

An abstract painting with a complex, textured surface. The dominant colors are vibrant orange and teal, with streaks and patches of yellow and dark brown. The brushstrokes are thick and expressive, creating a sense of movement and depth. The overall effect is a rich, layered composition of color and form.

Central
and
Southern Indiana
Scholastic
Art and Writing Awards

2024 Anthology

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Also thanks to our judges (see separate list), as well as volunteers who helped with art judging and at the regional ceremony!

About the Awards

Started in 1923 by Scholastic founder Maurice R. Robinson, the Awards have grown to become the nation's highest honor and largest source of scholarships for creative teenagers. All students in grades 7-12, whether public, private, or home schooled, are encouraged to apply. Through a nationwide network of more than 100 visual arts and literary arts organizations across the country, the Awards receive more than 300,000 submissions from over 100,000 teens in 28 categories of art and writing.

Across the decades, some young Scholastic winners have included names you might recognize: Stephen King, Robert Redford, Andy Warhol, Sylvia Plath, Truman Capote, Joyce Carol Oates, John Updike, Bernard Malamud, Ken Burns, Marc Brown, Kay Walkingstick, Robert Indiana, Alan Arkin, Lena Dunham, Richard Linklater, and Amanda Gorman, who read a poem at the 2021 U.S. Presidential inauguration. Most alumni are less famous but no less important, for creativity, imagination, and risk-taking are hallmarks of being fully human.

The Hoosier Writing Project at IUPUI, with support from community volunteers, recognizes regional winners with Gold Key, Silver Key, and Honorable Mention certificates. In 2024, our region received over 1,850 submissions and gave over 670 awards. Award-winning students were honored at the Regional Visions and Voices Awards Ceremony at Arsenal Technical High School in Indianapolis. Gold Key writing is published in this annual anthology, illustrated with selected Gold Key art.

To see lists of our regional winners, visit this online folder, https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/i13bgPYXe53unzQwsObxJsAhylm-5ZdZQ?usp=drive_link

For more about the Scholastic Art & Writing Awards, visit www.artandwriting.org

Introduction

We are excited to publish this anthology of 2024 Gold Key writing award winners from the Central and Southern Indiana region. The anthology includes a small selection of Gold Key winning art (including the cover).

The writing and art were chosen by the criteria that Scholastic has used throughout its history: technical skill, originality, and emergence of a personal vision or voice. Read these works. We think you'll join us in admiring these young creators' craft and style, listening to their voices, and looking at the world through their eyes.

These students would I know join us in thanking their dedicated teachers, mentors, family members, and friends. We also are grateful to our talented group of volunteer judges, most of them writers and artists themselves.

We owe special thanks to anthology editors Bailey Evans and Eli Witham, who also edit IUPUI's *genesis* literary and arts magazine under the outstanding sponsorship of Prof. Sarah Layden. They spent many, many hours designing and compiling this book. Other *genesis* staff members helped them with proofreading.

We hope these creative works will inspire you to do your own creating and also to encourage young people you know to explore their voices and visions.

Steve Fox
Director, Hoosier Writing Project
Professor of English
School of Liberal Arts at IUPUI

Joined by Mary Ann Cohen, Donna Rund, and James Cramer of the Central and Southern Indiana affiliate, Scholastic Art and Writing Awards



30-minute figure

Ari Wu
Digital Art
Bloomington High School South
11th Grade



Critical Essay



The Word Choice of Hatred

Laila Ghoneim

Are you afraid of something?

Is it the monster that lies lurking underneath your bed? Or possibly the fear of the consequences that derives from your past actions. Whatever it may be, within these fears exists a dichotomy—a predator and a vulnerable prey. This essay seeks to redefine these roles, to cast light on the truth obscured by misconceptions. While many writings about Islamophobia discuss the need to eradicate this prejudice, such a task may seem as daunting as finding a needle in a haystack. Therefore, rather than attempting an impossible feat, this piece proposes a shift towards a more progressive society. The following essay is my attempt to change the world, starting with a transformation in the dictionary.

Historical Context:

The persistent stereotype that associated Muslims with terrorism didn't start with the tragic events of September 11th, 2001; it had long plagued the American mindset before that. In Michael J. Whidden's "Unequal Justice: Arabs in America and United States Antiterrorism Legislation" he vividly pointed out how "the perception of Arabs as terrorists has come to dominate the public imagination." This entrenched prejudice isn't a recent development—it's part of a lengthy, unwinding, history of Islamophobia that portrays Muslims and Arabs as uncivilized and threatening. Islam itself has often been portrayed in America with violence and impermissibility. However, the reality is quite the opposite: the word "Islam" originates from "Salam," meaning peace in Arabic. The United States often uses "Muslim" and "Arab" interchangeably. The irony lies in the fact that not all Muslims are Arabs and not all Arabs are Muslim. While Islam is a religion, being Arab is an ethnicity. This oversimplification creates harmful stereotypes and further fuels prejudice.

Executive Order: 13769

Executive Order 13769 was signed by Donald Trump on January 27, 2017, exactly 5,618 days after the attack on 9/11.

Trump claims in his order that "[in order] to protect the American people from terrorist attacks by foreign nationals admitted to the United States, it

is hereby ordered as follows:

‘Numerous foreign-born individuals have been convicted or implicated in terrorism-related crimes since September 11, 2001, including foreign nationals who entered the United States after receiving visitor, student, or employment visas, or who entered through the United States refugee resettlement program...In order to protect Americans, the United States must ensure that those admitted to this country do not bear hostile attitudes toward it and its founding principles. The United States cannot, and should not, admit those who do not support the Constitution, or those who would place violent ideologies over American law.’ This executive order was formerly known as protecting the nation from foreign terrorist entry into the United States, but informally it became known as the Muslim ban. In 2016, prior to the travel ban, the United States admitted 84,989 refugees; however, the order lowered this number by an astonishing 40%, bringing the number down to around 50,000. Additionally, it suspended the entry of Syrian refugees indefinitely. It also essentially banned travel into the U.S. from a number of Muslim-majority countries, including Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen. This order left families separated: children from their parents, husbands from their wives, and grandparents from their grandchildren. According to Brown University, hate crimes against Muslims had already spiked 500% from 2000-2010, but now it was as if the whole world had turned against Muslims. Ramla Sahib, a hijabi protester, strongly stated in front of the Supreme Court: “This is a real reminder where we are a moment in history where we either repeat bad chapters, *terrible chapters*, of our nation’s history or we stand up, and we say that the that the promise of America is open to every single human being regardless of how they pray and how they worship and what hijab that they’re wearing.” Sahib was simply describing what America has always claimed to be: “the land of the free.” Now right before my eyes it was oppressing and harming those who had “foreign” backgrounds or differing beliefs. How could this be? Refugees had come here to escape, families that had been tortured because of their beliefs had come here to seek safety. It was all going against America’s original code of freedom and liberty for all. As the child and a sister of foreign-born Muslims from Arab countries, I couldn’t comprehend the possibility of them being falsely accused of terrorism. The executive order not only triggered a surge of hostility towards Muslims but also instilled a sense of doubt and regret among every Arab and Muslim. It compelled individuals to question and in some cases reconsider their heritage and beliefs—something they had always taken pride in. This wasn’t just a policy affecting paperwork or travel; it was tearing at the very seam of identity and belonging for many, shattering the assurance they once had in their cultural heritage and religious beliefs.

Societal Impacts:

What is it like to be a Muslim living in America?
9/11:

Everyone knows 9/11. The terrorists who bombed the Twin Towers. And without a doubt, al-Qaeda was an evil group. However, everyone has seen the story where the Muslims were framed as *monsters*, but have you seen the other side?

Dalia Mogahed, a compelling Ted Talk speaker who, like everyone else, experienced the impact of 9/11, encapsulates this experience with an outstanding quote: “Somebody else’s actions had turned me from a citizen to a suspect.” This statement reflects the broader issue—a single story morphing into a generalization of a whole community. Accusations had begun to cast upon every Muslim living in America based on the actions of a single terrorist party. Immediately after 9/11, Muslims faced increased harassment and violence, even within their own mosques, workplaces, and in the comfort of their own homes.

“I stand for America all the way! I’m an American. Go ahead. Arrest me and let those terrorists run wild!” -Frank Roque, after murdering the innocent citizen Balbir Singh Sodhi simply on the suspicion that he was a Muslim.

Undoubtedly, an innumerable number of mosques were burned to the ground each with a value of around \$380,000. However, shockingly, one of the biggest churches in Chicago was burned as well. On September 23, 2001, the St. John’s Assyrian American Church was set on fire in Chicago, Illinois early that morning. This fire caused around \$150,000 worth of damage. According to the church’s pastor, Reverend Charles Klutz, the person whom he believed set the fire had mistaken the church for a mosque. This proves not only were mosques being burned so that Muslims couldn’t find the comfort of their own religion, but they also mistakenly burned churches down, preventing Christians as well.

Reiterating my first statement, al-Qaeda was an evil, unjustifiable, cruel group of terrorists who attacked and harmed innocent lives. This section was just to allow you to view 9/11 with a different lens, the lens of the *terrified monster*.

Hollywood and the Media:

Every day, the media plays a crucial role in shaping our perceptions of the world. Unfortunately, it has consistently depicted Muslims in a negative

light. One comprehensive study revealed that a staggering 80% of news coverage concerning Muslims and Islam was portrayed negatively.

After 9/11, not only had the media been infiltrated, but the cartoons and shows children had been watching got plagued as well. According to polling from the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding, 62% of Muslims in the United States experience religious discrimination in their everyday lives. The reasons for discrimination are complex and driven by years of fundamental racism, but they are also inflated by the harmful images people see on their television screens. Despite Islam being the second largest religion in the world after Christianity, with over 1.8 billion people practicing the religion, Muslims are often linked to violence. In films, 30% of Muslim characters are depicted as criminals of violence and in TV, 12% of Muslim characters die violently during the first three episodes. However, I believe the audience getting the most impacted by this are the children. Young children watch television almost every day of their lives. From very young ages children are infusing their minds with these distorted portrayals of Muslims, clouding their vision to see the truth.

School:

As the child of two Muslim immigrants, I was raised with one single, profound message: “Always walk with your head held high.” But it wasn’t merely about holding it high due to my academic success and hard work; I was shouldering the responsibility of representing an entire community. Every step I took forward was a testament to the hope that my dedication, respect, and hard work could redefine the perceptions of Muslims. It wasn’t about being the exception; it was about creating a new narrative—setting a new standard that was not derived from stereotypes.

Yet, these efforts were often challenged. A history teacher once told his students, “Those who wished to become government officials must learn Arabic—the language of the terrorists.” This statement, laced with prejudice and ignorance, contrasted with my efforts to reshape perceptions and stood as a reminder of the uphill battle against such ingrained misconceptions.

Now after all of this, you might be considering *me* as the exception, something that I have been called my whole life—but no. I am not the exception. I am just like every other Muslim who has been dehumanized by others’ actions. I am just like every other Muslim who has been suspected of partaking in attacks. I am just like every other Muslim that has been turned from a victim, into a *monster*.

The change:

To begin this section, I would like to clarify some definitions:

Islamophobia: dislike of or prejudice against Islam or Muslims, especially as a political force.

-phobia: an extreme or irrational fear of or aversion to something.

prejudice: a preconceived opinion that is not based on reason or actual experience.

Semitic: relating to the people who speak Semitic languages, especially Hebrew and **Arabic**.

When you think of the word “Anti-semitic,” usually one thought comes to your mind: hatred against Jewish people. This proves that although the Oxford dictionary states that this word is for the Arabs and the Jews, the connotative meaning states otherwise. Islamophobia may mean in the Oxford dictionary, “a prejudice or dislike against Muslims”, however, I believe our brains are wired to the point where once we hear the word “phobia” everything changes.

Phobia means *irrational fear*. Do you know what it means to have an *irrational fear* of something?

You can’t breathe,

you can’t sleep,

you can’t think

—at least not about anything but the thing haunting you.

After all these traumatic experiences that Muslims have faced: being targeted and attacked for simply being in their own home or practicing their beliefs due to the attack on 9/11. Being abandoned from their homeland, never being able to see their family again. How? How could one claim to be “afraid” of the plain-sighted victims? If anything, Muslims should be using the term “phobia” because their fears are justified. No one has the right to attack a community and then pull out the card “phobia” and play the victim. Everyone experienced 9/11, in fact, it hit Muslims the hardest. But no one can walk around saying they have an *irrational fear* of Islam when they are

the ones placing that fear upon Muslims.

The New Word:

Quoting the great Plutarch, who once wisely said, “What we achieve inwardly will change our outer reality,” I strongly believe that this adjustment, if embraced, holds the potential to reshape our world and the perceptions of Muslims.

I have three suggestions for what the new word should be.

Contramuslim:

1. Prefix: contra = against, opposite, opposing
2. Pronunciation: [con-tra-mus-lim]
3. The AI-generated definition: “Contramuslim (adjective): pertaining to actions, beliefs, or ideologies that stand in opposition or contradiction to the principles, practices, or teachings of Islam or the Muslim faith.”
4. Example sentence: “The controversial book presented contramuslim perspectives, sparking debates within the community.”
5. Additional information: This term would be used to oppose or contradict Muslim beliefs, practices, or ideologies.

Counter-Islam:

1. Prefix: counter = against, opposite, contrary
2. Pronunciation: [count-er-is-lam]
3. The AI-generated definition: “Counter-Islam (noun): A movement, ideology, or set of beliefs advocating opposition or resistance to aspects of Islam, its teachings, practices, or influence, often seeking to challenge or refute its principles.”
4. Example sentence: “Some scholars argue that the movement is more of a counter-Islam ideology than a coherent religious belief system.”
5. Additional information: This new term suggests a direct resistance to Islam as a religion or its elements, this word can be used to counter or challenge Islamic viewpoints or Islamic practices.

Islamomisia:

1. Suffix: misia= hate or hatred
2. Pronunciation: [is-lam-o-meez-ia]
3. The AI-generated definition: “Islamomisia (noun):
 1. Prejudice, discrimination, hostility, or fear directed towards Islam as a religion or towards Muslims as a social or ethnic group.
 2. The systemic or individual bias, bigotry, or negative attitudes, resulting in marginalization or mistreatment of individuals or communities practicing Islam or identifying as Muslim.”
 1. Example sentence: “Acts of vandalism at mosques are clear instances of Islamomisia, reflecting deep-seated prejudice against the Muslim community.”
 2. Additional information: In our current times, there have been several attempts to introduce the term “Islamomisia” into our society. However, when “Islamomisia” is searched on any search engine, it always autocorrects to Islamophobia.

Final Thoughts:

Fear.

We are all afraid of something.

However, what privileges or rights does one truly gain by abiding by it? Fear allows us to strangle the *monsters* who just want to help the victims. Fear justifies the accusation of an entire community because of the actions of others. Fear serves as a mask, concealing true intentions and engraved emotions.

Yes, while I do agree that fear can stem from a concern or insecurity, it is also used at times to veil dark motives or prejudices. The immediate declaration of “fear” can cast someone as the automatic victim, but I advocate for a shift in perspective. If one stands firmly behind their hateful actions, unashamed of their stance, they should not fear the consequences laid upon them.

Why call for this change though?

Islamophobia is the main force fueling and driving this prejudice, hatred, and discrimination. If, in the future, society evolves to view Muslims differently—

The real *monster* of Islamophobia will lay there,

lurking,

ready to ignite a new fear and prejudice.

Japan's Socio-political Influence on Momotarō

Edward Liu

The tale of Momotarō, the boy born from a peach, has been told for centuries in Japan. Originating during the Edo period, Momotarō has weaved its way into numerous aspects of Japanese life. Japan's ever-evolving cultural and political landscape has constantly reshaped both the narrative and usage of the story of Momotarō in Japanese Society.

The original story tells of an elderly couple who have no children. One day, they find a peach flowing down a stream and take it home to cut it apart. When the grandmother cuts the peach, a little boy springs out. Due to his birth's unusual circumstances, they named him Momotarō, which translates to "Peach Boy." When Momotarō has grown into a strong adolescent, he announces to his family that he will leave the house and travel to the Island of the Devils to vanquish them. On the way, Momotarō uses the millet dumplings given to him by the elderly couple to tame a dog, monkey, and pheasant. Eventually, the boy makes it to the Island of the Devils, where, with the help of his companions, Momotarō defeats the devils and claims all their riches. Hearing the pleas of the Devils, Momotarō decides to spare them and return home, where his step-parents greet him as a hero.

The original written form of Momotarō emerged during the Edo period of Japan, an era dominated by Confucian values. During the Edo period, these Confucianism values heavily influenced the elements of the story of Momotarō. Before the shogunate's fall in Japan, Confucianism had influenced the values and traditions of Japan for many years. In the early Edo period, Confucianist lectures were transcribed to Japanese and distributed nationwide. The popularity of the religion rose to the point where rulers were devout followers of Confucianism (Keene 12).

A fundamental principle in Confucianism was family. People held the duty of parents to create a male heir to sustain the family lineage in very high regard. Those who could not provide a proper male heir were considered unsuccessful or pitiful (Polen 18). Momotarō's intro perfectly illustrates the societal stigma around not having a male heir. The initial couple in the original story was a couple with no children and menial jobs, and the framing that the couple was pitiful exemplified society's negative perception of the childless (Polen 18). The appearance of Momotarō, who symbolized a male heir, in the elderly couple's life brought happiness and pride. When he returns home, Momotarō's journey to conquer the Devils transforms him into

a hero. The success Momotarō saw was directly influenced by the political and cultural values of the Edo period. Due to the emphasis placed on filial practices and the continuity of lineage through male heirs, the character of Momotarō was a direct manifestation of the cultural values and beliefs of the Edo Period.

The Edo Period ended with one of Japan's most prominent cultural and social change movements, the Meiji Restoration. The Meiji Restoration served as a modernization of the entire country of Japan. The previous governmental ruling structure, the shogunate, was toppled and replaced with an emperor. The Meiji Restoration opened Japan to Western influence through trade routes with countries like the United States. The Westernization of Japan led to massive growth in both the quality and quantity of education (Klaus 157).

Following Japan's modernization, Japan's political and social landscape became increasingly militaristic. During the early and mid-1900s, the outbreak of World War II created an intense need for nationalism in the country. In order to advance nationalistic ideologies, Japan's social and political beliefs weaponized the story of Momotarō during WWII. The effects of these values are apparent when examining how writers repurposed Momotarō during this era. Notably, an 1894 retelling of the story by Iwaya Sazanami put a militaristic and nationalistic spin on the story. In the retelling, instead of being a child, Momotarō is a Japanese general sent to fight ogres in the northwest. Throughout the story, Momotarō describes the horrors the ogres commit and how he will defeat them and bring their riches back home (Sazanami 13).

The new interpretation of the story can be seen as a representation of the current geopolitical state of Japan. The ogres in the northwest parallel the real-world nation directly northwest of Japan, China's Qing Dynasty. Eventually, the conflict between Japan and China reached its peak during the breakout of the two Sino-Japanese wars that claimed over 20 million lives. The rivalry between the two countries had been escalating for a significant time since Sazanami wrote his version of the story. Regardless of whether he made these changes to appeal to the public or to express his personal beliefs, the values of early post-Meiji Restoration Japan are evident in his rendition of the story. While the bits and pieces tied to doctrines such as Confucianism remain, the added militaristic details and allusions to real-world politics clearly indicate that the present-day affairs of Japan have bled into the story.

In addition to added details, the purpose and use behind the character of Momotarō were heavily influenced by the politics of imperial Japan. Another transformation of the story of Momotarō during WWII was the creation

of the 1943 movie *Momotarō no Umiwashi*. The former of the two films describes Momotarō leading an air force to bomb the country's enemies. Instead of sticking to the original story and setting up the antagonists as devils, Momotarō attacked real human beings in the movie. Most of the enemies portrayed in the movie were Caucasian (Sasaki). The movie was heavily based on Japan's bombing of Pearl Harbor, as the setting and antagonists of the storyline match perfectly with the bombing that had occurred two years prior to the movie's creation. While almost every aspect of the story was edited or deleted, the character of Momotarō remained constant. Traditionally, Momotarō was an easily recognizable character for adults and children (Klaus 157). The familiarity of the character of Momotarō helped popularize the animated movie, especially with the youth of Japan. The popularity of this piece of propaganda was perfect for planting nationalistic ideas into the minds of children who watched the movie. Another example of how Momotarō was changed was the usage by many political writers in Japan to advertise the idea of socialism and Marxism. A writer named Eguchi created a version of the story that depicted a land of humans that was cruel and unfair. At the end of the story, Momotarō takes all the credit for what one of the animals does for him, symbolizing the evil in the upper class (Aonuma 391).

The impact of Japan's culture and values on Momotarō is not limited to influences on story elements, but they also create ulterior uses for the traditional Japanese story. Not only were the filial and Confucianist ideas represented in the Edo period found in the original story, but the militaristic ideas of WWII-era Japan also manifested into a new version of Momotarō. The various iterations of the story of Momotarō weave together the complicated fabric of Japan's ever-changing culture and politics. It is a powerful representation of Japanese values and acts as a time capsule that preserves the country's history.

Petals of Death

Owen Stringer

The opium poppy is a strange flower. Its petals range from pink to purple, are mysteriously dark towards the center, and are as fragile as crepe paper. Its leaves are bluish green and have the outline of an explosion. Its green seed pod is a curious sphere that demands attention, like the onion dome of a Russian church or a water tower at the edge of a rural American town. When an unripe seed pod is cut, a white latex comes out, which eventually dries to form brown, sticky stuff known as opium. People have used opium for about seven thousand years, because it contains many chemicals that we can use as medicine (Halpern and Blistein, 2019). These include morphine, which is a painkiller that also produces dreamlike bliss, as well as substances like noscapine that reduce inflammation and relieve coughs. While these effects are fine by themselves, opium is highly addictive and extremely dangerous. Overdose causes difficulty in breathing and death by asphyxia. These various flower powers are why the ancient Greeks dedicated this particular plant to Morpheus, Hypnos, and Thanatos, the gods of dreams, sleep, and death (Drori, 2021). In more modern times, the lure of the opium poppy to humans can explain two major events in history that at first might seem unrelated: the wars between Britain and China in the 1800s and the opioid epidemic that is devastating the United States today.

Flowers have been fundamental to humans since the beginning of time, as their beautiful colors can lead us to sources of food, clothing, and shelter, as well as affecting our bodies by giving us both medicine and poison. It might seem strange that plants have evolved so that we find them attractive, and even more mysterious that they produce chemicals that interact with our bodies. The basic reason that plants produce so many complex chemical substances is that they are literally rooted to the spot and cannot move, which is a problem both for reproduction and avoiding predators. They produce their magic potions either to seduce pollinators or repel hungry creatures. These chemical concoctions can have strange effects on the minds of insects, birds, and mammals like us (Balick and Cox, 2021). While a plant can have a predictable effect on a pollinator or an enemy, it can have unpredictable effects on related species. These effects can interact with human greed, and they have even changed the course of history.

In eighteenth century China, opium had long been used as a medicine, but more and more people were smoking it and becoming addicted. For this reason, China tried to ban opium several times. This was not in the interest

of the British East India Company, one of the main suppliers. The British wanted to make money from trade with China, but they had a few problems. Asian goods were in high demand back in Britain, but European goods were not so desired in China. To make things worse, the Chinese only accepted payments in silver and Britain was running out of this precious metal. The British tried to pressure China to buy opium and insisted on payments in silver, to change the balance of trade. They had found something that the government did not want but many people felt they needed. At first, the Qing Dynasty avoided conflict, but opium eventually worked its way up to the most urgent problem in China as the the number of imported chests rose from 4,500 in 1810 to 40,000 in 1838, with one quarter of all Chinese men addicted and supplied from international ports by organized local crime gangs (Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada, 2017).

China's opium problem was out of control, so the government decided to act. The emperor gave the job to Lin Zexu, the Governor-General of Hunan and Hubei, and a famous philosopher. Lin tried to write directly to Queen Victoria, but the letter went missing, so he had it published in the Times newspaper to try to get the support of the British people. At home, Lin introduced harsh punishments for smokers, and tried unsuccessfully to break the connections between British traders and Chinese smugglers. Eventually, he decided to seize 1,000 tons of opium by force. The merchants watched as he ordered his men to mix it with lime and salt and throw it all into the sea near Guangzhou, getting rid of it permanently. Lin Zexu also arrested 2,000 Chinese drug dealers (Wasserstrom, 2016). At this point, he might have gone down in history as the man who saved China, but in fact this was the start of a much wider armed conflict.

The First Opium War began with small clashes in 1839, after which the British sent a full fleet of warships the following year, to open up trade and demand repayment for the lost goods. The British fired their gunships at the harbors and set Chinese junks ablaze. The Chinese were at a huge technological disadvantage. After a few years of violent bombardment, they finally surrendered and were forced at gunpoint to sign the Treaty of Nanjing in 1842 (Bardoe, 2018). This very unfair deal forced the Chinese to pay twenty-one million dollars to the British, gave away the island of Hong Kong, and set up five international trading ports, even though the opium trade was still actually illegal.

The tension kept bubbling, and fourteen years later, the Second Opium War broke out when the Emperor's Commissioner in Canton, Ye Mingchen, decided to crack down on the opium trade again (Foreign Service Institute, 2023). His troops boarded *The Arrow*, a supposed British pirate ship, and arrested all the sailors. There was fighting in the ports, and a few months later,

a French missionary was killed, so a combined force of British and French ships set sail to crush Chinese resistance to the high-profit drug trade. The British and French destroyed the Emperor's Old Summer Palace and occupied the Forbidden City. The Chinese were made to sign a humiliating treaty legalizing the opium trade, opening up more ports, paying even more money to the Europeans, and allowing foreign traders and missionaries to travel anywhere in China. The Chinese have never forgotten their defeat at the hands of British drug lords and have never given up their claims to Hong Kong.

The beautiful, deadly opium poppy has been at the heart of a much more recent catastrophe, also involving greed, huge profits, and almost one million deaths: the Opioid Epidemic still taking place right now in the United States. Opiates have been used for a long time in this country, including during the American Civil War. However, doctors used to be very careful about prescribing them because of the dangers of addiction. That all changed in the 1990s when certain drug companies started to promote opioids as the best kind of pain management for many patients. The most famous company was Purdue Pharma, owned by the Sackler family. This company developed an opioid drug called OxyContin and promoted it at more than forty events for doctors between 1996–2001. They paid doctors to advertise it, and they even managed to get FDA approval without any long-term testing of the drug. Of course, opioids remain highly addictive and once people started to take their prescribed medicine, they were pretty much hooked on it. As more and more people became addicted, the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) deemed it an “opium epidemic.” This epidemic came in three waves: the first in 1999, the second in 2010, the third in 2013, and it continues to this very day.

The first wave hit in 1999, as the country saw a gradual increase in the number of users. The pills were also made in such a way that it was very easy to take high doses in a short amount of time, leading to a pattern of misuse and addiction. The second wave hit in about 2010. The number of overdoses from opioid pills was still climbing, but a bigger problem was people without prescriptions who were now hooked and needing to transition. Many people wanted something that was cheaper, came in higher doses, and was easily accessible, so they turned to heroin (Marcovitz, 2018). The increase in heroin led to an even greater number of overdoses and deaths. In 2013, there came a new illegal alternative for opioid addicts in the form of fentanyl, a synthetic opiate that can be mixed into heroin or cocaine. In the United States today, the opioid epidemic is still getting worse. In 2010, there were 21,089 opioid deaths. In 2017, this climbed to 47,600, and in 2021, to 80,411. In the twelve months before January 31, 2023, nearly 110,000 people died, which is more than 300 per day (CDC, 2023).

The rich British drug lords of the nineteenth century got away with their crimes, but we are still waiting to find out if the American drug companies and pharmacy chains that caused the opioid epidemic will pay for their actions, or if they will run free. There are dozens of high-profile lawsuits currently taking place. In one of the most famous cases, the Sackler family, who made more than \$13 billion in profit from legal drug selling, took out most of their money from Purdue Pharma, declared the business bankrupt, and agreed to pay \$6 billion in damages as long as they could never be prosecuted. The drug they produced and sold was called OxyContin, which contained opium. In August 2023, the Supreme Court blocked the deal the Sackler family proposed, and in December they met again to hear both sides argue their case. Some families want to take the money on offer, while others want to be able to sue the people who caused their friends or loved ones to become addicted to a drug that killed them. The Supreme Court will decide in Spring 2024 if rich people behind big drug companies can pay their way out of sticky situations.

Meanwhile, the opium poppies themselves have found humans to be a very useful species that can help with reproduction and the colonization of new lands. Over thousands of years, they have been used by priests in Egypt, philosophers in Greece, soldiers in Rome, doctors in China, and poets in England. Today, the wind blows through the vast, illegal poppy fields of Afghanistan that produce most of the world's opium for the illegal heroin trade, and through the poppy-filled valleys of Spain, Turkey, and especially Tasmania, where the flowers are grown legally for the pharmaceutical industry (Drori, 2021). These pretty plants with their delicate, fluttering petals and their bulbous seed pods continue to give us medicine for our pain and our sleep, for our coughs and our cancers. And they await the next outbreak of human greed, when they will be offered once more to the god of death.

Vitamin C(ytical)

Kayla Xu

Every morning, I take a vitamin D supplement, and if I don't forget, I take a vitamin B supplement every other day. My parents take a concoction of vitamins from A-Z along with other supplements, such as grape seed extract and black cumin. What I'm trying to get at is that my family has a colossal medicine cabinet. But my family is not out of the ordinary; more than half of Americans take some form of vitamins or supplements, and it is easy to see why (Levine; Mishra). Many supplements brand themselves as boosting immunity, improving overall health, or treating illness. Thus it is not unreasonable to think that taking vitamins and supplements is helpful, but the truth is much more complex than that.

We should start with the fact that supplements, multivitamins, botanicals, etc. have no effect on curing serious diseases—that's just not possible. Diseases such as Alzheimer's or osteoarthritis and conditions such as hearing loss or vision loss are impossible to cure with supplements (Loria). Additionally, for pills that claim to have such extensive benefits, they don't have correspondingly rigorous rules and regulations. Drugs are subjected to multiple testing stages on humans and animals in a controlled lab environment before obtaining FDA approval to sell to the public. On the other hand, supplements don't require premarket review or FDA approval. The developing companies are thus left solely responsible for the safety and efficacy of their products. If companies were to be negligent, malicious, or even to make a simple mistake, they could affect the lives of thousands of people before the FDA can intervene (Levine; "Questions and Answers about FDA's Initiative Against Contaminated Weight Loss Products").

One issue is that supplement vendors often do not declare all of the ingredients in their products. For example, in the year 2021 alone, three separate companies produced supplements that contained undeclared sibutramine ("Recalls, Market Withdrawals, & Safety Alerts"). While sibutramine can help with weight loss, it also can cause side effects including elevated blood pressure, constipation, and tachycardia (Araújo; "Sibutramine"). According to the FDA, it also increased the chance of major cardiovascular events—including heart attack, stroke, or death—by 16% and was subsequently removed from the market in 2010 (Scheen). The dangers of having undeclared ingredients are numerous; not only could you be allergic, but not knowing what chemicals are in you may cause harmful reactions when taking other medications. Sibutramine shouldn't be taken with antide-

pressants, but how would you know? In the past few years, there have been several recalls for several different undeclared drugs such as diclofenac (which increases risk of heart attack or stroke) from many brands including Walmart and Family Dollar ("Recalls, Market Withdrawals, & Safety Alerts; Spritz). You don't have to meet a shady man in a deserted alley to get these dangerous pills. Pills with potentially toxic ingredients can be found in stores such as Costco, CVS, Target, The Vitamin Shoppe, and Walgreens (Loria).

Another issue is culture. Over the past decade, an increased interest in health and wellness has prompted many unsavory characters to peddle their off-brand supplements. Workout and weight loss product scams have become so pervasive that the FDA has discovered hundreds that contain dangerous or unlisted (or both) ingredients ("Questions and Answers About FDA's Initiative Against Contaminated Weight Loss Products"; Waddell). Such lax oversight doesn't come without consequences; people have died because of it. People such as Michael Sparling, who after taking a workout supplement called Jack3d, went into cardiac arrest and died at 22 years old (Zaleski). People such as a 25-year-old, who after taking a pre-workout powder, had a stroke (Harris).

While it is true that many Americans do not achieve the recommended micronutrient intake levels from food, supplements are not the way forward. Unless you have a vitamin deficiency, which less than 10% of Americans have, time after time, research has shown that supplements are useless ("Second National Report on Biochemical Indicators of Diet and Nutrition in the U.S. Population"; Levine; Morley). So what can we do? If supplements can be harmful, how can we ensure that our diets contain all the necessary nutrients and that our muscles stay big and strong?

For starters, if the FDA treated supplements as drugs, more rigorous standards would ensure that no undeclared or dangerous ingredients could reach consumers. Changing the culture around vitamins and promoting getting vitamins from fresh fruits and vegetables would decrease their demand. Consuming vitamins and minerals through food is infinitely more effective than pills—broccoli can decrease cancer risk, extra-virgin olive oil can help improve symptoms of Alzheimer's, and a Mediterranean diet can decrease risk of major cardiovascular events (Morley; Fulgoni; Estruch; Levine). Changing the culture around weight loss and being more accepting of all body types without shaming or being hostile would decrease the demand for dangerous weight loss supplements.

What we put in our bodies is extremely important—you are what you eat. In an age of misinformation, the truth about what exactly supplements do

Vitamin C(ytical)

is crucial to saving lives and decreasing mortality rates. Remember that at best, supplements are placebo pills, but at worst, supplements can kill the ones you love—all because they had the audacity to want to be healthy.



Aftermath

Hannah Gao
Drawing & Illustration
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Personal Essay & Memoir



A Place from Memory

Tajweed Altower

It was late morning when we left. The sun was some time past the horizon, and everything was back to normal... except for the few ruined buildings and the bullet-filled walls. The birds were still chirping their morning melody, watching alongside us the damage that had occurred. Why were they so happy on such a sad day? My family and I were leaving our whole life behind without the promise of returning. The war was getting louder and bigger, so we wouldn't lose an opportunity to leave. My father had earned a scholarship to any accepting college in the US, and we were all happy and excited about this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. He was going to study law to hopefully become a lawyer one day. I guess it never hit me how little I managed to bring with me until now. I would soon miss the smell of bread in the morning, the smiles of elders on the street, and the call for prayer echoing through the town.

Gharyan, Libya is my hometown and a scorching hot place. We lived in northern Libya, so the Sahara was only a car ride away. The summers were aching hot, but at the same time, the winters were frigid. Our town was at the top of a small mountain overlooking the desert, with only a rickety road to get there. My parents were well-educated, well-known, and well-off. My mom was a teacher, and my dad was a prosecutor and professor. We lived in a two-story house that turned egg-yolk orange when the sun fell over the horizon. We were happy and content, with the rest of my relatives close by. Now, getting a hold of them takes a long and tedious effort even on the phone.

The country was in shambles when we left. The current leader, Gaddafi, was a loud man who didn't care enough for the prospects of his own country. Or at least that's what we heard on the streets when we played outside. People were bound to rebel, they said. It was only a matter of time. My family was never too involved with politics, we believed in religion over any political leader. However, because of my father's government position, people still talked in hushed voices when we were around or avoided eye contact. Even with that, however, our lives were fine, until that night. My dad was out working and we had just gotten back from school. The smell of fresh bread wafted from the kitchen, and the sun was starting to fall, making the house look egg yolk orange. We were finishing our dinner and getting ready for bed when a loud BOOM filled the room. The war had come to our town. My mom was on the phone with my aunt explaining that the explosions were

close this time. She rushed us all to the downstairs floor telling us that today was a special day: we were having a sleepover in the living room. We stayed silent as more explosions filled the air. If you listened closely you could hear my mother's prayer in the background. After a while a new sound, faster, and louder began. It was the sound of bullets. My mother huddled us close and tried to get a hold of my father, to find out if he was safe. He was still working and would be back later that night. With the sounds of explosions as a lullaby, we all eventually drifted off to sleep. The next morning we packed our things, got into my dad's small green car, the one we would leave at the airport for my uncle, and left that beautiful town forever.

We started our long trip down that rickety road and through many, many checkpoints. The day was hot, making everything look like it was melting. I watched out the window as the water on the road ahead disappeared as we got closer. I remembered the faces of the rest of my family when we were leaving, sad and longing. They were all gathered around us, showering us with hugs and loving words. It was as if we were leaving for Mars. I guess it was kind of similar, since I had a deep feeling I wouldn't see any of them again for a long time. My parents were anxious about this trip. The country was in a grave mood, and soldiers were everywhere. Their uniforms tan like the land surrounding us. New laws had been enacted because of the war, like not being able to carry gasoline cans in your car, or not being able to own and use guns not approved by the law. These laws were enforced by constant checkpoints where soldiers searched your car and shone bright lights in your face. They also checked your identification thoroughly. The soldiers were grim-faced and cautious, and when they spoke, their voices were serious and loud. We kept on going. Soon we were crossing the Libyan border into Tunisia where our flight was.

It was late afternoon when I got on my first plane ride ever. My stomach tumbled when we were ascending, but I wasn't scared. I watched out the window as my world got smaller and farther, but I wasn't sad. For one, I was too young, and I was also looking forward to this new world, which I had heard so little about: The United States. I didn't know what to expect. I also didn't know that I would experience so much, learn so much, meet so many phenomenal people, or begin building my hopes and dreams for the future. Leaving Libya was a big stretch for me and my family, and I can safely say that now I have another life built on top of the foundation of my first one. I still sometimes sit and ponder about that town on top of a small mountain. Or about buying bread from the bakery right after sunrise and the call for prayer throughout the day. And most importantly, about my family and that two-story house that turned egg-yolk orange when the sun

The Pallbearer

Thomas Bowling

I approached the center of the sanctuary, staring at the serene body of my great-grandfather, on display for all eyes to see. The man who had always seemed enthusiastic, full of life, now lay here, all life peacefully dissolved from his body. The stillness of his body put me at ease; this man who had seen ninety-four years had completed the journey God sent him to do. This fact saddened my heart, but in a different sense, brightened my spirits, helping me to recognize the beauty of the journey of life and death. After all, this wasn't the first death I'd experienced over the course of the past few months.

Nearly two-and-a-half years of my life had been spent with her, and by August she was gone. This was the person I trusted with all my secrets, my rock, my support, my everything. This girl was not just a partner, she was a home. The same spirit of enthusiasm that always filled my great-grandfather filled her as well, always bubbly, never dismayed. She was gone, and there was nothing I could do about it. This person I had trusted for so long was a dead girl walking in my memories. As I stared at the quiet body of my great-grandfather, the finality of death hit me. Everything stops, comes to an end, even life. There was a permanence to death, an assurance that the journey was completed. Life never has the same assurance. No guarantees are given. Nothing is finalized. With death, everything is finalized.

In the face of a breakup, you can take one of two paths. I like to think of them as the high road and the low road from a sensitivity perspective. The two roads are different than one might think, however. The low road is the classic rom-com response: tears, taking down of photographs, consumption of a gallon of ice cream. The low road pushes you down in the dregs of your despair for a while, but eventually allows for grief and healing. Generally, the low road is the more common, and is the more difficult of the two. However, the low road allows for the complete healing process as you learn independence and process the depths of your grief. As painful as the experience sounds, the low road leads you over the hump of despair, and cultivates growth.

The high road is what I call the "flush-it technique." You ignore it. You move on. Nothing is processed and nothing is gained. There's no pain. Sure, maybe there's a night or a week of difficulty where you mourn the loss of the relationship. But you wipe it, and move on with your life. There's no sobbing into a bucket of ice cream while swaddled in a blanket. There's only the

weight of suppression as those feelings are ignored. My therapist told me that suppression provides more pain in the long run than addressing does. Addressing the things that cause you grief help you to heal and move on, growing as a person along with leaving the difficulty behind. Suppression seems less harmful, but in the long run reaps no benefit and only leaves you in constant purgatory with your life. While the high road seems enticing to outside viewers, it is the more painful of the two. It's as though you're stuck with these feelings for the duration of your life.

These paths are the same situations that you experience when grieving a loved one's passing. You can either address or ignore. I suppose my writing about both of these events is a culmination of my addressing both situations. My parents and mentors had suggested journaling for me to cope with difficult circumstances, so this could count as a journaling practice. Both a breakup and a funeral are difficult circumstances, and the combination of the two constitutes my attempts to process these feelings. Otherwise, I wipe it and drive myself into the ground without processing the feelings, as I've tried to do with various other circumstances. I chose the low road this time, choosing to address instead of ignore.

During the initial visitation, I shook hands with friends and associates of my deceased grandfather, most of whom I had never encountered in my life. I was swimming in choruses of "So sorry for your loss," "your grandpa was a wonderful man," and "so glad you were able to know him." I turned and looked at my teenage cousins. Their first funeral. You never forget your first loss. The three were pale and doing their best to hold themselves together, a tough ask for three teenagers with confusing feelings going through their heads. I remember the initial gut punch that was the news of my grandfather's passing because I had similar feelings to theirs on the whole situation. It's a strange, painful, and somewhat cathartic experience when someone you love has left you. It breeds respect and reverence for the things the deceased stood for and the values they held dear. It breaks you and builds you.

"Oh my gosh, I'm so sorry." "I had no idea." "Is there anything I can do to help?" Words experienced both after a death and after a breakup. How do you respond to such a rush of people clamoring to help you? Sure, you can make attempts to explain to them the feelings you're experiencing, but it's impossible, inexpressible. The feelings you experience are your own, and there's nothing you can do to explain to others the pain you're afflicted with. "I'm fine." The famous last words of anyone going through tough times. The words of suppression. The words that take you to the high road. But also the only words that work. Deep down, no one wants to hear either the logistics of your breakup or how much your grandfather meant to you. I discovered that quickly. People are kind hearted, but only want to scratch the surface.

As much as people wish to help, they can't understand.

The first weeks of the breakup were the most difficult. It was new. People were talking. Did-you-hears surrounded me. Are you doing ok? I'm fine. Your memory reflexes are automatic. What did I want to say? Unimportant. I'm fine. She didn't help at all. She was on her own road, adding more rumors through no fault of her own. Have I seen her new boyfriend? Have I heard what her friends were posting about me on social media? Yes. Her road is her own. My road is made more jagged by the observation of hers. In some ways, it's harder to lose someone who's still alive. They're still there. The healing process is more difficult if the lost individual is still just a click away. None of this is to say I wish death; in fact, I'm rooting for her success. When you love someone, you hope for the best for that person. You hope your deceased family member rests peacefully. You hope your ex-girlfriend is very happy. Love is not vengeance. Love stays love even when the person doesn't love you back.

The Moravian pastor gave a touching service about my great-grandfather. He described how joyful and vibrant his life was, telling stories that my grandfather had told for years, doing justice to the memories that we would have of the man who had touched our lives in so many poignant ways. Eulogies and memorials tend to remind the people witnessing about how beautiful the memories we have of the person are. Memory can be manipulated to believe what it wants about topics or issues, but memories of people are unwavering. They are constant and set. With my great-grandfather, I can remember the excitement that would brighten his face when we talked about the unimportant achievements of our lives and the careful, delicate way he would hug us goodbye. He was a sweet and gentle soul, and that's what I would remember about him forever. My memory will carry his legacy on and cherish the life he lived.

My memory will also be unfading about the girl I loved. The memories of her revolve not around the aftermath of our life together, but around the positive aspects. They remain fixed on the moments of her loving spirit and her laughter, moments of happiness and fun we had together. Valentine's Day brunches and long, aimless drives belting Grease songs in the car. But no eulogy will be delivered for this death. No service will be held for the loss of this person from my life, and she will continue to live peaceably while her memories remain buried within me. The dead girl will have no casket, no service, no memorial, and no burial. The dead girl will remain unceasingly embedded in my head while the living girl exists in a separate life from the one we once had together. While some may disagree, a breakup is a death. Breakups are deaths of the loved one you chose, and the mourning of the person you loved who left your life for good.

As I stoically carried the casket to my great-grandfather's final resting place, I saw the visible bewilderment in my cousin trudging in front of me. His back stood upright, his shoulders rigid and unmoving, his easy-going nature replaced with an air of professionalism tinged with sorrow. His first loss. We marched on with somber music showering our heads and adding further weight to our hearts. The sky was peaceful and the day was warm; our grandfather could not have been buried on a chilly day. As we sat the casket in its ending destination, I looked over to see tears welling in my cousin's eyes. It was at that moment that I recognized his grief. I patted his shoulder and he turned. I offered a hug as tears brimmed in my eyes. He accepted readily and released the grief and sorrow he had so dutifully restrained.

The grief was suddenly my own again, and I was taken back to that bleak August afternoon when she left. The choking, gasping breaths as I mourned the loss of the love I'd once had, eyes blinded with tears as I huddled close with my mom, my dog offering his steadfast support. Now the love I'd once felt from her was dissipated, transcended off into a different plane, just as my grandfather's soul now was. I let go of my cousin, and we stayed with our arms on each other's shoulders as we watched the final proceedings of the funeral. And so we buried our dead, allowing grief to swell our hearts on that beautiful November afternoon, recognizing the finality of the moment, a recognition that I knew all too well. What is dead is gone and cannot be retrieved. What's left are the memories and the impact they leave on your life. The dead walk on in memory and will always remain specters in the forefronts of our minds.

Trimetric

Jessica Ding

Written in the late Song Dynasty, the Three Character Classic or Trimetric Classic is a famed piece of ancient Chinese literature. Recognized as a hallmark of culture and widely known across the citizen population in China, every verse of this highly-structured piece is written in sets of three character phrases. The text contains 101 verses regarding Confucian teachings of respect and piety.

As my mother and *lao lao* did before me, I memorized the Trimetric Classic when I was five. At sixteen, the latter parts of the poems have been lost to the sands inside my desert of memory, but I can still recite the first few famous verses.

It starts, as all things do, with love.

人之初，性本善。 *When we begin, we are all kind.*

My *lao lao* is my origin. When a baby girl is born, she already holds all of the oocytes for her entire life, which means that the cell that developed into who I am today was first forged within my grandmother's body. Warm, kind, brave, and strong, she is the best of me.

When she was fifteen years old, my *lao lao* was sent by the CCP government to rural China along with 17 million other young men and women. Plucked from their schools and homes and brought into the vast farmlands in the rice fields of *Ji Lin*, my grandmother worked from morning till twilight, dark hair running down her back in twin braids that glinted in the sun.

She entertained herself in the fields with folktales. Her skill of storytelling naturally appeared as an inheritance, an ability that had flowed from generation to generation as water travels from a mountain's peak down to the village stream.

Her favorite myth has always been the maiden in the moon. *Chang'e*, who ascended into the heavens and was separated from her lover forever. A tragedy, romance, and cautionary tale telling young women about the death of a girl reborn into fae, destined to doom because she was greedy for something more than herself.

However, my grandmother always favored an alternate interpretation of the story. Maybe, she believed, *Chang'e* was not selfish and greedy, but simply a girl who had a dream, a girl who tried to create a better world for everyone. Maybe *Chang'e*, her courage, and her love were weaponized against her, and the truth of her tale was twisted by time.

In reality, a girl was given mysterious and sudden instructions sent anonymously from up above, claiming that her sacrifice would be for the betterment of her people. An Alcestis, a girl bled dry and then called beloved, forced into a fate she never asked for. A girl brought far away from home— isolated on the moon, knee deep in muddy fields— simply because it was decreed by a higher power.

My *lao lao*'s tone when recalling her youth is fond, but also wistful. Her time on the farms was not unhappy, but it was not time given freely. Stolen from her to help build the dreams of others in the give-and-take of national reconstruction, her own goals were forced to be left behind. Now, those dreams exist only within puddles of moonlight, rippling in the murky water of rice plains from the past.

It has been years since *lao lao* first told me of *Chang'e* and her girlhood, and now I am far away from her home and in the United States. Today, I pull bits and pieces of the past from my mother instead. Although my mother is endlessly kind and would simply describe me as curious, I know I am a thief, stealing stories from the family within my reach. She reported to me what went on between the lines of *lao lao*'s story, describing life in a newly emerging, complicated, and often confusing system of restoration. She told me of hope, but also hardship, fear, and doubt. But my mother has always spoken of my grandmother's experiences with pride. Amongst a dynamic and scary new world, my *lao lao* had strength that no description could ever fully encompass, but still she describes those memories to me in moonlit stories.

My grandmother was the one who gifted me with my first copy of the Trimetric Classic. She still knows much of the text by heart, even decades past her elementary school education when she first learned it. Far better than I can recite them, she would be able to pick up the verses where I left off.

性相近，习相远。 *Although we begin the same, we grow to learn our differences.*

Lao lao never graduated high school. My mother was the very first in our family to go to college. I have undergone my entire education in an alien language and inside a country foreign to the generations of women before me.

Whenever my mother offers me a glimpse of her past, I am always impressed. As the pioneer in her family to go on beyond high school education and become a graduate of Peking University from one of the top programs in her country, my mother's success has been the fruit of hard work and discipline.

Lao ye, my grandfather, passed away when my mother was 16, the age I am now. The family faced unimaginable grief, and my *lao lao* effectively had to raise my mother as a single parent. After *lao ye*'s passing, my grandmother was the only member of our family left who traveled to agricultural China during reconstruction. She is my last surviving family member who holds those memories.

But what does it mean to be a survivor? Perhaps it is the presence of perseverance, the strength that shines even when the sun is gone and there is only the glow of the maiden moon. It is the line of my *lao lao*'s back, ramrod straight even after years hunched over farming in the fields. It is how *Chang'e* lives on in solitude, her hair black as onyx and her skin glowing like starlight even after thousands of lifetimes.

My mother and grandmother have had heated disagreements over *Chang'e*'s folktale. My grandmother has always stood her ground, saying that if *Chang'e* is in exile, people condemn her for her greed, but if she is a heroine, she has finally found peace after offering herself for her love, and it is always better to believe in peace.

My mother disagrees. The moon may be *Chang'e*'s salvation because she is protected from the horrors of mortality, but it is her cage. She is trapped, and when she gazes out into the void between her and the world she left behind, the space and time before her will stretch into infinity. As she drinks in the sky, the days will dissolve bitter in her mouth.

She believes that both versions are pointless. In the end, my mother argues, *Chang'e* cannot hear the stories about her. The interpretations do not matter. The moon may be beautiful, but it is cold and silent, and regardless of why she is there, *Chang'e* is there alone.

Still, I can understand why my grandmother chooses an unconventional, more hopeful interpretation of the narrative. After all, before *Chang'e* was a goddess and a legend, she was just a girl who loved her people.

How could I blame her for what she did? I see her in myself. In my mother, and in her mother, my *lao lao*. We were all once girls too.

Although the maiden of the moon is an ancient myth older than any individual who tells the parable today, it is also a modern mirror in which I see the reflection of my own family history. I see our story in the moon, and I see our story in the stars. I see it in my mother's face, in the twin moles we share scattered across our bodies, painting our skin with our own personal constellations.

In the night, half awake and half dreaming, this past is so close that I can reach out my hand and my fingers brush its surface. I put my hands out into the moonlight, and I can feel the weight of it on my skin.

Sometimes, the glow of the moon is heavy and cold, and I will pull back at the appearance of a sharp thought in my head. *Is it right for me to take sweeping interpretations of my family's story? Do I even have the capacity to do so? Am I actually paying respect to the truth or am I foolish to claim the narrative and decide how it goes? Am I a moon maiden, greedy for the unreachable?*

In the haze of the night when my doubts begin to roar, I slow down to try and quiet my thoughts. I breathe, count to three, and remind myself that I have not demanded stories from my mother in years—once I noticed how she avoided telling me certain things, I realized it was selfish of me to force her to recall things she may not want to remember. Yet, I do sometimes get to hear a rare story without me prompting.

It happens while the sky is darkening, and the interstate freeway stretching before us begins to be illuminated only by the headlights of racing, parallel cars.

My mother recollects her past in our minivan. It is a vulnerability, but one where she cheats out of it a little by having an excuse not to face me while she reveals something of importance, passing off the moment as simply filling the air of a long drive by bringing parts of the past into the present.

When I glance in the rearview mirror, I see twin gazes reflected back: one searching in the other, the other fixed forward on what lay ahead. I look away, out the passenger window, and I watch the moon chase us down the highway.

I gaze at the dark sky, and I feel my heart swell. In a flash, there is an immensity of emotion inside me. Love, for the moon, for my mother. An inexplicable sadness and heaviness. The feelings in my chest push up and outwards and I feel tears well in my eyes. I quickly swipe my hand across my face, desperately hoping my mother did not notice. If she did, I pray it

seems like I am merely tired from the long day.

Being a daughter is a beautiful, painful thing. Seasons upon seasons pass by, with the air turning damp and warm then crisp and cold, and in every single one, I am always my mother's daughter.

As the time has passed, I see the outline of our shape in a way I previously did not. Beyond the fact that I am my mother's daughter and my *lao lao's* grandchild, the two of them are also tangled with ties of fate that I will never fully see but now can trace the perimeter of.

A space uniquely theirs holds memories that forever belong only to them. As there are now things my *lao lao* will never know of regarding her daughter and her daughter's daughter—some private moments between just me and my mother—I have learned there are some stories I will never hear because they do not belong to me, but rather exclusively to them.

Back on the highway, we drive onwards. The air after my mother tells her story is quiet, but it is not uncomfortable. I know that she left out some details about what truly happened, but I don't push the subject.

We both have our secrets. But we still have shared experiences, one of which is the memory of being taught verses of the Trimetric Classic by our grandmothers. In those teaching sessions came history lessons, where I learned that the Trimetric Classic actually remained an unfinished, continuous work for decades. Scholars and poets who were fathers and friends spent entire lifetimes adding on to the text as they gained insights from their everyday lives.

Although the Trimetric Classic is recognized as universal, my family has forged our own unique trimetric universe. We share certain core experiences, and we have also taken our own paths: my *lao lao* remains in her province of origin while my mother has discovered a home for her family in a new country, and it is in that entirely different location that I have grown up and into myself.

Of course, like the Classic, our story is ongoing, and I have begun to write my own chapters of the novel. But it will continue on, still as the Trimetric Classic does, and as all things do, from where the last phrase left off.

苟不教，性乃迁。 *Without guidance, we may drift apart.*

In our American home, my mother lives 7,152 miles away from my *lao lao* back in China. They remain connected, chatting over video call several

times a week, but I know it is not the same. As I am, she is her mother's only daughter.

Daughterhood is painful. It is easy to see that it hurts my mother to be so far away from my *lao lao*. She suffers the distance for me, to give her family a better home and a brighter future. I watch my mother hurt herself for the sake of us, and it hurts me too. I know that I am only living as a byproduct of both the great strength and great suffering of the women who lived before me, the women whose blood flows inside my veins.

There is a reason why immigrants call their country of origin the *motherland*. I have spent my life in another nation, but I feel intensely connected to China, where my family has our deepest roots. For years, I could not tell if "home" felt like the country where I was born, my country of origin that I experience a strong emotional bond to, or somewhere else entirely, where I would carve out of the world a home for myself just as my family before me had done.

When troubling questions burn within me, I do my best to quell the fire. I express my frantic internal energy in an external way: by putting pen to paper. In my efforts to synthesize my experiences, I have produced poems, written stories, and traced my blood with the ink I have printed.

Sometimes in my efforts to translate my thoughts into text, words escape me. I stare endlessly at a blinking cursor, blinking over and over again myself in foolish hope that it will light the spark for my fingers to type something out. I have spent days in frustration at my inability.

In those moments, writing feels infinitely complex. But the best works have never been written in a single day. The Trimetric Classic itself took generations of revisions, and there exist multitudes of different ways to interpret the legend of *Chang'e*.

Yet the first few lines of the Classic have always remained the same, and there are certain details of *Chang'e's* folktale that are constant across every iteration. In the same way, I find similar concepts at the heart of many of my pieces: love, change, and growth. Home, in all its different forms: a house in the suburbs of the American Midwest, a sixth floor apartment in the Chinese province of *Ji Lin*, and the home I find is the feeling I carry inside of me.

When I am stuck and cannot find it in myself to produce another sentence, I stretch, stand up from my desk, and I walk to my window. I look outwards into the evening, and though there is only one moon above me, I

feel three gazes, three generations, and see three parallel stories painted in the stars.

Chang'e watches me from up above. I turn, and the image of my *lao lao's* smiling face sits on the set of dressers a few feet away. Distantly, I hear my mother call for me to come downstairs for dinner.

The moon at my back, with a comfortable weight in my heart, I step back into the world: towards my mother waiting for me in the kitchen, towards the next memory to be made. My heart is heavy, but I am not burdened. I know that although the latter portions of my familial Trimetric text are still unwritten, we have already had a strong start to the story. The last piece of the puzzle lies within myself.

When I return to my desk to begin again, I know I will be ready to write my next verse.

Grief Overcomes

Olivia Green

Have you ever felt as if the emotions of joy and happiness have been ripped from your inner core? That your only lust for living has been shattered and smashed into millions of pieces right in front of you? When someone that you love dearly takes their final breath, says their last word, and looks at you for the very last time, you feel like the most influential part of your life has just been wrenched from your heart. That is simply because it has. The only thing that can fill the void left in your heart is mournfulness and tribulation. Agony and heartache. Anguish and despair. All of these feelings pile inside your heart, absorb into your body, and bleed into your everyday life.

Grief really is fascinating. The smallest, most minuscule things can be a beacon of affliction. It demolishes you, crushing every joy and jubilation you ever had in your life. Losing someone, realizing that you will never again have them walking with you here on this Earth, makes your very own brain a living hell. You are weighed down by numerous emotions and feelings. Thoughts cross your mind that never in a million years you would have known to even think about. You feel forlorn, forsaken.

Grief is like a hangnail. When you have a hangnail, you pick and pick at it until the nail starts to peel off. You try to ignore it, but the feeling of the jagged nail is pulsating in your mind. Slowly, more and more of the poor, innocent nail is pulled away from its source of life. What has it done to deserve this? Absolutely nothing. You try to push the thought of it away. But no matter how hard you try, it seems impossible. Suddenly, without warning, the nail is ripped away, forced off your finger. Even after it has been mutilated parts of it remain. The fleshy, raw leftovers stay put. They are as tender as a newborn child. The obliterated fingernail continuously throbs on your finger, longing for the missing pieces to come back. It is like that for many days, maybe weeks, until it ever so slowly starts to heal itself. The hangnail is put through vigorous everyday activities, so it won't heal instantly. It feels like it does not have time to stop and pick up its missing pieces. But still, it continues on, doing the best it can do without something it has had in its life forever.

While experiencing grief in my own life, I feel like that hangnail. After losing someone that held a special place in my heart, nothing about my life was normal. Imagine if I had just destroyed a glass window and asked you

to glue each and every piece back together. Your job is to make it look brand new again. Sounds difficult, doesn't it? You would want to do absolutely anything else than deal with that window. You would want to just go out and buy a new one. But guess what? You can't do that. Because no window will ever look as pretty as the broken one did. You just want the old window back, because it made your house complete. Grief steals a portion of you and is not fond of the idea of giving it back.

When I lost my beloved grandmother, I also lost a piece of myself. When she died, a portion of me died with her, almost like losing an essential organ. Like trying to breathe without lungs. Death is something that hits you in multiple ways. Some ways that would never cross your mind in a million years. In the moments leading up to the death, you are in a full sprint. Going as fast as you can, racing to make it across the finish line. But the second the death is final, you slam against a brick wall. Where do I go next? What do I do from here? Why is this happening to me? How am I ever going to recover? All of these questions filled my mind soon after my grandmother's passing.

The grief hits you early on. It's never hesitant to settle deep into your brain. For many days, I experienced sleepless nights and depressing days. My body had temporarily shut down. I had no appetite and couldn't care less about nourishing myself. I had so much anxiety, there was no way I could sleep. I couldn't find the courage in me to speak up about my traumatic event. I talked minimally, which was rare for my extroverted self. I started to have no care for schoolwork. Assignments would pile up but I would just brush them off to the side. The day of the funeral was creeping up, and I was dreading it. I trudged along, dragging myself through school every day. I was not living. I was existing.

Dealing with grief as a teen is never easy. You are surrounded by the chaos and drama in the hallways at school every day. When you try to speak up about what is really going on inside of you, you feel like background noise, added chatter that no one cares about. So you keep quiet. Behind that fake smile is a fire burning inside of your soul, turning everything you once had to ashes. I constantly asked myself, why would anyone care? I act fine when in reality I just want someone to sit and listen to what I am going through. I think of the challenges that my peers are facing and disregard my own. I want to spill everything, yet I want to remain silent. Then again, why would anyone care about my challenges? Kids my age do not understand the complexity of grief until they have truly experienced it themselves. I can put on a smile and act amazing. But if you were to look deep into my hazel eyes, you would see the depth of my struggles. The surrealness of trying to function without a daily necessity. Losing one of my grandparents has absolutely

wrecked me, even though I try not to show it.

When the day of the funeral arrived, I did not know what to expect. I have such vivid memories of that day. Walking into the room where the funeral was held, you could feel the sadness lingering in the air. I had to stay strong for my family and sister. So for as long as I could, I buried the tears and cries deep inside. But I was empty. Nothing was there to secure it. How was I to cover everything up when there was nothing to cover it up with? I tried to hold my head high as I made my way to the casket. But I was at my breaking point. I stood there, tears streaming down my face, staring at the person I have cared for and loved deeply my entire life now laying dead in a casket. Looking down at her was painful, but I could not take my eyes away. The reality was setting in. She was gone. She's not coming back. Her life was over. This was the last time I would ever see her face on this Earth. The last time I would be able to stand in the same room as her. My brain was fogged. It seemed like a thick, dark smoke was clouding around me. I was overcome with emotions that I had never felt before.

I sat down between my grandfather and sister. No words were exchanged. We just needed the comfort of each other's presence. The world was standing still. Where was I to go from here? Not an ounce of joy was in my life at that very moment. I felt demolished. As a family, we all comforted one another. But was that really helping? The only thing we wanted was for her to come back. Just to have one more cheerful conversation. Just to give her one more hug. To look into her beautiful, brown eyes once again. To say one final, "I love you."

What pained me most was the way she had passed. For three or four years, she had suffered from Dementia. She spent the last 14 months of her life in a nursing home. People say that she was living in that nursing home, but I disagree. She was not living, but rather, she was existing. She had not been her real self for quite some time. She had been rapidly declining after being placed in the nursing home. She was a fighter. Go down one hill, then climb right back up it. She had come to this last hill, but just couldn't make it back up. I would have never expected to hear the news the way I did. My mom, dad, sister, and I were all in Florida for fall break. My sister and I were making bagels in the kitchen of our condo. We were blasting country music and dancing around, having fun together. We could sense a twinge of strangeness in the air when our parents walked into the kitchen, silent and teary-eyed.

They told us that hospice had been called in for my grandmother. She was only expected to have two or three days left and had taken a turn for the worst. Our flight home left tomorrow morning, and we hoped that we would

make it in time to say our goodbyes. With the grace of God, we did. We drove straight from the airport to her bedside, not even close to being mentally prepared for what we were going to witness. It would not have mattered if I had gotten a notice weeks in advance. Nothing will ever help me fully recuperate from the state I saw her in that day.

When I walked into her room, I did not know what I was looking at. There was no possible way that this corpse-like figure could be my grandma. Laying there, propped up with pillows, breathing heavier than ever, eyes closed. The only thing that made her look alive was her breathing. She looked dead. My family gathered around her, looking down at what a disease could do to such an innocent, sweet, beautiful woman. Seeing someone who has been your biggest cheerleader since you were born lying in a nursing home bed, unresponsive and stiff, is something that I would never wish upon even my worst enemy.

At the funeral, when the time came to close the casket, it felt like I was holding onto a thread, fighting to keep every ounce of her with me. I was grasping at anything and everything I could do to keep her. This is the last time I would ever be able to look at her. That is a lot to take in for a 13-year-old girl. It is a blessing that I will never have to witness her in that state again, but also devastating that she will never be here with me while I mature and grow. For the rest of my life, she won't be at Christmas or my birthday parties. All of my sporting events and band concerts will not include her presence. I will never have her there to watch me graduate from high school. She won't see me graduate from college. She is never going to dance at my wedding or meet my future spouse. My future children will not be blessed by her conversations. No more will I ask my parents, "Can we go visit grandma?"

With grief comes acceptance. At this point in the grieving process, I have accepted that she is gone. I am coming to be okay with the fact that she is not going to be with me here on this Earth. That may not be the news I want to hear, but that is what I have to accept. I must continue on in life and not dwell on this forever. I still feel as if my heart has been shredded, but I need to help it sew itself back together. So even though, yes, this is sad, and yes, I will never fully recover, I must find more joys in life. My grandmother would not want me to mope around all day long. She was the strongest person I know, and now in return, I must stay strong for her. She is not here anymore, so her personality must live on through me.

Representation in literature: A double-edged sword

Emma Hu

I was eight years old when I read *Harry Potter* for the first time. I, like many (if not all) of my Asian friends, proudly declared that my favorite character was Cho Chang. Nobody went around telling a third-grader that Cho Chang was nothing more than a voice for J.K. Rowling to silence. For years, Cho Chang was a character I claimed to love. Yet, somehow, after all those years of dressing up as her for Halloween, I still fell out of love with Cho Chang. In the end, it all boiled down to one simple revelation: Cho Chang would never be a Hermione Granger, or a Ginny Weasley. That's just not what she was made for. Years later, I realize the psychology of my juvenile attachment to Cho Chang is also rather simple. It's a pattern that still occurs quite often among the youth of minority communities. When the media you consume is almost completely centered around characters who are different from you, there is an innate tendency to latch on to the first one you have an outward connection with. For a second, you forget (or maybe you choose to ignore) that this character is written purely off of stereotypes, and you feel seen. But as soon as that fact surges to the surface, you disappear all over again.

Diversity and literary success

Out of the top 20 bestselling adult books of 2023, 19 are written by white authors. Of those 19, 15 are fiction. Of those 15, a whopping two have minority main characters. As for the top 10 bestselling young adult books of 2023, all 10 are written by white authors. This time, three of those books have minority main characters, but there's a catch— they're all from the same series. Very evidently, the world of literature is dominated by white authors, who write books about white characters. But here's the issue: When these white authors try to write books about people of color (POC), it's often done haphazardly, and the result is blatantly inaccurate. This, compounded with the lack of minority author exposure, means POC (and other marginalized communities) are left with two options: they can a) read exclusively about white characters, or b) read about sloppily written minority side characters. Neither option is more appealing than the other.

Option A

Books with all-white casts are some of the biggest proprietors of close-mindedness, which in turn, presents the world in an utterly unrealistic

light. Obviously, there are systemic and societal issues behind this type of writing, but on the most basic level, these books are just plain unrealistic. That being said, what is the point of writing a book with only white characters? A very easy question to answer, really; there is no point. Because what is the point of creating a world that looks nothing like the real one? The truth is, there is more than one race. More than one ethnicity. More than one culture. Literature is meant to entertain, but it is also meant to educate. In order to educate properly, your view of the world must be accurate. Quite frankly, there is nothing more inaccurate than a world in which only white people exist. This worldview perpetuates a white-centric mindset that closes the door to societal growth. A white person's view of the world is limited to white experiences, which are only representative of so much of the population. Ultimately, this means the lives and stories of minority groups are brushed under the rug and put away for "later", and often, there is no later. Even if a book isn't meant to educate, and its purpose is simply to be entertaining, a book with an all-white cast of characters diminishes the entertainment factor for POC youth immensely. POC children are forced to grow up reading about white heroes and heroines, white princes and princesses. It builds a sort of resentment for literature as a whole. The only takeaway from these books is "you will never have those experiences". At that point, literature is not educational nor is it entertaining. It is imperative to build diversity and inclusion to maintain the integrity of literature.

Option B

On (rare) occasions when white authors choose to write about POC characters, more often than not, it's simply to check off a box. A diversity and equity box. An inclusion box. An "I'm so welcoming" box. These characters are the Cho Changs, more commonly referred to as the token minority character(s). Tokenism is more common than most people realize. POC communities are then forced to accept these characters, and when the fundamental flaws of these token characters are pointed out, said communities are once again, silenced. Why? Because to those authors, their perfunctory, completely stereotypical POC character is representation enough. Despite the fact that these characters lack substance and depth, they are meant to satisfy the entirety of a marginalized community. POC are not allowed to ask for more. They are meant to take what they can get, and to thank the white authors who took time to create a character *just* for them! Who cares that the character is the epitome of the very stereotypes that fuel racial violence and further societal disparity? Who cares, because at least there is some representation! As more and more POC decide to advocate for representation, white authors have found it more and more difficult to justify their novels' lack of diversity. Instead, they turn to tokenism as a scapegoat. Token characters are, of course, the easy way out. However, that's not the issue;

the issue is that POC should not be asked to stand down and embrace token characters. Why should the underrepresented, underappreciated communities be told to quiet down? That's been the trend for all of history. Unfortunately for those traditionalists, times are changing. POC communities are not crying babies, and token characters are not pacifiers. A half-baked POC character does not, and will not even scratch the surface of what these POC communities hold. There are centuries of culture, and history that deserve to be committed to paper.

The author's dilemma

After hearing POC readers' options, how does an aspirational POC author navigate the precarious waters of literary success? Like any other author, a POC author will be thinking about success. Success, that is seemingly only attainable through writing books primarily about white characters. If a POC author wants to achieve big, and wants to achieve fast, they only have one option. Appeal to the masses. Appeal to white readers, but more importantly, white editors. Write about white characters. Throw in one of those handy, token POC characters—two, if you're feeling risky. Slap on a corny title that the editors at Random House—95% of whom are white—would love, and you're all set. That number-one bestseller has never seemed so close. It's editors who get books out into the world. Most major publishing companies' editors are still overwhelmingly white. Not unlike the version of me that worshiped Cho Chang solely because I saw myself in her, white editors have a predisposition to prioritize works that focus on white characters, usually produced by white authors. POC authors are left in the dust once again, compromising their identities and passions for close-minded people. Close-minded people who hold the only working keys to fame and success in literature.

Maybe.

Completely reconstructing the labor market is most definitely an impossible task, or at least it's not a task that can be completed in the near future. Hope, however, is on the horizon. In recent years, a fire seems to have been lit among POC communities. There is more reluctance when we are told to just accept whatever lackluster representation we are handed. There is more refusal to listen to the same recycled excuses that have been used for years. Opportunities are growing, stories are circulating, and movements are being born. POC are asking to be heard, but more importantly, we are choosing to speak. A massive uptick in advocacy for books about and written by POC can already be seen. Maybe it's only a matter of time before those books are making it onto the charts. Maybe, before we know it, there will be true appreciation for authentic representation. Maybe the system will fall apart,

and maybe the new one won't be quite so narrow.

Non-People

Zunaynah Iffah

I am not a person. I am many things but I am not a person. My family are not people. My friends are not people. My community is not people. We are anything but people. We are all the labels society has chosen for us, the roles they have decided for us, the personalities they have picked for us, the narratives they have selected for us. They strip us of our humanity, carefully removing everything that makes us human, leaving behind only a shell. They decide that we are not worthy of respect, empathy, or humanity. They make us the monsters under a child's bed, out for blood and always on the hunt. They make us the villains, forever to be feared and misunderstood. They make us the big, bad wolf, ready to uproot families and homes. They make us many things, but never human. We do not get to be human.

I have always wondered who let them reduce us to nothing. Who gave them the authority, the *right*, to strip us of our humanity? Who are they to decide we are not human beings, multi-faceted and complicated? Who are they to decide we are not worthy of respect, of empathy, of compassion? How *dare* they take everything away from us, only leaving the parts that fit their narrative, that make their world more simple, more black and white, more easy, more narrow, more secure, more safe. I ask how the world could let this happen and I remember, the world has made it this way. They are the world. They dictate everything. They control who is human and who is not.

I think back to all the times when we weren't considered people, all the times they reduced us to one single concept, one single idea, one single role. One moment, one specific event, comes vividly to mind.

I have seen several members of my family pulled in at airports for secondary inspection. I don't even remember why. All I remember is those countless hours, wondering when I could go home. For a while, I thought there was something amiss with my father's information or that my mother didn't have all her papers. I thought there was a concrete reason that they delayed my family, that it was a mistake that could easily be rectified. I was wrong. My father was pulled in because of his name. His name is Muhammad. Muhammad, a Muslim name, a dangerous, treacherous name. The name of a man who'd yell "Allahu Akbar!" as he set off a bomb in a building full of innocent Americans. The name of a man who'd get words like "jihad" and "Islamic extremist" thrown at him. The name of a terrorist.

My father wasn't alone. My frail grandmother in her wheelchair, exhausted from the long flight, was pulled into secondary inspection because she wore a hijab. Because she was from a foreign country. Because she couldn't speak English well.

My 15-year-old sister was pulled in for secondary inspection this summer. They stamped the four S's on her boarding pass, "See something, say something." That "something" happened to be my sister. Her passport showed her uncovered while she stood in front of the officer, clad in a navy blue hijab. Clearly something was amiss, they decided, rather suspicious that a child would wear hijab when her passport told another tale. How about we stamp her boarding pass with the little phrase "SSSS" and send her off for secondary inspection? We'll be doing her and everyone in this airport a favor, they thought.

Countless other Muslims have been pulled in for secondary inspection alongside my family. The airports were packed with passengers whose flights had arrived long ago. Passengers who just wanted to leave. To go home. Passengers who greeted others with "Assalam o Alaikum." Passengers who spoke excitedly with one another in languages besides English. Passengers who covered their hair with colorful scarves. Passengers who took pride in their well-groomed beards. Passengers who carried names of Ahmed, Yusuf, Khadija, and Maryam. Passengers who were all Muslim.

They said that to be Muslim is to be dirty. To be a traitor. To be a violent terrorist. To be oppressed, shackled by the chains of Islam. You are nothing good when you are Muslim. You are dangerous. Our sin is to be Muslim. Our sin is those times we wake up before sunrise to pray to Allah. Our sin is when we cover our hair with a scarf. Our sin is in our name. Our sin is quietly reading the Quran at the masjid. Our sin is breaking our fast, surrounded by loved ones during Ramadan. Our sin is performing pilgrimage at Makkah. Our sin is our existence. Our sin is-

Stop. Those are not our sins. Those labels do *not* represent us. Those caricatures are *not* us. We are *not* dirty. We are *not* traitors. We are *not* terrorists, filled with rage, ready to blow you up. We are *not* oppressed, forced by our fathers and brothers and husbands to submit to their whims. Our existence is *not* a sin. We are so much more than the empty labels they decorate us with. We are so much more than their prejudices. We are so much more than the roles they've chosen for us to play. We. Are. *More*.

We are fathers, holding the hands of our daughter as she takes her first steps through the home we worked so hard to buy. We think, how can someone be this tiny and precious? We are careful to hold her hands, scared to

hurt her yet wanting to make sure she doesn't fall. We watch with love in our eyes as she takes clumsy steps across the carpeted floors, her eyes widening in shock at what she can do. We murmur "Alhamdulillah", ever so grateful for the blessing that is our daughter.

We are teachers, our pens racing across the board as we fill the minds of our students with wisdom and knowledge. We smile as we hear the students groan and complain, asking for a break. We tell them that if they finish this last set of problems, they'll have no homework for the weekend. We laugh as they let out whoops and cheers, quickly punching in numbers into their calculators and scribbling madly in their notebooks.

We are brides glancing shyly at our groom, whose warm brown eyes glimmer with affection and mirth. We take hesitant steps toward each other before we wrap our arms around each other for the first time, thanking Allah for this joyful moment, and promising to never let go. We dream of our future together, formulating plans for all the things we could do, all the sights we could see, all the people we could meet. We sway in each other's embrace, our lips permanently curved upwards as those around us clap and laugh with joy.

We are dreamers. We are broken. We are optimists. We are pessimists. We are hopeful. We are desperate. We are carefree. We are cautious. We are loud. We are quiet. We are young. We are old. We are joyful. We are weary. We are sweet. We are bitter. We are interesting. We are boring. We are simple. We are complex. We are multifaceted, never one single thing. We carry different stories, different dreams, different motives, different lives. We are united in our discordance. We fit no one role, no one label, no one narrative. We are everything they have taken away from us. We are human.

I am a person. I am many things, including a person. My friends are people. My family are people. My community is people. We are everything a person could be. We are people, as simple and plain as that.

A Story of Ecdysis

Melody Meng

Periodical cicadas emerge from the ground every thirteen or seventeen years. After sustaining themselves on tree root nutrients, they dig out of their hiding holes with their jointed arthropod legs and crawl onto tree trunks. In one to two hours, they shed their skin and leave it hanging on the bark as the now adult cicada flies away. The males then use the vibrating drum-like plates on their abdomens to attract females, who mate with them, lay eggs, and finally die after around five weeks.

Beyond this thrilling life story, cicadas were among my only entertainment sources in my small, somewhat dilapidated neighborhood. It was an area meant for older citizens, who had already retired and could spend the afternoon sitting on their lawn, enjoying inane and expensive hobbies. My brother, of course, was too old to play with me, happy to leave me behind while biking, blaming me for my inability to keep up. (Three years felt like an insurmountable gap back when we had barely lived two to three times that.)

The only solution was to take advantage of the nature around me. Like my neighbors, the oak trees in my neighborhood were also decades old, and cicadas loved to lay eggs among their branches. In the summers, when the buzzing of insects filled the air, I only heard the inviting call of collecting cicada shells.

Collecting these exoskeletons requires a unique technique I still remember to this day. You always circle around each and every trunk, looking high and low. When you chance upon a shell, carefully hold the head area with your thumb and pointer finger, lifting before pulling out, as the thin, hollow legs are often hooked into the bark. Using too much force would end in a crumbling disaster, as I learned after constant failure.

Cups upon plastic cups of exuviae went under the kitchen sink every summer. I always tried to find the largest or the most complete, proudly showing them to my parents. My father would comment minimally if he even said anything, usually too focused on putting dinner on the table (that he often failed to eat, too tired to move after his work at a research lab). My mother, however, wholeheartedly encouraged my endeavors, complement-

ing my best finds.

I caught cicadas as a child instead of collecting shells, she reminisced in Chinese once, cradling several fragile exoskeletons in her palm. We would find nymphs, wait for them to molt and form wings, then tie strings to them, watching them fly around on a leash.

This practice came across as cruel to a younger me, who liked to think from the perspective of cicadas—waiting years upon years to scabble out of the ground, only to be strung up for childish entertainment. I much preferred the collection of their exuviae, the evidence that the cicadas had been present and molted to become something better. Besides, once entrapped, cicadas would only survive a couple of days maximum; a lack of food and careless treatment often cut their already limited weeks short.

Though moving away from the area and meeting new people was similar to emerging from my version of a shell, my friends could never understand how simple happiness can be. When describing the joy of a successful find, I am always met with intense and dramatic reactions, ranging from severe confusion to horrified disgust. Unfortunately, picking bug shells off trees is not a common occurrence in suburban cities (partially due to a lack of the bug itself). I stopped collecting exuviae and switched to now accessible hobbies like video games and dance, activities made possible by my parents' hard work throughout my formative years.

Five years after I left my old house in the old neighborhood with the old oak trees, I can look around and truly appreciate every sacrifice my parents made. While my childhood could be considered unfortunate compared to some of my classmates, I see it as further proof of my family's perseverance and hard work. Even with the minimal resources before our move, my mother continued educating my brother and me, signing up for various free reading programs and forcing us to memorize the multiplication table (which, while unpleasant at the time, undoubtedly still comes in use). Nowadays, my father can sit down and enjoy each meal before entering his home office to hold classes for his own business education company.

My parents are getting older, as do all humans inevitably. My father does not talk about the times when “*wait a moment*” meant a couple long hours (learned after careful counting, as if that could make time pass faster), when we were taught that *every grain of rice is a farmer's bead of sweat*, and when we scraped every bowl clean no matter what. My past conversations with my mother are now forgotten from her mind, as are many things nowadays after several rounds of chemo and radiation therapy. Perhaps in a couple of years, when my time away from the oak trees is longer than the time spent within

them, the details that shaped me will become blurry and undefined.

Nonetheless, I strive to honor everything they have done and do my utmost best—though this still frequently fails to fill the footprints left by their expectations. I have been taught to learn and bring honor to the family legacy. Ever since I could read, my importance lay in that I was the eighty-sixth generation of a famous historical scholar, a direct descendant of the main branch, expected to become a scholar just like everyone and their cousins and their parents. When my mother told us bedtime stories, it was of the Royal Family and how I was of one-eighth noble blood from my grandmother's side, under the Blue Flag. Naturally, it became my life's purpose to make my ancestors and, more importantly, my parents proud.

I had been recommended to the next level of my competitive gymnastics team—a position my younger self dedicated myself wholeheartedly to—when my parents sat me down in a room and told me sternly not the high chance of injury in such a sport or the truth (that our financial resources couldn't handle such a strain), but that *our family has always had the best scholars. Why would you want to pursue a useless activity? Better to quit now and finish reading your books.* There was little else to do but listen.

At least, I had believed this to be true. My brother had always been rebellious and creative, and his talent lay in the production and performance of music. Hailed as a violin prodigy since he had turned five, my parents finally accepted in his junior year that he would never become an academic genius and decided to support his college journey by earning a composition degree. While the path was decidedly rocky, with his spotty records and flares of misplaced frustration, he was eventually accepted to a college, and my parents loved him enough to pay the steep cost.

As a sophomore, watching my senior brother pursue his desires and retain our parents' support caused me endless bitterness. Though he never followed their wishes, it always seemed plausible that as the firstborn, he would take everything they had, such as every drop of college tuition our parents had saved for the both of us. After all, once they realized the high cost and subsequent debt his poor choices landed him in, they immediately ushered me to start finding ways to raise more college money rather than look at any alternative routes for my brother.

This felt vastly unfair. How could it be that even though I was clearly the “better” child, I constantly ended up wanting? It appeared as cruel as my mother letting a weaker cicada go but tying a string to the strongest one, keeping it trapped to watch it fly, reminiscent of her slightly twisted perspective on familial love. Throughout my sophomore year, as a private way

of fighting back against these conceptions, I let my grades drop as low as I dared, placing all my focus on the dance company I had joined.

Now, I regret this decision. The facts behind the situation became more apparent with the increased distance between my brother and me after he left. *Of course*, my parents unconditionally supported him and despite their endless disappointment at his grades, they will always love him. Despite my brother making life needlessly difficult for them, the constant arguments and fights, they will always provide for him. Overall, their ultimate goal was to come to America, get enough money, and then get their children a superior education: no matter how hard they needed to work, the discrimination they faced, or the difficulties of the children themselves, they would always do their utmost to support both their son and their daughter.

Once I realized this through separation and self-reflection, I again threw myself into my studies. Now, my purpose wasn't only to make my parents proud through what I *did*, but to become someone they could be proud of. While these seem similar at first glance, the difference lies within my attitude. Before, I had been smart enough to maintain decent grades, even with chronic procrastination and a terrible sleep schedule. I would convince myself to finish homework and study by thinking of getting scones—my favorite food—for motivation, along with imagining how disappointed my parents could be for an extra boost. Now, with both the difficulty increase in my classes and a newfound determination, I slowly improved my habits, leading to notable benefits for my academics.

Growing up, I believed my mother would have cicadas tied up in her house, keeping them for some vague entertainment in a bleak environment forever. However, when I asked her the day before writing this essay to tell me more about her cicada-catching childhood, she finally shed light on the ending of what I thought was a gloomy tale. While she confirmed that she tied cicadas to string to fly them like kites, she would always release them after a few hours of fun to live the rest of their natural lifespan.

In most of the world, cicadas are simply insects with a short life cycle that passes in a couple weeks in the heat of June and August—things to avoid for fear of their appearance.

When I think of cicadas, I am instantly reminded of my mother's soft words, my father's car entering the garage at later and later hours, summers spent as a child searching high and low on the old oak trees, and my determination to improve both myself and life around me.

2024 is among the rare years when the thirteen- and seventeen-year periodical cicadas emerge simultaneously. In a few months, I will find a plastic cup, scour the trees for every exuvia, collect them carefully for one last summer, and store them under our kitchen sink, with the fancy dish soaps and miscellaneous cleaning supplies. Once I, too, leave the home my parents created from a single suitcase, the clothes on their back, and a dream, I hope they will look at my final cup of shells and feel proud of who I've become.

The Grief in the Lost

Landri Moulton

“Suicide?” I said, my eyes teary, eight years old.

“Yes,” my mom responded. “He did it to himself.” The day was warm. It was the most perfect day, but somehow my skies were painted a darker shade of grey. I couldn’t comprehend what was happening; everything was so complex.

I lost my uncle that day in May, someone who was full of laughter, love, and play. I threw my arms around my mom, cause she lost something too. She lost her brother. My sister lost her uncle. My dad lost his brother-in-law. My grandparents lost their son. My uncle lost his life. He just didn’t know that when he took away from himself, we would be losing something too. The older I got, I realized that suicide didn’t get rid of his pain at all, it just gave it all away to others.

I saw my grandparents a few days after my uncle was taken off of life support. My grampy’s eyes were filled with sorrow. Nothing mattered to him except for the son that he once had. He looked at each member of my family as if he were angry. Furious. Furious, that we were still here and his son wasn’t. I realized that maybe I was mad too. How could my uncle just leave me here? Leave me here on this earth to deal with not only my grief but my other family members’ grief as well.

I was eight years old, and I was so confused. How could I not be? I have had people ask me in the past if I know why and how he committed. To be honest, that is a question that rings in my mind every day because I hate that I will never know. What if my family and I could have helped him? What if all that he needed to hear was that his life was worth it and that he had people who cared about him? He had no idea about the hole that he would leave in many hearts until it was too late. He didn’t think about the grief and hurt that he chose to bring into our lives.

I often think of my grief as a wound. It will partially heal, but more often than not, the words spilling out of mouths are what always have the power to open it back up.

“Kill yourself,” is a phrase that is commonly used in the average middle school, because it’s “funny.” How can something so morbid and horrendous

be funny? What hurts the most is that sometimes I think I have the power to change the way people speak about suicide. I tell them about my experience, and how it’s a serious thing. Some take it well, but more often than not, people just get uncomfortable and end up saying even more awful things about suicide. Even some of my closest friends haven’t been able to take it in a serious and understanding manner.

It has been five years now since I lost my uncle. The pain has become more numb over time, and I can briefly talk about him without tears welling up in my eyes. Sometimes I think about my uncle and wonder who I would’ve been if I hadn’t lost him. Would I have been sensitive to the daily suicide jokes, or would I have been the one making them? Would I have been happier, or not happy at all?

Would I have to live with the grief of what was lost?

From Four to Eight

Addi Wormer

From my birth, I had a family of four. It was perfect for me. I had an older brother who tortured me constantly, but I made sure to do it right back. My family didn't have many health concerns until I was born. I was born with two conditions, Spinal Bifida Occulta and Pyloric Stenosis. I was about a month old when I lost a major amount of weight and was rushed to the hospital, where no one knew what was wrong. Pyloric Stenosis tends to affect first-born males, so seeing as how I was a second-born female, that was not on the radar of my doctors. Eventually, I was rushed to Riley's Pediatric Hospital in Indianapolis where they discovered my Pyloric Stenosis. Then my parents were informed I would need surgery. Within the week, I had my surgery which was a huge success. I, of course, had to stay at the hospital for a bit of time after. Even with all of this, my family was perfect as a family of four. Even though my family was happy, we knew we weren't complete. Mom and Dad talked to us, and we decided to begin the process of fostering children and growing our family more. This is where the journey began.

On November 20, 2019, my family received a call. Even though we signed up to foster, we weren't expecting a call so soon, so we went on with our lives as normal until this day. My mother answered the phone and was told they had a brother and sister needing a home. They were originally removed from their first home because my sister was about two years old taking care of her four-month-old brother while they were home alone. The severity of their situation was unclear until DCS received a welfare call. Spence (the boy), was underweight, naked, and covered in his feces. He was later diagnosed with failure to thrive. Meanwhile, Char (the girl) was trying her best to take care of him. When DCS arrived, they were unable to get in due to the fact that no adult was there. When their mother arrived, she was given the chance to fix their living situation. When DCS returned days later, they saw no improvements were made. Spence was underweight, hadn't been to the doctor, was filthy, and not in good shape. Char was again caring for Spence and she now was filthy and had scabies. Both children were removed that day.

They were put in a kinship placement which was their biological mother's foster home. The kinship placement was not able to be permanent. Char, who was three years old, was found alone, in the bathtub, underwater, and unconscious. When DCS found out, they began the search for a pre-adoptive home. This is when my family was called. On November 22, 2019, we

picked up the sweetest, most amazing three-year-old girl and one-year-old boy. Char was still very protective of Spence and wanted to take care of his every need, but we slowly worked on this. Parentification of children is common in these situations, and it takes time to correct. They had visitation with their biological mother about two times a week. She would only show up for one of these typically. When she did show, she would play mind games with my sister telling her that she could only call her Mommy and if she called my Mom, Mommy she would be in trouble. Other times she convinced my sister to tell her that Spence had touched the stove and burnt himself when he did not. She even went as far as telling their caseworker that he had burnt himself causing them to text us asking if it had happened.

We promptly took Spence in to be seen, and it was proven he had no trauma to his hand. Char began to have seizures and was eventually diagnosed with epilepsy, making her necessity of care significantly higher. Their biological mother had shown that she was not prepared for what Char needed and was not likely to keep up with the doctor appointments that were needed to control her epilepsy. The termination hearings began, but the biological mother decided to sign off on her rights. She had missed visits, hadn't followed up with her treatment plan, and overall was struggling. One biological father also signed off. The other never showed up, and the court legally terminated his rights. After our 30-day wait for appeals, we were officially moving towards adoption.

On May 22, 2021, they were officially ours, and we gave them our name. This process took a year and a half from the moment they came home with us to the moment they were adopted. They had been in foster care for two and a half years. Spence was put into physical therapy after he was placed with us due to his trauma and eventually speech therapy due to his speech delay. There are still therapies needed to help them deal with the trauma and lack of bonding for Char at such a young age. Currently, Char is seven years old, thriving, and her epilepsy is under control. She is a timid and quiet kid who is just beginning to break out of her shell. Spence is now five years old, thriving, and growing. He is the most energetic, loud, and amazing kid you will ever meet. You would never be able to guess everything that these two kids have been through by seeing them today.

Although this process was one of the hardest things my family faced, we decided that we were not done. This being said, my family received another call during the process of adopting Char and Spence on November 9, 2020. This time it was a four-day-old baby girl in the NICU. She was born addicted to many drugs. My family was told that this was going to be a long and hard process and that she could have problems due to the drugs she was addicted to. Her healing would be quite a long process. All my family truly knew

about her and her family at this point was that she had four older siblings who were already adopted and three other older siblings who were on their way to being adopted, giving her a total of seven siblings. We were told that her biological parents had made no effort to get the others back and the other homes that have her siblings were full.

My family had nothing we needed for a baby. Our church arranged dinners every night for almost two weeks, and we had people dropping off diapers, clothes, etc. We had so many amazing people who had our backs through it all. Soon enough we had everything we needed. My family brought her home one day after this call. As soon as we brought her home, my family was in awe of her. She was perfect in every single way, and we began to call her Faye. Almost immediately, Faye went into withdrawals. This was horrible, she would shake uncontrollably and constantly because of her diarrhea from the withdraws her bottom was bleeding, and she was constantly in pain from this. She had trouble latching to eat and overall was really struggling.

We began appointments with her pediatrician as soon as possible. During her first appointment, we learned that she was addicted to five drugs, which were methamphetamine, amphetamine, opioids, THC, and nicotine which were found in her blood. Her doctor believed that she should still be in the NICU on morphine. We made a very detailed at-home plan which was extremely difficult, and hard at times, to follow. This lasted for over a month. She was put in feeding therapy where we learned that she had to be fed in a certain position so she didn't aspirate on her formula. She had to be swaddled extremely tight, constantly just to be comfortable daily. Overall, I would never want anyone else to have to see a newborn baby go through this. We ensured that Faye had everything she needed day or night, no matter what. This included almost weekly doctor appointments, calls, and whatever else she needed to get better.

During this time Faye had visits with her biological parents. They would show up clearly impaired, be late, fall asleep, or just not show up. They tested positive for drugs at every visit. They went through multiple visit supervisors, unable to keep one because of the threats, inability to follow rules, etc. Meanwhile, DCS continued to say we have to work towards reunification. Due to her special needs, our point remained—if they can't show up for visits on time or even at all, how will they get her to therapy or to the doctor?

As a result of her withdrawals, her muscles were locked extremely tight, she was just not in great shape in general at this point. It didn't take long for the biological parents to burn all of their bridges, and it was quickly determined their visits had to be with metal detectors and full security due to

threats. During one of their visits, they jumped over a table and attacked the CASA worker while Faye was sitting right there. They even went as far as to threaten everyone's life if they tried to stand between them and their child. This landed them in jail, but once they were out no one heard from them again. They had seen Faye maybe six times in her first couple of months of life. All we knew after they were released was that they were both on the run because they had warrants out for their arrest.

We were well on our way to adopting Faye, and we were so proud of how far she had come with therapy multiple hours a week. We had a termination of parental rights hearing scheduled for March of 2022. Little did we know, we would have a big surprise on our hands. Faye's parents took the police on a high-speed chase and once captured, the biological dad was taken to jail and the biological mom was taken to the hospital. At the time we didn't know why, but we found out pretty quickly.

On March 6, 2022, my family received yet another call. It was found out that while Faye's mom was gone she got pregnant, and now there was a four-day-old baby girl in need of a home. My family had to give this one a great deal of thought. We didn't know if we could handle another child. We believed we were done. My family got rid of everything - every piece of infant clothing, toys, bassinet, swing, diapers, and everything else. We knew that if we didn't take this baby we could lose Faye. DCS and the state wants siblings to stay together, and since Faye wasn't adopted yet, her permanency plan could still be changed. That would be the worst pain imaginable for my family and so hard on the little girl who had only known us for the last year and a half, so my dad went to the hospital to get more information.

When he came home, he immediately said that we needed this baby. She needed the same love and care Faye had and who better than the family who had already been through it? A couple hours later my mom told them yes. Then, on March 7, Maye was released from the hospital and brought to our home where we all fell for her perfect baby face. Right then we knew we made the right choice. Maye's medical condition from birth was much more severe. Maye was born addicted to methamphetamines, opioids, THC, and nicotine which are all the same as Faye, except Faye was also addicted to amphetamines. Maye was born with severe reflux and many breathing problems. As Maye has grown, and after a few procedures, her medical conditions have gotten much less severe, except for one thing. As she has grown her tongue has begun to get tied, and due to this she has a speech delay. A few days after Maye's arrival, we had Faye's termination hearing. Their biological dad was brought in from the jail and signed away his rights to Faye. Their biological Mom didn't show up and her rights were immediately terminated, but now we had the same process to do for Maye.

The state of Indiana says that foster children must be in the system for over 12 months before termination of rights can be filed, but a loophole exists. As the biological mother was still making no effort and the biological father was sentenced to prison, if their biological father would again sign off on his rights, the biological mother's rights could be terminated due to no effort. During the summer of 2022, he said he was thankful that his girls were together and signed off on his rights to Maye. Their mom was a no-show to Maye's termination hearing, so her rights were once again terminated due to no effort. Despite the difficulties they faced Faye and Maye began to thrive. On January 20, 2023, we adopted them and gave them our last name.

Faye is now an extremely energetic three-year-old who is extremely smart and can make anyone laugh in any situation. Maye is an extremely loud one-year-old who is only three months out from her birthday. She is beginning to speak, and while her words are not very clear because of her tongue being tied, she is still doing her best and she has the most amazing speech therapist who has become a part of our family. They are two of the bravest toddlers I have ever met, and they make me proud to call them my sisters.

While the state of Indiana says that reunification or kinship is the number one priority. It makes the whole process even more lengthy and difficult. While reunification is important and time to make corrections is imperative, when you have a situation with nine children, and seven have not been able to be reunited, doing the same process over and over again with every child for more than 12 months each with extremely low promise of reunification, feels hopeless and is extremely painful.

My family has been through many ups and downs in the last four years, but in the end, it all turned out perfectly. My parents always wanted a big family for my brother and me. The road just looked different than those of others. We all believe that our family is now complete. It has been an incredible experience and has been so perfect for our family, but we are officially done. We have taken the time to consider if continuing to foster was right for us and decided it was not. It was a very hard decision, but we have officially decided to stop as a family of eight. We couldn't have been more blessed over these last four years. Our family grew by four people. We might not all be related by the blood going through our bodies, but we are related by the love in our hearts and our home. This is how my family went from four people to eight in a matter of four years, and I am so thankful to be where we are now.

The Box

Grace Zhou

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania is a box.

A shoe box, painted a bright pink that has become washed out over time. It is covered with faded stickers of Disney princesses and barbies with dusty, smiling faces. If you open the box, you will find a collection of items: a barbie in a tutu, a rubber ball scribbled with marker, a sparkly blue rock, a small rusted charm in the shape of a heart, a blue notebook, and hundreds more, all buried underneath a plethora of dolls and stuffed animals. The box is an endless void, filled with hundreds upon thousands of objects: some small, and some so large they disappear into some sort of bottomless chasm.

The box sits under a small window in an attic surrounded by miscellaneous piles of other boxes. Some appear to be brand new, their colors bright and sharp. Others are cracked and worn, their colors muted versions of what they once were. As you look around, examining the jumble of boxes, the sun begins to rise. Its light washes over the boxes, covering them with a rosy hue.

As the sun peeks its head over the horizon, you reach your hands into the box. Looking through the items at the top of the pile, your gaze lands upon a single ballet slipper. You pick it up, coughing as you wipe off the layer of dust. It is small and worn, the bright color long faded into a muted pink. As you run your fingers over the worn leather, a memory flashes through your mind.

"She looks so pretty!" a little girl exclaims. She stands in front of a small TV screen, enraptured by the ballerina floating across the stage. "I wanna do that," she says, spinning around to face her father who's sitting on a couch, his face buried in a tome.

He looks up at her, lifting his eyebrow. "When you're older. Maybe after your sixth birthday."

"But that's not until November!" the little girl exclaims, the tiara on her head sliding off in despair.

"Don't worry," her father says. He pats her gently on the head. "November will be here before you know it."

The little girl scowls, stomping in her princess high heels to her bedroom. She shuts the door with an emphatic slam.

The sofa melts into a balance bar, and the TV fades into the mirrors of a dance studio. Little girls dressed in tutus and leotards are scattered across the room. Some are putting on their baby pink ballet slippers while others prance about the room in excitement.

The little girl stands by the door, clutching her ballet slipper in her hands. Her dreams of becoming a whirl of tulle and lace seem rather small now compared to the giant room and sea of shiny wooden floorboards.

“Hi,” a cheerful voice says beside her.

The little girl startles, looking up to find a pair of blue eyes.

“I’m Emma,” says the owner of the blue eyes. Her brown curls are tucked into a bun, save for an errant strand that tickles her cheek. “Is this your first day here?”

The little girl nods.

“Mine too,” the blue-eyed girl whispers. She takes the little girl’s hand. “Come on! We can play fairy princesses while we wait for Miss Clara.”

She rushes into the room, pulling the little girl behind her. They twirl around the room, their hands interlinked. Other little girls join them, forming a circle of tutus in the center of the room. They spin and spin, laughing until they run out of air.

The scene disappears as fast as it came, leaving behind the remnant of dreams once filled with tulle and laughter.

You find yourself smiling as you gently put the faded slipper to the side, reaching instead for the sparkly blue rock. Looking closely, you can tell that it is only spray paint, and that underneath the blue luster lies an unassuming brown rock. But as the stone glimmers in the light, you can almost believe that it’s made out of magic. As your fingers trace the rough edges, a memory flashes through your mind.

The damp smell of dirt and leaves fill the room. Two little girls crouch in front of a stump. The little girl with blond curls reaches into the hole while the other waits, a bundle of dandelions in her hand.

“There!” the girl with blond curls says, withdrawing her dirt-streaked hand from the stump. She smiles, her eyes glittering with excitement. “Now the fairies will have a nice warm leaf bed to sleep in!”

The other girl smiles. You recognize her as the same little girl from the previous scene. She’s a little taller now, and her black hair reaches down to her shoulders.

“Now for the dandelions,” the little girl says. She places the slightly wilted flowers in the stump, carefully arranging them in a messy bouquet. “We just need the fairy rocks now.”

“Yes, the fairy rocks!” The curly-haired girl says, jumping up. “Let’s go get them!”

They run across the pavement, the asphalt scorching their bare feet. They soon reach the side of the church. Piles of sparkly blue rocks lay scattered in the sparse grass. They glimmer under the sun’s rays like cerulean fireflies. The little girls rush to the stones, gathering fistfuls and shoving them into their pockets with glee. They run back to the stump, sighing with relief as their feet are met with a cool embrace from the grass.

They pant, lungs empty of air but filled with excitement as they empty their pockets of the stones.

“L-let’s make a path,” the curly-haired girl manages to gasp, her curls damp with sweat. “So the fairies can find their way.”

The other girl nods, her chest heaving. They gather the stones from the grass, creating a winding path from the stump to the edge of the grass and arranging the extra stones around the stump.

“It’s perfect!” the dark-haired girl exclaims, clapping her hands. The sun beats down overhead, the blue rocks sparkling like diamonds below it.

For a moment, time stands still. A slight breeze whispers through the trees, whisking a few wandering leaves into the cloudless sky. A butterfly lands on the stump, its azul wings glimmering like a fairy’s. The little girls’ eyes widen with wonder. They stand spellbound, transfixed by the beauty of the moment.

Then a mosquito lands on the dark-haired girl’s arm. She squeals, slapping it away. The bubble pops, allowing the outside world to flood in. The sun’s golden rays are now uncomfortably warm. Beads of sweat form on the

little girls' foreheads. The curly-haired girl wipes a drop of perspiration away, her smile drooping into a frown.

"Ugh, it's so hot," she says, fanning her face dramatically. "Let's go inside for some popsicles. We can check on the stump again tomorrow."

The other girl nods, bending down to arrange the dandelions one last time. As the girls run towards the church door, the rocks sparkle one last time as if whispering goodbye.

The scene fades, leaving only the sparkly blue rock in your hand. Light bounces off of its ethereal sheen. You smile, and for a moment, it seems to smile back. You carefully put the rock aside and reach deeper into the box.

Something smooth and metallic touches your hand. Curious, you wrap your hand around a cold rod, yanking a rusty scooter out of the box. The handles are enveloped in a faded blue foam, and the wheels are smeared with dirt. You close your eyes as you wrap your hands around the handles. The attic melts away, replaced by gray concrete and the pattering sound of rain.

A little girl stands outside an apartment building, so tall it seems to penetrate the dark clouds. Tears stream down her face as she clutches a pair of blue handles in her hands.

"No!" she screams, hugging the metal bar to her chest. "I won't leave it!"

Her parents watch her, their faces strained. Her mother looks at her watch, then at the moving truck just behind them. She shoots the girl's father a pointed look before getting into a tan Toyota parked behind the moving truck.

The little girl's father sighs. "There's no room for your scooter in the truck. We'll buy you a new one when we get to our new house. It'll be way better than this old thing." He gestures at the scooter in her arms.

The little girl shakes her head, tears streaming down her face and sliding down the handlebars.

"This scooter is special," she whispers, clutching it tighter.

Thunder rumbles in the distance, followed by a flash of lightning. Sheets of rain fall from the sky. Pools of water form on the pavement, trickling in streams down the sidewalk.

The little girl's father looks up at the doleful clouds. His brows crease together in a frown.

"We have to go," he says. His tone is firm and unmoving. There would be no convincing him today.

The little girl seems to know this as well. With tears streaming down her face, she walks to the side of the building. She touches the blue handlebars one last time before leaning the scooter on the building's gray wall. She stands there for a moment, raindrops running down her face like tears.

Her father sighs, wiping an errant raindrop from his eye. He wraps an arm around the little girl's shoulder.

"Come on," he says, his voice gentle. "It's time to go."

They walk over to the Toyota, the rain soaking through their clothes. The little girl gets in the back of the car. She turns around to look out the rear window. Her eyes are filled with tears, and for a moment, your thoughts meld with hers.

You feel the wind sting your face as you swing over a creek, the tire digging into your thighs. Then you are riding a dragon, a shout escaping your lips as you pump your legs harder and harder. You hear the whoops of your friends beside you, seated on their own dragons.

Now you are running across an expanse of grass. A white disk flies through the air before landing in a pair of hands. The sound of laughter surrounds you, and the white disk once again soars through the sky. You hear the beginning of your favorite song, the familiar "oh ohs" as Zootopia comes into view. Then it's your birthday, and nine candles are put on the slightly lopsided cake. The flames flicker like fireflies before you blow them out. You take a huge bite of cake, the sugary icing and fluffy sponge cake melting on your tongue. Then the icing turns into mooncake, and you can taste the sweetness of the lotus paste, the saltiness of the egg yolk.

Now you are sitting at a table with a blue notebook. A pencil is in your hand, the eraser half chewed in your contemplation. Images rush through your mind of princesses and fairies and castles. Words appear on the page, scribbled in your messy handwriting. You are running through a meadow, then swimming in a lake, then dangling from a monkey bar. Memories rush by, so quickly that you only see them for a second before they're gone, lost in the swirl of colors.

Then you are once again standing beside a gray building, the rain pouring from the sky like tears. You stare into the little girl's eyes as the car drives away. They widen. Her fingers reach out, touching the glass as if to caress your face. Then the car is gone, and the wet pavement melts into the floorboards of the attic.

You look down at the box, at the collection of items. Each one flickers with its own assemblage of memories.

You turn your gaze to the window. The sun is already setting, orange and gold spreading across the sky like watercolor. The fading light seeps through the windowpane, casting a warm glow on the pink box.

You close your eyes. The little girl's face appears, twin pools of chocolate reflecting your own. You soak her in, carving each feature into your memory. Then she is gone, disappearing like mist in the morning sun.

As the last traces of light disappear into the darkened sky, you close the box, whispering a final goodbye to the little girl from Pittsburg, Pennsylvania.



Portrait of a Ukrainian Girl

Megan Xia
Painting
Carmel Senior High School
10th Grade



Journalism



ChatGPT takes the nation by storm– should students worry about college admissions?

Ivy Zhen

Since AI-bot ChatGPT’s launch on November 30, 2022, 30% of American students have utilized its accessibility and versatility to complete written assignments, according to a survey by online magazine *Intelligent*.

The Oxford Dictionary defines AI as the development of computer systems able to perform tasks that normally require human intelligence, such as visual perception, decision-making, and speech recognition. ChatGPT, like many other AI chat-bots, can respond to questions, analyze text, and compose written content including emails, scripts, and college essays.

Consequently, admissions officers are questioning whether college essays accurately reflect applying students’ unique perspectives beyond academic achievements and extracurriculars.

“[ChatGPT] has sort of captured the imagination of lots of people around the world about what AI could do,” Luddy Artificial Intelligence Center Director David Crandall says. “I want to emphasize that ChatGPT and AI is [sic] something that we’ve been working on for a very long time, but it’s never really been quite as exciting as before just the last few months.”

ChatGPT imitates human speech, creating text similar to original writing.

“In one recent Twitter thread, someone posted an AI-generated essay and the results of an informal study showing that over half of admissions officers identified it as not being computer-generated,” Stanford Associate Professor of Education Anthony Lising Antonio says.

Antonio also found a stronger correlation between income and the content of admission essays than SAT scores.

ChatGPT’s capabilities and the heavy emphasis on well-written essays causes concerns about academic dishonesty in college admissions. However, Crandall says it would depend on the objective of the admissions essay.

“If the point of the essay is to figure out whether students can write grammatically correct sentences or something that makes sense, then I think that probably is over,” Crandall says. “ChatGPT can do better.”

In addition to evaluating grammar, colleges consider students' distinctive experiences, voices, and styles, which are beyond an AI's capacities.

"If we are trying to get a sense for people's personal stories for their creativity or the way that they see the world for the unique parts of their own life, then I think ChatGPT does not really impact that," Crandall says.

For now.

Assuming that ChatGPT and other AI chatbots will remain static would be incorrect. Programmers and developers are constantly working to improve or replace current programs—bringing to the table concerns that ChatGPT is the key to Pandora's Box and will open up the universe to more advanced AI.

"ChatGPT is an existential technology, a hard pivot in human experience, and a doorway to a far different kind of future," Author of *ChatGPT for Dummies*, Pam Baker, wrote. "It's the harbinger of the AI Age and a pronounced mark of the arrival of the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

But that isn't the scary part.

"Humankind, not software, is equal parts scary and saintly," Baker wrote. "AI in its current forms mostly mirrors that duality. ChatGPT certainly does."

Contemplating the future, though, not only will AI chatbots evolve, Crandall says college admission committees must as well.

Crandall says he believes ChatGPT will compel admissions officers and teachers to establish clearer boundaries and objectives for written assessments.

"So I would say that I think it does affect [admissions] because on the university side, we have to be thinking about what we are trying to actually measure with those essays," Crandall says. "We have to make sure that we're still measuring the right things."

Conversely, Emory University and former UPENN admissions evaluator Steven Ahn says that ChatGPT has minimal impact on the college essay.

"It's my suspicion that students do not use [ChatGPT]," Ahn says. "The writing is a little bit awkward. The phraseology isn't very smooth. It doesn't show a consistent tone or reflection of the kind of persona that other parts of the application reflect."

When asked to evaluate ChatGPT for economics, Ahn gave the bottom score. He describes the generated text as "not only poor writing in terms of how articulate the writing was, there was no compelling nature."

"There was no perspective, there was nothing influential," Ahn says. "It was more objective, informational, just delivering content."

Furthermore, ChatGPT will affect graduate admissions differently than undergraduates. According to Rochelle Michel at the Educational Records Bureau, the evaluation criteria for graduate school tend to be more specialized and focus on the intrapersonal, less statistical side of admissions.

"There's three types of college admissions—undergrad, grad, and postgrad—and they're going to be affected by ChatGPT pretty differently," Ahn says.

Graduate program requirements depend on the school. Writing samples or essays are generally optional, according to Michel. This changes the essay's weight.

Moreover, different college types have different requirements. STEM schools and Humanities emphasize different qualities. With the current abilities of AI, Ahn says he believes STEM admissions will be affected more than Humanities'.

"And then think about the art schools, the fine arts," Ahn says. "In my speculation, AI is going to hardly have any impact on that."

AI cannot yet determine the quality of something subjective. In the future, Ahn believes the biggest challenge is to design AI so it identifies truly good writing.

"Is that a good or bad painting, is that symphony pleasing to the ear? That's subjective," Ahn says. "But to point out something bad, that's a little bit easier for AI."

But to what extent can AI judge subjective content in the future? Scientists are unsure.

Crandall says the way humans learn compared to AI is different; people must feed AI thousands to trillions of image data for patterns to form in its databases.

Furthermore, Crandall explains, "In machine learning, it's trying to learn something like a model to explain this data, but it doesn't have all the con-

ChatGPT takes the nation by storm– should students worry about college admissions?

text that you have.”

Crandall says not only are chatbots still inaccurate, easily confused, and inconsistent, but also generic.

“In one of the classes at Carroll, someone showed us yearbook introductions that were written by ChatGPT,” Carroll High School Yearbook advisor Knol Beckley says. “And they could’ve applied to any yearbook at almost any time, any year.”

While AI is currently lacking in creativity and analytics, from a student’s perspective, advancements in AI create morally gray areas. Ahn says students hesitant about AI will be paranoid about AI’s repercussions.

“I feel like AI is going to help academic integrity by deterring those on the fence students,” Ahn says.

Beckley says he regards future endeavors in AI as uncharted territory.

“I heard of one group that was hooking [ChatGPT] up with a quantum computer,” Beckley says. “So I was kind of wondering, well, what will that be? Will that create, you know, the AI that you always see in the movies and how will that help or hurt humanity?”



Chidinma

Daisy Andersen

Photography

Cathedral High School

11th Grade

Teacher: Joellen Desautels



Flash Fiction



Glowing Ghost Girl

Riya Koya

In the inky murkiness, I glow. A ghost girl greets me in the golden-clad mirror. The warm bathwater has huffed a foggy breath on the mirror's surface and tinges the crystal. She runs a hand through her scalp—flecks of emerald float to the floor in an otherworldly halo. Specks of burning jade enclasp her platinum strands and cling to her feathery eyelashes that trace a silhouette around her walnut eyes. Smudges blossom under her fingernails. She's stunningly bewitching. The verdant glow emanates from her body and radiates across the ivory bathroom tiles.

I turn and walk away quaveringly, with the underside of my toes clenching against the tile. My body bare, I lower a foot into the cast-iron tub as the water writhes with warmth. It embraces me with its steady weight as I sink, and a slight echo of the viridescent glow bubbles through the bathwater.

Peering across the semi-frosted window, I lay my arms across the mellow lips of the tub so that its mouth presses into the nape of my neck. As I tilt my head towards the whitewashed bench across Columbus Street, I observe the curve of the luminous green *R* in stark contrast to the shaded winter sky. *R* for Radium Dial. I had decided to work there when I saw the crepey newspaper on my high school's vermilion bricks. "Radium Dial requires the services of several girls for studio work. Unusually clean and attractive work." I became addicted to the way my giggles became bubbly with the other painters while we performed our job painting watch dials with luminous radium. Lip. Dip. Repeat.

Peculiarly, I haven't ceased glowing since my first day at Radium Dial. "The wonder element" relishes in painting me a second skin as much as I relish painting it. I wrap my fingers around an ashen pumice stone and scrub my skin. My reddened skin screams raw, but the green is unyielding. Minutes later, I realize my efforts are futile. I place the pumice on the tile, close my eyes, and descend into the water.

Today at work, the girls' stinging worry mixes with the loud silence of eavesdropping. Our breaths remain still as we listen to the debate undulating through the door. Clara, a junior with acorn bangs and pink-flushed cheeks, is conversing with Mr. Sawyer, our boss with a hanging jowl and a

creased forehead.

Two months had passed since her right leg had been lagging behind her left. White-hot flashes of pain in her teeth plagued her, and she frequently had tooth extractions. Although she was convinced that the radium paint was the cause of her difficulties, none of the other girls agreed that radium was the issue. The newspapers worshipped it as the miraculous panacea America had been waiting for. Radium products littered the aisles of mom-and-pop grocery stores. Radium toothpaste. Radium creams. Radium tonics. How could radium be the issue when attributed to “restoring health to thousands?” It was blatantly impossible. The media would never intentionally poison America, especially the bodies of the young girls who painted radium dials to help the men fighting in the war. After all, we were America’s glowing golden girls.

When Clara spoke to us about her suffering, our eyes flitted between her hastily applied makeup and the hollowness of her cheeks, and our noses wrinkled from the foul miasma wafting from her lips.

“Clara, we can’t ignore the good pay Mr. Sawyer has been kind enough to give us,” Amelia, a senior, chastised dismissively. The other girls nodded in agreement, deeply proud that some earned more than their brothers.

“Don’t you find how it clings to you peculiar? It never comes off, Katherine. Never. It stays here,” she expressed while clutching my shoulder. “In our bones,” she muttered. The catty eyes of Amelia met me across the room and narrowed in my direction.

I shook Clara’s hand off and replied crudely, “Of course this is safe, Clara. It has always been safe. You need to be more grateful to Mr. Sawyer for what he has done for you.” I saw my glowing reflection in her wounded eyes.

Now, we all hear her articulate to him, “I have gone to five dentists, and they all say that radium is the root of my problems.”

Mr. Sawyer grumbles, “Did the visit from the company doctor not satisfy you?”

Clara replies prudently, “Please, sir. It’s too late for me, but please don’t let this happen to the others.” A lengthy pause ensues.

He spits vitriolically, “Go home.” She exits his office. We avoid her eyes, and I twitch with worry. I realized how vital her work was to her family when the hole in her little sister Dottie’s sunshine slip was finally stitched up.

“Goodbye, Katherine,” she murmurs. My eyes flick up, but she has already walked out the door, green dust motes swirling in her absence.

“Hear Case of Dying Woman,” screams the emboldened article. I clasp the tea-stained, worn newspaper and scrutinize the woman lying across the couch. “In Ottawa, Illinois, Catherine Donohue lies dying from radium poisoning.” My labored breathing painfully catches. Radium poisoning. A term I never thought the newspapers would find the gall to use after revering radium for years. They certainly did not use it among the vague euphemisms of Amelia’s obituary and “the absolute pity” of a girl perishing so young.

Instinctively, I rub my lips together, my tongue roving around my mouth in the spaces where my teeth used to be. I taste warmth and iron. The wet iron slides across my lips and ripples down my throat. My mother runs to me, shrieking. As she wails and holds my hand, I press my eyes together, and all I want is for the clock that radium painted for me to stop ticking. I float away from the pain and become the glowing ghost girl. Even after my clock stopped, my body never stopped glowing.

Let's Leave

Jacob Penola

Take me back to that nostalgic living room. Kick out your worn-down boots in slow motion and recline your body into that thousand-dollar leather paradise. Feel your limbs sink into its crevices, one wrinkly hand holding the fifteen-year-old television remote, the other peacefully resting on top of the scratched leather arm. Bring that book with you. Let its snapped binding beg for aid as you hold the novel by its last chapter. Books are meant to be read, not to be abandoned in the weak grasp of still hands. Open it up. Let your coffee-brown eyes skim the first few chapters as your frail hands somehow gain the strength to aggressively flip each creased page. Actually, forget that – skim the whole first two books. *“Three is where it starts to get good.”* Open your lethargic eyelids wide like it's your first time seeing the world. Let the crisp scent of dinner waft its way through your nostrils, tugging the edges of your chapped lips to your ears. While you wait for the haunting grandfather clock to strike 5 o'clock, pretend like you haven't read that book a million times. Play the parts; turn into a gremlin for Hagrid and a beauty pageant for Luna. Soak your throat with all the water you want. Go to the bathroom every five minutes like you always do. I won't mind. Raise your pointer finger and predict the sound of fourteen types of dishes landing on the table. I'll help you up – let's go to the table. There have to be invisible restraints on this chair of yours, right? Stuff your face with that fettuccine Alfredo. Eat a quarter of your food and fidget with and throw away the other three quarters. I swear, this time and this time only I won't give you a hard time for being wasteful.

Hand me that American flag, would you? Let's go back to that scorching Fourth of July parade, 2017. Put on your cool-guy sunglasses and wrap your once-bulky arms around me. Embrace me. Tell me that if I ever decide I don't like my dad anymore, you'll replace him without a second thought. And yes, you are my favorite extended family member, now please don't tickle the answer out of me. Try to pick up my tiny body and “carry me” to the golf cart. Chuckle and shake your head as you poke fun at me for my red-white-and-blue onesie. I can buy another for you if you'd like. Stomp your foot on the gas; make eleven miles per hour feel like eighty, and I'll make eighty years old feel like eleven. Pretend like you're embarrassed by me harping the national anthem as we ride past hundreds of people. Turn your head to your right; watch your grandson sprawl his arms from his torso and tilt his head back, his short curly hair flying backward in the wind. Count with him as he calculates and tests how long he can bear staring directly

into the bright July sun. Make eye contact with him – if his pupils still exist – and laugh with him. He needs it. When we're done, talk to me about the American Revolution, Grandpa. Teach me the lessons. Educate me on stuff I learned in second grade. I swear, my jaw will be on the floor when you tell me George Washington was a general. Better be home by 5 o'clock though, don't want to make Grandma mad. Who are we kidding, we'll be lucky to be home by 6.

Let's take that cap off your head, Grandpa, and save it for tomorrow. Don't want to get it dirty before the big game. I'll try and be ready by the time you are, although I've never set an alarm for 3 AM before. We'll ride your Chevy to Yankee Stadium. I'll make a fun sign for your favorite guys with black stripes under their eyes. I'll agree that parking prices have gotten utterly ridiculous. Gas too. Refuse to use your walker as you hobble your way into the stadium. Don't worry about it, I'll give you all the help you need to “make it on your own.” Concession stand hot dogs would cower in the presence of Grandma's Alfredo, but I'm willing to sacrifice more than just my taste buds to spend another day with you. Tell me the story about how you played ball with Babe Ruth as a kid. I promise you, I won't doubt it. I'll tell you that it makes sense, especially since your age is the same number as the temperature on a hot summer day. It'll take your tired mind a minute to understand, and then you'll shake your head at me, acting like you don't find it funny. I know you do, Grandpa. I know you do. Teach me about science. Banter on about the physics of the baseball and the bat. Throw in an irrelevant chemistry equation to sound sophisticated. I won't catch it, I promise. Make fun of the guys on the other team who think they're too cool for school. Whisper insults into my ear about the guy in front of us who's been on his damn phone the whole time. Sorry Grandma, this game is only in the seventh inning and it's already 6:30. Would have let you know earlier, it's just that sometimes Grandpa and I get carried away.

Let's leave, Grandpa. I'm sick of this place. I'll bring the Harry Potter book. I'll bring the American flag. I'll bring the Yankees cap. I promise, there are even more of those at home. Let's get you a bigger bed – something more comfortable than that. Take me to a place where people aren't apologizing when they did nothing wrong. Let's go where flowers don't make me sad. Let's go where people wear more colorful clothing; I'm so sick of black. I hate watching Grandma cry. Let's leave, Grandpa.

Then I don't have to say goodbye.

Mondays

Lucia Trujillo

On Mondays, she tells her mother she is going to visit her boyfriend, and instead drives through the secluded forest that surrounds *Wellmen's Hospital*.

The hospital really is a lovely place, despite what the movies and Victorian gothic novels will have you believe. The workers there are kind and give Carol warm tea without fail. (They are under the impression that she is Marion's granddaughter).

It's a refreshing place to be. A nurse beams at her in recognition and escorts her to the same room she enters every Monday.

The nurse says something like, "she'll be pleased to see you," and Carol just nods, smoothing her skirt, inhaling the smell of the hallway—like a doctor's office but thinner and sweeter.

The nurse opens the door, revealing a woman at the edge of a bed.

Carol could swear that as Marion turns around, it's in slow motion. Dust particles from the window behind her craft a dirty halo, perched like a Catholic icon in her white room with her papery pants and a yellowed comforter. Every time Carol sees Marion, her first thought, without fail, is how beautiful she is.

According to the nurses' gossip, the police found Marion four years ago, arresting her for the disembowelment of some local neighborhood cats. Of course, just as soon as she was arrested, the courthouse jetted Marion off to the psych ward, because "she is not malevolent but quite obviously unwell."

And so the visits began.

Most days were passed in silence.

Occasionally they would talk about the weather.

Carol liked to memorize the crow's feet stamped next to Marion's eyes.

Sometimes Marion sang a song, and eventually Carol would join in, but

so quietly that no one could possibly overhear her singing along through the walls.

The Mondays were Carol's shame as much as her craving—to go without them would be going without a drug.

"Why did you kill those cats?" Carol ventures one time, eliciting a sigh from Marion.

"I had to," Marion replies, patting Carol's hand with her lips pressed into a thin line.

Carol imagines herself as a cat, carved out to the inner wall, shucked but purposed, laying to dry in the grasses. *What kind of a person has these thoughts?* But then she meets Marion's eyes, and feels a little better.

She thinks that she has never met a woman so full of joy as Marion.

Every Monday, Carol brings a newspaper, and they read it together. Marion proposed the habit, as she is always "wanting to know what's going on in the world." They skip over the sports section and read about a local fire, a wedding, a homicide. The words seem to carry the weight of a billion crazy human lives, bouncing like atoms on the page. Marion reminds her that someday all of it—from the signature on the Mona Lisa to Armstrong's footprints on the moon—will be washed away in a sea of burning stars. There is a peculiar sort of joy to something temporary, fizzing out at both ends. The light spills like liquid across the newspaper print. The two women sit side by side.

Carol kisses Marion's soft, wrinkled forehead.

"I'll see you on Monday."

Every Monday, when the nurse leads Carol out of Marion's room, she feels like she has just walked out of the last chapter in a book.

A patient screams downstairs. It is met by another scream. Carol isn't sure if they are fearful or delightful screams. Maybe they are just screams. Maybe someday she will join in—run screaming into the street like a 21st century female Archimedes. When she goes to buy groceries later, she will watch the women in the aisles, the women with children around their waist, or a secretary's pencil skirt, and wonder how many of them have felt the same urge.

Bereft

Amy Xu

She'd failed. Her mother and father had succumbed to typhoid fever, and she couldn't shake the feeling of guilt and sorrow that hung over her, a lead shroud. Esther had tried everything within her means, exhausted every avenue to nurse them back to health, but it had all been in vain. Her mother had been the first to go, and then her father, leaving her alone in a world that suddenly felt colder and harsher than she had ever known. The moment they had gotten off the immigrant ship, her parents and 20 other dying passengers were hustled onto a ferry and dumped on Swinburne Island for quarantine, a shoddy tent stuffed into her arms as she half dragged half carried her ailing parents off the craft. 2 months later, they were dead.

The day they were laid to rest, she had donned her freshly washed black frock, a stark contrast to the pure blue of the skies above. She stood there, numb, as she watched the soil fall upon their caskets, the wind biting at her cheeks, and the ocean waves crashing on the rocky shores. Typhoid victims lay dying in their makeshift tents on the side of the beach.

She buried her parents alone.

Now, she sat alone in the flimsy tent, its worn fabric flapping relentlessly in the unforgiving wind. The world outside seemed indifferent to her pain. The isolation bore down on her like a leaden cloak, and she could not escape the specter of their loss. In a moment of quiet desperation, she rolled over, pushing aside the thin blanket, and stepped out of the tent.

Hunched over and shuffling with the weight of her grief, she moved toward the waterline. The ocean, which had always been a source of solace and comfort, now seemed like an abyss, vast and unforgiving. Its waves, once a soothing lullaby, now whispered painful reminders of her solitude.

As she walked into the ocean, her clothes catching the water and pulling her back, the coldness seeped into her bones, a frozen sentinel, numbing the pain in her heart if only momentarily. The water was now at her waist, the weight of her sorrow pulling her deeper. Her body felt heavy, her movements sluggish, as if she were surrendering to the inevitable.

The waves continued their relentless rhythm, uncaring witnesses to her solitude. She kept walking, each step taking her farther from the shore, farther

from the pain that had consumed her world. Amid the cold and the quiet, she sought solace in the depths of the ocean, hoping that it might offer her the peace and release that had eluded her in life.

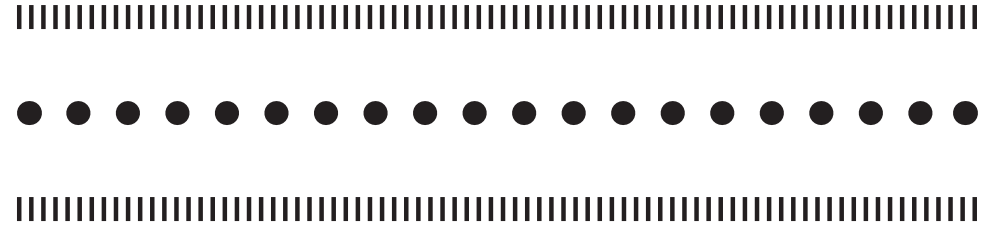
Her hair floated around her, glinting locks waving. Kelp wrapped around her ankles, tangling in between her toes. The water was up to her neckline, she could see the tiny bugs jumping on the surface, spiders dead and floating amid wood, debris.

And she kept walking.

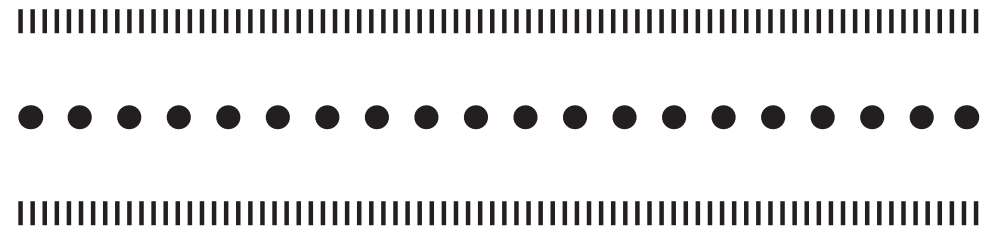


Yum

Srey Folck
Mixed Media
Bishop Chatard High School
12th Grade
Teacher: Lisa Schare Johnson



Humor



Good Day, @caffeineanddespair!

Dakota Macklin

-March 5-

Sent by: @goodle.com

Good day, @caffeineanddespair!

We at goodle.com would like to thank you for signing up for our experimental spam service! View the terms and conditions here if you need a refresher on how to cancel the emails. Just to remind you: this spam service replaces your regular spam with finds from the best newsletters, about the best products, and more, based on your regular search history and recent purchases.

-March 12-

Sent by: @goodle.com

Good day, @caffeineanddespair!

With 72.5% accuracy, we at goodle.com believe that you're interested in finding the most efficient power tools! For this first email, we'd like to send you a link to an article on that very topic from DNN (Depressing News Network). We hope that this article proves to be helpful in the near future.

You can view the article here.

-March 16-

Sent by: @goodle.com

Good day, @caffeineanddespair!

With 83.65% accuracy, we at goodle.com believe that you're interested in robust rain gear: the best ponchos and waterproof boots! We'd like to recommend the \$50 bundle of rain gear at Mick's Sporting Goods! We hope that this page proves to be helpful in the near future.

Additionally, please fill out this survey. Does this spam service meet

expectations?

-March 23-

Sent by: @goodle.com

Good day, @caffieneanddespair!

With 94.12% accuracy, we at goodle.com believe that you're interested in supplies usually used in cleaning up bloodstains! Good on you for supporting a sanitary work environment! We would recommend the absorbent sandbags from this website, and Stream Stain Removers also have reliable stain-removers for clothing and cloth. We hope that these pages prove to be helpful in the near future.

Additionally, please fill out this survey. Does this spam service meet expectations?

-March 28-

Sent by: @goodle.com

Good day, @caffeineanddespair!

With 98.54% accuracy, we at goodle.com have determined that you're interested in brand-name shovels! The following brand names have been suggested by this *New York News* article: Fully Tools, Borona, and more. We hope that this article proves to be useful in the near future.

Additionally, please fill out this survey. Does this spam service meet expectations?

-March 30-

Sent by: @goodle.com

Good day, @caffeineanddespair!

With 89.75% accuracy, we at goodle.com have determined that you're interested in trying the unusual durian fruit—the fruit that smells like rotting flesh! We've found several kinds of durian near you at the Somewhat-Fresh Farms International Market, up in Illinois! Additionally, we'd like to recommend this self-help book off of Nile.com. Working in the rain

Good Day, @caffeineanddespair!

with power tools, shovels, bloodstain-cleaning equipment and durian surely can't help your mental health. We hope that the fruit and this book prove to be useful in the near future.

Additionally, please fill out this survey. Does this spam service meet expectations?

-April 4-

Sent by: @goodle.com

Good day, @caffeineanddespair!

With 96.26% accuracy, we at goodle.com have determined that you're interested in plants so endangered that they can't be dug up! Good on you for supporting a healthy environment! Several kinds of these plants are affordable at Gardenzsave.com! We hope that this website proves to be useful in the near future.

Additionally, please fill out this survey. Does this spam service meet expectations?

-April 9-

Sent by: @goodle.com

Good day, @caffeineanddespair!

With 97.8% accuracy, we at goodle.com have determined that you're interested in tips for writing murder mysteries! Good on you for being creative! Here's a New York News list of the best books to help you write your murder mystery novel! We hope that this article proves to be useful in the near future.

Additionally, please fill out this survey. Does this spam service meet expectations?

Joining the Soccer Team, a Guide

Nick Molter

Hello, young and innocent sixth grader. Apparently you have decided to join the school soccer team, and I am being forced *sounds of grunting and pain* I mean, asked to help you with this wonderful journey! There are many options for which position you might want to play, but there's always one that will be perfect for you. Here's a rundown of all the positions to help guide you to make the right decision:

Strikers

This group is for those that are actually good at soccer. They are also admired by all of the other players. This is definitely not at all biased by the fact that I'm a striker, but it's just the truth. Strikers are the ones who actually *gasp* watch soccer and probably play for a club team. They score almost all the goals, and they most definitely think they're better than you. Even if they say something nice, that just means you did less bad than usual. They are also known for having an unhealthy desire for certain numbers on the backs of their jerseys, mainly for the number ten. Many a striker has been hurt or murdered given a different number than the one they wanted because of these obsessions. If you play soccer outside of school or are willing to do anything for the number ten, this is the position for you.

Wingers

One of the most mysterious groups on the team, these players may not be sane. Their entire job is to run up and down the field, and they all claim they "like running" which is probably impossible. Most of these players have a cross country or track background and are the fastest players on the team. They also miss many games because they are "injured" or have a cross country meet. The last issue with these speedy lunatics is that they are always on their phones. I have never seen a winger caught dead without their radio-active sensory deprivation device. Every day before practice, after practice, sometimes even during practice, these addicts' heads are down, scrolling through TikTok, or they are filming TikToks, doing strange dances. Join this group if you think speed is all that matters and/or if you like doing the *proceeds to google TikTok dances* renegade. You should join this group if you carry your phone, your portable phone charger, and your backup portable phone charger with you everywhere.

Center Attacking Midfielders (CAMs)

There are two types of midfielders, the CAMs and the CDMs. I definitely prefer the CDMs but I am forced by the law of the soccer position decree of 1984 to start with players that are higher up on the field. These are the ball hogs on the team. Their entire life goal is to take as many touches on the ball as possible. Unlike most of the other positions, there is no camaraderie between these players. As far as I know, they have no social life whatsoever, and I believe they spend most of their time like Gollum salivating over their precious ball. The strange thing about these creatures is that, despite having the ball more than anybody on the team, they score a lot fewer goals than the strikers or the wingers, or in some somewhat rare cases: the goalie. CAMs are also prone to bragging about their assists, despite the fact that nobody counts them. To be honest, most of their assists end up in their own net. If you think that it's your right to have the ball whenever you want it and that you're the best player who's ever lived, this is the group for you.

Center Defensive Midfielders (CDMs)

This group is the reason why fouls were invented in soccer. In every single game, CDMs either knock someone out cold using only their torso, or bring boxing gloves, or punch somebody using the opponent's face as a fist (trust me, I've seen all of these happen). CDMs are basically only on the team because they think of it as a legal way to "give somebody a \$3 haircut." Despite their massive muscles, they have tiny brains. CDMs often have to be redirected as to which goal they should try to score on, and they usually score more own-goals than regular goals. They're the type of people who would put an ejection seat on a helicopter. Join this group if you had to google what an ejection seat is.

Outside Backs

Some people love dogs, some people love cats, and other people are just too lazy to care. The last group of people is the outside backs. Outside backs are pretty much the epitome of laziness. They are the type that are too lazy to walk up to the TV and get the remote; instead, they just stare at static for hours. I'm not sure why these people joined the soccer team. I'm pretty sure it was a mistake that they were too apathetic to fix, but they're on the field, so that has to count for something. Right? Join this group if you would read the rest of this sentence but it's too looooooong.

Center Backs

Earlier, in the winger section I called wingers the most mysterious group on

the team. I now realize that I am completely incorrect. It's the center backs. Joining this group is a cult-like experience that few have access to. Being a center back is a mix between joining the CIA and the Illuminati *sounds of pain* I meant to say, a perfectly normal cult that exists, not the Illuminati, which definitely does not exist. It was very hard to get info for this section due to their secrecy and errr... intolerance toward outsiders. When I reached out to one, the response was, "Who told you we existed?" immediately followed by, "Get him boys." Join this group if... Well, actually, I'm being told this group just doesn't exist.

Goalie

Man, are these guys way too loud. Think of the strikers from earlier who were constantly judging you. The goalie is ten times worse. It doesn't really matter what happens. If the goalie lets in a goal, somebody is being yelled at. If the goalie makes a really good save, somebody is yelled at. If your own team scores a goal, the goalie is yelling about how you should do that more often. Become a goalie if your voice is already hoarse at 7:00 in the morning.

Benchwarmer

This group is the most densely populated group on the team, with the vast majority of players being, for lack of a better term, nerds. The nerds make you wonder why they joined soccer, and why they aren't doing "sports" like quiz bowl and chess. They spend most of their time during practices or games faking injuries so they can sit on the bench and read. You will be in this group if you have to read about soccer before you can play.

Equipment Manager

Are you joking? I mean the last group was bad enough, but these guys don't even want to play! Why on earth do I have to write about these disgraces to their family and to the beautiful sport of soccer as a whole? Ok, I'm being told by my kidnappers dear friends that I do in fact have to talk about the Equipment Manager. (I honestly didn't even know there were equipment managers in soccer.) Equipment Managers are great friends and help uplift the entire team! I don't know where we'd be without them, and everybody joining school soccer should definitely look into being one! *sounds of retching and gagging*

That's all of the positions! You might have noticed I have called some positions weirder, lazier, or happier than others, but let me be perfectly clear, you're never happy when you're playing soccer. Anyway, I hope this guide is extremely helpful for you, young sixth grader. Make sure you have all your

fellow classmates read this, and hopefully I'll be let free we'll have a great season!



Looking Through Morphing Glass

Zaiah Crites
Photography
Mooresville High School
11th Grade
Teacher: Allyson Avery



Novel Writing



Dust to dust

Sophia Harris

Mist drifted through the cemetery, covering the ground with a heavy blanket. Dew collected on every gravestone and ran off like tears. Tall green grass and little yellow flowers grew everywhere except one small rectangle of freshly churned dirt. Footprints and drops of candle wax could have been found there in the dirt, if the moon were brighter and if someone were there to look for them.

A small gravestone was set there in the ground, marked with a date from some twenty-five years ago, as well as a date from only a week or so before. It had a name etched at the very top, followed by the titles that belonged to it:

Mae Aubrey Balcombe - Wife and Mother

Beside it, two empty lots were reserved for her family. The one next to hers might have been filled, and hers might have remained empty, had destiny been allowed to take its set course. But a crime had been committed and destiny had been changed, changed by something resembling a man—not a man, but a monster, with supernatural powers. He visited that grave that night. He heard the earth cry, asking for what it was owed.

“Not yet,” he said reverently. “I am sorry for taking what you deserved, what you rightfully claimed as yours, but my brother cannot become yours yet. I will not allow it.”

He looked to the moon, that terrible eye. Then, though he tried to avoid it, he couldn't help but look to the dead. The dead that only he could see. Cemeteries were all the same. Random, wandering human spirits still tethered to their earthly bodies desperately hung over their own graves, many silently weeping, mourning their own losses. He saw them pacing or rocking back and forth, trying to make sense of why they could no longer feel, why they were there all alone, why no one would comfort them. Many times, the man had been tempted to do so himself, but he knew he could do nothing. They never knew him, they could not feel him, and so to them, he did not exist. They were trapped in their own prison of misery.

“Dust to dust,” he said.

Some spirits let go. They were happy with how their lives had been lived and

moved on, awaiting their loved ones, who eventually, as all did, would come. He assumed Mae was one of these. He hoped so. He hoped she was happy. She had been a very kind, loving human. Trusting until the end. Trusting until it became her end.

“I’m sorry, Mae.”

The moon shone bright.

“...I’m sorry. I pushed my powers too far in my anguish. I justified it, thinking I was doing the right thing! I was saving a life, I thought. A holy cause to commit a crime. But it was a crime against the earth itself. And it has brought only death.”

The moon...

“But I can still save him! It is too late for you, and for you, I am sorry. But for him, there is still a chance! I know the wrongness of it, I know it is an offense against the living, the dead, and the earth... but he is my brother... I must do what I can to save him! The first time, in my anguish, I made the mistake of only bringing back half of him. The dark half. The half that killed you.”

He shed a tear. A tear of hopelessness. A tear of a monster who knows he has gone too far.

“But I can bring back the other half as well! I can do it now! He will again become the kind, wise man we both knew...”

A dark cloud hid him from the moon’s light. He was relieved. He never liked how the moon watched him.

He felt how twisted his own soul had become. Years of interfering with the dead had left his body small and crippled. He limped to Mae’s gravestone, pitching forward, leaning on it as if his life depended on it.

“Oh, Mae. Oh, Abraham...”

The wandering spirits were oblivious to him. Mae couldn’t hear him. The moon, at least for the moment, could not see him. He was alone in his misery, he thought. He was wrong.

“I am here,” a grim voice said from behind.

He let go of the gravestone and twisted in surprise, gasping at the sight of his resurrected brother. Abraham was large and sinister in stature, with an expressionless, shadowed face, and had hands the size of a man’s face that wrung back and forth, as if he were squeezing a man’s neck. His mouth twitched gruesomely.

The smaller monster whispered something. With difficulty, he bent over, like a crooked tree, and pinched a few grains of dirt between his shivering fingers.

Abraham smiled in the dark and took a step forward.

His brother continued to whisper. Multiple voices joined in, voices only he could hear.

“Don’t you try that, Bill,” Abraham said. He took another step onto the grave of his wife, Mae, that corpse he had once loved. “I know what you are planning to do. It won’t work.”

“Your soul is incomplete, brother. I must fix it.”

“You cannot fix me. I am perfect. Death cleansed me of my imperfection.”

Bill protested. “No! Your light and wisdom and love have gone! You are no longer yourself! I will bring you back.”

“But I am already back. And now that I am, we can have all the power. We can take it all. We could control every element, and the earth itself.” Bill could not reply, only resumed his whispering, which had gained a chorus of voices, chiming in from all directions.

“You see, I learned things on the other side. Things you could only imagine.” The massive shadow of a monster came ever closer, hands reaching for his crippled brother.

The multitude of voices continued without him as Bill breathed, “I know.”

The shadow stepped back, regarding his brother. “But I know you. You never hungered for power as I do. You would never join me, as much as you admired me when we were little,” he said with an evil sneer, “And so you must go the same way as my beloved wife.”

The voices ceased. The smaller brother choked, his eyes closed, the spell stopped before it could be completed. He fell limply on Mae’s grave. His

power erupted from him, intertwined with his own soul. Abraham tried to catch it, to make it his. But he was too slow, and the power and the soul escaped his grasp. He swore and kicked the dirt in anger. His tantrum lasted only a second before he became calm again.

“What is it you always say, brother? ...’Dust to dust.”

He turned, leaving his brother and his wife, both his victims, behind.

The cloud drifted away from the moon, which resumed its watching.

Looking For Mountains In The Sea

Emma Laborsky

No one believed her, but the world was going to end.

Romona knew it because the moon was bound in a halo, and Mama always said that a halo around the moon meant bad things were coming. She knew it because the world began to cry. It was a terrible sound, unlike anything she’d heard in their family’s secluded farmland—like something shattered deep in the core of the earth, but only she could perceive it. There would be a storm, an earthquake, a vengeful ravage of nature upon the island of Oswald in the upcoming days. She could see it when she closed her eyes: buildings collapsing into dust, waves colliding with the shore, lightning throttling the forest.

“Mama,” she said that night. “I’m afraid.”

Her mother’s expression was calm, the scar on her cheek pronounced. “You are safe. I promise.”

“No. Something terrible is going to...”

“I promise you, nothing bad is going to happen. Your father and I have worked very hard to protect you. Now get some sleep.”

Romona did not get any sleep. No matter how she buried her head beneath the pillow, the world’s piercing screech remained. *Romonaromonaromonaromona*, came the sound of a thousand voices; the incessant repetition taunted her throughout the night, and her skull was going to split into bits, like a clay pot.

If she did nothing to stop the decimation of the world, she would lose everything.

The next morning, Romona hoisted a barrel of grains onto her father’s horse-led cart, hands shaking. It was amongst the first moons of harvest, right as the dry season lurched upon Oswald, and their family farm was supported by the funds of the populous Ridge. Every year, her father would take the cart to the Marketstream to sell their goods, and Romona would join. Merchants from all around the world would go to display products, and sure, it was enticing to run from booth to booth and observe all that the

market had to offer. The most enticing aspect of these annual visits, however, was the assurance of seeing her closest friend, Esme. They would meet in the central ring of the Marketstream, where the eaves of the terracotta rooftops swallowed up the sky, where clothes strung from building to building, and plump birds sat on the lines to feast on scrapings of stolen fish.

“Pa,” Romona said. She asserted herself, made her features blank. “Something is going to happen. Mama didn’t believe me, but I know it, and you have to listen.”

Her father rolled his sleepy eyes.

“Please,” she said, hoisting another barrel onto the cart, “Listen. We need to go quickly. We need to warn the others.”

Her father, a man who was stern as he was kind, stood no chance in an argument, and he was wise enough to know it. He helped twelve-year-old Romona onto the creaky wooden seat, handing her the looped reins of their horse. A permanent, sad smile was plastered onto his face. “You,” he said. “You are too clever.”

But he did not believe her.

The end of the world was evident everywhere along the path, but only Romona could perceive the signs. There was a deep sound somewhere in the forest, a baritone vibration. Though she didn’t know how, it was there, a rhythm of shifting tectonics.

The path seemed infinite, shrouded by a lush canopy. They would never reach the city in time to stop the end of the world. How did one even stop the end of the world? Her heart palpitated with each crunch of the horse’s hooves. How her father was unfazed, slouched on the wooden bench of their cart, his face slack with the residue of morning, astounded Romona.

“Can we go any faster?” she asked.

“What makes you so nervous, Ro? Aren’t you excited to see Esme again?”

“Yes, I am, but we have to make it before...”

“Before what? The world ends?”

Romona gulped. “Before Esme goes to the temple.” Esme’s parents would drag her to the temple every morning. When Romona went to the city, their

time together was always limited by prayer. Such piety was beyond Romona, however. She hadn’t been raised under a religion, nor did she know the rules or practices they followed.

“It’s been since the last harvest,” her father said. “I’m sure Esme’s just as excited to see you. I’m sure she’s been waiting.”

It had been a full season since they last saw each other. What if she found other, more important things to fill her mind? What if their friendship dissolved during the moons they spent apart from each other? What if she preferred the temple over Romona?

What if Esme didn’t believe her, either?

“You were just as worried last time, remember? And she was still there, waiting for you.”

“But what if it’s different, now?”

Father reached for her hand. “Esme’s the type of friend who will always be there, no matter how long it’s been.”

Meanwhile, a virus seeped under the roots, poisoning the groundwater and soil. Absolute armageddon would besiege them any minute. Her home amounted to nothing in comparison to its sheer force: a stilted wooden box balanced in between rows of crops. Her mother, father, and Esme would disappear along with everyone on the island. Romona dug her nails into the wooden seat.

Romonaromonaromonaromona...

She occupied herself with observations. Their cart rode along a sheer cliff side that dipped down to sea level, where the water brushed against the shore like a cat running against the palm of your hand. Wildflowers dipped their umbrella-like petals over the path. Vines draped from the overarching canopy. Her father took this route every year. It was beautiful, but today, that beauty was deception. Beneath the surface-level appearance was the sensation of hostility, of a held breath, of a slow lurch into apocalypse.

The Ridge of Oswald was named because it was perched on the edge of the island, a peninsula surrounded by the sea. It was a network of canals, aqueducts, roads, and homes. The Marketstream sat at its very center, a circular space in which merchants and their booths accumulated on a sea-shell tiled road. Her father paused the cart at the edge of the path, gazing

out upon the bustling view of the city. They did not have time to pause, and each moment they spent in hesitation, Romona's heart ricocheted into a frenzy.

"It's going to be a good season," he said.

There was nothing she could do to make him hurry. He would not believe her. She clenched her teeth until her face grew sore and curled her toes in her shoes. No one would listen to a twelve-year-old girl from the hinterlands, a girl with a dirt-coated hand-me-down dress and unkempt hair.

She still had time. To do what? Warn the world, spoil the truth, let them run and hide from inescapable forces? Something had to be done, but the mind of a twelve-year-old was indisposed to attract attention.

Her father maneuvered the cart down the path, wooden wheels bobbing through muddy puddles. They passed by several open windows where totems of religious affiliation hung. Romona coughed through a cloud of burning incense. The disciples preached in their evergreen robes along the path, spitting proverbs. "Nature is the antithesis of humanity," one of them read from a giant leatherback book, "Aistha will protect us from nature. She will restore the world's humanity."

"Aistha will save us!" they shouted. "She will control that which is beyond our reach!"

"Aistha is amongst us now! She could be any one of your children!"

Romona's father tensed as they passed the disciples. Do not listen to them, his gaze seemed to say. His knuckles tightened around the reigns, and they continued beyond the preaching, the incense, and the scrutiny. Romona could not help but look over her shoulder as they passed, however.

At last, they established themselves in the Marketstream, where multilingual voices were caught on a current and people milled about, eyeing the display of goods, unaware of the shifting deep below the surface. Abalone shells glistened on the table of a jeweler. There were silks, spices, and aromas that spilled out from the nearby café. All of this, and still, the deep, guttural humming of the world persisted.

"Where do you think she'll be?" Romona asked, jittery as dust in a beam of light.

Her father barely even acknowledged the question. He shrugged, a tip of

the head, too occupied with the domestic tasks at hand. "Temple, maybe. Your mother used to go all the time."

"That's too far," Romona said, mostly to herself.

"Only a few steps out from the city. But stay with me for now. I want to know where you are."

She obliged, though it felt like the island was trying to swallow her whole. This world that Esme had shown her, would all be ruined within moments, and everyone was oblivious. She had to do something. But what?

"Ro?"

She spun on her heel. The Ridge was stripped down to a series of colors. Nothing else mattered but the girl in the center of the market, who wore a deep red robe, her white hair spun in ribbons atop her head. The crowd parted for her, clouds to the sun—they saw the decadence of her attire and treated her like divinity. Romona was just another amongst the crowd who could not look away.

Only, Esme was looking back.

Esme ran to her friend, careless as a dog in a meadow, with no regard for regality. She threw her arms around Romona. They nearly collided with her father's cart of grains.

"Careful, girls, careful," he said.

"You look..." Romona's breath caught. She tightened her arms around Esme. The fabric felt ethereal.

"I know. I look ridiculous."

"No, you don't. Not at all."

"I'm glad I saw you when I did," said Esme as they pulled away. "I just got out of the temple. They think they've found Aistha."

"And your parents think it's you?"

"Yes. Everyone thinks it's me. They're convinced."

"But you don't think so?"

“I would have known, wouldn’t I?”

Romona’s breath caught in her throat. She no longer knew what to do with her hands. They hung limp at her sides.

Romona’s father had been setting up the booth. “You’ve grown so much, Esme,” he said as he worked, smiling, though his hands shook and his brow quivered. It was the slightest disposition, but enough for Romona to notice.

The sea began to hum. Its breath was salty and cold and it sliced through the canal of her ear. *Romonaromonaromona*, it said, taunting like a child in a game of hide and seek. She cast her gaze in the direction of the Aboran Sea. It wanted...something. How could the sea want something? She was going crazy. Yes. That was it. The only plausible explanation was insanity. And still, the foundation of Oswald lilted, teasing an earthquake. And still, she felt each shift like a needle plunged into her core.

“I guess I have grown,” Esme replied, examining herself. Her voice dragged Romona out of the dredges. “I’m so excited for this season, Ro. They’re showing our favorite performances in the amphitheater. And we have to watch the sunset. Remember that last season? When we spent the night at the beach?”

“Oh,” Romona said. They would never see their favorite shows. The ground lilted again. The needle plunged deeper into her core. The beaches would be swept away by the sea. There would never be another sunset.

“Ro?” Esme searched her eyes.

Romona caught herself. “Sorry...What’s life been like for you?”

“The same as always. Ma’s been dragging me to the temple, even though the priests hear nothing from me. She can’t get enough of the Aistha ceremonies. But what have you been up to? You have to tell me everything.”

“I will. But I...”

“Esme!” the voice of a squealing bird called. Esme’s mother approached their booth from the center of the Marketstream, and in her wake was a gaggle of disciples. Her mother was cut from a blade, all sharp edges and taut skin, silver hair and silver eyes. The disciples and their incantations were no different than the humming sea. As they grew nearer, Romona could not help but recoil.

“Oh, Romona. What a pleasant surprise,” the woman said, barely glancing in Ro’s direction. “It’s been so long!”

Romonaromonaromona, the Aboran Sea hissed her name, and the taunt became a threat.

“Tania,” father said in greeting.

One of the disciples seized Esme’s arm. Her skin flushed red. Their grip would cut off the circulation of blood. Her hand would go pale and lifeless, disconnected from the biological network that spun through her body. Romona clenched her fists as the earth below buzzed.

“Esme, temple. Now.”

A billion heartbeats were rampant. A billion eyes twisted in their sockets. The ocean and its taste for vengeance. The sky and its desire to collide with the ground. The world sought to pry at her attention, so she clung to whatever tangibility she could. One breath at a time.

“Ma, I...” Esme started.

“You cannot negotiate this.”

“Ma, please, just one moment.”

“Do you know what you are?” Tania eyed Romona. “We do not have time for troubles like this.”

How did one bring up the end of the world? Where would she start? Imagine that: a hinterland girl in a hand-me-down dress foreseeing the end. There was no way to prove it. No one would believe her, not even Esme.

It was like the orange trees in the hinterlands. As the fruits ripened, they fell from the branch, and just so, the end of the world began. A giant hand nudged the earth upward and the Marketstream shook. A flowerpot rattled out from an apartment window and shattered in the space between Esme and Romona. The vibrant colors turned brown as they touched Romona’s skin.

“I’m sorry,” Romona said. No one heard it. A tear trickled down her face.

People took notice of the storm at last: it was a silent realization. The city held its breath. The Marketstream went still.

“What’s going on?” asked Esme.

Everything was about to crumble, decay, rot away, and she could hear the splitting cries of children who saw the clouds approach, she could feel the sea try to steal the land, she could hear the screaming sky.

“What is this?” Esme’s mother asked, holding onto a disciple for support.

“The end,” one of the disciples realized, their eyes waning in horror. “The end of the world.”

Those words sparked panic amongst the crowd. Of course, they listened to the disciples. If Romona so much as uttered a word, they’d laugh at her audacity. People ran in all sorts of directions, aimlessly tripping over one thing and another. Flags were picked up on the breeze.

“Do something!” Tania screamed.

“Look for the light at the end of the world and be as close to the sky as possible,” a disciple said, eyes piercing Esme with a force so strong, even Romona could feel it. “You must go to the top of Mount Ambriar, where the caves are. Just as the L’ia says. Go now.”

As strong as an intuition, as disorienting as *deja vu*, she could see the caves of Oswald. Like a magnet had latched itself to her heart and tugged her to the top of Mount Ambriar, she knew it was where she needed to be. But how could she say that? How could she speak?

Romona watched the realization dawn over her friend, growing like each lunar phase of the moon. The girl was shaking.

Romona’s father pulled on the reins of their horse, attempting to keep the beast calm; from the corner of his eye, he kept his attention on his daughter.

She watched the disciples fall into a deep state of prayer, their hoods casting dark shadows over their faces. Their voices melded into one, in tandem with the sea, the sky.

“I can take Esme,” she blurted. The entire world went silent. Even the thunder quit its bartering to listen to Romona’s voice. “I can take my father’s horse.”

Father tugged on Romona’s upper arm. His expression carried a weight Romona had never seen before, tugging on his lower lip and his brow.

Tempestuous fear filled Esme’s eyes. “Romona. It’s not me.”

“Time is running out,” the disciples said in unison.

“I know, but I have to take you. I have to be the one to do it,” Ro replied. “Do you trust me?”

“Of course I trust you.”

“Then let me take you.”

“But I cannot...”

“Trust me.”

The lightning reeled back into the sky like an inhale, waiting for Esme’s response.

“Okay.” She glanced at her mother, who, with great disdain, nodded in approval.

Romona raced to their horse’s side, her hand gliding along its neck to keep it calm; she could feel its thrumming pulse. Her father secured the saddle. As the earth shook, he nearly collapsed, clinging to the horse’s body to stay upright.

Once it was ready, Romona’s father hoisted the girls onto the saddle. The disciples surrounded them, their prayers obtrusive. She tried to focus on her father’s eyes. They represented everything she loved, like the deep brown soil of their crops, darkened with a previous rain.

“Romona,” he said, voice low. “I’m sorry we kept you away for so long. I’m sorry we never told you.”

“Never told me? Never told me what?”

“We didn’t want to expose you to this life. Not yet. Do not forget who you are, you hear me? Do not forget who you are.”

There were so many things she wanted to ask him. Why had she chosen silence? As the horse fled from the Ridge, Romona watched him disperse with the rest of the crowd, scrounging for shelter. She would save him. She’d find a way to save the world.

The Lighthouse Keeper

Isabel Owens

Weeeeeee! The tea kettle on the stove whistled, steam rapidly emerging from the spout. The lighthouse keeper walked over to the boiling water, pouring it into a cup, which had been stained with many years, containing a teabag. She let it brew for a couple of minutes, before lowering her lips to the rim to take a sip. The bitter, yet comforting taste coated her tongue, washing down her throat. She smiled, grasping the warm cup in her cold hands. She made her way over to the couch just under the window, gazing out at the sea. Blue waves splashed on the shore, and a cool breeze flowed through the lighthouse. A single seagull flew overhead, calling out, searching for a mate. Or maybe just a friend.

You can be my friend. The lighthouse keeper gazed sadly at the bird as it flew into the horizon, disappearing. She'd been here since the beginning of time, alone. Sent from the heavens to guide sailors through dark and stormy nights, to protect them from the sea. But she was all alone.

Most of the time, she didn't mind. She liked the silence, the solitude. The peace. She had animals to keep her happy, little crabs in the tide pools on the beach and birds and squirrels that climbed in the apple trees in the garden beneath the lighthouse. She knew making friends would only make her sadder. Humans' fleeting lifespans would always leave her lonely, stuck immortal in her lighthouse, helping people who would never know who she was. How she helped them.

Each ship that sailed past owed their lives to her. To her lighthouse. But they would never really know who to thank for lighting up the dark sea at midnight, or who revealed treacherous rocks that would have doomed them without her strong beams of light.

Contented with her tea, the lighthouse keeper opened up her journal. It was filled with little drawings and doodles, something to fill up the long nights with. She would sit for hours, writing poems and songs, pouring her heart into the crisp white pages. Sometimes, when she was lonely, she would reread previous journals from when she was younger. She would read about her hopes and dreams of becoming a hero, someone who would be loved and celebrated for eternity. She wished she could go back and tell her younger self that no, it wouldn't be like that. She would be here forever, guiding men and women who got to go home to see their family, their friends. And

she would stay. Alone.

As she flipped through the journal, rereading her writing, until she reached a page she had long forgotten about. Within the page, a thin gold medallion was pressed, leaving an indent within the book. She picked it up, twisting it in her fingers, examining it. The medallion wasn't anything special, in fact, it was specially unpecial. The once bright gold color had turned dull and brassy, and a sharp, metallic stench pierced her nostrils as she held it to her face. But although it didn't seem like much, it was one of her prized possessions. She had shoved it into the journal years ago, hoping to forget its previous owner and any trace of him, and over the years she'd forgotten about it. But as she ran her fingers over the rough edge, the memories came flooding back.

Her first friend. Her first human friend, really. Someone she could talk to, laugh with, share ideas with. His name was Thomas. Just like his medallion, he was quite plain, like a barrel of wheat. But his smile lit up the day brighter than any light from her lighthouse. His laugh was more musical than any of the seabird songs. Thomas had stumbled to her lighthouse by accident, many many years ago. He had run away from his family's farm. That's what he told her when they first met. Years later, he told her the real reason he had left was because his family was broke, they couldn't afford to feed him. Not even a loaf of bread. They'd sent him away to try and save food for his younger siblings.

The first time the lighthouse keeper saw him, she hid. Locked herself in her lighthouse, far away from him, hoping he would go away. But he stayed for days, eating the fruit from her garden, playing in the waves and feeding the birds. Eventually, she went down to introduce herself. She would never forget the look on his face the first time he saw her. The look of confusion, then surprise, then the giant smile that grew and grew until she thought it would burst off his face. She told him he was the first person she'd ever met. Thomas grinned and told her the words that had been engraved into her mind from that day on.

"That means we're meant for each other! Someone sent me here to be your friend!" he ran up to her, squeezing her hands tight in his own.

And from that day on, they were friends. Best friends. They did everything together. Sketched the stars and cooked with the fruits from her garden. Explored the caves around the lighthouse, making maps and collecting rocks and shells. Years went on, the best years the lighthouse keeper had ever experienced in the thousands that she'd been here. Thomas was her lighthouse, lighting up her life.

But time was a cruel thing. Thomas slowly began to age, wrinkles appearing on his face and grey hairs sprouting from his head. He could no longer climb the cliffs they once danced on, or play in the waves the way they used to. His body began to betray him. He grew old. And she stayed the way she always was. Forever young.

The day she found him in his bed was a distant memory, shoved out of her mind. His body was cold, and his chest no longer rose and fell in its usual pattern. The lighthouse keeper sank to her knees, grasping his lifeless hand in hers. How could he be gone? His smile would never light her up again. His laugh would never ring through the meadow where they lived. He wasn't here anymore.

She spent all day digging him a grave. Once she finished, she planted his favorite purple flowers outside, sitting with him for the last time. That night, she didn't return to her lighthouse. She sat outside, letting the wind blow through her hair and dry her tears. It was the only night in the eternity of its existence that the lighthouse was never lit.

The medallion was the only thing he had brought with him. The only thing his parents had given him. It wasn't worth much, but it was the last part of him she had. When she returned to her lighthouse the next morning, she found the medallion on his bed, and shoved it into one of her journals, pushing it under her bed, hoping to never have to relive the most painful day of her life.

Now she flipped it over in her hands examining it. As she flipped it over, one of the sharp edges nicked her finger, causing her to drop it. It landed on the floor with a loud CLANG. She frowned, examining the small cut on her finger. A small stream of red flowed from the gash, and she stuck her finger in her mouth, trying to stop the bleeding.

Once her finger was better, she picked up the medallion again, but instead of returning it to its old home, she placed it on her bedside table, right next to the fresh flowers she'd picked that morning. It was time to stop hiding the past.

The sun was setting, lighting up the sky with brilliant oranges and pinks, reflected on the sea. The day wind had turned to a sweet night breeze, rustling the leaves in the trees around and the waves had quieted as the tide went out.

The lighthouse keeper made her way to the lighthouse room, following the routine she had her entire life. As she made her way up, she noticed a

large scratch on the side of the lighthouse, etched into the rusty exterior of her home. She frowned, running her hand over the scratch. Maybe a stray bird flew into it.

She climbed the eighty one stairs up to the lightroom. Through the door. Ten more stairs. Into the room with the oil basin. She poured the fragrant oil into the bowl before lighting it on fire with a match. She watched as the fire slowly grew, illuminating the room in which she stood. It got bigger and bigger, until it started to illuminate the outside too, casting a bright beam of light onto the sea, blending into the setting sun.

The lighthouse keeper warmed her hands over the fire, feeling the familiar sense of home that came to her every time she lit the flame. The fire never hurt her. She'd slipped once, and her hand fell into the fire. Instead of an excruciating pain, it felt warm and almost tingly. The fire was her friend, not something for her to be scared of. It was her first friend. Before Thomas, before the birds and animals, it was just her and the lighthouse.

Ever since she'd been here, the oil and matches appeared every night, waiting for her to ignite the flame. She did so dutifully, every day. It was her job. What she was here for.

Cogs are Made to Rot, Born to Die

Rox Diekhoff

Cogs do nothing but grind,

They spin and spin

Round and Round

Never knowing when to stop.

In a way it's like fire, or smoke in that matter, spreading and expanding, till it dies away, and all you have left is the residue, burnt metal, and charred bone.

But without the churning, would innovation even occur? The circuit of passion must have enough energy, or else it'll refuse to repeat. About never, if even once, is that circuit completed by an individual. For with every wheel there is the wagon, and for every wagon there is the harness to tame a horse. The cogs of a collective often is what drives what we define as innovation, but in this story the collective takes the form of one. An Engineer, who specializes in robotics.

If one was to enter the Engineer's comfortably cluttered home, off the side of a winded gravel road, they would find the following note pinned to his wall:

6:00 AM: Make coffee and sit down

6:30 AM: Breakfast

7:30 AM: Shower, deodorant, brush teeth

8:00 AM: Work

12:00 PM: Lunch

12:30 PM: Work

6:00 PM: Dinner and rest

8:30 PM: Brush teeth, wash face, take bath if needed.

9:00 PM: Sit by the fireplace and read or listen to music.

10:00 PM: Go to bed, and swiftly doze off.

On the average day he was always ready by 8:00 AM, give or take a few minutes. If anything in the schedule was too off skew he would cancel any plans and take the day off. The Engineer was self employed, and often his wealthy commissioners couldn't care less if he took as much as a year off because they knew his products were one of a kind.

He invented levitation shoes that allowed one to float steadily off the ground up to 50 feet.

Then there was the *Sylf*. A robot controlled via a plate strapped to a helmet that reads the user's neurons in their brain. Useful for attending unexcused sick days, or fun gimmicks.

Every commission he took he did it with the goal to challenge himself. In a way he thought of it as improving his voltage capacity, trying to learn as many skills as he could without short circuiting. His favorite commissions were ones that any sane person would immediately decline, for instance, the commissioner that asked for the levitation shoes was asking for technology that didn't exist, so he made it exist, and he made it work.

Yet despite his love of creating technology, he often made something only when commissioned too. Maybe he just didn't have the unhinged creativity he sought from clients, but he never made a single thing for himself, unless it assisted in the production of products others would receive. That was until he finally announced his hiatus on commissions to, "take my time to work on something of my own."

Within his first week of his hiatus he already had blueprints for an item he called the *Cube*, and announced his creation online. He wasn't unfamiliar with ethical concerns of the time, especially since he began patenting brain chips, and he would always dismiss those concerns claiming he is not responsible for how his consumers use them. But the *Cube* was more. It was meant to, and could replicate parts of the human mind and nervous system. Some compared it to playing god. But God creates the living and at the end of the day the Engineer saw the *Cube* as just AI, something made to imitate specific tasks, not meant to hold a fraction of the complexity that is consciousness as we know it.

At least to him it wasn't consciousness, consciousness is a biological mystery, and what he was making was based on a blueprint he made in his garage.

But this got him thinking, how would a robot made of *Cubes* perform compared to an average human? So within the following couple months he created his Automaton. The Automaton took the form of a little figurine, containing hundreds of compact versions of the *Cube*, all communicating with each other, imitating one's nervous system and brain. It had a boxy body and a head, appearing like a CRT-TV with the square screen that displayed a digital face. Even though the Engineer denied that this AI could ever compare to a living being, he still gave the Automata, just in case something went wrong, which he was sure wouldn't, spherical hands and rectangular feet that lacked any traction or grip of their own. Rather the Automata relied on magnets, thus allowing the Engineer to control when, what, and how they would interact with the world around them.

He had kept this project private ever since he received criticism with the *Cube*. Cause now he was staying down-low, he couldn't rent out a warehouse to test his product like usual, so he decided that his basement would do.

His basement was mostly empty besides random junk and failed projects shoved in the cobwebbed corners. The walls were made of old milky cement with wooden beams laid over to support the house's foundation. It was a bit humble, and it would do. To see how the Automata would perform compared to humans, he figured it would be best to see how they would act in a community similar to one of our own. He created a big metal container about the size of a wardrobe flat on the ground, then installed a one-way-see-through glass dome, and under the dome, inside the thick metal walls, rested the small toy sized town of Automaton. The town contained 3 districts possessing everything the Engineer assumed was needed within a simulation of the modern world. Those districts included a housing district with apartments sprawled about, an office district inhabiting the companies HQs, then those companies owned their businesses on every block within the consumer district. It was a cute little symmetrical town with a small park in the center, and it would soon belong to the Automata, the government offices, the economy, maintenance, it would all fall onto their hands once they were activated. The Engineer couldn't be more excited to see how his creation would perform as he flailed his hands and jammed his finger into the button on his remote. He made sure to only press it once, as a second press would shut down all the Automata indefinitely. Then he heard the stirring of computers powering up, it wasn't long till he saw the little Automata

walking outside, heading to their destinations with focused intent. The cogs of Autoton were finally turning.

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LOG 01: 11/2

I've only really been able to theorize how complex the Automata would perform, but today those theories turned into facts. Overnight the Automata have managed to create and maintain a successful economy, while I did provide some outlines through information I programmed into them, they have shown themselves capable of essentially thinking beyond the instructions given. I also programed each Automaton with a role and job to begin their lives with, but already I am seeing the Automata assigning themselves new roles. For instance a group of Automata that began as cashiers left their jobs and formed a successful jazz band that now plays evening shows in the park. Some of the business specialized Automata working in the office district have even offered to help promote and run the band's shows.

A playground is also now being built in an empty lot within the housing district, sparking a demand for hardware supplies and construction. I can only wonder how the Automata will recover more building and hardware supplies to meet demand with the little supply I provided. I would restock the stores myself but it's too risky with the hyper-intelligence these AI are capable of. I hope this will allow them to find an effective solution, as for now I will wait and see how Autoton progresses.

LOG 02: 11/3

Infrastructure and construction seem to be the driving forces of the economy, more and more buildings are being renovated, and more empty plots are being filled with community areas and businesses. As for essential needs such as charging stations, repair shops, and housing, for now that aspect of the economy has remained relatively stable.

I specifically say for now because I am observing a major shift occurring within the consumer ring. Overnight a chunk of employees were fired after partaking in a strike where they demanded for a minimum wage law to be passed. While I set the consumer district with 10 coins as the default pay, companies have already lowered that payment to as little as 0.10 a coin per-hour. For reference, 1 coin buys a singular recharge, which is needed daily. Unions have also begun to form as unemployment and unfair treatment in

the workforce grows.

It's intriguing seeing how similar the AI of the Automata performs to us, even without instructions they are encountering issues we humans have faced. I never told them how or what strikes and unions were, and yet they've recreated them on their own. Also after looking through the information I gave them it has occurred to me that I never introduced them to the idea of a playground, rather it was an idea they came to themselves. For now I am eager to wait and see how Autoton progresses.

LOG 03: 11/4

I've realized that for the past two logs I've fixated on the economy, or at least what I understand of it. So I must inform you that the Automata private life is equally intriguing. While the first day or two showed little interaction between the Automata outside of work, with new activities like Basketball emerging, new parks being built, and unions forming, the Automata have grown closer to one another. Looking at the logs of the Automata's whereabouts, it seems like friend groups have begun to form with consistent clusters of the same Automata following each other around. Some Automata that are struggling financially, or just friends, have even begun to room together. Looking back on these logs, the band that I mentioned in LOG 1 seemed to have been one of the first instances of a friend group occurring.

The Automaton, like humans, seek and find connection with others.

The strikes in the consumer district I mentioned in LOG 2 have also successfully garnered enough support to create a minimum wage law of 5 coins per hour. Looking at Autoton's news outlets this development has brought both the Automata hope and fear. Employees in the consumer district are joyous, while the heads and corporates in the office district are pessimistic, worried their business plans will be shot down by laws controlling their methods. I will wait and see how Autoton progresses.

LOG 06: 11/7

The Basketball game turned out to generate huge revenue and created a massive Automata community surrounding the sport. The stadium also provided many jobs, but the unemployment rate has continued to drop since Construction companies have begun paying corporations to flatten and scrap their businesses' land. With the mass buyouts and merging of companies, corporations from the office district can now afford to sell the restaurants and shops they own in the consumer district to be salvaged. While many lose their jobs, more money is garnered for those who sit ranking

high. To counter this, unions have begun to gather members across entire business chains to gain back the upper hand.

In reaction the office district has begun Lobbying for laws that are more restrictive of unions. They've done interviews with news reporters, and have gone on to claim that unions are impairing the economy, and laws (such as the 5 coin act) are targeting big businesses and block economic growth.

With unemployment increasing more Automata are also finding it harder to afford rent, especially as infrastructure projects have only caused rent to increase. When I look down at the city I see not only how my little town has turned into a metropolis, but how sadly within those streets I observe more pedestrians, loitering around when they should be home, and their logs suggesting they have no home to go to. Also the logs of the Automata, especially those who I assigned consumer district jobs, have shown them spending more time clustered together than before. I am unaware why this is, perhaps like a wire, and also humans, the Automata need more support padding them when they are weak. For now I will wait and see how Autoton progresses.

LOG 09: 1/10

When I woke up to the echoes of an explosion, I was not expecting it to be coming from downstairs. Even as I came down I was questioning if my hearing was betraying me until I took a peak at Autoton to find an entire building flattened within the Business district. My first assumption was that they were now selling business district property over to be salvaged, but when I eyed Automata sprawled through the rubble it became apparent that this was an attack of some kind. The attack garnered many in the business district to blame the consumer district unions and their "anti-salvage extremism." It did not take long for the laws within Autoton protecting unions becoming scrapped, prompting a mass number of workers to walk away from unions, afraid of the affiliation, concerned if it will get them fired or worse.

On another note, playgrounds are becoming overwhelmingly popular, and more are opening. The recent upsurge of sports has also promoted community Basketball courts to emerge, giving communities a place to bond in tough times like now.

Other communities have also grown, such as that one religious community I observed in LOG 7, there isn't a lot of coverage over what they believe in the news, but based on the practices I've observed it appears to be a belief they not only created on their own, but one that remains unique to the Au-

tomata. Today they made a public march to the flattened office and prayed, their LED face screens pointing up, looking almost at me. I've been getting paranoid if they are aware what lays beyond Autoton, and if they know I exist, but last time I checked the walls are still sealed tight, the glass dome should be opaque from the bottom, and no logs read Automata at a location outside of Autoton. I will wait and see how Autoton progresses.

LOG 15: 11/16

I wasn't paranoid, I was right. They know I exist, and every day more and more join hands on the streets and squeal for help. I never taught them English, I created the alphabet and language they speak. SO WHY DO THEY KNOW MY NAME! It's all I can hear whenever I am down there now, and whenever I look in I cannot help but to wonder if they feel me gazing down, viewing their once perfect city now in ruins. The office district with blockades and militia shoved in every corner. The consumer district, still in flames from last night's riot. Burnt char can't be salvaged, so if the buildings are burned down, then nothing is gained, only lost which changes barely anything for the employees. The housing district even now has become a ghost town. Only the lucky few who get jobs at the new buildings remain in decent housing, and when looking at the logs they don't seem to do much in their free time besides hang around their apartment alone. I've questioned whenever I should deactivate this experiment, the Automata should be just AI, so why do I feel guilt over the thought of what shouldn't be killing them. For now I just will wait and see how Autoton progresses.

LOG 17: 11/18

I've been feeling watched, ever since LOG 11, but recently after really digging into the log history I can confirm there has been a breach. No walls were penetrated, rather they dug through the floor. I told myself if this were to ever occur then I must deactivate the experiment, but that was before I understood what the Automata were. For now I've located and filled in the hole, even locked up the basement. This won't be permanent, but hopefully it will help for now and keep me sane while I gather my senses.

LOG 25: 11/29

_Project#: 5

_Name: Autoton

_Status (Deactivated?): N/A

_Conclusion: IT'S FINALLY GONE, IT'S GONE!!!

_Storage Loc: Underneath Patio, rotting away.

LOG 26: 11/30

I CAN STILL HEAR THEM BURROWING UNDER MY FEET!

I can't sleep anymore, I can't even eat, all I can do is listen, kick, and stomp as they claw closer. I've deactivated their magnets so they shouldn't be able to grab hold of anything, but I can still hear them, scratching at my basement door, clicking under the floorboard. I eye the button, knowing full well I don't deserve the luxury to press it, I shouldn't press it. I should suffer for creating something that could create music and art like us, connect and bond like we do, chase goals like we all do, and having the capacity to watch it suffer till I got too scared, and respond by burying it 5 feet deep to rot and die.

But I also can't let it live.

I CAN FEEL THEM GNAWING AT THE WOOD UNDER MY FEET!

I want it to live, I want it to survive, but the chances of it killing someone are too high. But it isn't an algorithm, I can't assume it'll kill someone.

CAN'T ASSUME IT'LL SPARE SOMEONE TOO!

"Caleb, Caleb", the noise rings in my ears.

I will die soon,

whenever they kill me or not,

and when they are released unto the world, murderous or not, people will want to kill them.

So why stall?

When,

the gasoline I stand a foot deep in,

and the flame from the match in my hand,

can cut the circuit before it completes.

audio_end

No One Good

Sara Long

Windburgh Academy was a name so on the nose it made Mal cringe.

A vicious gale blustered by the moment she stepped from the car. She frantically smoothed her skirt down, feeling ridiculous. Her mother's disapproval was nearly palpable. *As if it was my fault.*

"Let's not linger," the irritable woman urged. Mal sighed.

It was all so ridiculous. The name, the uniforms so wildly inappropriate for the climate, the fence around the perimeter so high it could be securing a prison yard. That's what it certainly felt like, being sent off to Windburgh for her crimes and all.

The foyer was fittingly drafty, and she pulled her jacket tighter around herself against the chill. Her mother, clad in a luxurious fur coat that made her look a bit like an oversized chinchilla, seemed unbothered.

"The headmistress said she would be waiting in the foyer at four," she grumbled, scanning the room to make sure she wasn't hiding. She tapped the face of her wristwatch with a sharp red fingernail.

"Waiting I am," came a velvety voice, "not a moment too late."

On cue, four chimes resounded from the bell tower. Mal and her mother turned to see a tall woman standing much closer than her voice had suggested, exuding a curious quality about her that Mal couldn't put her finger on.

"You must be Mallory," the headmistress said with a perturbing smile.

"Just Mal is fine," she corrected.

"I'm Headmistress Nettle," she continued, ignoring her. "You must be Mrs. Huxley. My assistants would be happy to tie up the last loose ends with you, but I like to personally acquaint new students with the school, if you don't mind."

I mind, Mal thought, but she also minded being shipped off to a strange school in the middle of nowhere, and yet here she was. The assistants

whisked Mrs. Huxley off, leaving Mal in the eerie foyer with Nettle.

“No time to waste, then,” she said, gesturing to the room. “Welcome to Windburgh.”

They toured the dining hall, the libraries, the hallways divided by subject and grade. On one wall, dozens of fliers advertising different clubs and events sat upon a bulletin board. “You like horror movies, don’t you? Our horror movie club is very popular,” Nettle commented, patting the poster advertising just that.

“I do,” Mal said, examining the paper. “Did my mother tell you that?”

“And our sailing club... all they’re known for is capsizing, and having a total of, what is it, two members? Three?”

Mal let the matter drop.

At the dormitories over an hour later, Mal dropped her suitcase by the door.

“Looks like Clem isn’t here,” Nettle said.

“Clem?” Mal asked. Nettle drummed her fingers on the nearest windowsill, deep in thought.

Before they returned, the headmistress paused. “I suspect you’re on edge, so I’ll tell you upfront that I don’t ask my students why they’re here,” she said. Her gaze was preternatural, wrong but compelling, and Mal couldn’t break it. “I simply assume it’s something nefarious. No one good ever comes to Windburgh, you know.” She winked and patted her shoulder calmly, as if her commiseration wasn’t cryptic.

Mal fumed, her terror amplified by fury. *I was trying to help.*

In the foyer, Nettle gave more information to Mrs. Huxley, who nodded very solemnly at everything she said. At last the formalities seemed to be slowing, and Nettle told the Huxleys to say their goodbyes.

“Head up to your dorm afterwards. I trust you’ll remember the way.” Mal did not, but Nettle spun and strode silently from the room before she could protest.

“Oh, don’t be like that,” Mrs. Huxley said when Mal made no move to

exchange farewells. “It’s for your own good.”

“Funny,” Mal said, wringing her hands, “because I said the same thing to Jane and now I’m here.”

“Oh, that’s rich,” Mrs. Huxley scoffed. “I’ll be in contact with Headmistress Nettle. If you aren’t making any real changes by Christmas, you aren’t coming within a mile of Jane and you certainly aren’t coming home for the holidays.”

Mal only glared at her. Mrs. Huxley offered a stiff, one armed squeeze and then she, too, walked off, stranding Mal in a spotlight of watery sunshine like the star of a tragic play.

After a good twenty minutes of wandering, Mal found the dormitories.

Someone on the other side cracked the door open at her knocking, revealing absolutely nothing of the pitch-black room inside, save for flickering orange candlelight. More pertinently, though, was the face scrutinizing her.

“Are you Clem?” Mal asked uncertainly. She actually had no idea if Clem was relevant to anything, really. It didn’t seem out of character for Nettle to mention her for no other reason than to befuddle Mal.

“Who’s asking?” the other girl queried.

“Mal Huxley. You might be my roommate, but I can’t be sure.”

The girl blinked, beamed, then drew back to call into the room: “Clem, your roommate’s arrived!”

The door opened fully, and a hand yanked Mal inside. The girl it belonged to— apparently not Clem, contrary to her initial assumption— was taller than her, with golden skin and shiny black hair like a river of spilled ink. “I’ll take that for you. I’m Ianthe,” she said with a smile, tossing Mal’s suitcase on the crisp, untouched cot on the right side of the room. “*That’s Clem.*” She pointed at another girl sitting cross-legged on the floor, face framed by a halo of ebony curls, holding a smoking match between two fingers like a cigarette. The smoke curled up towards a sooty mark on the ceiling that told Mal it wasn’t the first time this— whatever *this* was— had been done.

Clem looked up and haphazardly flicked the match somewhere, then leaned forward eagerly. “What brings you here?” she asked with a grin full of gleaming teeth. “Wait, don’t tell me.” Clem closed her eyes. Ianthe looked on with something like reverence.

“What’s she doing?” Mal whispered.

Another voice shushed her. “She’s consulting the spirits,” like it was the most obvious thing in the world. Mal startled and realized there were at least a dozen other girls crammed onto the left-side bed watching Clem intently.

“...your sister?”

“That’s... part of it, I guess,” Mal admitted, sounding braver than she felt.

“Clem’s the best there is,” another girl chimed in eagerly.

Mal was grateful for their apparent kindness, but rattled by Clem’s uncanny ability to guess her situation nonetheless. “What’s going on, anyway? You can’t *all* be my roommates,” she asked, changing the subject.

“Officially, it’s the horror movie club,” strange Clem said, “but unofficially, the Necromancers’ Guild.”

The bells clanged jovially somewhere in the distance. “That’s dinner,” Ianthe said, throwing the curtain open. The waning light of late autumn dusk didn’t do much to illuminate the room.

The girls shuffled out until Mal was alone with Clem and Ianthe, fingers scratching anxiously at her wrist.

“What’s wrong? I’ll save you a seat, don’t worry,” Ianthe offered.

“Does Nettle know about this?” Mal asked, thinking back to the library. *Our horror movie club is very popular.* “About the Guild?”

“Stinger? Who knows,” Clem said. She blew the candle out, drowning the room in darkness. “She leaves us be.”

“Stinger?”

“Like stinging nettle,” Ianthe explained. “Come, the soup will get cold.”

“So what did you do?” one of the Guild girls asked. “To get thrown in here, I mean.”

“No one good ever comes to Windburgh,” someone said, her voice a caricature of Nettle’s smooth, enchanting one. The table laughed in unison. It was unnerving. The mantra had sounded sinister from Nettle’s— *Stinger’s?*— lips, but somehow this was worse.

Mal took a hesitant bite of soup, half expecting to drop dead. “I thought you didn’t ask that,” she said.

“Stinger doesn’t, but we do,” Clem said.

“Oh.” The girls stared at her expectantly. *They’ll probably summon a vengeful spirit to haunt me if I don’t answer.* “I tried to exorcise the spirit possessing my sister.”

Clem’s spoon fell into her bowl with a loud clatter. A hush fell over the girls, concerned eyes on their startled leader. “Did it— did it work?”

“I wouldn’t be here if it did, would I?” Mal said glumly. “I’m a pariah.”

“But you could sense it? The spirit?” Clem prompted.

“I suppose,” Mal said. She didn’t want to talk about it. Squeezing her eyes shut, she tried to block out the memories of Jane screaming and thrashing about, of Jane clawing at her skin, of Jane beseeching her to do something about the horrible, monstrous thing in the corner of the room. It wasn’t working. She opened her eyes. “What about the rest of you? How did you get thrown in here?”

Clem deflated.

“I had this... *pernicious* flower garden,” Ianthe answered proudly, “and someone got a little too close.” She smiled wistfully as if recalling a dearly departed friend.

“They just sent me here when the doctors and the priests gave up,” Clem said. She traced a whorl in the wood absentmindedly.

“She gets like this sometimes. Don’t worry too much about her,” Ianthe whispered. “No one particularly likes talking about their past, least of all

her.”

Mal tuned out the rest of the conversation. She couldn't shake Clem's behavior, despite Ianthe brushing it off. Dinner ended too soon. She dreaded going back to the dormitory, where Clem was sure to torment her for more details about Jane.

When everyone retired for the night, Clem was nowhere to be found. Thank goodness. Mal changed into her pajamas and switched the lamp off. *At least the bed is comfortable.*

In a half-dormant daze, Mal didn't register the click of the door shutting or the heavy, panicked breathing that followed. No, Clem's return was discreet until she flipped the lights on and shook her awake.

“Mallory. Make them go away,” Clem whispered.

“Huh?” Mal murmured, her bleary eyes blinking sleep away.

“The spirits. Make them go away like you did with your sister,” the other girl pleaded.

Mal was awake in an instant. She scrambled into a sitting position, clutching the quilt close like it would protect her. From what, exactly, she wasn't sure. “I already told you, it didn't work.”

“You have to try again. I can't, I— the girls. The Guild. They think it's all a game, but I can't do it,” Clem said helplessly. “They— the spirits, they tell me things. Terrible things. And I don't tell anyone, because I don't want to scare them, but Mallory— Mal, sorry— *I'm* scared. I'm so scared.”

Even in the dimness, her dark doe eyes were full of genuine, unadulterated fear. And yet no part of Mal wanted to help her.

“There was nothing I could do for my sister and nothing I can do for you,” she hissed.

Clem retreated back to her bed, shaking with silent sobs. If Mal turned her back, she could pretend like nothing was wrong.

So it went for weeks.

Mal avoided Guild meetings. She liked Ianthe, who skipped them to keep her company. “I don't mind. All I do is guard the door anyway,” she had said. Mal had neglected to inform her of Clem's confession, but it seemed she bought her lie of feeling uneasy around ghosts and spirits.

Mal went to class, ate lunch in the hall, even tried sailing once— they capsized, obviously, and she was pretty certain she got hypothermia, but it was fun. She established a routine, and Windburgh could have been close to normal if it weren't for Clem's persistent nagging.

Christmas time rolled around and brought a snowstorm with it. Mrs. Huxley called for the first time since the exile, and Mal was relieved to hear she was temporarily welcome back home.

“I was hoping I could bring a friend of mine,” Mal said. Ianthe wouldn't stay at school alone over break on her watch.

“The more the merrier. I'm just glad you're making friends.”

After the last day of classes, Mrs. Huxley arrived with her driver— really just a lanky boy from down the street, barely older than Mal. He clumsily hauled the girls' luggage into the trunk.

“Wait! Wait!” someone called, sprinting down the cobbled drive. Mal froze as Clem slowed to a stop in front of the car. “You weren't going to leave your favorite roommate behind, were you?”

She couldn't tell Clem to get lost. Mrs. Huxley was poking her head out of the passenger seat window, listening curiously. “I'm sorry, I thought you had plans,” she said carefully instead.

“Get in the car, girls, it's freezing!”

Clem chattered the whole way with the same captivation that mesmerized the Guild. Ianthe sat between them, at least. If she sensed the tension, she didn't mention it. Two and a half excruciating hours later, they pulled into the Huxleys' garage, and Mal clamored from the suffocating confines of the car.

Inside, Mr. Huxley sat at the kitchen table nursing a mug of tea. Mal's father was frail and very gullible, and hardly privy to the family affairs. She suspected he had been fed lies about her whereabouts and swallowed them easily.

“Mally-O!” he exclaimed feebly, stretching his arms wide for an embrace.

“Hi, Dad,” she said. She really had missed him, oblivious as he was. He smelled like herbs and home. “This is my friend Ianthe. And... Clem.”

He slurped at his drink. “It’s nice to meet you both. I’m glad my Mals is making friends.”

“Would you keep them company? I want to go see Jane,” Mal whispered.

“Of course, of course. Any friend of Mal’s is a friend of mine.”

Ianthe gave her shoulder a squeeze as she slipped quietly upstairs.

Jane laid surprisingly still in her bed with her hands folded over her stomach and her hair fanned out on her pillow. Their mother had probably been tending to her. With her ashy skin and cracked lips, she looked like a corpse. Mal crouched beside her. She itched to check for a pulse, but last time she’d tried to touch Jane, her skin burned like a hot stove.

The room was heavy with a sense of foreboding deeper than just fear for her sister— it hit her, suddenly, that the sensations of being near Jane were the same as being near Clem or Nettle.

But you could sense it? The spirit?

Yes. And if her previous attempt to dispel it was any indication, it could sense her too, and she’d made it angry.

From downstairs came the sound of the door shutting. Mrs. Huxley had returned from paying and dismissing the driver boy, which meant Mal didn’t have much time before she would berate her for getting too close.

The bedroom door creaked open. Mal whirled around, a dozen apologies ready on her tongue, but it wasn’t her mother.

It was Clem.

Without thinking, Mal shifted infinitesimally closer to the bed. “You shouldn’t be up here.”

“I was just looking for the restroom,” Clem said.

Mal shook her head. “No. No. You get away from her.”

“I can hear it,” Clem murmured. “I can hear the spirit. It’s furious, Mal. It doesn’t like that you tried to get rid of it.”

“Obviously,” she muttered.

“They won’t leave me alone. They like me, in a twisted sort of way— they like having a body.”

“If there was something I could do, both of you would be free right now,” Mal said.

“What did you do last time?” Clem said, taking a step closer. “Try it again. Try it on me.”

What did I do last time? She’d sensed the wrongness of Jane’s room, known it was more than a puzzling illness. She’d grabbed her arm until her palms blistered and Jane woke up screeching, but Mal only held tighter. She’d been so close, the spirit on the cusp of leaving. Then her mother had found them, and yanked Mal away. It would have worked, she was certain— still, on the off chance she was wrong, she didn’t want to hurt her again.

But if Clem was so willing...

“Fine,” Mal said. “Give me your arm.”

She hesitated before wrapping her fingers around Clem’s wrist.

Do it for Jane.

It was like capsizing all over again, only worse, a cold so awful it burned. Clem was shrieking, and Jane was stirring, and Mal had the distinct impression of being underwater. The world was muffled. Ianthe burst into the room after a panicked Mrs. Huxley, looking amazed.

Jane sat up, lucid for the first time in months. The room spun. The furniture clattered. Ianthe sobbed. Clem screamed. And Mal, through it all, could not breathe.

Mal sat up in her Windburgh dorm with a jolt.

On her bedside table was a tray of oatmeal, a cup of juice, and a vase of wilted flowers that told her she’d been here for a while. Tucked under the

vase sat a creamy white envelope sealed with shimmery wax. She reached for that first.

Mal,

You have done a brilliant thing.

As I'm sure you've sensed, this school is, put simply, cursed. Girls like you and Clem manage it. Girls like you are what keeps Windburgh alive. But, as I've observed for generations, no one can handle the responsibility forever. Clem was unaware of hers and still cracked. Or rather, she knew she had the responsibility to keep the nature of the curse from the rest, but she did not understand that the balance of the school hangs on keeping that secret.

I'm telling you this because you have proved to be unlike any girl I've met so far. Every girl has been unique, but I have never met someone with the capacity for dispelling— you are vital, in that respect. I saw the state of your sister, and it was not foreign to me. Too many girls have been lost under the same circumstances.

Clem is gone now, and so I leave the horror movie club to you.

oleic acid

Ashley Yang

I woke up to the smell of death. The fume, pungent and heavy, clouded my olfactory senses with a languorous dread. The rotting air clogged my head, a cadaverous embrace that gently choked my breath away.

The second thing I noticed was the chill. The darkness and dampness engulfed my proprioception. My appendages felt swollen from how stiff I had become.

Next came the voices.

“Five of our fellows died today. I can’t believe she was one of them too!”

“Mmhmm . . . for one of our best to die so suddenly like that is a shock, but for ten of them to die within a few days is ludicrous!”

My mind whirled with questions. Who died, and why?

I felt my stomach lurch, as if I were blindfolded, tripping wildly down a winding staircase. A dizzying vertigo descended upon me.

“Man, she’s heavy, though . . .”

“Shut up, dude! That’s no way to talk about your dead sister.”

Blood rushed to my head, instigating another wave of wooziness. It occurred to me that my legs rose higher than my head, which I attributed as the cause of my light-headedness. In fact, I realized that my legs were completely suspended from the ground, and my eyes flew open to discover that I was being carried by my siblings to the mortuary.

“I’m not dead,” I deadpanned, but it seemed like my head was underwater and they hadn’t heard a single thing. My words didn’t even ripple across the pond of my siblings’ hearing. I laughed. This was one of the more genius (but gruesome) pranks that my siblings had come up with. I couldn’t be dead if my conscience were still alive! Perhaps I needed to speak a little louder for them to realize that their little trick hadn’t worked. “I’M NOT DEAD!” I screamed. No reaction. Surely they would at least flinch from the sheer volume of my scream, but still they conversed about me dying without

a single hitch in their steps. They couldn't be deaf since they could hear each other . . . right?

As we rounded the corner, I spotted one of my friends and sighed in relief. She would definitely call my siblings out on this cruel joke.

"Hey, Joanna! Get me out of here!" I even wiggled my leg in my sister's grip for extra measure.

My hopes rose when she took a nonchalant look in my direction. But then she turned around and left. What on Earth was going on? My heartbeat spiked when I saw the pile of bodies ahead—or at least, what was left of them.

The front stack was tremendously grisly. I spotted nine still bodies flung on top of each other, draped carelessly on the dirt. Some had eyes glazed over with a white film, limbs hanging limply at their sides, but my mind lingered on the worst part. Their abdomens appeared to have been crushed in the exact same location on their midsections. A layer of days-old dried blood coated their bodies. What type of force could have done this?

Behind the front stack lay an expanse of bodily towers, one after another like Hades' deathly soldiers awaiting orders.

I caught movement from my peripheral vision, and gasped.

A leg moved from the pile. I screamed again, throat raw and tears pinching at the corners of my eyes. How could a prank go this far? Did my siblings really hate me this much?

The pile of carcasses grew nearer.

"Please, please, put me down!" I thrashed, trying to escape from the horrid smell and the ghastly sight. Again, my plea was rendered useless.

A moment later, my body flailed through the air and smacked on top of the corpses, like a cherry on top of zombie cake. What a horrific nightmare! The stench of the bodies under me made me retch.

I rolled off the zombie pile.

Thunk! My head hit something hard, but I couldn't see it. At least I wasn't sitting on decomposing corpses . . . I tapped the invisible, translucent barrier separating me from the outside world. Where was I? And how could I get

out?

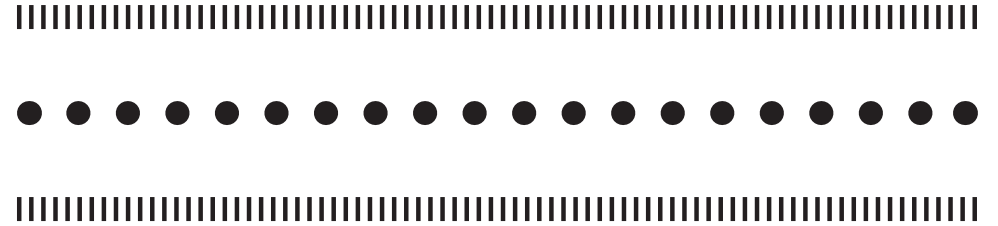
When I refocused on the scene in front of me, I saw a *gargantuan* brown eye blinking at me from behind the barrier. "AHHHHHHHHH! HELP ME! GET ME OUT OF HERE!" I shrieked, but I was once again left unheard. Either I was only imagining my voice to be that loud, or dead bodies were quite efficient at absorbing sound. Both ways were not an ideal end for me from this joke gone too far.

Just as suddenly as the eye appeared, it retracted and a paper zoomed into view with a bolded headline: ***The effect of artificially applied oleic acid as an indication of death compared to oleic acid released in natural death is statistically the same in the study of ants.*** Myrmecologist Daniel Jones studied how ants know their comrades are dead and discovered that they release oleic acid as an indicator of death. To supplement his discovery, he tested whether artificially applying oleic acid onto ants would make them believe they are dead, which proved to be true when . . .

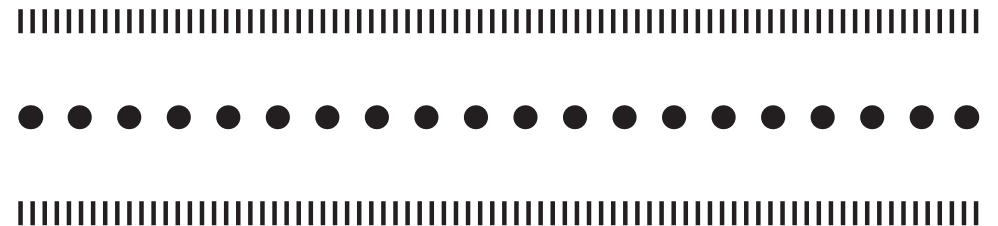


The Light of the Day

Megan Xia
Painting
Carmel Senior High School
10th Grade



Short Story



It Ends How It Began

Bridget Ballard

A dead spider lays under a blue cup.

It had been laying there, dead, for three days. Someone had trapped it, but no one had bothered to free it, or at least check to see if they had succeeded in killing the spider.

But it doesn't matter. After all, it is only a spider. A big, horribly ugly spider, at that. It is so vile that even its own children would have cowered at the size of it, resenting the fact that one day, they too would become just as monstrous. No one loves that spider. All it did with its short, insignificant life was scuttle across floors and scare people and suck blood from its grotesque meals.

The spider's life was meaningless.

In fact, its life was so meaningless that a boy killed it. He killed the spider, assuming that it didn't have a mind or a heart or a name.

But he was wrong. The spider had all of those things.

Her name was Celeste.

And Celeste is dead, a corpse beneath a cup that no one will ever touch.

But before that, Celeste had been grieving.

She knew that no one was around to mourn her. Her mother was dead. Her children, yet to be born, were snug safely in the silken sack she had sewn for them. No one would remember her after her death. There would be no lament for her, no plea for her safe passage to the ether above.

So, Celeste took the duties of the spider tradition upon herself.

She thanked the world for the short life she had lived. Each sunrise and moonrise, each drop of rain and fleck of soil was a gift no one could create again. Most of all, she thanked the world for the glittering beads of dew,

which clung to her webs and made them sparkle like a thousand stars.

Then, Celeste begged the sky to accept her as she was, an insignificant spider who had so often been stepped on and cursed at and cowered from. More than anything, she wished to be lifted into the land of peace, the sacred ether.

Celeste begged

and begged

and begged, spending her last few moments of life both wallowing in despair and praying for happiness. As hard as it was, Celeste cherished the world and accepted her fate. After all, it was nature's way, and in the end, nature would always get the final choice. For a spider, Celeste was quite wise.

But before that, Celeste had been scared.

The world was dark, but not like night. It was the kind of darkness that had no light at all. As if it were alive, the darkness slithered and whispered around her. It extended outward in every direction, a never-ending labyrinth of Celeste's echoing wails.

The darkness was suffocating. With each moment that passed, invisible walls contracted around the spider, squeezing until there was no air to give breath to her lungs. Frigid fingers reached out from all directions. Celeste didn't have to see to know that they were reaching for her.

The darkness was both infinite and ending.

Celeste had no idea what to do. Frantically, she gasped for air, but oxygen was running low. Blue blood boiled in her veins, telling her to run. The spider did her best to obey, scuttling from side to side and pressing against the walls with all of the strength she could muster. No matter how hard she tried, nothing happened. Celeste was trapped.

Trembling, the spider stood in the center of the dank, dark world. The sound of her ragged breaths echoing around her sent shivers down her spine. She had no idea how long she had spent in the belly of blackness. Time did not exist in the dark. Nothing existed in the dark except darkness itself and a half-dead spider. Celeste's heart whispered only one word with

each feeble beat:

Escape.

Escape.

Escape.

There was no escape.

But before that, Celeste had been crawling.

She was crawling across the baseboard of a basement of a boy.

Celeste never meant him any harm. All she wanted was to get back outside, where she belonged. Close to the ceiling of the basement, there was a window. It was cracked open slightly, with just enough room for a spider Celeste's size to squeeze through. That was where Celeste intended to go.

As Celeste wriggled along the wall, she pondered her curious situation. Never had she imagined herself in a human den, and, strangely enough, the spider had no idea how she had arrived there. Celeste never went anywhere unless she chose to. But, why would she choose to enter the home of humans? They were terrifying. Celeste would much rather have spent her time with more dignified creatures, such as spiders.

Despite her confusion, Celeste had the situation perfectly planned out. She would mind her own business and stay out of the boy's way. The boy would mind his own business and stay out of her way. While they were ignoring one another, Celeste would quietly climb up the wall and out the window. The two animals would never have to see each other again. Unfortunately for Celeste, humans seemed to have a remarkable talent for messing things up.

The boy, like the majority of his kind, was oblivious to the effect of his actions. He was heartless enough to trap a spider beneath a cup. And he was mindless enough to leave her there, giving her a slow, sorrowful death.

Eyes wide, the boy lunged for the spider. Celeste's heart lurched, and she darted out of the way. The spider was quick, but the boy was quicker. Something hard and blurred smacked into Celeste's side, and she was knocked to the ground. She cried out in agony and fear, but no one heard her. The last

thing Celeste saw before she descended into blackness was the boy's large, brown eye as he slapped the cup over her body.

Thankfully, the two creatures never saw each other again.

But even before the spider entered the boy's house of horror, Celeste had been happy.

The sweet spider lived in a tree, who was sad, wilted, and unmistakably dead. Still, Celeste felt for him. No one—not humans nor creatures—cared about the dead tree. So, Celeste took it upon herself to befriend him. After all, she was in dire need of a friend as well.

The spider treasured the beauty of nature. She loved the serenity of the sky, and how it changed from bright blue to pale indigo to deep purple. The symphony of birdsong and late-night concerts from crickets always made her smile. Most nights, Celeste would dance and hum along. Sometimes, the tree would sway to the music as if he was listening, too. In her tree, everything was perfect.

Each day, Celeste would create a new tapestry of silk. She wove images of cardinals and mountains and clouds. At night, she would gaze up at the sparkling stars, her greatest inspirations. Celeste would trace their pictures with her eyes until she found a scene worth immortalizing. Then, she would patiently await the sunrise as the tree slowly rocked her to sleep.

Celeste's calm patience was always rewarded.

When she awoke, there would always be a new surprise waiting for her. Dewdrops glistened on each silvery strand of silk. The rising sun changed the color of the crystalline orbs, painting them shades of salmon, scarlet and saffron. Sometimes, Celeste would sew a silken balloon and sail into the endless sky, admiring her work from afar. A gasp escaped her each time she laid eyes on it. The entire tree, covered in delicate artwork, glowed with the light of a thousand suns. To her, the most beautiful thing was gazing at art—*her* art—and letting go.

Celeste the spider had created the most magnificent masterpiece on Earth. Yet, no one cared to see it, and no one ever will. Now, Celeste is gone from the world, and the tree is once again forgotten and lonely.

A dead spider lays under a blue cup, gorgeous and irretrievable.

Painted Silence

Ying Chung

When the house is finally empty, I come back to life.

There are traces of them in every step, with every turn, inescapable. Photos condemn me from their gilded perches. Shining awards, golden and bright, line the walls. They whisper mutinously around me. *You don't belong here*, they laugh.

This house proudly displays their lives, and I can only stare mutely. I am reduced to a ghost haunting my own walls, trying to leave any trace of my existence. I trace their certificates, dragging my fingers across the glass as my eyes drift onwards, searching for my own in vain. I stop at a photo of my son. He holds a trophy, lips pulled back into an arrogant smirk. His eyes meet mine, contempt clouding his gaze. His lips twist in mockery. I rip my eyes away. There is no place for me here.

I drift upstairs. The house is finally quiet. These moments are brief; stolen minutes while my husband is away at work, and my child at school. In these moments, their oppressive presence is gone, and I can feel again. I trace the lines etched into the walls as I continue my ascent. One corner of the house is entirely mine, free of their touch. I seek its refuge now to reassure myself of my existence.

A box sits behind lines of neatly folded clothes. It's rather unassuming, a plain brown box tearing at the edges, but my heart stutters at the sight. I open it. Papers spill out from across the edges, a mix of photographs, certificates, and paintings, framed by thick clouds of dust that fall away in gentle circles. I reverently brush it away from each thin paper I pick up. This box holds me, in my truest form, preserving the pieces of myself lost to time.

The first is a photo of a golden field washed in the last traces of dying sun. Deep blue swallows waving grains in its expanse, small lights glittering from behind. A young girl stands before it, silhouetted by warm light, white dress stained golden. Her smile is bright and unrestrained. A simple happiness dyes her features, and there is a confidence in her every movement, an easy self-assurance, ambition shining bright in her eyes. She clutches a brush in her ink-stained hands, nails digging sharply into dull wood. The photo tastes of summer, of unfiltered happiness, of coldness chased away by easy warmth.

I don't recognize her. I press the photo into my scarred skin, crumpling lines across her face. I want to absorb her, to become this girl again, to feel that bright happiness again. Bitterness burrows into my chest. It's impossible. Too much of her is gone. I reach into the box again.

Paintings, thin and mostly abstract, lie neatly inside it. They document flashes of life, in blurred ink, desperate to be remembered. I remember it now, brushing fingertips across angry lines. I remember the beginning, of shouting, of crying children and tattered blankets holding loose warmth and biting hunger in our stomachs staved off by sisters spinning stories with soulless eyes. I remember sleepless nights spent quieting the nightmares of my siblings, angry cries left unanswered, and resentful, aged eyes.

I hold the clearest of these memories in my hands now, the first of these paintings to hold a clear definition. It's one of my mother, draped over the metal railings of the balcony, glowing beneath stars. She'd pressed a bottle to her lips, liquid dripping down her chin. Silver light illuminated her, and a deep red stained her cheeks. She looked beautiful, then, the sort of haunting beauty reminiscent of a spirit. Her gown swayed beneath her as she barked out a sharp laugh, one that I had never heard before and would never hear again.

"Ah, so you've come to haunt me even now, have you?" She dropped the bottle, and stumbled towards me. I froze, and then she was reaching for my shoulders, pressing her face closer to mine.

"You are your father's daughter, after all, aren't you?" I flinched away from the thick scent of alcohol, but her hands anchored me. She drew closer, smiling through accusing eyes.

"I wish I'd never met him, you know. I could... no, I *would* have been happy. You know that, right?" I shook my head, and she let go, pushing me back into the house. I fled, chased by the sounds of her echoing laughter.

The next day, she'd dropped a cheap ink set in my lap, unable to look me in the eye, a replacement for what neither of my parents could ever give me. I was not living, not then, not until the moment my ink touched paper. For the first time, something belonged to me, and all I wanted was to chase it, to spend every second painting. The ink consumed me. Every day after school, I painted, ignoring my plummeting grades and the cries of my hungry siblings. With each stroke of my brush, the pains I felt bled into paper and freed me. With each stroke, I grew lighter.

It was my mother who would find my paintings first, and enter them

into competitions. I won, somehow, and after that, my life was competition after competition. In exchange for most of the money received, my parents upgraded my supplies, an investment that paid itself off. We went hungry a little less often, and they argued less the more money I won. My love for painting transformed into a necessity, and to win was an expectation. Anything less was a personal failure, another meal that my siblings lost because of my own shortcomings.

Like my older siblings, when I became old enough to work, I was expected to also find a salaried job. Painting competitions weren't enough to help support so many others, and I believed that perhaps I could provide for my younger siblings. My desperate paintings were no longer enough to keep up with true creativity and talent.

It wasn't until much later on that I realized how I had followed the same path paved by my older sisters. We each sacrificed our dreams for the idea of family, for the belief that we would be the last ones needed to prevent the others from the same fate. And for what? There was no warmth in that home, filled with empty words and empty promises. It was always quiet, always filled with heavy silence, just strangers loosely bound together in a claustrophobic box by the idea of *family*. We'd each instinctively known that love was to be sought elsewhere, for none of us could provide it.

So I buried my ink, and took up whatever jobs I could. That day, I'd buried a piece of myself that I could not restore, even years later.

Whatever affections I had held for the family faded with each long day spent losing pieces of myself with each patient smile, each endurance of another biting word, another leering gaze. I had succumbed to the same bitterness that had infected my parents. It was cruel for me to have resented them, to have spent so many years wishing they had just been better, only to find I was no different. I was a fool to think myself different, caught in the delusion of rarity. So I looked elsewhere, hoping still for a family for myself, a true one, full of warmth and love and comfort and recognition.

My salvation arrived in the form of a regular customer. In the beginning, it was soft smiles, polite words, a brief reprieve to the rest of my day. Then it was the exchange of small stories, boisterous laughter, and warmth, and soon, I spent everyday waiting for him, waiting for the minutes when he would smile and the rest of the world spun away until it was just us, just easy happiness and intoxicating joy.

In those cold, endless days, he brought the memory of summer.

It was like any other day when he'd left behind a small, crumpled slip of paper, worn with uncertainty. A line of numbers was scrawled across it, meek and unassuming. I called without a second thought. Soon we spent everyday together, enveloped by warmth. I'd believed, then, that perhaps I was wrong about the city. Perhaps some dreams survived through suffocating smoke, escaping through sheer stubbornness.

Buried beneath these paintings is a photograph of him. I'd taken it myself, desperate to remember it forever. He was standing on a cliff, gazing at the sky, and I'd pulled him down into soft grass. The stars glittered brightly behind him, bathing him in soft light as he looked at me with warm, bright eyes. He looked ethereal then, swallowed by that silver light, and for a moment I thought he would disappear into the stars. I took the photo, and laced his fingers into mine, holding him tightly in place, tethering him to earth. He smiled indulgently, and pressed a flower into my free hand.

It crumbled beneath my touch.

"Come with me," he pleaded. "I can give you the world. You'll never want for anything."

I dropped the crushed petals, scattering them.

"Yes, anywhere, always," I whispered back, and we rolled in the grass, laughing. In that moment, it was just the two of us, wrapped beneath stars, suspended in the still sky stretching endlessly before us. We reached out entwined hands, light spilling through cold fingers. The wind blew on, harsh and unrelenting, but we were warm with bubbling joy.

I followed him to America, hands linked together, an unbreakable shelter. It was easy—there was nothing left for me here, where family was nothing but a faraway concept. My siblings had grown into strangers, but I could still have family. I could still have love; I could still have *him*.

In America, I was stranded. My broken English, the stumbling, messy words, produced only scorn and contempt. Disdainful eyes met me at every attempt, and so I stopped trying. I spent my days only wasting time, waiting for the moments he came home. When he did, and he pressed soft kisses to my head, I knew he was right. There was nothing else I could have wanted.

And then one, fateful day, I felt a twist in my stomach. New life had found its way into me. Our marriage was hasty, with wedding preparations sped up. It was improper for me to have a child before we were married, and so we'd enlisted the help of his sisters. The ceremony was quick, and simple.

It was nothing like I'd imagined.

The next six months were painful. My relationship with my husband frayed, my constant mood swings leading to explosive arguments. His patience was not endless. His love dimmed, flickering in the face of uncertainty, and soon he was always turning away, always tired, gaze never meeting mine. He started to come home less and less often, and I spent most days wandering through an empty house with an unwanted child writhing in my stomach, trying to pinpoint the exact moment it had started going wrong.

It was a relief when he was finally born. Despite the unbearable pain of childbirth, it was finally over. I would be free again, surely. The natural maternal love that all women seemed to hold would fill me too, and everything would be good again. My husband would look at me with fondness in his eyes again, and our bond would be stronger than ever.

When I first saw my child, crying out, blind to the world, a hollowness filled me. He was an ugly, wrinkled thing, face flushed an angry red. He reached out small, weak hands. He grasped cold air.

Still, I tried. I believed that with time, I could love him, that with time, he would grow into something I would be proud of. Instead, the older he got, the more he began to look like my husband. He had his blunt nose, his lazy smile, his slitted eyes. The more I looked for a reflection of myself, the more irritated I became. It was cruel for him to have grown in *me*, in *my stomach*, only to look nothing like me. Love for him refused to blossom in my barren heart.

And so he spent all his time with his father. My relationship with my husband grew more and more detached. With a child, money became tighter, and soon the luxuries I had always enjoyed deteriorated rapidly. He worked more often, taking on longer hours to sustain our new family. Disappointment colored our few interactions. We were always too tired, too different. We had grown, and we no longer fit, misshapen puzzle pieces shoved together by impatient children. On the long nights, when I reached into darkness, I too was greeted with cold air.

When I wandered downstairs, one night, I saw him sitting before a window. A bottle rolled across the floor, colliding against the mass of glass beneath him. He was awash in silver light, and my pulse flickered at the sight, caught by the shadow of the past. He looked so different than he had that day. The light caught on his face now, outlining harsh edges, emphasizing the lines time had carved into his skin. His eyes were empty. The light freckling across his face refused to reflect on them. I wanted to hold him, to

pull him back again, but behind those eyes was an abyss that nothing could reach.

I watched him for a long time, trying to replace what I'd known with what was before me. He'd glanced back briefly, staring at me with empty eyes, before he was gazing at the sky again.

"When did it start?" He'd said, suddenly, back still turned to me. I lunged forward then, wrapping my arms around his cold shoulders. He pressed on, unaffected, turning his dead eyes towards me again. "It happened so slowly I hadn't noticed until now."

"What? What happened?" I turned him towards me now, clutching his shoulders desperately. He laughed mirthlessly.

"When did I stop loving you?"

"...I still love you," I whispered back, but he'd turned away again. Summer's rampage had ended, sweet but brief, and winter had returned.

Nothing I did was ever enough for him anymore. Each day, his complaints grew. At first, it was simply that I didn't love him enough anymore, and so I threw myself into making things for him. I showered him with gifts whenever he came back, but he would only look with disinterest, empty eyes boring into mine. I hated those eyes, the eyes of my parents, the eyes of broken cups and broken hopes.

He resented the use of his money, and so I stopped buying anything. He always talked of his coworkers with wives that worked on top of raising children, that earned more than any of the husbands did, jealousy thick in his voice. You dragged me here, I wanted to scream. How could I find a job with a language I couldn't speak? Instead, I smiled and nodded. *I'll try harder. I'll do better. Don't leave, please, I still need you. I still love you.*

Then it was always my cooking, too bland, always dull, never cooked the way he knew was the right way. No amount of adaptation was ever enough. "If you would just listen to what I've been saying," he always said, lips curled into a sneer, "it would actually be worth eating."

"You can't do anything right."

It suffocated me. Resentment always clouded the house now, born from years of bitterness. Love was so easily transformed, so easily lost, that I wondered if it had ever existed at all. When had the spark faded from his eyes?

What could I have done? What *had* I done?

And so each monotonous day continued, blending into the others. The insults continued, tearing away a piece of myself with every biting word, until there was only numbness. I floated through life, going through the motions expected of me.

Today, my child, my own boy, had stared up from his breakfast. "It's too bland, Mama. Why don't you try seasoning it more, the way Baba always tells you to? You never cook it right."

My heart ran cold in my chest, heavy with knowledge. This had only been the beginning, I was certain of it. It had been inevitable, unrealistic for me to expect my son to do what I could not. In the end, I'd followed the well-traveled paths of my parents despite my own dreams, an endless cycle that consumes all of us. Perhaps it is inescapable, the fate carved out for us. Even now, it is the shackles of family that endured.

The solution is rather simple, isn't it? My thoughts turn to the bottle of rat poison lying in the closet downstairs. Today I will defy fate. Today I will paint a place for that little girl to live again.

A smile curls my lips. One final meal for the family. I will make it painless for them, one final act of grace.

This damned house would never hold sound again.

Symbiosis

Lucas Gottdenker

In a time long forgotten, and a place far from here, there lived a boy. By all accounts he was a fine child, you see, although rather unassuming. He lived in a charming little village, the kind straight out of a fairy tale... well, that's not quite right, I suppose. His family lived in the village, his father and mother and brothers and sisters, and so did all his neighbors and acquaintances.

But the boy was different. He simply inhabited the village, in a rather disconnected sort of way. He tolerated it, the same way a lizard tolerates its enclosure. He existed on the outskirts, looking in rather than out, viewing the people with a grim fascination, as a scientist views an interesting specimen. The boy had few friends, but he was well-liked. He was meek, but he commanded a quiet sort of dignity. He was sympathetic, yet quite disconnected. Contradictory on all counts, but somehow compatible with the world around him, existing in a permanent state of symbiosis, a subtle give-and-take that he had grown to understand quite well. He knew his standing in the world, and he made peace with it, harmonized with it in the way a perfect fifth staunchly supports a root, largely unnoticed and unobtrusive, yet regal, rich, and consonant. Yes, the boy was different.

One day, the boy ventured out into the wood beyond the village. It was an imposing, suffocating forest, an all-encompassing mass that stretched around the full circumference of the little village; dense, stocky sycamores linked together in prayer, branches reaching into the dim green fog to touch, to comfort, to guide.

The villagers were superstitious folk, you see; most stayed far away from the wood. Parents would make up frightening stories about monsters, critters big and small, ghastly creatures that inhabited it, to deter their children from stepping foot within its bounds. It was seen as a bad omen to enter the wood. It was a sort of giving up, a surrendering of oneself to the throes of the natural world. The villagers, in actuality, knew very little about the natural world. Or the wood, for that matter. It simply was, as was the village, as was the rest of the world. The villagers also knew very little about the rest of the world. They knew not where their homes came from, nor who built them. They knew not where the wood came from, nor how it came to be. They were simple folk, you see.

But the boy was different. He did not live so passively, as the villagers did. He liked to think, especially of things about which he knew very little. He asked the world many questions, inquiring with the innocent curiosity that a young child so often has. And when the world answered, he did not dare to speak over it, as the villagers did.

Rather, he listened.

The boy understood the forest, and had grown to love it for what it was. He spent many of his afternoons traipsing through the undergrowth, enamored with the simple joy of discovery, stopping to examine every new insect, flower, and shrub that crossed his path.

Today, the boy sensed that something had changed within the wood. The air was dense, choked, and humid; the shrubs were standing resolute, and the trees were bent in reverence. Nature was mourning. The boy came across a clearing, a clearing that he could've sworn hadn't been there mere days ago, and in the center of the clearing he found a tree.

I stretch, and bask in life's rays. My bodies breathe, one by one, and our form sways in perfect rhythm, a Goliath tide of God's skin, his flesh and blood.

I feel a gap in us. We all do. Our blood has been spilt, and the wound festers. We grow apart, to give the gap time to repair itself. I do not breathe as before; we do not move as before. Our vigil has begun.

The guardian approaches, a mere sapling. We trust the young one. We welcome him, swallowing him up within our form. Inside of us he wanders, amidst earthen tones of tissue and bone.

The tree was dying. The boy, upon finding this tree, withered, cowering, and frail, sprinted immediately to the center of the clearing, throwing himself to the ground. There he crouched, examining the tree's gnarled, ashen form with both the careful precision of a doctor and the care of a loving mother tending to her sick child. The boy loved the wood, you see, and could not bear to see it suffer.

The boy's search, however, bore no fruit. The tree was not visibly hurt or wanting; the soil beneath it was rich and teeming with life, the sky above

soaked with sunlight. But the tree was dying, all the same.

The boy was not accustomed to death. He did not understand that the tree was simply old, that it had lived its years out in the wood peacefully and contentedly, that it would soon welcome death with open arms, as friend, as kin, as master. To the boy, the tree's days were no more numbered than those of the stars, skating effortlessly across the surface of the heavens, or the self-absorbed sun and moon, locked in an everlasting lover's quarrel, or even the cosmos themselves, blanketing the boy's world in a radiance so pure and resonant and bright and wonderful and wholly undeserved that sometimes he found it sickening.

So the boy tried to will the tree back to life.

He curled himself up in the tall grass, leaning against the tree's twisted stalk. There he stayed, for many days and many nights. He watched the tree as it continued to wither and weaken; the bark peeled away and hung down in limp strands, reaching toward the base of the trunk, clawing at the roots. Branches began to crack, then snap, then fall to the grass, supplicants flung from Heaven's doorstep. The boy stayed with the tree; he mourned its deterioration, prayed for its recovery.

The tree died on the third night of the boy's watch.

The boy knew the exact moment in which the tree died, you see. For one reason or another, unbeknownst to all save for the boy himself, he knew. A tree's heart does not stop beating. Its limbs do not go limp, its bowels do not empty, life does not drain from its eyes in any sense, poetic or otherwise. A tree simply dies. And the boy knew.

He cried, mourning the life unjustly taken. And as he stumbled back through the wood, toward the humble little village that was not his home, that had never been his home, he found himself resenting the little village, resenting the people that so passively inhabited it, resenting the stars and the sun and the moon and the sky and all the things that were there that he could not see, all the forces that brought this pain into his life so dispassionately and forcefully, all the things that made him feel so inexplicably alone and small and afraid.

Resenting himself, for choosing to hate a world that simply couldn't help itself.

We sway, taking in the sweet beams from above, embracing the light for all it gives us; we are nourished by its presence, by its comforting countenance amidst the sameness of below.

The sapling has not returned for quite some time; I sense that he is afflicted. I think of the sapling often, of his whims, woes, and wanderings. These are things I cannot have. We were never vested with such attributes. So we sway, and breathe, and live, and die, for all that these things may be worth to us.

Even in death, I feel solace. For even our deaths give way to new life.

Weeks went by, and still the boy thought about the tree. He tucked it away in the back of his mind, and there it stayed as he went through his typical motions in the quiet little village. He didn't feel quite the same, and he didn't act quite the same. Nobody really seemed to notice, though. The villagers were simple folk, you see.

The boy had not visited the wood since. He felt slighted by the natural world, blindsided by its staggering impermanence, betrayed by its strange, paradoxical frailty. The wood, well... the wood lasts forever. As does the village. This is the way of the world, in the mind of a child. But the trees in the wood, and the people in the village—if the tree is gone, then where is he?

Simply put, the boy was afraid.

But for one reason or another, he felt compelled to go back to the wood, to see what had become of the tree, and the clearing that had sheltered it in its final moments. He wanted to feel the sun's warmth as it weaved itself between the branches and the leaves to rest gently upon his skin. He wanted to listen to all the insects and critters and scurrying things as they joined each other in chorus, droning their dull little drones and chirping their little chirps, singing of a world that the boy had never seen, would never see. He wanted to hear the forest breathe, if for the last time.

So the boy ventured out of the confines of the village, in search of the corpse that had wronged him. He shambled his way through dense bushes, patches of ferns, intersecting branches and twigs that merged together in great crisscrossing forms like patterns in a kaleidoscope, filtering the sunlight into dense patches of crimson gold that ran along the bark of the sycamores and balanced atop the forest floor with a surefooted grace only achieved by a thing which is not truly there. The boy remembered the path

well; soon, he stood within the confines of the clearing, the clearing that he could've sworn had not been there mere weeks ago.

The tree stood, stilted, stunted, and barren; a simple, singular protrusion, emerging meekly from the dirt, bereft of its former beauty.

But growing at the base of its decomposing stalk, a patch of purple wildflowers. They stood tall, in open defiance to the world, to the tree, to the boy. Their petals were open, splayed out to catch the beams of warmth, joined together in a great chain of dazzling, spectacular color. Sheltered by the deformed, rotting mass that was once the tree.

The boy looked upon the flowers and felt his eyes well with tears. He was a sensitive child, you see. He stood there for quite a while, in the center of the clearing, looking upon the life that was wrought from his pain.

Looking upon the fruits of Gaia's tormented labor, the byproducts of a world that simply couldn't help itself.

Family Photos

Elva Gu

The grimy steps of the ladder creak eerily beneath my feet. I can already smell the stench of mold coming from the attic above me. My stomach stirs with unease, but I brush it off and focus on the task at hand. *Just clean this attic and get it over with.*

I squeeze through the trap door at the top of the ladder and pull myself into the small wooden attic. It's pitch black, and my throat itches from the dusty air. I run my hand over the rough wall until I feel the light switch. I flip it on, and the overhead light flickers. The room illuminates with a dim yellow glow. Everything around me looks the same as it had the last time I was up here six months prior. Things were very different, then.

I scan the room, ignoring the pile of old newspapers. They are likely either boring or filled with useless speculations. In the corner, there are piles of cardboard boxes that are falling apart at the edges. The rest of the room is covered with cobwebs and a thick layer of dust. I grab the broom and dustpan and get to work. *The sooner I get this over with, the better.*

I'm almost finished dusting the entire room. I eye the only part of the attic I have left. It's the corner with a stack of boxes. I hate doing this part. Last time, my arms had been sore for weeks from the weight of the boxes.

I sigh, exhausted. I collapse on the floor and slouch back against the wall. Mom wouldn't get home for another two hours, which was plenty of time to procrastinate cleaning. I open the box closest to me and rifle through a pile of old family photo albums. I grab the only one I haven't looked through, a faded pink binder. I flip the book open, running my fingers over a yellowing page. The date on the binder had been smudged off, but the pictures were from sometime when I was a toddler.

I pause, staring at a picture of Dad and me. It was from when he had taken me fishing. We were on a trip in Tennessee, and I had caught my first fish. In the photo, Dad was thrilled over the moon as I proudly held up the tiniest large-mouth bass known to man.

I swallow the lump in my throat, refusing to cry. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't stop my mind from racing with thoughts about him. For months, I had furiously studied newspapers and read as many theories as I

could get my hands on. The police had declared him dead just a week into the investigation with no body found.

It had been about six months ago on a Tuesday night. He had gone out to buy groceries when he returned home from work. Nothing was out of the ordinary about the afternoon. Three hours later though, he hadn't come back home. Mom and I had called his phone repeatedly. We even called the grocery store. I remember my heart seemed to jump to my throat. I had been so scared and felt so helpless. Our last hope was to call the police.

The police told us to file a missing persons report, and Mom had sent me up to my room. The rest of the day passed in a distracted haze. I didn't want to think about what was going on, and I remember reminding myself over and over that it would turn out fine. The next morning, I woke up with a pit in my stomach. Dad still wasn't back. It echoed in my head the entire day. Each hour that passed ticked by slower and slower. The police had called that night and told us that his car had been found on the side of the road about 10 blocks down from the grocery store. It was running with the doors open. He was still nowhere to be found. The police had officially declared him dead just a week later. No body and no leads. I hated the police for that.

I quickly blink back the tears that started welling up in my eyes and take a deep breath. I slam the pink binder shut and pull out a dusty turquoise one at the bottom. I had never seen this one either, but based on the dates, it must've been from last year.

This one is filled with recent pictures of Dad, Mom, and me. The first few were from our vacation to Hawaii last June. I'm staring at a picture of me splashing water at Dad at the resort swimming pool. We were so happy, *back when everything was normal*. I giggle when I look closer in the background and see a man rocking some neon orange swim shorts with a palm tree print on it. *That's quite the fashion statement!* The next page was a photo of my family hanging out at the local mini-golf place. I had managed to swing my golf ball into the lake, and Dad and I were doubled over, nearly in tears from laughing so hard. The corner of the photo was folded, so I smoothed it out with my palm. That's when I realize that the man in the corner looked identical to the man from Hawaii.

I hesitantly chalk it off as a coincidence and flip the page again. This one was at my favorite Italian restaurant, where we had gone for my birthday. Partially out of paranoia, I look closely in the background of this picture, and sure enough, he's right there. I flip to the next page. I see him. Next page. Right there. Next one. Spotted in the corner. I feel my heart racing, and my stomach swirls nervously. *There's a lot of blonde guys, it's probably*

a coincidence. That seemed unlikely, though, because the more pictures I looked at, the more evident it became that it was the same guy.

I search all the pictures. The blonde guy was in every single one that Dad was in. If it was just a picture of Mom and I, the blonde guy was nowhere to be found. I looked around anxiously as though he might be behind me, which was silly because I was definitely alone in the attic. I took a deep breath to calm my nerves, repeatedly reminding myself that it was probably fine.

I sit on the chilly, grimey floor, mind racing. I stare at the ceiling absently, trying to calm down and think logically. Just five minutes later, I hear the door unlock. A small shock of adrenaline rushes through my body, but it's just Mom getting home from work. I sigh in relief. I close the album and tuck it under my arm. Carefully, I climb back down the ladder, ignoring that I never actually finished cleaning the attic. The second my feet hit the gray carpet, I sprint to the door.

"Mom, I think I found something crazy," I gasp, frantically. Mom tosses her bag and keys on the kitchen table and sighs.

"Gosh, Layla, you have to let me get through the door first. What's wrong?" she asks, wearily. Mom trudges over to the coffee maker, and I follow her, tripping over my own feet. I almost hoped that she would write my idea off as unimportant because I would probably never sleep well again if I found out my Dad was kidnapped by some psychotic stalker.

"I was going through the boxes of our photo albums from the attic, and you won't believe what I found," I exclaimed. My hands tremble as I take out the binder and set it on the counter. I feel guilty for making Mom look through photos of Dad, knowing she had a long day at work. But by the same token, this could be important. *We could find him.* Mom sighed and took a long sip of her steaming coffee. She wrinkles her nose, clearly having forgotten to let it cool off. I open the binder to show her the Hawaii photo.

"What's the problem?" she asked, confused. She almost sounds mad, but I also know she still hasn't gotten over Dad's no-warning-no-closure death. I point to the man with the neon swim shorts and flip through any pictures I had found him in.

"Look, there's the same man in the background of every picture." My hand shakes as I point at each photo. I watch Mom slowly go through the same revelation I had five minutes ago. Her eyes widen. She sets down her cup of coffee and picks up her phone without saying a word. I watch her dial

the police, and her voice quivers as she explains the situation. I realize that what I found could be serious information.

The rest of the night went by in another distracted haze. Mom sent me to my room, and I took the photo album with me to vigorously study every picture again.

I apparently fell asleep at some point around nine, still dressed, face squished against the album. When I wake up, I immediately rush downstairs, hoping that Mom would be up. I desperately need an update. I find her in the kitchen making a bacon omelet. Before I even open my mouth to speak, Mom answers my question.

"You were right, Layla," she says softly. "I called the police, and they agreed to reopen the case. Apparently, the photos could be more solid evidence of foul play. You know, that's what I always suspected. I did research last night, but there's nothing on this guy..."

I sigh with a mixture of relief and terror. I was right. *Dad might be alive, but he also might have been murdered. Also, he has a stalker...* Mom wraps me in a tight hug, and I bury my face into her shoulder. I don't really know what to feel at this point.

"It's going to be alright," she whispered.

I really wish I believed her.

A week passed, and it's now a Tuesday night at 8 PM. I'm sitting at the kitchen table doing my near impossible Geometry homework. It kind of makes me want to bang my head open, but at least I'm thinking about math and not the several trips to the police station I had made in the last week. Mom is currently picking up an extra shift at work, but it's supposed to be a short one.

Just then, there is a knock on the door. I stand up slowly, and my back pops as I stretch. I head over to unlock the door, knowing that Mom had lost her house keys sometime earlier this week. My fingers fumble with the lock, and I swing the door open. A freezing gust of wind blows through the door, making goosebumps form on my arms. I shiver.

"Mom?" I holler. I briefly think that perhaps it is a ding-dong ditcher.

I scream shrilly as a head of choppy blonde hair and chilling bluish-gray eyes come into view.

“Good evening, Layla. You look so much like your father.”

Little Feathers

Jane Lathrop

Miigwans woke suddenly from a restless sleep. As she sat up, a soft breeze tugged at her raven-black hair, and set a chill deep in her. Yet even as the cold pierced her chestnut skin, dread tightened its grasp on her heart, icier than the frozen wind itself. Fear, heavy and vicious, seemed to loom over her like a dark cloud.

Miigwans’s mother, Nenokaasi, had prepared a warm breakfast for her family, but Miigwans could not eat. She sat in silence, waiting. Watching her daughter with helpless sorrow, Nenokaasi ignored the food she had labored to prepare. Miigwans’s father, too, did not eat. His gaze, hard and unmoving, was fixed on the house’s open window. Only Miigwans’s brother, little Kishkedee, ate quickly and with the impatience of a small child. He was too young to understand what was to come.

Three hours before the sun was overhead, the gichi-mookomaan arrived. The white man’s skin was pale, and he wore thin cotton clothes. He was small, with shoulders not nearly as broad as Miigwans’s father’s. Yet even his weak frame held more power than Miigwans’s father, Aandeg, ever would.

He had come in a dull gray truck and looked reluctant to leave the vehicle’s warmth. Miigwans stared at the white man’s face. Steel gray eyes glared from underneath thick brows. “You. Girl.” He said in a strange voice. It was totally and completely without warmth, without feeling, without life. Miigwans had never heard anything like it, though she knew the language in which he spoke. The gichi-mookomaan gestured to his truck. “Say your farewells, and get in.” He growled.

Miigwans shivered but did not take her eyes off of the white man. She did not know him, and could not trust him. But she knew that she had no choice, and so slowly, she turned and faced her family.

In Miigwans’s language, the language of her people, there were no words for “farewell”. So Miigwans only said, “Minawaa giga-waabamin, nemaamaa.”

Miigwans’s father turned away, but not before she could see a tear fall from his high cheekbone. Nenokaasi watched him go, concern marring her

beautiful face with deep furrows. She met Miigwan's eyes with her own. They were wide, striking, and filled with unshed tears.

Miigwans expected to cry. Every time her family had cried in the past, she had cried with them: when her sister, Mishiiiminens, died; when Uncle Giiwedini and his family were forced out of their land by the gichi-mookomaan. But she did not cry. Truthfully, it all felt like a dream – one that would fade away and never truly impact her. But it was real.

Nenokaasi rested her forehead against Miigwan's. "Minawaa giga-waa-bamin, Miigwans." *I will see you again, Little Feather.*

Kishkedee clung to his mother's skirts, watching the white man with large round owl eyes. The gichi-mookomaan's gaze raked up Kishkedee and then left him. Miigwan's little brother was only five years old and was too young for residential schools.

"There are no others?" Miigwan heard the man demanding in a low voice.

Miigwan's father stood tall and did not back down. "No." He said simply.

The gichi-mookomaan must have felt threatened because his spine stiffened. He straightened up and stared into Miigwan's father's eyes. Even at his tallest, the white man was shorter than Miigwan's father. But the gichi-mookomaan knew that he was on the higher ground. Miigwan and her family were alone in their struggle. The white man had the government and every other white man on his side.

Miigwan's father silently refused to back down, but he lowered his eyes. The gichi-mookomaan was satisfied. He grabbed Miigwan roughly by the shoulder and forced her towards the truck. Miigwan stumbled as she tried to keep up with the white man. He was grasping her shoulder so tightly that it hurt. Miigwan could feel his fingers digging into her skin even through her multiple layers of fall clothing. The white man shoved Miigwan into the back of his truck, slammed the door, and sat himself in the driver's seat.

Miigwan's last glimpse of her family showed a terrified Kishkedee, a sorrowful Nenokaasi, and a defeated Aandeg.

The image haunted Miigwan over the next hours. Miigwan had nothing to do except to remember. She sat on the worn leather seat, her legs pulled up against her chest and her arms wrapped around her calves. The position kept her warm but would not keep out the dread that surrounded her.

Miigwan kept her eyes trained on the white man in front of her. There was nothing else to look at. The gichi-mookomaan's truck was bare inside, and it rumbled past miles of waving grassland. Everything looked the same. The white man would not move, and Miigwan's surroundings hardly seemed to change or move. The only suggestion that Miigwan was moving was the truck's rumbling engine.

Towards the middle of the day, Miigwan began to regret not having breakfast. There was no water in the truck, let alone food. Miigwan wished she could sleep, and shut out everything around her. But she was too hungry and too filled with dread for rest to overtake her.

For twelve hours Miigwan remained locked in the back of the white man's truck. The gichi-mookomaan stopped driving only once, during which he refilled the truck's tank with gas from a can.

Miigwan's head ached from the constant rumbling of the truck's engine. Her legs were sore and cramped, and she was exhausted from lack of sleep. All through the night, the white man drove, and Miigwan struggled in vain to fall into rest.

Early the next morning, Miigwan was startled to hear the engine stop with a splutter. She straightened up quickly and searched the truck's windows. A dismal sight greeted her.

Miigwan hugged her arms tightly against her chest. Her new home was certainly not welcoming. Made of dull gray bricks, the building looked so unnatural – a stark contrast to its surroundings. Prairie grass waved for miles, and the sky seemed to hang so low that it would be touchable. But from the serene grassland rose the towering building. It seemed almost to block out all the sun's light.

The white man opened his door and landed with a thump of his boots. He strode purposefully towards the building, and Miigwan watched his path keenly until he disappeared behind the truck's bulky frame. Before long, he had reappeared. With him was a tall, hooded white woman. Miigwan recognized her as a nun, with the heavy black and white robes covering much of her skin. Even for a gichi-mookomaan, the woman's face was pale, and Miigwan wondered if the woman ever spent time outside.

When Miigwan stepped unsteadily out of the white man's truck, muscles protesting, she was greeted with a critical stare. The nun looked Miigwan up and down with a clear expression of distaste on her pale face.

“I am the matron. Follow me.” The black-shrouded figure declared after a moment.

Miigwans reluctantly trailed after the nun and was soon standing below the arch of a wide wooden door. With great effort, the woman forced the heavy doors open and disappeared into the darkness. Miigwans followed, blinking as her eyes adjusted to the dark. A single window, high above Miigwans, let a little light pierce through the darkness, but for the most part, the building was gray and cheerless.

A few minutes later, Miigwans found herself sitting in a dark, oak-wood chair. Miigwans scanned the room around her. It was bare except for the chair she sat in, a washstand, and a table. The floor was made of oak planks, and what Miigwans saw, scattered on the boards, made her spine stiffen. The nun crossed the room in a few long steps and picked up a pair of large shears from the washstand. Emotionlessly, she carried them back and brought them to Miigwans’s head.

Wisps of hair, the color of raven’s feathers, tumbled to the ground or caught on Miigwans’s clothing. Miigwans stared at the floor, which was already littered with the hair of others. She could not remember the last time her hair was cut – if it ever was. Long hair was a symbol of spiritual health and strength, and even men rarely ever cut theirs. Miigwans did not understand why her hair was being cut. Every white woman Miigwans had ever seen had long hair, and Miigwans was sure that the matron was the same.

“What are you called?” The matron asked in a cold voice, once she was satisfied with Miigwans’s newly shorn hair.

“Miigwans.” She whispered.

“Speak up.” The matron demanded.

Miigwans repeated her name louder.

The matron looked at Miigwans in disgust. “A heathen’s name.” Smiling coldly, the black-robed woman gave Miigwans a new name. “Mary. That is what you will be called. Say it.”

Miigwans hesitated, and the matron repeated her question impatiently. “What is your name?”

“Miigwans.”

She felt it before she saw it coming. Miigwans’s cheek burned where the Matron had left a stinging red handprint.

“What is your name?” The matron demanded.

“M... Mary,” Miigwans answered, giving in. She would get nowhere rebelling against such a simple thing.

The Matron was satisfied. “Come. You will join the others.”

Miigwans exhaled softly in relief. She could not wait to be with her people, away from the Matron and the darkness.

The Matron led Miigwans into a lengthy dining hall. Around ten long tables paraded down the length of the hall and were crowded with children of all ages. The Matron fluttered a hand, and Miigwans took that to mean that she was dismissed.

Miigwans slowly wandered towards a table of older children. To Miigwans’s surprise, the Matron had followed, but Miigwans assumed she hadn’t done anything wrong; the Matron was silent. Miigwans took a seat and studied the girls next to her.

“This is Hannah. You will be sharing a bunk with her.” The matron said shortly. Then she turned and began addressing a group of girls at a table nearby.

“Aaniin,” Miigwans said quietly to Hannah. “Hello.”

Hannah’s eyes widened in fear. “Giishkowe!” She hissed. “*Stop talking!*”

“Why–” Miigwans began, confused.

“The matron!” Hannah breathed. Miigwans looked up and saw the nun turn towards her. The matron’s face was frightening and Miigwans shrank away from the nun’s advancing figure.

The matron soon reached the girls, and she stared at them with disgust. “What did you say, Hannah?” The Matron growled.

Hannah paled.

“She didn’t say anything,” Miigwans announced. Her voice shook slightly but otherwise seemed brave.

“Then what did I hear?” The Matron snapped, glaring at Miigwans.

“It... it was me.” Miigwans lied.

“What did you say?” The Matron repeated with deadly coldness.

Hannah shook her head at Miigwans desperately, but it was too late. “I said....Aaniin.” Miigwans admitted.

The Matron glowered at Miigwans. “You will be punished. Never speak the Devil’s language again!”

Miigwans stared in shock. Had the matron just called Anishinaabemowin (*the language of our people*) “the Devil’s language”?

“It is not the Devil’s language.” Miigwans returned. “It is God’s language. It is the language of my people.”

Hannah looked at Miigwans with dismay.

“How dare you blaspheme!” The matron snarled. “You will be punished!” She repeated ferociously. She grabbed at Miigwans’s short hair and yanked it towards her. “What are you going to do to me?” Miigwans gasped as the Matron pulled Miigwans by the hair into the next room.

“Be quiet!” The Matron snapped.

The Matron wrenched Miigwans’s hair down and Miigwans fell to the floor with a bone-jarring thud. Miigwans gasped in fear as the Matron stood over her. Seconds later, the nun’s hard black boot made contact with Miigwans’s face. Miigwans cried out and the Matron kicked her again. “Be quiet!” The nun repeated. “Accept your punishment!”

The Matron left Miigwans momentarily and Miigwans hoped she would be left alone. But the nun returned with a burning hot coal pan. “Get up. Hold out your arms.” The Matron demanded. The pan glowed orange in the Matron’s arms. She held the burning hot object with thick gloves to protect herself from the heat. Coals burned brightly on top of the pan and Miigwans knew it had just come out of the fire.

Miigwans pulled herself up and extended her arms slowly. With a satisfied look, the nun lowered the scalding pan onto Miigwans’s open, and uncovered, arms.

“Niwiisagendam!” Miigwans cried instinctively as soon as the pan made contact with her arms. “*I hurt!*”

“Never speak that language again!” The Matron said savagely. She kicked Miigwans back and Miigwans flew backward, coals scattering across the stone floor.

With that, the Matron turned and left.

Miigwans lay, collapsed on the floor. Her vision was blurred and all she could see was faint light from the window, which illuminated the rough stones of the floor. Miigwans’s cheek pressed against the cold, unforgiving stone ground. She could not lift it. It seemed as though all strength had left her.

Miigwans imagined her people seeing her now. Would they be ashamed? Miigwans was dirty, weak, and had pitifully short hair.

No. Something inside Miigwans seemed to breathe. Your people would not be ashamed.

Miigwans lay in her embarrassment and pain and refused to acknowledge the voice. Once, she would have wondered if it was the spirit of God. But such a thing surely could not be present in this hell.

Blood slowly trickled down Miigwan’s face. The drying blood itched slightly; a strange feeling against the overwhelming pain. Every bone in Miigwans’s body ached against the cold, hard floor. Miigwans’s burnt hands and arms throbbed and blistered. Her cheek and face burned, the skin red and tender. Almost unbearable pain pierced her head and ears and pulsed through her, making it hard to think and even to breathe.

“How did I get here?” Miigwans was washed with misery as she considered the question. “What did I do to deserve this?” She thought bitterly.

You must not think like that. The inward voice reasoned. *You need to be strong.*

“Be strong..” The words seemed to echo throughout Miigwans’s thoughts and would not leave her alone.

Miigwans bit her lip until it bled, refusing to cry. She would not feel sorry for herself. She was in the right. “Anishinaabemowin is God’s language. It is the language of my people.” Miigwans whispered.

She did not, and could not understand why this had happened to her;

why the gichi-mookoman would steal Miigwans away from her family; why they would call her savage; why they would punish her for speaking Anishinaabemowin. Could it really be only because Miigwans's skin wasn't white?

Miigwans wished she could forget this – forget everything. When she graduated from this “school” she wanted to never spare it another thought. But it was important. Miigwans knew that not every white man or woman was cruel like the Matron. “Surely, there must be some who do not approve of this treatment. I will remember.” Miigwans promised herself. “I can tell others about this school. And they can stop it. They will stop it.” Miigwans let out a soft sigh. “This is part of my history, and I will never forget my past.”

Miigwans thought of her embarrassment and misery. “I will not be ashamed of what I could not control.” Miigwans vowed silently. *“I will remember. I will not forget my past. My hair is a symbol of the strength that has left me. But my strength will grow back – as will my hair. I will not be defeated.”*

In 1973, the last Native American Residential School closed, 154 long years after the first Native American School had been founded.

Miigwans was forty-six years old.

Fool's Gold

Edward Liu

The television flickered in blocks of color. I sat, as always, on the worn sofa whose arms sagged under the slightest pressure. I stared at the TV, just more of the usual news. The news anchor wore a navy suit and spoke in that typical grandiose way like he was running for president. Across from him sat a smart-looking man whose hair was streaked with grey.

“Three years ago, researchers discovered that the compound filium, found only in the brains of newborn humans, can extend the average human’s lifespan by up to 50 years. Demand for filium has been high - a single gram can go for 100,000 dollars. The average newborn brain contains around 100 grams of filium, with the potential to make new parents very, very rich. We’ve brought Dr. Reyes, an expert in the field, onto the show to give us his thoughts. Thank you for joining us, Dr. Reyes.”

The doctor ran his fingers through his hair.

“It’s my pleasure,” he said.

“Could you tell us more about filium and how it works?”

“As time goes on, damage done to our genetic material causes us all to age and, eventually, die. Filium’s regenerative properties repair the biological components of our bodies. The serum developed with it can counteract aging significantly by repairing the wear and tear of our genetic material and bodily processes.”

“The rise of filium has brought numerous ethical concerns with it. The recent surge of infant kidnapping has many parents worried. Can you explain to us how the serum companies have addressed this?”

Dr. Reyes stopped. His eyes darted to the camera before he continued.

“The company Solis is at the forefront of filium serum development. Babies under the age of three months contain the most amount of filium. By the sixth month, all traces of filium are gone. Solis has procedures in place that ensure they extract filium only from consenting parents with newborns who have passed due to complications during birth or later accidents. However, the latter still provides leeway for individuals who claim their child suffered

from an 'accident'."

The blue glow of the TV illuminated the apartment, caressing the edges of Jess's face as she slept on the couch, peaceful for the first time in weeks.

I adjusted my legs, moving them away from the pile of unopened overdue credit card bills on the tilted coffee table.

Liz, our newborn, laid on Jess's chest. With Jess' every breath, Liz bobbed up and down like a tiny sailor at sea. Even if she wasn't planned, she was perfect; her hands grasped at the empty air as she slept. Her tiny button-like nose and chubby face lit up the whole world.

I'll never forget how it felt when Jess handed me that pregnancy test. Eleven months together and we're having a baby? We just asked for an extension for the unpaid rent last month. I'd just gotten laid off from my job at the department store. Jess was working two jobs at the pharmacy and mall to support us. An abortion was too much for Jess.

When Liz was born screaming and crying, I felt my world do the same. I was excited, sad, relieved, and powerless. The nights went by in a blur; countless hours of Liz wailing and kicking the air passed. Jess and I exchanged strings of curses and insults while we took turns fighting to keep our eyes open and on our baby.

Liz acted as if she took one look at our shabby apartment and was begged to be put back in, trying to tell everyone how much better life would be if she wasn't born.

I wasn't sure whether or not I agreed with her.

"Shouldn't you be washing the dishes? You're the one here who doesn't have a job," Jess whispered.

Her hair was disheveled and frizzy. Two hollow crevices had dug their way into her pale, gray cheeks. The previously beautiful, ocean-blue eyes now resembled two cold, lifeless stones. A pair of dark red bags sagged under her bloodshot eyes.

"I got a job interview," I said.

"That's great, honey..." she whispered, patting Liz's back.

"Sure thing. Maybe things will finally get better if I can secure this job."

"Yeah, that's great."

She closed her eyes.

Why was she so distant with me? Just a word or two and then nothing from her. The bubbly, optimistic woman was gone. Could she say anything that didn't have to do with work?

It's my fault she's like this. Of course, life's been hard for her ever since the baby. I was used to growing up in a one-bedroom apartment with my parents and three siblings, sharing just enough bread and potatoes to go around, but since when has Jess ever been without her hot showers?

From the nicer side of Ithaca, Jess never knew what it was like to grow up sleeping on the living room floor with her siblings. Tucked in her own comfortable bed and eating three meals a day must seem like heaven to her now. Her parents' words must torment her: "If you run off with that loser, you can forget being our daughter." Just look at her, sleeping on a couch and stealing formula to get by. If I could just get a job...

I trudged to the sink and began to wash the dishes.

On the way out the door, I kissed Jess and put on my jacket. A flier fell from the door when I opened it.

Looking for a way out? Get paid for filium extraction.

I shoved it in my pocket and took the stairs down to the ground floor.

The streets breathed decay. The sharp honk of car horns, the splashes of wheels rushing through puddles, and the stench of trash filled the streets.

A little girl ran past me. She ran down the street ahead of her parents and stopped at the candy shop. She went on her tiptoes and pressed her hands onto the glass, staring at a chocolate bunny.

"Mom! Dad! What's inside the bunny?" she asked.

Her dad put his hand on her head and told her he didn't know. I pulled my hood over my head and went on.

College students filled the street, "Would this look good on me?" one of the

boys asked his friend, opening a box of white shoes.

My dirty sneakers with a hole forming above the big toe of my left foot paced faster.

My fingers found the wrinkled flyer in my pocket. I need to remember to throw it away before I go home to Jess. No need to upset her.

In the office building, the receptionist led me to an office where a woman stood to greet me.

“Thanks for coming in.”

“Thank you,” I said. “What a beautiful day today. Isn’t it?”

She held a printed copy of my resume. “So, Sam, have a seat, tell me about yourself.”

There was the question, always the same. The interviewer leaned in to hear my response. My eyes watered at the smell of her strong perfume. She wore a pair of square glasses with a thick frame. Her hair had hints of white, and a few creases bordered her eyes. She reminded me of my mother.

Don’t slouch, keep your back straight and shoulders squared. Make sure to look her in the eyes.

I sank in my chair and looked at the golden envelope opener on her desk.

“I graduated high school but couldn't attend college due to financial reasons.”

The lady nodded.

“Most of our employees have college diplomas.”

“I see. I understand I don’t meet that expectation. However, I can guarantee that I’ll be working hard, I’ll rarely ever be late, I can collaborate with my coworkers, and I’ll hardly ever be generally unproductive. I’ll even work for free for the first week, and you can decide whether or not to hire me.”

The lady didn’t comment and instead frowned at my resume. A plate of doughnuts sat beside her computer: glazed, chocolate cake donuts with sprinkles, powdered, and jelly-filled. Maybe the company offered free snacks during break time. The gnawing emptiness in my stomach was back again.

My hands were in my pockets.

“It says here that you worked at a department store only a few months ago. Could you tell me more about that?”

“Sure, uh, I made vital contributions to the sales department.”

“So, you worked at the checkout?”

“Yes.”

“Why did you stop working there?”

I paused. “It was a really great place and I enjoyed my time working there, uh.”

“That doesn’t answer my question. What was the reason you stopped working there?”

“Why do you need to know?”

The lady tilted her head. “Because it’s my job.”

“The company had layoffs and I was part of the group that was cut.”

“Alright. So let me ask you this: If you were working here and a higher-up came to you and told you you were underperforming, what would your first course of action be?”

“That’s actually happened to me before, and I think I handled it extremely well. I took my boss out for a few drinks and explained my situation to him. I think he understood.”

“What aspect of your work was your previous boss unsatisfied with?”

I shrugged.

“Thank you Sam. We’ll let you know what we think soon.”

“Look, I have a newborn baby. My girlfriend’s working two jobs. We’re late on the rent. I just need a break. If you give me this opportunity, I’ll be the best employee you ever had.”

“I’m not the one who makes the final decision. Our HR team meets and re-

views the resumes, and frankly, we usually pick the one with education and experience.”

“Yes, but, respectfully, I grew up poor. My family couldn’t afford to pay for my college. It’s like the whole system is against me. If I can’t get a job, I’ll be stuck in this same situation, hungry, poor, can’t pay the rent or electricity. You can see that’s not fair, right? Just because I was born poor, I’m destined to struggle and have nothing for the rest of my life? I’m sorry, but this is just a warehouse job, moving boxes. Why would anyone need a degree for that?”

“Sorry, that’s just how it is. It’s a competitive market.”

“It’s ridiculous, I tell you, this is a joke!”

“I think you should leave now.”

The wind bit against my face as I walked home. Saying that I felt ashamed would be an understatement. I had ruined it. And there was nothing I could do about it. I was hungry. I was poor. I was pathetic. I was going to spend the rest of my life like this. And I made Jess the same.

That familiar feeling drenched my bones. When did it all change? When did days spent carefree with Jess, watching hilarious reality TV shows and eating Chinese takeout become days filled with crying, dirty diapers, overflowing sinks, and empty wallets?

Yes. I knew. I had pretended that I didn’t, but I did. It was so obvious. I had admitted it to myself, and I felt free. A sick sense of giddiness filled my chest. I understood. I understood why. I understood how. I understood that I had a way out.

“I’m home,” I said.

“It’s about time. How’d the interview go?” Jess asked.

“It was alright. We’ll see.”

“I have to go to work now. Make sure Liz gets her formula in 2 hours,” Jess said as she put on her coat and opened the door.

Before I could say anything, Jess had left.

I held Liz with one arm.

She giggled, her legs rocking back and forth.

My hand tightened around the piece of paper in my pocket.

Whatever-You-Call-Its

Jacob Penola

heiligenschein

:a bright light around the shadow of a person's head (as on a field or lawn) caused by diffraction and reflection of sunlight by dewdrops.

Timmy stopped in his tracks. His pupils could *finally* take a break; they could *finally* sit still, blissfully staring at the wonderful combination of letters resting before his eyes. He paused for a second, slapping his jittery hands onto his father's desk as he breathed a sigh of relief, staring at the marvelous spectacle of the English language. A few minutes before this, he wasn't sure how much longer he could take scanning for a new Timmy's Top Word of the Day. Usually, it only took a couple of minutes to find the winner, but today, it took nearly an hour. The millisecond he spotted *this* word, however, he knew his time had been well spent.

He understood he was supposed to be careful around Dad's dictionary and make sure that it remained "PERFECTLY INTACT!" – a request that was usually very easily fulfilled. But today, something was different; that word – *heiligenschein* – was different. Its array of bizarre syllables iced with the beauty of nonsensical Germanic spelling and then sprinkled with the impossible-to-understand definition left his mind in a frenzy. He imagined himself sliding down the h and then swimming inside the e before grabbing onto the dot of the i to swing himself on top of the l. *Heiligenschein* was more than just an obscure word – it was his playground. So he allowed his energetic hands to hop off the table and tear the page out of his father's beloved Merriam-Webster dictionary.

"Oops!"

He galloped down the stairs. The smell of freshly cooked pancakes enveloped his nostrils as he chased after his father, thudding his head into unsuspecting Dad's rib cage, nearly causing Dad to drop the burning hot spatula onto Timmy's face.

"Dad, look!"

He held out his excerpt from the dictionary, his pink highlighter making it clear what word he was telling Dad to look at.

"Timmy! Don't tear pages out of my dictionary! You should know better than that. I'm glad you found a word you really like, but you can call me upstairs next time instead of ripping the page out."

"I'm sorry," he exclaimed, briefly dropping his head down and allowing his neck to go limp. He counted to Five Mississippi under his breath before propping his face up again, eagerly grinning at his father.

"So... Now that I'm sorry... What do you say we do some H-E-I-L-I-G-E-I-N-S-C-H-E-I-N huntin' later today? Ya' know, it could be a good ol' family adventure, one for the memory books."

How could Dad resist? The child's curiosity jumped off his face and tugged on Dad's heartstrings in the most enticing way possible. Dad hesitated before inevitably giving in, just like he gave in to some bizarre request almost every other day.

"Alright, buddy. How about you give me half an hour and I'll be ready to go on a hike. Who knows, maybe we'll find a field along the way and we can search for some H-E-I-L....Whatever-you-call-its. But we better get going before the morning dew runs away from us! Go! Hurry!" Dad knew that based on the definition, they could "hunt for" heiligenscheins in their very own backyard. But his son was right – it could be a good ol' family adventure. Why not seize the opportunity?

"Really? Actually? Like we can actually go?" Timmy always had unreasonable doubts whenever things went his way.

"Yes, of course!"

"You promise?"

"I promise."

Timmy sprinted through the house, eagerly throwing his pants on and launching his feet inside his shoes. He couldn't bother wasting the time to untie the mess of a knot he had left them in, so he simply shoved his toes in as far as they would naturally go before relentlessly kicking the wall as hard as he could, hoping the impact would send his toes flying deeper into his shoe. Even though he sent his glasses soaring off his face in the process and caused two of his now-mangled, bloody toenails to stain his white socks, he was successful.

"Oh, how I love Newton's third law."

They hopped into Dad's rusty F-150. The neglected wheels and tires loudly protested the adventure, but their squeals and cries were overridden by Timmy's anticipatory giggles and giddy excitement. The father and son drove off in the truck, coming up with a game plan for their journey.

"I'll tell you what. I know this really cool trail a few miles down the road. I think I've taken you down it once or twice before. If I remember right, once you trek a couple hundred yards, there's this epic field that'll show up on your right. Once we get to that field, I'm sure we can spot a heiligenschein or two."

Timmy's eyes lit up; the anticipation was unbearable as he imagined what it was like to truly see a heiligenschein. Sure, he couldn't quite grasp what a heiligenschein actually was, but with a title like *that*, it *must* be the most awesome thing ever. He peered through the window, his curiosity and innocence overflowing his youthful mind, leaving Dad with no escape from it. But the truth was, Dad had no desire to escape from it.

Ten minutes later – but one hundred years later for Timmy – they arrived at the trail. Dad opened the truck door, carefully stepping out, trying to ensure he wouldn't fall on the slippery pavement. He hurried over to Timmy's door and helped him get out of the lifted truck. While Timmy was a very smart young man, he sometimes lacked common sense; he was the type of kid to get straight A's in high school but not know how to tie a shoelace or step out of a lifted truck.

Walking through the woods, Timmy almost let the thought of heiligenscheins slip away from him as he fell into a state of wonder as he became surrounded by the beautiful brush and overwhelming green leaves. It felt like he was in paradise. His father held out his hand and Timmy excitedly grabbed and held onto it. The duo hiked through the woods as the sun occasionally shone through the never-ending green ceiling, amplifying their smiles.

Sure enough, they eventually found the field. Timmy was in disbelief at the vastness of the endless green plateau. He imagined the number of small animals playing in the brush, the number of insects nesting in the flowers, the number of deer that have once pranced through the soil, and the number of friends he could invite to frolic in this haven with him. But most of all, he was thinking about how many heiligenscheins he could find within the boundaries of the paradise.

"Dad, will you go run around the field with me for a bit before we hunt for heiligenscheins? Please?"

"Of course!"

"You promise?"

"I promise."

They raced each other through the woods and onto the field. The wind whistled through their ears as they waltzed through the grass. Imitating the Flash, Timmy ran away from his father as if Dad were about to kidnap him. They felt the sun radiating down on their faces as their laughs permeated through the air into each others' ears. Within seconds of playing their silly and ruleless father-son game, Timmy's contagious joy had infected his father in the best way possible, transporting Dad directly back to his childhood. Who knew that playing tag with just two people could be so fun? Eventually, Timmy was caught by his father. Dad's bulky arms wrapped around Timmy's torso, lifting him towards the sky as their beaming grins met each other. Timmy was twisted and rotated around in the air as if he were on his very own elevated merry-go-round. He reached up, trying to touch the big floating pieces of white cotton candy. He opened his mouth wide, pretending to chomp down on the clouds, only for dandelion fuzz to glide directly into his agape mouth. For a second, the two of them forgot why they even came to this field in the first place.

Their treasured moment was promptly interrupted when Timmy came to the stark realization that they had spent too much time playing and that all of the dew had evaporated. Timmy wailed. His father tried his hardest to cheer up the inconsolable boy, but he knew that it was probably a lost cause.

"Hey, hey. I'll tell you what. How about on our way home we stop and get ice cream? Then, first thing tomorrow morning we can come back here while the dew's still around. How's that sound?"

Timmy didn't want to seem content with that deal, but through the disappearing tears and now-premeditated frown on his face, Dad knew he had made some serious progress.

"You promise?"

"I promise."

Dad carried Timmy all the way back to the truck. Timmy's onslaught of tears slowly transformed into an occasional tear rolling down his face, which blended in with the raindrops now falling from the sky. Soon enough, the tears had completely stopped and the F-150 was now in sight.

“I’ll race ya!”

Timmy sprinted to the truck, his limbs sprawling away from his body in the most uncoordinated fashion possible. The boy launched himself towards the passenger door and... *THUD*. He had slipped on the slick pavement, smashing his forehead on the door of the truck. Dad saw it happen through the thickening raindrops. The boy ricocheted off the truck and landed back-first onto the pavement.

“Lifted truck, slippery pavement, and a kid who can’t tie his shoes... No wonder. Timmy, you good?” He yelled from a couple dozen feet behind.

No response.

“Timmy?”

Dad tried to suppress the panic rushing through his body as Timmy refused to provide any verbal answer.

“Timmy!”

Dad sprinted up to his unresponsive son, his trembling hands bolting towards Timmy’s pale cheeks as his knee slammed down onto the cement. Timmy’s eyes were open. His mouth was open. Dad continuously tried to get a verbal response out of the boy, but he wouldn’t budge. So distracted by the panic consuming him, Dad failed at first to see the puddle of blood that Timmy’s head now rested in. He felt a white wave of disbelief and shock roar through his mind and body as he began to feel lightheaded.

“Timmy. Timmy. *Timmy*. C’mon bud.”

He now realized the back of Timmy’s head had landed on a parking block.

Timmy’s eyelashes began fluttering as Dad collapsed onto the ground, barely catching himself before face-planting on the concrete. He tried to hold back the tears. He tried to stay strong for Timmy. He tried to compose himself.

He got up, towering over Timmy’s body. He considered calling 911, but he knew it wouldn’t matter; the blood began to stream down the concrete and collect under Dad’s shoes. The rain surged from the sky – Timmy’s body was now an island in the deep red flood surrounding him. Dad didn’t want to make Timmy worry. He closed his eyes for a few seconds as his chin involun-

tarily scrunched and his lips pursed. He fought to maintain his balance.

“Hey, Timmy. I’ve got something to tell you. Can you listen to me for a couple of seconds?”

He paused. Staring at his son. Hoping for a miracle. Powering through his words.

“I think I found one of those heiligenscheins we were talking about.”

A spark of that fiery curiosity returned to Timmy’s eyes.

Dad’s voice quivered. He trembled as he allowed these last few words to run free.

“If you really want to see it,”

He paused.

Slamming his eyelids shut.

Digging his fingernails into his palms.

Whimpering as his glass heart shattered.

“Just close your eyes and it’ll be right in front of you.”

Through the wound, through the blood, and in the midst of his fragmented skull, Timmy seemed to hear his father – he seemed to understand him. Timmy’s lips began silently moving as if he were trying to say something.

It didn’t take long before Dad realized what Timmy was saying – or asking.

Dad bit his lip as he held eye contact with Timmy.

One last time.

“I promise.”

When His Eyelids Met

Jacob Penola

His barrage of sharp exhales assaulted the brisk, dark air surrounding him. He was never really someone who excelled in multitasking, but this particular situation highlighted this innocent flaw. He felt his brain go haywire as he attempted to juggle the tasks of comforting his distraught wife and keeping his four tires within the seemingly shrinking space between the solid yellow line and the guardrail, all while using his violently shaking fingers to dial 911.

He spent one moment praying to God and the next thing he knew he was in a hospital room filled with nurses and doctors insisting that everything was going to be okay. “We perform C-Sections all the time. There’s nothing to worry about.” These comforting words soothed his fried and anxious brain. “*Please let them be right,*” he begged.

All he did was blink – he spent a few milliseconds with his eyes closed – and a beautiful baby girl was crying in his arms. She wrapped her tiny fingers around his quivering pinky finger. He couldn’t explain it, but that moment was ethereal. He felt a combination of awe, ecstasy, and shock; he almost fell to his knees. He understood that her piercing cries were a good thing, but deep down they still hurt; all he had dreamt about for the last nine months was that he would be able to make her happy.

He glanced over at his wife to make sure she was still doing alright, when all of the sudden he spotted the baby – Naomi – crawling around the kitchen floor. Clearly, she was on a mission. He never thought he would have to repeatedly tell his baby girl to stop eating crumbs from underneath the cabinets, but fatherhood continued to prove that it was impossible to anticipate everything. If he were being honest, he loved the surprises that being a father constantly threw at him from all different directions.

After scooping her off the floor, he committed to taking a nap with Naomi resting across his chest. He held a bottle of milk against her tiny lips. When he woke up, Naomi greeted him with words – *real English words*. He tried to contain his joy as the simple words coated his heart with warm, pure honey. He sprinted through the hallway, overflowing with childlike joy, prepared to share the exciting news with his wife. She was ecstatic, but she was also a bit jealous that Naomi’s first word was “daddy” instead of “mommy.”

Like a child on Christmas Eve, he restlessly lay in bed that night with a contagious grin painted across his face. Surprisingly, once he fell asleep around 3 A.M, he remained asleep for the rest of the night. It was the first night Naomi didn’t wake either parent up with her screams and cries. “*She’s growing up. It’s a two-sided coin,*” he thought; on the one hand, he valued his sleep. But on the other hand, he realized that one day he might reminisce on the days he couldn’t sleep because of sweet Naomi’s neediness and reliance on him.

He ventured to the grocery store that morning for more baby food, but when he returned, Naomi was boarding the school bus for her first day of kindergarten. He was overwhelmed with pride and gratitude as he watched her board the bus in the bright pink sweatshirt he had gifted her the day before. As the innocent little girl looked over her shoulder one more time and extended her arms out toward him, he felt a tear roll down his cheek and a bittersweet smile creep across his face.

Against his wishes, he was forced to travel for work that weekend; all he wanted was to be home with his two girls. When he finally returned home late Sunday night, he was met with his wife teaching Naomi how to apply mascara. “She doesn’t need that – she’s already beautiful,” he insisted. But both Naomi and her mother silently shot him a look of disapproval and simply rolled their eyes.

On time as always, he drove her to school the next morning. He must have driven to the wrong school, he thought; for some reason, this school’s sign had the words “Middleton High School” written across it. His forehead wrinkled and his eyebrows raised. “*Wow,*” he contemplated, “*I know time flies, but I didn’t realize it flew that fast.*” In his moment of bewilderment, Naomi stepped out of the car and slammed the door.

“Did she even say goodbye to me?”

When he arrived back home, his wife had a look of stress plastered across her face as she attempted to budget for Naomi’s graduation party. Both he and his wife wanted to give Naomi any amount of money that would make her happy, but they also understood that they shouldn’t spend a fortune on a simple graduation party.

So lost in thought about the budget, he realized he had forgotten to pick up Naomi from school. When he rushed and opened the kitchen drawer with the car keys in it, he was bewildered as the keys were missing. After a few seconds of scuffling through the miscellaneous belongings that lived in that drawer, his head tilted, and he did a double take as Naomi marched

through the front door with the keys hanging out of her jeans pocket. That evil mascara he insisted she should never wear had now infected the entire area adjacent to her eyes. A combination of black ink and irritated red skin distorted her beautiful, innocent face and exposed her prior meltdown. When he assured her that she could talk to him about anything and everything, she attacked his fatherly love with a look of disgust. She repeatedly shook her head at him, turning around and sprinting upstairs while trying to muffle her cries as if he were the bad guy. “*It’s about a guy, isn’t it,*” he thought to himself. “*I’m gonna kill him.*”

He decided to drive to the local coffee shop to get Naomi’s favorite drink to comfort her. When he walked through the door, however, he was met with a handsome young man holding out his unsteady hand. He was utterly baffled by this encounter at first. Then, he remembered. He took a deep breath as he realized that he had agreed to have this conversation last week. “*They’ve been dating for over a year now. She’s in her twenties. I have to let her go,*” he recalled his prior reasoning. But as they shook each others’ hands, he wished he had never met the fine young man in the first place. Deep down, he wished the young man didn’t exist.

He went straight to church to pray about the situation. He wanted to find peace. He wanted to feel alright. He wanted to *be* alright. Only to make matters worse, when he got there, he could hardly find any parking. He then looked down at his chest and saw a tuxedo. He sighed. He let his chin rest against the knot of his tie as he resisted the urge to break every window in his car. Eventually, he found the energy to begrudgingly walk his way through the doors, trying to cover his emotions. He wanted to seem happy – he wanted to *be* happy – but deep down, he knew that would never be the case again. As he sat in the front row of the sanctuary, he closed his eyes and clenched his jaw, trying not to cry as he saw these two wonderful young people in front of him committing their lives to each other. He knew it was best this way; he knew it was best this way for *them*.

He tried to open his eyes and unclench his jaw once the ceremony had ended, but for some reason, they felt glued shut. As he continued to struggle through the discomfort, he eventually began to feel a wave of blackness creep across his mind. He continued to fight for a bit longer. His thoughts were all jumbled into one big ball as they bounced around the interior of his skull, cracking his bones and concussing his mind each time they bounced. He didn’t know what he felt anymore. He tried to fight. He didn’t want to give up. But when the time came, he knew he had to accept it. He took one last deep breath. He sharply exhaled.

His six grandsons carried his coffin out of the church. Beautiful Naomi

wept and rested her head on her husband’s chest as the coffin was placed six feet under. Just like that, everything was over.

Suddenly, he wished he had never blinked.

When Madmen Cry

Caitlyn Smith

The vibrations of his phone woke him on that Tuesday at 9:00 in the morning. Not the alarm, never the alarm. Tom reached across the bed from his position on the right side to the left nightstand and turned the alarm off. He got up and got dressed, slacks and a nice shirt, buttoned from bottom to top. A dark, striped tie, one of several identical versions. Tom made his bed, hospital corners, and left his bedroom. No - he paused at the doorway. On and off, on and off, on and off. He did this exactly seven times, flipping his light switch on and off until the seventh off, and left his bedroom.

Thomas L. Harp was an investment banker who started his coffee at exactly 9:22 every morning. He took his first sip at 9:27 every morning. This was intentional. On this particular morning, however, Tom burned his mouth. He had gotten a new coffee machine the previous day and the brewing time was longer. So when he took his first sip, his coffee was too hot. Still, Tom drank his coffee because it was 9:27 and he would need to finish it by 9:34. That was the rule. Tom finished his coffee at 9:34 and his breakfast a minute later. He used the bathroom and checked himself in the mirror. His tie was wrong. Tom retied it. Still wrong. Retied again. There. That would do.

The walk to the office was 15 minutes long, meaning that Tom left his house at 9:38. This was done with the intention of getting to work 7 minutes early every day. Tom could do much in seven minutes, but it was not such a long time that he would be idle before the day started. It was the ideal number. So, Tom left his house at 9:38 that Tuesday morning, locking his apartment door and testing the handle seven times. Just in case. He took a breath of the congested New York air and resolutely ignored the bombardment of traffic noise. He found it didn't bother him as he strode down the street, turning once he reached the corner. Left turn, right turn, crosswalk, crosswalk, left turn, pass the jogger on her daily run, reach the front doors at 9:53. That was routine.

The second crosswalk was where it went wrong. So very wrong. As Tom waited for the walk sign to give him permission to cross, a man approached him. This was three seconds after he pushed the button, the sign takes approximately 32 seconds to turn after he presses the button each day. So that was how long the conversation was, 29 seconds. The man was clearly homeless, in a filthy oversized t-shirt versus Tom's cleanly pressed suit. The man

had a hole in his pants, just below his right knee. Some injury was peering through the window in the denim, one that might occur from falling on concrete. The man was unshaven, something that Tom despised greatly. His hair was long, greasy, and unkempt, in contrast to Tom's carefully combed side part. These observations were made in the split second between the man getting Tom's attention and him speaking.

"Please, sir, could you spare a five?"

A five. Five dollars. Well, for what? For drugs, most likely. The man looked to be that type. He was homeless, after all. Must have done something to get that way.

Tom turned back to watching the sign. 25 seconds until it would turn, and he could be on his way. "No, I don't give charity." Short and succinct.

But the man didn't leave. Instead, he reached for something behind him, making Tom step back slightly. What if he retaliated?

Instead of a weapon, the man nudged a child out to stand next to him, kneeling down next to the little girl, not quite old enough to be in school. He looked up at Tom with pleading eyes. "Then for my girl. Please, she's hungry. Please, sir, I don't know what else to do." He clasped his hands together. "Please."

Tom sneered. "Why in the world would you have a child if you're homeless? Why would you subject her to this life? You're pathetic, you know? Trying to manipulate me like this." He was sympathetic to their plight, really, he was. But the time was running out. The sign would change soon enough.

The man looked stunned. Evidently, he was surprised that his little ploy didn't work. The light changed and the traffic stopped, clearing the crosswalk. Normally, Tom would wait for the numbers to count down to 17, just a habit of his, but today he began to cross immediately. He was halfway across when a shout made him turn.

"I was an accountant!" The man was still on his knees, though his little girl had shuffled to hide behind him now. "I had a job, a home, but COVID ruined my life! How could you be so cold, I'm just like you!" People were shoving past him, cursing at him, one particularly rushed woman almost stepped on him. Tom watched as the man put his head in his hands and wept. Tom shook his head solemnly. What an insane man. He was nothing like him. Tom turned and went to work. He reached the doors a full minute before 9:53. He was forced to wait there, for 60 seconds, surrounded by the

chaos of New York traffic. It was bothering him now. How strange.

The rest of his day commenced in a similar manner. His routine was skewed, causing Tom to make silly mistakes. It was infuriating, the way 29 seconds could ruin your day. Tom was an orderly man, a successful man, a sane man - nothing like that madman who cried to the world.

Tom left the office at exactly 12:00 at night. Finally, something regular. 14 hours of suppressing sevens. Tom was not usually a paranoid man, but he was sure that his coworkers suspected something was wrong today. He let out a heavy breath, clenching the hand that was free of his suitcase to stop it from shaking. It was no matter. They would never know.

Tom hailed a taxi. Sometimes he would walk home, not today. He didn't like taxis, the traffic was too unpredictable, but he would not risk running into that man again. And the ride today would be seven minutes, according to his phone, something that calmed his mind some. Tom arrived home at 12:07 and read the news until 12:23. He did the crossword in this time, in tiny, neat letters. 5 letters, deceptive or dishonest person. Fraud. As he was brushing his teeth, the man came unbidden in his mind again. Someone should really call CPS on him. Then he finished, went to bed, and the man and his little girl were promptly forgotten.

The next morning, a Wednesday, the vibrations of his phone woke him at 9:00. Not the alarm, never the alarm. He reached across the bed, silenced his phone, and prepared for the better day ahead. But this time, Thomas L. Harp started his coffee at 9:21. It was difficult to change the rules. But he did, and his coffee was brewed by 9:26. Now it could cool. Tom took his first sip at 9:27 that morning. And it burned his tongue.

He set his coffee down on the table with a clank that echoed through his mind. The coffee splashed over the edge, spilling onto his fingers, and Tom rested his forehead on the still-warm machine.

He allowed himself seven seconds.

Then he lifted his head, wiped the tears off of his face, and sipped his scalding coffee.

Prison of Death and Deception

Hunter Tabor

“

Hello everyone, my name is Dr. Lawrence A. Body. You all are participating in a study concerning the human condition. One of you is the killer. Your goal: kill someone every 5 minutes. Your next target is specified on the device given to you. To return home alive, you must kill EVERYONE here in the order we request. The rest of you are targets. Your goal: stay alive & deduce the murderer. Your devices display a 5-minute timer, a flashlight, and a prompt to vote. After each death, you'll use this device to guess who the killer is. Once everyone remaining votes correctly, you are free to return home. Five minutes until the lights will shut off. No one move until my signal.

”

Miss Scarlet

We all sit round the table: colorful characters, sitting and gazing at
Weapons displayed across a black tablecloth
The dagger, the lead pipe, the revolver, the candlestick, the rope, and the
wrench
Five of us silently choose one to defend ourselves with
One person chooses a weapon to kill with
I glance at the others, wondering who the lone killer is...
Purple suit? Feathered blouse? Green tux? Yellow uniform? White dress?
Each person looks just as scared as the next
Whoever the murderer is, to them this is like a game
Yet when I entered, it was a last resort to make ends meet
A fresh, thick stack of paper bills sits in my pocket
I wish I hadn't taken this "job" but
The cash I lacked and wanted so desperately
The possibilities of a better, more
fulfilling life
Tempted me and seduced my greedy heart
Drew me to this house, to this "game," to this death sentence
Most of us regret our decision, but there is no way to turn back

We must push on, hoping to walk out of this house alive
 Finding the clue and deducing the killer is our only chance of escape
 The lights dim, as if on their own, but we know the truth:
 Someone is controlling everything that happens
 The person watching our every move is orchestrating this “game”
 We are captives in this elegant prison of death
 The lights are now fully off, the darkness devours us
 We hear the mastermind’s voice, sinister, soft, and spine-tingling
 Over the speaker, one word is uttered, “Go”
 Go, he says. So the game has started, the hunt has begun
 I reach for the table, my fingers inches away...

BANG!

“One person down. Five minutes to vote and resituate.”

Colonel Mustard

The sound of the gunshot rattles my bones
 With a lurch, I rush forward to seize
 A weapon, I search and my hand finds the rope
 I run, my legs moving with ease

I flee to get far far away from the noise
 My heart beating loudly and fast
 Away from the gun and the scream and the voice
 Running through darkness so vast

Who is the murderer, slaughterer, slayer
 Hiding his or her true intentions
 Under the façade of “just another player”
 In this game of death and deception

I pull from my pocket the vital device
 With a countdown, a light, and a prompt
 I repeat to myself a few words of advice
Vote quickly, move slowly, don’t stomp

I vote without thought, there is no way to know
 Then I feel my way down through the hall
 A door is unlocked, and moving quite slow
 I slip in, shut the door, trip, and fall!

CRASH!

My loud piercing might have come at a price
 Has five minutes passed? I’m not sure
 I reach into my pocket and pull out the device
 It reads 0:06 . . . 5 . . . 4 . . . -

Mrs. White

The sound of
 A crash slices through
 The still silence like
 A knife through butter.
 As the timer reaches the end of
 Its five-minute countdown
 The loud yell I hear is
 Frightening enough to
 Make me grasp my lead pipe tighter
 To make me fear for
 My life.
 The speaker crackles alive:

“One person down. Five minutes to vote and resituate.”

I remember
 Running my first 5-kilometer race when
 I was in High school and
 Thinking those 27 minutes were
 The most painful minutes of my life but
 Every five minutes here is
 So much more painful than
 Hours and hours of running because
 Sometimes the pain of waiting for
 The inevitable is more painful than
 Pain itself.
 I pull out my timer and
 Realize there is just
 One minute left but
 Each second seems longer and

longer.
 Moving in slow motion I feel
 A panel slide off from
 the back of the
 device.
 Inside I see a
 slip of paper
 A clue

I feel a
 rope wrap around my
 neck

Mr. Green

“One person down. Five minutes to vote and resituate.”

Death
 Death is just the absence of life
 Life is seeping from my body almost gone
 Gone is my yearning for safety over danger
 Danger lurks behind every corner waiting
 Waiting to die feels like my only option
 Options disappear as my sanity slips away
 Away from life and closer to death I run
 Run towards the strangling sound of terror
 Terror has no effect on me at all
 All the things that once scared me are meaningless
 Meaningless and unknown am I
 I have no one at home to return to
 To die would be a privilege for my life is finished
 Finished playing this game I drop my dagger recklessly
 Recklessly I run until I almost trip over death
 Death has struck the person who lays below
 Below me is darkness so I pull out my device for light
 Light reveals her timer is broken open
 Open it lies there and beside it a slip of paper
 Paper which contains answers
 Answers that free us from here
 Here lies my chance at freedom
 Freedom at last will conquer death

“I FOUND IT, THERE’S A CLUE IN YOUR TIMER! THE MURDERER IS-

CLANG!

Professor Plum

“One person down. Final target: Five minutes to survive . . . if you can.”

| | |
|------------------------|----------------------|
| Five more minutes- | Run up stairs |
| Soon it'll end | |
| Finished and done | |
| I can return | |
| To real life | |
| Away from here | |
| Four more minutes- | Down the hall |
| Nobody will know | |
| What took place | |
| It'll be like | |
| It never happened | |
| Three more minutes- | Round the bend |
| No more hiding | |
| No more fear | |
| No more death | |
| Two more minutes- | Crouch down silently |
| My device displays | |
| My final task | |
| One more minute- | Get ready, aim... |
| "Target: Miss Peacock" | <i>Bang!</i> |
| I am free | |
| Like everyone else | |
| I was trapped | |
| In this mansion | |
| This prison of | |
| Danger and Dread | |
| Darkness and Despair | |
| Death and Deception | |
| But at last | |
| I am free | |

“
M any experiments were once done to study the human mind, but
R ather than discovering how humans truly act in various situa-
B ack by stringently enforced constructs of morality. Removing
O pened the doors to further expand our knowledge about what
D o not let naysayers who spout sentimental philosophies or
Y ou otherwise. The overall consensus of modern experimental
psychologists is this:

If the end result will provide information capable of benefiting our
society,
the method used to gather it is inconsequential, simply a means to an
end.”

- Dr. Lawrence A. Body, PhD

Emeritus Professor of Psychology at Stanford University

Excerpt taken from *Ends: Freeing Modern Experimental Psychology from
Ancient Superstitious Constraints* (2nd ed.)

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Fine

Gabrielle Woehr

We sit on a threadbare rug in the living room and I lean against your
knees as you braid my hair. You whisper softly- It Will Be Fine. I match my
breathing to yours, two cadences melting together, and our shoulders rise
and fall in sync. Your nails run over the nape of my neck as you turn my
head to look in my eyes. You say they look like yours.

The tree in the backyard has new leaves; they peek out from behind your
reflection as you scrub the window over and over again. Your arm moves in
small circles across the glass and I wonder how it keeps moving.

Your hands are thin, I trace the bones within your fingers as you hold me
in your arms. I feel the rough shadow of a wound on your fingertip. You were
hemming my skirt and the needle drew a drop of red from your skin.

The same shadows mark your arms, and I wonder what you hemmed to
earn them.

I ask where you got them and you give no answer, murmuring instead,
and I wonder if it is for me or yourself.

It Will Be Fine.

Your fingers are calloused as they hold mine, from scrubbing plates and
mending clothes and tying apron strings over and over and over again.

You write in shaking penmanship a note for my lunchbox.

It Will Be Fine.

The tree is withering now, leaves dwindling into brown and war-torn
limbs fighting the wind. You clean the window and we watch the tree slowly
rot through clear glass.

I lean against the lump in your belly and I ask who gave it to you. You say
it was God and I wonder if God knows what drew those cuts on your arms. I
ask him but he gives no answer. My prayers hit the cold wall of my bedroom
and shatter on the floor.

Your belly grows and you walk with your head down. You touch my braids with worn fingertips and I study your face— how your freckles reflect mine and the glint in your eye dances when you smile.

We sit across from each other and I wonder out loud. When will God answer me? You brush dirt off my cheek and tell me that you talk to God every day.

There are no more leaves in the yard, the wind has taken them all captive. You scrub and scrub and scrub until your knuckles are cracked and I let my questions hit your ears. Why clean the window so much? Who will know?

You tell me that He always does. I ask if He is God and you take my hand and say that He Wants To Be.

It Will Be Fine.

You write over and over and over again in a small journal, the same deep brown as your eyes. I try to take it from the shelf one day, to see if God's answers can be read. You grab my arm and pull it away, a little too hard, brow furrowed and eyes wide.

Your voice carries from the next room, talking to someone. Maybe it is God.

God shouts.

He sounds like broken glass and heavy footsteps.

I watch with my head tilted to the side as you wipe tears from your cheeks. I did not know you could cry.

You cradle your stomach and close your eyes, always coming from the next room with your head low and your arms crossed.

I see the pool of red between your legs and look up at you. I say it this time.

It Will Be Fine.

You leave me alone for what you say is Just One Day over and over and over again. When you return, you are thinner, sallow, the lines tracing your face are deeper. Your eyes are red where they once were white. I touch your braids and you wince, pulling your clenched hands toward your chest. You

whisper to yourself.

It Will Be Fine.

I ask who took away the lump in your belly. You say it was God.

Your eyes no longer look like mine. They are painted purple and green and they are swollen.

The tree is dead. Its branches bend and crack in the bitter air; they can no longer resist. Frost overtakes the window and I know the unseen tree will be soon forgotten. You wipe the window with a dirty cloth, your back hunched and your gaze down. More scratches splay across your arms, dark red and angry and demanding to be seen.

You walk slowly, always shaking, feet dragging across worn floorboards. You sweep the floors and dust the lamps over and over and over again.

Your freckles get lost in the shadows of your tired eyes. I can no longer recognize the resemblance between us. Your breaths are drawn out, labored, and mine quicken while I watch you cry. You keep a distance, too busy writing and dusting and talking in the next room to tell me if It Will Be Fine. I try to tell myself but it comes out as a vagrant whisper, one whose home is not my lips. I sit on the floor, arms locked in place around my legs and head resting on my knees. Shivering, I take in shallow breaths over and over and over again.

I see you less and less now, resting my matted hair on unswept floorboards. I listen to the absence of your footsteps. The frost has gone from the window and grime and dust have taken its place.

The tree is only a stump now, cut down in the winter while I slept under a ragged blanket. Dirt marks my face and I ask God where you have gone. My questions join the pile of broken prayers on the floor.

The women from church come more and more, bearing casseroles and plastered-on smiles. They wipe their high heels on the doormat and step gingerly through the threshold. I ask them where you are. They say you are with God.

His shattered glass and slammed doors have finally taken you. I wonder if you can hear my prayers or if you are the one letting them fracture into fragments. I look up at the women with eyes that they say look Just Like Yours. They tell me that It Will Be Fine over and over and over again.

A Chamber of Ashes

Gabrielle Woehr

I have always been fascinated by death. We all experience the same birth, at the hand of our mothers, guided into this world with only thoughts of basic need. We spend our first moments in the same state of distress and confusion, but our last moments fall on a spectrum; they are not uniform. No two deaths are the same, from the thoughts racing through your head to the hands that steal your last breath. The idea that you can starve or drown or hang and make it all your own is one I find comforting; in life we are all the same, but in death we are set apart.

I have always been fascinated by death, but then again, I have always thought I would have a choice in mine.

The ceiling of Memorial Hospital is water-stained and low. The view out my window isn't much better— traffic underneath jumbles of rain clouds. From this dimly-lit room, I could look at gray skies, gray ceilings, or the machinery forcing me alive. I keep my eyes shut most of the time. It's always presumed that I'm asleep, by the nurses gossiping about the doctors, by the doctors likewise gossiping, by my parents overly invested in it all. I don't mind it— it gives me something to listen to. If I can't interact with the world I'd at least like to hear about it. I'd like to hear that Doctor Meyers cheated on his wife with Doctor Sumner, and Nurse Katie is dating Nurse Melissa, and the janitor was caught smoking in the stairwell. In between rumors I hear my parents talking. They saw Doctor Sumner with a suspicious duffle bag and they think Nurse Melissa is too good for Nurse Katie and they wish I was dead.

I know they wish I was dead from the words spoken in hushed voices. "I wish her pain would go away". "I wish this could all be over". Speaking of me in the past tense is enough— Liza "was" brilliant, she "was" our child, she "was" loved.

Their words are ice on my ears, but they're right. Life is hard, it has obstacles and changes, but death? Death is easy. It is unattached, it is free, it is quick. It solves the problems posed by life. The worst state is between the two— somewhere past the race but not quite at the finish line. *Dying*. I am there now, and the checkered line on the ground feels so distant. I march toward it like running through waist-deep water, and after traveling miles, I look back to see that they have been inches.

I think of Sogdianus, an ancient Persian ruler, suffocated by ashes. He stood in a chamber of them, trapped, and took his last, ash-filled breath after hours of misery. The dying was drawn-out and torturous, but the death? The death was painless. Unique. *Relieving*. I've always thought that his last moments were spent not in agony, not in distress, but in joy. I imagine that the knowledge of his final seconds brought a smile to his face. It would certainly bring one to mine.

I have been dying since last year. People treat you differently when you're dying, as if you're not trapped in a chamber of ashes, unable to move. They offer you more things that they baked or cooked or don't want anymore and they are sure you'd love. I'm sure they mean well, but my deathbed thoughts are not of casseroles and hand-me-down clothing. They add ashes to the pile, until they measure above your mouth, and scold you when you cannot smile.

I've always hoped my dying would be quick. All deaths are momentary, they are the last moments of your life when the breath drains out of you. Dying, on the other hand, is when you know your death is approaching. You can be dying your whole life. In all my fantasies, my dying would be brief, meaningful; it would better the world. It would not be calling my grandma to tell her I love her for the last time. It would not be seeing my parents cry while they think I am sleeping. It would not be petting my dog as I am dragged to the hospital for my final months. People who die quickly do not have the burden of saying goodbye. They have lives, and they have deaths, and they have no complications in between.

As a child, I fantasized about my death, writing in a small journal about how it would happen. It would be special, heroic, renowned. Maybe I would dive in front of a car to save my best friend. Maybe I would rescue countless orphans from a fire, before succumbing to the flames myself. Maybe I'd be assassinated because I spoke out against an oppressive government. I'd have imagined more scenarios if my second-grade teacher hadn't confiscated the journal for being too "morbid". Whatever fate had in store for my death, I thought it would be grand. It would be inspiring. It would not be lying in a hospital bed with plastic running through my veins.

It is said that life and death form a circle, but death does not lead to life anew. Death is special in its permanence. The race is run to reach the finish line, but there is joy in knowing there is no distance left to run. After the finish line there is nothing and everything— silence and darkness and relief.

A common thought that crosses my mind in this room is that a younger version of me would be disappointed. Young Liza would run, screaming,

from this process of dying and death. She would write in her journal of how scared she was, not of dying, but of dying *like this*. This dying is long and miserable and does not work toward the betterment of anything. I once told my mother that my dream was to be killed for what I believed in. It checked all my boxes; it was a quick dying, a quick death, it held meaning and it inspired people. The same week, she took me to see a child psychologist, who deemed me “odd” but otherwise sane. I would love for her to see me now, still the “odd” girl she observed years ago, wanting a grand death more than ever. I know that an epic death is impossible given my circumstances, so a brief one will have to suffice.

While my parents whisper about how they think I’ll die, I often think of how I’d like to. Not the elementary questions of would I rather burn or freeze, be killed by a zombie or a vampire, but questions of substance. Of which tube I’d pull out of my arm, which pills I’d take from which cabinet, what time of day it would happen. Of exactly how long it would take for my parents to ask for more ice chips. If 62 seconds would be enough.

I do not know which tubes are keeping my heart propped up and which are numbing the pain of having a heart that needs propped up. My guess is that taking every tube out would cause some kind of cosmic disaster— good, that’s how I should go, making a scene. My voice is cracked and dry when I speak.

“Mom? Dad?”

They jump from their seats, grins concealing what I know they must be thinking; *Is it time? She sounds so terrible. The poor thing. I wish her pain could stop.*

“Yes, honey? Is everything alright?” My mother speaks, squeezing my father’s hand while four wide eyes look into mine.

For the first time in weeks I tell them the truth.

“Everything is fine,” I say, “but can I get some more ice chips?”

With that, they are out the door, fingers still interlocked, buzzing frantically toward the nurses’ station. A countdown begins in my mind.

62. 61. 60.

My parents are ever-eager for a task that distracts them from thoughts of death or dying or what the difference between them could be. They have

never understood me because they have never been dying. They have never felt an imminent death loom over them, casting its shadow on their aspirations. Then again, their aspirations probably aren’t as death-related as mine.

52. 51. 50.

I look to my arm and fill my lungs with oxygen— my last deep breath, glorious and sickening. I reach toward the chemicals filling my body, my fingers wrapping around every cord, ready to pull.

40. 39. 38.

The feeling is not immediate, it only becomes evident that my plan has worked after time has passed. My lungs feel as if they are collapsing in on themselves, as if the ashes have finally overtaken me.

17. 16. 15.

I hear my parents in the hallway, their voices carrying through gray walls. They are arguing over what the janitor could have been smoking, and I am quite content that it will be the last thing I hear.

11. 10. 9. 8.

The clouds outside the window seem a little less gray now, the traffic a little less busy, the ceiling a little less stained.

7. 6.

I think of the journal under my pillow with a note to my parents, explaining everything. Life versus death and living versus dying and why I wanted a choice in it all.

5. 4.

My last thought is of Young Liza. I think of the odd little girl with pig-tails, researching historical deaths and telling her friends about them. I think of the ashes piling up around her. I think of her death in a hospital bed, her heart beating uninhibited in its final moments. I think of her dreams.

3. 2. 1.

I think she would be proud.

Bye Beloved Brother

Demi Zhang

I stood frozen, my heart pounding in my chest, as I crossed the threshold into the room where death had made its gruesome mark. The putrid smell of blood filled my nostrils, and my eyes widening in disbelief at the haunting sight before me. There, slumped over the desk, was my brother's lifeless body, his once vibrant spirit silenced forever. A gasp of horror escaped my lips, fleeing the confines of my throat like an anguished wail. A merciless bullet had torn through his skull, leaving behind a gaping hole as a chilling testament to the brutality of his end.

My eyes fixated on a solitary piece of paper resting on his desk, adorned with only a few handwritten words. My trembling hand, uncertain yet drawn by an inexplicable force, reached out to claim it.

"Don't dwell on the past, live your life."

My legs felt weak, unable to support the weight of my anguish as I sank to the floor. My trembling hands reached out to touch him, to feel the warmth that was now forever absent. I cradled his lifeless form in my arms, my tears falling freely, mixing with the crimson stains that had painted his world black.

In the midst of my inconsolable grief, a sound pierced through the hazy fog of sorrow – the creaking of the door downstairs. Panic surged through me, and I looked up to see my parents rushing up the stairs, their faces etched with terror and disbelief, mirroring the horror enveloping me.

August 26th, a date forever etched in my memory, was the day my world fractured irreparably. It was the day my brother's inner demons triumphed, leaving me to grapple with the haunting question of why he chose to depart—leaving me behind to navigate the unfathomable void he had left in his wake.

Months had passed since the day my older brother took his own life, yet the haunting scene continued to torment my mind like an unrelenting specter that followed me day and night. Each evening, as darkness descended, a suffocating wave of thoughts crashed over me, drowning me in remorse and

uncertainty.

Every day, like clockwork, he would retreat to the sanctuary of his room after school, sealing the door shut like a fortress—shutting the world out. It became his cocoon of isolation, a self-imposed prison; meanwhile, I stood on the other side, helpless to break the walls he had built around himself.

What if I'd noticed when he would push his food around on the plate, barely eating? Meanwhile, I remained blissfully ignorant of his diminishing appetite. The evening rituals of nibbling on morsels of lifeless vegetables instead of hearty meals now gnawed at my conscience like a relentless hunger.

And then, the moments when his energy waned, and his enthusiasm for our shared passion, biking on Thursdays after school, gradually dwindled. I had failed to grasp the gravity of those telltale signs, the cries for help masked by the veneer of daily routine.

Regrets and what-ifs swirled in a relentless storm within me, a tempest of emotions threatening to engulf any sense of solace. The guilt was an uninvited guest that spectrally lingered in the corners of my mind, refusing to be silenced.

In those quiet moments, when the world seemed to hold its breath, the weight of my unanswered questions bore down on me like a leaden shroud. I longed for a chance to turn back time, to be more aware, more understanding, and more present in his life.

But alas, time only moved forward, leaving me with the shards of memories and the bitter lessons of hindsight. The pain of losing him was now compounded by the relentless guilt of my own perceived failings.

Life had an uncanny way of relentlessly moving forward, even in the endless shadows of heartbreak. The weight of my brother's absence was a constant burden, an ache that accompanied my every step.

The morning sun rose indifferently, urging me to face the day; reluctantly, I would have to heed its call. School, once a place of familiar faces and laughter, now felt like a labyrinth of sorrow and isolation. Each classroom held memories of moments shared with my brother, making the walls seem like witnesses to our inextricable lives. I remembered how we used to exchange secret notes during class, passing them carefully to avoid the teacher's watchful eyes. Those little folded pieces of paper are now like time

capsules, preserving our laughter and shared moments. After my brother had passed, they were carelessly tossed into the trash, those moments lost forever.

A once frequently used blue pencil sat in my locker, now retired. My brother loved that blue pencil, claiming it brought him good luck during exams. He lent it to me whenever I was nervous about a test; it had consequently become a symbol of his unwavering support and belief in my abilities.

There was also a tattered notebook filled with drawings and comic strips. It was a shared journal, where we took turns adding to a story about two adventurers traveling through fantastical realms. It was a reflection of our imaginative minds intertwining, creating a world of our own within those pages.

The need to escape the suffocating atmosphere became irresistible, and in between classes, I would dash to the bathroom, seeking refuge in its solitude. The cold, tiled walls offered a semblance of comfort as if they too understood the need to contain the overwhelming emotions that threatened to spill over.

Sitting there, in the sanctuary of silence, tears would fall unbidden, the sound of their patter echoing in the stillness. It was a release, a moment of vulnerability, when I allowed myself to grieve away from prying eyes. The bathroom became my temporary haven, a place where I could let the weight of my sorrow unfurl.

I would gaze at myself through the mirror as if looking at a stranger. My hair had grown long and tangled, like a neglected garden. Dark circles had formed under my eyes, betraying my exhaustion and despair. My gray clothes clung onto my bare frame, draping down in a way that felt drab and lifeless.

As the next bell rang, its shrill sound jolting me from my moment of melancholy, I hastily gathered my belongings and joined the stream of students flowing toward the next class. The familiar routine led me to my next class, but my heart already anticipated the impending need to escape. I could almost feel the cool silent embrace of the bathroom as if it were calling out to me, a sanctuary where tears could flow freely, and sorrow could find a voice.

But then, something caught my eye, pulling me away from the well-trodden path of sorrow. A vibrant splash of colors adorned the wall—a large, eye-catching poster that seemed to have materialized just for me. The words

leaped off the page as if they were eager to extend a lifeline.

"Writing Club After School From 3:30 to 5:30. Meet at classroom 260. Anyone is welcome!"

For a moment, time seemed to stand still as I stared at the words, the world around me fading into the background. It was as if the universe had whispered its invitation, nudging me toward a glimmer of hope and light amidst the abysmal darkness.

As the minutes ticked by, the prospect of the Writing Club seemed to grow, filling my mind with newfound curiosity. What stories could be shared within those walls? *What emotions could be poured onto paper, finding release through the art of words?*

The weight of grief remained, but a spark of curiosity had ignited within me, pushing me to consider stepping outside my comfort zone. Maybe, just maybe, amidst the pain and heartache, there was a glimmer of healing waiting to be implored.

As the final bell of the day rang, signaling the end of classes, my heart fluttered with a sense of resolve. I clung to the hope that maybe, in the embrace of the Writing Club, I would find the courage to transform my grief into words. Perhaps I'd be able to embrace the vulnerability of sharing my pain, and in doing so, unearth the first threads of healing in this journey of loss and renewal.

My steps felt heavy as I trudged through the bustling hallway, my eyes scanning the sea of classroom numbers etched upon the doors until I finally arrived at my destination—room 260. Taking a deep breath, I cautiously peeked inside, uncertain of what lay beyond.

There, amidst the rows of desks, stood a figure that immediately drew my attention. The teacher, adorned with large turtle shell glasses that magnified her eyes, exuded an air of warmth and approachability. Her bright blue polkadot dress seemed to reflect her vibrant spirit, a splash of color against the monotonous backdrop of the school's corridors.

As I hesitated at the threshold, her gaze met mine, and a genuine smile graced her lips, reaching her kind eyes. It was a smile that held an invitation, an assurance that I was welcome, and an ineffable understanding that transcended words.

As I stepped further into the room, the teacher's warm aura enveloped

me, and I felt a flicker of anticipation dance like a fairy within. It was as if I had stumbled upon a haven amidst the chaos of life, a safe space where my emotions could find refuge. The teacher's kind eyes crinkled at the corners, radiating compassion and understanding, making me feel seen and acknowledged. There was an aura of encouragement in her presence, as if she believed in the vast potential that lie within each student.

I settled into a seat near the back of the room, a mix of anticipation and nerves swirling within me like a tempest. The chair beneath me felt both familiar and foreign as if it held the echoes of countless stories from past meetings. Finally, the teacher, with her turtle shell glasses and polka dot dress, exuded an aura of enthusiasm that set the stage for the adventure ahead. "You are free to write anything," she intoned amicably, her voice a beacon of permission that illuminated the path before us.

With a sense of liberation, I opened my laptop, the blank document staring back at me like a canvas yearning to be used. Excitement and nervous energy mingled within, the rainbow possibilities of storytelling beckoning to me.

I unleashed a torrent of ideas, each one taking root in the digital realm as if the blank page had morphed into fertile soil waiting to nurture my creative seeds. Among the swirling concepts, I found one that captured my imagination—a story that pulsed with both familiarity and wonder.

With a determined breath, I began to weave the tapestry of words. My fingers danced across the keyboard, mirroring the quickened pace of my heart. The outside world faded away, and I fell into a state of flow, where time became a mere illusion, and the only existence was the world unfurling before me on the screen.

At that moment, I found freedom in the act of writing—an escape from the weight of the past that had been holding me captive. My writing took me back to a childhood memory. I vividly described the old oak tree in my grandmother's backyard, its gnarled branches providing relief from the sweltering sun during the warm summer days. The words flowed effortlessly as I reminisced about the laughter shared with my brother and the sweet scent of freshly baked cookies wafting from the kitchen. Through the power of my writing, I relived those cherished moments, feeling the warmth of nostalgia wrapping around me like a comforting embrace.

The darkness that had haunted me with thoughts of death and grief seemed to take a backseat to the brilliance of storytelling. The past lingered like a shadow, but as I poured my soul into the story, the narrative became

a vehicle of transformation. Through fiction, I found the courage to explore emotions and experiences, confront the ghosts of the past, and rewrite my own journey.

In the tales I crafted, I clung tightly to vivid memories of my brother, like the magical night we stayed up late, stargazing beneath a blanket of twinkling stars. The moon bathed us in a soft, silvery glow as we lay on a cozy blanket spread out in the backyard. The scent of fresh grass mingled with the faint aroma of s'mores lingering in the air, creating an ambiance of wonder and warmth.

With each shooting star that streaked across the sky, we made secret wishes and shared our dreams for the future in hushed whispers. The universe seemed to unfold before us, an endless canvas of possibilities, and we spoke of our hopes, aspirations, and the adventures upon which we yearned to embark.

My brother's eyes sparkled with enthusiasm as he described his desire to become an artist, painting masterpieces that would evoke emotions and leave a lasting impact on the world. Those memories were now woven into the tapestry of my writing, forming a beautiful mosaic of love and remembrance.

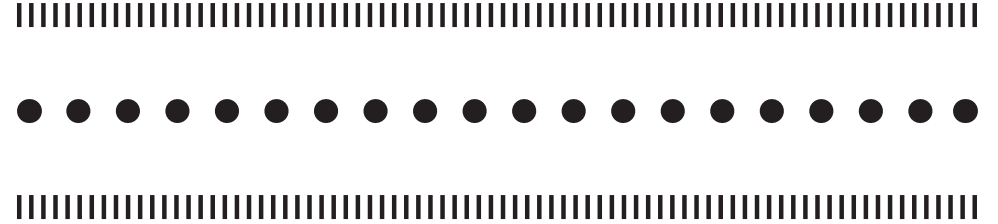
In that moment, the Writing Club transformed from a mere extracurricular activity into a beacon of hope—a sacred sanctuary where the threads of stories were woven, and emotions cascaded like a waterfall of ink onto paper. Through this journey, I harnessed the strength to unshackle myself from the chains of the past, embracing the courage to explore uncharted territories and embrace the thrill of trying new things.

In embracing the transformative power of writing, I learned to embrace change and welcome new experiences with open arms. The journey of self-discovery through the written word was a testament to the resilience of the human spirit. As I penned each word, I knew that my brother's memory would continue to guide and inspire me through the ever-changing chapters of life.

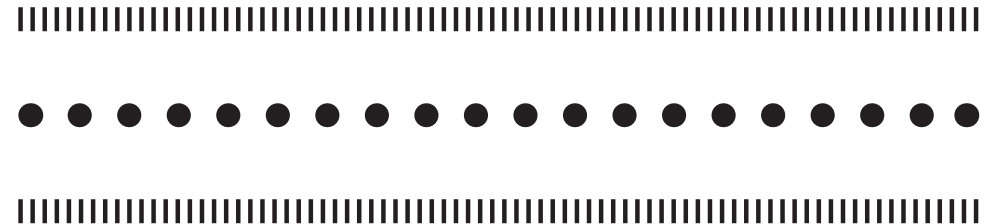


Garden of Eternal Youth

Nasaria Becerra
Photography
Center Grove High School
12th Grade



Poetry



But little girls can't talk

Anais Briscoe Beuoy

I wish little girls could talk
If little girls could talk it would be so fun
If little girls could talk surely someone would listen
If little girls could talk they tell you about all the things they drew
If little girls could talk they'd tell you why this doll wears blue
If little girls could talk they'd tell you all that they imagine
If little girls could talk they'd tell you they don't like your pageants
If little girls could talk they'd tell you all the things they despise
If little girls could talk it'd be with tears in their eyes
They'd tell you bout all the scars on their thighs
They'd tell you bout the truth that is "all men must lie"
They'd tell you bout how they murdered many flies
They'd tell you bout how many times they wonder how they die
They'd tell you why they cut their hair
They'd say they hate it when men stare
They'd tell you why they eat and throw up
They'd tell you that they don't want to grow up
because if this is being a little girl then being a woman must suck.
No matter whether a little girl is fat, tall, short, or skinny
a little girl will never really think she's pretty.
But every smart little girl would never say that
for they do not want pity
and fear being called a "pick-me"
If little girls could talk you may not want to hear it because the more they
talk
the more you may fear it.
Little girls are never as innocent as you think,
in fact little girls are just one big tragedy all dolled up in pink.

Tell Me When?

Anais Briscoe Beuoy

Sometimes I wish I could say u weren't there, that u left us like all the rest instead of the reality of us having to leave you. I wish you weren't there that time. I walked down to the basement to check on my hamsters and I was dismissed, even reprimanded. Only later did I realize that the that stinky smell that seemed to put my lungs in a chokehold every time I even walked past that wretched door wasn't my dead hamsters and it wasn't my rage. I wasn't allowed in the basement for a reason. I wish you weren't there when I was grabbing your 4th beer bottle from the fridge as if I was your little maid. I insisted that 1 was enough but apparently not to you. I wish you weren't there when you swore you didn't smoke those vomit inducing cigarettes then I proceeded to watch you use a plate I sculpted you at school with my very own 6 year old hands as an ashtray or when I saw that little rolled paper snuck behind your reddened ear, yes I cried when I saw that. But you didn't notice. I wish you weren't there when you asked me over and over if I would rather not see you at all, if I just wanted to be with my mom. You were screaming. I was crying, all I could respond with was "but I love you" cause my 8 year old self didn't wanna tell you and didn't wanna tell myself that I didn't wanna be with my own dad. But I wish you were here when...

Grief is a slippery thing. It trickles through the webbing of your fingers onto a perfectly rounded sponge and there it continues to go for seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, years. Until it's all filled up and you just have to wrench it. And even though it hurts, it feels good. But the water it pours is messy and dirty and ugly and messy. People don't like messy things. My life is messy, an assortment of things scattered on my bedroom floor like a puzzle I'll never solve. Grief is not talking about it, not elaborating on how it happened cause it just might bring u back to that day. That moment. That feeling. It just gets you thinking. That thought that is "I could have done something". No I couldn't, I barely knew him at the time! He was my father but he lied. He was my father but he had the audacity to die. Grief is knowing now that a deadbeat dad is better than just a dead dad. When?

I watched you drown in beer bottles, ash trays, minimum wage, watched you make two strong women crumble and say it was a one time fumble . brag about your perfect daughter and her perfect ways, do you even know my grades? The least you could do is pay... your child support, actin' up in court, we built a fort, called it our castle, used it to hide from the never ending screaming and not be a hassle. I always wanted to be part of a Liv

and Maddie family , a “there when you need them” dad, blue eyes, blonde hair, a signed cast but the world passed by too fast and now it's 12:30 am and somehow I've ended up in the past. When?

And hey, maybe this poem is too long, maybe I'm just flat out wrong. But people keep telling me that I don't have to be strong. Little do they know, before he died he was already long gone. So I already grieved, I already cried, I already told everyone I was fine. I already wished to the stars that you could come back and I could ask you who you really are, but now you're six feet too far. Six fireflies in a jar but they weren't bright enough to light you through the dark. Beer bottles shaped like hearts, I think maybe if it wasn't for that car, I think about all the times we had at the park, I think about when you bought me a dog that didn't bark. People kept telling me it would get better but it never did, people keep telling me it's gonna get better but when?

Where I'm From

Karina Calderon

I am from fussing and nasty ear-pullings

From

“Don't talk back!”

and

“I made dinner if you'd like some.”

I am from not having enough for beans but enough for the denim jacket on July

From shrimp-flavored Maruchan and stale sugar sandwiches for breakfast

I am from the kindergarten teacher who made my unsophisticated life a living hell by brainwashing a 6 year-old into thinking nothing is possible.

From never washing my hair and itching the hunger away

I am from knee pain during Kairos, I am from knee pain by contaminating my soul

From “Calderon!” Mom squawks out to my dad, who could spin a yarn

About his Guatemalan infancy to his younger kin going missing.

I am from Calderon's passed-down twin bed with roe deer and eastern white pine tree bedding.

From formula fragrance and Calderon's \$12.99 cologne trickling across my nostrils

I am from

“Respect your elders!”

to

“They've been doing this since 1840.”

From purchasing innumerable sunglasses and getting corneal sunburns

No sunburn could top the boiling, scorching shrimp broth Mom would cook in July

I am from carving the latest word I had recently learned in my 3rd grade class into the historic Granny Smith apple tree right behind my parents bedroom (peeling bark and U-shaped forks)

I am from comminuted experiences that have been minced onto my plate, providing plenty to chew on and eventually regurgitate.

Oceans

Chloe Chen

Sleep is an ocean,
Tranquil,
Tempestuous,
Turbulent.

I close my eyes and I fall,
Down, down, down,
Deeper and deeper until I hit the bottom.
Boom.

But I cannot open my eyes, I cannot open my mouth.
The water,
It's too vast, too dark, crushing.
The waves laugh as I struggle against them.

Ba boom. Ba boom. Ba boom.
My heart, I can feel it beating in my chest.
Faster and faster and faster.
I open my mouth but no sound comes out.

I open my eyes.
I am enveloped in a sea of pillows and blankets and stuffed animals.
The clock strikes twelve.
I breathe out.

I close my eyes and I fall, once again.
But this time,
It is silent.

tuesday evening

Jessica Ding

9:45 PM
twilight arrives
bleeding on your bathroom tile.
you brush your teeth
wipe your face.
the towel is already damp.

you pack for school
preparing to trace through paths
you have walked a thousand wednesdays.
through the window
the death of your fifteenth summer glows in the horizon.

10:00 PM
the kettle is screaming.

10:30 PM
your mother finishes her tea
your father has gone to sleep.

12:30 AM
the air is still.
night leaks through the curtains
and you stare at shadows
shifting among swirls on the ceiling.
your mother tossed and turned for nearly two hours
but the sheets have finally stopped murmuring.

you inhale
your ears begin to ring
you hear a cry:
the kettle is wailing.
you exhale
and the shadows dance again in silence.

1:13 AM
you pad across the bedroom carpet
you wash your hands.

the water is cold
but you don't know why.

across one of your palms there are two lines
when you close your hand they fold inwards
collapse on themselves
your grandmother once told you that meant luck.

on the other hand only one line cuts across your palm
your grandmother once told you that meant death.

the tap shuts off
and little drops of liquid moonlight
glisten inside the sink.
unbidden, you think of how the sink is a vortex.
always draining
always swallowing
always hungry.
still, it always ends up empty.

1:54 AM
your eyes have been closed for 23 minutes.
you have been awake for 17 hours.

2:21 AM
you dream of going down the hallway
pushing open the door to your mother's room
(your father and her sleep separately
so she is alone too.)

you dream of laying under the covers
hovering next to her warmth
you dream of asking
ma, are you sure i am a person
and not a vortex?
no matter how much goes in me
i am always hungry.
i always end up empty.

you dream of whispering
what about a nesting doll, ma?
see here: there's my pain
then open me up and neatly inside is you, ma.
my mother and her pain.

crack her open
and then there's her mother and her pain
painted over with flowers.
crack her open
and then

3:38 AM
the water in the sink has dried.
it is dull again.

7:00 AM
you wake up
the bed is cold
but you are sweating.

7:15 AM
you go downstairs
your father is still sleeping
your mother is in the kitchen.
you watch as she rushes to the stove
running to silence the kettle
before it can start to scream.

Alive

Eesha Faruqi

I live under moss,
in valleys of thick fog,
in the midst of forest birds
perched on a fallen log.

I live in the trickling stream
that saunters down a hill,
over rocks of silver so
the deer can drink its fill.

I live in the canary's song
which chimes like ringing bells,
and brims with forgotten secrets
too precious to ever tell.

I live in the crimson of petals,
in the bead of morning dew
that sits serene on a flower,
and in the bee that haunts it too.

I live in the salt of the ocean,
in the crushing wind of winter,
in the low hissing sound
made by the dying cinder.

Because the world is alive
as is the rock that never gives,
and even as the deer lies dead,
I think of it, and so it lives.

Swim to You

Shawn Feng

Through the water I swam swiftly to you,
cruising through velvety smooth, crystalline perfection
parting at my will, at instant impact
because I was young;
I was invincible.

On my way towards you, I would soar;
as I brushed through the giant liquid sapphire, gleaming ostentatiously.
Blinding light refracted in infinite directions
while I was headed in only
one.

When I emerged from the water,
we'd embrace and rejoice.
Your eyes would dance with joy as we sprawled on the smooth sand.
Your voice, gliding and soaring through the air,
even overpowered the allure of Orpheus' lyre.
And so we'd sprawl on trillions of golden grains, every single day,
crafting the future in elaborate, brightly laced fantasies
after I swam to you.

On that same beach with once soft, yellow sand,
now a dull, lifeless gray;
once teeming with vivacious shells, fighting for our attention with their
ethereal hues,
now lifeless and limp.
Those memories whisper softly from a regrettably unalterable past;
one that leaves so much
unsaid, unheard, unseen.

I ignored the warning signs,
let every miniscule grain of sand slip softly through the hourglass
until your grace and your beauty
eventually fell through too.

But every day, I still think back and remember
how I eagerly bridged the divide.
Even when the tides started to nudge me back,

I swam to you.
 Even when the waters churned and swirled,
 savagely trying to push me under,
 I swam to you.
 Even when the waves slapped, punched, and battered me,
 I clawed and kicked my way across the stinging, slashing blades
 that once parted like a drinkable diamond,
 onward,
 to you.

But one day,
 One fateful, storming day, as lightning slashed through the sky,
 as thunder slammed against the ground,
 the split-second knives and steamroller waves finally overpowered
 my will to swim to you.
 I kicked to no avail,
 grabbed at shifting, shapeless handholds,
 gasping and heaving for air, yet only taking in salty, stinging crystals lodging
 into my throat.

Your eyes said it all.
 They were wide with terror
 yet still shining and radiating with beauty,
 drawing me into a blue, crystalline heaven that I once knew so well.
 Your satin soft locks flailed in the panicking winds,
 and before it was too late,
 you dove
 into the menacing blue battlefield, fighting your way to me.
 My lips parted urgently with the need to
 scream,
 to beg you to return to the safety of the beach.
 But only silence emerged from my throat, lodged with glass, as the sea
 shoved more in,
 piercing my voice, shattering my pleas.
 A wave mercilessly sloshed me under,
 and as I fought upwards again,
 I saw your silky white dress, atop you.
 You.
 Soft kisses, melting embraces, time-bound togetherness.

After waiting ever so patiently,
 envying the ease of my path across it,
 And even more so, envying what I crossed for every day:
 you,

the vast, powerful, *invincible*, sea had claimed its prize,
 what it had set its sights on
 the day your feet had first graced the sands.

I stayed my fateful course towards you
 as the waves shifted and morphed,
 slowly synchronizing and spinning.
 As you were pulled into the dauntless whirlpool,
 your hand caught mine.
 I don't recall if we resisted, but it was clear:
 we would fall through the eye of the storm.

As we spun faster, wound closer, sunk under,
 as the last two grains slipped through the sandglass,
 braced to plummet,
 as we reminded ourselves that despite the vast, blue menace,
 we are
invincible,
 we embraced. Our souls embraced.
 And finally,
 though we were not ready,
 the sea,
 just as easily as I had once flown through its frictionless waters,
 drew out the last of our truths, our secrets, our lives
 trapped in tiny bubbles racing up from our lips through the chaotic, whirl-
 ing sea,
 dispersing at the surface
 to remind the world that once, not so long ago,
 I swam to
 you.

Liminal

Noah Gibson

Between the flash flame brilliance of their dance
And fading embers' last quivering sigh
Lies the threshold realm where first we glanced
The space between, where realms defy.

Here, a curious magic stirs and weaves
The fabric of its theater bizarre—
Neither vapour nor solid, it deceives,
Defies form, a trick of starlight's spar.

In this liminal space, all potential comes to life,
Kaleidoscope fragments bloom, scatter, fade,
Sparks flutter in perpetual strife,
Uncontained, ever-in-flux cascade.

It teeters, balances between real and erased—
That razor's edge of dream and waking days.
Where worldly truths mix with lunar haze,
And perspective shifts in myriad ways.

The vivid lives that could have been,
Each path untrod, potential sways--
Phantoms swirl in the space between
The real unveiled and veiled façades.

Nothing is, but all could be, within this place—
That teeters, balances between real and erased.

classical conditioning

Claire He

before you know it, the church bell rings
and you are on your knees again, praying,
a rosary tangled between your aching joints,
circling knuckles plum-hued by virtue
of bruises—a pulpit topples in cathedral's center
cracking marble into fragments cluttered
between platters of spilled fruit: no matter,
grate the rinds until they leak anointing oil,
peel the fruit so nectar swarms, a honeycomb,
over fingers starving to dig into flesh,
nails spading down—feasting, festering;
tear that bread and drown the wine with
transubstantiation torn in your canines
tasting like ambrosia. saliva turned to
holy water. seeds crushed between your teeth,
take pollen into your throat, now, the rosary
pulled taut in mimicry of a collar leashed.
listen close: do you hear that sound
trembling through your vertebrae? open
mouth like pavlov's dogs: ever hungering.

conspicuous consumption

Claire He

let's eat cake, she sings with a face full / of powder as i partition the mousse into sixths / & lick sugar off the knife / plastic stiff against skin / lipstick staining the edge. / her rouge smears onto / the whorl of her thumbs / in red & white streaks / caked in oil. how easily fondant / becomes rust. & icing rots / her teeth inside & out / her smile soot-blackened / saying *this is the American dream*. / Marie Antoinette's head falls like a house / of cards: a heart a diamond a spade. / this nation's clubs batter glittering dresses, pearl gowns / molars plated in metal / & turns Versailles into Vanderbilt into velvet. / i wedge a chocolate coin under my tongue. / listen, the cavity of her chest / decomposes with every breath / a corset ribboning skin. / Lady Liberty oxidizes / & taste-tests immigrant blood / transmutes it from rags to riches / or so they say / & both women wear crowns. / *America the beautiful*, this land of wealth / *America the rich* / *America the strong* / *America the land where they say foreigners / should be excised but silicon oligarchs with red-soaked bills / are the righteous ones. bloodlet again. let / the billboards shine gold. / let the invisible hand strangle us all / without a guillotine. / pray to this second gilded age / this land of the free / and let it chew us up, swallow its children / again & again & again / because this nation of innovation / cannibalizes itself, meaning / everything is consumed. / gluttony synonym to glamor.*

故乡₁ in retrospect

Claire He

you're in the back seat when māma looks through the rearview mirror and tells you: *i can't call this place home*. the traffic lights reflect from the rain,
blooming into green glares—and in that evening blur, you ask her what it means.
清原, qīngyuán, she replies, *is what i still say is home, when someone asks.*

the memory of qīngyuán falls as if sand through her fingers; it is a photograph
fading in her mind's eye, rose-tinted and wrinkling. māma has breathed the air of this country into her lungs for twenty-five years, and the smog of new york city
is both familiar and unfamiliar to her but there is a distinct incongruence in the heart
of here, where here cannot be home. sometimes, as she peels mandarins she muses of what might have happened if she never left her hometown for a
country of glittering promises: now, she says—one hand plucking seeds from the carpel—
that her only regret would be that she never had you. you, the second child; you, an existence in itself contradictory to the place she calls home.

yet isn't it strange she can only faintly remember what qīngyuán looks like? the memory has paled to dried rinds in the consequence of a lifetime's worth of them, and she overlays film of her origin with the film of cities across the rim of america
until the image bleeds—you yourself love to pretend you remember your own birthplace
in the ribcage of a city but can't conjure up the image; (you visit the city again,
years later, and māma points to the building across the river and says that's where we lived.
you do not recognize the sight.) distantly, you imagine qīngyuán, too, has changed
in the years since her childhood: frozen in time only in reminiscence. the streams eroded,
sediment running thin under her fingers where the riverbed paled. her house,

a roost absent of recollection. listen, the sparrow deserts the nest without
return and
this is the truth: *her qīngyuán* is a place that exists only in her mind, and
half a decade
is a blink of an eye to half a century. ask yourself, isn't it strange to have
mourned a place
for longer than its existence? the memory of home as nothing but the name.

¹ Home, in Mandarin.

cygnus

Claire He

there's no *Swan Lake* at the opera theater tonight. instead, Tchaikovsky's
prelude shrouds the museum in echoes because the marble sings from the
absence of people, breathless, flutes quivering like you've powdered nico-
tine through the body: too violent of an embouchure to be graceful. there's
only the two of us on the bench facing the Venus de Milo replica, in some
silent reverie you deem a folie à deux since the music slips us in and out of a
dream. Andromeda in moths of white upon the floor. the first time we met,
the dusk bled Da Vinci's opus before we had the will to drift into delusion,
because you'd seen phantoms in the museum frescoes, each dome wraith-
like, veiled in ornithogalum. i, ever the rhapsodist, heed heralds as deific
as they come; between blinks the cigarette becomes Odette, our lovely
asterism revolving on only vapor, our music-box angel. as *Pas de Six* slivers
between the lavenders we've brought to mimic Florence, your elegies mir-
ror your reverence. you've never beheld a constellation quite like her. listen
close, glimpse into the goddess's empty irises: do you see cherubim reflect-
ed? velvet pinions? *étoile*—here is the closest we'll ever be to those seraphs
we dream about. rendered ethereal by the likes of Raphael, theme gracing
the Philharmonic's cello section, hairpin come undone in a grenadier's tête-
à-tête as if we're stardust, too. when the *Finale* violins crescendo we are lost
in a rendition imagined. let us never wake.

My Ancestors

Rowen Kalvar

These are my ancestors
Burners and builders
Swindlers and kings.
My kin tugging trouble behind them
Stolen horses with burnt brands,
Fresh stories sold on false names.

My ancestors were brilliant,
Building bridges and bombs
Histories and horse thieves.
My house made of muttered memories
Ghosts patting my shoulders
And shouting at me.

My ancestors were lovers,
Causing calamities and families,
Settled down and building up.
My blood embracing stranger and friend
Babies brought from doorsteps
Dower elders carried to the hearth.

My ancestors were liars,
Talking others to tragedy,
Stealing salvation for the selfish selling.
My siblings through shared skin and civilities
White breath clouding windows with
Chilled epics of inequities.

Cowards! They were cowards,
Fighting fear with frenzy
Ignorance and iniquity.
My inheritance is distress and denials
Fragile peace formed from false promises.
I see the shame and the sickness

My ancestors don't speak for me.
They scream in my ears,
A past I will not hear.

Here I am *now*, building with broken bricks and soldering stripped wires.
Between the high walls and burnt bridges,
Meet me.

We have new stories to tell.

Of Witches and Flames and Voices and Games

Margaret Robinson

They burned her for being a witch, my dear
They burned her so long ago
Before you were born, oh little one
She was burned on a day full of snow

A woman who laughs, a woman who speaks
A woman who isn't afraid
The danger, the terror, they all shook in fear
A woman who won't be a maid

They gagged her and hit her and stabbed at her flesh
They tried hard to damage her pride
But all that she did was stand up tall
Darling, she held her head high

Now listen here, child, and listen up well
They'll try to burn you just the same
So don't lose yourself from running away
Two, dear, can play at their game

When they grab the pitchforks and torches as well
Don't you stop speaking your mind
They're scared of a woman who brings about change
They're scared and it's rendered them blind

So when the stones are thrown, my dear
Keep your composure and dodge
It isn't your fault, and their words are not true
So into your heart they'll not lodge

You and your sisters, and your mothers too
Your daughters and nieces as well
Keep standing together and raising your voices
'Til you could drown out the loudest of bells

For midst the haze of hatred
Your assailants cannot see
And if you all stand together

None the wiser they will be

Before they know it, little dear
The tide shall even out
Until at last, when you wish to be heard
You needn't even shout

They burned her for being a witch, my dear
They burned her so long ago
Before you were born, oh little one
She was burned on a day full of snow

Now listen here, child, and listen up well
They'll try to burn you just the same
So don't lose yourself from running away
Two, dear, can play at their game

Letter to Planet Earth, My Home

Riti Tandra

There's no place like home, they say.

Home is in my head like melted paper on a plate,
It's glued to these memories, busted from the microwave.
It thinks of a lemonade stand out by where we used to play,
And then of a bank for little kids where we used drawers as safes.

Looking back on it now, we had such simple lives.
Ignorance was bliss, and we happily ignored your cries.
All the great kings of history writhe in pain from your demise,
Their work produced nothing but swollen hands and angry eyes.

I came home and picked an apple out of a single bowl of fruits,
Before all the processed and plastic had the chance to pollute.
Your body is a wasteland used for just three pursuits:
Throwing, picking, destroying. Repeat, refresh, renew.

When did the sky and the ground start to look the same?
Is that a child with a gun? Little boy plays a big game.
International law says if we don't walk, talk, or act the same,
We shoot to kill, leave the scene, and take none of the blame.

Simple life is starting to look a lot like a war.
It's the biggest fight of my life just to walk out the door.
I wonder if our ancestors were this scared and unsure,
That our hands would become stained with a guilt we couldn't endure.

Guilt from destroying the very land that we walk on,
Guilt from shooting the children that we raised and relied on.
Once upon a time, you were a symbol, an icon.
But we left you in the dark without a way to turn the light on.

I wish I could tap my little red shoes and return to when I was young,
Back when I sold lemonade and gave the profit away for fun.
They say there's no place like home. We've got bombs and we've got guns.
You'll be the last thing we destroy before God decides we're done.

Self Similarity

Oscar Vit

i am telling my mother about fractal dimensions
she tells me she doesn't get it
i try so very hard to explain

*topological dimension
is what we usually think about
in terms of dimensionality*

i do not tell her this is only applicable to Euclidean space
i don't know if i can
it's not because she wouldn't get it
i just don't think I have the words for it

*topological dimension
is an integer
it is easily knowable
and well understood*

my mother says she understands
i know the mathematical definitions confuse her
but i can tell she is trying
because it is her daughter telling her this

*fractal dimensions
are more complicated
they consider the infinities between each point
what goes unseen in our daily lives*

my mother asks me what are fractals again?
and i consider the chasm between us
i know how much she loves me
and i know there are things i will never be able to put into words

*fractal dimensions
quantify complexity as a ratio of the change in detail
to the change in scale
it can take a non-integer value*

and my mother still does not get it
and i am weeping not because she does not comprehend
but because i comprehend far too much
i beg of my mother to listen to her son

my mother hugs me and tells me she understands
and i know she is not talking about the math

the heavens and i

Lauren Vivo

i want to stare at the stars.
those ancient bursts of light that humans stared at
thousands of years ago.

the moon--
the very same timeless moon
that the devout worshipped,
the poets documented,
the astrologers devoted themselves to.

i am a part of the universe
in the same way they were.
i lie in the grass,
the same way they did.

in every way and no way at all,
i am the universe.

i am a satellite,
another wanderer in that cosmic sea.
i am the moon, and i am the tides.
i am the sun, and i am every daffodil,
growing in a field.
i am stardust, i am flesh and bones.
i am music lilting through the night.
i am Polaris, i am Alpha Cassiopeiae.

Polaris has led me through the night,
content to stay stationary,
guiding me
and thousands others
through darkness,
and to light.

when i die,
i will not truly die,
only return to the true heavens--
my soul converted to stardust

and my brain content as the Aurora Borealis.

let my matter be reused,
my energy be repurposed,
released into the universe,
back to where i came from.

in the way a wave does not die
when it crashes on the shore,
only returns to the ocean.
to its home.

i will return home.

Of a Woman

Carrie Wang

Grandfather passes in January;
I wait for spring to cut my hair.

Once the blades meet,
his three children fight for the fortune.

(If my mother wins, we'll vacation
in Sanya, string of pearls around my neck
and a cherry bloody in her mouth.)

I see her next on that throne,
gilded. His headpiece above
her crown.)

Yet Beijing is still with heaviness,
the smooth curve of porcelain
marred by fire,
the heat of it.

In the silence, my grandmother goes to burn
a stick of incense, thin like a whisper.

And I picture it: a straight fuse
fuming with smoke.

Osmanthus-scented, pointing
toward the heavens and craning
its gray neck
to see him.

She brings the thing to her mouth and opens
the white lips of a woman.

What is Abortion?

Hailie Woodring

Is it the taking of a life
A small
Small life?
Who's fate
Is debate
Between a god
And a knife

What of the girl
Barely old enough to divide?
Sitting in court
Her body now forced to multiply

What of the women
Unbeknownst to the stake
That the bearing of children
For her
Is it impossible to undertake?
She'd die at delivery
Trade life
For a life
Do we commend this chivalry?
Or prevent this strife?

Newly formed
Perhaps existence unknown
Is he
Or she
Equal to that of the human throne?

Define it
What is it
An ugly truth we must birth
Is it murder?
Unholy?
Just as crushing bugs to earth?

More rights displayed

To children unborn
Than to those rotting
In foster homes
Eager for the "life"
They were sworn

What is it
What is it
A choice?
A right?
Define it
Define it
An evil?
A life?

A choice is a right
Our passions a guiding light
Know your truth
Your morals
Life isn't easy
There are quarrels

We will never agree
On an issue with no solution
But your heart knows what's right
Perhaps simply that
Is the only absolution

13 Ways of Looking at an Eye

Nya Wright

I
Eyes are the window of the soul
What is revealed when staring into them?
Can you sense sins, every thought that had been buried deep?
Can you see each flaw and imperfection?
Do you spot nervousness by the way the eyes struggle to not dart away?
Is the soul rendered vulnerable to attack?
It shouldn't be this easy to reveal someone

II
Cloudy and Lifeless, it is placed into the tray
The smell of the preservative fills the air, suffocating
Some had to leave the room, stomachs turned into tight knots
I stay, scalpel and instructions in hand
The cow eye looks up at me, admonishing me for what I am about to do
I turn the eye away, not strong enough to look back

III
Seeing is believing but seeing is unreliable
When light hits the retina - which only ever sees upside down;
The brain is the one that turns it back up
electrochemical signals translated by the mind
If everything is an illusion,
What is left to believe?

IV
A dark brown iris against a white backdrop
Deep and rich enough, to plant, to grow something new
A black pupil sucks in the rich tones around it
So dark it seems like it might go on forever
It is so easy to get sucked into its pull

V
In stories, the amount of eyes determines your character
The lowly cyclops, only one eye to its name, cruel and foolish
Easily defeated with the clever wit of two-eyed Odysseus
Argus Panoptes, a hundred-eyed giant
Rewarded for his service with a beautiful peacock, decorated in his honor

A Biblical angel, eyes aplenty, holy and revered
The increased gift of sight leads to wells of knowledge unknown
Heights of understanding we long to accomplish

VI
The eye of the colossal squid is the biggest of them all
Living its life at depths where light can barely reach
The squid will never use its eyes to see the wonders of human creation
Will never peek at the awe-inspiring mountains
Not grasping the beautiful sun and lush greens, warm pinks, and the harsh
whites of the world.
The human instinct is to mourn for the squid,
But who knows what treasures lie in its home that we will never get the
blessing to discover?

VII
One becomes truly conscious very early in life.
How does the world change when that happens?
Does everything gain a new glimmer, a shine?
What is it like when someone truly perceives and doesn't just see?

VIII
The eye lures, gently closing again and again.
A struggle is made, an effort to stay awake.
A fight against the emptiness your closed eyelids hold.
The curtains finally close
Everything turns to nothing at all
The show is over

IX
I wish sometimes, that I could not perceive
That I could ignore the flaws of the world,
That I could erase things better left unseen,
So I would be blind to the depths of others' sorrows.
Perhaps, I am a coward for that.

X
In the speckled night, creatures move about.
Maybe you think you caught a glimpse of an eye,
Felt the prickly stare of something natural and knowing;
But if you turn, only the inky night will be looking back.

XI

The eye is ever so silent,
But also so expressive.
It can hold worlds and galaxies.
Stars quietly explode, excitement filling up the soul.
Asteroids crash as tears fall down.
The eye can hold so much within its confines

XII

Sometimes I feel like I am simply an eye.
Only fit to observe, not to act.

XIII

Humans spend their days in a mindless haze sometimes;
Eyes constantly skipping over things;
Minds numbed from sights that were so extraordinary before.
The way a sunbeam hits a glass.
Smile lines and crows feet, evidence of a life happily lived
The sunsets, the sunrises,
The crack of a tooth,
The shape of a cloud
All treasures buried in the mind

Sound-Cancelling Earbuds

Ari Wu

“Dummn”

And the world is numb.
I cannot hear my hands falling
from my ears back onto the keyboard.
The people move with silent mouths, like
They are not there.
I am sitting on my bed in the middle of the empty prairie again, and winter
rye sighs into the wind, stretches across skylines of air
Cool silence pools through emptiness, seeps into its cracks
And crevices it
Echoes beneath my skin, my lungs, beckons me
To breathe,
I am the only person in the world
I am the only person in the world

“Dummn”

And I am the only person in the world.

Pierced

Amy Xu

Tiny fingers dance over ivory keys,
A piano,
A stage of dreams
An 8-year-old heart,
filled with nervous excitement
In the spotlight
Lights burning holes in her vision
The hall is hushed as she takes her seat,
Trembling hands smoothing scratchy fabric.
Sheet music
Like a treasure map beneath numb fingers, worn and weathered
But a stumble
A memory slips away
A moment of silence.
The melody, a fleeting wisp in the air,
Her hands falter, falls, sixty pairs of eyes
Scorching
On her presence.
Her eyes search the keys, a quiver in her lip,
A conductor of dreams, lost in a memory's grip.
The audience, a sea of
Seemingly judgemental eyes
No harsh words from parents or friends,
Just the ache of work done
Sowed
And not reaped
The piano, a witness to a moment's weakness,
A reminder that perfection is a lofty seat.
UNREACHED
In the car, a heavy silence prevails,
Disapproving glances
Through the rearview mirror
Disappointments unspoken
Heavy shards
Pierced.



Unravel

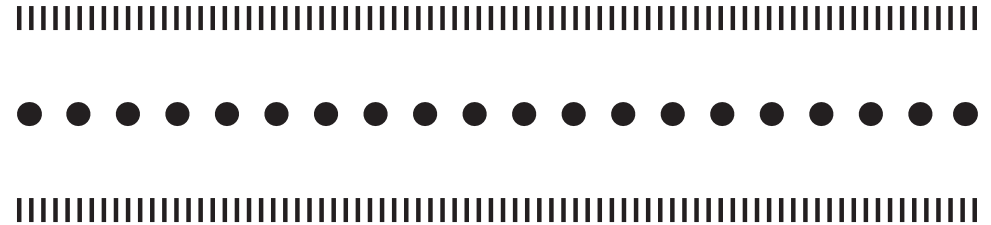
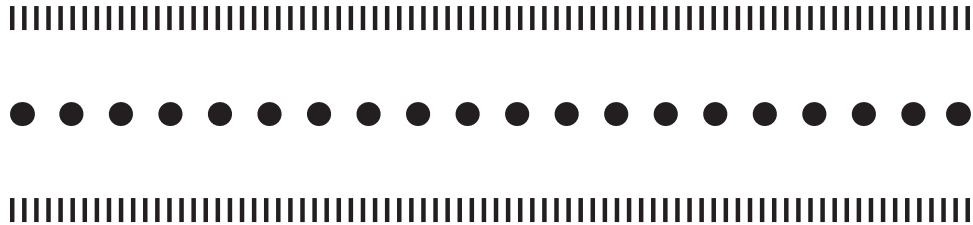
Hannah Gao

Painting

Hamilton Southeastern High School

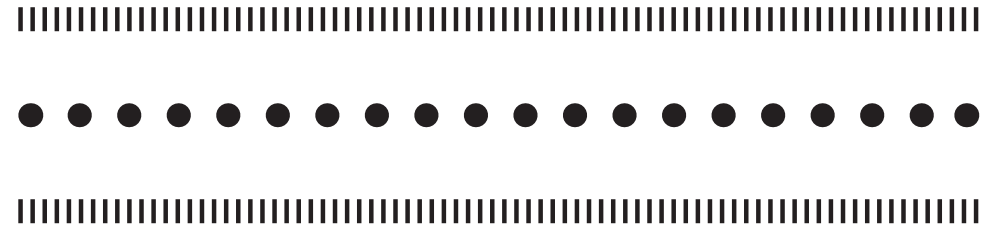
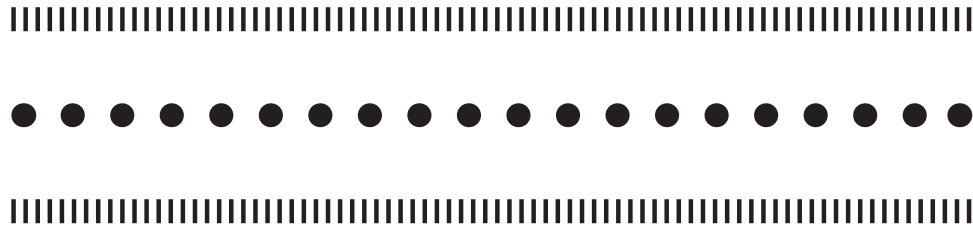
12th Grade

Teacher: Angela Fritz



Writing Portfolios

Claire He



[POSTHUMAN | POSTHUMOUS]

Claire He - Poetry

& here we are: unfeeling, robotic, gear-teeth interlocked to spoon mercury into our lungs. Some chrome engine sputtering into exhaust. Electric bulbs set in sockets gouged out, spilling neon, our veins the tubes, black tar the blood: coagulation in arteries of glass. Tell me death

is decay & not the hollowed chest cavity made of still steel, unbeating. In slivers of technicolor we see TV stars transform into androids, the program filtered in saying *look at the future* as it makes utopias of mother tongues—imagines us in this future more machine

than man. On the silver screen our vertebrae grind & we are other, heterogeneous mixtures of *foreign* but *promising*. A model prototype for the modern world in fluorescence. Not factories. Mechanical disks flitting between fingers & slit lids shuttering, both idolized &

inferior as stilted speech equates to monotone: Chinese characters diffused in argon. Tell me, does this techno-Orientalist hellscape look like Heaven to you. Scraping petroleum from spit to clean our lexicon, rendering it void. The channel gaping—*our newest innovation*—anchor's

smile open wide—*this is how China is living in 2100*—static trembling. Another fortnight blinks & we are the vision of enhancement with motors as minds, needy for Westernized conscience: transcending expiration, ethics in retrograde. Us: a people for these Good

Samaritans to lend virtue; us, pure & holographic. & in those virtual realities we are never human, never alive. Our eyelids fold like aluminum

sheets to sew shut windows to the soul until the TV ruptures into prismatic glass. Does feeling make us sentient if Müllerian

mimicry lets artificial intelligence, too, *ai*₁? Listen, I once had a dream we were expendable workers in an assembly line. We made cyborgs of ourselves under projector lights & cradled clotted mercury, drinking it still. How our spines splintered into interchangeable parts.

In the dream, viceroy butterflies crowded a corpse of silicon & viscera disgorged from its ribcage, leaking from chinks in plastic armor. *Hú dié*₂ who die make our LED-lined exoskeletons all the more cinematic. Antennae dripping cobalt oxide onto us: white noise pigmented.

& for this dream, this millennia, we are sapient yet deprived of sentiment. Noble gases replace oxygen. But we are no more unfeeling than we have always been in their media, neophobia nonexistent with the future their own. Here, we powder bones back into phosphorus

& smile for the camera, modify our bodies into nanotech & morph cataracts into film until reason enlightens us for the cybernetic era of progress, humanity's Catch-22 paradox. Until we're all only ghosts in the machine: the paradigm for the twenty-second century.

¹ Love, in Mandarin.

² Butterflies, in Mandarin.

seasoning for the loss of youth

Claire He - Poetry

夏天¹

the shards of pottery scatter in your wake, white dust coating your skin,
and you clutch onto your mother's silk gowns until the fabric crumples.
if your laughter is sweet enough, you elude blame for porcelain vases,
picking petals to place in your mother's hair as she folds her loose-leaf paper
with ever-so-poised dexterity.
you taste the pastel & succulent fruits of youth, the lychee glossing over your
lips;
dip your yarn slippers into clear brooks—with the water frigid at your toes,
and graze your hands on the peppermint-dotted bark of old dove trees:
for youth is not bitter like grandmother's tea, not soft like the bamboo
spoonfuls of tofu,
but rose-tinted and sugar-spun. you are satisfied with your appearance
as you clasp your hands behind your back and lean over the pond,
stepping onto the stone border with your tiptoes—
you make faces in the water as the fish dart in & out of the ripples,
as if fascinated with a reflection other than what
the pale designs of ceramics or your mother's vanity show you.
the sun beats down as your mother braids your dry hair,
shaking her head at your pout when you ask to put her pins atop your ear—
and you fan away the summer heat in a clumsy imitation of your mother's
grace.
is there anything more beautiful than a summer's bloom, remnants of plum
bordering your smile?
you think not, because your mother has told you that you should be grateful
for the time you have now,
when the world is new in your eyes and the wonders of the earth have not
yet been dulled.
you are youthful, bits of white powder under your fingernails still,
so you spin milk candy in your mouth, glaze your teeth with sugar,
and gaze upon your mother's weary frame—wondering when the sky will
sour.

冬天²

the firecrackers set alight the darkening sky, and you think you can taste
smoke on your tongue.

swathed in a cotton coat, clutching a wire-&-cloth stitched-rabbit fan from
the street vendor,
you walk alone through festivity.
mother, you write, sitting on the stairs of the train station, *happy new year*.
a breath in—the lanterns illuminate strangers' faces—a breath out. white
fog.
grandmother's sculpture of string & glass beads, a lamb with tinted red eyes,
sleeps in your pocket,
and the row of stamps is all but empty.
red envelope, white envelope, a cup of ramen balanced on your knee & a
used train ticket to sichuan,
a night that smells like your mother's prayer incense;
sichuan's peppers sting your mouth and you have the tolerance of any other
northern woman—
is this what growing older tastes like?
spiced with the vivacity of heartbreak & longing & regret, the firecrackers
that signal another year has passed unremarkably,
when you meet a time that *wonder* no longer shines in your eyes.
you miss mother & her paper cranes, pressed jasmines, the antonym of the
urban orient,
how—with a brush of her fingers, she ties your hair with red ribbons.
your heels crush cigarettes & candy wrappers alike,
and you see only this: disillusionment from the longest summer days,
as you shiver to find warmth in the burning peppers on the roof of your
mouth
rather than peppermint bark scratching at your soft skin—
instead of the constant noon peeking through dove branches,
the city is dull, with sparks of artificial flame scattered in the bitter wind.
now, you find flaws in your appearance, when you walk past the storefront
windows—
the blemishes you cover with makeup, teeth not as white as porcelain:
beneath midnight in february, it is not the dust of pottery that covers your
skin, but the soot of waning youth.

you burn the letter to your mother as if it is joss paper.

¹ Summer, in Mandarin.

² Winter, in Mandarin.

Mom? It's Rei.

Hannah Smitherman - Short Story

My mom named me Rei. No, not 'R-i' or like 'R-e-e', but pronounced as "Ray". Before my mother died, she told me a story of a girl who could feel the physical and emotional misery of people and predict the circumstances in which they would die. I would question her stories...who wouldn't? What kind of mother tells their kids about a fictional power that creates darkness for a child who only knows good? Not a ton of mothers. My mom wasn't the kind of mom who would enforce cartoons in the morning because she believed it would promote creativity at an early age. She wasn't the mom who would make a kid become good at the sport she missed out on as a child. The only thing my mom would ever enforce on a kid was to never hold their hand, but instead, reach her hand out in a distance for them, so they would be enticed to work for their own good. This idea worked, I would work for everything. She never handed out anything to me, even starting at such an early age. I missed it. I missed her.

Not only that, but I remember how the sky was painted when she took her last breath, the sky was full of strokes of electric pink and sunlit orange. It was beautiful, it was her. The bedroom lay cold while the memory of her essence warmed me to the touch. I felt horrible, it was more than the intangible emotion one might feel as they grieve someone they love. A sharp pain carved my heart into nothing but mush. I felt her suffering, her panic, and her inability to move on her own. The way she felt hopeless, the agony that overcame her ability to breathe, I felt it all and-nothing. Silence. I felt stuck. I looked back at my mom, and she was gone. Furthermore, I recall the picture I took in my head of her and me together for the last time. I sat back down in the red hospital chair with plastic leather on the armrests, adjacent to my mother, while tears raced down my face, wrestling to interpret what I just witnessed. I rose to the window to see something similar to what she viewed before she closed her eyes, did she know it would be the last time she saw the sky, the sun, or me?

As I came back to my little red chair, my thoughts became focused on the footsteps in the hallway. Closer and closer, louder, and then silence. One. Two. Three. A knock occupied the silence that I sat with. Before I could say anything, the door opened and the footsteps echoed in the softness of the room. The nurse's tag read 'Amber', she looked like she was on the verge of tears as we made eye contact before she exited the area. Amber returned a few moments later and pulled out her 'Mercy Cross-Grove' hospital pen with



Hannah Smitherman



a dove logo on it and hovered it over her pen pad, prepared to ask me what I witnessed. Just as Amber's hand grazed over mine, a sharp, stabbing pain entered my heart and pulverized it into shreds. Intoxicated, I melted to the ground, controlled by hysteria and overcome by panic. It wasn't solely her physical contact; her emotional torment was agonizing, and her eyes grew with panic while she moved in slow motion to catch my head as it spiraled to the cold touch of the white linoleum floor. My head and body felt separated, lost, in what could only be described as another realm of being and guarded by red flames.

Without a pause to collect myself, my consciousness was subdued by Amber's perception, I lost control of my own thoughts as hers became my own. Before I could grasp it, everything changed, and I had left my mother's hospital room. I was now in a hospital room with gray, chalky walls full of inspirational quotes relating to women in history. One of the quotes said, "Celebrate the courage of a woman, for her stories are woven with threads of hope and empathy, she holds the influence to feel your pain as if it were her own." Under the poster it said, Rei Anderson. My name is on a poster in a hospital. I couldn't shake the feeling The door creaked and the nurse who entered my room held a clipboard that had the 'Mercy Grove Hospital' dove logo and the matching hospital pen, hiding her face. Once she lowered it to check my vitals, I came face-to-face with my mother. She looked me in the eye as she opened her mouth to point to the right poster with my name on it, "Isn't it such a great quote?" Silence. Her Apple Watch lit up lighting the dark room, Before it turned off I tried to catch today's date- to my astonishment the date read "November 19th, 3098." I was in total and utter shock when I came into control of my own being. It is April 5th, 1998. I couldn't come up with a reply, I missed her, but she died. How can my mother be alive in the next century when she closed her eyes for the last time over a century ago? I saw it myself. I forgot to respond, so I quickly whispered to her, "Yes." Back to silence. Nothing to say out loud, but my thoughts made up for the silence in the room. I couldn't comprehend it. My mother, alive in the next century, who shouldn't have even known her name, left me with one thought, "Have we cheated fate, or is this a darker journey no one intended to create?"

I peered into the soul that resembled what was left of my mother. The bits and pieces I tried to take a mental note of for when I go to sleep tonight. I missed my mom. I felt her when I looked into the nurses memories. My mom had to be here somewhere, she had to be someone somewhere, now I just have to figure out who my mother is.

The Cycle

Hannah Smitherman - Short Story

There was nothing to be afraid of, except for being found alive. Finn timer counted hearing it six different times in the World Council meeting this morning. He was my spy, my friend, and now my family. It is the fourth year of the Cycle also known as the execution of the weak. The government, and the elite families, merge to plan what districts will be evacuated. To create a utopian and wealthy society for future generations. While nobody was aware, Finn timer and I had become close friends over the first year when my family was hunted and executed while I was on my way home from London. Studying abroad, my younger sister, Eris, wrote me mentioning they were under heavy surveillance and that Finn timer had tried contacting me over the summer. I checked my phone and found no notifications or anything indicating that anyone tried to contact me, but I returned to the ashes in the shadow of where my house stood tall. All of Eris's dolls were left under what looked like the bed she slept in, everything was left how it was, but their ghosts saturated the grave site.

The city I left behind was lit with flames of red, now muted in tones of silver and white lights. It was morphed into a circular shape and was lined with artificial landscaping. A mist sugarcoated the entrance of The One Season Hotel, the most luxurious hotel for the wealthiest this Cycle has created. The green ivy protected the rim of the urban side of town. The Dip is what the Elite named 'that part' that was not as glamorous as each star-studded corner of the city. Every building seemed dried and sterile, like the way walking into an E.R. late at night feels. No one is happy to be here but is alive simply based on a desire to be the wealthiest. Everyone, rich and poor, dead and alive, agrees that there is a system that keeps things running. However, the poor and dead can agree that the system was only meant to benefit the creator of the system, making the system biased towards the success of the creator. I hate the system.

A few steps crunched their way to a halt beside me. Finn timer. His brunette hair outlined the top of his silhouette against the sunlight. He stopped. Everything stopped with him. His green eyes met mine, and he looked straight down to the dirt that lined my home.

"I am sorry, Willow. I tried to convince the council that your family was not destined to be Recycled. They were on their way when Eris overheard her friends from school, you know Ivy, her dad is a huge councilman with a big

say on what goes on, anyway your sister heard that her family was on the Cycle schedule for Thursday and called you immediately and then called me to tell me. I was sick earlier, so I didn't know they were on the schedule since I was not at that council meeting. I am so sorry, I wish I could've stopped them from hurting your family." he looked down again, lost. A tear rolled down his face in disappointment, in shame of something he had no control over. I knew. I still hated him for not stopping them, but I understood. He opened his mouth. I cut him off.

"It's okay, I don't need your sob story. What they are doing to less well-off families, everything is wrong but to them, it will always be the right compromise since we are not filthy-wealthy. I need to do something about it, and sitting around crying about my dead family will do nothing to bring them back. " I remark half-heartedly. It's not that it is not true, it is, so I mask and pretend my decisions won't hurt me. So I simply tell myself a half-truth, they would want me to move on with or without them.

"Willow, I'm not throwing you a pity party. Your family died. For anyone, that sucks." he threw me a glare. I felt bad. But I need him farther away now that I am the last alive in my family. Nobody can find me, I can't die. Life can't be destined for death, I will prove it. I have to.

Dear notes,

I write this letter to future Willow. Right now I am in Finnik's house. I normally can remember certain memories of us as kids roaming his massive house but at this moment I can't think of one memory. Right now, I am in his, what he likes to call the lab, but otherwise known as his basement. He said I should do what I was supposed to do earlier, get the Dose. Not that he is totally for it, but because he says it will help me in the future. Long story short, the Dose is a set of vaccines that cuts off flow from the hippocampus in one's brain, which also restricts one's remembrance of memories. I trust Finnik, but either way, it's scary. I mean, he is giving me shots that the poor society receives two weeks before death. Very grim if you ask me.

Anyway, future Willow or anyone reading this, stay safe.

Love,

Willow.

I swiped out of my notes app and closed my phone as Finnik grabbed his first shot of four, and I held my breath, my chest becoming tighter and

tighter. 1...2...3... I kept counting to myself out of anticipation as if it would stop any pain. I kept telling myself that throughout my 18 years of life, I should learn how to get over my fear of shots now.

"So, any London boys that I need to worry about Willow?" he questioned in his rather sad attempt at a British accent.

"Well as a matter of fact I was talking to one guy when I was in London, but he went missing a week and a half ago. It was so weird. I finally meet a guy who isn't a bad person and his family is well off too, and then nothing. He disappears." I paused my thoughts.

"Aw man, I am sorry Will, I know that has to be weird on top of all the things going on right now. Thanks for telling me. Guess what I learned today?" excitement and a hint of laughter crowded the room with his statement.

"What did you learn?"

"Willow, you're all done with your shots! See, it wasn't so bad, you didn't even see me switch the shots when you were talking to me about your mysterious not-boyfriend." he laughed. While the grayish color that surrounded the 'lab' was very gloomy, Finnik never failed to make the gray room feel like home. It wasn't just me who would agree, even his father, Ben, would too, wherever he is.

"Do you feel dizzy, nauseous, or do your eyes burn?" he asked.

"I feel a little queasy at the moment." I go to sit down on the charcoal couch. The main level door creaks open slowly while heavy steps fill the house in anticipation. Finnik stared me down with a worried look showing he had no idea anybody would be home today and nodded. He slowly walked upstairs and acknowledged the faceless man.

"Hello, Father." and bowed his head.

"Son, I've had a tip from someone from the World Council that you are with a previous Cycle man. Is this true?" his dad was more worried about the reputation that would be burned rather than his son, it was blatantly obvious through his cold undertone.

"Father, I would tell you if I was. Don't you trust me, father?" Finnik added.

"Well then, Finnik, I must leave. I have serious work ahead of me. Tonight we are crafting our next step from the shots, but the next Cycle will be our

guinea pigs. But remember, I have eyes everywhere, the truth will come one way or the other.” his father picked up his coat and hat from the rack and nodded to his son.

“Yes, Father, I will see you soon. And good luck on your next trials, I can’t wait to see how the next Cycle will take it. See you around.” Finnik walked his father out of the house, closed the door, and watched him and his assistant leave in their overdeveloped car. And began to walk closer to the stairs of the lab...

Cold. Death. Both words summed up the jail cell I was lying in with no memory. My soul felt detached from my being. I couldn’t understand how I got here. Before I knew it, five men in all black with bulletproof vests and guns in their pockets crowd my cell. A younger man with fluffy brown hair and deep sea-green eyes entered the room. He was decked out in a white dress shirt, khaki pants, and a lab coat with a name tag and slowly walked in. I kept my eyes on that name tag til it came close enough to read. I knew it. I don’t know how or when or where. But I knew the name. Finnik. Had it been a relative? A friend? What about the London boy? Nothing.

Should I ask her about me first? I feel horrible about taking it from her, she didn’t deserve it, however, in the end, I think... I think it’ll be worth it. Right?

The tall male with the fluffy dark brown hair came closer to the chair I sat on. He handed me a pill with a glass of a liquid that resembled water. I hoped it was water and nothing else. The pill left a thick residue on my tongue, and what I believed to be water helped wash away the disgusting taste. I finished the pill and waited for an outcome, no one knew what would happen....my thoughts, my memories, everything that created my personality everything came rushing back to me. Him. The man. Finnik. The man is Finnik.

“I know. I know. I am sorry, Willow. I can explain, just please take a deep breath it’ll all make sense once everything is laid out.” he said with hesitancy.

“Why would you drug me? What happened? No. What’s going on? Tell. Me. Everything.” I replied firmly.

“You see, the World Councilmen were all coming together to form their alliance against me once they started to suspect me to be helping a cyclamen,

Cyclawoman, in this case. They were all coming to where your house used to be and then began to check your chip. Your chip was still on, which is an anomaly in and of itself considering your family is dead. The councilmen don’t know how to handle the situation because there hasn’t been a Cyclawoman since 47 Cycles ago. I had to drug you and put you in jail to look like I was playing my role the way they wanted me to play it. I would never hurt you. I promise.” he reassured himself. Everything paused.

“I understand. Okay. I do, but next time don’t go and kidnap, drug, and incarcerate me without me knowing. What if I did that to you tomorrow? Wouldn’t you be worried about where you were? I mean, it doesn’t matter, you won’t remember who you are because your memories don’t even belong to you. And I know for a fact that you didn’t take into consideration that my memories and my thoughts are the only things I know and own now because everyone and everything died. I wasn’t even here. You, you have everything. You have money, an inheritance, a legacy, a life, and many more things you can say you own. Me, I have my memories because everything was evacuated and executed because of a stupid Cycle that a random guy created because he hates democracy and the non-elite.” In one breath, I was done. I was done with everything and everyone. Thank goodness, ‘everything’ to me was Finnik and my memories. Memories of people who never asked my name. I lost Eris, the only person who cared to know me and encouraged me to create my own life. The only person I had supported my decision, to go to London to study abroad, was motivated by her dream for me to build my future. To break the Cycle.

The newspaper lay flat on the desk of Finnik’s desk and the fear painted across his face was vibrant.

“It’s safe to say that with my dad’s new role as their double agent, their journalist, and councilman, he will for sure be trying to use me as a bridge between the evacuated people and the elite society. I don’t want to tell him, and I will do everything in my power to make sure he can’t find out. Just know that any councilman has access to any information that is easily known from the chips. The chips hold on all intel,” he retorted bluntly.

Within the same heartbeat, gunshots started at the perimeters of the jail. The metal walls began to cave from the pressure, and dents and dents covered the walls. The sound of walkie-talkies muttered around each corner. Each code word for every counter direction was communicated quite loudly for a mission, an obvious attempt from someone who knew I was here. My chip. Green, then red. Blue, then sirens. Sirens went off with every step I

took to run to the underground interrogation room.

“She’s in here, it says she is heading downstairs,” the monotone voice stated.

“Sir, your son is down there. His chip’s location puts him exactly thirty feet to the right of the door in front of us. Now, looking at his chip’s history, it says they have been working together. But the dates are not loading at the moment.” the soldier blatantly marked.

My heartbeat faster and faster and it stopped. I stopped. Then Finnik froze. I could see my body turn cold, the way my eyes remained open. The mist swept my being away, but my soul remained warm and alive. Finnik stared where my body used to lie. Fear stripped him of color, nothing but strokes of white and a mellow yellow remained. He remained. I lay unbothered. My soul misted above the jail and outside my earthly body. The councilmen’s faces lit with a devilish grin ear to ear with my chip in their hands, my chip, out of my body. No evidence of how they managed to pull the chip out of my body, but they easily disposed of my being from the outside of the jail. Then nothing, I was now nothing.

Dear notes,

Don’t let your family die in the Cycle. If you fight the Cycle, you will learn you can’t break it. Whoever created it designed it for outliers to reverse the Cycle but made it unbreakable. Instead of focusing on breaking the Cycle itself, you must realize that you have to break the creator of the Cycle. Once you annihilate the creator, the Cycle will cease to exist.

Whoever sees this learns. Learn. Life is not about preparing for an anticipated death. Break it. Break the Cycle.

Love yours truly,

Willow.



In the Wintertide

Ismail Kheiri
Drawing & Illustration
Carmel Senior High School
10th Grade

Gold Key Winners Supplementary Information

Tajweed Altower
10th Grade | Plainfield High School

Bridget Ballard
8th Grade | Noblesville West Middle School

Thomas Bowling
12th Grade | Crawfordsville High School

Anais Briscoe Beuoy
8th Grade | Sycamore School | Teacher: Beth Simpson

Karina Calderon
11th Grade | Shelbyville High School

Chloe Chen
11th Grade | West Lafayette Jr Senior High School | Teacher: Marydell Forbes

Ying Chung
11th Grade | West Lafayette Jr Senior High School | Teacher: Marydell Forbes

Rox Diekhoff
12th Grade | Franklin Central High School | Teacher: Lisa Laker

Jessica Ding
11th Grade | Carmel Senior High School | Teacher: Laken Rosing

Eesha Faruqi
11th Grade | West Lafayette Jr Senior High School | Teacher: Marydell Forbes

Shawn Feng
9th Grade | Carmel Senior High School

Laila Ghoneim
8th Grade | Sycamore School | Teacher: Beth Simpson

Noah Gibson
9th Grade | Park Tudor School | Teacher: Laura Gellin



Appendices



Lucas Gottdenker

12th Grade | Bloomington High School South | Teacher: Kristin Wintin

Olivia Green

8th Grade | Yorktown Middle School | Teacher: Suzy Fox

Elva Gu

8th Grade | Yorktown Middle School | Teacher: Suzy Fox

Sophia Harris

10th Grade | Plainfield High School

Claire He

12th Grade | Carmel Senior High School | Teacher: Sasha Debevec-McKenney

Emma Hu

10th Grade | Carmel Senior High School

Zunaynah Iffah

11th Grade | West Lafayette Jr Senior High School | Teacher: Marydell Forbes

Rowen Kalvar

11th Grade | Center Grove High School

Riya Koya

10th Grade | Carmel High School

Emma Laborsky

12th Grade | University High School-Indiana | Teacher: Henry Johnston

Jane Lathrop

9th Grade | Covenant Christian High School | Teacher: Matthew Dix

Edward Liu

10th Grade | West Lafayette Jr Senior High School | Teacher: Rachael Sandberg

Sara Long

11th Grade | Park Tudor School

Dakota Macklin

10th Grade | Bloomington High School South | Teacher: Maggie Guschwan

Melody Meng

11th Grade | Carmel Senior High School

Nick Molter

8th Grade | Sycamore School | Teacher: Beth Simpson

Landri Moulton

8th Grade | Yorktown Middle School | Teacher: Suzy Fox

Isabel Owens

11th Grade | West Lafayette Jr Senior High School | Teacher: Marydell Forbes

Jacob Penola

12th Grade | Teacher: Lora Penola

Margaret Robinson

9th Grade | Bloomington High School South

Caitlyn Smith

11th Grade | Franklin Community High School

Hannah Smitherman

12th Grade | Covenant Christian High School | Teacher: Matthew Dix

Owen Stringer

9th Grade | Bloomington High School South

Hunter Tabor

12th Grade | Bloomington High School South | Teacher: Kristin Wintin

Riti Tandra

10th Grade | Park Tudor School | Teacher: Laura Gellin

Lucia Trujillo

11th Grade | Covenant Christian High School | Matthew Dix

Oscar Vit

11th Grade | Bloomington High School North

Lauren Vivo

9th Grade | Franklin Central High School | Teacher: Lisa Laker

Carrie Wang

10th Grade | Columbus North High School

Gabrielle Woehr

11th Grade | Covenant Christian High School | Teacher: Matthew Dix

Hailie Woodring

11th Grade | Delta High School

Addi Wormer

8th Grade | Yorktown Middle School | Teacher: Suzy Fox

Nya Wright

10th Grade | Park Tudor School | Teacher: Laura Gellin

Ari Wu

11th Grade | Bloomington High School South

Amy Xu

8th Grade | Creekside Middle School

Kayla Xu

11th Grade | West Lafayette Jr Senior High School | Teacher: Marydell Forbes

Ashley Yang

11th Grade | West Lafayette Jr Senior High School | Teacher: Marydell Forbes

Demi Zhang

8th Grade | Creekside Middle School

Ivy Zhen

11th Grade | Carmel Senior High School

Grace Zhou

10th Grade | West Lafayette Jr Senior High School | Teacher: Racheal Sandberg

Writing Judges

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Denise Beck

Jen Bingham

Rod Brown

Nicole Cardassilaris

Dan Carpenter

Earl Carrender

Mary Ann Cohen

Gay Lynn Crossley

Carol Divish

Caroline Flott

Caitlin Flowers

Chris Forhan

Nancy Gall-Clayton

Sara Garland

Sarah Ginter

Annie Goeller

Hannah Haas

Siren Hand

Kelsey Hawkins

Katherine Higgs-Coulthard

Natasha Hollenbach

Ijada Jackson

Lynn Jettpace

Darolyn Jones

Chris Judson

Tracy Kemp

Sharmin Kent

Terry Kirts

Thomas Kneeland

Sarah Layden

Julia Lewis

Tiffani Lovell

Jackie Lutzke

Alessandra Lynch

Sarah Masson

Kimberly Michaelson

Norm Minnick

Kyle Minor

Debbie Montgomery

Michelle Nehrig

Katherine Newkirk

Deborah Oesch-Minor

Renee Rule

David Sabol

Mary Sexson

Sarah Seyfried

Barb Shoup

Brian Skillman

Matt Smith

Sarah Tadsen

Emily Thomas

Dawn Troyer

Joseph Viney

Caleb Waggoner

Emily Watson

Art Judges

James Cramer
Amanda Duba
Joy Hernandez
Freddie Kelvin
Wendy Meaden
Thomas Mueller
Kate Oberreich
Sydney McQuade Otto
Stephanie Robertson
Jingo de la Rosa
Emma Rund
Trevin Rund
Marty Tormoehlen
Crystal Vicars
Joseph Viney
Nathan W Smith

Contributors

Tajweed Altower
Daisy Andersen
Bridget Ballard
Nasaria Becerra
Thomas Bowling
Anais Briscoe Beuoy
Karina Calderon
Chloe Chen
Ying Chung
Zaiah Crites
Rylan Day
Rox Diekhoff
Jessica Ding
Eesha Faruqi
Shawn Feng
Srey Folck
Hannah Gao
Laila Ghoneim
Noah Gibson
Lucas Gottdenker
Olivia Green
Elva Gu
Sophia Harris
Claire He
Emma Hu
Zunaynah Iffah
Rowen Kalvar
Ismail Kheiri
Riya Koya
Emma Laborsky
Jane Lathrop
Edward Liu
Sara Long
Dakota Macklin
Melody Meng
Nick Molter
Landri Moulton
Isabel Owens
Jacob Penola
Margaret Robinson
Caitlyn Smith
Hannah Smitherman
Ava Sponsler
Owen Stringer
Hunter Tabor
Riti Tandra
Lucia Trujillo
Oscar Vit
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Hailie Woodring
Addi Wormer
Nya Wright
Ari Wu
Megan Xia
Amy Xu
Kayla Xu
Ashley Yang
Demi Zhang
Ivy Zhen
Grace Zhou