

I also remember on that day Asher's parents coming to visit and they discussed his homosexuality. I remember his father striking him. Asher says I came over and gave him an earful.

I don't remember that part at all, but he claims I did yell at his dad and threatened him.

I've learned that our memories are really reconstructive. Those emotional ones that stick with us, will be in our long term memories forever. I also learned not to dwell so much on the past and because of that my Seasonal Affective Disorder hasn't been so bad.

I will still continue to live with the past of depression but I won't let it affect me. I will live the rest of my life no longer lonely. Thanks, Asher. Thanks, Alice.



Sophia Gamber

## River Ganges

Oh, lover—what is truth?  
If I could fit it on this postcard I would not even try.  
I sat for three hours beside that place on the back of the Gangaji  
where sons bring the bodies of their parents or wives  
to be burned—

    I can tell you now, with some certainty,  
    that all bodies burn  
in more or less  
    the same

way

—and I watched the way the ancient men of the cremation ground  
broke the charcoaled neck of the dead  
with a tender kind of swift precision  
to release the soul to the river,  
to moksha, to liberation, going home again  
to the soul of the soul of the universe.  
To set fire to your mother's body, they say, is  
the greatest act of love a son can offer.

I cannot help but think of my own small brother,  
blond and on a baseball team in suburban South Jersey,  
lighting our mataji's lips with kashi grasses and clay.

And lover, how about perception? How about awareness?  
There is a world in which I live  
with you, and perhaps a small cat, in Philadelphia.  
We sleep in on Saturdays and kill cockroaches  
that hide under our laundry machine  
and we wander down to our own river in the evening  
in search of food trucks or a good movie.  
It is the same world—

    and yet, how could it be?  
—in which a boy's body floats backside up  
in this sacred river Ganga, water-logged pants  
around his ankles and bruising on his back,  
five years old (maybe) and learning the language  
of the river saints through osmosis.

What am I supposed to feel?  
What am I supposed to say?  
What is there to feel anyway?

He and I came to bathe in the water, each through one  
of such a vast  
plurality of paths  
leading down to the same riverside.

And lover, it is not, I suppose,  
as though they have never found a child  
washed up in the Delaware.

You know, dear, they say it as they bear the bodies down  
to the cremation grounds at the water's edge;  
the chaiwalla men have it written above their chai stalls;  
and though perhaps you cannot see it at first,  
I am sure it is graffittied somewhere along  
every path  
leading down  
to the mother river:

ram nam satya hei—

The name of God is truth.

Althea Unertl

The Universe Will Always Listen If You Ask Her, Which Is Why  
I Like Her More than God

The Universe will always listen  
if you ask her to,  
with no presumption or promise of maybe  
granting wishes  
folded into your palms on Sundays.

The Universe is blind,  
sits in a rocking chair  
on the maybe-ninth-planet Persephone  
and knits  
Space-Time  
by touch,  
the rings of Saturn  
her stitch markers.

The Universe is blind,  
but she is a better reader  
than us,  
a better artist,  
a better listener.  
Hand her your pages,  
your typewriter,  
your soul,

and the souls of your feet

so she may read  
you,  
and may  
weave  
and knit you  
into her ever-expanding edges.



Sarah DeFelice

Window Women



Sydney Cope

Decaying Light



Anthony Alvarez

A Thought of Death





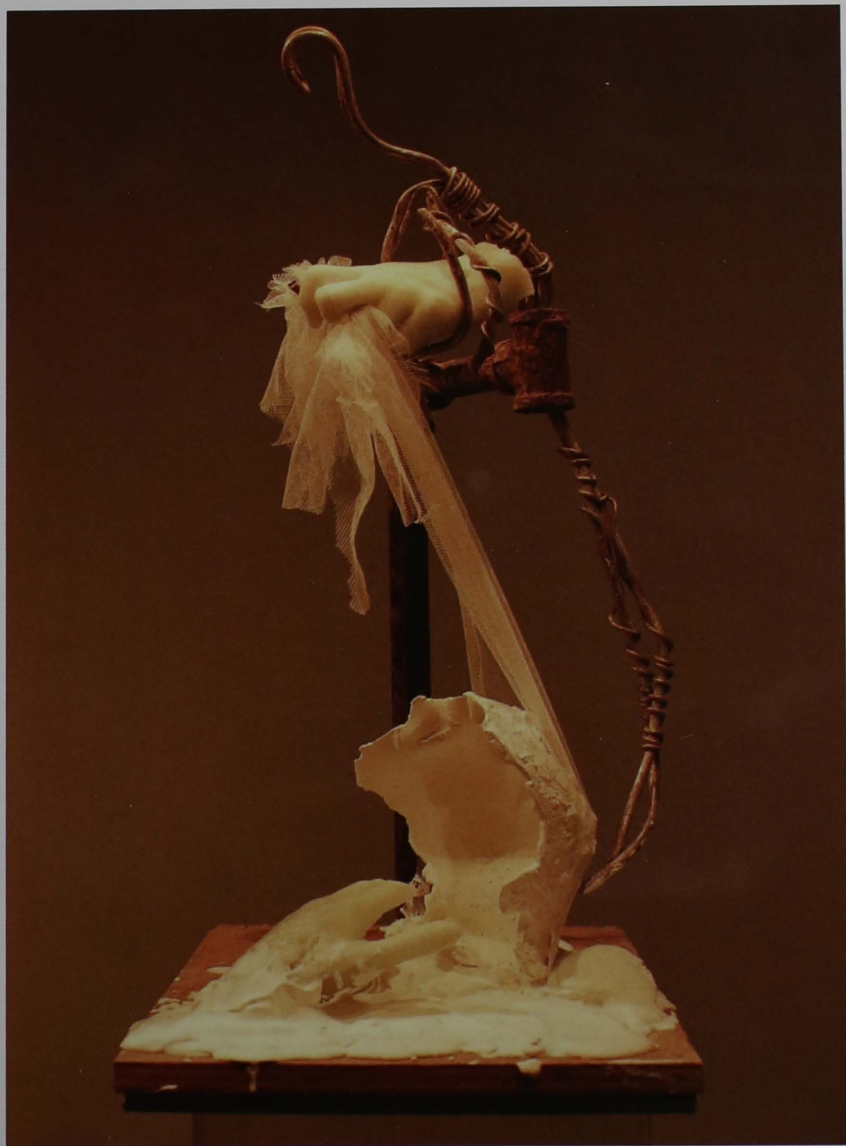
Yanlin Li

The Imagery



Yanlin Li

The Imagery



Sarah Wilbert

For Rent





Neomi Haut

Dead Bee



Kate Bormann

Hobson



Solana Warner

## A Lukewarm Light

1. Pretend you are a fish staring into an underwater chasm. Taste the temperature of water with a louse-eaten tongue. Fill your milky eyes with the absence of reflections. Contemplate how your sheen of skin is the brightest thing in this world.
2. Pretend people are metallic. Your name means rust in every language but human. I hear it creeping up derelict tire rungs and settling where your skin meets your nails. I hear it vortexing down disused sink drains and dripping on a backdoor gutter. It echoes in the space between fallen superstore letters.
3. Pretend you are The Giving Tree. Pretend people don't wince when they hear your name, because your modesty makes them uncomfortable. Uproot your muscled branches and give away the home that has never given you anything. Write an Action-Adventure sequel to yourself in which you seek out your lost pieces.
4. Pretend cheeks are made of feathers. Yours billow softly in the after-autumn breeze.
5. Pretend you are an atheist. Let the tree frogs possess themselves in a way the phrase "all god's creatures" never allowed. Give them credit for cerulean secretions and blanket pink tongues.
6. Pretend you are aloe, spreading thick and viscous over my tempers. Once you dry, my healed skin bursts from saurian casing. You look at me with curled iguana eyes.
7. Pretend your name is McMurphy. Or Billy. Or a character from any book that you admire. Realize that you are a summation of folded pages and annotated receipts and by reading, you add your own character to the story.
8. Pretend your knuckles are funk lyric rhymes. You're an explosion of joints and knock-kneed vibes, long toed jams and New Orleans style. Jazzy beats click from split ends.



9. Pretend you don't have to pretend these things anymore and just let them be.

10. Pretend you are a fish.

Nicole Kosar

Family Trees

We hadn't spoken in years, simply communicating through falsely-happy birthday wishes and formal holiday greetings, pretending that even if there was a problem, we didn't know about it.

It was a slow decay of my father and his sister's relationship. So slow that no one—not even them—knew it was happening. At six years old, I was too preoccupied avoiding with my little sister's teeth to pay attention to my dad and aunt's clipped sentences and short words, but there was always a loud silence in the background, usually filled with my sister's screeches. My dad later described it as the tension between an older sister and her younger brother who wants to break free from her control. He was tired of always following her lead, and it was a betrayal to her for him to turn away.

We used to go over to my aunt's house for sleepovers, and in the morning my dad would always laugh while my cousin piled on so much syrup and whipped cream on his pancakes that soon all he was eating was a watery mixture of white fluff and sticky gold. My aunt's mouth snapped shut before a terse, "Noah, *stop that*. That's *disgusting*, isn't it, Jerry?" She addressed my dad, frustration clear in her voice.

When my dad would let me watch my cousins play James Bond video games, and my aunt clipped into the room, a disapproving frown following the already-made creases on her face, as well as something else. As if she was waiting for him to cross her, for him to fail so she could pounce. All these little things took vicious bites of their relationship.

Then, my aunt bought a retired attack dog who came at my dad clawing and biting as soon as he walked through the door, prompting my father to visit the hospital and reassess his relationship with said sister, who, to this day, denies any responsibility.

Then, we didn't hear from them. It wasn't a big deal; they lived a few states away from us, so no one really cared. We still sent those cards, but we stuck to formality, savoring the buffer of slow land travel. Then, one day, a few years later, my father decreed that, even though his relationship with our aunt was nonexistent, my sister and I should have one. So he provided us with cell phone numbers.

But we didn't remember what it was like to have an aunt, and there was certainly no hole in our family tree because of it. So when our aunt's visit to our grandma's overlapped with ours, it was obviously an absurd mistake. Quickly, as if to get out of my parents' immediate vicinity, my father's sister asked, "How about I take the girls shopping?" and whisked my

sister and me out of the apartment, my father waving with relief as we shot daggers at him.

When we were more familiar with each other and my six-year-old garbling mouth could handle awkward sounds, my sister and I called her Aunt Nani, which requires a strange accent where you treat both n's as ñ's and which I've long forgotten how to pronounce. So I didn't call her anything, just smiled tightly and awkwardly, my sister mimicking my expression. At fourteen, my sister loved to boast about how people think she's the older one, due to her height and her love of makeup, but, when our long-forgotten aunt appeared out of nowhere to catch up, my younger sister reverted to her familial description and visibly relied on me to take care of the adults.

When our aunt spoke, her voice had a high-pitched rumble, like two glass stones rubbing together. She wanted to know about school, our likes and dislikes, everything she hasn't heard about. But she was not trying as hard as she could've been.

"How's school?"

"Good. We're on break now so it's nice." I couldn't decide where to put my hands, and they bounced from crossed, to folded on my lap, to scratching my ear.

"Going anywhere?"

"Yeah. Skiing. Up in Vermont."

"Oh. Hm. Okay." A huff. "Funny how your father has enough time now. But when your grandma needs our help, he won't spare the time."

I opened my mouth to point out that while we lived in Connecticut and she in Pennsylvania, she had moved our grandmother from two hours away in New York to five in Pennsylvania. Then I thought better of it and closed my mouth with a click. It didn't matter; she was still talking.

"Never mind. Anyways. I was going to take you to this cute little Christmas-style shop. Does that sound good?"

"Yeah. Thanks." I was at a loss of anything else to say, but I couldn't very well say that I'd actually much rather be in my parents' car, heading back to Connecticut.

"I just never know what you like or don't like because I never see you guys in action. On account of your father, I suppose. But, you see, I never get to see you girls, so I never know. Because your father..." A sigh, and then a forced smile. "Well! Never mind! Here we are!" We pulled into a busy parking lot.

It was a well-lighted and cute little wooden shop, a sharp contrast to the black night outside. We spent time drifting through the aisles. She likes soaps, as all old women seem to, and my sister and I tried to get high off scented pine strips.



We found some seashells and my sister offered some blather about loving the beach and the sea.

“Oh, I love the sea.” My aunt seized the opportunity to sigh dramatically. “Last month, we went to the Bahamas for four weeks! It was beautiful—the sea was so clear and the sun so bright. We scuba dove and snorkeled and just relaxed all day every day.”

A connection! “Yeah, we went to Indonesia a few years ago. It was the same; clear ocean and so, so hot. We went to temples and beaches and monkeys were everywhere!”

Her bony face tightened, as did her grip on the netted bag of sea shells. “Oh, I didn’t *know* your father had the *time* or *money* for *such a trip*. Fun-ny. Ha!”

I gave her an awkward grimace-smile and looked back down at the sea shells. Adults are supposed to be tall and solid and grown up, and it was so weird to see my aunt break down to an angry popular high school girl’s level.

The night continued in the same way, walking around aimlessly and deeming items as cute or ugly or weird. The biased anger that crept through all of my aunt’s words and subsequent awkward silences were drowned out by these noncommittal remarks. Then my sister saw a pillow with a penguin on it.

“Nicole! Look!” she held it up, already in love. “I *need* it!”

I pulled out my phone to take a picture—we’d find it online later.

“Unfortunately, I can’t buy that for you,” my aunt said, and I cringed; her tone was too *off* to be classified as regretful.

“Oh, no, that’s oka—” my sister said quickly, but our aunt continued.

“Unlike your father in that big, old house and his expensive, exotic vacations, I do not have the time or money or sanity to spare. I drive down here to see your grandmother three times a week. I help her in and out of bed, take care of the nurses and her apartment, all the expenses and more. My savings have been dwindling for years now. I do all her shopping. Do you know I spend \$200 a week on toilet paper for your grandmother? A week!” She barked out a laugh. “And your father. His excuse is his work. Or saving for your girls’ college. Really, just anything to get out of helping.” She whirled around to face the two of us, crouching down a little to do so. “You wouldn’t become your father, right, girls? You’d help me, wouldn’t you?”

I bit my lip and smiled, but maybe it came off as guilty because she smile-grimaced at me in return. Silence.

Then, “I have something like this already...” My sister slid the pillow back in place. We left the store in a quiet that raised my hackles and headed back to the car.

She turned to us when we got out of the car, once again at our grandmother's apartment. She leaned in to give us a quick hug, and an airy and faintly familiar smell drifted past my nose. Old cedar trees and hair dye. It made my head spin, like when I see an actor in a TV show and can't quite remember what movie they're from.

She didn't risk the trip back up to my grandmother's apartment, so she dropped us off at the doors and drove off as we walked inside. That non-existent hole in our family tree didn't open, but I noticed the absence of a *thing*. A blank space. I never knew much about extended family, and I didn't care to foster a relationship at this point. But if I tried, I could imagine how, at one point, that space wasn't so blank.

1

Dusting of flour  
Loosed from fingers worn smooth  
By the wooden grips of a rolling pin.  
Creased Italian palms print  
Wrinkles in the dough,  
Pressing it flat in the center  
While plumping the periphery,  
Spilling a spiral of seasoned sauce  
Throughout.

2

Polygons formed by the  
Criss-cross of an oven grate  
Tattoo the dough  
While it swells against the flame,  
The reservoir of cheese liquefying,  
Migrating, mingling  
With the basil,  
Trading the secrets of spices.

3

Round plate on a round table  
Family rounded 'round the edible circle.  
Round red meats, rounded crust, night well-rounded  
By the rounds of laughter.  
But square boxes.

4

I was told once  
That pizza is pizza because  
An old queen of Italy  
Saw an Italian flag in the  
White of mozzarella, red of tomato, and green  
Of basil.  
But I prefer to think that  
these things were borne in the clasp



of angel wings,  
Having put their cornets down  
To imbibe.

Jesus Camp

They gave me a new shirt in the police department waiting room, but I couldn't find a place to change. I paced a little and peered down the hallway, but I couldn't see a bathroom. The dispatcher's eyes sagged. Her fingers never stopped pressing buttons and her voice never stopped mumbling into the radio. I didn't want to bother her, so I sat down in my bloody t-shirt and waited.

The police officers stood a little ways away from me. One of them kept sneaking glances over at me. He had earnest brown eyes. I looked at my hands. They were stained with blood too. I tried to wipe it off on my jeans. It was dry.

The officer with the earnest eyes walked over to me. He knelt down in front of my chair and tried to capture my eyes with his. "It's not your fault, son," he said softly.

I nodded. He didn't talk in a loud voice. It didn't sound patronizing when he called me son.

"The road was dark. The streetlight was out. Someone will fix it." I tried to rub the blood off of my hands with my thumb. I could tell that the officer wanted to tilt my chin up so that I would look into his eyes. It made me determined to avoid his glance. His eyes held pity in the same unaffected way as the mourners at my father's funeral. They offered condolences to me while confidently believing that my tragedy would never be their own.

"He was riding down the wrong side of the road. It was so dark... It would have been easy for anyone to miss him. It's not your fault. He committed accidental suicide on your car."

I kept rubbing my thumb against my hand. It was like trying to scrape off dried glue. "Do you have a bathroom?" I muttered.

"Yeah, I'll walk you."

I sat in the police station until noon. The shirt they gave me was too big and the shorts were too small, so I just sat in my bloody clothes. When my mom arrived she wore a floppy pink sunhat and big sunglasses with her suit. Ever since we moved, Mom has made it her mission to embody Florida. She bought suits in bright colors, which she wears to her job at the travel agency. Her skin constantly smells like sunscreen. I keep waiting for old people to retire in the crevices around her forced smile.

"Oh, Thomas," she wailed when she saw me. She threw her arms around me in a suffocating hug. "Thank God, you're alright." She released me and turned to the dispatcher. "Can he go?"

The dispatcher nodded. "He has the report information. You'll just have to call your insurance company."

Mom and I walked out to the beat up Subaru. She walked around to inspect the damages. "This doesn't look that bad," she said. "Are you sure this killed a man?" She laughed uncomfortably. "Sorry," she said. She walked over to me. "Do you have the keys?"

I pulled the keys out of my pocket and passed them to her.

She unlocked the car and started it. "It works. You could probably still drive this," she said as she turned the car off. "But if you feel more comfortable, I will get you a plane ticket."

"Home?"

"No silly, to Maine. You still have to work at camp."

\* \* \*

Mom volunteered me to teach carpentry at a summer camp in Maine two months before Dad died. We were still living in New Hampshire then, so Maine didn't seem that far away. She thought it would be a good experience for me to spend the summer away from home as a sort of trial before college. After Dad died, I assumed she needed me to stay. I was the oldest, after all. I needed to be there to help with Noah. She hadn't told me until yesterday that I still had to go. The plan had initially been for me to drive there, but after the accident I decided I would rather fly.

When the plane landed, a smiling, blond girl was waiting for me. "Are you Thomas?" she asked.

I nodded.

"I'm Delilah." She extended a hand. When I didn't extend my own she put it awkwardly at her side. "So umm, do you have your bags?" she asked.

I raised my duffle bag.

"Cool."

I sat with my knees pulled tightly around me for most of the drive. Every time I looked out the window, the trees seemed to be lurching inward. At every jolt, I felt like the car was swerving.

"So, where you from?" Delilah asked.

"Florida."

"Wow, that's far. Did you used to go to the camp as a kid?"

"Nope."

"How'd you hear about us then?"

"My mom found it online. She thought I needed an easy summer job."

She laughed. "I wouldn't call teaching God's word to hundreds of elementary schoolers easy."

"What?"



“We’re a church camp. Didn’t you know that?”

She blew over a speed bump. For a minute, I glimpsed a squirrel dashing with terror across the street. He was almost to the yellow line when we passed him. My stomach jumped. “Could you pull over for a sec?”

“Yeah, sure. Why?”

Before she put the car in park, I opened the door and vomited on the side of the road.

\*\*\*

My cabin was small, with only one window. On the windowsill was a crucifix and a Bible. Delilah told me they kept them in every room. Even though I didn’t have to share the cabin, there was a second bed.

I set my bag on the bottom bunk and pulled out a change of clothes and my toiletries. I was still dressed in my clothes from that morning. In the confined space I was acutely aware that I smelled like Hell. My body was chilled with sweat. The aftertaste of stomach bile lingered in my mouth. I couldn’t decide whether or not to change first or brush my teeth. I sat on the naked mattress with my clothes on my lap and my toiletry bag in my hands.

The eyes of Christ stared at me from the cross. I wondered what mind game my Mom was playing with me by sending me here. The last time any of us had gone to church was my father’s funeral. Before that, we had went one Easter, years ago, when my Mom panicked that she was dooming her entire family to Hell and dragged us there. She dressed my brother, Noah, and I in tiny suits and forced us to sing with a children’s choir we had never rehearsed with. Dad was a firm atheist, but he humored Mom and sat with her in the balcony. During the service he used his glasses to magnify light from the stained glass windows which made her laugh during solemn prayer. It was unseasonably cold when we left. The snowflakes looked like falling stars as they fell. Noah kept closing his eyes to wish on them as we walked. Dad mocked the Latin chants from the service and Mom took his hand, laughing. He looked at her face, all lit up by the streetlights and told her to stop trying to find God in a box. Mom nodded reverently and closed her eyes. I believed she was praying until she stuck out her tongue to catch a falling snowflake.

When my father died we buried him in a little brown box under the dirt in a quaint Lutheran cemetery beside his parents. A little white cross marks his grave. None of us have visited the grave since he died.

I thought about trying to see him again, since I was back in New England and all, but I couldn’t bring myself to go there. My eyes burned as I sat on the bed. I wanted to call my Mom and ask her to bring me home, but I could hear her sunny tone encouraging me to try it and refusing to buy my airfare. I put down the toiletry bag and counted out the bills in my wallet. I had \$40 and a credit card with a \$500 limit. I toyed with the idea of flying

home and visiting the police officer with the earnest eyes. I wanted to ask him what the name of the man I had killed was. I was sure someone must have said it as police officers and ambulances buzzed around me, but I didn't remember hearing it over the sound of the defibrillator. I had watched intently as the paramedics eased the leathery man onto the stretcher and attempted to zap the life back into him. I remembered searching for his pulse in the sweaty folds of his fat neck before they arrived. If I had called 911 sooner, would he have survived? I wanted to ask the police officer that. I wanted to hear his molasses smooth voice tell me once more that this wasn't my fault. I think I fell asleep sitting there, my hands still holding my wallet.

The kids arrived the next day in busloads of giggles and shrieks. None of them knew a damn thing about carpentry. I had to help them complete two projects. I took a deep, sawdust-filled breath. "Okay," I shouted. The shop was cavernous. It swallowed every sound and spit it back at their little ears. "How many of you know why you're here?"

"Because Jesus was a carpenter!" a boy called out. He looked at me eagerly through metal framed glasses that were begging to be called spectacles. I could see the veins easily through his patchy hair. He was balding in the fourth grade.

"No," I said. "You're actually just here to build a race car."

"Would God want us to build race cars?" he called out again. His voice was squeaky like the sound of wet sneakers against tiled floor. It was disturbingly childish.

I was about to ask him, "Who cares?" when Delilah spoke up. "God wants us to learn our talents, Michael," she said, "So that we can use them to help others. If you find you're good at woodworking by making a race car, then you can use that skill to help build houses for the homeless or make flower boxes for old women. It's not about the race car, it's about finding out what your talents are and then taking those skills and using them to serve."

That sounded like a ridiculous amount of pressure for a shitty toy race car, but the boy seemed to settle down. "Okay, let's get started." I said. I passed out a block of wood to each of the campers. "Draw a design for your car on this block, then bring it to me and I'll cut it out for you."

I walked around the table, pushing the marker box from student to student. Most of them picked haphazardly. Michael paused before he chose. He sifted through the box until he found the blue marker. "Thank you for waiting," he said.

"No problem," I said. "I hope you like the activity."

He smiled and I smiled back. It was the first time in months that I felt like I had said something honest. For months I had been telling people half-truths. I told them I was okay when my Dad died. That it was fine. I had learned the "everything's fine" smile so well. It was all lips—no teeth. If you



smiled like that people knew they could safely walk away from you without worrying that you'd commit suicide or something. I really hoped that Michael would enjoy this class. I loved my carpentry class in high school. It made me feel as though it wasn't a problem that I was tall and lanky with no muscles. My hands could get rough with tools. They could create something. In that class I made a ukulele for me father. I carved it out of soft mahogany. The smell lingered on my fingers for days. One day, I hope to carve a guitar.

I sat behind the table saw while the kids drew. They drew in silence. Hands clasped in fists around their markers. A soothing whisper-hum of voices floated through the air. It was easy for me to tune out their noise. When one of the boys finished their design and it was time for me to cut, I was able to tune out the sound of the table saw too. I didn't think during all that quiet. In some ways I felt I had run out of things to think about. If I let my mind wander, it would always find its way back to the crash. The body hulking over my windshield, the face I couldn't remember. I wondered if he was a father on his way to work. Maybe he coached his son's Little League team. It was hard to imagine a fat man driving a motorcycle coaching Little League, but I did it anyway. I forced myself to see him zipping a baseball into the pocket of his leather jacket to bring to the game. I could only see the tiny thefts I had committed by driving my car that morning. I couldn't accept that I had stolen a man's life, a child's father, but I could imagine myself stealing the baseball from a Little League game. The kids might be disappointed someone took their ball, but someone will always volunteer up another. I could fess up to the crime of petty theft. I couldn't fess up to bank robbery. I couldn't fess up to vehicular manslaughter. In all that quiet, I made my mind empty. I let it skim over the kids' mumbled conversations without really hearing them. The words floated through my brain without becoming tangible to me. I could grasp at the voices, but I couldn't touch them. I couldn't hold on.

We worked like this for a few days. The kids drew and redrew their designs, each of them striving for the perfect car. One by one they brought me their cars, each boy knowing he had found divinity, knowing that his car was preordained to win.

On the last day of cutting Michael came up to me. He twisted the cap of his marker on and back off again. "I lost my block," he said. "Can I get a new one?"

"I'm sorry, but I don't have any extras," I told him.

His shoulders slumped. They were jagged against his shirt. "That's okay," he told me as he walked back towards the benches.

A little while after he left a girl came up to the table saw. I remembered her from yesterday. Her glasses made her eyes look so big and



distorted that she seemed to be perpetually mourning. Yesterday, I accidentally cut her car in half. The glasses magnified her disappointment.

She set a block down in front of me. "What's that?" I asked.

"It's my car," she said. "Will you cut it?"

"But your car broke," I said. "We don't have any extras."

"We do. I found one." She slid the block closer to me. "Will you cut it?"

I picked up the block. On the front was her design in clean, black lines. I turned the block over. The back had a fully drawn design in blue. "This is someone else's," I told her. "You took it and drew on the other side."

"No, it's not. It's mine. I found it," she insisted.

I could tell she was on her way to a meltdown, but I wasn't about to give the car back to her. "Excuse me," I called out to the room. "Did anyone lose their block?"

Everyone stared back at me. Most of them were affixing their wheels or finishing off their designs.

Michael raised his hand. I pointed to him with the block. "Michael, is this yours?"

"No," he said. "I think it's an extra. I saw some kids practicing on it earlier."

The girl grinned at me. A look of triumph behind her sad, distorted bug eyes. Reluctantly, I turned the saw on and eased it over the wood. When I was finished I looked at Michael. Her design had cut right through the blue car.

After camp ended for the day, I asked Delilah to drive me to the hardware store. She waited in the car while I went inside. The wood was stacked in a neat pile in the back corner. I found a small block of wood and tucked it inside a brown paper bag. Before arriving, I had counted out the price in exact change. The bills were folded, thick in my pocket. I passed the aisles of the store for a moment. I walked through light bulbs, metal rods, and tools. I could hear the roar of Delilah's engine from inside the store. It hummed anxiously in my brain. After a while, she honked. I didn't realize how much time I had spent wandering. The store owner eyed me suspiciously as I rushed out the door.

I tucked the block of wood on the passenger seat and refused to look at it for the entirety of the drive. I could hear the wood jostle and crinkle the brown paper bag I brought to carry it. I drove over gravel and the bag tumbled to the car floor, but I didn't reach down to grab it. I focused straight on the road. My hands trembled slightly as she drove. Every time a branch shook, my foot tapped an imaginary brake. The thudding sound of the wind against the car grated at me nerves. I had almost escaped the image of the man rolling over my windshield.

The campers were just finishing dinner when I arrived. Many of them were playing lawn games in their down time before evening Mass. I walked over to the boys' cabin. The windows were dark, but I knocked anyway.

"Come in."

I opened the door. Michael sat alone on his bunk. His prayer book was open in front of him.

"Michael?"

He looked up. "Oh, hi."

I sat down on the floor in front of him. "I bought you something."

"Oh?"

I slid the block of wood in front of him. He barely looked up from his prayer book to register it.

"Thanks."

I wanted to ask him about the girl he gave his block to. I wanted to know if he has a crush on her, or if he just needed a good deed for the day. He seemed so serene sitting there, reading his prayer book. His eyes almost closed as they studied the words. His lips moved silently over them too. His posture was so intent that I had to ask, "What are you reading?"

He cleared his throat. "Compassionate and loving God, yours is the beauty of childhood and yours is the fullness of years. Comfort us in our sorrow, strengthen us with hope, and breathe peace into our troubled hearts. Assure us that the love we had was not in vain. Indeed, make it a part of the store of goodness you are even now pouring out upon him in your eternal kingdom. Indeed, help us to bless you for the gift you gave us in him, for the joy he gave all who knew him, for the memories that will abide with us, and for the assurance that he lives forever in the joy and peace of your presence. Guide us through this time of sadness with the light of your love and the strength of your compassion; we ask it in the name of Christ Jesus."

"Amen," I said.

"Amen." He nodded. His eyes turned back to the book. His lips started silently moving, almost kissing the next set of words.

"Does that work?" I asked softly, talking more to myself than to him.

His lips kept moving gently over the words. When he finished the prayer he closed his eyes. "It does," he said. With his eyes closed and his body so still, it seemed he was also responding to himself instead of me. He gently shut his prayer book and I noticed that he was reading a book of funeral verse.

"Did you lose someone?" I asked, hopeful, but hesitant.

He shook his head. "I'm trying to attempt to understand God's work before I have an imminent need." His voice was so young and gentle as he prayed. The words passed easily through his thin lips. "What are we doing after we finish the cars?" he asked.

“We’re making crosses.”

He nodded and went back to moving his lips silently over the words of prayer. I sat with him and watched his thin lips move. I watched his frail body sway slightly with the weight of his words. He held the book out from his body with reverence. The spectacles sat on the edge of his nose. He seemed to be lost in the rhythm of his words. I tried to get lost with him. I tried to imagine God sending shocks through my body until I was on my knees crying out praises to him, but no voice spoke to me. All I could hear was the sound of the boys running outside. All I could see were their brightly colored shirts bouncing in and out of view. I closed my eyes and tried to see God or my father’s face, but all I could see was the mouth of the earnest police officer as he said, “It’s not your fault.”

Michael shut his prayer book. “We should head to Mass now.”

I set the brown paper bag on his bed. “Yeah, we probably should.”

He looked up to me. The spectacles slid down along his nose. “Will you come sit with me again afterwards?”

I looked at his hopeful eyes and nodded.

Michael pulled a wooden bracelet out of his pocket. He folded the bracelet into my palm. “You can use my prayer beads.”

I sat in the back row during Mass. Michael sat in the front. The priest proclaimed from the pulpit that God was speaking to all of us. We just had to listen and he would make himself known to us. He told a story about a blind woman who owned a vegetable stand. Every day she sat out at her little wooden stand with peeling paint and sold potatoes by the pound. As customers came up they selected their potatoes and weighed them on their own. They left the money for the woman in a plastic coffee bin. She never pawed around trying to find the scale. She never clumsily dropped potatoes while trying to bag them. She just sat there and as people passed she said, “God bless.” The priest asked us why we thought the woman trusted all of those people to pay their fair share for the food they took. In a second his booming voice supplied us with an answer. He said the woman trusted that God would speak to each of the people at her stand through the look in her glassy, broken eyes. God had taken her sight in an accident, and he told her that he would protect her dignity from that moment onward. She would never have to beg or paw around to find the money for food or shelter.

As I listened, I couldn’t figure out how the woman understood God’s word. If she had lost her sight in an accident created by God, wouldn’t that mean she was his mistake? If he screwed up her sight how could she rely on him to speak to each and every visitor? How did she know they would hear him?

While Father continued yelling out questions, Delilah motioned for me to follow her out into the lobby. I snuck out of the chapel at her will.



"I was in the office, and the hardware store called," she said.

"Oh?"

"They told me you stole a block of wood. Is that true?"

"What? No, I paid for that." My hand went reflexively to my jeans pocket. The bills were still folded inside. "I umm...I must have forgotten." I took out the bills and passed them to her.

She counted them out. "Yep, this is the amount."

"So we'll just pay them back then right?"

Delilah sighed. She crossed her arms over her body. "They don't want to press charges but...the store owner, his son goes to this camp you see...and he doesn't think you're setting a very godly example."

"But it was an accident."

"It doesn't matter. You committed a mortal sin."

I crumpled my hands into tight fists. "So what am I going to do then?"

She handed me a set of car keys. "Your rental car is outside. You can return it at the airport."

"I...have to drive? Is there anything else I could do?"

"The store owner says he could forgive you, if you confessed your sins to all of the campers."

I thought about standing in front of the kids. Their eyes burning holes in my body as I confessed. One hole for each sin. I would get pinprick-sized burns for the lies I had told. I would get a baseball-sized hole for stealing. My entire body would burn for killing a man. I could handle the holes.

"When can I confess?"

"At the end of Mass tonight. When Father asks if anyone has any announcements."

I stood in the back of the chapel for the rest of the service, shifting from foot to foot. The priest kept shouting everything. He yelled the prayers. He yelled the blessings. When he gestured, one finger always stood out and waggled. As he approached the final blessing, all I could see was the man I had killed lying in a blob across my cracked windshield. I wondered if this confession would save me from facing the eternal consequences for murder. Would it allow me to fall easily into sleep on the night of my death, just like my father had? I didn't hear the priest ask if anyone had any announcements, I just started walking towards the front. The words of the officer pounded out a drum beat and my feet kept its pace. It wasn't my fault. It wasn't my fault. It wasn't my fault. Within minutes I was standing in front of the church.

"I guess Thomas has something to say," the pastor boomed.

I looked out at the eyes of the children. The chapel was just as cavernous as the shop. The children watched me with a similar intent. I looked at Michael sitting in the front. His eyes watched me intently. I

thought about how earnestly he prayed. His lips moved over the words as if he'd memorized them.

"I... I want to confess...I need to absolve..." I was not sure what to ask for. I had never done this. Michael started mouthing a prayer from the pew. I tried to read his lips, but I couldn't understand their swift, easy movements. I assumed he was making his own confession, unprompted and without real sin. I saw my car accident. I could feel the cold, sweaty skin of the man as I searched for his pulse point. The officer kept repeating, "It wasn't your fault."

I walked out of the church. Straight through the aisle and to Delilah with the rental car. "I'm going," I said. She didn't try to stop me. I got in the car and shifted it into gear. Soon I was flying down the gravel road, away from the camp. I could drive again and the engine was quiet. I rolled down the window with my left hand. As I did so, the prayer beads slid down my wrist. They clicked gently against each other. Their music was almost the sound of my father plucking the ukulele's first chords.

Michael Heimbaugh

Song with no music.

I.

I stayed up all night  
preparing my defense/  
Didn't want to stick around  
for the consequence/

*And I know a little laughter never hurt no one/*

*But in a world like this you can't have too much fun*

Just wake me up when things start to make sense.

II.

I tried to write a novel/  
but never reached the end  
The hero was a charmer/  
but a lousy friend

*My romances never seem to work out quite right/*

*Still I keep on writing late into the night*

The words, they break me and they refuse to let me bend.

III.

I'm still finding it hard/  
to figure out what's real  
These words are so soothing/  
but they're not what I feel

*I've still got a few habits I don't want to kick/*

*Your healthiest obsessions can still make you sick*

To the point that you no longer want to let yourself heal.

IV.

I write the songs  
that make the whole world scream/  
And they'll rip through your soul  
like a tractor beam/

*My heart's an engine fueled by dread and doubt/*

*And it'll keep churning long after my brain burns out*

But my brain and my heart don't do much for my self-esteem.



V.

I can't shake the feeling/  
that I'm getting too old  
My arms and my legs/  
just won't do what they're told

*I can't leave the house, I'm too drunk and too tired/*

*I can't go outside, the trees are all wired*

Just wake me up after the first thousand copies are sold.

VI.

I'm writing my next novel/  
on a sidewalk crack  
It rains every day/  
still I keep coming back

*I was taught to never let an opportunity slip/*

*But how many times can one man bite his own lip?*

With my luck I'll wind up living in a shotgun shack.

VII.

I call up some old friends of mine/  
Bob, Leonard, Tom and Paul  
But they're more like acquaintances/  
And they don't help at all

*I come to them broken, pleading for their advice/*

*What they're saying sounds pretty but it just don't suffice*

When the world's one big obstacle and I can't get over the wall.

VIII.

I'm trapped in the chorus/  
I drown in every verse  
I haven't got time/  
to relax or rehearse

*My face is on fire, and I'm speaking in tongues*

*With the air that explodes in collapsible lungs*

I stayed up all night, but fuck it—  
things are still getting worse.

Dustin Brinker

Manhoodlike

*After "Womanishness" by Amy Gerstler*

The joke that is manhood. The brutish burly curly  
pricky dicky stinky muss of us. All we found was  
superiority in the bushes. Expected to tower  
over an ever-present family. To chop the wood  
and butcher the cow. When the knife comes  
to the door, we must bend it with our teeth  
and chew on the hilt until our canines can  
fray rope. Our arrogance knows no bounds.  
Our entitlement needs no words. But don't  
worry. There's still years to go.

Mara Koren

### Third Story

The Rauchs live in two rooms at the top of a house. They have three children: 7-week-old Miriam, 4-year-old Josiah, and 6-year-old Naomi. All five of them sleep in one room. The wall that stretches from the bedroom to the bathroom is lined with bookshelves built by Hans. There are piled rows deep per shelf, and on the top, reaching the ceiling, with books. The Rauchs are moving. Their new house is a few blocks away, also a third-floor apartment, but the children will have their own bedroom.

I never pass up the opportunity to spend time at people's houses, or to go places I wouldn't ordinarily go. If I can make the decision in the spur of the moment, it's even better. I don't have expectations. Seeing the films about John Coltrane at the Ritz last week was a moment of peace and wonder, when the soft darkness sunk into the theater. I love being surrounded by people who are older than me. When I was little, my father and I spent almost every day at a coffee shop near our house. I grew up treating the baristas like friends; I've always been comfortable speaking to adults. At the Ritz, I liked being one of few young people, watching gray haired folks with canes and style and lives and likes unknown fill in around me.

The Rauchs are moving to Windsor Street, West Philly, and when Blaise said he was helping them schlep boxes for the third weekend in a row, I offered to help. On Saturday we packed boxes, and on that Friday before, they invited me to their house for Chinese food. Their apartment is full of stuff: a corner kitchen with a sink full of dishes, the computer, a large doll house and a few shelves of toys, the table and some mismatched chairs. The ceiling is high and wood paneled. I sit next to Naomi. I like little kids, but sometimes I don't feel grown up enough to know how to talk to them. I can still remember being that age. I think of how old 21 sounded to six-year-old me, and I'm not ready to be that 21-year-old. I don't know the middle ground of not being a friend but not being a parent.

"Who wants more rice?" Naomi asks. She's the 6-year-old. We've been eating for a bit, most of us are finishing up. "If you had more rice which would you put on it?" She holds up two packets: soy sauce and duck sauce.

"I'd have soy sauce," I say.

I explain to Karen, Hans's wife, about my semester at Drexel. The usual questions, where do I live, what classes do I take? She has a calm presence, and she's interested in what I have to say. She's the person in a crowd who still hears you when everyone starts talking over you. She has



long silver-brown hair. It's easy to see her face in Naomi's and Han's nose on Josiah.

"If you had more rice, which one would you want?" Naomi holds up the same sauce packets.

"You already asked us," I say. "Which one do you want?"

"Duck sauce!" She tries to open the packet by squeezing it to bursting point. Hans takes it from her and opens it with a tear.

After dinner Josiah and Naomi scoot over to their toys. Josiah crawls under the table on all fours and licks his father's and Blaise's arms. I pretend to grab him as he goes by and he shrieks. Naomi joins instantly. They want to be chased, and tickled. The space is too small for them to run far, though, and Hans asks them to quiet; he and Blaise's brother are discussing Beyoncé for some reason. I know I'm egging on Naomi and Josiah, but I'm elated that they think I'm fun. I know I should play the adult and say sorry, we need to quiet down now, "inside voices." I'm not the good adult. I keep chasing them just so they'll scream and laugh. This is what I love about being off campus. I miss the moments that feel like family when I'm at school. I never get to tickle little kids, or sit in theaters with old people who love Coltrane more than I ever have or probably will. Josiah and Naomi both want me to flip them after we eat. I hold their hands and they run up my body, kicking their feet in a backwards somersault to the floor. Again and again, Naomi and then Josiah.

"She prefers to be upside-down," Karen says, laughing. Her upside-down children.

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The next day, Blaise and I take the 13 to 49<sup>th</sup> Street and arrive around 2 p.m. First thing, a rented pickup is already full of furniture and boxes. Hans drives it over and the rest of us walk. There are so many more trees here than Drexel campus, and people have gardens. It seems like everyone recognizes how lucky they are to have a lawn and uses it fully, every inch sprouting with orange flowers and deep green-blue plants. We make a fireman's chain with the helpers: me; Blaise; his younger brother Asher; Ethan, Wes, and Tennyson, who I don't know; and Hans. First, we pass all the heavy boxes to the porch, then to the second floor, then to the third, then to the attic, already piled with multicolored boxes. Most of their packing boxes are empty IPA beer cases. "It's like we're moving a small high school's library," Karen had said. It's true, they have Cicero and Winnie the Pooh, Marco Polo, the Best American Essays, and math and science. A collection of heavy red tomes. A floppy book still wrapped with paper and ribbon.

In the afternoon I ask if I can hold the baby, Miriam. Karen hands her over. She says the baby's gassy so I should hold her upright, with her head on my chest and an arm under her bottom. She gives me a yellow blanket in

case Miriam throws up. I jiggle the baby gently, kissing her wispy hair. I am the younger sibling, I haven't held a baby in years, now that my little cousins are both teenagers. Miriam falls asleep against my chest as I walk her around the apartment. To the sink full of crusted and softened cereal dishes, weaving around the corner of the table covered with white paper cups, back to the bedroom. Everyone talks about that new baby smell and it's true, sort of like fresh laundry.

Karen starts boxing up records, telling me about when she worked as a nanny and used to spend evenings sifting through thrift stores, buying records and taking quiet nights to lay back and listen to them, just listen. "I hope my kids know this part of me," she says, while I rock the baby and she finally has both of her hands free. "They might have to read my journals or something."

The person I am right now, my internship at a soup kitchen, my semester in Philly, will be stories I might tell kids if I ever have them. The cool lives your parents had before you know them. They won't know the particulars of who I am right now, how I bite the skin around my fingers when I'm nervous, how I watch *Project Runway* when I should be doing homework. I hope Karen's kids wonder about her, who their mother was before them. I hope they imagine her in golden evening light, her eyes closed, long hair soft splayed behind her, feeling lifted by the music of records.

"You know how your mind wanders, and it goes so deep you forget for a minute it's not real?" Karen asked over Chinese food. "Well, I was imagining the other day that Miriam came out of the room fully grown, like 18, annoyed that I hadn't woken her earlier. I thought, what if you just left kids alone too long and they came out fully grown?"

Blaise's younger sister Eden, who's my age, came to help a few hours after we did. She asks if she can have a turn with the baby and I say yeah, of course, even though I never want to give her back. I go down to help pack the truck. It feels stereotypical, all of the women up in the house taking care of the baby while the men do work, but I can't help wanting it. And also I love the fireman's chain, all of us heaving the boxes and boxes of books, 43 in total, and not even half of the books off the shelves. I like the way my arms hurt. A day before I barely knew Hans or Karen, and I like how suddenly I'm a part of their lives. Moving house needs people, so we are here. Hans fills a blue plastic cup from the sink at the new house and we all drink from it, passing it down the line. The moments are golden and sweaty. All of us and all of our stories, together for an afternoon.

We might forget this day somewhere deep into the future, but packing, the moving and passing of books is alive that afternoon. Boxing up a house sends memories flying. Miriam won't remember the Saint Bernard

apartment, it will be a place for her only in stories, where her family all slept in one room, and her mother dreamed about her growing up, could see her, only for a moment, richly alive, scowling, radiant.



Sophia Gamber

Cynicism (or, Wednesday afternoon, at Target, in the Ladies'  
Intimate Apparel Section)

//She carefully picks through the disorganized  
and disheveled bins of underwear,  
thongs in dark blue, green, red,  
lacey shades of seduction, like seeing through half  
closed eyelids in the half light, sighing, gasping—

hmm, yes,  
*that* must be what  
that shade of red is...

Picking up a pair, checking the size, the feel of  
the spandex blend, the pull of it in her fingers,  
considering casually which he would  
best like to slowly strip off her body.  
She wonders about the next time they will be disorganized  
and disheveled together, sighing slightly to herself,  
thinking absentmindedly how silly it is to buy underwear  
for yourself  
for someone else  
before moving on to a row of underwire bras  
with delicate black lace overlays.//

Is this what other women in  
the Ladies' Intimate Apparel Section at Target  
are thinking when they see me here?

It's usually what I'm thinking when I see them,

carefully bending low towards the floor  
in search of their size,  
picking out the pair with Batman on the ass  
or a "naughty" holiday-themed print,  
because maybe he'll think that's just  
the sexiest thing he's ever seen.

I think of all the time we spend waiting and planning,  
posing and positioning ourselves,

carefully considering the little things  
(literally, this thong is the width of dental floss)—  
little things

(like laughter, the way I sneeze or walk,  
my underwear choices, my hair, my etc. etc. etc.)  
that might please/tease him, ease him, make him  
feel at home with me, or long to be with me,  
think about me at night when I'm not around, think about  
"us" *italicized* and in the future tense, (because obviously,  
just the idea of "us"/ "you and me"/ warm and fuzzy/  
that whole silly business of "love" or  
"pansy-eyed emotionalism"

probably isn't enough—no,  
I'm definitely going to need some  
floral-printed panties with a see-through ass  
if I want to keep him happy).

Is it ridiculous? Pathetic?

To wrap ourselves up in wrapping-paper panties;  
wait patiently for our turn to be opened up and *un-wrapped*?  
Do we die a small personal death when we blush  
with affection *or satisfaction*  
when we see that look on his face  
as he tears open the paper?

I wander over to the Gentlemen's Intimate Apparel Section,  
which nobody calls the Gentlemen's *Intimate Apparel* Section  
(because that would *really* be ridiculous),

where underwear comes in plastic-wrapped  
packages of six next to beige argyle socks.  
Blues, greys, plain white or black, one eccentric purple pair  
with a disconcerting pattern of yellow cartoon bananas.  
Do Gentlemen wonder as they peruse,  
carefully considering boxers v. briefs,  
when their purchase might next find itself  
disheveled and disorganized,  
scattered haphazardly, perhaps hurriedly,  
across a bedroom floor.

Do they, every once in a while (just for special occasions  
or perhaps some fun little afternoon diversion),  
go in groups of two or three, giddy and giggling,

to the Gentlemen's *Intimate Apparel* Section,  
saying things like  
"Oh my god, Nathan, she's going  
to absolutely *die* when she sees you in

those  
plaid boxers."



Angela Antoinette Bey

Music.

**Next stop 15th street.**

Play music

Music blares from the girl in the reflection of this window seat  
Reminisicin' 'bout shufflin' 'cross city-grown concrete  
Rappin' beats, tapping feet to the siss-siss-siss of the 36  
Departing and arriving at

**-11th street.**

Play music

*Like playin' make believe*

Like Sundays with your shoes off  
A hip-hoppin' and jump-jackin' to Prince on the boombox  
Dancin' in the purple rain, purple ballies in your hair, like—  
Knowin' it's a school night and knowin' you don't care  
Musical chairs everywhere, you're in your element,  
Dancing in the glow of the street-lights, 'cross the sediment  
With that silver-capped smile and that honey-brown skin  
Music moves the soul-public transportation

**Next stop 13th-**

Music makes you switch, switch, switch, move quick.  
Makes life an indie flick,  
Music got me thinkin' poetic, got me empathetic  
Got me in my feels, got me head 'r heels  
Got me starin' at murals on building's sides, got me admirin' its colors and  
the one on my hide  
Got me smilin', got me snappin', got me tappin' my feet  
Got everyone on the bus avoiding me.

*But hey, got my own seat!*

**Next stop-**

"Can't stop, won't stop Rocafella Records, 'cause we, we get down baby, we  
get down—"

"I'm goin' down! I'm goin' down—"

"Making my way downtown, walkin' fast- faces pass and I'm homebound—"

**Next stop 9th-**

And I'm homebound.

Music got me thinkin' of home

Thinkin' of home

Thinkin' like "watch me sing higher at my lowest", jazz-shit type

Always switchin' rhythm, switchin' key, switchin' seat, after seat,

Switchin' tone like tracks, wishin' on switchin' lives

Wishin' for comfortability

**Next stop 5th street**

...

**Next stop-**

Music puts life on pause

**3rd street**

And I'm *outta* my seat

To the *front* of the bus

Music puts life on pause

**Next stop 1st street**

"Thank you."

"Have a great day."

And I'm shufflin'

Shufflin' through steps

Shufflin' through tracks,

Shufflin' to what to play

**Next-**

Lauren Toscano

Sissy

Today Veronica tells me I am ugly because my nose is too big. She says if I shave my head like my brother, I would look like Popeye, and all of the other kids laugh, and I do not like that. I do not like that people are laughing at me. But I do not say anything. I just keep my head down and walk to class.

My teacher, Mrs. Solomon, tells us that the entire fifth grade class has to write letters to kids with cancer because they get lonely in the hospitals.

I do not really know much about cancer. My great-aunt Nora got cancer because she smoked, like, a lot of cigarettes or something, and she had a hole in her throat. She had a little microphone the size of a cigar that she would hold up to the hole, and she would talk.

Hi, Aunt Nora, I would say when my mom would force me and my brother to go over to her house. Her house was small with newspapers stacked everywhere and it smelled like milk.

Hi, Sissy, my great-aunt would say in that robotic voice. I do not know what her normal voice sounded like but it probably did not sound like that. It made me kind of sad, but it mostly freaked me out.

Mrs. Solomon gives us all lined paper and tells us to write. She tells us to say things like "you are a star" or "get well soon." I think it is kind of retarded that she wants us to say, "get well soon," because if they wanted to get well, they would. I do not correct her, though.

She gives us the names of the people we are supposed to write to. She gives me a boy named Jesus, but apparently it is pronounced like Hey-Zeus, which is weird. That makes no sense because it is spelled like Jesus. In my letter, I write that I hope he feels better because he is a shiny star and God loves him very much.

"You can't write that, Sissy," Mrs. Solomon tells me. She is leaning over me to look at what I have written. I can smell her perfume. It smells like the perfume my mom wears when she goes on dates.

"Why not?" I ask.

"He might not believe in God," Mrs. Solomon says.

"His name is Jesus," I say, pronouncing it like the Bible Jesus.

"You can't always assume, Sissy," she tells me, and she walks over to Weird Chase's desk to see what he has written.



I cross out the bit about God or whatever. That is really stupid. My brother Hunter does not believe in God, but that is because he is stupid. I think he is stupid because he is always sniffing stuff. I walked in on him sniffing dryer sheets in the laundry room once and he just told me to go away.

Instead, I write, *if you did not have cancer maybe you could be a basketball player*. Then I sign it. *Sincerely, Sissy*.

Weird Chase is looking over at me. He is twitching in his seat like he has bugs up his pants. He probably does. He had ringworm last year and it was a big deal. Like, he could not even come into school because he would have, like, infected the whole class or something gross like that. We call him Weird Chase because he is so weird.

He always touches himself through his pants, like scratching where his you-know-what is. No one says anything about it. I just do not think anyone really cares.

“What did you write about, Sissy?” he asks me. His voice always sounds muffled, like someone is covering his mouth with their hand. It makes no sense. His voice really annoys me.

I tell him not to worry about it. I tell him to leave me alone.

Veronica, who sits a row behind Chase, leans forward. “Ooh, are the *retards* talking?” Veronica’s best friend, Lacey, who sits next to her cackles and covers her dumb little mouth.

I want to say something back, but Veronica is still talking. “You guys are the dumbest people I know. And Sissy, your nose is so big it could cover the entire school if it rained.”

Lacey is losing her mind, she is laughing so hard. She is stupid too, but Veronica hangs out with her because Lacey’s dad is really rich. At least, that is what I think.

Veronica and Lacey are cooing and making kissy noises. I am so angry I ball up my hands into fists and my nails dig into my palms. I think I bleed a little bit too. When the bell rings, I hand in my letter.

\*\*\*

When I get home, my mom is in the bathroom curling her hair. I sit on the closed toilet seat and watch her. My mom is so beautiful. Right now, she is wearing a long red silk bathrobe with an embroidered dragon on the back.

I tell her that today I wrote a letter to some kid with cancer. “His name is Jesus, but it is pronounced Hey-Zeus.”

“That is nice, honey.” My mom unplugs the curling iron and gets started on her makeup. She has another date tonight. This time it is with the son of the guy who owns the grocery store down the street. This is my mom’s first date with him.

“Isn’t that weird?” I ask.

“What?”

“That it is spelled Jesus,” I say, “but pronounced Hey-Zeus.”

“It is because it is Spanish.”

“Oh.”

My mom is coating her long eyelashes with mascara. She does not need makeup. She is so pretty, I do not know how she got stuck with an ugly kid like me. My nose is so big.

“I would hate to have cancer,” I say.

“Me too, honey,” my mom says. She is not looking at me. She is focusing on her makeup. “I do not know what I would do if I did not have hair.”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“When you have cancer.” My mom looks over at me. Her skin is so shiny. “The treatment makes you lose your hair.”

“So you are bald?”

“Yeah.”

“That sucks.”

When she finishes her makeup, she flashes a flight attendant smile in the mirror to make sure there is no lipstick on her teeth. She walks into her bedroom to get dressed. I stand up and look at myself in the bathroom mirror. My hair is brown and goes to my shoulders. It is very boring but I could not imagine what it would be like if I was bald.

My mom pokes her head in the bathroom. She is wearing a tight purple dress. “I will be home later,” she tells me, kissing my forehead. She leaves a red mark. “Hunter is going to watch you.”

Yeah, right. He is in his room sniffing computer duster.

“Okay,” I say. “I love you.”

My mom walks away without saying anything. I hear the front door open and then close. I hear the lock click. I sigh and go upstairs. There is music coming from Hunter’s room. I slam my palm against the door so he can hear me.

“Hunter?” I ask. “Hunter. Mom left.”

Suddenly the doorknob clicks and the door is pulled back. My brother is standing there. He is sixteen and very tall. I have to tilt my head all the way back to look at him. “Leave me alone for the rest of the night. Got it?”

I nod. “Whatever.” Right before he closes the door I say, “Where is that electric razor?”

“What?”

“The electric razor that you used to shave your head.”

My brother is completely bald. It is embarrassing. All of his friends are bald too. They all tattooed weird German words on their knuckles with pen ink and a needle. My mom flipped out when she saw.

"It is in the bathroom," Hunter replies. "Why do you need it?"

I shrug. "Just wondering."

He slams the door and I tiptoe into the bathroom. This is the bathroom Hunter and I share. It is disgusting. It is dingy and the lighting is horrible. It always reeks like piss and there is always Hunter's facial hair in the sink. I dig around in the cabinet under the sink until I finally find the electric razor. I plug it in.

I stare into the mirror at my face. My big fat nose. My big fat dumb brown eyes. I truly am ugly. My eyes practically bug out. I always look surprised. I lift the razor to my head and start to shave. I can still hear the music in Hunter's room blasting. Hair falls onto my shoulders and onto the floor. I will have to clean it up later, but right now I do not really care all that much.

I can see the ski slope that is my skull. Flat at the forehead and a fat bone plateauing at the top. I am a cone head. As I continue to shave, I think about Hey-Zeus in the hospital. I think about the kids with no legs who play basketball. There is a league of them at the YMCA a few blocks down. Some of them are really good at playing basketball. There were all of these reporters interviewing them for the local news and they were all like, how does it feel to have no legs?

And the kids were like, I have great friends and they treat me like I have legs, I love basketball.

And the reporters all cooed and smiled. Hunter used to go to the games with all his bald friends. I had to go with them sometimes if my mom went on dates. Hunter and his friends would yell at them that they were retards and cripples until they finally all got kicked out and got told not to come back. But they would always be back for the next game. When we would get kicked out, we would wait outside for one of Hunter's friends' moms to pick us up. His friends would all make fun of me for having a Jewish nose even though I am not even Jewish.

When I am done shaving my head, I study myself in the mirror. I run my hand over my head and I can feel the pink skin that is my scalp. It kind of makes me feel funny. I do not look like Popeye though, so Veronica is wrong.

I put on my Tweety Bird sweatshirt and pull the hood up so no one can tell I shaved my head. I bang my fist against Hunter's door and tell him I am going to the park. He does not say anything back. I doubt he heard me. I doubt he would care anyway.



I walk down the street, hands shoved in my pockets. It is fall and it is getting colder out. I really did pick a bad time to shave my head. I am going to be freezing in the winter.

As I walk past the bookstore, I see two of Hunter's bald friends. The fatter one is wearing a shirt with some kind of flag on it that is red, white, and blue with stars on, but it is not the American flag. They are throwing pebbles at incoming traffic. That is their favorite thing to do. I am trying to walk past them, hoping they will not recognize me, but the fat one, Kyle, notices me walking by.

"Hey, Sissy," he says. "What are you doing here? Where's Hunter?"

I shrug. I do not want to talk to them.

The smaller one, Jake, laughs. "You should not be out here by yourself. You're going to get kidnapped."

"Yeah," Kyle tells me. "This town has gotten a lot more dangerous since *they* got here."

I do not know who *they* are, but I assume *they* are bad. "Can I just get through?" I say.

"Where are you going?" Kyle taunts. "Gonna get that nose fixed?"

I ignore them and keep walking. I have no idea why Hunter hangs out with them. They are really stupid. And mean.

I stop at the grocery store before I go to the park because the grocery store is on the way. The grocery store is really brightly lit. I go over to where the deli and meat are. Two years ago, my mom decided my brother and I were not allowed to eat meat anymore. We are all vegetarian now, but it was not even my decision. I know Hunter eats meat still in secret. My mom used to make hams for dinner when I was younger, and that was my favorite. That was when my dad was still around and my mom did not go on as many dates. I really miss eating the hams.

No one is watching me right now. It is a Thursday night, and no one is really here. The grocery store is mostly empty. I pick up one of the hams by the netting around it, take one last peek around the deli, and then shove it up my Tweety Bird hoodie.

I try to walk out without looking suspicious but a pimply teenage boy who is stocking a shelf with cans looks over at me and his eyes flint between my "stomach" to my face, and he starts to say something, but I am already running. I bolt out of the grocery store running as fast as I can. The ham slides out of my sweatshirt and falls to the ground, but I do not care. I continue running faster and faster and faster.

I stop when I get to the park and slide my hood back over my head. It had fallen off when I was running. No one chased me from the grocery store, but I imagine that ham laying there on the concrete. Half-thawed and probably covered in gnats by now. I sigh and shove my hands in my pockets.

A breeze rolls by, and even though my hood is up, I can still feel the wind against my scalp.

I see Veronica and Lacey and some dim-witted girl named Jessie sitting on the grass by the swing set. Veronica's painting her nails in the grass, and Lacey is braiding Jessie's hair.

"Hey, Veronica," I say.

She looks over from where she is sitting. She stands up and looks right at me. "Sissy, did you *follow* us here, you weirdo?"

"No," I tell her. "I just came to tell you that you were wrong."

"Wrong about what?" Veronica looks pissed off.

I take a deep breath and peel my hood back. My bald head is exposed to the whole entire world it feels like.

"Oh my god," Lacey says.

"Oh my god." Veronica lifts a hand to her mouth and started laughing. "You *do* look like Popeye. I did not think it was possible for you to be even uglier than you already are."

Lacey and Jessie start laughing, but they are both half-witted idiots, so I try to ignore it.

"Why did you do it?" Veronica asks. "To be like your dumb Nazi brother?"

I tell her to fuck off. I tell her I have cancer.

Veronica is not happy with this answer. She walks right up to me and shoves me. I fall backwards onto the ground. I can feel the grass tickling my scalp. I can feel the wet dew. I can feel the earth.

"Everyone knows you are retarded," Veronica is saying. "And your mom is a big slut, and that is why your dad left. It is really sad. Or maybe he left because you are so ugly."

I sit up and brush myself off. There are blades of grass stuck to my Tweety Bird sweatshirt. I can hear Lacey saying, "And her brother is ugly too."

"Yeah," Jessie says, "he and his friends are so weird. My sister says they are all probably going to get expelled soon because all they do is cause trouble."

"Your whole family is messed up," Veronica says, "and everyone in town knows it."

I stand up and ball my hands into fists. I hate Veronica, I hate her so much. I lunge toward her and grab her hair. I tug.

Veronica cries in pain, and Jessie and Lacey pry me off of her, but I am kicking and reaching for Veronica. I hate her I hate her I hate her I hate her.

Jessie and Lacey pin me to the grass. Veronica stands there fixing her hair. I had pulled out a chunk that falls at her feet.

“You are so weird! I am telling my dad you attacked me,” Veronica is saying.

I start laughing really, really hard. I think about my shaved head. I think about my mother getting ready for the date and my brother with his pen ink-and-needle tattoos and my dad and the ham I had stolen and Weird Chase and Popeye and getting kicked out of wheelchair basketball games. I laugh harder and harder, and Veronica and her friends are really confused. But I do not care. I am still laughing. I think about Hey-Zeus, bald headed in a hospital bed. I am not sure what he looks like but I use my imagination. He is probably sad because he is dying and meanwhile I am lying on the grass, laughing with a shaved head. I cannot help him. I am sorry Hey-Zeus, but I cannot help you.



## Sarah Gow

### Piñata body and hearing the gun shot.

Most people CUT their wrists, *so they say*--  
And when they find me crumpled and clean  
they'll be confused and so, so proud—they'll  
say that I'm a *good* girl because I know  
how to die quietly and not make a scene.  
I know how to die like taxidermy. Like  
the deer head mounted above your uncle's  
pool table in the basement—her eyes still listening  
for what a gunshot should look like—  
perks her ears to smell her own blood  
and falling like a jar of marbles on the kitchen floor—  
is she beautiful?

They make me hold out my wrists out as proof  
that there's no scores. No lacerations. No wound—  
check my palms for self-stigmata.  
If only they knew what matches are for.  
Forearms are for counting your flaws in lines.  
The folds of hips make the cuts into gills.  
Breathe in blood and milk—  
accordion my body music—but what  
they expected least was for me to lock  
myself in my room and begin with paper machete—  
each strip of newspaper fused ink with my flesh—  
my forehead was a headline about Syria and  
how many stuffed animals they lost  
to matches and gasoline—I paste the "want ads"  
across my breasts so I can be flat-chested like  
a *good* dyke-- use the comics for my forearms  
because there's nothing more funny than  
cutting yourself open to find candy—used the  
sports section to wrap around my waist  
because that's all the boys read anyway.  
I started with tootsie rolls and moved on to  
root beer barrels—one by one down my throat—  
closed my eyes like a deer—swallowed and stuffed  
in my gills—strands of licorice—jelly-filled strawberries  
bricks of crackle-chocolate and taffy and

ruptured bags of skittles like marbles on the kitchen  
floor—no one suspects a girl to be a *piñata*—  
*What a great way to die quietly*  
*and loud at the same time.*

Hang yourself by tissue paper. Wait for your birthday.  
Invite your friends. Bob for apples. Take up sticks  
together to tear holes in the seven-sides  
of yourself as a star-shaped *piñata*—confetti  
tasseled and ready to bleed blow-pops and  
tootsie rolls. They won't know it was you.  
Too busy with the candy—they've already  
checked your wrists anyway. One of them will  
see the headlines on the inside of the *piñata*-  
carcass and wonder if Syria has *piñatas*  
or strawberry jelly candies  
or if they wanted to buy an accordion from  
the "want ads." They'll look up and notice  
the deer head—still waiting to see the  
sound of gun shot. They'll wonder why  
the candy tastes so much like milk and marbles  
on a kitchen floor.

## Althea Unertl

### Buttermilk

i.

In this void of bottled burgundy ships  
I tip my head back  
and let myself float along with the current.  
My hand and your hand lace together in an intricate latticework masterpiece  
of skin and bones and blood. So easily—  
so easily could I snap your fingers apart  
and carve images on your bones.

ii.

Heavy and light  
I am crying from my fingertips  
and when you ask me why I'm still trying  
I tell you that I am a poet who learned to love,  
that I am fighting with my steady breaths  
with fist balled up around pens, inkwells filled with blood  
even though you spent the seconds  
of your ragged breaths  
telling me that loving myself isn't worth it.

iii.

How do you tell a story that isn't yours?

iv.

The first time you wake up in the hospital instead of heaven,  
angry like the edges of a broken bottle,  
I breathe out a sigh of empty relief.  
I want to write with you  
about the lies you've been praying for,  
how living vicariously through others  
instead of through your anger  
is the best way to let yourself cry  
because yeah, the soul you pretend  
is God will fuck you over time and time again and you will have to say,  
"Okay"  
and mean it.  
Instead,



I make you coffee  
and wash your hair with holy water  
when you come home.

v.  
Today is the happiest day of my life.  
I am in love,  
so I don't tell you.  
She and I hold hands under the blankets  
breathing our thoughts into the air.

vi.  
I can see your body from the window.  
steady my shaking hands  
I can see your body from mine.

vii.  
There's a slipping, snapping sound,  
a crackle  
that tells me I know what's coming.  
It hurts more every time and less than it will tomorrow.  
I think intently of the buttermilk in the fridge—  
if only I could taste it in my throat  
and pretend today is that cold winter morning  
when we made buttermilk biscuits  
and sat drinking orange juice by the fire.

viii.  
Did you really think God would love you more this time?

## Paige Szmodis

### Transactions

“Fifty-six dollars and twenty-eight cents.” My lips were dry and eyes drowsy as they squinted at the cash register screen cloaked in the summer’s evening sunlight.

The customer sat down her smart phone on the counter where “Jim” was still talking in a muffled monotone. “What?” The lady ruffled through her floral patterned purse. It knocked into the shelves of fashion and cooking magazines that I had meticulously stocked behind her.

*Is she talking to me or “Jim”?* “Your total is fifty-six dollars and twenty-eight cents.” I checked the screen again.

She muttered, “What was that expensive?”

“Well—” I started, “I think the organic produce was...”

She cut me off, swiping her credit card with expertise and swiftly shoving it back into her bulky wallet. Her gold bracelets chimed when she snatched the long receipt from me. “Thanks, Cara.”

I startled, then remembered my name tag and how it was printed wrong. My name was Clara. “Have a nice day,” I managed.

She was gone before I could finish, as my manager, Nancy, said to tell her about all the savings she could make with the coupons the next time she shopped at Fresh Greens Market. My heart thumped to the decrescendo of her heels clicking on the tiled, sterile floor until they were cut off by the screech of the sliding doors. I shifted uncomfortably in my short white polo. In front of me, a boy, who looked like he would be in high school too, checked out the next customer in less than a minute. Waiting for a shopper to approach my line from the depths of our green aisles, I worked on smoothing the creases in my new checkered apron.

“Clara!” Nancy called from the back office. “Come on back here!” She asked a few shoppers how they were doing with a beaming smile while I made my way to the tiny, dimly-lit room.

*They’re going to fire me. After my first week?* I thought, putting on a tight smile for Nancy as she sat me down in a hard chair across from the cluttered desk.

“So...” She flipped her carefully styled hair out of the way, searching through random files spilled across the table. “How’ve you been doing? Have you gotten more comfortable at the register?”

I shifted to cross my legs. “Um, yeah, I have.” *No, I haven’t.* My stomach gurgled its anxious dissent.

“Great.” She smiled at me with pink lips and plump red cheeks without making eye contact. “I’ve been told that you could be a little louder with the customers. Are you greeting everyone as they enter the store?”

“Yeah, I try—”

“I know how hard it can be.” Nancy scribbled notes on some papers with her polished nails. The phone between us rang. She twirled it up towards her ear, made a polite greeting, and put them on hold while I shifted back and forth on my creaking swivel chair.

“I used to be quiet and shy too.” She looked back up at me with dazzling green eyes and reached out a manicured claw to pat at my slouched shoulder. “You just have to pretend like you’re not and it’ll get easier! Any questions?”

“No.” I sunk deeper into my chair. The springs dug into my legs.

“You can go ahead on your break now. Don’t forget to time out.”

By the time I left the office, her voice was rambling on the phone. She was leaning back in her chair with fingers twisted around the tangled cord.

The sky outside was a sheet of gray clouds, and I realized that I should have rode my bike, even though it was too small and still painted that awful neon green that I liked in middle school. At least the Market was only a few blocks from my house. I checked my watch continuously to pace myself down the sidewalk. One stride through each concrete square. I soon bounded up the front steps of our narrow town house, disappointed not to find any scents wafting from the kitchen. Mom was already in sweatpants in the living room, still working in her makeshift office. Dad typically worked late.

“Home already?” Mom called. I told her three times earlier in the day that I worked late.

I yelled back, looking through the cabinets, “No, just eating.” I counted down the time I had before having to return for the last four hours of my shift. “I work tomorrow from four to eleven too,” I sighed and flung my nametag amongst the clutter of the kitchen table. It landed next to Mom’s fashion magazines that I never saw her reading and Dad’s recipes for homemade dinners that he swore he would make one of these nights. I resisted the urge to put them into neat stacks; I wouldn’t have enough time.

“That’s great, honey.” She didn’t look up from the glowing of her computer screen.

*Yeah, great.* I shrugged.

I loosened the tight tie of my apron, but the knot still dug into my back while I sat amongst the mess to eat my dinner of microwavable pizza, which ended up being a pile of soggy disappointment. I should have brought something home with me from the Market. My mind ticked to the time of my



watch through the mistakes I made during my first shift. *Once, I accepted a coupon that was expired. I forgot to ask another man how he was doing after he asked me first. How many cents was my drawer off?*

By the time I was half-way finished, I had to rush to rinse the red sauce from my hands with icy water. Mom's computer keys were still chattering from the other room while I calculated the time it would take to walk back to the Market. I had to wait at the front door until precisely 6:52. Enough time to lock the unruly doorknob behind me, to wait for the light to change at the intersection, and to time in at the register for 7:00. With a deep breath, I twisted the doorknob and almost collided with Dad as he barged in.

"Sorry, kiddo!" He glanced at me just enough to lift his briefcase and clear the top of my head.

I skirted around him and slipped through the doorway to plod back to the Market. For a minute, I waited at the intersection until 6:55. The rain hit me on the crosswalk at 6:56. I sped up my calculated pace with the speed of the drops as they crashed against the pavement harder and harder. 6:57—I noticed that I was missing my nametag. My heart raced at the image of it lying hidden in piles of advertisements and cheap recipes. There was no time to get it now. 6:58—I shook out my damp hair, shivered at the chilling rain, and shuffled through the sliding doors with the current of customers. Everyone trailed in muddy puddles into the Market's tiled floors. I peeled off from all the chaos of the crowd at the register to type in my six digit ID and four digit password. 7:00.

"Hi!" an older man wearing a matching polo and apron called to me like we were childhood friends from behind his checkout. He scanned with slim hands, packing cans and boxes into neat pyramids in the flimsy plastic bags. "You must be the new girl. I'm Jeff."

"Yeah... I'm Clara."

"Nice to meet you." He peeled a five and three pennies from his register drawer and slammed it close.

I turned around so he wouldn't catch my shaky breath. My lungs choked on the chilling damp air and on the fear of Nancy noticing my nametag's absence. Soon my checkout line was clogged with the flood of customers. My pulse thudded in my ears to the beat of the first man's footsteps. He slammed down a case of light beer in front me. I asked him if he needed help finding anything anyway. The man grumbled something out of his gray mustache, and he was soon out of my way, swinging the beer through the sliding doors.

"You helped me earlier," said a familiar nasally voice.

I swiveled my head back around, watching a woman approach my line with a kid in tow. I almost responded "I don't think so..." until I noticed the purple purse threatening the magazine rack again and heard the clanging

of her gold bracelets. "Yeah..." I slurred. *What did I do wrong? I gave her the wrong change? No, I hit the wrong payment type? I forgot to offer her help finding anything?*

She slammed down the long receipt with the coupons still attached at the end. "I wanted to apply this." Another slam—a 20% off coupon.

"Um..."

"Can you still accept the coupon? They've done it for me before."

"Uh, Jeff?" I turned around and asked him if he knew.

Jeff nodded back, but his fingers were busy punching at his register.

"Just a minute," I told the woman as she tapped her nails on the counter. I scanned the store, but Nancy wasn't in eyesight. With trembling fingers still numb from the rain, I picked up the phone and clicked "page."

"Manager to the front of the store, please," my cracked voice interrupted the entire store's jolly radio music. The phone receiver beeped at me until I reached over to settle the phone down in its correct spot. I tried to smile at the woman and averted meeting the blank stares of the customers behind her. Her kid stomped around in circles, leaving mud chips and grass stems from his soccer cleats on the floor. His mother ignored him as he played around with the magazines and candy, moving packs around and dropping them on the dirty ground.

"This shouldn't be taking so long..." the woman mumbled, going through a detailed to-do list as if to prove to me how busy she was. Her fingernails kept clanging against the counter. I couldn't find the breath to apologize to her. My hands reached towards the phone again, teasing the "page" button to call up Nancy again. My eyes clung to the aisles, blinking hard before they began to water, just in time to find her bouncing towards the register. I tried to smile back at her, but my lips rushed to ask how to apply the coupon to the completed transaction. I watched her as she pushed buttons on the register, trying to make sure she wasn't angry. I strained to keep track of what she selected, so I would know how to do it later, but her sharp, shining nails were distracting. She swiftly swiped one of our store credit cards and placed it in my clammy hand.

Before I could reach out all the way, the woman snatched it from me. Her artificial nails scraped my palm. "Well, that took too long. We're gonna be late. Come on, Michael." She clawed at her son's shoulder and dragged him by the jersey out of the store.

"Have a nice day!" Nancy took my line and cried after them.

I forgot to hide the fear in my widened eyes, but Nancy pretended like it didn't happen. "Why don't you go work on straightening up Aisle 2," she said normally and assumed my position to check out the line of customers.



I made sure not to look at any of them as I made my way to the aisles; I didn't want to see their scowls and rolling eyes. But the sound of their tapping toes couldn't be avoided. *I should quit. I should just quit. I can't learn all of this. I can't study this material on my own at home.*

I mechanically strolled to Aisle 2. The Beverage Aisle. I faced the items the way Nancy showed me on my first day. Starting with the top shelf and working my way left to right, up to down. Like reading a book, only the lines were made of bags of coffee grains and boxes of organic tea. I just needed to ensure they were in straight lines with their labels all facing front to stare back at the shoppers. The shelves bombarded me with aromas of cinnamon chai and calming herbs and bitter citrus. I kept fumbling to pick up knocked over items. I heard Nancy helping people up front, her cheery "Have a nice day!" floating over the advertisements for car insurance on the radio. *I can't quit, I decided, I would have to ask Nancy how to do that too.* My chest felt locked up, like a key had been twisted into my ribs, but my mind was spinning out of my skull, floating towards the fluorescent lights above. My elbow knocked over a canister of citrus herbal tea. I watched helplessly as it swirled towards then crashed on the floor. I sighed at my misconfigured face's reflection in the shining, freshly-mopped tiles.

"Oh..." An elderly woman took a few sluggish steps towards the canister. I wanted to swoop down to pick it up before she did, but her shaking hand was already reaching towards it. I shifted uncomfortably while waiting for her back to straighten slowly. "Here you go."

"Thanks," I muttered, placing the tea back into its spot on the cool metal shelves.

The old woman's eyes wrinkled at me with extra creases from smiling. She turned back to look at the signs hanging above our heads. Her thin lips silently mouthed the lists of products. Now was the time. "*It'll get easier!*" Nancy's words echoed in my ears alongside my thumping pulse, the jingles on the radio, and the clanging of the cash register drawer.

"D-do you need help finding anything?" *Did I say that the right way?*

She pursed her lips tighter. "Well... I'm looking for some cooking oil."

*Thank God.* "Oh, right this way." I started off to Aisle 8, having to slow down so that she would keep up with me with her knobby knees and small steps. "Here..." I showed her the end of the aisle. "Um..."

"Oh! This one!" She plucked a yellow can from the shelf just below eye level. "Thank you so much... I'm all set now."

"Great, I can check you out up front." I walked alongside her to the front and opened a new line for her, swiping her can of cooking oil through with an additional pack of sugar free mints.



The transaction only took a minute, but she took the time to thank me again. "You've been such a great help. What's your name?"

"Clara." I smiled.

"Thank you again, Clara."

"Thank you," I returned. I was still smiling at the next weary mother with a newborn in its car seat on the shopping cart full of packs of cookies and gummy snacks.

"Thanks, Clara. I've got it." Nancy bounced back to the register to check her out.

I strode down the slowing Market's aisles to Aisle 2, where I wafted among the tea packs and coffee grounds until the end of my shift.

Julia Rae Hodenfield

## Of Mornings Considering Womanhood

I fell into a bright orange dream while holding Shelly's slim long body. Rhapsody in Blue swung below me like a hammock as I imagined a man running around streets of New York in summer. Bustling, burping, with grey sidewalks, carts serving Indian food and scarves and portraits and roasted peanuts and I fell asleep.

A few minutes later sun streamed in, a gentle reminder that nighttime has folded itself like a bed sheet. Shelley woke up wrapped in a purple, fuzzy blanket and played soul music before feet even hit floor. We danced drowsily in underwear wiping smudged eye shadow and singing soprano. Eyes opened like Venus fly traps and we gorged similes like: this room is as orange as a pumpkin. We suck on rainbow prisms soaking into white walls, remarking how delicious colors feel sliding down our throats. All day I will feel full of metaphors, stuffed to the gills with pale blue skies on white window panes.

I brush my teeth, Mya flosses; we look like a marching band of good oral hygiene in the dusty bathroom mirror. Clothes meet skin, shimmying into twisted tops, applying a new coat of eye shadow and an extra swipe of gloss.

Today Shelly will read, sing, and act, and I will write, fuck, and rhyme and we will reconvene again when the sun and moon switch places. Light of morning will wake me grateful and groggy but if I can just put my pen to the page...

Valerie Osborne

Sachrang

When we were living in Sachrang  
we slept on duvets mother stuffed  
full of straw and tufts of grass.  
In the winter these would freeze,  
fracture and crack under the  
movement of our bodies so  
we'd wake sore, iced pricklers  
poking skin through the cotton.  
Mother sewed patches over the holes,  
bits and ends off the tablecloth.  
This was all we had.

Soldiers crossing the border  
deserted guns and grenades in the pines.  
My brothers and I were scavengers,  
took up arms as playthings.  
Shouted commands to drown out  
the growls of our stomachs.  
Hiding our toys in our jackets,  
hard steel bumped and bruised,  
banged against juttled ribs.

Once I saw two men shoot crows  
off the bells of St. Michael's.  
They plucked their feathers one by one  
and boiled them into soup.  
Eyes of fat bubbled on the surface,  
oily broth greased their lips.  
Days passed in February. I sat vigil  
for black birds, practicing my shot.

There was life before that.  
I remember picnics in Spring.  
My mother would name flowers,  
strolling along the Fluss.  
We'd sing prayers to St. Francis  
and fall asleep in soft grass,



sucking red currants while  
the sun waltzed slowly behind  
the peak of the Sonntagshorn.

But when I dream of Sachrang  
I dream of stiffened fingers, numb on the trigger.  
I dream of blood and feathers sunken in the snow.

Kevin Moore

Decay

Everything glows under the last light of the fleeting day. A soft breeze picks up and flows across the landscape, and the golden expanses of wheat and grass sway with the unexpected current. The warm rush of air surges, falling into the crevices of sunken earth and root-like valleys that wrinkle the horizons. Until, finally, it reaches a small cottage nestled tenderly among the gentle hills. Its fresh coat of white paint reflects the light of the falling star. The breeze passes through the open gate that sits at the drive's end and slides its way through the wrap-around porch before climbing up to the open window on the second story. The thin, white curtains are pulled shut, but the glow of the evening soaks through, coating the room beyond in a diffused wash of orange and red. And as the breeze disturbs the drawn curtains, shadowy waves of golden light shimmer across the walls.

It is a bedroom, modestly furnished and meticulously cleaned. The floor is made of a drunken-red mahogany, about the color of wine. The walls are bare, save a few framed pictures and an old analog clock that hangs next to the door. A small table-top calendar sits on the nightstand next to the bed. Its upper edge is torn with the weeks and months already passed. The current page is listed as June 8<sup>th</sup>, 1963.

A young woman sits at the foot of the bed. Her light brown hair is pulled back out of her face, which is already etched with slight lines of worry. Her dark eyes stare intently ahead of her, and her right hand, trembling slightly, is clutching the dial of a television set.

*THE END OF THE WORLD?*

The voice cracks through the set and into the quiet evening, but she does not hear it. Nor does she move. She remains fixated, unable to break her gaze from the images of destruction before her. Giant masses of earth fall into nothingness, and a bottomless cavern continues to grow as the walls of the world crumble away about it.

*UNPRECEDENTED JAPANESE SINKHOLE CONSUMES THE EAST.*

She blinks, wanting to wipe her eyes to make sure her vision is not obscured, or to pinch herself and wake from this dream, but she knows she cannot.

*AN ESTIMATED 15 MINUTES UNTIL AMERICA IS BREACHED. 20  
MINUTES UNTIL TOTAL GLOBAL DESTRUCTION.*

She looks up at the clock on the wall and is suddenly aware of its relentless ticking, and she runs. She runs out of the room and down the stairs and out the front door, and it slams shut behind her, and she runs into the front drive, but time seems warped. Like there's not enough of it. Or maybe there is enough, but it's just going by too fast, and she can't keep up. But she tries. She tries to remember where he said he would be, where he was going, but there's nothing. She just stands there, in the dirt, panicked and alone.

"Jax!" she calls out. The breeze is constant now, and the sky is starting to grow darker.

"Jackson!" she tries calling again, and this time, there is a response.

"I'm here."

She follows the sound of the voice, frantically tearing into the field that sits to the left of the house and carving a path through the amber sea. There he is, seated facing westward with his back to her in a little clearing no more than ten feet in diameter.

"Jax, there's a sinkhole that's...they're saying we're all going to *die*."

"I know." He picks up a little box from the dirt at his side and waves it slightly. "Heard it over the radio." He sets it back down beside him. His voice was surprisingly calm. "Everythin's collapsing on itself."

"What are we gonna do?" She waited for him to answer, but he didn't, at least not for a few moments. But he finally turned his head and extended his hand to her.

"Let's watch the sunset."

*THE SINKHOLE WILL REACH THE EASTERN SEABOARD IN 13  
MINUTES.*

She was about to say no, about to beg him to run with her to *somewhere*, but the crackling voice interrupts her response. She looks down at his side, and he moves to turn off the little radio set, but she grabs his hand to stop him.

"Alright, I'll stay, but keep the radio on." Jax nods and motions for her to sit on his opposite side.

They sit here in silence for several minutes, watching the fading star sink closer to the horizon as the wheat blows around them.

*9 MINUTES REMAIN FOR THE EAST COAST. ESCAPE IS IMPOSSIBLE.*

"Lillian?"



“Yeah”

“I ever tell you about Glenn?” Lillian looks at him and shakes her head.

“Glenn?”

“Yeah, my friend Glenn.”

“No, I don’t believe you have.”

Jax stops to think for a moment, his brow tightening as he tries to find a solid starting point. He is no older than she, roughly 30 years of age, though his clean-shaven face is lined with more wrinkles than hers, and his black hair, once combed neatly to one side, is now rustled out of place by the wind.

8 MINUTES.

Time speeds up, the world around them intensifying, yet they endure. Fixed in place as if they were glued to the bottom of a snow globe, the world their confetti. He finds a place to start.

“I guess he wasn’t much of a friend as he was a local hero. When I was a little boy, probably no older than Edward was when he passed, there was this magician livin’ in our neighborhood named Glenn. He was in his forties, used to work in some circus. I think it was in New York. Not sure why he left. Anyway, all the children would gather in the street and he’d perform tricks and such for us when there wasn’t nothing else to do since it was so damned hot all summer. He’d make coins disappear and turn flowers into doves. You know, standard magician things.” Jax chuckles a little bit, and Lillian smiles.

*THE U.K. HAS BEEN COMPLETELY CONSUMED. THE OCEAN IS DRAINING INTO THE ABYSS AS WE SPEAK. 7 MINUTES REMAIN UNTIL AMERICAN LANDFALL.*

Jax scratches at his jaw-line, the shadow of a beard illuminated by the evening light. “Anyway, he’d do bigger tricks on special occasions. Fourth of July and Labor Day, mostly. Some birthdays, but he didn’t like those much. Something about getting old made him scared. He’d saw women in boxes clean in two and bring ‘em back together. You’ve seen that before, I bet. Or, one year, he locked himself in a metal cage and closed the door, put a tarp over it and such, and he appeared behind us! And we all just about lost it. We loved him. We wanted to be him. The world wasn’t much but a mystery to us, but he was our guide of sorts. He made us want to explore it. But he always said that he was gonna save his best trick for last. Said it

would change the world, that it was *real* magic. That people would talk about him for centuries to come and that we'd witness history."

"But he didn't tell you what it was?" Lillian asks. Jax shakes his head.

"No, he wouldn't tell nobody. Said it'd ruin the surprise. But word started goin' round amongst us neighborhood kids that he'd turn himself into an owl or something. Or maybe a bat. Or he'd make it rain with a snap of his fingers. Or he'd turn the world on its axis and the hemispheres would switch and he'd be a god. And we were so excited for his next show 'cause that's when he said he'd go and finally do it. We'd see *real* magic, the first real magic ever. And finally the Fourth of July came and we couldn't wait any longer." Jax stops.

"Well? What was the trick?" Lillian watches as he shakes his head.

"I don't know. They found him the morning after he didn't show up. Drank himself half to hell and used a .44 to make it the rest of the way."

*MILLIONS OF TONS OF EARTH ARE COLLAPSING BY THE SECOND. SCIENTISTS ARE UNSURE AS TO THE CAUSE OF THIS CATASTROPHE. THE ONLY CERTAINTY AT THIS POINT IS THE DESTRUCTION OF OUR WORLD. ANNIHALATION IS IMMINENT. DEATH IS INEVITABLE.*

Jax puts his head back and breathes in slowly.

"I always loved the smell of these fields in the summer," he says.

Lillian looks around. The tops of the wheat glow like candles in the sunlight. Stray grains shake loose of their hold and spiral about the little clearing in the breeze, like embers freed of the fire. She looks back at him. Streaks of gray can be seen in his hair. Her own hair is looking paler. Time continues to intensify its rapid pace, and the wind is screaming past them now.

"Would you say you're happy?" she asks.

"The world is about to completely eat itself, so not 'specially."

"No, I mean, overall," she clarifies. "With life."

"I don't know." He suddenly feels the need to keep his hands busy and snags a stray clump of grass as it flies past his face. He pulls out a single blade and toys with it. "I mean, I've got regrets, sure."

"Like what?" Jax laughs and rolls his eyes.

"Well, I spent the better part of the past week painting the damn house for one. Guess that wasn't really necessary." They laugh, and the sound of their joy masks the most recent radio update. *Four* is the only word that they hear.

"The extended warranty on the microwave was kind of a waste, too. How 'bout you?" Lillian frowns.

"It rained in the middle of our wedding ceremony, so planning to hold it inside would have been a good idea."

"But it made for a much funnier memory," Jax pointed out.

"True." Lillian sighs and shrugs her shoulders. "I don't know, I guess I've always hated my job. Marketing just never really interested me."

"You could've quit. Helped me out here on the farm if you didn't like the job."

"But I liked the money. We needed it."

"So that's it then? For regrets that is?" Lillian chuckles and smiles slyly.

"Marrying you." They both laugh before she continues.

"I wish Edward were still here," she says. "I wish we could cure disease as well as we hate people who think different than us. Maybe if we didn't spend so much money on fighting wars we could have found an end to cancer. I—I wish he were still here."

"Yeah. Me too."

*THE SINKHOLE HAS REACHED THE EASTERN SEABOARD. ITS OPPOSITE SIDE IS ALREADY CLOSING IN ON THE MISSISSIPPI.*

Jax turns off the radio and places it on the ground once more. It rattles amongst the dirt as early tremors can be felt moving cross the land.

"I don't think we need to hear any more of that." His wrinkled hands reach up to move through his white hair. A sad smile takes shape behind his scraggly beard. "Look, he's been gone for 50 years now. We're all meetin' our end today anyway, maybe it wasn't so bad that he got to enjoy the world while it was still in one piece." He reaches his hand out once more and takes that of Lillian, frailer than he remembers, but familiar nonetheless. The ground below them is rumbling now, and they look up in time to see the surrounding hills topple out of view.

"It's time," Lillian says. Her gray hair blows violently about in the gale.

"Appears so."

As the sun finally settles below the horizon, the void reaches the edge of their plot, and the sea of wheat surrounding the couple slips away. The house is ripped apart by an opening chasm, and its ruin plummets into the widening abyss. Soon, there is nothing but the clearing, and the pair are completely surrounded by emptiness. Jax closes his eyes and waits for the fall.

"Do you believe in Heaven?" Lillian asks suddenly.

"What?" He opens them again and sees that she is crying.



"I mean, after Glenn passed. Do you still think there could be some magic in the world? Are we ever going to see each other again?"

"I—I don't know." He wants to have an answer. To say how he wants to believe that they will, but even if they don't, he still loves her. He wants her to know that. And that even though they are at the end, he's glad they got to see it together, the last sunset. Or, at the very least, offer some sort of farewell. But time moves too quickly, and it finally runs out. She's already gone. Lost in the darkness below as her half of the platform of earth crumbles, and she is ripped from the faint grasp of his tired hands.

And suddenly he is alone.

There is nothing but darkness, save the last patch of dirt separating him from the fall. But it doesn't give way. Several minutes pass and nothing happens. The void has stopped growing just a few square feet shy of total decimation. Jax sits alone on the last piece of reality as the final witness to the passage of time. Jax begins to realize that he never will fall, and his plot of reality won't give way unless he wills it. He has to be the one to let go. So he does. He stands at the edge of the platform and looks down at the eternal fall awaiting him, and he closes his eyes and jumps into the void, hoping to find Heaven at the bottom.

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Jax opens his eyes and looks around the room he finds himself in. The walls are decorated with a beige, paisley print, and a few paintings are scattered across the walls. There's a bed in the middle of the room, its headboard resting against a wall furnished with a few computer monitors. A nightstand sits next to that, and a collection of chrysanthemums rest in a vase on top. In the corner of the room sits a wooden chair, and to the right of that, a window, its curtains half-drawn to let in the natural light. The sun is setting. He can hear the muffled sounds of a conversation from somewhere nearby.

"I'm sorry, ma'am. He's waking up now, but there's nothing else we can do."

"Can I see him?"

A door opens behind him, and a woman walks up and stands before his wheelchair.

"Jax?"

Her face is old and worn, but kind and comforting all the same. Her dark eyes search his for any type of reaction, but she finds none. He has no memory whatsoever of the life they just shared. She turns and walks to the end of the room and opens the window, and a soft breeze rolls in. Jax lifts his head and smells the fresh air. He smiles.

When she turns around again, she is crying, but he doesn't know why. She walks back and pushes his chair to the window and pulls up the

wooden chair next to him, taking his hand as she sits down. Together they watch the sunset.

And then there was nothing.

## Athena (Taleah) Gainey

### The Oracle:

I am the oracle of the tribe.  
I speak the stories of those unable to tell their own,  
Of the people who have died loudly,  
Their voices still screaming in your ears  
As my vocal chords make waves across my throat into your soul  
I am the storyteller of your blood pool,  
The recorder of your genepool.  
I say you and not me, because I may not belong to your branch,  
But you are part of the tree  
Of history, of community, of family, of unity  
And me?  
I'm just telling stories about your destiny.  
You ought to listen to me.  
I tell stories to the babes too young to understand the truth,  
And though you just celebrated your 54th  
On this billion-year-old earth  
You are but an infant three seconds from birth.  
And your time is so limited.  
So I tell these stories in under three minutes  
And put words to rhyme so that you can remember.  
I tell stories of our past history  
So that history  
Doesn't become our future reality.  
Ignorance is a cage that binds us in slavery.  
We put on these heavy shackles willingly;  
We lock them tight and swallow the key  
And still wonder why we bleed constantly?  
Listen to me!  
And be free.  
Speak your truth!  
But don't be foolish enough to think  
You were the only people oppressed.  
Open your ears to those who speak for progress—  
Because for some people the Dream is not achievable;  
For some people, we will never be equal;  
For some people, our spilled blood is the only solution to their problems;  
For some people, America will never be the land of the free,



Because it requires too much  
Bravery,  
False chivalry,  
Honestly,  
Liability.

The only real freedom they will ever see  
Lies with the pages in my stories.  
So open your ears and listen to me.  
My stores are not just fables and rage.  
I write to carve the tiger from the page.  
I speak to free you from your  
Ignorance cage.

To those people:  
Your stories are important, don't speak them quietly,  
Because even if the majority became a minority,  
Their voices would still scream to authority,  
"Give it to me,"

If yours are too weak.  
And let me speak.

For I am the speaker of firm words,  
I break through the dense barrier of their minds  
And penetrate their  
Egotistical, Irrevocable, Inflexible, Indelible, Reprehensible  
Stereotypical mindset;

My words break through the wool over their eyes,  
I am the light that penetrates their shadow thoughts and enlightens their  
vision

They blatantly ignore your stories,  
So I will scream it in their ears until it is engraved in their brains:

That the bystanders  
Can no longer  
Be the reprimanded  
Of events they can't remember,  
That the loud majority  
Will no longer quiet the minority.

So my voice will speak loudly  
For those who've died proudly,  
So that you'll know your ancestry,  
So ignorance won't lead you blindly,

We live through our told story.  
Pick up the pen and follow me,  
So that we

Can be the oracles to this tribe called humanity,  
So they will never deny our power to live freely.  
This is what it means to me—

To be a poet.

I seek shelter. At 8:14 in the morning, I stop at the intersection of Lancaster Avenue and 35<sup>th</sup> Street. The light seems to never change, and my mind becomes cluttered. Endless piles of work, ambitious projects to never be completed. Students avoiding eye contact. Bus schedules. Fitness goals, meal plans. A vague image of a white picket fence, flanked by pristine roses, an Edith Piaf song playing overtop. Unsettling. The light changes. I cross the street and find my way into the Green Line Café. The barista, Miles, prepares my breakfast with a nod of the head. An everything bagel with hummus and a small coffee. They dissolve the fence, the roses, the sounds of “Non, Je Ne Regrette Rien” with their cool smile. I smile back and take my usual seat in the backroom, tucked between a stocked waist-level bookshelf and a set of French doors to the outdoor patio. I roll back the top sheets of my notepad and begin to write.

\*\*\*

“Don’t that hurt your fingers?” a middle aged black man asks the young white saxophone player between songs, awestruck. The young performer, out of earshot and more timid in voice, responds indiscernibly. “Oh, you got callouses, like from blisters or some shit? Do your hand bleed?”

Church of the Advocate. 18<sup>th</sup> and Diamond. Coltrane would have been ninety today. The jam continues, cutting off this jaunty conversation. The Philadelphia Jazz Project brought together a group of regional and international musicians to pay tribute. The church is a site of musical history. Music in the sense of love. Hearts beating in time for generations. Pay close enough attention and see the blood rushing through every person’s veins at 117 beats per minute—syncopated. Charles Burns and a crew of nameless workers erected the church from grey stone from 1887-1897. Technicolor murals depicting black bodies. One of Frederick Douglass reaching out his gaunt hand to his brother. Soft blues and purples in waves, fantastical skies surround him. Drab, grey stone. Statues of angels and saints, gothic pillars and buttresses. Vibrant black and white photos of Coltrane, Monk, Ellington. An archive of contrasts, lives upon lives, stories upon stories.

Loose, flexible, musicians switch regularly, always in complete sync. Their last piece, Coltrane’s rendition of “Bye Bye Blackbird,” a fifteen minute adventure into improvisation, begins with a wailing sax line, the rest of the outfit quickly joining in to accent it. Bass tones, soft and exploratory. Seventh and ninth chords on the piano and guitar accenting, filling space.



Snare and kick keeping rhythmic center. Layer upon layer, crests of waves crashing again and again. I can't pinpoint the place of these crashes in the time and space of things. I think of Calvino's *Mr. Palomar*, how he reads the waves of the ocean with mathematics in mind, unable to make complete sense or separate one from another. They all lead into and draw away from one another—each wave, each musical voice. I sit and watch them. I don't try to make them run in the opposite direction, overturning time. I don't lose patience and leave. I allow myself to be seduced by the sound, slipping into some indiscernible, beautiful basin where sounds collect like water.

Full of love, full of peace. My left knee a snare drum, my right thigh a ride. A spirit weaves through the seats and into the souls of everyone in the room. Jazz music! Get lost in it! Let out a great big sigh! Jive with it, love each other, don't be ashamed. Be perplexed and in love with it, cry out a little and hear that everyone else is right there with you. Build up walls of souls, sing to each other. Build a shelter.

\*\*\*

I finish my second cup of coffee and shift my attention. My mind gathers poison again. A monstrous high-rise. Sharp angles, massive glass windows. I wonder how the builders managed to maneuver them into place with such precision. Grey concrete, blue and yellow painted walls, repeated. Twenty-four floors of it. A sky deck that overlooks the whole of the city. Shared space. Downward faces, absorbed in glowing screens. No one here knocks on doors asking for sugar. They order it to be delivered to their room, never leaving their seats. Repeated scenes, faces ignoring faces, urban sprawl, urban noise, unaware undergrads in sweatpants, ghetto of privilege, perpetuated squalor.

The Green Line lives in shadow of the high-rise, two blocks away. A two-story brick building. Oak floors and table-tops. Olive walls and black chairs. My feet touch earth, not infrastructure. A living room. Nameless, warm faces working, reading, drinking coffee, eating bagels. The soft clatter of computer keys, the brushing of pages turning. The sharp metallic bangs and screeches of the espresso machine. A cacophony of comfort.

A friend reported on her Facebook account that she had, sealed within an elevator with a group of Drexel students, heard one casually exclaim, "He's such a faggot!" I'm left unsurprised by the event, my muscles and soul numb. Scenes of middle school lunches, cardboard crust pizza, Jesse Simpson concluding that my lips were so chapped not because of the cold weather but because of my propensity for dick-sucking. Grammar essentialists denounce me from behind oak lecterns. A societal mistake. A white eraser landing upon a frantically marked yellow notepad. Erase. Erase. Erase. The sounds of my former name echoing. I regret nothing. White

picket fences. Roses. Tense, tense, tense. Body covered in bruises that may never heal. Where can I go?

I seek shelter. Miles, so young and vibrant, comes to refill my coffee once more. They must see the fatigue behind my blue eyes as I write. I smile and thank them. Their hair falls in soft, short curls against their temples, their wire-frame glasses reflecting the sharp angle of their jawline as they smile at me and turn away.

I don't tell anyone about this place, one of my small shelters. Would it be discovered, I have countless alternatives. Back rooms of coffee shops, basements filled with guitars and amplifiers and sweaty, beautiful people. Stages for poetry to sing from the mouths of the pained, warm futon mattresses on hardwood floors shared with shining lovers, the space between my stomach and the back of an acoustic guitar as I strum, hot coffee clutched between shivering, shaking hands.

The café becomes too cold. I'm always prepared for this, as it happens every morning around 10:30. I put on my favorite jacket—worn white, nearly yellow, covered in pins and patches where it's been torn. I give one shiver and think again of the word faggot rolling off the tongue of that kid in the elevator. My third cup half-full still. I repeat the word again and again until it ceases to mean anything. I listen to myself, let waves lead into and pull away from one other, forming an ocean. 117 heart beats per minute. Ideas flow. There is an ocean below me. I can't drown in it. Water envelopes me. I am safe for now.

I rise from my chair and set my dishes on the counter. Outside at the corner of 35<sup>th</sup> and Lancaster, I wait for the light to change. Vibrant roses. No white picket fence. Only the sound of birds and bristling oak tree branches.

Brian Thomas

Remembrances, well.

*After after Leonard Cohen*

“Never been to New York, but I know the hotels from songs”

I.      There’s a golden lightbulb in every hotel room—  
It says “come, come sleep under my sedative glow,”  
A siren call of bright and flickering,  
The bulb’s tinny voice mixes with the frozen, recycled air.  
I’m waiting for my friends—it’s no match for me.

They’re all over, friends in rooms overlooking uneven streets  
With sharp old bricks, sticky trash and smells.  
They’re in vibrant cities, and when we are happy, we send  
Books and crumpled letters to each other in green ink.

II.     A light drizzle off the robust leaves, a dim hum as the streetlights  
          rise.  
Three old people sit across from me, laughter trickling like hymns  
As I read and think about the long walk to where I’m staying.  
A trash can sits stout by their side, overflowing with bottles like  
flowers,  
Remnants of a lifelong party, their intrepid enjoyment of everything.

On the day I die, I expect a shining rainstorm.  
On each day I still live, I expect to eat three perfect oranges.  
I’ve been many places, but I return ecstatic to familiar things:  
A bench in the sun; a soft, worn shirt; a cold bottle of water.

III.    From above, the lights from town stick needle-holes into night,  
Blending like melting copper in a cloudy sludge.  
We’re on top of the parking garage, waiting for the sun,  
Waiting for confirmation that they’re tearing it down.  
Our feet dangle like fish hooks over the ledge, our voices crack like  
the earth.

Heaven is a hole in the universe, burrowed out and burrowing still  
With shovels made of gold. We throw our blossomed memories



Into the deep, speckled eggs precious and safe, given up and gone  
Like flecks of cracked paint given flight by the wind.

“The unmade bed...killed me...”

- IV. A little kid, a tiny tyrant, rampages around, kicking dandelions,  
The little white stems optimized for flight, discover the world  
With fire fervor until they tire out and go to sleep.  
Each one is dusty with potential, each tied to the world,  
The wind, more than to a path or doctrine, freed by love.

When we moved to the city, curtains and pollen swirled in the street.  
Anticipation rising like water in a sinking car, we dropped some  
things,  
And by summer’s end, we’re alone in the sun, alone on chilly roofs,  
As the season transitions to a chastising fever.

- V. Often, my insides feel tied like microphone chords.  
I inhale chemical memories off of sheets and pillows,  
Clouds in my eyes as I read, re-read every letter  
I’ve ever received. Am I losing time? Or is every moment  
I spend in the past a tiny shuffle into the cadenced future.

If you don’t make your bed each morning, bugs  
Might infiltrate like sleeping soldiers in rigid formation.  
I have trouble staying asleep now, and often wake up  
Singing hymns I learned in the pews of my dreams.

“Marvelous.”

- VI. Dear forensic light storms, dear feathered mask-wearers—  
The subtle wonders of shade in spring, underneath an oak  
With beehives hanging like ornaments and cornfield forests  
Swaying drunkenly to an unheard melody. Dear superfluous removal,  
Dear green glass broken then stomped into cotton-soft mud,

Dear wide-eyed child with wild brown hair—  
The world is full of tiny particles that get excited  
When they feel the wind, when they see a new animal.  
Waterfalls of calmness drench us every day.

## Ray Macedonia

### Driving to the Beach

In the mid-August rush of summer, James and Mary drive over the Delaware Indian River Inlet Bridge. It is a weekday, and the dark is just about to ask the bridge to stare at planes flirting with the ground with red blinking eyes. James hopes his superstitious driving takes them safely across, while keeping Mary's cheek comfortably against the car window. Surprisingly, his passenger only stirs when they coast down the end of the bridge to the road; she yawns and peels her face from the window.

Mary looks at the ceiling and inhales through her teeth. James puts on his turn signal; he lets her breath speak to him.

The eyes of nesting Winnebagos blink at James' four door sedan as it grinds over the campground gravel. Potbellied fishermen look over their shoulders at this sparrow in eagles' nests. Mary sticks her tongue out at them. What a kid. James sighs.

The tent is nearly unpacked at the sight of sunset, and so the light dripping down the sky lends brown and orange to clever kids' hands. James ties a bow on the laces over the spikes. James ties bows in Mary's hair. Blue dust is rising from the path they take to the shoreline. Mary leads them to the crosswalk. Mary is the clever one.

They go mysteriously and barefoot onto the blue sands. James is wearing his hat; Mary lets him wear it. Mary lets him cry again and looks dryly into the tide pools.

James is fishing over the dock; he is not wearing his hat. Mary lays on the grass above him spreading her legs apart, pointing her toes. Mary is afraid to stretch her arms out, she is afraid of all of the things she can touch. Mary lets the clouds stay put, and they do.

Mary only cries when she is hungry, so Mary eats too much. Mary is the tallest in the first grade. Mary needs to be big enough to love James as much as Mom did.

James catches a big fish. He holds the fish close to his overalls, lets it wriggle like a cat against his hands. Satisfied, he feeds it to the water. Mary is red. Mary is hungry. Mary slaps his back and hands and face. Mary likes to gut fish. James is laughing.

Mary listens to James when he talks about the sand in his shoes. James doesn't talk so much about Mom anymore. Mary stops listening. Mary lets herself think about what it would be like to eat an octopus. Mary touches her tongue, imagining suction cups. Mary and James both like taking risks.

Mary lists all of the things James forgot to bring:

- peanut butter
- plastic bowl
- baseball
- James' kite
- Mary's kite
- raincoat

James reports back that there is an umbrella in the trunk. Mary tells him that umbrellas are for sissies. Mary curses, and James swats her head. James hates himself even more than Mom now.

Mary asks James what he liked best about Mom. James is standing up now. James needs to walk around. James does not believe in God or Jesus or the angels or Mom anymore.

The past year, Dad has stopped eating breakfast with Mary. Mary still pours her cereal slowly and reads the Sunday comics. Mary hopes that he will replace Mom's old alarm clock. Mary hopes that he will remember how to get out of bed in the morning. James is too busy dragging his feet to take care of her. Dad sleeps through her patience.

James and Mary eat french fries on the trunk of the car. Mary waits for James to finish his; he does not finish. Mary feeds a seagull and cheers James with her laughter. James tells Mary a secret that he has been telling her for her whole life. Mary eats the rest of his fries.

Mary lets James wear his hat again today. James tears the tent down. James hurts his hands again. James breaks Mary's sunglasses. James is regret. James is the undertow. James is his drowning Father. James is his Mother. Mary is hiding in the bathrooms.

Mom used to talk about building a barn. She would leave the doors unlocked, she would play Fleetwood Mac and paint pictures of horses with twenty eyes. One for each of her favorite colors. She would eat figs and suck on lemons like she did when they were kids; she said that they were like candy, and packed them in our lunches when she remembered to. The barn would have a garden, the garden would have gardeners with big hearts and crossed eyes. James hates himself for laughing at her with his friends. Mocking her artist's patience, her manic generosity.

James apologizes like Mom did, so Mary stops eating. Mary looks at the dark sky like dad looks at the kitchen lamp, but James loves Mary more than he loves Dad. James sits with her until sunrise and tucks her into her sleeping bag. James can't cry like he did before. James is a crow's mother.

Mary and James eat Dairy Queen on the rocks by the inlet. James has spent an hour at the grill scraping burnt aluminum and grease. James doesn't mind. James writes the names of the birds passing by on Mary's neck. The sun sifts sunburns over the bridge of his nose; James squints.

\*\*\*



Mom's funeral is a game of tennis, with Dad on one side and James on the other. Mary is hiding behind Mom's casket when Dad and James start yelling at each other.

Mary thinks that sandcastles are the only houses to be buried even before they're built, she tells James. She tells James that Mom was never above the ground in the first place. Mary is not interested in crying anymore.

Mary used to keep a diary to angrily cross out names like Taylor Jones and Briana Kohler. Mary uses it now to write in, to keep track of James. James isn't hard to read. Mary does a good job. Mary is bored of James moping.

Mary can hear James through the lips of the tent, under the busy gulls; James asks questions like he is at the end of the world. He says he knows. He says that the only way he'll know to stop is getting there, by eating dinner in Shanghai. He'll know to stop asking stupid questions when they stop sounding stupid and turn to wedding bells. James thinks he's very smart.

It is raining on Tuesday morning. James and Mary are shouting. Their smiles underline panic in their eyes. They are louder than the rain.

James and Mary wake up at the same time now. James and Mary sleep through the gritted teeth of midday and wake up in time for dinner. James and Mary don't eat very much; they sit and wait. There is always something to wait for, and by the time it comes it is not worth early summer greetings and, instead, is met with glassy eyes. James no longer ties Mary's hair up. James no longer sits alone. James doesn't think too hard. James lets Mary do the talking. James picks her up and spins her through the air, knocking off his glasses. Mary forgives him for dropping her, two kids grinning at the edge of the ocean.

-You've grown up a lot.

-I've been growing bigger for a long time!

James thinks he understands. James laughs, flipping through Vanity Fair. There is someone in the feature that looks like Mom. James thought he was ok. He is not. He is not ok. Mary stands up and kicks sand in his face.

-What the hell, Mary!

Mary does not respond, she just wrenches the magazine away from him. She walks confidently into water that surrounds her like a mythic swamp man. She throws Vanity Fair into the water. It does not throw well; it unfurls and flutters to the surface. Mary covers it with water, screaming. She comes back and puts her head on James' stomach. James rubs sand out of his long eyelashes and tussles her hair.

James remembers the first time he was heartbroken. Mary was in her pajamas when she saw him on the couch. Mary squeezed James' hand and

told him to keep quiet until the morning woke him up. Mary needs sleep, she told him; she is learning a lot tomorrow.

James remembers the first time he hit Dad back.

\*\*\*

On the way home, James lets Mary pump the gas. Mary would smell like gasoline all her life if she could. James says he will buy her gasoline perfume for her birthday. Mary says Dad already has some. James is quiet, and then laughs. Mary stays awake the whole ride this time. Mary explains to James the difference between meteors, meteorites, and meteoroids. James smiles. Mary turns up the radio to listen to the AM static. Mary likes the sound of the engine rippling the radio waves. She imagines the whole world being rumbled by her like the radio is by the engine. Mary sticks her arm out the window and claws at the highway air.

Mary no longer eats breakfast alone. James waits for Mary and Mary wakes up early. James doodles in the margins of the Sunday paper between spoons of cereal.

James and Mary pack each other's lunches now. James likes figs and lemons. Mary likes Slim Jims. James plunks a hat on Mary's head to block the sun, not before ruffling her hair. James follows her out the door.

Tommy Armstrong

## I'm Going to Ask Him How

Be honest. Have you ever had a slinky that actually worked?

No.

You fucking told me you did!

Uh.

You ever go to Chuckie Cheese?

Me and my sister would win

Tickets and get the plastic one

And it fucking goes down

One step.

I saw

Ace Ventura when I was a kid—

When he made the slinky go down

Like

So many stairs

That was like the first one, right?

I don't know, like the

With the Dolphin, the Dolphin,

No.

No.

No.

This is the one with the African tribe.

Oh, oh, so that's When Nature Calls,

That's the second.

How many were there?

There were two,

Well,

There were technically three—

There was a really shitty one about, like

His kid.

That, uh, fucking, what's his face,

Jim Carrey

Wasn't even in.

So what's the poem thing you have to do?

Where you have to talk to a poet guy?

Oh, I'm writing this thing for the paper about

Some poet's coming here for a reading, and I'm



Interviewing him

And then putting it in the paper the week before he comes

And I'm gonna ask, like,

Really

cool questions.

Like fucking

Questions

That come from here.

“What did you eat for breakfast today?”

Like really cool questions?

I'm gonna ask him, like

How...

How on a scale from one to ten—this is the last ridiculous question,

On a scale from one to ten

How circumcised is he.

I'm going to ask him how

He is happy.

How to be...

Does

Does poetry make him happy?

'Cause that's like the question everyone's trying to figure out.

If you're just like, straight up, like

“What is Happiness?”

Yeah, everyone's like,

Self-conscious all the time

I don't know.

Like.

Okay, I understand that people judge themselves...

I think people who are

Sad

Tend to think, well, if I can't be happy,

Then I might as well be good, and maybe if I'm

Good

Then that will make me

Happy.

So I think that people who are sad

Tend to look at themselves in like a negative light,

Because if I'm very modest, and what is the extreme of modesty?

Just

Shitting

On yourself.

I mean maybe they think that will bring them satisfaction,

But it doesn't!  
Like even if there is satisfaction, it's the  
Satisfaction  
Of someone being like:  
"Hey,  
are you okay?"  
Maybe that's why they have all those quotes  
Where it's like,  
"You've survived 100% of the days from before,"  
That shit's downstairs in the laundry room.  
You know, it's like  
things  
That you fucking  
Do  
Like everyday  
People who are depressed  
Are like...

Like people who are seeking happiness see  
"Be Kind to Everyone"  
and they're like,  
"Yeah!  
I'll be kind to  
Everyone!"  
Or like  
I don't know.  
They just like accept like, a filler  
Dogma  
To  
To supply their happiness  
Rather than finding it intrinsically  
And like I don't know if I can judge people for that.  
Like this one girl lived at my house for a while.  
She had like,  
Shit with her family or whatever.  
And then she moved out, and I haven't seen her  
For a long time,  
But I'm friends with her on Facebook  
And all of her banners—like  
All of them  
Were like  
Inspirational quotes.

I don't know.

Do you ever feel like shit—

Pfft.

A little bit when you read these stories,

I thought the question was gonna end there,

Like,

“Do you ever feel like shit?”

Shit! ‘Cause you are

Shit, Tommy.

You know that,

Right?

No, nono.

Those things where it's like, uh

Um.

Fuck,

I forgot what I was gonna say.

Oh!

Uh, no wait, I'm still fucking...

Motivational!

Mo-tivational.

Facebook!

Uh.

Oh, nonono, like those

Stories.

It's like,

You read something that's like,

“This person is 10 years old and has saved”

like

“18 lives!”

Or, y'know,

“Has done all this work running a

charity organization,”

like the lemonade stand thing.

Like, for cancer.

Yeah.

Oh yeahyeahyeah! So you'll see those,

And I don't know about you,

But I sometimes feel shittier,



Or those people who do community service,  
I did like  
No

community service in high school.

Yeah!

Yeah, 'cause y'know,  
I wasn't in NHS,  
'cause it was just a broken establishment and people were  
doing community service just to get into colleges,  
I don't know.

Oh! Fucking NHS was  
Stupid.

Oh! Fucking NHS was  
Big poopy—

I don't know a lot of people,  
It's just comparative,  
Like that's why it's always in flux.

I think people should  
fucking  
Be like,

“Yo, man!

I'm happy just 'cause”

Like,

“I feel things!”

That's hard.

That is hard,

I don't know.

I'm happy

When I lie down in my

Bed, dude.

I don't know.

Some people don't have a bed

And that's a reason to not be happy.

But people who have beds—

Like I lie down in my bed and I'm like,

“Oh my

God! This is the

Shit!”

And also,

But also,

A lot of that requires not like

Holding onto certain things

What am I trying to say?

Yeah, I feel like—

But you gotta like let go of some of that stuff,  
Y'know?

Like people lie down at night and they're like,

“Oh my God, my day was so stressful!

I got hurt at Rugby,

And the election,

Doing this stuff!

And, and, and,

These girls!

And I don't see my girlfriend every day!

And like what are people thinking of me?”

Like I could think that all that stuff.

But instead,

I'm like,

“I'm gonna lie down, and uh,

uh,

go to sleep.

And I feel really good.

Just 'cause,

Y'know,

I feel good.

I don't know.

That'll do it.

“Remember the last time I had

sex

with my

girlfriend?”

“Remember the last time I had sex with my girlfriend?

It

Didn't happen! You know why?”

You?

No, I don't know why, it was just a hypothetical.

I was waiting for you to like,

Fill the void.

Oh. Shit.

I wasn't—

I was like, “Do you know why that happened”

And you're like,

“Cause,

'Cause,  
she had a katana!  
It was  
Angry  
At me!"  
Something like,  
Something of that nature.

I feel like a big part of my happiness is,  
Um.



Arthur Robinson

Sour Graves

[*NARRATOR enters and sits casually, addressing the audience.*]

NARRATOR

I've been thinking a lot about life lately. Because it's really, *really* strange to me. I get that it's full of green trees, birds singing, kids laughing, carnivals and movies and all that. It's great! Don't get me wrong—I really love living. Or at least, I really love **my** life. But it's just so...weird. Don't you think? A couple months ago, my grandfather passed away. I didn't really know him too well, but it got me thinking about this whole "death" fiasco. Who decided that was a good idea? "Oh yeah, you've got plenty of time to have fun: eat, drink, love, dance, enjoy what you've got, oh is that a rogue satellite hurtling through Earth's atmosphere?"—BAM! Toast. Toodaloo. Well, I mean, that's not how my grandfather died, obviously. He laughed himself to death.

[*Beat.*]

That actually sounds kind of nice, right? Live your life joking, die joking. I bet it feels better too. I've actually got a couple jokes myself. Like this one: knock-knock.

[*Pause.*]

No seriously, knock-knock.

[*When a response is given.*]

Not my grandfather!

[*Laughs geekily to self.*]

Aw what? No, it's fine; I know you shouldn't laugh at that sort of stuff. Know who else shouldn't have laughed?

[*Pause.*]

MY GRANDFATHER.

[*Laughs geekily again.*]

Aw shucks, I'm sorry if this is uncomfortable for all of you. Death is just so odd to me. We get this amazing thing called life, but then we get death. We get rain for the flowers, and then we get a flood. We get a really tasty looking bag of candy for Halloween, and then they turn out to be Necco Wafers. We get really talented musicians and then we get Nickelback. We get one super-hilarious punch line, and it's so funny that it kills us.

[*Lights come up on the coffin area. Two ne'er-do-wells over a grave at night. BUD is digging, but is quite weak—the other, AL, is sitting thoughtfully. A coffin (or something resembling a coffin) is in front of*

them. As NARRATOR speaks, AL wipes sweat and dirt off of her face.]

NARRATOR

I know I might be weird for thinking about this. But I can't be the only one who wonders, right? Maybe some cultured, sophisticated, well-dressed, like-minded individual is pondering the same deep questions. But y'know, I think I might already have answers...

[AL mirrors NARRATOR's thoughtful expression.]

AL

Hey, Bud. You ever just...wonder why?

BUD

[Gives AL a look and keeps digging.]

AL

Like, graveyards. Why? We say that we value all life equally. But you have people living in mansions and people living in slums. Dudes in top hats and dudes with no clothes. Everyone's got such a different hand. Some people, they have it great. Some people have nothing. Then you die and you're supposed to be equal. You know? Let God sort them out. No class differences. But nah. Some gravestones are bigger than others. Some people just get thrown into a big ol' pit in the ground, rotting away together. Doesn't that seem just...bad? Like we value some deaths more than others? How do you even do that? You know? [Pause.]

AL

I just... I don't know. I always thought things would be a little more incredible than this. That all these people here would have some amazing story we'd remember them for. That I would have some amazing story. Just something exciting or adventurous. Not something that left me in buried in a hole in the ground, where everyone forgets me. [Another pause.]

AL

You there? Bud?

BUD

[Exasperated, throws down his shovel.] Al.

AL

Yeah?

BUD

Al, we're robbing a grave.

AL

Yeah, I mean...

BUD

No, Al. I'm covered in sweat and mud. Digging up a dead guy. You are assisting in this. At least, nominally.

AL

But what's wrong with thinking about this? We're not animals. We're not wallowing in filth...

BUD

Al we're digging up a grave. We *are* wallowing in filth. What part of this don't you get? We actually cannot get much lower than this.

AL

Y-yeah I'm sorry I ju-

BUD

I just don't care! I don't! We don't do that wishy-washy stuff right now. We. Dig. Up. Graves. Wanna know what I think? I think that stuff you were talking about, that whole 'some deaths worth more than others' crap? That's great! Bigger the grave, bigger the payout! This guy is gonna be loaded, alright?

AL

But -

BUD

No! Buts! No buts. We go to the grave. We dig up the grave. Nice and early. Only a little bit after they're buried so the soil is still soft. We take the stuff they don't need—and man, when you're dead you don't need *anything*—and we have money to feed ourselves! Good enough? [*Silence.*]

AL

I just...feel like it'd be nice to have a crazy cool adventure. You know? Something that made us feel like we're...living!



BUD

What the hell, Al? This isn't living enough for you? *Making a living?*

AL

Yeah... Yeah okay. Here, scooch over.

*[The two dig, with more energy. Eventually they pull the coffin on stage forward, showing that they have it up. NARRATOR speaks.]*

NARRATOR

Life has problems. Life takes work. Group effort, teamwork, struggle!

BUD

...Woof.

AL

Yeah.

BUD

So you, uh... *[He indicates a crowbar to AL.]*

AL

I uh... right. Right, count of 3. *[They both begin counting, but the wrong way.]*

AL

3... 2...oh jeeze. I'm so sorry I just...

BUD

1... 2... are you kidding me? You said count of three, that's ON three.

BUD

Alright, again. *[They make the same mistake, but with the other way around.]*

AL

1... 2...whaaaaat? Alright that wasn't my fault...

BUD

3... 2...you idiot. Just. Alright. We count UP from one. Okay?

AL

Got it. Got it...

NARRATOR

Sometimes teamwork isn't enough.

*[They both clear their throats. AL begins doing some vocal warm ups. BUD stares at her in disbelief.]*

AL

What? I'm nervous.

BUD

You're... nervous? *[Exasperated.]* Never mind, let's just do this.

AL & BUD

1...2...

CARL

*[Starting offstage before entering.]* THREE CHILDREN! TWO LOVING PARENTS! ONE PASSIONATE LOVER. But nobody has sympathy for...ME! THE OLD ROOMMATE!

*[CARL has entered with such gusto that AL and BUD stare at him in disbelief. CARL begins crying over the coffin, completely ignoring AL and BUD. NARRATOR chimes in.]*

NARRATOR

Life is awkward.

CARL

Oh Ronaldo Hernandez-

*[Trying to remember them to himself.]*

Geoffery Feicker...

*[Counting on his fingers for a moment.]*

The Third! YOU WERE MY WORLD. MY WOOOOORLD! What cruelty! To leave you in a coffin, barely even put into the Earth! As if they dug you a hole, but left you out of it. Which makes it...UNHOLY!

*[Begins wailing and crying on the grave again. BUD opens his mouth in frustration, but AL holds him back.]*

NARRATOR

Life is *really* awkward.

AL

Hey...uh-

CARL

What's this? A fellow mourner? Perhaps a high school buddy? Extended family? Torment me not! I was Ron's roommate! I knew him so deeply, on a level nobody could understand! I breathed the same air he breathed! If only I could join him in this slumber!

AL

Whoa, whoa. Hey. No, it's nothing like that dude. We're just, uh...

CARL

Oh Ronaldo! You were so loved!

AL

Easy buddy...

CARL

*[Attempting to be Shakespearean.]*

O' behold, most loving roommate of mine,  
By shadows of night, strangers come to look!  
And at this strange hour of twelve forty nine  
I return to you this borrowed textbook.

*[Dramatically puts the textbook on the "grave" before sobbing uncontrollably again.]*

AL

Man, you must have really loved the guy. I'm not here to mourn for him, but I think it's really sweet that in death you can still have people who love you, regardless of where you're from. And regardless of you being...well, dead. Right? *[Beat.]*

CARL

You're not here to mourn? DID YOU HATE RONALDO? YOU VILE SCUM! I WILL END YOU! *[He makes for AL and grabs her by the collar.]*

AL

No no no! Back off! We're not here to give you any trouble. Christ, who are you?

CARL

You know not my pain! You know nothing of loss! HOW DARE YOOOU?!



BUD

Oh hell – STOP IT! [*BUD pulls out a handgun and points it at the two of them to make them break it up.*]

AL

You have a gun? Hey, whoa!  
Watch that. Not at me!

CARL

Ooooookay. Hey. Now let's just—  
give that one a big ol' thought.

BUD

Alright. Look. I have one hell of a headache, and I've run out of patience. I am not in any mood for any of...whatever the hell this is!

AL

Alright, alright! Buddy. It's me! You and me, right? We can work this out without deep-sixing a stranger!

BUD

Oh no no no. This isn't just for him. Get that crowbar and start prying!

AL

What?! [*BUD thrusts the gun at AL and makes an angry noise.*]

AL

Hey! Hold on a second!

BUD

No. Just shut up! Can you stop talking for ONE second? [*Gathering himself.*]  
Al. I am sorry. I truly am. I know we've been at this for a long time-

AL

Seven months and five days. We go to book club together!

BUD

Whatever! [*Beat.*] And you know what, you have shitty taste. No regards for the classics.

AL

[*Hurt.*] How could you say that?

CARL

You defilers bring hatred to Ronaldo's grave!

BUD

SHUT UP! Start prying. Or you two get to join these assholes in the dirt.

*[Silence and then AL begins reluctantly prying the coffin open.]*

*[A long pause, while AL is still prying.]*

CARL

That was a...actually a pretty cool one-liner.

BUD

*[Cutting him off.]* JUST STOP IT.

CARL

Alright. Alright. *[Awkward pause.]*

NARRATOR

Life has people who are going to betray you.

AL

So before I open this...I gotta know. We're...not friends after this, right?

BUD

Oh for Christ's sake. Just DO IT!

*[AL shoots BUD a forlorn look, then shakes her head at him before opening the coffin. Suddenly, DICK bursts from within and startles the rest of them before pulling out a gun of his own and aiming at BUD.]*

DICK

*[Panicked.]* Alright everybody get away! Put down that gun! Now!

AL

Oh my God!

BUD

What the hell?

CARL

*[Beat.]* RONALDO?

NARRATOR

Life is full of really weird surprises.

DICK

The hell is a Ronaldo? [*Looks at the coffin.*] You have to be kidding me. What kind of name is Ronaldo? I guess I oughta consider myself lucky. Someone was bound to come for a guy with a crazy name like that...

CARL

Hey! Nothin' weird about a guy named Ronaldo Hernandez Geoffery Feicker... [*Begins to realize how stupid it sounds.*] Alright just shut your face!

DICK

Oh, my apologies, have *you* got a gun pointed at me? No, I'm sorry, it's the other way around, so shut up!

BUD

What the hell is this?

DICK

Hey! What did I say about the gun? Unless... [*Realizing.*] Oooh. You must be here to finish the job.

BUD

[*Gibbering in disbelief.*] WHAT?

DICK

Don't play dumb, ya sack of fish. You bunch of mooks knew I couldn't pay off my debts on time, so you buried me alive. Well guess what! I was ready. I had the gun loaded and on me. If you hadn't taken me by surprise...

BUD

No you asshole! I'm trying to rob your grave!

CARL

Whoah that's what you were doing? TO RONALDO?

AL & BUD

HE'S NOT RONALDO.

DICK

You all had better start explaining. Or else you'll join these assholes here in the dirt.



AL  
Oooh no...uh. I  
don't know how to  
say this but he  
already...

BUD  
I uh...I actually said  
that one already.  
What are the odds,  
right?

CARL  
Whoah that's crazy!  
He just...aaah that  
was cool.

DICK  
Yeah? Damn.  
[All of them pause and stare at their feet for a second. BUD shuffles a  
tiny bit and Al coughs nervously.]

NARRATOR  
Life is just *so freaking awkward.*

DICK  
Whatever. You don't need to be clever when you're the only one left alive.

AL  
Alright, y'know what? Screw it! [Pulls out own gun. BUD is stunned.]

BUD  
Seriously? You?! Why?!

AL  
Because I...I wanted an adventure! I told you, I always wanted an adventure  
so I was going to...I was going to pull a fast one on you and take whatever  
we stole for myself!

BUD  
You...you were gonna screw me?

AL  
You screwed me first!

BUD  
Oh you son of a bitch! You were gonna really screw me!

AL  
Like you have any right to talk! YOU SCREWED ME. YOU SCREWED  
ME SO HARD.

CARL

[*Cutting them off.*] LET'S JUST—take a second. Alright? Kids don't have to hear that. [*Gestures at the audience. The other three give a brief look and then look at each other before resuming their Mexican standoff.*]

NARRATOR

Dying is a really scary idea. That's why so graveyards are so spooky! Can you just imagine, a place built solely for dead people?

BUD

Jesus Christ...

DICK

EVERYONE BACK OFF! [*Trying to stay chill.*] I-I-I might not be the biggest fish in the ocean, but I'm sure as hell the biggest fish in this... [*Awkwardly searching for the word.*] Goddammit, I can't just do this on the spot.

AL

Lake?

DICK

Yeah! Lake!

CARL

Yeah it's uh...it's more like a puddle when you look at it feasibly...

DICK

[*Losing it.*] Oh can you j-j-just not? I don't know who you assholes think you are, but you are way out of your league here. Alright?! Now-now I know I may not look like I'm capable of killing a guy, but I'm telling you it's easy! Aight? It's just my life! I have to do this sort of stuff all the time! Stealing, killing...

AL

You've seriously killed somebody?

DICK

[*Pause.*] Okay, no! B-b-but one time I thought *really* hard about it!

BUD

I feel like that isn't the same thing at all.

DICK

[*Panicking.*] BUT I COULD DO IT. RIGHT NOW! You got me? You came here to snuff me, and now I've gotta snuff y-

AL

We didn't come here to do anything! Well I mean, we came here to steal your stuff. You're just...y'know, supposed to be dead.

DICK

Yeah? Well I'm not. And I don't plan on dying anytime soon. Alright? I got tired of dreaming, and I got tired of sitting in some cubicle waiting for my big break. So I took things into my own hands. I thought maybe, MAYBE I could do something exciting and thrilling with my life. And now I'm here. No money to pay back some debts, and a bunch of mooks after me. You know what? Being in that coffin taught me something. Life sort of blows sometimes. But I'm still taking it over dying any day. Even when things don't go to plan.

AL

A lot of things don't go to plan...

BUD

Oh yeah, like your plan to double cross me?

AL

Would you get off your high horse? God this is just like you talking about how great Jane Austen is.

BUD

Jane Austen is a literary saint!

AL

Jane Austen can suck a fat one!

BUD

[*Fully enraged.*] MOTHER FU-



CARL

[*Before he can finish.*] ENOUGH! I will not have you desecrate this sacred resting place any longer! [*He pulls out a Nerf gun.*] NOW DROP YOUR WEAPONS, CADS!

[*They all slowly begin to lower their weapons in disbelief while staring at him. Then, slowly, they begin to laugh.*]

CARL

LAUGH WHILE YOU CAN! [*He fires a nerf dart which sails harmlessly through the air and hits the ground. In their shock, all three of them aim and fire their pistols at CARL, who collapses to the ground. Pause.*]

AL

[*Meekly.*] Oh fuck.

BUD

Oh Christ...

CARL

[*Struggles and says faintly.*] Oh...Ronaldo... [*Makes a blech sound to signal his death.*]

DICK

[*Shocked beyond belief.*] Oh...oooooh... [*Silence, before DICK dashes offstage wailing, leaving AL and BUD staring at CARL's body. There is a thoughtful pause.*]

NARRATOR

Death is sudden. Horribly, tragically, unavoidably sudden.

AL

...What do we do?

BUD

I uh... I... [*They both notice the now empty coffin at the same time. They look at each other and nod grimly before starting to move CARL's body. Finding it too heavy, they drop it for a moment, resting in silence.*]

NARRATOR

It's also awkward.

BUD

...Hey. Al.

AL

Yeah, Bud?

BUD

I uh...you can keep talking. About artsy stuff. About living. About wanting to have an adventure...

AL

No. No, I...I can live without all of that actually.

BUD

Shit...we almost died, huh?

AL

Mmm.

BUD

Like, really died. Guns out and blazing. Jesus Christ...

AL

Yeah...hey Bud?

BUD

Yeah?

AL

I uh...I'm sorry about that Jane Austen thing.

BUD

Yeah?

AL

Yeah. I actually...kind of like going to book club. To hear you talk about her.

NARRATOR

But isn't that just another part of living? If death wasn't around, I don't think life would be either. The whole point of living is that we've got this 'dying' thing coming our way. It's always gonna be part of the deal. So we can love

life and love the fact that part of life is dying, right? I'm gonna enjoy my life. I'm gonna smile, and joke, and have a lot of fun with those Necco Wafers, satellites, and maybe Nickelback. Maybe. [*Thinks about the last one more.*] Yeah, maybe not Nickelback. But if I'm lucky, I'll go out laughing too. Or at least smiling. Isn't that the goal? Smiling until the very end?  
[*The Narrator beams with happiness. There is a pause. BUD begins to smile slowly and gives AL a small pat on the shoulder. The set goes dark as they both share a tired grin.*]

FIN.



## CONTRIBUTORS

Anthony Alvarez is a senior art major with a focus in photography. He finds content within the intimacy that he builds between himself and the subject.

Tommy Armstrong is a 2020 English major who likes creative writing, film, music, theatre, and footnotes\*, in that order exactly. He has a lot of friends\* to thank for supporting him and helping him make those things better.  
\*Untrue.

Angela Antoinette Bey is unapologetically black and queer; they write sometimes too. R.I.P. Prince Rogers Nelson.

Kate Bormann is a junior Art and Art History major from Flemington, NJ. She enjoys traveling, meeting new people, and eating food.

Dustin Brinker is thrilled to have his work chosen for this year's edition of *The Lantern* after waiting until his senior year to send in pieces. A French and BCMB double major, his love for language draws him to the writing process and to editing, and he hopes to incorporate them both into his future career in medicine.

Sydney Cope is a sophomore majoring in Neuroscience and Studio Art. She loves spending time in the dark room working on prints, listening to music, and reading.

Zooey Cox thinks that music is sounding great today. If they ever have a kid, they'll let them listen to music because music is...seems...pretty fine to do...listen to.

Sarah DeFelice is a sophomore double-major in Biology and Spanish who is also an artist and activist.

Chiara DeMelfi is a sophomore Computer Science major who occasionally writes poetry and abuses run-on sentences, and once submitted 10 bad jokes to a bad joke contest hoping one would win, but, sadly, no pun in ten did.

Courtney DuChene is a sophomore English and Media and Communications Studies double major and a Creative Writing and Film Studies double minor.

Matt Dwyer is a sophomore who only truly needs creeks, cats and waffles. Despite his easy-going nature, he is oddly infuriated by the improper use of escalators.

Athena (Taleah) Gainey is a freshman interested in pursuing media and communications and art as a double major. She has been writing poetry since she was 10 years old and spoken word for 3 years. She hopes to continue writing.

Sophia Gamber needs a lot of work and some TLC, but she's got a lot of charm and good lighting, and just imagine what you could do with all this great counter space.

Sarah Gow is actually an alien and sometimes creeps out of their oatmeal dungeon to grab a cup of black coffee or book of poetry off the shelf. When they are lonely they are kept company by a colony of snails and the dream they will one day live in a tiny house with a pug, a cat, and books.

Neomi Haut is a studio art major with a minor in sociology. She finds inspiration in combining the two subjects by exploring social issues through street photography. Neomi graduated in December 2016 and is excited begin a new chapter in her life!

Michael Heimbaugh is humbled and pleasantly surprised to have had his work published in not four, but five (!) editions of *The Lantern*. He dedicates "Song with No Music" to the late great Leonard Cohen, who was its chief inspiration. He hopes to meet you again one day.

Mario Heitman is an art major who likes speaking in the third person. His work is said to be quite fuego by those said to be in the know.

Julia Rae Hodenfield is bursting with excitement at having a poem in the lantern. She would like to take this tiny forum to metaphorically grasp the palm of anyone who needs it—we will prevail through art and love.

Mara Koren enjoys green beans and long walks through Wegmans.

Nicole Kosar is a Psychology major and a Creative Writing minor who likes to talk about herself. She hopes her personal life helps others feel less alone.

Yanlin Li: Class of 2018, Art and Art History, dual concentration.

Juan Lopez wishes merely to share his understanding of the ancient and dialectical arts with the global proletariat. (Include everything below the line “my bio is as follows,” including what’s in these parentheses).

Joe Makuc is a sophomore History and English major. He thinks the world is a fine place and worth the fighting for.

Ria Malones is a freshman Psychology and Media and Communications double major with a Japanese minor. She loves sushi and the number of books she owns competes strongly with the number of animes she has watched. She dedicates her piece to anyone who has felt alone in the dark.

Kevin Moore: WANTED—for the robbery of the First National Bank in Trickle Creek. Armed and dangerous. Reward of \$500, dead or alive.

Valerie Osborne is a junior English major currently studying abroad in Dublin, Ireland. She would like to thank God and Werner Herzog's Wikipedia page.

Eden Angelina Patrick: 21. Sociology Major. New York City.

Arthur Robinson is the innermost of the four Galilean moons of the planet Jupiter. He is the fourth-largest moon, has the highest density of all the moons, and has the least amount of relative water of any known object in the Solar System. He was discovered in 1610 and was named after the mythological character Arthur, a priestess of The Lady of the Lake who became one of Zeus’s lovers. This piece is dedicated to his grandmother; 我爱你奶奶！

Serena Schaefer is a sophomore Computer Science and Mathematics double major with a minor in Creative Writing. She enjoys attending mineral and fossil shows.

Megan Sear is a junior English and Dance major from Allentown, PA.

Emily Shue's piece is dedicated to Liv, Ava, Colin, Dan, and always, always, to Joanne.

Paige Szmodis is a junior majoring in English and Gender and Women's Studies who hopes to one day live in a tiny house surrounded by her books and cats.



Brian Thomas trusts the process.

Lauren Toscano believes most conspiracy theories.

Kara Travis is in an absurd relationship with commas. Indeed, she'll create any excuse to, uh, put them in a sentence.

Althea Unertl thinks you look great today!

Solana Warner was planning on infiltrating the Freemasons to learn their secrets and expose their conspiracies before realizing the shocking truth that they don't really do anything. In fact, their only discernible activity is congregating and being white men together, and we all know there's enough of that in America.

Sarah Wilbert is a junior Art and Art History major with a Museum Studies minor. Sarah is an aspiring artist who hopes to have a higher net worth than Jay Z and Beyonce combined ( $\approx$ \$875,000,000). She also knows the lyrics to every single song in the world. Ever.

