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The Lantern, 2015-2016

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Last summer, during Fourth of July celebrations, I took a liking to this balcony, which overlooks the river with a landscape of Penn’s Landing and the Benjamin Franklin Bridge. By night, the river was dark, except where it reflected the bridge, lit up in red, white, and blue, or where there were ducks gently bobbing in the waves. The city, starving for attention, still shone brightly into the night. For most of the night I stared at the riverfront and the city’s skyline. I tried to see if I could meet the sunrise, but I ended up falling asleep around 4 AM. In the morning, I woke up, and looked down into the river, and took this picture.

Editor’s Note
I’d like to thank the section editors and teams for their dedication to finding great work; the copy editors and bio editors who made sure that everyone’s pieces got the credit and presentation they deserved; and the production staff, for answering the difficult questions all the way through. I’d also like to thank Dr. Volkmer for guiding us through the process. Most of all, I’d like to thank the contributors who gave us their marvelous writing and art. When the process of putting the magazine together got difficult, even skimming through the contents was enough to remind me what an honor it is to present such great work to the campus. Ursinus is deeply fortunate to have such a dynamic, varied, and generous creative community on campus. I hope readers enjoy and are inspired by this year’s edition of The Lantern.

Nora Sternlof, Editor 2016
POETRY PRIZE WINNER

“Ghosts” by Blaise Laramee

Poetry can spark “lit cannon[s]” of thought, of creativity, of memory. Its timeless questions can leave us “thin and lean,” extinguished like dud shells. “Ghosts” masterfully contrasts the restlessness of the search for ourselves with the peace of “rolling over in sleep” like Bashō.

RUNNER UP

“Mama’s Stance on Sugar” by Jada Grice

The metaphor in “Mama’s Stance on Sugar,” a simple ingredient, sweetens the recipe. The poem mixes slow-simmered anger with a heap of aged wisdom to create a dish with spice and robustness.

Christopher Tereshko ’03

Christopher Thereskho is the former editor of The Lantern. He won Ursinus’s Geoffrey Dolman Prize in Creative Writing in 2003. He teaches English, AP Lit, and Creative Writing at The Academy for Urban Leadership Charter School in Perth Amboy, NJ. He lives in Edison, NJ.
Ghosts

And yet we all live, do we not,
in a phantom dwelling?
-Bashō

So the old Japanese poet says
before putting down the pen,
closing the book, and rolling over in sleep
in a hut by Mount Iwama.

He is content to drop
this thought, a lit cannon with
the fuse crackling sparks,
on to the page
then abandon it completely.

But here I am, three hundred
and twenty-six years later,
awake, thinking about Bashō
and the transience of this bed, that lamp,
my own two hands
gripping the sheets.

It is poetry, Bashō says, that caused Po-Chüi
to ruin his five vital organs,
poetry that starved Tu Fu
thin and lean as a bean pole;

and it is the daily living of poetry
I realize, standing at the bathroom sink,
one hand holding a glass of water,
the other clutching the towel rack
as it dissolves between my fingers,

that has made spirits of us all,
ghosts in our own bodies,
souls in borrowed clothes
we will one day have to return,
the tag worn off, the receipt illegible, 
the chance for a refund 
long past.
PROSE PRIZE WINNER

“Going to China” by Sarah Gow

I selected “Going to China” because as I read I was transported to the world of the narrator. I was moved by the imagery and the intergenerational relationships depicted.

Keir Lewis ’91

After serving as The Lantern’s editor, Keir Lewis returned to the DC area, where she earned her Masters in Education from George Washington University. She has a certification in Administration and currently works as an Assistant Principal at John F. Kennedy High School in Silver Spring, Maryland.
SARAH GOW

Going to China

When my family still lived on Franklin Street and when my brother was still the size of a large potato in a basket my great-aunts used to babysit us. They loved parading Billy around in the stroller. They took turns—my Aunt Flo and my Aunt Mary did. There were three aunts back then. Mary and Flo had traditional white cotton-candy hair and white-beaded necklaces. Their outfits had colors that matched in a funny way and I remember thinking to myself that there must be a sort of ‘grandparent’ uniform that they had to follow. My other aunt was Aunt Joan and her hair was just as puffy but it was a reddish brown and she wore a fish necklace. Later, when I was in elementary school, I would ask why her hair didn’t turn white like Aunt Mary and Aunt Flo’s hair and my father would laugh and say, “Of course it’s white—you think that’s natural? She has it done.” At the time I couldn’t imagine what “done” meant so I got funny images in my head of people coloring in each thin strand of her curls.

Her fish necklace was segmented so that as she walked the tiny body wriggled on its silver line around her droopy neck. Each of its scales was a slightly different shade of emerald or muted ruby framed by a gold border. The tail was gold too. The fish’s eyes were a foamy green haze and they blinked as the light reflected off of them.

As a four-year-old girl I had many stories to explain the origins of this fish depending on the day. Most of them involved dragons of some sort. I was a girl of dinosaurs, dragons, and antique hats. I was certain it had to be a talisman of some sort. I wanted to wear it myself. I was trying to devise a way to get my Aunt Joan to give it to me as a present. I kept wondering what would happen if I put it on—I was fairly certain that it would transport me to some mystical location.

A more haunting idea entered my head. It was quite possible that the necklace held some significance to my Aunt Joan because she wore it nearly every time I saw her. I imagined her as a witch encrusting the surface of the necklace in varying colors of glitter.

“Aunt Flo, can I go outside? I’m bored,” I said. Mary and Flo’s necks were craned, looking in on the baby Billy in the swing.
He was asleep but they still kept staring at him. He made me very angry—I couldn’t understand why they looked at him when he never did anything.

“It’ll be dark soon and it’s got a chill out there,” Aunt Flo said, waving her hand to illustrate her disapproval of the venture. Mary nodded and offered some saltwater taffy to me. They were always bringing saltwater taffy around like it was some sort of delicacy. I only liked the really colorful pieces—not because they tasted any different but because of how you could twist them and make them look like dizzy spirals.

“I’ll go outside with her,” Aunt Joan said, putting down her Women’s World magazine on the end table. The cover featured a middle-aged woman with brilliant white teeth holding a pie like it was a Renoir. “Must you?” Flo asked, looking up from the crib where Billy was gumming the edge of his blanket.

Outside my Aunt Joan sat on the porch. We were alone. This was my chance. I honed in on the fish necklace. I stared hard—hoping she would mention it first. She munch on a few pretzel sticks from a bowl she had taken with her from the kitchen.

“Can I see your necklace?” I asked, reaching out for it as she lowered herself slowly into the lawn chair on the porch.

“You see with your hands?”

Puzzled, I drew back. She chuckled and bent down her neck and instructed me to touch the scales and how they had different layers. “Where is it from?” I asked.

She hesitated and crunched on more pretzels, looking up at something in the distance. Finally, she looked back and me with a new glint in her irises and said, “It’s from China!”

My mind went instantly to kimonos and all the interesting emblems that embellish the walls of Chinese take-out joints. I loved anything that felt different or exotic even if it was only an approximation of another culture at best. I thought of the meandering bodies of oriental dragons clutching sapphire orbs. Holding the fish tail, I went there.

“That’s it!” I exclaimed.

“What?”

“That’s it! That’s what the necklace does.”

“Oh! Yes, of course!” she said, smiling and nodding at my enthusiasm. “What does it do again?”

“It takes you to China!”

“To China? Isn’t that a long way away?”
Frantically I looked around. Something. Anything. Anything different. I looked at my bare feet and thought about how China must be directly beneath me, only a lot of digging away. I thought about maybe trying to dig and how it wasn’t that late and there were a few hours of sunlight left and how possibly, maybe if I tried hard enough, I might be able to dig to China before Mom and Dad got home. I thought about bringing Dad General Tso’s chicken from General Tso himself instead of from the place up the street. They would be so excited by my discovery. But I had the fish! I remembered that I wouldn’t need to dig—the fish would get me there.

“Can I wear it?” I asked.
Aunt Joan hesitated again and handed me a pretzel stick as I sat on her knee to continue to hold the fish. “You don’t need to,” she said finally.

Disappointed, I asked, “Why not? I need it to get to China.”
“Hold the fish’s little tail. Hold it really tight,” she said.
I grasped it and it was cold and I could have sworn it was slick with water. I imagined that maybe each night she let it swim off while she slept. Maybe it went to China to shine its scales.

“Now I want you to go to China and bring me back something.”

“Go to China?” I asked. I had been expecting something tangible to happen. I did in fact feel different but nothing had actually physically changed and I twirled around to see if there was something visual I was missing. “How do I get there?”

“Well, you go around the house,” my aunt said quietly and quickly as if trying to get it out of the way.

“Around the house?”

“Go around to the back yard where China is and bring me something to show me you’ve been there. I’ll be here waiting at the house while you go to China. It’s lovely. Say hi to a panda for me.”

“Pandas are in China?”
“Of course! They do all sorts of things there.”
“I went to the zoo once and I didn’t even get to see one panda.”

“They’re rare you know. Endangered.”
“Endangered?”
“It means that...It means...” She chewed another pretzel for a second. “You know I’m not sure what it means. It just means
there’s not a lot of them and that they’re special.”

“Oh.”

I put the hood of my sweatshirt up, pretending it was a sort of construction helmet. I hopped down from the porch onto the stone path that led to the backyard. The stone was cold on my small bare toes but I liked the way it felt. I remember my dad telling me that toads and frogs were cold-blooded and the coldness of my feet made me imagine that I might be cold-blooded, too, just like them. I held one out in the sun to sun myself like a snake.

Once in the backyard I noted that nothing had changed. I hadn’t really expected a drastic change but I had hoped something would appear just different enough to fuel my game. In the center of the stone path sat my tiny green tricycle. I pounced on it and scooped it up—running to greet my aunt who was surprised to see me back so soon.

“Is that from China? My goodness, what is it?”

This was the first time I recall pretending something. I knew full well what I was holding but the possibility was in the question. It ignited something. It invited me to change what I was holding. “A dragon statue! It’s made of emerald!” I said.

“Can I put it on my mantel next to the Santa Claus figures?”

“Of course! I brought it back for you, didn’t I?”

This system continued until I had moved all of my toys from the backyard to the porch and had begun to run around to the back just to bring my aunt one spearmint leaf at a time from the bush behind our house. I plucked them and held them above my head as if they were gems from the Shang Dynasty. She collected them in the empty pretzel bowl. We were saving them to make tea.

The sun set and I caught bugs that were banging their heads against the lights in the backyard, bringing them to the porch to set them free to bang their heads against the porch light. “Ew, oh my goodness,” my aunt said each time I would let one go. She would draw back as if it were a giant beast. I had told her they were “Dragon Larva,” so that we could grow a bunch of babies.

Eventually, Mary and Flo came peering out the window to see the mess I had made of toys and of spearmint leaves in the bowl and spread all over the porch. They instructed us to come inside because it was dark. Joan didn’t protest and simply took my hand and led me in.

“Aren’t you going to make her clean that up?” they asked.
“It was my idea,” she said. “It’s late anyway.”

“They had a long day of work though,” Mary said, referring to my parents who would be back any minute.

“I’m sure they’ll understand,” Joan said.

I don’t remember my mom or dad mentioning anything to me about the mess but they did ask about China frequently. It became a practice. I would lead Aunt Joan outside the moment that she came to watch us and instruct her to wait for me to bring her things from China to decorate her house. The tricycle became a tiger and a crane. It was an ox cart and a vase in the same day sometimes.

Mary and Flo thought it was funny how we would go to China. They talked about it in a different way than Joan did. Joan was always very serious about my question. Mary and Flo would laugh and say, “What are you doing going to China and moving all your toys? Your poor mother and father.” They didn’t like to pretend about it—I think it made them uncomfortable how insistent Joan was about really going to China. They didn’t know about the talisman part either—the fish necklace.

One day I whispered to Joan, “Will you not tell Aunt Mary and Aunt Flo how I get to China?”

“Never! I’d never tell them,” she said, and so I stopped worrying about it and continued my game.

Eventually we moved from Franklin Street to Kutztown where there was a different China—but I didn’t go there because the aunts didn’t babysit anymore. Aunt Joan must have grown less fond of the fish necklace because I only saw it on rare occasions. She had all sorts of jewelry, though.

She only started to wear it frequently again soon after she was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s, at least when she still dressed herself. Something about it must have always caught her eye in the morning. She didn’t talk much anymore and she mostly just caressed my cheek and told me how beautiful a woman I was at fourteen, sitting in her living room where the dragon should have been sitting next to the ornamental vase on her mantel. She didn’t know my name anymore—but she was the kind of person who wouldn’t ask. She knew she was supposed to know so she just kept saying, “You know you’re so beautiful.”

I touched the tail of the fish around her neck and said, “You know you are too?”
She laughed because she didn’t know what I meant and she patted my leg and repeated, “Just so beautiful.”

I lived in her room last summer so I could work a job at a daycare in the area. Everything was preserved as it had been in her life. It was like a museum. Her business cards from when she worked for Century 21 were still in her drawer. That was how I learned she used to sell real estate. It became clear to me how little I knew about her. Mary and Flo would describe her as “The one who did everything. She played golf. She was a secretary. Oh! She traveled too—everywhere. Wherever a plane ticket would take her. She loved you. She thought you were a thrill.”

She died two years ago and now her necklace is in her jewelry box next to all sorts of talismans. They were all shiny and glorious but only the fish led to China. I touched the scales. I considered putting it on but I decided against it after lifting it from the box and seeing it wriggle the way it used to around her neck. I didn’t put it on—it felt wrong. It felt like it was something to be touched and not worn.

So I closed the box and walked downstairs where Mary and Flo were sitting in the living room where the mantel was still only covered with Santa Claus statues and framed school photos of all the cousins.
CREAGER PRIZE WINNER

“98% Guaranteed” by Mara Koren

“98% Guaranteed” was a fun ride that kept getting faster. It started out grounded in 70s classroom architecture, and the next thing we knew fire truck sirens were mythological sirens and a death jazz band had teeth falling out on stage. The story was exuberant and quirky, but used restraint when necessary. The perfect story to read out loud.

RUNNER UP

“The Mariana Trench” by Sophia Gamber

“The Mariana Trench” has a mature, honest voice. The unexpected structure and reflective new voice in the second half shows the evolution of the narrator.

Maura and Maeve Sutherland are the first mother-daughter alumni team to serve as judges. Maura Sutherland, class of 1986, was a Lantern staffer, a dramatist and a cheerleader. Maeve, ’12, was the winner of the Creative Writing Scholarship, and a regular contributor and staffer for The Lantern. Maeve won the Watson Scholarship, and travelled around the world living and researching intentional peace-based communities.
The reason I cut all my hair off is because of a green piece of paper someone shoved under the wall during math class. The paper was picked up by Bert, who sits right next to the faux wall. These walls make up our school. Long ago, when people still had hope, teachers thought it would be beneficial to have retractable walls so all corners of academia could coexist. No one thinks that’s a good idea anymore, but the walls are still there, with about an inch of space between them and the floor. Which is how Bert got the paper. _BATTLE OF THE BANDZ_ it said, and below that: _Please, no actual weapons. We’ve had issues in the past._

Bert showed the paper to me at lunch. “If we win we get an all-expenses-paid tour of Cornish church basements,” he said.

“Cornish church basements?” I asked.

“Yeah. Basement shows in Corn…Land.”

“You mean Cornwall?”

Bert laughed. “Right, _Corneiling_. No, Cornfloor!”

“It really is Cornwall.”

“So are you in?”

“I don’t know… You know my father will freak if he finds out.”

“So?” Bert asked. “Just don’t tell him. It’s not like we’re _guaranteed_ to win or anything.”

We were very far from guaranteed. Our band is Absentee Philanthropist, electro punk. We’ve done a few local gigs, and we have a lot of lights. I mean _a lot_. Most of them I’ve had to secure through back channels, but I’m good at that. The most wattage per bulb for a string of fairy lights I’ve ever seen is 200, but I can’t tell you where I saw that or I might be killed. We use a combined 600W, which is still illegal in most every territory—luckily most people aren’t up to date on codes for that sort of thing. 200W per bulb can cause buildings to implode—so I’ve heard—and probably the only way I could get my hands on that would be to trade in my 1964 John Lennon hologram, anyway, which isn’t going to happen. I may not have the rights to any sound, but John still does a loop of dance moves and even takes a bow. For all that, though, we’re just a high school band. We’ll be facing stiff competition.

Bert had already convinced our drummer, Chelsea.
is the type of person who never says anything but is loved by all, and is always down to do anything. Break into an abandoned building? Sure. Steal your dad’s car at six in the morning because you just can’t live without mac and cheese for another second? She’s there. I was the one Bert had to convince, and I said yes for three stupid reasons. 1) is that I think it is slightly possible that we might maybe have a shot at winning. We aren’t the best band, but we do have a lot of lights. People like lights. 2) is that Felix Tiger was across the table from me at the time, and I may or may not have wanted to impress him. And 3) is that Randy Sneeper came by just then and “accidentally” knocked his mashed potatoes onto my head.

Randy and I hate each other; we hate each other just like our fathers hated each other. It all started when my father accidentally burnt Randy’s father’s house to the ground. It really wasn’t my father’s fault—just a freak accident with lighting and a badly placed whisk—but Randy’s father never forgave my father for it. Randy honestly has no reason to hate me, though. I’ve never done anything to him. I mean, it’s true that I did fill the gas tank of his father’s car with super-slowing slime that I had to trade in my 98%-guaranteed-to-have-once-been-touched-by-Michael-Jackson Mickey Mouse Pez Dispenser for. Randy shouldn’t have even been mad about that, though. We were both just kids at the time. I guess in seventh grade I may have spray-painted “RANDY SUCKZ” on the side of the old factory, but making me scrub it off was totally unnecessary. I used a soluble base, and it would have been gone within a few months anyway. I can see why he might have been somewhat upset when his back sprouted purple warts last spring, but to be honest, I wasn’t fully aware of the effect of that salve I traded my 56%-guaranteed-authentic pocket-size Ouija Board for. All of Randy’s life he’s looked down on me, because his dad’s a hotshot cop, and my dad is an electrician. I need to win the competition to prove Randy wrong.

So that’s why I cut all my hair off. It was two nights before the competition, and Bert and Chelsea and I were working on our “image” for the band. We were in the attic of my house with the door closed so my father, below, asleep, wouldn’t overhear. My father is against everything to do with the band. He believes being an electrician is the only thing that counts as a “real job.”

“No, I’m not wearing that,” I said, pointing the dresses Bert had sewn. They were black with glowing purple seams.
"I worked a long time on these! And look!" He held up a matching jumpsuit sort of thing for himself.

I cringed. "We don’t need you prancing around in that thing."

"I don’t prance."

"Well I thought we were just going to wear jeans and t-shirts."

"You think that’s how the Beatles made it? Wearing jeans and t-shirts?"

"That’s how the Stones made it," I grumbled.

Bert is all about the image of the band. That’s why I have the 1964 John Lennon hologram, really. Don’t get me wrong, I traded in my 63%-guaranteed-to-have-been-looked-at-by-Jimi-Hendrix guitar picks for him, and I don’t regret it at all. But Bert felt having just the three of us up on stage wasn’t enough. He insisted we needed a fourth member, but we couldn’t find anyone who played rhythm guitar and was willing to put up with Bert. That’s when I got the idea for the hologram.

“What do you think, Chels?” Bert asked, proffering the glowing dresses.

Chelsea shrugged. “Sure.”

Bert winked at her, then turned to me and said I needed a haircut.

“No, I am not wearing that dress and cutting my hair off!”

Bert deliberated for a while. Ten minutes later, clumps of my once long brown hair littered the attic floor.

When he was done, I looked at my new, strange self in the mirror, and wondered if I should just back out. Maybe my father was right about the band being pointless. We probably wouldn’t win. Or maybe I should give up on Bert and his hair-brained schemes and ask Felix Tiger if he would do a duet of “I Got You Babe” with me instead. Or maybe I should run off into the night and never return. Bert brought me back to earth. “If we win this competition,” he said, “we could really make it.”

I nodded, tilting my head and feeling the air around my newly exposed ears.

“I think we should ensure our chances,” Bert said.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

It’s two days before the competition now, and Bert and I are skipping school. My backpack is loaded with all the necessary
bottles and objects. We go to the bar where the competition is being held, me riding on the back of Bert’s bicycle. The bar is at the center of town: old, brick, and falling apart. Inside is a sea of orange shag carpet, sour smoke drifting in front of the lights. There’s a low stage up front, the actual bar off to one side. Bert points to the bar. We sit down and Bert orders two Aqua Russians in his most confident voice. The drink burns down my throat and stains my lips blue. Bert asks the bartender for a list of the bands competing in the Battle of the Bandz, and after some hemming and hawing, he comes back with a scribbled list. Bert slides the bartender a five-dollar bill and says, “We appreciate it.” And he winks.

I’m kind of drunk at this point. “Oh my god, Bert, stop winking at people!”
“’I never wink at people!”
“I SAW YOU!”
“Shhhhhhhhh!!”

We run our fingers down the list of bands.
“How about The Decrepit Fetus Trio?” Bert asks.
“Oh they’re pretty good. Death Jazz.”
Bert circles their name with a red marker, just as the bartender passes by, giving us a strange look. Bert makes a shushing motion again. “The walls have ears,” he says, giggling. We weave our way to the bathroom and hold the list between us.
Bert squints at the paper. “The Ramblin’ Giuseppes?”
“They’re Opera Bluegrass,” I say. “I wouldn’t worry about them.”

“Simone and Barnacle?”
“Scream folk. Definitely competition.” Another red circle.
“David Bowie Our Lord and Savior?”
“Ooh they’re good. Glam gospel. They’ve opened for Salacious Encephalopathy before.”

“Who?” Bert asks.
“You’ve never heard of them?”
“No?”
“Well never mind.”
Satisfied, Bert folds up the list and asks, “Do you have enough stuff for all of them?”
I root through my backpack and nod. “Yeah. We should be good.”

We go back to the bar and order two Shirley Dimples,
laughing the whole time. I ask, “Do you think Felix Tiger will like my hair?”

“Do you like him?”

“Sometimes in Spanish last year he’d put his head on my shoulder.”

Bert lets out an explosive laugh. “It’s love in its purest form!”

I almost tell him about the love potion I traded my 100%-guaranteed-realistic Fox Mulder action figure for—and how I’d been seconds away from pouring the potion into Felix Tiger’s water bottle when I accidentally dropped my vial of hair-lengthener, and my leg hair grew eight times its normal length. I had to leave school early that day, and never did get to use the love potion. Which is for the best, really. It was a stupid idea, and I’ve heard it can have terrible side effects. Although it is possible that a little of the potion may have gotten in his water bottle, I can’t be certain. A few drops might be enough to, say, give someone the urge to put their head on someone else’s shoulder. The effects of it would have long worn off by now, but I have no idea if it was legitimate head-resting or not.

The next day I tell my father that I’m going to Bert’s house, and then Bert and Chelsea and I drive to the bar in Bert’s huge van. Bert wears his ridiculous jumpsuit anyway. We linger inside, waiting for our turn. For some reason, the other bands don’t seem to be on their A-game today.

Each band gets to play one song. The Decrepit Fetus Trio is currently playing. They’re a great band, except today their lead singer seems to be having trouble. Every few seconds he stops and cups a hand to his mouth. By the end of the performance, all but two of his teeth are gone, and he can’t really pronounce Ls or Ss. They take a bow and something small and white falls to the stage. The singer runs off, clutching his mouth.

Next up is Simone and Barnacle, scream folk. They shake the entire bar with their song: If I had a hammer I’d CRACK OPEN YOUR MOTHERFUCKING SKULL! Barnacle’s hair keeps growing longer and longer throughout their performance. By the time they make it to the “If I had a bell” verse, Barnacle can’t see well enough to get even the simple chords right. They have to forfeit halfway through. The crowd is supportive and gives them a round of applause.
Right before us is David Bowie Our Lord and Savior. They all seem to have strange rashes or something, though, because they’re all hunching their shoulders and trying to rub up against things. They make it through like pros nevertheless.

DBOLaS take their bow and it’s time for us to set up. I unwind our spool of lights and we wrap them around everything—the instruments, things on the walls (moose antlers, sprinklers), ourselves—from necks to feet. Along with that we have glow-in-the-dark guitar strings, frets made from glow sticks, and Chelsea’s bass drum turns chloride hexahydrate red every time she hits it. Of course, 1964 John Lennon is set up stage right, ready to twist if not shout. This is electro punk at its finest. I look out over the crowd, but don’t see Felix Tiger. I do see Randy, lurking near the back.

We turn on our amps, crackling with static electricity so potent sparks snap and die around us. Bert barely touches the microphone stand and it knocks him backwards. He laughs and grabs for it again. “Hey, we’re Absentee Philanthropist. Here’s a song.”

I get the first few chord thrashes right, and we’re off, the whole bar positively shaking. GOD SAVE THE QUEEN! A STATIC REGIME! THEY MADE YOU DIALECTRIC! POTENTIALLY GALVANIC!

In a sort of dream I look out over the bar. People are getting wilder, starting to dance. Our song gains in speed. Randy’s standing resolute in the back, arms folded flat over his chest. I kick a switch on 1964 John Lennon and he shifts into hyper speed, dancing so fast he looks like he’s about to implode. My hands fly over the neck of the guitar, striking chords faster than my brain can process them. At this point it doesn’t even matter if I get them right. We are cacophonous: light and sound, nothing else.

Before the show I’d coated my guitar with the combustible powder that I had to trade six of my I-Can’t-Believe-it’s-Not-a-Hotdog hotdogs for. Now, at the height of the song, Bert gives me a nod. I throw my guitar to the stage and it bursts into psychedelic flames. The fire is supposed to be immediate but ephemeral. Instead it lasts just a second too long, then starts to spread over spilled beer on the stage. At first I don’t know what’s going on, but then everything is hot, and people are screaming, and big clouds of smoke are wafting from somewhere. That’s when I notice the shag carpet has started to go up. “Oh, shit.”

Bert is untangling fairly lights so fast all I see is a blur. I
start untangling too, as the fire spreads to some rags on the bar, then feeds on spilled drinks all along the bar's surface. I look back and Chelsea's got the lights stuck around her head. I yank them free, breaking wires. Sparks rain on us, harmlessly. "Go! Go!" I push Chelsea to the side of the stage. In a minute the fire's going to catch onto the roof. "Shit shit shit!" I get all my lights off, but I can't see anything. It's hard to breathe. All I can think is Stop Look and Listen. No. Stop Drop and Roll? The heat is so intense it's a physical force pushing me down. I stagger forward.

There's a cough from below me and someone grabs my ankle. I jerk away, then realize it's Bert, tangled in the fairy lights, which are bubbling from the heat. Bert's skin is polka dotted with burns, angry red stripes running down his arms. My whole world is orange and black. I can hardly see what I'm doing as I pry the melting lights off of him, searing my hands. Something smells like burning hair, also like a campfire, also like when tires skid on pavement. I grab Bert's shoulders and yank, somehow getting him up.

Down from the stage, the bar is a graveyard of toppled chairs and spilled drinks. The fire hasn't made it to the center of the room yet. I drag Bert along, coughing, tears streaming from my eyes.

We break into sunlight and clear air, and I collapse with Bert on the pavement. Everyone is there, watching as the bar burns down. Sirens echo down the street: the beautiful women in long flowing gowns who put out fires, trailing hoses behind them. While half of them battle the fire, the other half don heavy yet still glamorous jackets and batter down the door to make sure no one is trapped inside. Everyone cheers loudly when the fire is put out, and the sirens report no casualties. They wrap Bert and me in lavish pink blankets. Before I can fully catch my breath, though, someone says, "Emeline Stein?"

I look up and Randy's dad, Office Sneeper, is there, in uniform. When I'd asked what was going on, Sneeper said Randy had seen it was my guitar that started the whole fire, and that I was being taken in for questioning. Before I could do anything else, Sneeper was "escorting" me into the back of the cruiser.

At the station they hook me up to a lithograph machine and ask me a bunch of questions.

"Is your full name Emeline H. Stein?"
"Yes."
"Were you at the Battle of the Bandz contest?" The Lithograph machine clicks and whirrs.

"Yes."

"Is it true you’ve been charged with vandalism in the past?"

"Well yes, but—"

"Did you burn down the bar on 9th Avenue?"

"The whole thing was an accident!"

"Answer the question, miss."

I make two fists under the table. "I guess. Yes."

The lithograph produces a lovely picture of a mountain at sunrise, and after holding it up to the light, the officer deduces I’m telling the truth. They don’t listen when I tell them it was all a mistake, that the fire was supposed to be harmless.

"You admitted to the crime, miss."

"Yeah, but—"

They send me to sit on a bench while they make a few calls. I wish I had some of the invisibility solution that I traded in my 87%-guaranteed-authentic-penguin-skin penguin in for, but I used it up last year: my algebra teacher could never seem to find me when it was time for a quiz.

Before I can ask to see a lawyer—or to use the bathroom, because I might still have those tooth-loosening crystals on me somewhere—my father comes into the station. This is the last thing I need. Officer Sneeper pulls him aside to explain the details, which I’m sure he’s more than overjoyed to do. My father stands with his jaw clenched and hands fisted. He doesn’t blink during the entire conversation.

When Sneeper’s done my father comes over to me. I’m sitting on the bench, and I try to look pitiful so he doesn’t get too mad. He sits next to me, frowning, and in a low voice says, "I have thirty-second-incapacitation air spray in my pocket. Do you think you can make a distraction?"

For a moment I just blink at him. "I, um." I feel in my pocket and find two Distraction Beans™ at the very bottom. I traded in my 73%-guaranteed-Real Human Hair American Girl Doll for those, but used most of them last winter whenever I saw my econ teacher coming. I never did the homework for that class. To my father I say, "Yeah, I think so."

"Good," he says. "On one." And he counts down softly.

At "one" I toss the Distraction Beans™. All eyes except mine and my father’s follow them across the room. It’s just enough
time for him to spritz the incapacitation solution in their direction. All the officers and Randy fall to the ground. My father and I leap over them and make our escape.

In the car my father says, "Their memory of the past three hours has been wiped. You should be in the clear." He glances at me and asks, "Did you really do it?"

"What?"
"Burn down the bar?"
I fiddle with my seatbelt a moment. "Yeah."
"I thought so," he says, almost smiling. Not looking at me he adds, "Looked like a damn fine job."
"Oh. Thanks."
"Look," he says. "I don't know anything about those Distraction Beans™, understand?"
"And I don't know anything about any Incapacity Spray."
"Alright then," he says.

The next day at school Randy sneers at me, but he doesn't seem to remember me burning down a building. When I see Bert at lunch he's sad: partially because his hair was mostly singed off yesterday, and partially because of another reason. "We didn't win," he says.

"What?"
"The competition."
"Oh, yeah. I kind of figured that."
"They give it to David Bowie Our Lord and Savior."
"You mean there was still a winner? But they had to stop every five seconds to scratch all those rashes!"
Bert nods. "I know."
"Then again we did burn the bar down."
"Yeah."
We both sigh. Then Bert says, "Oh, Felix Tiger was looking for you."
"Really?" I ask.
"Yeah. He said he likes your hair."
Walking across campus in the summer, I see a thousand squalid ants
Traversing the lip of a tin can like electrons on the sidewalk,
And I think of everyone I carry in my body, all the friends
And voices raspy with experience who’ve spoken to me,
All the people I’ve been pushed up against like two drops of jelly
Under the flat pressure of a breakfast knife. A fox passes by,
A sick one, ragged and alone, sadness underneath wild, cloudy eyes.

My memory is breaking, falling off in vicious chunks like a melting glacier,
Bits of it interjected into my life like grenade flashes /
(I think you’re in the North these days).
/ and with a diamond certainty, a foundation of frozen water and wind, I imagine

All of my friends, a party in the flicker of a candle,
Thanking them over drinks for the fullness of my recognized self,
And I dissolve—a puddle of small debts, one for every fleck of love.
Prayer

It is winter,
and these days, in the afternoon,
the world turns milky and pale
and the sky matches the cold color of the earth.
In the darkness of an evening you and I
crisscross the slick pavement,
holding hands or maybe not,
and give our breath to the angry air
like some kind of tribute or peace offering.
It curls out of me,
crawling out from my esophagus and into the night.

Often in winter I think of the boy,
Michael,
who would have been my uncle,
had he grown up enough to ever meet me.
He was four years old, in Michigan, where God
keeps house holed up in the snow with
the windows shuttered tightly against the wind
and the grass buried and trampled.

His mother wrapped him up in snow boots
and scarves and a hand-me-down coat
from the church collection box
and sang absentmindedly the hymns of her father,
and his father, and his father’s father.
Michael’s father
looked up over his work bench, and thought,
in between mechanical musings on ball bearings and carpentry,
that
that boy had perhaps the most beautiful blue-green eyes.
How proud a Finlander can be
when he sees the old country in the eyes of a child.

And Michael,
four years old,
walked down the porch step and tripped
and fell face first into the snow
and suffocated
and died.

Tonight, in winter,
as we are walking in the dark and you
are talking about some other sadness
and I am not really listening,
I look out over the snow and think
of drowned children
and say a prayer for all those lost at sea.

I breathe out long and low and deep and feel
it pulled away from me: a peace offering,
a tribute, a song of supplication, a winter’s hymn
for my grandparents
and for blue-green Finlander eyes that,
in summer,

sometimes match the sky.
The Little One

When I try to go to bed, I do not sleep. Instead, I wrap myself tight in the blankets and keep my limbs close to my heart, listening. Oh, I hear them in the darkness, their pleas kitten-like, scratching their toothy instrument until my bedchambers rattle with haunting music. Soft *buhh-daah-daas* clink together, sounding sad and lonesome, but still full of pining hope. Echoing across the room, the whispering ballads make my body shiver with what should be fright. My aunt or brother or the other creatures that lurk inside my house would be scared of them. This must be terrifying, how the shadowy limbs dance along my windowsill. When the corners of my bed speak to me in a secret tongue, the darkness consumes my fears until my body reeks of sweat and curiosity.

The darkness, every night, tightly wraps itself around me like an old fleece. “What sort of darkness is a blanket?” I think as I picture nomadic ghosts drifting along the hills outside my window. But I am lost as well, just one nomad in my bed; I walk along my slumber like a wise child, but still I stare at the ceiling with questions. When I try to sleep, I press my hands to my chest to hear the steady cackling of an under-used heart and sometimes, *always*, I hear the imitation of a heart beat with my own. That scares me, not the music of the shadows, but the other heart that says, “Look here child, I am alive too!” The music always seems to grow louder and I whisper to its chime, like wind. I sometimes remember, longingly, that I have never seen this darkness in the day, when the linens billow and my softness can be seen with light. I wonder how soft the monster is.

I see them tonight. They poke out of the bed like from a maiden’s aprons. I see them tonight, their gentle hands, pallid and thin hands like a ballet dancer’s, nails pink like blushing. Like a little rose. Their hands curl and I sometimes have to remind myself that they are as curious as I am. One night, when I am not dreaming, my hands do not hold tight to my chest. I am hot. The air is stifling from the summer and even the open window does not help so I disrobe the blankets and set free my body upon the bed. My limbs spill out, arched feet, knobby knuckles, the quiet reassurance of my breaths. My arm stretches, my muscles ache,
until the tips of my fingers graze the edge of the mattress. Those dancing hands sweep over mine then, a soft caress, quizzical in their movement. I think that perhaps they are studying the texture of my finger pads against their own.

I let my hand still, hanging off of the bed, and will away the anxious beat of my heart as plump, fruit-like fingers wrap themselves around my own. They are holding my hand, I think, and it is pleasant. It is lovely. I am balloon-like, as I feel like floating from my cloud-like embrace and I think I cherish them, maybe. They sing again, and it does not shriek or cry, but hums contently half-hidden underneath my bed. I wish then, to see their face, and thank them for their beautiful song. My hand clasps theirs strongly, my grip rough and secure and safe; I try to show them that they are safe. I yank up, like a rod on string, pulling up my prize.

"Come here. I would like to see you, please," I say kindly as I tug their arm from the bed.

They startle and push away, pulling their fingers from mine until I hear them whimper from the lacey trappings of the bed. They slither across the floor, still whimpering. Perhaps, I think, they are closer to crying, as they sink themselves away into the shadows.

"No need to hide," I reassure them.

I am so very curious so I stir myself upright and stand, barefoot, on the warped floorboards. My nightclothes cling to my skin and my breath hitches as I try to spot the shadows shifting around the room. They stay close to the floor sometimes so I kneel down and reach out my hand, my own fingers not at all that of a dancer's, like a doll's.

"I never knew where you came from when I was little," I say, because I have never thought about that before. "And now I do not know if I am scared of you or not."

I see a body forming from behind me. I turn around and kneel beside my bed, peering underneath as those long white arms reach out like they are playing. They slap their hands on the floor and then retreat, but every time they come back out, they are more curious. They shake their body into the sallow light, the small halo of grey cast by the crying candle. They melt beside my wardrobe. My hands shake too, my heart imploring; I think I am nervous, as if I await them like a shy ghoul. Should I wrap them up from the cold? Should I sing to them and convince myself how wonderful
this is? People would think I am lucky, to have such a little friend.

Still hesitant, they delicately brush their pale skin up against the floorboards. I see half their body, alien and abstract like the beginnings of a masterful painting. Their head—that must be the head—lifts up and trestles of shadowed locks fall into their face. Half of them pure darkness, the other flickers with my human form. It hurts me. Eyes slanted and full of wondrous expression, their head lulls back until they are tilting it endearingly. Now they move their arms to propel themselves closer to me, nudging their fingers at mine as I lift them up.

Oh, this is lovely, I know. I know this is lovely, not frightening at all, but I do not smile. My chest patters and expands with the heart I thought useless now stammering away like the taps from a nail against glass. My hands act like water, but I grasp their fingers regardless and hold them while we sit on the floor together. They whimper still, and I wonder if they know how to cry with tears. They do not make tears, only music. So my arms wrap around their torso and I feel what I think is a heart calling to me. That heartbeat, not my own: it beats against my chest, against my stomach. I would like to cry myself, this is so lovely. This is frightening.

“‘I would like a friend,” I whisper in their ear.

They push their head at me until they are cradled against my skin; their eyes observe the collar of my shirt, the small buttons up the front. They lift their hand and touch it with amazement until they lose interest. They cannot use many of their limbs as they mark rivers along the floor. I think with surprise how warm their skin is even while their steady breaths seem cold.

“But I am still a child. I have other work to do besides hold you,” I say to them lightly, my hands combing through a mess of moving shadows that cling to their moonlike face.

They do not reply and I think that they cannot possibly respond to me, our mouths so different, our songs like that of a howling war-cry and the infant breaths of a faerie. Somehow I know which one is mine now and which is theirs.

I observe as they blink and the moon could eclipse, could blot out. The world could have blinked as well, their eyes the only universes I seem to care about anymore. What sort of shadow is so needy? My chest keeps its hopeful song, my mouth quirking into a smile because I must. I must do this. They blink again and make an expression to mirror my own and I would like to fall apart then.
They look so beautiful. They look like me. They look like me and I feel their heart, like ripened fruit (too ripe!) against my bellybutton. I see them tonight and I am scared.

Their music: it splits open like fruit spilling from its bowl and I cry. I cry and cry as their music plucks at my hair, my purpled skin, screeching in the pool we made together. My feet smear across the floor and I stumble as I try to stand with this crying thing that wraps itself around me, strangling my own music. “I am just a child,” I think as I clutch my breast. I am just a child. Yet, I still hold them as I fall in the shadows of the room; I still hold them as I clamor onto the bed. Sweat clings to me; my curiosity replaced with fear, with horror as I soothe the lump of shadows. “I am not ready,” I think, as I sing a lullaby. “I am not ready,” I plead, as I soothe their little heart.

I sit upon the bed and do not sleep as I listen to the fading sounds of a child crying. My legs fold up and I cradle them, shushing their tears as I pull them ever closer to my heart. I wait and wait, my eyes weak, my own crying silenced, strangled out. I wish to be a nomad, a ghost. I wish to haunt underneath a bed and fall asleep in linens. I wish to sprawl along the floorboards and giggle and sing. “I love you, little one,” I tell them as they close their eyes, bug-like.

It is true. It is true, but it does not settle the ache.
I remember the day planet Earth ran out of fossil fuels: June 14, 2068. As sad as it was, it was also slightly hilarious. We all saw it coming, not just tree-hugging environmentalists. For God’s sake, even Thomas fucking Edison said we should get onto solar and wind before we ran out of oil and coal, and that guy was such a capitalist that he murdered dogs to sell the public on direct current. By the time we ran out of coal, petroleum, and natural gas, we had pumped our troposphere so full of carbon dioxide and wrought so much havoc on our climate that Manhattan was under water with Ground Zero and the nearby Islamic Cultural Center—finally erected in 2060—drowning in the Atlantic Ocean. Antarctica was not only melting, but being pelted with balls of fire at least as much as it was being pelted with snow. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict still hadn’t been formally resolved, although right-wing fear mongering about how the Palestinians want to “drive the Jews into the sea” became pretty irrelevant as the sea was driven into the Jews. My family lost our beach house in Delaware. Thankfully, by summertime, our house in the suburbs of Philadelphia became a beach house.

Humanity went back to burning wood for fuel, like we used to. Trees are, of course, a renewable resource, but anyone with a fifth grade education could tell that our energy demands could not be met sustainably with the amount of trees on our planet. About three years later, on April 20, 2071, the report came that the last tree had been cut down in the Amazon. Nobody was shocked. The news anchors might as well have just read from The Lorax. The United Nations had met and discussed some goals that day, but since both it and their constituent governments had at best symbolic power (kind of like the English crown by the mid-twentieth century), we were waiting for the World Summit of Oil Pharaohs to announce some decisions. They had de facto power as the owners of most of the world’s wealth. Pharaoh Rex III of Exxon Mobil finally got behind a podium and announced that humanity would be moving on to the shrubs and bushes. To aid in this process, they would formalize the abolition of private ownership of bushes so as to let them extract the bushes.
“Remember the words of Pete Seeger?” he said. “‘This land is your land; this land is my land’? What an ideal that was! Well, now we’ll have it! We hope you don’t mind us taking the bushes from your lawns, although really, it’s our land, too.” I’m not sure whom the fuck he thought was buying into those mental gymnastics, but he’s a self-proclaimed deity, so he wasn’t really interested in anyone’s rebuttal.

By the next day, the bushes had been removed from my lawn by Lower Merion Township due to an emergency ordinance. The day after, I went to the Sunoco station to buy one of my bushes back. It cost $50,000. Yeah, I knew better than to keep burning biofuels, but I was an engineer, and I had to work into the night, and my work was important. Benjamin, my English teacher of a neighbor, on the other hand, was trying to make little sheets of paper for his seventh graders to write on, and it’s like, go fuck yourself, Ben.

When I got home, it was getting kind of dark, so I lit the bush on fire and cooked some General Tso’s tofu. When I was done eating, I sat at the table and stared into the fire for several minutes. The flames were going, but it didn’t seem like the bush was actually being consumed by the fire.

I heard a voice: “Joseph.”

I said, “What?” I looked around for who was calling me.

“Over here.” The voice was emanating from the bush. “I am the Lord, your God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—”

“What about Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Leah?”

“You know, if you just let me finish my sentence, I would have gotten to them, too. People never listen when they come up.”

“Huh. Interesting. So, God, do You really have no other way to communicate with people?”

“Actually, I communicate with scientists all the time, but the rest of the world hasn’t been taking them very seriously. You humans only take to heart the things that make a profit. You do the same thing with My Torah.”

“Huh. Interesting. So why are You here?”

“Well, the last book that teaches people how to make solar panels has been burned for firewood, so I was like, ‘That’s it. I’m going in.’ I need you to help Me lead humanity into a sustainable infrastructure.”

“What took You so long to intercede?”
“Haven’t you read Exodus? I don’t come every time I’m called. I come when there’s a crisis.”

I spent the next few hours with God as Xe—yes, Xe told me Xe preferred those pronouns—explained to me how to make solar panels and windmills with some readily available materials left on Earth. Xe explained that I’d have to get some folks together—fucking Benjamin included—to start a little eco-kibbutz commune kind of thing. Ben was a better speaker than I am, so it made sense. We could just squat on some land thanks to a loophole in the Pharaohs’ new decree, and the community would grow over time. Xe explained we’d have to lower our demand significantly, but we’d make it work by doing low-energy community activities together. We’d also have to go to the Pharaohs and demand they invest in our clean solar and wind infrastructure. God also explained to me that the Pharaohs’ secret lair was in Philadelphia at the top of what used to be the Comcast tower.

Ben and I swam to their lair and found an entrance. We had to lie and say we were from British Petroleum to get past the guards. The Pharaohs were a little annoyed at first that someone just walked in unannounced, but thanks to their own rules, they legally couldn’t kick us out. We went before them and showed them our prototype. They wouldn’t invest in our solar and wind infrastructure.

On October 29, 2072, the news came that the world had run out of bushes and shrubs. Our community had grown a little bit, and our crops were providing fresh air and food for folks, but people all over the globe were gasping for breath because photosynthesis was hardly happening. We went before the World Summit of Oil Pharaohs again and begged them—tersely, because we didn’t want to waste too much breath—to invest in our solar and wind infrastructure. They said they’d think about it, took huffs from their oxygen tanks, and said no. We asked them what they were going to use instead. They pointed to the TV, where the US Presidential frontrunner whose campaign they paid for was promising the American people that we’d be mining on the moon if she were elected.

My eco-kibbutz grew in the next couple years, though we had a bit of trouble getting water. The hydrocarbons on the moon were being harvested very quickly, and the mass of the moon was changing. The tides no longer had the oomph of decades past, and the rivers slowed down.
Once Judaism, Islam, and China had jointly revised their lunar calendars so as to account for the new and confusing moon phases, Ben and I figured we’d give it another shot. We went back to the World Summit of Oil Pharaohs, explaining to them that our little eco-kibbutz had surprising resilience given the recent major shifts. They still said no to investing in our solar and wind infrastructure.

Our eco-kibbutz went on okay, but the rest of the world was trying some crazy shit just to keep up with global capitalism’s energy demands. They hooked up turbines to their circulatory systems to harness the energy of their own blood flow. They were burning the frogs, bugs, and beasts of the Earth. They went to Antarctica and tried to harness energy from its fire-yielding hail. Some Satanists were trying (unsuccessfully) to harness energy from dark matter. Still desperate for energy, parents began slaying their firstborns and setting them ablaze.

We swam back to the World Summit of Oil Pharaohs. Pharaoh Rex III of Exxon Mobil actually seemed pretty interested in investing in our solar and wind infrastructure. He started crying over the loss of little Rex IV. The other Pharaohs shouted him down and told him to shut the fuck up. The final verdict was no, they would not invest in our solar and wind infrastructure.

Just as we were about to turn around and leave, we somehow jumped from where we were standing and slammed into the eastern wall of the room. “What was that?” Ben asked.

“Funny you should ask,” started the Pharaoh from British Petroleum. “We’ve figured out a new way to harness energy, and we’re starting now.”

It turns out they had decided to harness the kinetic energy of the Earth’s rotation about its axis. Since we humans still had the kinetic energy of the original rotation, we were repeatedly thrown into the eastern wall of the room. It seemed the sun stood still in the sky. The mechanism the Pharaohs used to slow down the Earth’s rotation about its axis also slowed its orbit around the sun.

The Earth briefly came to a halt. Then the sun seemed to get bigger in the sky. We hurtled toward the sun and our impending doom for the next two months. Ultimately, we burned, and the Pharaohs burned with us. For the last few minutes of our lives, we had solar energy, and lots of it.
"I heard it’s only open strange hours. Somethin’ like ten at night till eight in the morning. Not the most respectable place, if you know what I mean.” The bartender paused to snatch up a pile of limp and crumpled bills from the countertop. Customers swarmed into the building like errant moths, jostling against me and the counter with their polyester wings.

I did know what he meant, but I pressed on despite his warning, though I had to wait another moment or two before I could regain the man’s attention. “And it’s on Lamprey Drive? Just a jog past the old convenience store that went out of business?”

“Yep, that’s the one.” He swiveled to pass a foamy beer to an eager hand in the crowd. I drummed my fingers on my leg, watching the glasses glint in the dull orange glow of the bar lights. They circulated like ghosts, autonomous against the gray-draped shadows that milled about after a hard day’s work. “Just one more question, then I’ll be out of your hair. Who do you know who went? Maybe, I mean, just so I can know that it’s even real.”

The bartender glanced sharply up at me, scouring gobs of beer bubbles off his hands with a browning rag. “What’s it to you who I know? I ain’t lying, though I probably should if it’ll get people like you away from that shady business. You best stay away from that place, if you know what’s good for you.”

“Thanks for the advice.” I slapped a twenty on the counter and gulped down the last sip of my beer before leaving. The brisk autumn air chewed at my nose and throat before I could cocoon my face in a long wool scarf.

Had I heard that kind of caution about my destination two months ago—no, even two weeks ago—I would have turned around and gone home. But I was dying. I was dying mentally, if not physically, and that had driven me down desperate routes. Impromptu excursions to midnight towns, begging barflies for their sorry tales, heck, even downing a veritable rainbow of drugs in order to see something extraordinary. Nothing killed my damned writer’s block.
Now, I had been low on inspiration for a while now, but the mere thought of writing had begun to leave my mouth dry, sandpaper tongue against gristle sides. Last Sunday, my editor had told me to either write “something good” or consider myself the penniless blogger I had been before they picked me up.

A stoplight counted down to red, and a stampede of cars clawed by. I must have watched the crossing sign come and go three times by now, rooted like an ancient tree on weary sidewalks. This time, however, when the sign changed, I stepped out onto the slippery white lines bridging the gap to Lamprey Drive.

The Amber Macaroon, advertised only by a decaying wooden sign hung on limp thread, lay at the bottom of a cellar staircase. The place would have been impossible to find for anyone without previous information about its whereabouts—and then, still difficult. I circled the old Greek restaurant multiple times before finding the inconspicuous sign around back for the unaffiliated business renting out the basement. The Amber Macaroon. I nearly turned and left.

The door handle, cast in milky darkness from the building above, left a gritty coating on my fingers, but hunger for the services they supposedly, improbably had left me pushing brazenly into the store. Dust blotted out my vision with angry mushroom clouds, stirring and stewing like cobweb soup. Amidst the storm, lost in the gunmetal shades, stepped a man of unidentifiable age—forty? fifty? ninety? He rested his hands on a cracked glass case containing week-old pastries beneath its fine mint patina.

“Let me guess,” he creaked, and the voice sounded wrong—too real in this fantastical place I had likely invented—and “you’re here to buy a dream.”

He was an emaciated author type, this one. From the way he burst through the door, all jointed knuckles and wild eyes, I knew.

“Can you do what I’ve heard you can do?” he blustered, beer heat rising to his face like a balloon being pumped.

“Depends on what you heard.”

My sooty friends danced pirouettes around his ragged suit and unwashed hair. He began to pace around the cramped room in tight strides, able to do only what he knew in a situation so foreign. When it was clear he was too overwhelmed to continue with his questioning, I took the reins.
“What’s your name, son?”
“Randolph. Randy to family and friends.” He echoed his name a few more times in soft whispers--a mantra, desperate to fill the air with a shred of familiarity.

“Alright, Randy, you here to buy or to sell?”
“E-Excuse me? Sell? How can a person sell a dream?”
I sighed, clucking my tongue. “Well, the dreams you’re buying have to come from someone, right?” He blinked, wild eyes rolling around of their own accord. Couldn’t be anything but an author. “Well, anyway, what dream are you looking to purchase?”

“What kinds do you have?”
“Oh, all kinds. Sweet, salty, sour, bitter—you name it.”
Randy leaned forward secretively, as if we stood on a stage. “Do they really... well, er, taste like those things?”

My guffaw shook his bones like brittle leaves. “Har har, no, they ain’t taste like that. That’s just the essence of how the dream feels, you see? And I just like calling ‘em that for reactions like yours.”

He tugged at his jacket, scowling. “I’m looking for something...inspiring, let’s say.” Randy chose his words meticulously, as if he were plucking the chosen ones from a conveyor belt of language possibilities.

I paused, drinking in the desperation mounting in his gaze. “Oh, I got inspiring. Here, take a gander at my stock of sours.” I gestured to an admittedly sad crumble of croissants. “See, they’re the weird ones. The ones you think everything’s great and normal in, but then, before you know it, you’re being chased through a zombie abyss by Batman with your brother’s face. I assure you, you’d have a lot to write about with these.”

Hunger ate at his brain, and his jagged knuckles undulated, tapping against the glass in anticipation. “What about those?” He jabbed a talon at a line of deflated muffins.

“Those are the sweets, but you wouldn’t like them.”
“How come?”
“Lukewarm contentment never made a good story.”
“True. How about those?” His chin jerked in the direction of some barren churro branches.

“Bitters. Saturated in sadness.”
“Sadness can make a compelling story.”
“But there are thousands of those. You need something a bit more unique.”
“What are—”
“Salties. The popovers are salties—dreams with lots of everyday mishmash. And that’s about it for my different kinds.”
Randy stared at each in turn, eyes flicking like a metronome. After thorough investigation, he finally landed upon what I had waited for him to notice.
“What about those?” He unfurled his claws to point once more, this time at a sandy cluster of bear claws tucked in a corner.
“Oh, those? They’re not for you.” Nothing could be more tempting.
“Why not? I’m a paying customer, and I deserve to be told all the wares, dammit.”
“Well, I’m just worried for you is all. Some people can’t handle these, so I don’t go out of my way to advertise, but if you feel you can, then I’ll consider—”
“Just tell me what it is.”
“Fine, fine.” I raised my hands in feigned capitulation.
“But don’t blame me if you don’t like it.” Randy’s nose hung low to the glass, fingers suction-cupped to the side. “These are the nightmares.”

His eyes expanded, possibilities inflating them into white galaxies with a black planet pinprick suspended in space. “Yes, this is it. This is what I need.” Reverentially, dazedly, he pulled a leather wallet from his pocket. “How much?”
“How much is it worth to you?” I gave him an assessing look—a hard glare, I’m told—and his fingers scissored through his wallet until, at last, he pulled out a hundred and slid it across the counter.
“Now how does it work?” He sounded less manic now, sobered by the deal he had just involved himself in.
My hands wrapped up a bear claw with steady, familiar movements. “It all is very simple now. You just have to eat it. The next time you fall asleep, the dream will come of its own accord. If you want to stretch it out, you could eat a piece of the pastry, but then you just get a fragment of the full effect at a time.”
“How do I know that what’s a nightmare for one person will be a nightmare for me?”
“It’s not the things that appear in the dream that frighten a person. The fear is there from the beginning—it simply takes a form that your terrified mind chooses.”

I placed the package in my gnarled hands, and he shivered
at the weight of it. Randy shuffled a few steps back before turning around. His hand on the door, I called out, “See you soon!” He gave me a confused look before pushing through the rickety gate and into the milky darkness above.

It would only be a matter of time before he came fluttering back. Like a moth to light.

The Last Dream

It’s getting late.
I know I shouldn’t go out on my own anymore, or at least that’s what they tell me. When you start getting old, everyone jumps at the chance to bar you from even the most exceedingly simple tasks.

First, it’s the food. They start mixing some extra vitamins and pain pills into your morning breakfast—subtly, of course, so as not to let you know that your joints are failing. The new blend could almost pass for the same flavor, but there’s this residual foreshadowing that always catches on the tongue.

Then comes the help. And I’m not talking about an innocent oh-can-I-refill-your-glass sort of help, oh no. We’re talking about an excessive, overbearing lack of privacy here. It’s the kind where your family becomes your crutch and carriage with a few pairs of complacent arms. It’s the kind where you can’t even go to the bathroom without someone a few feet away spotting you for a stumble when you stand.

But despite the obvious imperfection of the situation, I’m not saying that I’m not grateful to them all. I’m touched by everything my family has done for me, I really am. They weren’t the kind of people to ship me off to a “better place,” so any complaints on my part are rather insignificant.

But the fact is, it’s getting late. And I’ve got somewhere I need to go.

The dust had settled, which invariably meant it was a dull night for business. I twirled my index finger in a pile of it, almost urging it into its usual whirlwind. A large piece of lint ricocheted down off the glass onto the shelf of croissants, but I doubted anyone would notice, so I left it there.
I had a list of things to do for nights like these—where had it gone? My hands turned out my pockets and patted my old fishing vest until I heard an appropriate crinkle.

- Count dust particles
- Flick around lint
- Peel off pieces of that ugly wallpaper
- Bake a new set of pastries for customers

As the last one—that highly ambitious goal—was written mainly for decorum, I accepted that I had exhausted my nightly entertainment options. I had begun to search the room for a crusty old volume of Whitman when I heard the faintest clatter of the door.

Once I had ascertained that no, no one was actually standing at the threshold, I drew the plastic curtains back over the window. The shuffling impact came again.

This time, I threw the door wide for whatever sorry person couldn’t reach up to turn the knob. I was greeted by the sight of a small, shriveled dog with a face that had withstood the test of time. Ghosts seemed to waltz in his eyes like eternity, until I realized that my neon lights were simply reflecting off his cataracts.

His entrance was dignified, if not graceful. I offered to guide him inside with my hands, but the way he looked past me told me he both needed and did not want my help. So instead, I held the door wide for close to five minutes as he wended his way through the frame and towards the counter. After all, he was still a customer.

Allowing him time to catch his breath, for his ribs were rattling against his straining lungs, I assumed my post behind the glass case. His legs shook like reverberating bass strings. When he was ready, I began.

“Hello and welcome. Are you here to buy or to sell?”

His muttish ears rose limply, like a question mark.

“Buy,” I repeated slowly, and the dog licked smoothed his ragged gray beard down with his tongue. “Sell—” He let out a wheeze that had possibly been a bark in a different era.

“‘Sell’ it is.”

I looked through my pastries, keeping an eye on the dog’s quiet fortitude. It was usually very easy to tell what kind of dream
I was buying. One look would explain it all. But this dog—would his dream be bitter or sweet?

I stifled a small gasp of realization, when it finally dawned on me that it didn’t matter how I sorted it. This was not meant to be a normal transaction, a profitable venture; that would be pointless in this case.

My own joints cracked and complained as I crouched down to set a muffin next to the milky-eyed creature. “You simply fall asleep next to it, all right?” And the dog fell to his haunches, likely more from exhaustion than understanding. “It’s okay, you can rest now.” Out of respect for his wishes, I waited until he had curled up around the pastry and drifted off before stroking his wiry fur. In an hour, he was cold.

I never usually looked closely at the contents of the dreams I dealt. However, last dreams become a testament to their owner’s memory. An important way of being remembered, no matter the unconventional path. So I held the dream in my hands and gazed in at its forcibly robbed, selflessly given contents.

And I was right in choosing a sweet. There was not a trace of lament in that golden afternoon—it was not a flashy memory, either. Just a bottled and condensed moment, capturing the soft caresses and angled sunlight on two figures bathing in grass.

In the morning, I left my store for the first time since last November. I broke the locks of rust from my car and pulled clumps of moss hair off its roof, then drove long and gentle into the country.

When I had found a hill that glimmered and rose like seagreen tidal waves, I pulled the shovel out of the backseat.

Eventually, though evening rose to greet me like a wine-colored blush, I found the house I remembered seeing in the dream. My finger scraped dust off the doorbell when I pressed. This was always the hardest part.

See, death, on its own, could be so tragically beautiful. It was the bittersweet departure from choice and chance and ended in a swirl of recollection. But casting aside that disconnected aperture in order to grieve—that is the hard part. To let yourself see the families and interconnection when one topples them like dominoes.

The door opened, and the familiar weather-creased face came into view, laugh lines playing around his eyes.
“I’m so sorry,” I announced, and held out a palm containing a collar and a muffin. “I can tell he was a wonderful and beloved family member. If you’ll allow me to explain, he wanted you to have something to remember him by.”
Becoming

I am rolling down a muddy, mossy bank. Malleable twigs, branches, entire bushes attach to my white lace dress.

I pick up speed, I pick up earth, I try to stop myself when I reach the cliff, but it is useless.

I am disguised as a woodland monster flying over sharp stones, crashing into the rocky, rolling river.

Breaking my own heart, the blow cushioned by the moss caked to every curve and concave of my body.

This is me: brown leaves for hair, bones made of cherry trees, and eyes of river rocks smoothed from rapids.

My idea of self, purged like a bird from a cavity nest in a dead tree trunk rotting at the roots

Grappling up the bank and slowly eroding away.
Save my naked flesh,
stretched over my bones like
canvas made of storm clouds

my cries are petals falling from
flowers. My heart
is a germinating seed,
life bursting from the hard
shell that by some
miraculous event

had made its way to safely
nurtured by warm, silted
dirt and sun rays
breathing hot, foggy life
into my soul.
The bubbles burst over my skin with the intensity of atomic bombs. I float through the dirty water. My body is lifeless, but my nerves explode with excitement. I watch the particulates pass me by like infected matter; the refuse of a plastic city that radiates its waste daily through the sea like a virus. Navigating through rotten reefs and decaying fish, I finally find my destination. The one circle, the diameter of a dime, that has been saved from the human wreck. I navigate its circumference, marveling at the emptiness, Pure and Clean. I look behind me, and see a line of half-dead people, like me, waiting to see the one space we deemed could remain in nature’s grasp, a dying memory of our once beautiful past.
ALEXANDRA HEMP

Construction Site

I wanted to bear a house with you
Borne from wood and bricks,
To weathervane the seasons like wind in our hair
And to lay on the roof stargazing with you
Swimming in constellations, losing ourselves in galaxies.

The world is my oyster
And I am the pearl
An ugly, jagged grain of sand
That is concealed within pretty
As if it wouldn’t hurt so much.

I guess you realized that
So you slipped out the back door
After playing your games
Darts missing the corkboard
Holes in my drywall.

Heartbreak means
I eat myself happy
And bleed myself thin,
Collect my tears in fishbowls
And use them to water flowers.

I would’ve kept them in our home
The now half-hollow dry heave
That I grovel in among the unused bricks
And nail-ridden slats of rotting wood.
But I still want to make something if I could.

Out of the leftover cement,
Something other than a home
To protect this heart inside a room
To build its walls thick and high
To seal it in a tomb.
ALLISON ARINAGA

Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Dragon

I
Above the ice-choked fog
The only color
Was the flame of the dragon.

II
I felt a sudden urge to cry,
Like a prospector
Who has witnessed the dragon.

III
The dragon roamed the countryside.
It was a puzzle
Made of one piece.

IV
Why does the vigilant man search
For serpents in the sea
When the dragon looms
Over his unprotected head?

V
The dragon’s head may roll
From a golden cutlass,
But its wings are still in the sky
And its flame is still burning.

VI
I know there is no room for error.
The dragon is watching.

VII
He pulled in the pawns on the chessboard
With his magnetic hands.
But the dragon captured the rooks
With magnetic riddling.
Then the queen took them both.
VIII
The dragon and master are one.
The master and dragon are less than one.

IX
I understand the universe,
From the gritty slum
To the reticent stars.
Then I remember the dragon,
And realize
That everything I know is wrong.

X
There are no euphemisms for the dragon,
Only the realities of vice, corruption,
And an incomplete circle.

XI
The shimmering scales of the dragon
Are like the eyes of a woman
Who can talk to the flowers.

XII
The stones by the river are glowing.
Someone must be riding the dragon.

XIII
It smelled like yesterday
As twilight stretched her legs.
The fireflies darted over the silver pond,
But the dragon floated above
And became a part of the wispy fog.
Like the ocean waves, my brother never
Stays in one place for long; north, east, west, south,
Didn’t matter, the backyard’s endeavor:
Touch this, pull cat’s tail, touch that, hand in mouth,
Mom’s worst nightmare and best blessing, move,
Writhe and shimmy, flash his snaggle-tooth smile,
On repeat in a smooth twilight, cribbed groove.
Now, he plays baseball with Eddie and Kyle.
Skies are painted gray, mom texts: “Come home please!”
Blue Nike shoes, shedding summertime sweat,
Gasping, breathing, loving his scuffed-up knees,
Ballpark dirt, grape soda stains, a brunette
Babe on a poster hidden from mom’s sight.
Cap and gown...wow...he graduates tonight.
ALEXZANDRIA LUBEN

No Sleep

It’s 11 o’clock and I’m wrapped up in my sheets drifting off to Neverland when Daddy busts my door wide open. I have to wipe the crust from my eyes and slip on my glasses to see him huffin and puffin at my doorway. He’s wearing that same old dingy wife beater, black basketball shorts, and hot dog-looking house shoes. He’s looking at me all firm-like and has a firm grip on his grown folks glass. I forgot that Ma was going on a trip for work and I’d have to be bothered again.

“Cass,” he says.
“What?”
“What!”
Daddy repeats what I say when it isn’t formal enough but I don’t care.
“Yes Daddy what’s up?”
“Come here.”
“Come where?”
“Get up Cass and come here.”
So I shoo him away for a second so I can put something less raggedy on. I’m putting on my red Mickey Mouse pajama suit, regretting every second I spend out of my bed.
“Cass!”
“I’m coming!”
I go to my momma’s room but it’s just my kid sister watching her shows on the TV. She’s sitting looking like a plastic doll like the TV cast a spell on her. I roll my eyes and slam the door.
“In here,” Daddy says.
I find him standing in my sister’s room. That old yellow light was shining the best it could. And the pink walls seemed brighter than ever with Daddy standing there with his glass. I’m standing in the doorway and his back is turned towards me.
“Close the door,” he says.
I walk up to see what he’s doing and do that little eye thing I do. When somebody says something strange I go and look at them in their eyes to see if they’re kidding or not. If they make a goofy face after they said something goofy then that means they’re lying. So I walk up to him and then I see a small briefcase open on
my sister’s bed. I bolt out that room to my sister and tell her not to leave my Momma’s room.

My sister turns her head real slow to me like she got something smart to say. But we’re not going there right now. I slam the door again and I hear her growling from the hallway. But that’s okay as long as she doesn’t see Daddy out of his mind. Or doing whatever he thinks he’s gonna do with his gun.

“Cass, get in here!”

So finally I’m standing there beside him taking him seriously and whatnot.

“Look. You see that? This is a Ruger GP100.” He’s running his hands over it trying to make it all cute. It does look nice though. It’s made with silver steel and has the nice dark wood touches. It’s a revolver—real fancy for my daddy. He must have spent all his money on it. Now he’s pushing out the cylinder and telling me to peek into the chamber like he’s trying to give me goose bumps or something. So now I have goose bumps on goose bumps and I’m really hoping he’ll put it away. But he just keeps playing with it. He’s taking it apart, putting it back together, and playing around with bullets. I’m watching it all scared because I forgot how to talk.

“Are you watching?” He asks me. “It’s three shot-double action. Hoo wee! And it’s a .350 magnum revolver.”

“Daddy what are you doing?”

“Uh—no it’s a .357 magnum.”

Then he takes the gun real slow like and aims it at my sister’s bedroom window. Then he pulls the trigger. If I had to pee I would have done it right there. But there’s no loud sound. I just hear the gun click.

“Here,” he says. “Show me how to load the gun and shoot it.”

The gun feels so heavy in my hands. I forget how to move.

“What do I do?”

So he spends forever explaining everything from the beginning. I knew he wasn’t going to let me leave until I knew what to do. So I listen and I aim the gun at my sister’s window. I try to be all cool with it but I’m too weak to pull the trigger. I just keep trying again and again but I still can’t do it. But I figure I can load the bullets alright. I take a couple from the suitcase.

“Yep,” he says. “Now push it open.”
I push a gold bullet into each space. And I’m real careful about it, too.


I put in the last three and push the cylinder back in. He takes a big gulp of his grown folks to celebrate. I think it’s time to celebrate too, so I start packing up the gun in the suitcase, but he stops me.

“Where’d ya mama put the photo albums?” Daddy picks up his gun again and grips his glass real tight as if that will keep him from falling down.

“What photo albums?”

“Go look in the living room.” Daddy’s all stem now looking at me like he has a lot more to say.

I know where the photo albums are so I pull them out from under the couch where Daddy followed me to. He’s still holding that gun and I’m not sure if he put bullets back in it.

“Daddy, why don’t you put that away?”

“Cassandra, bring me the photo album,” Daddy says with glass stuck on his lips. Then the phone starts ringing in the kitchen.

“Don’t you—just let it rang.”

But I get up anyway.

“Yello.” It’s Ma on the other side.

“Yeah Ma, what’s up?” I’m scared all over again because Ma can’t deal with Daddy getting drunk like this no more. When she’s here he only takes a few sips to get a buzz but he’s all lonely now. But he’ll be real lonely when Ma leaves him.

“Why you sound like you don’t want to talk to me? What’s your daddy doing?”

“He sleep.”

“Good! So I don’t have to hear it when I get back.”

“Tonight?”

“Yes sweetheart. My flight was cancelled and I wasn’t excited about the work trip in Tampa no way. I wanna be in my bed. You got a problem with that?”

“When are you going to be back?”

“Half an hour. What’s the problem?”

“Cass!” Daddy is shouting from the living room at me.

“What the hell is going on?”

“Nothing,” I say to Ma, “I’m just tired.” I’m not exactly lying and Daddy is still shouting at me.
“Yeah right. What’s going on?” Momma says.
“Ma, I’ll see you when you get here.” I hang up the phone real quick before she hears Daddy shouting at me and start scrambling through the kitchen. Nothing but leftovers in the refrigerator so I put some mac and cheese in the microwave. If pasta don’t shut him up the Itis will. I turn the microwave on then I run back to the living room.

“Damn,” he says, “why you ignoring me?” Daddy is still holding his gun. “Sit down Cassandra.” He pulls out an old photo of him in a restaurant sitting next to a kind of pretty woman with big black hair. Oil is shining on her yellow skin, especially her forehead. Her eyes are real dark and slanted. And the person taking the picture caught her with her mouth all twisted.

She’s wearing a bougie two piece that matches my daddy’s Marine’s uniform. His arm is wrapped around her tight and he’s shining too. Unlike her, he’s smiling. His back is all straight like he’s balancing a weight on his head and a mug of beer is three inches away from both his hands. “This is your mother,” he says.

Daddy was speaking real strange but I could understand him ‘til now. The lady in the picture isn’t Mommy. But maybe he didn’t say what I thought he said.

“That’s not my granny.”

“That’s not my momma, your momma.”

I’m getting real upset at Daddy. He thinks he’s real funny when he drinks grown folks but Momma don’t and I don’t either. The phone starts ringing again and I see Daddy’s face turn ugly. His bald head is poking out and his mouth is turned upside down. He wobbles to get up from the couch and uses the gun to help push himself up.

“Daddy, I thought you were gonna put that away.”

“Talk to me in twenty years.”

He trips and makes his way to the telephone. I rush after him and try to push him away but he’s so much bigger than me. He laughs and picks up the telephone.

“Who is it?” Daddy has his chest all poked out like a goose and the phone is ten inches away from his head.

“Chris? I thought you was sleep.”

“Muthafuhck.”

“What the hell is going on?”

Daddy slams the phone on the counter and breaks it into three pieces. The gun falls out his sweaty hands on the floor. I run
to his feet and I reach for the gun. Daddy doesn’t want me to hold it anymore so he starts pushing me away. I push him as hard as I can. I push him even harder than last time. I push him so hard that he tips over and I get to hold the gun now. My face must have turned uglier than his cause he’s looking at me like a monster. I’m holding the gun firm like he holds his grown folks’ glass.

“Cassandra,” he shouts. “What the hell you think you doing?” Daddy is walking backwards with his eyes bugging out. But I just run away to my sister’s room and hide the gun in the suitcase under my sister’s bed. I wipe my sweaty hands on my pajamas as I walk back to Daddy in the kitchen.

“Sit down,” I say, pointing at the kitchen table. I know Mommy has to be on her way now. “You need to eat.”

Daddy isn’t talking no more, he’s listening to me. He sits down in the wobbly chair. He never sits in that chair even when he’s drunk. “Bring it here,” he says.

“No!” The microwave starts beeping real loud.

“Dammit! Bring the food here.”

I thought Daddy was talking about the gun. I run past him and fix up the mac and cheese like he likes it. I shake some Red Rooster on the top and put some black pepper on it. It smells funny but I stick a fork in it and hand it to him.

“She coming?” he says real low.

“Yeah, she’s on her way.”

I run to the living room and find the picture Daddy showed me. I want to keep looking at the lady’s greasy face. Her mouth is all fixed like she wants to tell me something. So I stuff the picture in my pants and start cleaning up. I put the photo albums under the couch and turn off the light. Then I dump Daddy’s grown folks in the kitchen sink. Now Daddy’s eyelids are real low and he can barely open his mouth.

“Come on Daddy.” I pull at his arms. He gets up and follows me to his room. My sister is sleep on the bed with the TV blasting. But I don’t turn it off. Daddy moves over my sister and gets under the sheets.

“Turn the damn TV off,” he shouts.

“Stop talking so loud. You’re gonna wake up Summer.”

“Cassandra, ya Daddy won’t be here forever.”

“Why you talking so loud?”

“Are you listening to me?”

“Daddy, please.”
“You love your Daddy?”

“Yes I love you, Daddy. Goodnight.” I kiss him on his sweaty bald head and tuck him in like a baby doll. I turn off the TV and run back to the kitchen to clean after Daddy. I reach to pick up Daddy’s nasty mac and cheese but I hear a voice.

“What’s going on?”

It’s Momma. She came out from the dark living room. I try real hard not to look at her but her eyes are burning a hole in my head. I’m praying she’ll walk away but she comes closer.

“What is that?” Momma is looking at the bump in my pants.

“Ma, I’m sleepy.”

“Give it to me.” She’s getting real mad so I give her the picture. Then Momma makes a sound so loud that I have to cover my ears.
ALYSE BREWER

A Lesson in Physical Education

Orange and black were my middle school’s colors, which I always thought was a terrible idea; it felt like an inescapable state of Halloween. In hindsight, it was probably appropriate since it was middle school and everyone pretended to be someone else anyway.

Gathered in a sea of grey punctuated by orange and black, we might as well have been prisoners. In gym class, we were forced to wear uniforms—a gray T-shirt scrawled with your name and knee-long shorts that girls rolled at the waists. I never understood why these uniforms were enforced.

“Everyone line up!” Mrs. Welsh said, whistle shrieking. Kids lagged behind, clustering off with friends in pairs and threes before arriving to the black foul line. “Count off by two,” she said, pointing at each student. I was paired with Mariana, a friend of mine.

Yet a small, buried part of me was sometimes grateful for the shred of conformity uniform provided. I was fourteen and I still desperately wanted to belong. In the classroom, I could hide my obvious insecurities beneath class participation and lengthy essays; I didn’t have to be different. I relished *To Kill a Mockingbird*, understood blood types, painted self-portraits. I was a student who could read, write, and learn. Academics were and are my main source of camouflage.

Gym, on the other hand, was a different animal entirely. There was nowhere to hide, nowhere to disguise my shining, metal crutch—in gym it became a blatant indicator of my own disadvantages. Here, I could not participate: not in basketball where I couldn’t jump to make the shots, not in flag football where I fell gracelessly, and not even in badminton where I lacked the dexterity and the speed to reach the ball in time.

My gym teachers were baffled by my situation.

As a student with mild cerebral palsy, my condition presented a unique set of challenges—although I ambulated with a crutch, I tried to maintain independence. My disability did not affect my schoolwork, or my social life—only my stamina through physical activity.
Ironically, even I wasn’t sure of what I could do. Few opportunities to play Frisbee or kickball or flag football presented themselves on a regular basis. Up until gym, most of my physical activity had been designed to fit my needs, not the other way around.

Still, I found myself surprised by my own limitations. It sounds naïve, and I was well aware that I had a disability, but if I encountered a physical challenge, I adapted the task so that I could do it—often using bags, stools, sometimes pure luck, or whatever was necessary to complete my goal. On the occasions I couldn’t, I would ask for help. Field hockey or volleyball was not a circumstance where I could rely on objects or others. It was body mechanics.

“Today, we’re playing badminton! Rackets are over there, birdies are in the bucket. Be careful not to break the thread!” Mrs. Welsh said, shooting a pointed look at two boys who were already engaged in an imaginary lightsaber fight. “These are expensive equipment people, not weapons.”

Mariana disappeared in the crowd to get rackets, dark ponytail swaying while I stood idle, waiting for Mrs. Welsh. Mrs. Welsh had white blonde hair, reddened cheeks, and a thick, muscular body.

Oh boy, I thought, here it comes. I had grown accustomed to the protocol by now, and even if I wasn’t, I would be familiarized with it by the time I entered high school. The routine included three parts: the Beckon, the Look, and the Motto. After the teacher explained the activity for the class and my peers dispersed, I awaited the Beckon, which was usually a wave or a finger crook. We needed to meet to discuss what we were going to do with me for the next activity, because I probably wasn’t going to be able to do it, and they probably didn’t know what to do with me. The Look was always a softening of the chin, a quick, guilty glance to the floor, and sometimes occurred in conjunction with the Beckon. The last phase was the Motto. The Motto was a variation of a motivational quote, but their default response was, simply, “Do what you can,” accompanied by a sympathetic head tilt and a pat on the shoulder.

“Alyse? All good? Do you think you can do this?”

Although I had serious doubts, I figured I’d try anyway. I nodded. “I think so.”

“Great! Thatta girl!” She patted my back with too much
gusto, nearly sending me careening towards the floor. Surprisingly, we had skipped the Beckon and Look today.

Mariana was bold with brown eyes, long lashes, and a fierce Italian heritage. Exchanging eye rolls, Mariana and I drifted over to the last unpaired partners, jocks named Hunter and Marcus who hooted loudly, chest bumping during every activity. We were the gawky, uncoordinated girls who treated gym class as a chore. They were gym class royalty, who would likely destroy us in the first ten seconds. As predicted, the first shot directed my way sailed way to my left, my racket faltering pathetically, missing it by a mile.

“Yes, great shot man!” The pair exchanged muscular, hearty high-fives.

Mariana threw Hunter a nasty look. “Here, let me try,” she gently tapped the birdie, shooting it in an almost perfect arc to my racket. I missed again. By the time I processed where the birdie was going in conjunction to my body, it fell. I couldn’t simultaneously monitor the birdie and move myself accordingly.

Hunter and Marcus were glistening with sweaty pride. Hit after hit, I missed and hit after hit, they scored. After a couple of similar matches, I craved the safety of the sidelines, the security of my little metal folding chair. I wanted quiet, contemplative time to compose poetry and leaving the shooting and the scoring to people who actually cared about it. Mariana wanted justice. She huffed, eyes flashing. “I’ll be right back, okay?”

I watched her march purposefully to Mrs. Welsh, amused at the way her heritage subtly appeared in arm-sweeping gestures. I was not surprised by Mariana’s frustration, or her fiery defense. Unlike so many others, she understood.

She was the friend to silently, automatically offer her arm in front of a staircase with no railings or like now, the ferociously protective mother bear who glared back at all the people that stared at me. Gym was always my required purgatory, but at least I had a warrior for an ally.

Mariana strode back, smiling. “Okay, so I talked to Mrs. Welsh and she said we can do whatever we want as long as it’s sort of like badminton. I told her we didn’t care about the stupid final tournament or whatever, so let’s play by ourselves instead.”

So we chose a secluded corner of the room, relatively protected from rogue birdies, and played. We discovered that with five feet of space between I could actually make the racket connect
with the ball. And whenever that happened, we celebrated just as passionately as gym class royalty, hooting and clapping.

It was spring now and sixty out, cool with clear skies. I was propped against one of the portable classrooms observing my fingernails, while the other kids were running around in the crusty yellow jerseys playing a half-hearted game of lacrosse. Tom Matthews was the kind of kid that you automatically assumed was a football player, just by the shape of him. Tom was horsing around with his friend, Russell. He wrestled the ball out of his grasp and thrust it far.

Russell ran backwards, his eyes cemented to the ball, which disappeared yards away.

"Yo man! Not fair," he called.

Tom laughed, cupping his palms around his mouth to yell, "Tables have turned, Russ!" He wiped swiped at his sweaty forehead with the backside of his hand. His head snapped to the left suddenly, focusing on a yellow butterfly, circling above. His net drifted upwards, missing its wings by an inch. Again, Tom attempted to capture it, and again it flew away. His footsteps were lithe as if he, the brawny football player, and the butterfly were engaged in an intricate dance routine. His shoulders tightened before he pounced catching its wings beneath his net. The whole ordeal lasted maybe two minutes. Russell loped back, ball officially retrieved. "C'mon Matthews, take two."

"Hey, I caught you a butterfly, and I named it Russell!"

Russell wandered over crouching down and inspecting the net, then crushed it with the butt end of his lacrosse stick.

"Hey! I was going to let it out! Why did you do that?"

The whistle interrupted their altercation. I never did get to hear Russell's justification, but maybe he did it for the same reason people bum sidewalk ants with magnifying glasses—because they can.

Chris Lyons was one of the only boys I trusted not to drop me during ballroom dancing lessons. Why participation in ballroom dancing was mandatory in gym class still remains unclear. Chris and I had been in the same classes in elementary school. As the new kid in fourth grade, he welcomed me to sit next to him in the cafeteria and invited me to his laser tag birthday party.
In five years, not much had changed. He was taller, lanky now, but he had the same kindness and bright green eyes. Mrs. Welsh had excused him from his tech class for the class period, since we mutually agreed he was trustworthy.

He was also one of my first crushes. This was one of the only times I looked forward to gym, filled with a nervous nostalgia. I couldn’t listen to how we were supposed to step, there was a buzzing in my ears and I was hyper aware of how his hand rested upon my shoulder. My palms were embarrassingly clammy. I kept apologizing for the way my feet would betray me, overcomplicating the simple steps. Later, during the dance marathon, I was hoping I would get asked during the obligatory slow song, like so many other girls. He didn’t. He danced with a girl named Sydney.

Flipping on my wrinkled gym shirt, I listened to the torrent of creative excuses in the girls’ locker room in the form of forged doctor’s notes and serendipitous visits to the nurse’s office, anything to get out of running the mile. Unlike the rest, I didn’t need fabricated proof, but that day I would walk anyway.

I ventured over to Mrs. Welsh’s office, which sat in the back corner of the girls’ locker room, tapping on the frame of the open door.

“Alyse! Come on in, my dear. What can I do for you?”

“Hi Mrs. Welsh. Well, I know the mile is today, and I wasn’t sure what you wanted me to do...” I trailed off. I was hoping she would excuse me, let me instead visit the library or at least sit on the sidelines.

“Hmm,” she said. Her chin fell into her hands for a moment, considering. “Tell you what. You do the best you can. See how far you can walk and we’ll go from there,” she said, smiling.

Eager to please, I felt obligated to try my best, even if it meant risking exhaustion in the process. I have always been uncomfortable with admitting my weaknesses, for fear that revealing vulnerability further than my disability would only intensify the pity I think people already feel for me.

It was already eighty degrees. I trudged down to the track, lagging behind as always. I didn’t know what my ‘best’ was. The hole in my right shoe stretched open as my foot dragged behind. Mrs. Welsh stood as a small dot at the far end of the track, thumb
posed over timer, whistle pressed between her teeth. She was too far away now, and I was too stubborn to give up when I said I would commit. So I walked.

Our track field wasn’t new or nice. It was pebbled with gravel instead of smooth lanes. When I finally reached the starting line, kids were already running and I was struggling to breathe. Invisible cotton balls clouded my throat transforming each breath into a dry wheeze. My cheeks flamed as I felt perspiration pool at my back, shirt clinging to my skin.

I was still walking with my old crutch, which was near its death. The cuff was dangerously flexible, shifting from side to side with every few steps. I kept tucked to the inside lanes to shorten the distance and to avoid collision with my classmates. To pass the time, I counted the swaying ponytails and the sweat stains on t-shirts as they ran. When her whistle trilled, I walked over half of a mile.

In many ways, it truly was my physical education. I was ignorant to some of my limitations and gym forced me to identify the weakness I would rather not confront.

Later, during my ten-hour nap, I discovered that my mom had called my school and explained that I should be excused from walking the mile in the future, formally adding it to my accommodations.

I walked that half of a mile for the same reason I don’t always press the button for handicap doors or choose to climb the stairs instead of taking the ramp. For the same reason I stood for the entirety of six hours for my dance marathon, even if I needed to hibernate for a full two days afterward. Sometimes it’s about pride, those small triumphs. I can’t run a 5K, but I can open the door for myself, take the stairs when I want to. And just because I have access to all these advantages doesn’t mean I always want them, that I sometimes don’t resent them. Sometimes it’s simply about choosing my challenges, ridiculous as it might seem, inconvenient as it might be.

For an entire year of middle school, I refused a wheelchair to transport me to class. I didn’t want more attention, another piece of equipment to magnify my disability. I finally relented when I realized that arriving five minutes late and exhausted to every class was interfering with my ability to learn.
In elementary school, I had aides who would support me with daily tasks—carrying my bag, helping me at recess, meeting me at my bus in the morning. I had a few who took their role too seriously and didn’t understand my strong desire for independence. I felt claustrophobic. I didn’t want to be followed to the pencil sharpener or be trailed at recess. I often didn’t understand why I needed special treatment. No one else needed someone following them, so why did I?

I wanted then what I still want now—normalcy. The presence of aides and crutches and wheelchairs just seemed to widen the gulf between myself and my classmates. In elementary school, I knew they saw me as privileged and spoiled, but they didn’t understand that special treatment was something I didn’t ask for, something I often didn’t want.

However, as contradictory as it may seem, special treatment was necessary when it came to physical education. When approached, my counselor swore that state standards said that annual physical education was mandatory for all students, but someone should have excused me from classes; I should have been considered the loophole.

Now, I am twenty-one and in college. It’s been two years since my last gym class and gym classes are no longer my mandatory misery. I can exercise or nap based on my energy and ability level, and I have since learned what works and what doesn’t. My fervent pursuit of independence has finally been fulfilled. There is a strange dichotomy of enjoying feeling free, yet also frustration that I must still rely on others for things I cannot do, but throughout my experience I have learned to ask for help. That stubborn streak has abated somewhat. I now take the help when it’s offered, as doing so does not represent weakness, but strength.

And in all the ways that I’ve changed, I still feel that flame catch when presented with a challenge, that dares me to take the steps, carry a heavy bag, or walk a little faster; the one that as it burns, insists, I can.
SEAN KENNY

Statues

a woman kneels in the dirt
her bronze shirt wrinkled
her brass teeth gritted
as though vexed at some
stubborn root.
she kneels, clutching the handle
of a long-gone spade
a dead spot
in the wind of time.

a prow-headed couple reclines
in the grass
basking in what would be
afternoon rays if it wasn't
late at night.

late at night as the kids stumble
in their grown-up clothes
across the dew-slick lawn,
a steel seed-pod awaits germination
slab of marble thrusts through granite—
a passionate earthquake.

a three-legged family watches over the
moon-cut bricks as the children head
inside, steel faces watching them
in case they stumble

the last door slams on the evening with an echoing slap that silences
the wind.

the gardener straightens up and
knuckles her back, her features
relaxing into
enfolding night.
the blade-headed couple tickle each other
in the darkness, steel digits rasping
like sore-throated lovers
while their three-legged children
chase each other among the
feathered trees

silhouettes and so much more.

steel faces shivered with sudden laughter
as the great metal seed
shuddered and ruptured,
unfurling tender fans
of gossamer in gold and
hyacinth.
Who can love a black woman?
Whose color is of the earth
The same earth the creator blew life into
The same earth that kisses every being that walks upon its delicate land
Whose skin is adored so much so by the sun, his touches leave her with a kind of golden glow,
That even the moon weeps silver tears at the sight of her majesty.

Who can love a black woman?
Whose hair is of the clouds
Full and free
Echoing the whispers of the wind
Flowing to the beat of the unsung drum rum-ba-dum-dum
Hear the beats flow through her soul, a soul that sings of growth and love.

Who can love a black woman?
Whose plump limps can speak the most intelligent words of wisdom,
New secrets and stories being embedded into the thoughts of this humanity
Articulating truths
Holding onto mysteries, mysteries to only to be solved within time

Who can love a black woman?
Whose full-fledged hips and backside groove with every step she takes
In perfect motion, motion with the rhythm
The rhythm of her soul
Flowing to the beat of the unsung drum rum-ba-dum-dum
Hear the beats flow through her soul, that soul that sings of growth and love.

Perhaps, perhaps one could love a black woman
If her skin was just a few shades lighter
If her hair was just a tad bit straighter
If her wide-set upturned nose could slide downward at a smaller angle ever so slightly
If her full hips could not be so evident, but whisked away from her very existence completely
If when she articulated her intelligence and her aspirations, it could just sound a little more white
If her full lips didn’t speak the truths about blackness in America—
Perhaps then, yes then, one could love a black woman.

But, if this is what I must do to be loved by this humanity, then this love is not for I,
For I’d rather drown in the beauty of my blackness than be saved by one who wants me to escape it.
Evidently, I do not need to know who can love a black woman, for I love myself.
Such a love prevails any
Such a love is above all
What fragmented memory carries importance to me, and why do you follow me down this rabbit hole of my spinal cord? I think I thought it be you, fragmented cliff-hanging memory, when apple picking followed me in a car, one sunny day, a yellow car brisking in a yellow sun, on a yellow highway in an unknown land in Minnesota.

What fragmented memory follows me next, and what do you chase after like children run amuck in the street after, I think I thought it be you again, disjointed door-hinge memory when a group of teenagers brought me to a candy store, one sunny day a dirt-gravel driveway sitting in a dirt-gravel parking lot, on a long highway in an unknown land in Minnesota.

What fragmented memory follows me next, and when did you run up to me in a long forgotten dream, abruptlying my blackened-eyed sleep then, I think I thought it be this memory again, muddled lime cocktail of a memory, when we arrived at the apple farm and I stole apples, red cherry delicious warm apples hugging taste buds and melting like sugar on appledrops, one sunny day, a green grass field littered with green leaf trees, off a distant highway in an unknown land in Minnesota.

What solidified memory follows me next, and who drives the yellow car brisking in the yellow sun, on a yellow highway driving me home from apple picking in the brisking sun on a warm Sun day then, I remember this memory again, sweet sleep kissed my eyes again.
sweet sleep which i had not felt in years of many, driving down the long yellow distant highway in an unknown land in Minnesota.
My first job began in a little store named “Fun Craft.” Its walls are covered in plaster crafts for kids to paint and happy colorful benches for them to sit on. The back is pretty empty except for one long table and one small box with a DJ booth. The purpose of the store is to be a birthday party place for children, like Chuck E. Cheese, but more classy, hands on, and expensive.

I really had no interest in working anywhere until my friend got a job at Fun Craft. Employee hours depended on parties, so I only had to work a few hours on weekends; it was one of the only steady jobs I could think of doing with my busy cheerleading schedule.

Of course only weeks after I got the job my best friend quit, and left me to my own devices against my stern Persian boss, near-illiterate Italian manager, and sex-addicted, pothead co-worker.

The first word that comes to mind when describing my time at Fun Craft is janky. If you’re not familiar with the word, Urban Dictionary gives a good definition: “inferior quality; held in low social regard; old and dilapidated; refers almost exclusively to inanimate material objects, not to people.” Yes, good ol’ Fun Craft was janky in most senses of the word…but it was up to me, basically, to hide this from the public.

My interview with the boss, Sima, was held in the party room. Though I had never had a job interview I knew something was off; my boss didn’t even look at the resume I spent hours making, and instead switched between grilling me with questions and ignoring my answers. Her sharp Iranian accent, dark calculating eyes, and tight, black bun confused and commanded my respect at the same time. How did this woman get in the business of birthday parties for children? She finished the meeting by saying, “Okay, well, I have a party coming in now so you can start your trial period as a party hostess. Go get an apron and Lauren will tell you what to do.” That’s right, no training period, no weaning, and no pay, because I wasn’t technically “hired” yet.

I was thrown into my first party without any prior warning; all of a sudden I was tasked with blowing up 40 balloons, wrestling 3-year-olds into smocks, and trying my best to follow a very strict protocol I knew almost nothing about. Sima sat behind the counter...
and watched me like a librarian watches loud children as I scrambled around. She did not give any instruction or aid. Occasionally she would take something out of my hand, like a paintbrush I was trying to clean, and say with her brisk accent, “How old are you that you don’t know how to clean a brush. This is how you do it. Now do it.”

Two very important things I learned about Sima during my first few parties:

1. She is the biggest cheapskate I’d ever met. The crafts were chipped and dusty, and made from plaster that came in bulk from China for less than a dollar a piece. She charged almost fifteen dollars for them, however. Also, she reused everything. Even small plastic cups that held the cheap acrylic paint had to be rinsed every day, and employees were only allowed to give the children scant amounts to cover their project. Children’s smocks were old button-down shirts that her husband used to wear, and even the glitter that went on the crafts was rationed. Despite this, the cheapest party was no less than five hundred dollars, and she drove a Mercedes-Benz convertible to work every day.

2. She was a strong believer in sink or swim. For slow learners like me, this was a huge source of stress. She barked her orders, leaving no time for explanation. Of course I sank most of the time in the beginning. I fumbled around, messily serving pizza and pretending to know the moves to a dance I had never heard of, and got to look forward to receiving a lecture at the end of the party on how poorly I did (side note: these lectures were the reason my friend quit).

One of the greatest examples of this sink or swim attitude was when I was “promoted” to be a DJ. Before, I was merely a party hostess. I handled cleaning, organizing, and basically anything the DJ needed. Of course the promotion did not give any monetary gain (we were all paid minimum wage), but it was more about status. The DJ is the one who handles the “fun,” who plays the music, organizes the dances, and must ensure the party is the best ever. I did not want to be a DJ. There seemed to be too much room for error, too many children and parents to please, and way too many buttons and knobs in the DJ booth. I distinctly remember Sima calling me the day I was “promoted.”

“Rae, you’ve been watching Lauren DJ, correct?”

If I answered no, I would get a lecture, so I answered, “Yeah, of course.”
“Good. You’ll be doing the DJ today and Lauren will be hosting. I’ll see you at 3.” And then the line went dead.

My first time DJ-ing was the deepest I’ve ever sunk at Fun Craft, or Fuck Crap which I had started calling it after my third lecture from Sima. I accidentally blew out one of the speakers while playing the uncensored version of “Imma B” by will.i.am— I didn’t know how to do volume control or how to change a CD. I made several children cry, including the birthday boy, from screaming too loud into the microphone, and nearly gave a parent an epileptic seizure from keeping the strobe lights on too long. The party was so awkward and terrible that Sima kicked me out of the DJ booth halfway and tried to heel the kids into submission.

Sima does not allow her employees to give up on any given task, so even though my first party was painfully terrible I was still forced to DJ at subsequent parties. Many people ask me why I even stayed at the job. My reasoning back then was that I needed the money, some little kids were cute, and I was too scared of Sima. I’m glad I didn’t quit, because eventually my practice paid off. I guess I became buoyant over time, for I sank less and less the longer I worked.

After a while I knew what to expect, I could look at the schedule for the day and prepare what I needed for the party in advance. I allowed myself to be the butt of the joke for the bratty girls who needed something in common (teasing me), I had to demand respect from the rowdy boys to prevent damage to the property, and make up for the silence when the children were shy. I knew what songs and dances to play before the parties even arrived. One essential thing: blowing up the “right” colored balloons to give out at the end, otherwise fights will break out. The most important thing to realize as a DJ is that you set the mood for how the party is going to be. If the DJ is awkward and shy, the kids are going to feed off that energy and the party will bust. To combat this I would stand up in front of the children and parents at the beginning of the party and introduce myself and get the kids pumped up. This is usually what I would say:

“HELLLLO BOYS AND GIRLS! Welcome to Fun Craft, I’m so glad you could all come out. Does everyone know why we’re here today? WHAT ARE WE CELEBRATING BOYS AND GIRLS? IS IT SOMEONE’S BIIIIIBIRTHDAY?” At this point, I would be screaming in my soprano cheerleader voice, and the children would be bouncing in their seats, screaming the name of
the birthday kid. “I WANT EVERYONE TO SAY THE LOUDEST HAPPY BIRTHDAY FOR TOMMY ON THE COUNT OF THREE!” They would then say a decent sounding “happy birthday!” but to really take them over the edge I would keep going. I would make them stand up and do jumping jacks to get them even more pumped up, “ONE MORE TIME, YOU TOO PARENTS! ONE TWO THREE.” Then 15-40 high-pitched younglings would screech “HAPPY BIRTHDAY,” and all adults would clutch their eardrums and talk louder for a little while.

The trick for me was to act almost crazed with excitement so I could coax it out of the little ones. Despite how I was really feeling, I always had to be on my game, or else the party would suck and some little boy or girl would go home sad. One day I came into work right after I had been dumped, literally thirty minutes before I walked in. Sima eyed me with trepidation as I wiped my blood shot eyes and released post-hysteria breathing sounds between “HAPPY BIRTHDAY!”’s. I did the cha-cha slide with a mechanical smile and took a crying break in the storage room while they ate their pizza. But whenever I was around any child or parent, I was the slightly crazy, annoyingly chipper DJ Sun-Rae.

As the months went on I put more and more into my job, not that I was getting much out of it. Sima didn’t let us keep our tips and never gave anyone a raise. But I dutifully memorized the words to Frozen and even choreographed dances for the more popular songs like “Call Me Maybe” and “Gangnam Style.” Every week meant a new mixed CD. I had stacks and stacks to choose from in an organization that didn’t make sense to anyone but me. Sima stopped yelling at me, but also fired all her other employees on a monthly basis. It seemed like the gods saw that I was becoming cocky in my position and decided to test me with the worst party I’ve ever had.

I knew it was going to be an interesting party when I couldn’t pronounce the birthday girl’s name correctly. It started out when all the guests arrived thirty minutes before the party was even supposed to start; nothing was set up and I had just clocked in when they came. The birthday girl was turning four, so the majority of the kids were three or younger. The birthday girl’s family was Indian, and all the relatives showed up. I’m talking grandmas, aunts, cousins, second cousins, divorced wives, etc. I should also mention that almost none of them spoke English and
did not want any English music played. All at once the store had been transformed to a claustrophobic madhouse, with children getting stampeded by strollers and paint getting flung onto the walls. Mind you, it was just me, my middle-aged manager Jocelyn, and my timid new co-worker Gabby (sex-addict Lauren quit to work at Disneyland), versus the seventy-plus people. They brought their own food in huge containers that needed to be heated and served in a specific way, but no one could understand the instructions. The worst part was the dance party in the back. The parents forbade me from turning on the disco ball because it made them dizzy, and they only wanted to listen to Indian music. The children were bored out of their minds, and decided to climb on me/tackle me, just to change things up. The Hokey Pokey played on a loop while I wrestled with children, Gabby was too scared of the masses to help me, and the parents were snapping photos on their iPads. I think I might still have some scratches from those little devils.

Yeah, some parties weren’t all that pretty; I couldn’t do anything but crawl onto my couch and complain to my mom afterwards. My parents got a kick out of all the stories I had—there were definitely some characters. But I was still proud of what I did; I could feed off the energy of the children and figure out how to bring out a smile on even the most timid of children. I guess I really liked it because I knew I was good at it and Sima noticed that, too. When another employee was messing up she would make me stand next to her as she yelled at them and compared them to me.

“Why can’t you be more like Rae? She engages the children blah blah blah blah...” This, of course, made me slightly despised by the hostesses. She was also always trying to get me to go to the main store in New York to DJ, but I liked being the queen of Fuck Crap, and didn’t want to compete with any other DJs.

One day in July I walked into the store and noticed that the walls were more bare than usual. Jocelyn, my manager who thought she was like a mother to me, seemed to be a bit weirder than usual—which is saying something. She kept mumbling in her Long Island accent to no one in particular about how she was going to buy a store of her own.

“You know I got my degree in Communications, I know this stuff. I mentored so many girls when I worked at Saks in New York; I had my own counter you know? These girls had nothing. I
gave them everything. I can have my own store. I would set it up completely different, you know?” And on and on and on.

I didn’t pay much attention to her accented, whispered, rants—I was too busy dancing with Sima to the newest Enrique Iglesias song. She was smiling and attempting to sing along, a sight I never thought I’d witness.

The party girl came in. She was turning nine and had fifteen of her closest friends. This was the ideal age and number of kids to have a party with. Everything seemed to go my way. We played High School Musical, and they actually followed the rules of Freeze Dance. Sima even let me eat pizza with them, which was strange because during one of the first parties she brought me to the back and lectured me for drinking a cup of fruit punch. Everything was going my way, the lights never glitched, no one vomited on the floor, and I (Sima) got a huge tip. But everything that goes up must come down.

After I finished mopping Sima gathered me, crazy Jocelyn, and quiet Gabby to the front and told us that she was selling the shop.

“Yes. Well, I’ve had a good run with this store but it is time to move on. Thank you for working so hard, everyone. I wanted to honor this last party, which is why I didn’t tell you I was closing shop. Now help me pack everything up into my car.”

As I packed the dusty little crafts into boxes, a flood of memories washed over me. Like when Sima ripped up my time-card because I didn’t clock in on the right date, or when the chubby 10 year old birthday boy called me DJ Sungay. Yeah this place was janky as hell. But I also laughed while I stacked up my countless CDs...I had been working at this job for a year and a half and had seen some crazy, weird, annoying things, but I put my heart into it and getting hugged by a child at the end of their party made it all worth it. No kid deserves to have a bad birthday.

I drove home and walked inside. My mom put the Times down and asked me how the party went, smiling in anticipation of a funny story.

“Good,” I hiccupped, “But I’m really going to miss that place.”

And I hugged my mom and cried for a good long time, because janky or not, Fun Craft taught me how to swim.
The vast field and mountains were gradually becoming orange as the sun came out. The upper part of the sky was still dark. I watched the view from the window as I rode the taxi that had left Denver International Airport around 5:30 am. I was traveling alone during my second summer break in college. After I had traveled around California and Utah, I came to Colorado. I wanted to see the house where I used to live ten years ago. The house with white walls, green roof, and a green door. The house where I spent my early elementary school years. I kept on watching the purple sky and the mountains as I thought about my childhood days.

When I was seven years old, I had a habit of sleepwalking. Every night, I went to sleep in the bed in my room, but sometimes—like once every three weeks—I woke up in different places. I woke up on the sofa in the living room, or under the wooden table in the dining room, or in my brother’s bed taking away his blanket. I never knew how I traveled to different places in the house at midnight.

My sleepwalking started about six months after my family and I moved from Tokyo to Colorado. I was born in Tokyo, and was brought up in there until the age of seven. We had to move because my father worked for IBM and they moved him. He was a computer engineer and worked long hours, so I rarely saw him at home although we moved together. My stay-at-home mother barely spoke English. Most of the time, she did all the housework and took care of my nine-year-old brother, Ken, my two-year-old sister, Emma, and me.

Mom came downstairs after she made Emma take a nap in her bed. “It’s time to do your homework, guys.” Mom smiled and sat down by the low wooden table in the living room.

“Oh, man!” Ken said. “I have to run now!” He leaped off the white sofa and dashed upstairs.

“Hey! Ken!” Mom called but he was already gone. “I have to catch him later,” she sighed. “Do you have some homework, Reina?”

I opened the zipper of my pink backpack and took out a
blue sheet of paper. Twenty math problems were printed on it. I was good at math so I didn’t feel too bad working on the homework. I liked math because I used to learn it in Tokyo too, and math problems didn’t ask me to write in English. It took me a lot of time when I had to read or write in English. I knew that it was because I am Japanese. I knew that I was different from other kids in the classroom, and that I needed to learn English to talk with them.

I finished the math homework in about ten minutes. I had only one problem I needed to ask for help from Mom. Mom knew everything, so she taught me how to solve four times eight.

“Great job, Reina.” Mom gently touched my head with her white hand when I finished solving all of them. She had a nice smile on her face.

I smiled too. I loved Mom’s smile. That was why I always did my homework and didn’t run away like Ken. Ken always played Mario Kart in his room until Mom yelled and forced him to get out his homework. Ken was good at making Mom mad. He often broke stuff. When he broke the TV screen into pieces by hitting it with his baseball bat and didn’t apologize, Mom got so mad that she locked him outside for a minute. I thought it would have been really scary. I hated to make Mom mad, so I always tried to be a good girl.

Putting the math homework into my backpack, I remembered that I wanted to tell her about my surprising news I had today. “Oh, Mom. Guess what happened to me this morning. I was sleeping on this sofa.” I tapped on the sofa behind me. “You saw me sleeping in my bed last night, right?”

“Yes, I saw you sleeping in your bed,” Mom said. “Hmm... You might have woken up around midnight and came here.”

I shook my head. “I didn’t wake up and move, Mom. When I woke up this morning, I was here. Maybe the Tooth Fairies moved me here.”

Mom laughed. “They may have.” She patted my shoulder and stood up.

The phone was ringing. Mom walked fast toward the white phone near the kitchen.

“Hello?” she answered, but started to speak in Japanese after that.

I knew she was talking with Dad by the way she spoke. Dad went to another place in the United States last week. He said
he had to work there for one week. I didn’t really know why he sometimes had to go to different places. Work seemed very complicated.

After I saw Mom put down the phone, I asked what she talked about with Dad.

“Dad said he can’t come back tomorrow.” Mom sighed.

“He has to stay in Los Angeles for another week.”

I didn’t know what to say because Mom looked sad and tired.

Emma started crying upstairs. She was a baby, so she often cried when she couldn’t find Mom around her. Mom went upstairs to calm Emma. She also had to make Ken stop racing with his Kart.

Two days had passed, and it was Saturday. Just after I got up that day, I looked into the mirror in the bathroom, and noticed that my eyes looked weird. They were much thinner than usual. I tried opening them wider but it didn’t make much difference. My eyelids were covering the top half my eyes like heavy snow on the roof. I wondered why. Maybe my eyes were so tired that they couldn’t open properly today. I stared at the mirror. The serious problem here was that my face looked awful. I didn’t want to meet anyone looking like this. I knew people are going to say that I look weird today, and laugh at this awful face. What a day. Thank God, at least it was Saturday. I only had to meet Mom, Ken, and Emma.

I kept my face facing the floor as I walked down stairs. My hair helped me hide it like a curtain. I entered the dining room filled with the smell of coffee. I peeked out of my black hair curtain. I saw Mom stirring eggs on the pan in the kitchen.

“Good morning, Mom,” I said as I pretended that I was just stroking my hair with my hand.

“Good morning, Reina.” Mom kept on stirring.

I sat down on my chair at the dining table. I was still stroking my hair. I didn’t know what else I could do to keep naturally hiding my face inside the hair curtain. Maybe it was unnatural because I didn’t usually stroke my hair at the dining table.

“Reina,” Mom said.

My heart jumped up a little. Did she notice that I was trying to hide my face? I stopped stroking.

Mom continued, “Why were you crying and acting violently last night?”
I thought for a moment but I couldn’t understand the meaning of her question. “What did you say?”
Mom sighed. “I said, why were you crying like a baby last night? It was around midnight.”
I was confused. I totally forgot about my thin eyes and looked at her face. “But I didn’t cry, Mom. I was sleeping last night.”
Mom looked at me for a moment. “You were crying,” she said. “You just don’t remember.” Her eyes went back to the eggs. Her face looked a little tired.
Maybe I just didn’t remember, I thought. Mom would not tell a lie. Maybe I made her tired waking her up around midnight. Maybe she was mad at me. I knew what I should say to make her feel better. I faced the floor again and said, “I’m sorry.”
As we ate toast and eggs for breakfast, Mom taught me that eyelids become heavier and eyes become thinner when people cry a lot before going to sleep. She said they would recover soon. Ken stopped walking and gave me a weird look when he first saw my face. I quickly faced the floor and shut my hair curtain, but it was too late. I heard him laugh and shout, “You look weird!” He teased me all morning so that I had to hit his head six times with my math textbook. Emma didn’t seem to recognize the change of my face. She was laughing and throwing her naked Barbie dolls beside me as usual. In the afternoon, I noticed that my eyes had recovered to their original size. I smiled at the mirror.
Before I went to bed that day, I opened the white lacy curtain in my room and looked at the sky. The sky was dark and cloudy. I wanted to wish upon the stars but no stars were showing up today. I decided to make a wish anyway. I closed my eyes. I wished that I would sleep well every night and would not cry at midnight. I wished that I would never get thin eyes. I wished that I would never make Mom tired and mad. I said all the wishes three times in my heart so that the wishes would reach to the stars. I looked at the dark sky again and went to bed. I fell asleep, nice and deep. I was sound asleep until I heard some voices.
Mom was saying something. I heard someone crying and screaming too. What is going on? I saw the brown wooden floor of the living room. I was sitting there. My legs were kicking the floor violently like I was doing swimming kicks. It took me a while to recognize that it was me who was crying and screaming.
“That’s enough, Reina.” Mom was standing in front of me.
I saw her gray pants and her red slippers. I didn’t see her face but I could tell from her voice that she was really tired and irritated. I should stop crying, I thought. I knew that crying makes mom angry. I didn’t want to make her mad. Stop crying. Stop kicking the floor. I tried hard to calm myself down. Stop crying. My crying didn’t stop. My heart was beating fast. There was a violent animal inside me. A violent and mad animal that was totally out of my control. Stop kicking the floor. My legs didn’t stop.

“What do you act like this?” Mom said. She knelt down on the floor looking straight to my eyes. Her eyes looked serious. Stop crying. Stop kicking the floor. I stared at the floor. I felt my tears running down my face and soaking the collar of my blue pajama. *Why am I crying like this? Why?* My legs became tired and finally stopped kicking. I felt a little pain on my heels. Mom came a bit closer. “Why? Tell me, Reina.” She reached her hand toward my shoulder.

I looked at her white hand. The hand I loved. I felt comfortable whenever she touched me with that hand. I wanted to wait for it to come to my shoulder but the cruel animal inside me didn’t like it. My hand slapped her arm. Her hand went down to the floor. Mom’s eyes became wider for a second. I was sobbing. Mom did not move. I knew Mom was disappointed. I didn’t know what to do. I kept sobbing. Soon I felt the violent emotion of the animal again. My legs started kicking her red slippers. My hand started pounding her hand.

“That’s ENOUGH!!” Mom suddenly stood up and grabbed my wrists. She started to walk dragging me behind her.

I cried louder. I twisted my body and tried to escape but it didn’t work. Mom’s hands were holding me too tight. My hips were sliding on the wooden floor. *What is she going to do?* The white sofa in the living room went farther and farther away. I heard her fast and loud footsteps. My heart was beating faster. I twisted my body again. She stopped. We were in front of the door of our house. *The door...* I knew what she was going to do then.

“No!” I stood up. I moved my legs and my arms using all my strength. But it just made her hands grab me stronger. I cried louder. She opened the green heavy door. I felt the cool air on my wet cheeks.

“You should cool down!” Mom was pushing me outside. “NOOOooo!!” I shook my arms and kicked the floor, but
my body was pushed out of the house and into the darkness. The door closed. I could only see the light of a small lamp hanging by the door. I could only hear the sound of my sobbing. I turned the knob and pulled it, but the door didn’t open. It was locked. *It was locked.* I cried like the end of the world. I banged on the door using both of my hands. The door remained closed. Everything besides me stayed silent. The cool air cooled down my feet, but didn’t cool down my head.

I didn’t know how long I cried there. It wasn’t a long time. I gradually became tired and started to sob quietly. I sat down on the brick stairs, and stared at my toes. The leaves on the tree in the front yard were rustling. I looked around. A weak streetlight in front of the yard was blinking with a strange sound. No one was walking on the street, and the house across the street didn’t have any lights on. Very quiet and dark. I wished there were a lot of lights and buildings like Tokyo. I looked at my toes again. It was getting cold. The door finally opened then. I saw Mom and the light from inside the house. I stood up. My eyes looked up at Mom’s face.

“Did you cool down enough?” Mom said.

I said nothing. I walked inside still sobbing quietly. I kept on walking and left Mom behind. I didn’t want to talk with her. I got to my bed. I wiped my tears with my sleeves and wrapped myself in my blanket. The violent animal inside me was calm.

My face is gonna look awful tomorrow, I thought. And when I go down stairs, Mom will say, “You were crying and screaming last night. Do you remember?”

My habit of sleepwalking was gone by the time I was eight. My family and I moved back to Tokyo soon after I became nine. I was glad to go back to my home country although I missed my friends and the view of the great mountains in Colorado.

The taxi stopped to the side of the street.

“Is this the right place?” The driver turned back and looked at me.

“Yes. Thank you.”

I stood on the sidewalk for a while after I got off the taxi. The house with white walls, green roof, and a green door was in front of me. I walked closer to the house. Nobody seemed to live there. The white paint on some parts of the wall had fallen off, and I could see the skin of the wood. Ten years had passed since I
moved out of this house. Using my iPhone, I took some photos and sent them to my mother who was at home in Tokyo. She was looking forward to seeing the photos of our old house.

I put the iPhone in my pocket as I slowly walked through the front yard. I stood in front of the green door. It was smaller than the one in my memory.
EMILY SHUE

Eve as a Book in the Bible

Eve gave Adam his rib back last Tuesday night, told him that it was nothing more than a thorn in her side for all of those years and by the way, the apple tasted better than you ever did. God created women from the bone of a man. Last Monday, Adam broke a few of Eve’s bones because she didn’t get dinner on the table fast enough—he never touched that rib, though. Why would he want to destroy the one thing he actually valued? When he apologized over peas and carrots on Tuesday, she split her body at the seams just to give him back the only part of her that he could possibly claim as his own, returned it through his jugular and watched the blood burst through like fireworks. Later, as we killed a bottle of wine, she said, “You know, we ate the fruit together, but I didn’t learn a thing about the knowledge of truth and evil until he dealt the first blow. Hell, maybe the snake was just trying to warn me.”

Isn’t it funny? Creation and destruction are always the same when you look at them through the eyes of a man who believes he is God and you are just another one of the animals he didn’t bother to name.

On my eighteenth birthday my mother told me that the reason she got pregnant with me was because she knew my father wouldn’t hit her for at least nine months and she was tired of singin’ those punching bag blues. I wish I could open up my chest and remove all of the parts that came from him. I wish it was as simple as a single bone swirled in a pile of dust; dirt in my veins would feel cleaner than his blood ever has. On bad days I can still hear his voice in my head; on worse days I choke on his words as they leave my own mouth. On bad days I can still feel his hands around my throat;
on worse days I look down at my hands and see his fists.

I used to believe that if I gave my body to enough men maybe one of them would conquer it in a way that was gentle, maybe one of them could map out all the ugly pieces and scare them off for good.

Back then, I didn’t know they would remove all the wrong parts, didn’t know that the ugly ones just grow back.

Eve gave Adam his rib back last Tuesday night, thought she had finally found her way out of the garden for good but just ended up at my door, and I didn’t have the heart to tell her that there are some things you can’t give back.

Even as we spoke, Adam’s rib was returning to its rightful place at the bottom of her ribcage, stronger than ever before and we were both still trapped in paradise.
Boys

In preschool Joey Stanziola laughed at me when I tripped and fell into the sandbox.

It was heartbreaking, really. I’d named a few of my stuffed animals after him. Told my mom I was going to marry him.

Then he laughed.

It wasn’t funny. I landed next to my favorite toy: the strainer. I preferred it over the other toys because it was bright red. A lot of girls only liked red because it was the color closest to pink and games like Trouble or Sorry didn’t have any pink pieces. But it was my favorite color because it was the first in the rainbow, despite all that nonsense everyone was always chanting about first being the worst. So during recess I’d sit with just my feet in the box, straining sand onto my toes, pretending I was my great-grandmother sprinkling bread crumbs over chicken. When I fell, my right knee hit one of the sides of the box. Blood dripped, a red snake slinking down my leg from my knee. Slowly. Deliberately. It stung like the spanking I’d once received for being “fresh.”

I didn’t cry because I didn’t want Joey to call me a baby. I wanted more than anything to stick my tongue out at him as I shakily stood up and turned to walk away, but my mother said that was rude, and my grandmother said it wasn’t ladylike. So I didn’t do it. Instead, I asked Mrs. Adams for a Band-Aid, and one of the teacher’s aids brought me into the bathroom, patted my knee with a wet paper towel and told me I was brave.

But all I heard was Joey laughing in my mind. Head tilted back at an angle that allowed me to see straight up his nostrils. Pointing. Not moving toward me. Not helping me up or getting the teacher. Laughing. Over and over.

In the bathtub later I held the big blue cup my mother used every night to wash my hair. I poured water on the scrape over and over again.

I thought maybe if I kept cleansing it, it would disappear.

On July 3rd, the summer after my freshmen year of college, Cameron took me to Belmar. It was my favorite beach because it was the cheapest, and if you walked down by the pier off 2nd Street you could ditch the sunscreen-spackled crowds. No
one ever went down there because it reeked of fish and seagull shit. But, if you walked a little bit past the pier the smell faded and you could watch boats ducking under the draw-bridge that proudly straddled the inlet.

Once we held our breath and walked past the pier, I picked up a stick. Cameron picked up a thin piece of driftwood. We started drawing sketches in the sand: a palm tree, a house, a dog. Our sketches: a kindergartener’s best attempt at Pictionary, an artist’s doodles on a napkin at a Starbucks. Circles and squares and squiggles in the sand.

“What the heck is that supposed to be?” I asked, pointing at the giant circle Cameron was drawing.

He closed the circle then attached a tiny triangle to it. “A whaaaaaaaallllllle!” he exclaimed, making the word sound as big as the creature itself.

I laughed, took a step back so I could see it better, and then stubbed my toe on a rock poking out of a pile of sand. Cursing, I hopped a few inches holding my foot in my hand. Lost my balance. Let the sand catch me as I fell into it.

He kicked up sand as he ran toward me. It swelled in the wind then sprinkled back down to the ground, like plumes of water dissipating in the Bellagio fountain.

“I’m fine, I’m fine, get back to your masterpiece,” I said when he got to me.

“No way, I gotta teach this mean rock a lesson,” he replied, picking it up, turning it over in his hands once. Twice.

He threw it into the ocean. It landed with the plop of a plump raindrop.

A hand, an offering: he helped me stand.

In second grade Drew Intile told me I had buck teeth. Drew Intile. There was some debate about the proper pronunciation of his last name.

Some people thought it was In-tile, others thought it was In-til-ee. I thought In-tile suited him much better. It sounded harsher. Int-til-ee reminded me too much of purple flowers blooming in a basket on a kitchen window sill.

That year, “specials” were everyone’s favorite class of the day. Each day of the week we’d go to a different special: Art on Mondays, Gym on Tuesday and Thursdays, Music on Wednesdays, and library time on Fridays. Since there were six
second grade classes and only five specials, our class had to split up. Three students from our class went to each of the other classrooms for specials. Drew Intile, Joey Stanziola and I were assigned to Ms. Matala’s room, which was all the way down the hall from our classroom.

It was a long stretch of hall to walk without a teacher.
“What’s wrong with your teeth?” Drew asked me the first day, nudging Joey and snickering.
“N-nothing,” I replied, looking down at the tiles passing beneath my feet. I tried to focus on stepping in the middle of them, not on the lines.
“Yeah, you have buck teeth!” he said, pointing.
I brought my hand up to my face, shielding my mouth.
“You look like a beaver!” Joey added, sticking his own front teeth out and crossing his eyes. He looked like a deranged chipmunk.

I was shaking too much to answer.
I didn’t cry until ten minutes later, when I took the hall pass and went to the bathroom. I checked under all the stalls first before I chose the one furthest from the door. The light had gone out over it. I sat on the toilet with my pants on, allowed myself three minutes to cry, and then wiped my face with a stiff piece of toilet paper. I went back to art and didn’t say a word as I bent over my pinch-pot, squeezing the clay until my thumbs and index fingers turned an unpitying pink.

“Your teeth are beautiful,” Cameron whispered one night last summer. “Like tiny white pearls.”
I don’t hold his clichés against him. He’s a mathhead, not a writer.
“You sir, are just trying to get into my pants,” I joked.
He laughed, and then said, “And you miss, are trying to dodge a compliment. But really, Krissy. They’re beautiful.”
I shook my head like I always did.
That night I had a dream: all of my teeth spilling out of my mouth like words. They sounded like pennies hitting the floor: clink, clink, clink. Cameron picked them up one by one as they fell. He gently dropped them in his shirt pocket, promising to help me put them back in.
“Thank you,” I whispered to the dark.
In fifth grade Joey Stanziola and Kenneth Sulfaro threw garbage at me on the school bus.

Fifth-graders got to sit in the back of the bus, out of earshot from the driver. My seat was the second-to-last one on the right. Joey and Kenneth sat in the very last seat diagonally behind me. That day, I was reading *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*. I’d started the series on Sunday. It was Tuesday.

The first piece of garbage landed in the hood of my bright yellow Mudd sweatshirt. My mom always said the best way to get people to leave you alone is to ignore them. Eventually, they’ll get bored and stop. So I continued reading. Cookie crumbs showered down onto my Aloha Teal backpack as a Chips Ahoy bag sailed over me. A tootsie roll wrapper landed in my hair. “Bull’s-eye,” Kenneth exclaimed.

I turned the page. A water bottle landed on the book in my lap. Startled by its sudden appearance, I jumped. They laughed. There was still water in it, which seeped out and blurred the words on the pages. Hand shaking, I picked up the water bottle, and without making eye contact with either of them, threw it onto the floor.

I asked my mom to drive me to school the next morning.

The first weekend of college we had a dance. I didn’t want to go. It was semi-formal, which I could never quite figure out the definition of.

“Just wear something nice,” our RA had said to us in our hall meeting.

I didn’t bring a whole lot of semi-formal attire with me to college. I had two pairs of heels, both of which I’d only worn once, and those were sitting in the back of my closet at home. My high school graduation dress was folded up in my dorm room dresser. I pulled it out, shrugged, and put it on. It was white and tight, with pink and orange flowers wrapping around my hips and stretching up the sides of the soft fabric.

5:30. I still had some time to tidy up the room. An empty box of White Cheddar Cheez-Its sat on my desk, two empty bags of Goldfish lay on top of my dresser. I threw them into the already overflowing bag of garbage, tied the bag shut, and walked into the hall to put it in one of the garbage cans by the stairs.

There was a group of guys outside my door debating over whether or not they had to wear pants to the dance or if they could
get away with shorts. They were athletes. Basketball, baseball, something with a ball that I couldn’t remember. I squeezed by, looking down at the carpet.

I heard the conversation abruptly shift, a car swerving to change lanes.

“What’s her name?” one of them asked
“I think it’s Sam,” another replied.
“No, no, that’s her roommate,” the third said.
“Hey!” the first one called.
I dropped my bag into the can. Thud. I looked behind me, but then realized they were talking to me.

“What’s your name?”
“Uh, Kristen...” I replied.
“I like your dress,” the third one called.
My eyes narrowed. It couldn’t be a compliment. It never was a compliment.
But he smiled at me and didn’t laugh.
“Um, thanks,” I answered without making eye contact, went back in my room and shut the door.
So strange.

Before leaving for dinner, I checked my phone. There was a message from Cameron.

“You’re beautiful. I love you so much,” he’d said.
I sank on the bed, sinking into the Tempurpedic mattress topper. Swung my feet back and forth, looking down at the chipped red nail polish on my toes.
Then I replied, “No. And I love you too.”
DARRAH HEWLETT

Diamond Heart

Skeptical Miss, please absolve me.
I know not what I did

but you freeze
on this sidewalk,
solid as Diamond but

soft as talc.

Their corundum leers, grips,
jeers, scratches and claws
your rose quartz harmless soul,

your freedom tainted
exterior cracked,
bonds torn
and unformed.

Those imbeciles
should crumble.

I am so sorry that
my silicon courtesy
is not enough
to help, in some

iridescent way,
mend your Diamond heart.
PAIGE SZMODIS

To Apollo

Today, it’s time for dusk to fall and cast shadows over your golden arrows, blindingly bright from their time spent in the sun’s spotlight. I am Eileithyia born again—remember, I am the Goddess of Childbirth—I am Artemis; without me, you would be stuck in our mother’s weak womb. I protect all the young women with silver crescent scars. We don’t need your golden healing for our open wounds.

Remember, I am the Goddess of the Wilderness. This island is made of my flesh. I grew mountains out of my hip bones. I pulled the cypress tree from my curved spine to shield the young doe and their robust ribcage antlers. Your pythons and ravens and hyacinths would wither without my forest. And I have waited, too long, hidden in the caverns of my cavities from your bloated sunrays.

Remember, I am the Goddess of the Hunt. I don’t need sunlight to shoot straight. My bow and arrows pierce your prophecies of peace. I twist your ambrosia words into silver spears made of my prey’s chipped teeth. Your lyres and hymns only exist to call my nymphs, to twist more thorn bush mazes in the forest.

Remember, I am the Goddess of the Moon. Come dusk, you must stumble into the waves of my blue blood, tides tugged by my smirking silver crescent. I don’t need your laurels; I cast my own halos from moonlight. My melody resounds enough; I can’t hear your harmony. While your light is contained in lanterns, mine controls the sea.

One day, everyone will rejoice in the dark dawn between the days, when you will fall again, and I will rise from my mountains of bone marrow to see how your sun makes my moon shine brighter, wrapping silver halo reflections around my island, my skin.
LAUREN GEIGER

Joanne and Her July Garden

Auntie, you kneeled among your red sunflowers in your patch of backyard in South Bethlehem—a patch of dirt that you shaped into gardens lush with lavender. Chain-link fence framed your figure, hunched like the neighbor’s plastic Kiddie Pool propped against the fence, draining drops of sun-warmed water into your zinnia. The sun-warmed scent of summer dripped into the patchwork of gardens, back porches, and chain-link fence. Beyond the rows of red brick houses, beyond your straw sunhat hovering over the tomato plants, the steel plant’s smoke stacks sank to earth. A pigeon like a small, sea-smoothed stone swooped to your birdbath from the coop behind the back alley. Look, you said. Look.

Auntie, I think of you kneeled among your red sunflowers. A cabbage moth suns its paper wings on the rim of your sunhat. Your soil-sodden fingers guide green beans to wooden poles. Four summers ago, when we moved your boxes from South Bethlehem, I ran back to the garden to see if we left anything behind. It felt strange to see weeds mar your saffron marigolds as your wooden trellis of moonflowers sank to earth. I plucked a rusted trowel from a bed of fallen blooms beneath the butterfly bushes. A pigeon like a small, sea-smoothed stone swooped to your birdbath. Look.
Sometimes I feel you, still,
in the hollow of my stomach.
I dream of your drum beat,
fluttering staccato inside.
I wonder what it might
have been like, to see you once
unhidden, nestled in the bend
of my elbow. I’m full of empty space.
Hunger after dark.

Yellow walls paint my eyelids,
a room I’d found downtown
snuck quietly between a buy-and-sell
and Mickey’s Subs and Pizza.
It smelled funny, cherry cough drops
and sour milk, just like Annie said
last New Year’s. Spilling secrets from
wine glasses, we stained the carpet red.

I hope you like it there, that honey-colored
box with its plastic chairs and April magazines.
It gave me butterflies, gossamer wings white
and blue. Did you enjoy those?
My last gift before the doctor called,
Dr. Two-Gold-Teeth-and-Bald-Livered-Head.
He stuck frozen steel inside
and called me by my first name.
I rode the bus home, leaving you behind.
JORDAN HODESS

Young white girls, hollow bodies, and home

Young white girls in their (some focused, some not; some color, some not) pictures
singing folk songs in floral prints and flowery hair
find a weakness in me.
Springtime grows in their breath and smiles,
smiles to me, or to themselves,
maybe the flowers,
perhaps the folk songs
held inside their hollow-bodied instruments,
songs that I try to fill my hollow frame with;
smiles—they stack lightly on the music, not filling much space
perhaps to the wind
or their friends
or maybe the hem that gently flutters on their knees
now and again.
I can smell springtime when I look at this picture long enough,
suddenly tasting the air of a neighborhood drive
to which I’ve never been
but would gladly visit.
Although,
how like the ones I already know it will be.
How strangely at home we be in places as strangers;
how odd we travel there in pictures of others;
and how I feel solemnly at home where there’s
a thrift store dress
and acoustic guitar.
MORGAN LARESE

Soldiers at Gettysburg
MARIO HEITMAN

Pattern
MICHAEL HEIMBAUGH

Foliage
SARAH DEFELICE

Arrow
MARY HOLMCRANS

Move Out
CHUKYI KYAPING

Wanderers
JADA GRICE

Mama’s Stance on Sugar

White people have never did a thing directly to you
They are humans, Beet
They just have it so hard because they have had to live their lives
being processed sugar
White and grainy
They are afraid to go outside of the norms
They are afraid to be raw sugar
Sweetened and Natural
Brown and underrated
The sidewalk here is lovely. I like to look at it as you talk. Sometimes you go on and on but say nothing at all, so I occupy myself with scrutinizing the pebbles submerged in frozen concrete. There are leaves strewn across the way here and there. I like to memorize the patterns of the veins. The leaves are green like apple skins, but also green like the dark glaze on my dinner plates or the cool color of your eyes when it's nighttime and you stare off into the emptiness of a streetlight. Some of the leaves died months ago and somehow lingered through the winter. They are the same brown, almost-orange color of a lipstick my mother once bought that chapped my lips so badly I couldn't kiss you for days without feeling a little embarrassed.

I step from leaf to leaf, keeping time with the iambic ebb of your voice. I don't remember where the conversation has gone. There's a pause in which you linger on your last syllable for emphasis before taking a breath. Here it'd be generally appropriate for me to nod and look over thoughtfully as though in agreement, which I do, because at times like these when I am neither entirely comfortable nor entirely sure of what you're talking about, I find it easiest to just be appropriate. There's a certain loneliness in our peripatetic walks together. I think maybe that sort of loneliness is everywhere, but no one is ever supposed to acknowledge it. I suppose this is why you talk to fill the silence of the neighborhood.

My English teacher used that word, “peripatetic,” today in class and I took a liking to it. I like the way it sounds when I say it right without slipping over the t's and p's, which for whatever reason becomes harder and harder to do the more times I say it. It's the lazy time of afternoon where there is no movement. We are anomalies. Some antic part of me tells me that we should seek shelter, despite, or perhaps because of, the perfection of the afternoon. We should be punished for disturbing the stillness. At the very least, we should stop moving.

Unaware, you continue rambling.

"Rosie," you say, "Are you listening?"

My mother is having a hors d'oeuvres party tonight. There will be finger foods and wine in little glasses with delicate stems
and women with shaved legs wearing sundresses that respectfully reach a touch past their knees. People will come over in the afternoon and will stay until late into the night even though the invitation did not specify any dinner to follow the little platters or the wine glasses. Your mother will be there and she’ll feel uncomfortable on the porch eating the little finger foods and passing on the wine and sitting next to all those shaved legs. Or maybe not. Maybe she’ll be fine.

My mother will want me to stay, sit, and talk to her friends about something small and simple. My father doesn’t particularly care if I stay or leave. Martha keeps talking about her English essay, the one she wants me to help her with, the one about *The Catcher in the Rye* and the red hat and the whole point of such a plotless novel.

“Rosie,” she says, “do you know a word for something like the opposite of loneliness? Is there, like, even a word for that? Rosie, are you even paying attention?”

And so as the afternoon melts the cars begin pulling up, and the chairs fill with the middle-aged women and their husbands, and the cheese set on the table is freed from its wrappings and slowly devoured. Your mother, it would appear, is in her element.

You’re uptown with the boys tonight. That’s what we call them. That’s the name our mothers have given to your friends in the language of wine and cheese and good company. The Boys. You told me on the phone that they were lonely and needed their ringleader, and I have yet to decide if you really are the linchpin or if you just love to flatter yourself. Or maybe that you just didn’t want to be here.

I sneak upstairs to my room as soon as the last of the guests, very fashionably late, wander up the front steps. It’s the time of night when the street looks very gray and blurry if you look at any one spot for very long. Nobody but Mama notices when I leave. She’s not angry. She probably just wishes that I’d stuck around to pour more of the wine I am not allowed to drink for more of the women I am supposed to flatter. Sometimes all the people make me very uncomfortable, and sometimes it is just nice to sit quietly and watch them.

During times like these I like to list in my head all of the facts that I know to be true. I start with the ones about me. I am seventeen years old, and I have a freckle on my right eyelid and my left big toe. Slowly I get farther and farther away until I am...
telling myself that ethyl formate exists in small quantities in interstellar space and that the ocean floor is 6.87 miles down at its deepest point, which is located in the Mariana Trench.

Before I left, your mother, drunk off good company, had been telling me about her wedding to your father, and about how lovely it is to marry into your family. She winked at me over the rim of her water glass. She does not mention her divorce. I smiled and shifted in my seat and said that someday I’d love to wear my mother’s wedding dress. Privately, I listed the European capitals in my head a few times over.

For a few minutes afterwards I sat and watched Kyle Robinson from around the corner explain the subtleties of the red wine in his glass. He is a very funny man, Kyle Robinson. The kind of funny that people call you when they don’t want to be rude by calling you what they really think. He lives alone in a big house filled with things he does not use. He likes dogs and smokes kush from a long thin clay pipe, which he says he bought in Ireland in the eighties, and keeps a wealth of useless information on hand at all times. I think that maybe he has had ADHD since before ADHD had a name. He doesn't expect you to talk when he has conversations with you. This is perhaps my favorite thing about him. I left as Kyle Robinson began his explanation of grape cultivation to your mother and Mrs. Bauer and another woman whose name I don’t know. I adequately flattered the women with the shaven legs, and Martha, sitting with Mrs. Bauer’s oldest son, seems to have forgotten about the opposite of loneliness. This is a thing I would call success.

Martha’s and my room is in the attic of our house and has painted plasterboard ceilings and walls. There is a ceiling fan and a few air vents, but nothing keeps the heat down during the humid spring and summer. Sometimes I sleep in the bathtub on the floor below to escape the heat.

Tonight the heat is tolerable. I put on some music and almost forget about it. I think about what you are doing, uptown with the boys, and imagine you gathered in a loose circle in the parking lot behind the Seven-Eleven. I see you laughing groggily, moving in slow motion, the scent of exhaust mingling with dank, earthy smoke. I don’t like these thoughts so I turn the music up louder. You said you would stop doing those things because you know that I hate them, but I know that you secretly still want to sometimes, and it makes me so uncomfortable to demand that you
stop screwing around. I hate the way marijuana has come to smell, on you at least, like lack of ambition.

I turn the volume up even louder and allow myself to stop thinking. *Fuck it, right?* I think, disguising my own dull anxiety with haphazard nonchalance. *I'll just stop thinking.* I turn the music up louder still. It feels good to be swallowed up in sound. I like the piano in the beginning because it's soft and gentle and lonely, and I like the way the sound builds until it breaks over like waves and I tumble around in the surf with water in my nose and ears and forced up under my eyelids. Most of all, I love the percussion.

It's a very nice way to forget about thinking.

Later on I read an article on schizophrenia and the corpus callosum, and laugh at a political cartoon on the internet that uses the shrinking trends of women's underwear as proof of global warming. I think about how beautiful it is that ethyl formate makes the universe taste like raspberries.

Eventually I sleep. I dream of wine and cheese and good company and the Mariana Trench. I dream of the shadowy landscape of the uptown corners, cowed by monsters and smoke and the laughter of middle-voiced boys. There is a moment when these dreams turn into a strange sex fantasy of you, and I don't remember the last time I dreamed about sex with you. I don't need to dream about sex anymore, because it happens all the time now, even sometimes when I don't really want it to.

In the middle of the night I wake up with a feeling of strangeness, or maybe of separateness. My body is hollow and unfamiliar. I don't know why.

There is a woman who lives across the street whose name I do not know. She's been living there with her husband and their dog going on six months now, and I've never learned their names. The woman has very small feet, and she likes to exaggerate their size by wearing high heels with sharp, pointy toes. My mother once said that women wear these kinds of shoes because they're some kind of assertion of power and dominance, the same way long fingernails with red polish are. It's all about the claws. Kyle Robinson says she's got a big job as an account manager at a corporate something-or-other, and I suppose claws are necessary there.

It's funny though, because when I happen to see her on Sundays, as we both head off to our preferred Sunday services,
she's always wearing the same pair of round-toed patent-leather flats. Presumably they were very good-looking shoes once, but now they're stained and scuffed and the leather's been worn very thin in the toes. I often wonder what this means.

All of my shoes have round toes. You've probably never thought about my toes or my shoes or what any of it means. The first time I realized this I felt overwhelmingly bitter. But that's beside the point.

Sometimes I worry about her, the woman with the pointy toes. Most nights she comes home very late from work, but I don't think she's ever missed a Sunday Mass.

Occasionally I see her car pulling in late, and I watch her sneak quietly into her house. Her husband keeps all the lights on for her and I watch the rooms fall dark, one by one, as she makes her way up to their bed. I wonder if he gets lonely without her-- if the dog and the lights are really enough to keep him company at night while his wife works her pointy-toed job with the other pointy-toed people.

I wonder if he longs for Sundays.

Today you and I are outside walking around under the sun again. We crisscross the sidewalks aimlessly and you are talking. Kyle Robinson and the pointy-toed woman were left behind as we followed the railroad tracks into the next town over, which is very much like ours except that they have a McDonald's here, and are generally more liberal with their liquor licenses.

Right now you are explaining the relative merit of one thing versus another, but I'm not sure anymore what these things are or what context they are in or why they are even remotely important. So I just nod and agree.

You look at me rather suddenly with a sort of frustrated confusion and ask gently, "Rosie, what would you like to talk about?"

What would I like to talk about? I don't know. I don't have anything to say.

"I don't particularly care," I tell you.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. Really. Don't worry. I like listening to you talk." It's gotten so normal to say stupid things like this. You give me a look to suggest you won't be dropping the question anytime soon, and rephrase it quietly a few steps later. Your voice is so soft and low—it catches ever so slightly in your throat and makes me want
to hide. I can only ever seem to tell you what I think you want to hear, and sometimes this makes me hate you. Mostly though, I hate myself. I think I’m scared of you but I don’t quite know why.

Soon we come upon a little park with a playground and lots of trees. It’s the park we went to last year, the day after we kissed for the first time. It was here that we kissed for a second time, and a third and fourth and fifth time. It was cooler then, it was April, and April is never as nice as people feel it should be. I think it’s strange that I can kiss you now without thinking about it or feeling it, and it makes me a little uneasy. I ponder this awhile so that the next time we kiss I can say that I proved myself wrong.

So we wander some more before you turn to look at me under the oak tree in the park where Sharon Mayer saw us kissing in the dark from her passing car and made such a fuss the next day in your history class. We kissed until our lips were swollen, back in the time when we were sloppy and it was cold and we didn’t know how to keep our spit in our mouths.

In those days you and I were children. I wonder if, in these days, maybe I am not.

It’s August, three years later, and I am getting high for the first time. I am twenty, but just barely, and home from college for the summer. We are sitting in the grass in the backyard as the night falls and fireflies have come out to play in the smoke from the fire and from Martha’s slowly shrinking joint. This is not what our mother would call good company, but at least we have boxed wine and a badly rolled joint to pass between us. A token of our undying affection for each other, I guess. Actually, I don’t really know most of these people. Martha brought them over.

The smoke curls in the air around us. I don’t know if I like getting high. I am thinking about the last three pages of this story, but I don’t really know why. There are people talking slowly around me. Their voices feel like warm gelatin and I am not really paying attention. I’m thinking about how those last three pages never really felt finished, and how only a half handful of people ever read them. The unfinishedness feels like an itchiness, and I don’t know why I want to write more of it all of a sudden after a few years of forgetting about it. My face feels funny. Maybe when I wake up tomorrow I will write another three pages of this story before I go to work. My face feels really strange. Should I be concerned? Probably not. I mean, it’s probably fine.
The "you" I wrote to way back then was really named Michael. We met when I was fourteen, and we were together for a long time after I wrote the first three pages. I don't always remember why. He used to smoke all the time, but he never mentioned anything about his face getting tingly. Maybe I should be concerned after all.

I leave the yard and the fireflies and the small circle gathered there. I walk back to the house, letting my feet feel the full timbre of the dirt ringing quietly below my soles. Maybe I like this getting high thing, but mostly I am nervous I will fall into the fire pit if I stay near it too long. It had a strange sort of dull magnetic pull. Anyway, there's paper in the kitchen in the drawer by the stove. Maybe, I think, this will not wait until the morning. My face still feels weird. Why is my face so tingly?

I hated it so much when Michael would go out and get high with his friends. He'd sit behind the Seven-Eleven, getting his jeans dirty with the curb silt, passing around a joint and letting himself turn into quiet mush. He missed my birthday once to go get high with his friends. He thought he was so grown up, on a Wednesday night with a beer in his hand and his homework casually forgotten, but he was just seventeen and, like all the other seventeen year olds, trying his best to not be at home.

His mother cried when she found out I'd broken up with him. She came by one afternoon, sat on our porch and tried not to cry as she told me it felt like she'd lost a daughter. But there were other 'you's' after Michael, of course. Pretty soon after we broke up I was dating a boy named Wyatt. He was a percussionist and a mathlete, and he had these green eyes unlike anything I've seen since. They looked straight through you, like you were nothing and everything at once. We used to do crosswords together, on Saturday afternoons or one time at the beach, but he always figured out the clues before I did. And then there was Daniel, in the winter of my first year of college. The first night we spent together was passed in the cold talking about God and our parents and the few stars we could see through the suburban light pollution and the bare limbs of the campus oak trees.

Damn it. My pen is dead. Where the fuck did the other one go?

I don't know what it means that the fake names I just assigned my ex-boyfriends are all names we'd decided to give our hypothetical future sons, in the days of our relationships when we
were naïve enough and happy enough to entertain the wild fantasy that we’d be together that long. That was really a very odd thing for me to do, I suppose. Really, really odd. Stephen said we’d name our son Michael. I hated that name but I never told him. Ian suggested Wyatt once one morning, casually, while he watched me clumsily playing piano. He came and sat beside me on the bench, gently pushed my hands out of the way, and launched into Chopin. I don’t remember how we started talking about baby names. But I really don’t want to name my son Wyatt anyway.

Andrew never fantasized about baby names with me. It just wasn’t his way. I named him Daniel here because my mother thought he looked like the actor Daniel Radcliffe. She was very pleased by his cheekbones. He was lovely, even if he didn’t want to talk about baby names. Or maybe, because he didn’t feel the need to talk about maybe names.

And I named myself Rosie when I first started writing this. I don’t know why I picked Rosie. Maybe I was going for something cheery or optimistic.

I wrote things for each of them, ‘Wyatt’ and ‘Daniel,’ just I had written these first three pages to ‘Michael,’ and addressed all the things I could never say to them in stories and letters they never saw. It strikes me, here in the kitchen with the lamp’s dull glow falling over the table and the moths clinging to the light bulbs, that I am still like the little girl at the hors d’oeuvres party on the porch. I am still so quiet sometimes. And for no good reason.

These days I am taking time to be alone. After Daniel, it just made good sense. I do things by myself now. I went to a movie once and just sat in the dark. Nobody tried to kiss me or eat my popcorn and I got to pick what I wanted to see. I’m writing again too, and not just when I’m high, although if this is what writing when I’m high is like, I think I should be high all the time. I don’t want to write to a ‘you’ anymore. ‘You’s have been largely disappointing, like when ‘you’s’ cheated on me, left me for college or another person or nothing in particular, stopped asking how I was or what I was feeling or stopped trying to find out what my favorite things were. It scares me that I feel so jaded and tired already. I feel too bitter to only be twenty. I must be older. Yes. That must be it. Born middle aged. I turn twenty-one in a year. Fuck that.
I vaguely remember examining the deepening wrinkles on my forehead this morning before I left for work, squinting my eyes to get a better look, realizing with horror that that would only make the wrinkles worse. Three of them. Tiny creases drawn crookedly. Yes, this is proof. Born middle aged and recently determined to die alone.

Damn it. I've got to pull myself together. Stop being so damn histrionic.

"Histrionic" is a word I learned in the tenth grade, a few weeks after I learned "peripatetic." Both of these words are extremely pretentious.

The second pen has dried up. I want to feel the ink pull itself out onto the paper. I feel like I've lost something. I slip out of my chair and crawl around under the table. I don't know where it is or why I still feel so heavy without it, and I hate that I've marked the passage of the last five years in increments of other people. What does this make me? What kind of woman am I? Pathetic? Small? Stupid? I feel myself sinking to the floor. Slowly, as if through warm gelatin. There were so many other things in my life. Cocktail parties on the porch and my grandmother's cancer and high school and college and ambition and all the trappings of a real life that wasn't so absorbed around one person at a time. So why do I feel like there are people walking around with bits and pieces of me? Why do I feel as though I am covered in holes? What if all the best parts are gone? I wonder how many people there are out there carrying with them small pieces of the people I once was. I want to scream and say it's mine, it's mine, you can't have me, give me back! But I was the one who gave me away in the first place.

The kitchen feels so strange. Like everything is comfortable but not really, and blurry around the periphery but extra focused on the foreground and I don't know why I am crying all of a sudden, but I hear Martha's laughter outside coming in through the open window and it sounds just like the laughter in that strange dream I once had of Michael and the monsters in the alley and that strange, sad sex that always felt so much like suffocating. Flesh memory replays it for me. Memory is such an odd thing. It's
all so close and so far away. There are hands on my shoulder blades. I wish he’d go away. Leave me alone. Leave me alone! You, you, you, me, me; I don’t know which way the walls go. Memories pile up like a dull aching or a monotonous pounding, over and over and over, and now the kitchen is so swollen and so strange and I am just crying, crying, crying.

Mama stumbles downstairs through the dark, half asleep in her old purple nightdress.

“Rosie, darling,” she says. “What’s all this? What’s wrong?”

Why am I still calling myself ‘Rosie?’ That’s not even my name. Maybe I do not like being high after all.

My mother crouches down beside me on the floor and holds me against her shoulders. She touches my face with a broad palm but I can’t quite feel her fingers there. The pointy-toed woman and her husband and their dog don’t live across the street anymore. They moved while I was away for my first semester of college. The leaves must have been changing then, returning to that crunchy russet glory that makes the sidewalks so good for dancing, stepping from leaf to leaf to hear them crunch underfoot. I wonder how many of those leaves lingered on the ground through the winter, only to be clomped on by a bored child when spring and summer came. It feels so odd to be home again after a year away, spent sleeping in a new bed and crunching different leaves beneath my feet. I step squarely across all the sidewalk cracks, wondering what it means to feel so thin, crisp and crunchy and far away.

There are days, like today, when I miss Michael, the same way there are days when I miss Wyatt and Daniel. Sometimes I miss them collectively, like cascading mourning, like a long string of days that turned into years that turned into a heavy rock in my pocket. It’s silly, really. I feel like such a simple-minded, wishy-washy little woman with too many feelings, who thought once that she’d be married to the terrible boy she’d dated when she was seventeen. It’s just silly. I’m just silly. Martha is going away to school in the fall this year. It will be an empty house for our mother, save of course for our father and our little grey dog. She called me a few days ago while I was at work and asked me to pick up some detergent on my way home before sighing softly into the phone.
“You’re like a partner now, sometimes,” she said, “It feels like it was only yesterday when we painted the nursery—do you remember?—it had big yellow circles on the walls. A wave painted over Martha’s bed and a star over yours.”

“No, Mama, I don’t remember.”

“No? Well, you were still little when we repainted it. It’s funny, though, I still feel the exact same age.”

Maybe we are all just phases of each other’s lives.
Sometimes, like today, I find myself wandering down the railroad tracks towards that park with the swings. I go alone now, and think about things that I do not have names or faces for. I count the pebbles lodged in the sidewalk. I count the railroad spikes pinning the tracks to the earth. I think about how beautiful it is that ethyl formate makes the universe taste like raspberries. Warm air wraps around my legs. There is so much life in a person. It sinks all the way down into them, deep past anything you can see, and deeper still until they themselves can’t always see everything clearly. Like trenches carved into the ocean floor. It can be so dark and cold sometimes, but so beautiful if you know where to look or how to see. How lucky we are to be so enormously vast. How scary it is to be so deep and empty and far away. Sometimes, like right now, when the sun shines down through the leaves, I am overwhelmed with how beautiful the whole world is. Sometimes, maybe also like right now, I feel a bit as though I am drowning.

Everything is so much the same. The train tracks still curve in that same soft sinusoidal pattern through the fringes of town. I wander past the playground but I don’t stop to sit on the swings or to think about the places nearby where Michael used to kiss me, boldly with his tongue, in front of the little kids and their mothers, because he thought it was funny how uncomfortable it made me.

I keep moving because I do not want to remember. I just want to keep walking. I just want to keep going. In three more years maybe I will write three more pages, and maybe there will be three more people to write about. I think that maybe loneliness is other people, just as much as the opposite of loneliness must be other people, too. I feel so old and so tired and so young and stupid. I’m twenty. I’m twenty. Maybe this is just where I’m supposed to be. Maybe this is just what has to happen. We’re still children sometimes. We’re supposed to hurt ourselves accidently and have no idea what we’re doing. Right? The sun sinks low over the neighborhood.
RYAN FERGUSON

Hurricane

As raindrops wind their way
down a battered window sill,
zigzagging past still droplets,
I sit in my room peering at the
dark grey cloak of clouds that
covers the sky.

I am reminded of the
one day a hurricane came to visit
my city by the sea.
I was only ten and yet
I intensely listened to the pounding rain
on barricaded windows.
It sounded like tiny hammers
hitting tiny nails.
My father found me crouched with my
ear to shuttered window.
I was straining to hear the symphony outside
It was at that moment when he decided
to take me to the beach.

The car whisked past windswept signs
and skirted past flooded streets.
Down Crayton and up Gulf Shore
the world roared with thunder
and howled with an ill-tempered wind.
The car slowed to a stop on a cold and vacant street.
We struggled to walk down storm-washed paths,
and there I saw a writhing dark grey mass.
The hurricane had transformed the ocean into a great
maw which swallowed up sand and plants and even
a bit of the street.

I surveyed the storm’s power
safely at my father’s side.
Sensing my curiosity sated,
we returned to shelter.
Now I turn from the storm in my window, because now I know the cold touch of rain and the sound of the storm, like I know my father's face.
I pile up your crumpled napkins
onto your ketchup-smeared plates,
and move them away.

Anything else, gentlemen?
No, I'm in school, gotta pay somehow.
History, actually, I love what I study.
No, anatomy was never my interest.
Can I get you anything else?
My name's Sara. I've been working here two years.
No sir, no night job for me.
I just make some desserts and serve the food.
We've got cannoli, brownies, cookies, and pies.
No, I'm serving personal sweets, sorry gentlemen.
No, I don't think I can sit, especially there, sorry sir.
I have other tables, but please
let me know if you need anything else.

No sir, you can't pay in kisses.
No sir, I'm not selling that today.
No sir, we don't take American Express.

A $0.75 tip and a note, "you should smile more."
EMILY SHUE

Avenue H Blues

I like the way the poison feels; it helps me to forget.
I like the way the needle stings, its synthesized regret.
They say it’s gonna kill me but it hasn’t failed me yet.

Don’t got no warmth except the flame I use to make it good.
Don’t need no warmth except the flames that rise within my blood.
You pushed that needle? Hold on tight, you’re Noah in the flood.

I rain all night and dream all day. I’ve seen the eyes of God.
He’s tired and exhausted and I find it kind of odd
that he’s tired and exhausted unless we’re shootin’ up.

He fucks me like a phantom and afterwards I ache.
He fucks me with a needle and makes my heartbeats shake
between the pulse of bodies and the siren song of H.

It feels like slow red rivers on a velvet afternoon.
It feels like catastrophic karma cooking on my spoon,
and if it’s gonna kill me, then it better happen soon.
Lattice thee the liturgy,
a cross for all mankind,
to bear the wares and feel the stares
of what you cannot hide.
The knowing knolls will take their tolls
on old and broken knees
that shuffle to their holy lands.
Milk and honey, cows and bees.

The beatitudes of latitude
blind the women of their cares.
And the prostrate men of wisdom
speak in undulating prayers.
Kyrie eleison, deus,
miserere mei et salva me,
benedictum Nomen Sanctum eius,
sink Ecclesiastic days.

Thursday’s child so soft and round,
a knight from times gone by.
They come together soundlessly
for they lack the will to cry.
A string of somber sisters
sits by the sepulcher.
They mourn the past of emptiness
and the future still unsure.

The hour of nones by fear is done,
scraped like a rusty spoon
against the twitching eyelids
of a girl who cannot choose.
A scimitar of saintliness
embedded in the throats
of heresies and sanctities,
neither knowing what they wrote.

The hour of nones approaches then
like thunder and like lies.
Leveling the fields of faith
despite the sower’s cries.
The dirt and dust of latter days
swept up upon the wind.
The psalms, the alms, the steadfast qualms
mixed up with sands of sin.

Then the secular symposium,
devoid of gentleness,
proves the only safety
from the sanctuary’s breast.
In the epiphany of periphery
then hide the broken ones,
in the darkness, in the nothing,
sheltered from the hour of nones.
INTRODUCTION: followed by subtitle

I used to work for the local news station, back in the days when there was still local news that needed to be stationed. The national news began over-hunting the local news populations in the ladder half of the No-Stairs Century and, by the late 60’s, had forced them all into extinction\(^1\) which is a real shame because the local news always looked so goddamn majestic in those nature magazines I pretended to read at the dentist’s office. I was very priderful of my work and found it quite rewarding; it was that same kind of satisfaction that you might get when you’ve finished inhaling your meal from McProcessed Meals and you find extra fries at the bottom of the bag. And then you inhale those too. And then you inhale the bag. And then you inhale the doctors that are trying to remove the plastic bag from your system. And then you inhale the vending machine that you find in the waiting room ‘cause... well, nobody else was going to, right? And then a middle-aged mother of twelve rebelliously-obedient children walks up to you and says “Excuse me sir but I do believe you just inhaled my car keys. And why, pray tell, aren’t you wearing any pan—” and then you inhale her before you finally exhale and the world gets spun around so hard by the force of it all that the Chinese have to celebrate four new years in the span of twelve minutes and they lock you up in Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane and you manage to score Hopkins’ autograph during a recess period\(^2\). Yeah, I found it that rewarding.

I liked to interview people. I specialized in The Mute. The people, of course, not the remote control button. That’s another field entirely.\(^3\) I always found their silence so...captivating. They have such a way with thoughts. My producers and peers praised my ability to extract such detailed emotion from my subjects. I simply insisted that this was merely a result of the incredible stories that I was graced with telling...well, that and the gruesome methods of torture that my medieval ancestors developed (did you know— fun fact— that I am descended from the man who invented the Catherine Wheel?).\(^4\) Of course, I was just trying (and succeeding) to be humble. My skills resembled those of a god. A
small time, underpaid, Your Local News at Nine god, but a god nonetheless. I was an unknown legend.

As one would expect, my memory is teeming with riveting lore of my days out in the field. Like that time I witnessed a man attempt suicide by leaping from the roof of a seven story building only to land precisely within a cylindrical vat of blueberry-flavored Jell-O with a diameter measuring just three feet and two inches. He escaped undamaged save the extensive psychological trauma and the irreparable dull shade of aqua marine that stained 98.374% of his skin. And how could I possibly forget the time that the dairy farm out on Huweetay Avenue spontaneously exploded? It rained New York strip for twenty-seven minutes over the southeast corner of Brudellie County. The official investigation yielded inconclusive results but I still firmly believe in my theory that those damn hooligans from Gleeson High poked a hole in Ol’ Bessie and lit the fatal match that sparked the chain reaction.

But these are all stories that you have undoubtedly heard countless times, especially upon reading and rereading and re-rereading my previous memoirs *Nameless Narrator: The Life and Times of America’s Sweetheart* and—my personal favorite—*My Other Car is a Sandwich*. What you really want to hear about in this soon-to-be masterpiece are the stories that haven’t been told before, the ones that I never even considered writing down because, quite frankly, I did not know how the public would react to the shocking and censored truth. The kind that they teach you never to share with the public when you’re just a wee tyke in the academy. Now, the truth can occasionally be hard to swallow, so in the event that you start choking and recover by miraculously performing the Heimlich maneuver on yourself, try inhaling it next time as if it were the bonus fries at the bottom of the plastic bag that may or may not be currently lodged in your small intestine.

Chapter One: The Plot Thickens

The year was 1938. I was a young reporter fresh out of the academy (I attended the Oldport School of Broadcast Journalism and Martial Arts, an online institution that has since gone bankrupt due to its “lack of credibility” and has been revived as Vicksburg University’s School of Dog Fighting Dotcom). Following my graduation, I found myself in the incredible realm of unemployment. The freedom was exhilarating, and the constant
rejection from potential employers was almost as fun as that time in the seventeenth grade when my class went skydiving with a pack of talking cigarettes over the Puerto Rican Alps.\(^9\) However, there came a time when I actually had to find a source of income to support the family of mice that resided in my home and to cease disappointing my parents and their friend Gladys.

“Find a job, you silly goose,” Gladys would say.

“Are you *daft*, bitch? It’s 4 a.m. I told you to leave me the fuck alone. Now get the fuck off of my porch and never come back or I’ll blow your fucking face off with this 12-gauge and dissolve your unrecognizable remains in a tub of acid,” I would politely retort.

I always dreamed of being a famous interviewer, but everyone has to start small before they can achieve their dreams. For me, this small start began after I returned from Europe (if trace amounts of acid-infused human flesh are ever found under the Eiffel Tower, I wasn’t there),\(^{10}\) as a curator for the Hipster Weekly-featured New Vaduz Miniature Museum of Miniatures in my home state of Rhode Island.\(^{11}\) I was responsible for curating the miniatures in the miniature exhibits on Miniature Schnauzers and Mini Coopers. The museum also serves as a front for an extensive, international heroin empire,\(^{12}\) though now that I have revealed this information, they will likely try to hunt me down and execute me *American History X* style, so in the event that I am unheard of after a period of at least six years, please assume that I am either exiled in Siberia, disemboweled, or dead.

Anywho, the museum grounds were located directly across the street and several miles down the road from the local news affiliate COW48.\(^{13}\) And after I witnessed the tragic death of one of their interns as he attempted to cross Strauggin Lagoon with nothing but a few dozen sandbags and a toaster that was still plugged in, I joined in the bidding war for his identity. A few well-placed bribes later\(^{14}\) and I was the proud owner of an unpaid job in network programming. I had reached the big time.

Chapter Two: A Biased Exploration of Thermal Radiation

After several months of delivering coffee and divorce papers, I managed to land my first paid gig in the field of sort-of-truthful-but-not-really storytelling as a sound technician. I relished my newfound position (I’m not the biggest fan of either mustard or
ketchup) and fulfilled my duties to the best of my capabilities. I always made sure that there was enough sound in the studio, testing the acoustics and other applicable sound terms by clapping my hands in front of my open mouth to the rhythms of Canadian propaganda tunes I so fondly remembered from my days in The War. One time, the head producer, Mr. Doctor Bob Kuhmeller, even left me a note saying I had to visit him in his office. He was so impressed by my abilities as a sound technician that he asked me to personally check the sound in his office (he thought there may have been an issue with the wavelengths of the room). I clapped him "Ontario, The Harmonious," much to his delight, and assured him that the sound in his quarters was, in fact, working properly. He thanked me profusely and sent me on my way.

Twenty-eight days, six hours, forty-two minutes, and twelve seconds later, I once again found myself in the office of one Mr. Doctor Bob Kuhmeller. And, after word of our brief yet fiery affair reached the eardrums of corporate (after Bob's assistant ass-kisser Chadwick Brosiff walked in at the worst possible moment), Bob's position with the network was instantly terminated and everyone at our station was promoted one level up to fill the void that he left. I, however, managed to survive the ordeal since I knew way too much about the network founder Terry Cow's serial killer-esque hobby involving the thin papers that peel off of the back of stickers and the fabric of the table cloths in the break room, so I was promoted to the position of Head Mop. I was initially thrilled with my new role in the studio, but I soon discovered that I lacked the absorbent hair that the position demanded, so I decided to trade my job for that of an interviewer. It took some searching, but I eventually struck up a deal with a deaf disco fan whose legendary afro is still the subject of much gossip in parts of southern Kansas and northeastern Wyoming. I had finally attained my dream job.

Chapter Seven: The Chapter that Follows the Pages that Are Missing from Your Copy

So there I was, pressed up against the bare naked flesh of the world's largest sumo wrestler with nothing in my possession to eat but a can of freeze-dried pineapples and the leftover pasta that I still had in my undergarments from the night before. I lay there, between his rolls of flesh for two dark, grueling, moist weeks.
before I finally saw that radiant beam of light. “Is anybody down there?” A heavenly voice called to me.

“No,” I shouted in reply. “But please send toilet paper!”

Chapter Eight: Carlos’s Second Stint in Rehab

The media hype surrounding my eventual rescue from the caverns of self-indulgence was unprecedented (it took forty-three professional fat-climbers to haul me out of the man’s stomach). Never before had an interviewer achieved this level of fame so early into their career. I was making history faster than they could write it down in the elementary school history books.

I insisted on returning to work promptly after I was rescued, and just a few decades later I was back in the saddle doing a story on the upcoming ’24 presidential elections. “What do you think of Caroll Spinney running for president?” I asked one kindly gentleman at a crowded pub in Boston.

“Who’s she?” the kindly gentleman inquired between sips of something toxic.

“He is the voice actor and puppeteer for Oscar the Grouch,” I responded.

“Who?” the kindly gentleman inquired.

“The Sesame Street character,” I responded.

“Oh.” The kindly gentleman inquired once more as he took another swig. I slowly leaned in closer, gently pressing my microphone up against his lips and dragging it across his face before settling it in the middle of his forehead.

“Do you approve of his running for presidency?” I softly responded.

He leaned back with great unease, staring intently at the microphone in my hand. “Is that a pickle?” he inquired.

“Please sir, just answer the questions,” I responded.

He looked into my eyes, tears welling. “Am I under arrest?” he inquired.

I sighed. “Thank you for your time.” I responded no further. I scanned the bar for another potential victim and spotted a middle-aged couple eating a plate of half-cooked pillows. They were sitting at a table in the far corner of the room, so I began hastily pushing my way past the thousands of patrons in the place and wading through the seas of broken lawn mower parts that were scattered across the wooden floors.
"Excuse me sir, ma'am," I said upon my eventual arrival, tipping my hat toward each as they were addressed. "I was wondering if I could ask you a few questions about the upcoming primetime bout between Oscar the Grouch and Big Bird."

"Certainly," the man responded.

I stared at him with a puzzled gaze. "Apologies for my following inquiry, sir, but may I inquire what type of accent that is?"

"Comic Sans," he joyfully responded. "I'm from Minnesota."

I attempted to fight my growing frustration. "Well, what's your opinion on the recent rock market crash?" I managed to ask.

"I think it's just horrible," he joyfully responded. "Our economy is nose-diving. I'm willing to blame those damn hooligans from Gleeson High. They're always getting into trouble. I heard they've been shoving rocks in the local bovine population."

"Any thoughts on the escalating conflict in the Middle-of-the-Southeast?" I dreaded the moment his mouth would open again to answer my question.

"Oh, it's just horrible. Simply horrible. A real horrible situation. Tragic. Tragically horrible. So many young and old and kind-of-old-but-sort-of-young-at-the-same-time people have already been lost. Just a terribly tragic and horrible issue," he joyfully responded.

"I'm sorry," I said, throwing down my notebook and pencil on the table and wiping the sweat and chocolate syrup from my forehead. "I can't take your accent any longer. Is there any way I could speak with your wife instead?"

"Hey, that's a bit rude of you, man. And I doubt it," he joyfully responded. "She only speaks in Wingdings."

"My father was a potato!" she screeched.

Chapter Nine: Hosting the Oscars

After President Spinney took office, I was notified of how happy he was with my reporting of his campaign. He begged the producers to allow me to host the Sesame Street spin-off "The Oscars" (featuring the family of his lovably miserable character), and they eagerly complied after he threatened them with capital punishment."

The first episode could not have gone any better. The
children absolutely loved my turn as the host of the local network classic.

“Why, hello there, Mrs. Grouch!” I greeted the hideous beast before me.

“I’m not in the show,” our lighting operator, Gary, responded.

“You’re ugly enough to be,” I said.

“Narrator,” Janice, the show’s producer, silently screamed at me from behind the cameras. “What the hell are you doing?! We’re live!”

“Fuck yeah, we’re live!” I shouted back, ripping apart my shirt to reveal my newest tattoo of a tattoo-less torso. I had to destroy something; the moment was calling for it. I searched for the most fragile thing I could find and settled on the dreams and aspirations of the socially awkward intern standing off to one side of the set.

“Your mom’s a TOASTER!” I pointed at her and laughed hysterically as she turned and sprinted away, burnt bread crumbs pouring down her face.

“Narrator, are you high right now?!”

I looked down at my shirt and the dust of cocaine-laced methamphetamines that covered it. “No,” I calmly responded.

“Yeah you are! Security!”

I freaked out, so I just threw my piping hot coffee into the crowd and grabbed the nearest blunt object I could find to defend myself: Gary.

“LET GO OF ME! OH GOD, JUST PLEASE LET GO OF ME!” he screamed. I laughed hysterically as I wildly swung him about the room, smashing his repulsive frame against the riot shields of the oncoming security guards. They fled in terror, fearful that with just the right angle and amount of force, Gary’s bones might shatter and pierce through their armored uniforms. I turned on Janice, gripping Gary’s flimsy arms in my hands, and threw them on the ground. And after I was satisfied with my results, I stabbed Gary in the heart with the shards of a half-eaten #2 Ticonderoga pencil that I found among the wreckage scattered across the floor.

Of course, everything before I stabbed Gary was all part of the show. The Oscars were cheering in the corner the entire time, except for Billy Oscar and Tiffany Oscar who were incestuously making out behind the family dumpster. But once I stabbed good
ol’ Gary to death, oh no. “That’s just taking it too far,” they said. “Gary was great,” they said. “Gary had children,” they said. “Gary was an amputee,” they said. “Gary was paralyzed,” they said. “Jesus Christ, narrator, Gary had cancer, you shouldn’t have gone and butchered him,” they said. Why would you ever do such a thing?

“Because I wanted to,” I said.

Chapter 10: The End of the Beginning of the Middle*

*The following chapter has been inexplicably censored by the Association of Social Strengthening and Harmony’s Official Legal Enforcement Squad. Any concerns regarding the content of this passage should be directed toward them. They obviously care more than I do.

My trial was held in the small town of . The courthouse was packed with admirers and haters alike. There must have been at least people in attendance. You may find this hard to believe, but even came to see my trial, as she was such a big fan of mine.

I was charged with counts of , and last but certainly not least (and easily the most fascinating of my charges), counts of . In total, I was facing approximately in prison.

“All rise!” The honorable Judge called the court to order.

“I’d like to start with a statement, if I may?” Judge glared at me over his .

“That was a question,” he finally said.

“On the topic of questions, what is your favorite color?” I asked.

“What?” He looked annoyed, with just a smidgen of irritated on the side.


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“Blue,” he answered dryly. “Now can we please get on with the trial?” Not a sound from the audience. “Good, the prosecution can now begin their opening statement—“

“Do you like flowers?” I asked. He sighed.

“Sure, now—”

“What is your favorite kind of chocolate bar?”

“I don’t like chocolate.”

“Do you believe in God?”

His face softened ever so slightly. “Well I… I don’t—”

“What was your relationship like with your maternal grandfather?”

“He was never really—“

“What is your most painful memory?” I asked.

And he stopped. And the whole world stopped. And we sat there, suspended in time and space, with nothing to do but listen to the silence and wait for somebody to press Play on the elusive remote control that had fallen between the cushions once more. If I had ever learned how to interview remote control buttons I may have been more help in the situation. But instead, I too was frozen in place, imagining what the sound of the ticking clock may have been like had the hands been permitted to move about their face, tallying each second with a rhythmic Tick Tock Tick Tock Tick Tock until it fades from perception, and my writings are left in the hands of someone who probably thinks I am crazed, though I would of course wager that they are the crazy ones. After all, you read this, didn’t you?
Dark skies had begun their march overhead around noon and by nightfall they began to shed their excess weight. The water always gave the graveyard an unwelcome air of life. The graveyard surrounded a tall square rock of a building. It was a mausoleum. It wouldn’t have stuck out if it hadn’t been on top of a hill; massive upturned stones stood all around, covered in trees and greenery. Gargoyles alone lined the mausoleum’s roof, some of which had long since fallen to rubble. Others still seemed alive, bearing weapons and sneers. Once upon a time, great kings and men of letters lived nearby. Now only their graves remain.

The gentle rain was the only sound heard as a young girl approached. The mud grabbed her bare feet, trying to bring her down to her ancestors. She wound her way between giant slabs of stone and fallen trees. The water made patches of dirt that flowed freely, but she was steady and did her best to avoid anything dangerous.

She came to a stop at a tree that grew right next to the marble walls. Tombstones lay mangled underneath its roots. She crouched in the tree’s shadow and checked the names etched in the tombstones. It was so worn she couldn’t see a name. That meant the stone was cheap or far too old for her to waste her time digging. She continued on, creeping around the wall, keeping as dry as she could, and found her way inside. As she entered, she noticed a plaque above the doorway that read “Mortui Vivos Docent.” She didn’t know what it meant, but it sounded nice. The walls were lined with shiny plaques and the ceilings were twice as high as her head. It was all lit by simple lights set into the ceilings. She wondered what powered them. The plaques bore names and vocations. Each plaque was the same size, shape, and material.

“No... no... no... Show Mara a nice one...”

Finally, she came across a plaque that read: “Bartimaeus Samarkhand, jeweler and reveler. He asks only for life to be lived, and remain unchanged in its amorphous nature.”

Mara struck with her folding shovel between the “and” and the “for,” sending shards of stone flying. She soon pulled the coffin out and met the inhabitant. Her manners clearly lacking, she only smiled as she pulled out several rings and necklaces. The gold
stood out against her olive skin, gems gleaming red and blue. She continued her way through the crypt, finding jewels, medals, anything that could survive aging hundreds, if not thousands, of years. Then she came to the catacombs.

A dark stairwell led down into the earth. Dripping sounds echoed up to her. In the wall words were etched in: “Here you will find our greatest minds laid low, and our lowest citizens made unto gods.” The words sounded familiar.

“Ooohhhh-ho-ho-ho, jackpot.....” Mara was interrupted by her bag, which had begun to buzz loudly. She scrambled with it until she found a little ball and twisted it to turn it off. The annoying sound echoed briefly, and she snapped out of her trance and realized how loud she’d been in her quest across the mausoleum, and that she would need to return to the city quickly to sell her findings and do her shopping.

She made her way out of the building, following her path of destruction, or what she thought was her path. The walls were undamaged, the floor completely clean. She recognized the names that she had, just an hour before, reduced to dust. Not even muddy footprints met her when she found the entrance. She stopped at the archway and turned to face the empty hallway. She heard only her racing heartbeat.

She returned to the city—the ruins—by midday. The muddy paths and wilds had made her passage difficult. Concrete needles could be seen from miles away, punctuating the city’s various materials and marking the center of what was once a shining capital. The city was slowly growing back to its original splendor, but it was a race against the quickly growing vines and trees. People were still far and few between, and the massive grey buildings stood empty.

“Hey Mar, whatcha got for me? Pickpocket anymore visiting re-explorers?” The short and round pawnbroker stood in front of what was once a bank. His rifle was taller than he was. His beard covered most of his face, and his hair was drawn back in a simple pony-tail. His clothes were dark brown, matching his hair. The only color on him that wasn’t brown was on his bright red cheeks.

“Nope, I’m finding honest pay now.” She walked to his table and laid her bounty of jewels on his desk.

He eyeballed the stones and metals, running his fingers
over them, then looked up at her. “Yeah, right, honest.” He clicked his tongue and shook his head. “But that’s none of my business. I’ll give you twenty each, thirty for the necklaces.”

“Deal.”

He clutched his chest. “No haggling? Who are you and what have you done with my friend?” He dramatically put one hand to his forehead, while he counted out the money with his other.

“We’re not friends,” was her only reply, as she grabbed the money and walked out.

She walked along old brick streets, red dust flowing along the dark cracks that once made up the zigzag pattern the bricks formed. Here and there, tall trees grew over iron gates and concrete patches. She found her way home through the red and the green.

“Mama? I’m home! Sorry I’m late!” The sun was now setting behind her.

The house was cluttered, but not outright falling apart like the rest of the neighborhood. They had been one of the first families to stake a claim to the territory. The floor was swept clean, revealing tile floors; the walls were covered in murals that had been painted and painted over again and again. She found her mother in the dining room, paint in hand, her wild grey hair straining against a ribbon that bound it back. The wall was covered in rows of colorful lines, each one a little different. They went up and down, each column of color starting from a horizontal line of black.

“You’ve been busy today, haven’t you?” Mara wandered around, looking at the walls and the table, touching here and there. She embraced her mother, Tara, who slowly turned and hugged back.

“I can’t remember what I was looking for. It looked like this... They’ll help me remember...” Mara’s mother had a soft voice, haunting like the ghosts she had told her daughter about long ago. The paintbrush in her hand was baby-blue, with a matching paint along the tip. “The color... it’s not right. I need...”

Mara held her hand out and caught the brush as her mother dropped it and hurried off. The old woman was out, and Mara heard her footsteps up the stairs and scurrying about while Mara cleaned up the mess left behind. Occasionally, Mara frowned at the ceiling as it creaked under her mother’s weight. Mara carried the things to the kitchen and then began to make supper. Dozens of
cans and jars of food, preserved for ages, lined the cupboards; she began to set the table as her mother came in.

"Hello Mara dear, how was your trip?" Tara sat at the table and poured water from a canteen into a pair of cups.
Mara smiled. "Fine. I got lost, and some weird stuff happened." She turned and finished setting the table.
"That's nice. I'm glad you're back." Her mother didn't seem to be paying much attention
"I'm glad you're back too." Mara was resigned to her mother's... 'quirks.'

After they finished their meal, Mara led her mother up into the bedroom. Tara was humming to herself until they reached the bed.

Tara turned around and smiled at her daughter. "Did I ever tell you about the history of the city? It's wonderful, almost everyone died years ago, mostly the great minds, and the normal people who survived the disaster ran away. That's why we came here when we did; everyone is going to come back soon..."

She continued on and on, while Mara laid down on the floor. The stories came quickly from her mother, about the "Great Thunder" and the acidic rain that followed, about the old days when men made of stone helped build and keep watch of cities, hospitals, morgues, and more. Tara soon tired, but Mara stared at the ceiling, wishing these stories could be true.

Mara returned to the mausoleum just a few nights later. The walls were once again unmarred, the floors clean. She soon found her way to the catacombs, and that sign that said "here you will find our greatest minds laid low, and our lowest citizens made unto gods." She found a single torch to light her way through the darkness as she wound her way down through the stairwell, down into the depths of the earth. A few minutes later, the stairway opened up into a spacious circular cavern. It was lit in by a large chandelier in the high ceiling. The chandelier glowed an unearthly light blue. Mara stared up at the light, and looked around at the walls, eager to find more tombs, jewels, and gold. But there were only shelves.

Floor to ceiling, with stairs leading up all around, shelves filled with books. They looked like columns of color that rose from the black stone of the shelves. Stone gargoyles stood all around, regularly placed, just like on the roof of the building. She walked
about, disappointed and confused. The stone demons were as tall as she was, and when she stared one in the eyes, she thought the eyes gleamed strangely. The books she found were difficult to understand, but she found one that seemed newer than the rest. Handwritten. She tried to make out the writing, but it took her much too long to make out each word. She’d be here all night. She grabbed a few random books, hoping that one or two could be worth a fair amount.

Her bag began to buzz angrily as her timer went off: The sound bothered her, but she took her time as she flipped through a book of history. She reached in her bag, pulled out the little ball, and twisted it shut. But its sound was replaced with grinding, the sound of stone on stone. She turned around to see the gargoyles shuddering, shaking off their skins of dust and rubble. They shed years of dust off their hides and their heads as she ran towards the stairs.

Up and up she sprinted, chest heaving, eyes wide. The darkness only hindered her slightly as her hands followed the walls. She made it to the doorway and then began to slow. She didn’t hear anything following her.

As she turned back her foot caught on the final step, and her bag went flying. Her shovel catapulted across the hall, scarring the wall with its blade. She slid across the smooth floor, breath knocked out of her.

She felt the wind blow across her face. Then she heard her bag move and felt the ground shake.

“Can I help you?” came a gravelly voice.

She opened her eyes to see hard features and harsh teeth, all across a wide and sneering mouth. Right above were eyes lit with a light blue. She screamed and passed out.

When she came to, her head throbbed, and the floor spun until she sat up. She was at the entrance, with her bag and belongings packed neatly away, including the book. The sun was shining through the doorway, and the birds were singing. It made her trek home pleasant, if she didn’t realize it in her daze.

When she finally reached the city, rather than head to the pawnbroker, with her package, she went straight home. She held the book out to her mother. “Mama, could you tell me those stories again?”
ALEXANDER KRAMER

Wild Turkey

It’s been four months since my parents’ divorce, two since I dropped out of school, one since Becca broke up with me, and three since I’ve last shaved. Becca told me to call her when I enroll in school again, and said some shit about her disappointment in how my potential is being wasted. I’m not exactly sure; I wasn’t listening well. It’s been hectic lately, nurturing relationships with my parents.

“Come here, you bastard!” my dad hollers from the kitchen.

“Uh, was that directed toward me?” I chuckle under my breath. I peer into the kitchen. The drunken fool is barely able to stand.

“Grab me the Wild Turkey.”

I look at him for a bit, long enough for him to become frustrated and start to stumble over and crawl up onto a stool, reaching toward the cabinet. I can see from where I’m standing that there’s barely a shot left in the bottle.

“All right,” I say. “I’ll get it.” I grab his wrist and wrap my other arm around his waist. Waltzing this man out of the kitchen and down the hall has become routine. His room is cold, but he likes it that way. He falls onto his bed, and immediately begins snoring.

My phone rings from the living room. It’s my mom. My mom is a wonderful person; it’s a shame my dad relapsed the way he did. I had never seen my mom more crushed. I’d do anything for her. Our relationship has gotten a lot stronger since their divorce.

“Hello?”

“Hey Rex, where are you? When will you be home?”

“I stopped off at Dad’s to check in again. I’m pretty beat. I might just crash on the couch here.”

“How’s he doing?”

“The usual, I guess.”

“The usual?”

“Well, he asked me for money.”

“You know better than to enable him, Rex.”

“Mom, I know. I only came over to make sure he was all
“You’ll only be throwing your money straight into his booze fund.”

“Mom, stop. I know.”

“Just making sure, honey. Sleep tight. I’ll see you tomorrow.” She hangs up the phone.

There are no blankets around. It’s freezing, and my dad has one of those televisions that’s just too damn hard to figure out. The phone now sits on the coffee table, looking lonely. I pick it up and hesitate before dialing Becca’s number. It rings three times, and sends me to voicemail. I see the kitchen cabinet door from the living room couch, and it’s open, and it’s open, the Wild Turkey staring back at me.

I wake up hugging a couch pillow with the sun glaring through the blinds right into my eyes. It’s already 9:30, and I’ll start to feel bad if I don’t get home to see my mom soon. Loud rustling and clumsy thumping comes from my dad’s room, and he lets out a big bear-like yawn. His footsteps are heavy as he walks into the kitchen where I’m chowing down on some Frosted Flakes.

“Oh, hey, Rex, when did you get here?” he asks.

“Uh.” I pause. “Just a little while ago. I wanted to see if you needed help with anything this morning.”

“Not that I can think of,” he responds, sitting down next to me with a bowl of cereal. “But it’s good to see you.”

I finish chewing, look up at him and smirk. “It’s good to see you too, Dad.”

It feels good to just sit here and eat with him. We are quiet, both looking out the kitchen window at the same tree, half bare, with red leaves surrounding its trunk.

He interrupts the soothing silence. “Actually there is one thing. I’m a little short on cash right now and won’t be able to make it to the bank today, and I was wondering if you had forty bucks on you. The gas station I like to fill my car at only takes cash.”

“Dad, just go to the Sheetz right up the road. They take cards.”

“I know, I know. It’s the weirdest thing though. I went there yesterday and my damn card wouldn’t take.”

“Well, I don’t have any money on me now, Dad. I’d have to go home or to the ATM.”

“Oh,” he says. “Well, I’d really appreciate if you could.”
I put my bowl in the dishwasher, and head toward the door. “I’ll let you know. I’m going to head home now.”

“Don’t forget! I could really use the help,” he yells out as I get into my car.

My car is warm from the sun beating through the windows. It’s Sunday, and I know that Becca has a soccer game today at noon. Her college, Dickinson, is only forty-five minutes away, but it’s in the opposite direction of my thirty minute drive home. I need to see her, and maybe showing up at her game will give me a chance to finally talk things out with her. The drive is not a bad one, mainly back roads, with lots of trees that look gorgeous now that their leaves are changing.

My thoughts are bouncing from Becca to my dad. The more I drive and the closer I get to Becca’s college, the more pumped I am to talk about how I’m turning my life around, and about how I think we can really work things out. My dad’s gas tank was full. I checked when I left his house. I keep thinking about how much help he needs. My mom was right; I cannot enable him. I need to stand up to him and refuse to lend him money this time.

All of a sudden, I’m at the soccer field at Dickinson. My confidence is at an all-time high. The parking lot is packed, the smell of hot dogs and burgers is flooding through my windows. There are families tailgating all over. Right next to the field is Becca’s family tailgating. Her older brother is standing there throwing football with some other guy.

“Yo, Drew!” I call out.

Her brother turns his head, and drops his jaw. He rushes over to me.

“Hey, man, I don’t know if it’s a good idea for you to be here.”

“It’s fine,” I respond. “I just came to support Becca and hopefully talk to her after the game.” I jog over toward the rest of her family. They all look shocked to see me, and they greet me very hesitantly. The only one I don’t recognize is the guy who was throwing with Drew.

“Hey, I’m Rex.”

He shakes my hand. “Nice to meet you. I’m Jake.” He’s wearing a Vineyard Vines shirt and Ray Bans. His jaw line looks like it was chiseled out of marble.

“Are you a student here, Jake?”
"No, I’m actually just visiting from U Penn."

"Whoa damn! What’s your major?" I look around to see if Becca’s family is as impressed as I am. Her mom gives me an unexpected look of concern and pity.

"I’m actually in my second year of med school." He speaks so calmly, as if it isn’t something to be proud of.

"Well, what brings you here?"

"I drove down yesterday so I could come support Becca today."

"Oh, nice! Where’d you stay?"

"Uh, I stayed in Becca’s dorm room." He chuckles and smirks.

I think I’m going to yak, right next to their tailgate. The color leaves my face, and I hunch over because it feels like I’ve just been hit in the stomach with an iron rod.

"I just forgot, I have to go home to see my mom!" I walk urgently toward my car with a mix of frustration, anger, and stupidity running through my body. My car doesn’t start right away. It takes four attempts, and the tires burn out as I speed away. They’re all probably thinking how I looked like such a moron.

My mind is moving fast, and it feels like I’m driving to match the pace of my thoughts. The once calming memories of her sitting in the passenger seat snapping her bubble gum and laughing with me are only furthering my rage. I pull into the driveway and sit there for at least twenty minutes, until my mom is standing right outside of the car window.

"Rex?" She says. "Are you going to come inside?" She must see something is wrong on my face. "Rexy, please come inside, and let me know what’s going on."

I slowly unbuckle my seat belt and open the car door. I feel more in shock now, like I’ve just watched the Phillies lose in game seven of the World Series. The walk from the car to the house feels like a mile long trek. My knees start to buckle and my body collapses onto the love seat in the living room. The cushions sink in, and my body feels like it is enveloped by the piece of furniture. My mom walks in and sees me sitting in silence. She puts a fresh glass of apple cider down on the side table next to me. She can tell that I don’t want to talk, but briefly places her hand on my shoulder. There’s a vibration coming from the arm of the chair. It’s my cell phone.

The text reads, “We need to talk.” It’s from Becca.
I don’t respond because I have no idea what to say, and I’m still uncertain the emotion my limbic system is currently trying to produce.

The walls are not white. They are off white, with a green border at the top. I’ve lived here my entire life and never noticed until now. The green border isn’t even the same color green as the carpet. This is bothering me way more than it should. Someone should fix that. After about ten minutes of staring and thinking about how awfully put together the living room is, my phone buzzes again.

Once more, it’s her. “I’m coming over.”

I was even thinking about shaving today. I guess that’s out the window. It’s a difficult feeling to not be what someone else is looking for. It’s not only that, but to be so far from what they’re looking for that they move on in a month!

The time moves slowly, and it feels like hours before the doorbell rings. My mom answers the door, while I stay glued to the love seat. Footsteps echo from the foyer, and my mom walks into the living room with a look of confusion on her face.

“Hey, Rex, look who’s here,” she says. “I’ll just leave you two. Yell if you need anything.”

All I can do at this point is nod.

“Hey,” Becca says. Her eyes look tired, and her hair is mangled. Her jersey has green streaks from the grass field. “I’m really sorry you found out this way, Rex. I’ve been meaning to tell you.”

“It’s cool,” I respond, trying to limit the quivering of my voice.

“It’s just, I needed someone who had their life together.” She pauses. “I didn’t mean it like that—you’re a good person. You just need time to focus on yourself, and I’m not at a point where I can sit around and wait.”

Now it’s clear exactly what emotion is going to emerge. The blood rushes to my head and I stand up. “Why are you talking to me with that condescending tone? Do you think you’re better than me because your parents are still together, and because your dad can still afford to put you through college?”

“Rex, I didn’t mean it like…”

“Get out,” I say strangely calm.

“Just be careful, Rex. I’d hate to see you end up like—”

I cut her off. “Like what?”

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“Nevermind, I shouldn’t have said that.”
“Like my father? I really think you need to leave, Becca.”
She doesn’t move.
I feel my face getting flushed. My mouth opens. “Damn it, get out!”

She turns to walk toward the door. After two steps she turns and looks back at me, her tired eyes now tearing up. I follow her to the door and watch her drive off. The kitchen counter is less than five feet away and on it are my car keys.

I yell to my mom, “Becca is gone, and I’m headed out to blow off some steam!”

“Be careful, honey,” she says from the top of the stairs.
The car is cooler than it was earlier because the sun has finally set. My mom is now standing on the front porch watching me start the car. I pull off and drive down the street toward the strip mall in between my house and my dad’s. The radio automatically turns on, but I quickly reach to turn it off. All I can think about is how pissed off I am. My grip on the wheel gets tighter with every thought that goes through my mind: my parents’ divorce, the inability to finish my college education, that Jake guy, and the damn greens not matching in the living room.

I pull up to the strip mall, and on the very end of it is an ATM. I get out and withdraw eighty dollars, forty for me and forty for my dad. Before I head over to my dad’s, I need to make one more stop—the Wine and Spirits store. I use the forty for me to get a handle of Captain. The forty dollars I withdrew for my dad I’m using to get his favorite, Wild Turkey. The man working the counter asks for my ID. I confidently whip it out, show him, take the bags, and head toward the door.

I start my car up, this time turning on the radio. The rest of the drive to my dad’s feels incredibly short. I pull up to his house and grab the bags. I walk up to his door proudly, as if I am the world’s best son.

I knock on the door twice, and open it a crack, yelling, “Hey, Dad, I got you something!”
The creek I have walked in today
I feel around my feet still,
sitting in this chair, by this golden lamp.
The current circles my toes like a cold string,
like string tied to a finger to remember
something necessary.
I remember that creek, and all the creeks
I have never walked in, shaded and cool,
glittering through a field, or underground like nickel,
following gravity through the lowest point of a landscape
down to the sea, where it becomes the tide,
and is given the strength and grace to move things
larger than leaves and silt, pebbles
and the small tokens of the woods: hazelnuts, snail shells,
nymphs of dragonflies and blueberries.
Now it picks up fishing boats and throws them,
shoulders schooners on its broad gray back,
moves whole continents away from others,
pulls the moon to its cheek
and lets it go.
I smell his words.
He lingers in my doorway
Like how vodka and bubblegum
Linger on his breath.
He tells me to come with him.
I follow him outside.
He holds my hand as we cross the street.
The trees cast monster shadows. I have always been
A little afraid of the dark.
I look down.
He isn’t wearing shoes.

I know those toes,
Smaller, fearless, poised
At the edge of a pool.
The boy I nanny jumps in.
I splash him,
Covering his ears with crashing waves.
He doesn’t yet hear the casual chatter,
The pool’s soundtrack of high school sex, drunken slurs, rolling
joints in bathroom stalls.
All he can hear is the splash of water and a lifeguard’s whistle.
No splashing allowed.
But he keeps splashing,
With his bright, joyful eyes
And a missing-tooth grin.

He whistles soft,
Twinkle, twinkle little star,
And looks up at the sky. He wants a star to fall
So he can make a wish. I steady his big, heavy body so he doesn’t fall.
We stop in front of a telephone post. He picks the rusty, ugly, old
man staples out of it.
He mutters drunkenly, “This used to be a tree.”
I imagine his long limbs scaling strong branches,
Pulling him up to see the world from this tree that is now a telephone post.
Growing up ruins things in a way.
The boy I nanny,
He teaches me
The rules of tag.
His mane is mussed from the pool, wild in
Every direction; it is hard to take him seriously when he says
I, with my flattened, mature locks, am the monster. I have to catch him.
I guide him, covering up the park’s graffiti.
My hands shield his eyes, blocking out swastikas, penises, a fuck or two.
All he sees are bright blues, reds, yellows, and a slow, tired monster
Who can’t catch his lighting speed feet.

I’m barefoot now.
Calloused, chipped toes,
I stare at them
So I don’t have to see
His body, folded and fetal,
Heaving big, ugly wretches into the recycling bin,
Folded over and naked.
I wonder if,
As he tossed vodka down his throat,
He wanted to be small again.
Small, vulnerable,
The alcohol shields his ears and his eyes blocking out
The dicks scribbled on walls, the fuck yous and god damn its of fist fights outside,
And the first time he had to look at his chipped, calloused toes
To avoid seeing some chick give a blow in
A bathroom stall.
I rub his back, and he mutters drunkenly,
“Don’t touch me,”
My hands keep turning as if the moles
Could take us back to climbing trees, splashing in pools, and running through parks.
I pray
An adult’s wish.
I pray for us to be small again.

I am barefoot
As I chase him down the slide.
I trap him in its big, blue, yawning mouth.
The monster gobbling him up,
Wrapping him in a big bear hug,
I swing him off the ground.
He asks me when I became a grown up.
I tell him I don’t know.
He doesn’t like that answer.
He tells me he will be a grown up next month
When he starts school and turns six.
I look at the aging leaves around us. They’re wrinkled, orange, and hung over.
They’re ready to start their slow fall towards death.
I hold him tight and make him pinky promise
That even when he is a grown up
He will never be too big
For me to chase down slides.
And he says,
“Let’s go for a walk.”
Deaconess

I didn’t want anyone seeing me die.
Like any nurse
I wanted to go quiet and white like
dinner placements and prayer books.
I wanted to go like that winter snow
storm when my husband drove
me to work at Bryn Mawr because
someone has to pace the parameters
of hospital beds—we ghosts
that wear the same uniform in
different skins.

I didn’t want people’s eyes pouring over me
as I went—I’ve seen that. It’s not
quiet. There’s beeping.
They sew you to machines.
Their pupils are endless, gaping mouths.
The awestricken audience.
They carry old mason jars, bottling up
each of your breaths.

I melted into linoleum last night.
I went whiter than baby socks.
As nameless as an empty sheetless bed.
I worked for decades outside that very room.
In their white shoes my fellow
nurses were there at my coffin.

My sons will get my last paycheck,
but I don’t know who will sign it.

They will pack themselves into brief-
cases. People will tell them a thousand times
“I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry.”
I wish one apology could
come from my lips. I’m sorry for dying,
but not for nights I spent
holding coiled hands while they passed, instead of watching my sons fall asleep. I was always white in there—white in a hospital. My skin was so frail and thin. They never have to know what I look like laid out before them—my bed a sterile casket.

My sons don’t know the woman who wears the deaconess—they know a woman in the white and red polka-dot dress who has thick glasses that she keeps at the tip of her nose when she reads Winnie the Pooh out loud. They don’t know that I push my glasses against my face when I read charts at the foot of hospital beds. I read my own charts while I was waiting for death to take me. For machines to summon my kin in their red-cross emblems.

I will preserve their memory in Technicolor. To them I will remain “mother” and “movie night,” and “canned peas,” and “French toast Sundays before mass at nine.” They will think of “mommy,” and “let me sleep five minutes more.” They will hear my voice say “wake up your brother,” and “I love you like mashed potato stains.” I’ll still be saying “be quiet, Dad, your son is talking” and “look at what the little one is drawing” when they sit quietly with their father in the rec room where my armchair will be vacant. They will remember “McDonalds parking lots” and recall on occasion “shut bedroom doors” and regret the “timeouts” I assigned after they put bull frogs in my sock drawer.

My sons will never have to know me as “cancer,” or the woman who washes death off her hands each night.
AMANDA SIERZEGA

Border of Love

Every valley within the Alps holds a glacier between its two fingers.

When your mother was a little girl and her father was a geologist, she travelled with him on expeditions measuring glaciers, calculating their age, origin, the climate of the area ten thousand years ago, and whatever else it is geologists do. She played her recorder and explored the world, walking ahead of her father with a rope around her waist while he and his men held the other end. When ice was too thin for four-year-old legs, it splintered under forty pounds, and she sometimes fell through.

But daddy pulled her back to the surface, they walked around the dent she made, and the little girl pretended her recorder was a flute and let ice chunks and water run through her fingers, sans cold or fear.

She took you skiing in Italy during winter break one year of college, and you skied next to her four-year-old footprints down the eastern Dolomites. She showed you the quietest place in the world: above clouds atop the Alps where weary but successful travelers sleep. But instead you sat together above sky snow clumps and below the sun, 2752 feet closer to timelessness. And then you climbed further to the Border of Love at the boundary between Switzerland and Italy, 11,000 feet above sea level, and swam in that sea. At home when you hiked through her favorite spots, she showed you how beautiful your backyard can be through leaf-rock lenses and sand castles built under Venus' rays.

Your mother died last spring at home while you were at school trying to make strawberry shortcake from scratch. Her bones and skin and hair cracked and mended themselves three times, but could not recreate themselves one more or any more times until eternity, to watch you walk with your child or with someone, or by yourself on a glacier, or through grass, as long as you thought “yes” when you did.
I met her once after I smoked 100 chalk cigarettes with you on stage as Gloria and Gloria. We ordered tea at the bar and I think ice cream made from frozen Alpine molecules, but that might have been her voice’s vibrations and bangles moving while she spoke with her soul about the beauty of it all. None of us had ever seen snow in April before, except her. She is playing her recorder, exploring glaciers, and will never slip through the surface again. She is 11,000 feet above the sea and Alps, swimming, hiking, and showing you Switzerland.
Dear Son,

Words cannot explain the guilt I feel knowing that I have sacrificed the greatest gift I will ever receive in my entire lifetime. The King has threatened to take my life, but he doesn’t know that it has already been taken away from me. I pray that you will be in good hands, and that this mysterious savior of mine protects you and cares for you. It pains me that you will be raised by a stranger, but do not think of him as a stranger, but rather a man of many talents.

I remember clearly his sudden apparition in this jail. Standing barely above my knees, he held the confidence of a giant. He appeared all knowing of the situation at hand. Using his magic ways to turn these dried stalks of grain into one of the most precious elements in the world, he has spared me my life. He is not a criminal; he is a hero. Never forget this.

Even after three days, I recognize everything in this dreary enclosure. I can identify everything with my eyes closed. Like many forsaken places, there is a distinct gloom within these four walls. I see faded colors, so faded that they have all morphed into one: grey. Then with an unwavering determination, my savior lights up the room with beautiful gold. I am confused and alone. One day I am back at home, reading and wondering how life is. Then I have been forced to do the impossible. Suddenly, out of nowhere I am saved! Who is he, and where does he come from? I cannot tell if he is good or evil.

I don’t even know his name.
BRIAN THOMAS

Purchasing Poplars

He was dreaming in foggy greens and blues, fuzzy figures with no plot or purpose dancing around like the northern lights. “Francis,” he heard them call, “Francis,” in his mom’s voice. The door opened, the light was bright, and moments later his mother was hovering over him with a careful smile. He mumbled something unintelligible, tried to pull open his eyes after scraping the sharp, hard crust deposited in his lids. The light washed into them like a flood of fire, and he nervously surveyed the room to make sure there weren’t any bottle caps or cups. There weren’t.

“Francis, it’s already 8:30. You told me earlier this week to get you up at 8:30 if you weren’t already up.” His mother was looking at him with a careful smile, her blonde hair blow-dried. She had on a plain salmon colored shirt from Kohl’s.

Francis pushed through the fog, put a hand to his head and sipped some water from a glass he kept on his bedside table. His mom had sat down at the foot of his bed. He could tell she was fighting off a look. Even if I wanted to get up I couldn’t, he thought, not with you trapping me in here under the damn sheets. His head pulsed like a kick drum.

“Yeah, uh thanks. No, I do want to get up earlier, I just couldn’t sleep last night. So I might just take another hour or two.”

“Well we have those tickets for the Impressionist thing at the art museum, bud. We have to get going by quarter after nine at the latest. Unless you don’t want to go. I can go by myself if you’re too tired.”

“Oh, right. Yeah. I thought that was next week, isn’t today the, uh, 13th?”

“I changed them this morning. It’s just such a nice day, and I figured if we waited, you know, you’re going back to school, things are getting hectic, so I just changed them to today since I know we’re both free. You’re still free, right? You still want to?”

“Yes, yeah, I want to. No, that all sounds good.” He sniffed and drank some more water. “I’ll just get a shower and have some breakfast and we’ll be golden.”

She smiled at him and left, and in a few minutes he heard her teapot screaming. He got up and grabbed a towel. In the shower, the cold water felt good and every glob of snot and spit
felt like an exorcism. He couldn’t believe that she did this. It worried him. His mother had never forced him to do something like this. As he brushed his teeth, he heard Rachel practicing guitar, early morning exercises where she clumsily formed the G and C chords he had taught her. He was supposed to help her pick out a guitar last week, but could tell by the sound that she had done it on her own.

He picked out a t-shirt, but put it back, opting for a nice fitting red button up. He wanted to look good, felt like he had to prove something. Walking downstairs, he ran his fingers through his hair. It was getting too long. His mother was playing solitaire on her phone, and she looked up at him and smiled. He forced a smile back, found some white bread, toasted it and ate it with soft, melted butter. The coffeemaker beeped and Francis filled a mug and drank more water.

“Are you feeling okay?” his mother said. She took the last bite of her cereal and turned the volume on the TV up. It was the Good Morning Philadelphia program, a group of cheery newscasters dressed in bright colors talking with passion about a local firefighter who won an award.

“Oh yeah, no I’m fine. I just had some weird dreams last night, but I’m fine.” He needed her to turn it down, but knew that he couldn’t act annoyed by the noise. He made a mental note to get his sunglasses off the shelf before they left. “I’m excited to go today, I really am. What’s the exhibition called again? I know it’s about Impressionism, but what’s the angle?”

“Oh I don’t know, one of those cheesy titles they have for things. I’m just going to use the bathroom and then we’ll go,” his mother said, walking upstairs. He set his plate in the sink as if it were an egg, careful not to be too loud. On his phone he googled “Philadelphia Museum of Art Impressionism.” It was the only American stop of this show, which featured the personal collection of their main advocate and collector. Perfect, thought Francis.

Rachel came down the stairs in her PJs. She smiled at Francis and grabbed a cup of coffee. Coffee was a new thing for her, something that high school had forced her to take up, along with a job and early mornings.

“You sounded good in there, I heard you working on those chords,” said Francis.

“Thanks, I’m still getting the hang of it.” She looked too young for high school, but too old for middle school. “I’m going to
try and play an open mic in a few weeks, you should come and check it out.” She kept her eyes on her coffee.

“I’ll definitely try to, absolutely,” said Francis. Rachel smiled again, looking at the ground. She said “great” and walked back upstairs.

His mother emerged, grabbed her small brown leather purse and they got in the car. This journey was one they made many times. She called it their “thing.” Together, they had seen Van Gogh, ancient Korean art, and a Jasper Johns showcase that Francis loved but his mother hated. She always liked to spend time in the European section of the permanent gallery before the special exhibits, in front of the Monets and Manets. Francis didn’t mind this section. There was a Klimt piece he liked and some other interesting sculptures, but his mother loved looking at the Impressionist paintings. She would always brag to her friends when they went together. Francis preferred going to the museum with friends, especially the art school types he hung out with in high school. He loved to watch them run around the contemporary section, laughing at the Duchamp toilet and telling him all about the artists. That room was also the only one that didn’t smell like the perfume his grandmother wore.

They pulled out of the driveway, listening to the same classic rock station they always did. His mom told him he could change it if he wanted, but Francis declined, said he didn’t mind and didn’t know how to work the satellite radio anyway. They drove past a few office parks, and Francis thought about how nice they were. He loved office parks the way someone loves the plates at their parents’ house. Every doctor, dentist, therapist that he’d ever visited was housed in an office park. He liked knowing that there were boring buildings around that you could go into messed up and leave feeling so much better. They passed the fire station and post office, and merged onto I-76, the main artery into Philadelphia.

“Man, people just fly on this road, you know? I’m doing 65, already above the limit, and they’re passing me at 80 miles an hour or so. It’s insane,” said his mom.

Francis nodded his head and realized he had forgotten his sunglasses. He kept looking down.

“I have some shades in the glove compartment,” his mom said, almost on cue. “They’re women’s ones of course, but it’s not like anybody is going to see you.”
“Sure, thanks so much.” Francis’s voice was quiet and resigned. He fished around and found a pair of white wide-lens frames with sparkles on them, and put them on. “Hey, I looked up the exhibit, read about it this morning. It’s really cool, it’s less about them and more about this dude, this guy who saved them and bankrolled them and found them,” he said. “Apparently he hung them all up in his house. They recreate it at the end of the exhibit.”

“That does sound cool. I know you actually hate doing this, getting up early and going to the art museum with your mother and all, but it means a lot to me.” They were getting off the highway, only a few feet until they pulled into the milk-colored parking garage off of Eakins Oval.

“Cut that out, you know I like doing this.” Francis felt like an actor reciting his lines. “I like art, I had nothing else to do today, and it’s a free lunch.” He smiled at her, she chuckled, and he felt victorious. As they found a parking spot, he took off the sunglasses and massaged his temples.

After paying, they walked upstairs, his mother ahead of him, Francis breathing heavy like a sprinter after a race. It was cold and dry in the museum, and it always made him thirsty. Over the steps hung a massive painting, a giant yellow and orange sun with abstract farmers milling about a valley. His mom waited for him at the top of the steps, and they moved into the European gallery, as always.

“I think the exhibit you wanted to see is over here,” said Francis, pointing to the long line attended by interns wearing horn-rimmed glasses.

“Oh yeah, no it is, but they’re timed tickets. We still have another hour and a half to kill before our time,” said his mom, moving towards the gallery. Francis sighed and followed her.

They wandered around and got separated. Francis eventually found his mother looking at Van Gogh’s *Rain*. She always commented on it, how he painted it while looking through the bars at an asylum, how she could just see him sitting there and wildly going at it. Francis stood at a distance and watched. She stood still, clutching the string of her purse, a calm look on her face. A woman wearing a striped t-shirt stepped in front of her and started taking pictures and talking loudly. Francis could tell his mother was annoyed, but she couldn’t do anything. She looked like she was bound to a chair with her sock in her mouth. Francis went over to her. She turned to him before he could speak.
“There you are. I was just—I just love this one. I was just thinking about your grandfather. He loved coming here. Until he got sick, he did. He would just find a bench and watch the people. I just wish you could have met him. He would have been so proud.”

Francis smiled. He’d heard it before, the same speech every time they were there, but it still got to him a little.

“It’s—he just couldn’t stop, you know? Not after the dialysis, the liver failure. Just couldn’t stop, and he never got to meet you or do what he wanted.”

Francis looked at her. He felt hungry. He nodded, said “Yeah, that’s a shame,” so quietly that she didn’t hear him, looked down at his shoes, and wished he was in bed. They stood for a little longer, and Francis checked his watch. “I think it’s almost our time,” he said.

They both got the audio tours, black rectangles with earbuds worn on lanyards that played ninety second tidbits of information for certain paintings. A scrawny intern with bags under his eyes sanitized them before they were handed out. They went in, navigated the crowds of elderly people and looked at the paintings. Eventually they got separated again. Francis didn’t mind. He moved around quickly, looking at each painting for sixty seconds before moving on. He bumped into a man in a wheel chair in front of a Monet, said he was sorry and smiled. Francis thought about whether or not he could get old. He thought about the future, let it swirl around in his head like cream in coffee, thought about where he could be in ten years, in twenty. Nothing tangible came up, just abstractions. He’d have a job, a house, but he couldn’t think of what or when or where. Before college, he had a solid plan that he told to everyone. It was law school, or teacher, or writer, inevitable success at whatever he chose. He didn’t know what made him happy anymore.

He moved to the next room, dedicated entirely to Monet’s series of poplars. The audio tour said that Monet bought the land the poplars stood on from his landlord just so that he could paint these pictures. Francis thought about whether or not he would do that, if he had enough drive to invest in something so high stakes, to finish something like that. He looked at one of the paintings, three thin poplars nervously erect, awash in sunset red and light sky blue. It reminded him of the first time his mom caught him drinking, the summer before college. She found three Yuengling bottles hidden under old sweatshirts in his closet, confronted him
on the stairs that afternoon with a shaky voice. Three bottles, 36 oz. of trust poured out and earned back in a month. She looked so worried when she found them, the same look she had when he came home stumbling from a house party his first spring break back from school. He vomited in the bathroom three times after she went to bed, and the morning after she didn’t say anything, just gave him water and forced him to eat some toast. That whole week she reminded him how proud she was of his grades.

He liked the poplars. Something about their thin flimsiness and soft colors soothed him. He stayed in the room for a while, then moved on, eventually waiting in the gift shop for his mom. After about ten minutes, she emerged, looking happy.

“I just love that stuff, you know? It’s so nice. I think I’m going to buy a print of the poplars and get it framed. It’ll look nice in the basement, don’t you think?”

Francis smiled and nodded, knew that she would put it next to the liquor cabinet with the other prints she bought from the other exhibits.

They went to get a quick lunch at the cafeteria, Francis ordering tacos with extra hot sauce and beans, his mother getting a turkey sandwich. They took their food and found a seat, brushing off brittle crumbs from the previous occupants. Over their seat was a still life of a guitar.

“You know, Rachel really wanted you to help her out picking out a guitar. She did all that research and it would have been nice to have you there,” his mother said, focusing on her sandwich.

Francis had woken up sick the morning they were supposed to go. He convinced himself that it was bad timing, that any other morning would have been great. He told his mom that he was having bad seasonal allergies and that he couldn’t go to the music store, and then forgot about it.

“Yeah, I know. She got a good one though. I wouldn’t have been much help anyway. She has to pick it out herself,” he said, letting a touch of irritation slide into his voice. “Why do you bring it up?”

“I don’t know, she was just excited. And I know you heard her practicing this morning.”

“Yeah she’s getting better, I’ll definitely give her some more lessons. She’s eager to learn, just like I was.”

“She really is, I’m so proud of both of you. And it is really
nice that you teach her, and that you come with me to the museum, it just would have also been really nice if you could have gone with us then to get the guitar. It’s not a big deal, though,” his mother said, her voice drifting off. They finished their food and left, heading right to the car.

Francis’ mother struggled to pay her ticket at the automated box, but Francis helped her. She pulled around Eakins Oval and merged onto I-76, checking her blind spot.

“What were you working on last night?” she said.

“Just getting stuff ready for school, reading the news. I watched a movie. Hey, I really am sorry I couldn’t go get the guitar with Rachel.”

“That’s not really work, though. Were you drinking at all?”

She maintained her speed perfectly, 75 mph and keeping with traffic.

“No. Just couldn’t sleep, you know.” Francis scrolled through his phone.

“I just heard you creeping around, heard the toilet flush a bunch.”

“Oh, well, I mean I had like, one beer, just while I was watching the movie, just to chill out. Nothing crazy though, just wanted to calm down a little.”

“You’re lying.” Aside from a wispy cloud on the horizon, the sky was spotless.

“Jesus, what are you talking about, how would I even get liquor, I’m twenty years old and you lock the liquor cabinet on me.” He was breathing heavy, his fingers bounced on his thigh.

“You can’t say—please don’t say things that way. Besides the lock doesn’t do me any good, I have to keep moving the key,” she said. “I measure the bottles, and I count the beers in the fridge. I know the signs, Francis, don’t lie to me.”

“Look, do I look like a—do I look like—just forget about it. There’s nothing there. I just have a few drinks sometimes to be sociable at school and relax at home. Okay? I came all the way out here today with you, can’t we just drop it?”

“I thought you liked going to the museum.”

“I do. No, I do, I really do. Sorry. And I like spending time with you. If I’d known we were going today, I would have been tip top, you know that. You just sprung it on me. I’m responsible when I have stuff to do, my grades are good, I’m engaged in things, and I do like going to these kinds of things with you,
"Look, I know the signs. And I know you wouldn’t tell me, you wouldn’t tell anybody. You can, but you wouldn’t."

"Jesus—no. I mean, yes of course I would tell you. I know the signs too, mom. I’m fine, I make you proud, we do these things, and if it ever starts getting bad, I would tell you, but I’m telling you now, lay off it."

"Just know that I know, and that I’m watching out. I swear to God, Francis, if you do this again, or if you lie to me, I’m going to have to do something. I don’t know what, but something."

Francis didn’t say anything for the rest of the ride. They didn’t hit any traffic. The sun sat at midday, getting ready to start setting and shooting bursts of red off the rims of the cars around them. He stared out the window and listened to the radio, music and intermittent flashes of fuzz that filled the air in between them, two humans perched like pebbles on a cliff, nothing to do until the one falls off.
I love my girl, really. Heck, I’ve loved her since I was gifted to her and shown special favor. It was as if we were the best of friends, going everywhere, doing everything, always together. But that’s the thing. We’re always together. Is it selfish of me to find her a bit clingy? I mean, I’m barely dry from being washed before she puts me on, and I’m long dirty before she takes me off. Don’t get me wrong; I love spending time with her, but I’ve been fraying at the edges for weeks. How much more am I expected to handle?

And my unwinding stitches are certainly not helped when we’re sent into The-Creepy-Forest-that-I-Regret-We-Live-Near. I can wrap her in a protective cocoon for only so long, and I’m capable of shielding her from only so much. I am just one cloak, after all, and not a very useful one to wear into the woods. The girl and her mother didn’t really think over how much like a walking bloodstain she’d be, and of course the suggestive scarlet attracted a land-shark.

For being supposed best friends, she acts as though she can’t hear me when I talk to her, tell her not to do something potentially life threatening; doesn’t she remember the half an hour spiel her mother gave? Stick to the path. Don’t wander. Don’t talk to strangers. Honestly.

Maybe I’m cowardly, and she must think so too; why else would she tear me so forcefully from the branches and briars I desperately cling to, urging her to retrace her steps? Yes, yes, the flowers found in the woods are very pretty, but so are the flowers in Grandmother’s garden. The old lady’s sight is failing as it is, and she probably wouldn’t even recognize flowers picked from there.

Perhaps my girl’s sight is fading as well – not that parents who’d send a child off into the dark woods alone would have the ware withal to consider their kid may have vision issues. Why else would she not recognize all that fur and that ghastly grin? I should’ve suggested glasses sooner. But not those tacky kind of glasses her grandma owns, now perched on the wolf’s poorly disguised face; they’re about as helpful to the situation as twin lens making a competition of “Eye see through you” jokes can ever
hope to be.

And now... Now, I'm some place I'd rather not be, somewhere between a stomach and the small intestines that go with it. Being what I am, I'm quite used to having all kinds of bodily fluids dripped, wiped, and smeared all over me; however, that was all from my girl whom I'd readily be torn to shreds for, and never have I had the pleasure of acid eating through my fibers. I'm not afraid of the Big-Bad Wolf, but I may be a bit wary of that ax that totally just went through some of my patchwork. I wonder if it's too late to become a camouflage-colored blanket instead.
ALBERT HAHN

Sunken

at night

it wraps me in hollow arms
doesnt make me compromise
my side of the bed
says im not alone
tells me its been my closest friend
takes my hand and gently squeezing

it carves out a map of the labyrinth on my chest
says its love is safely stored within me
with no chance of escaping

it is an attentive companion
but one who is too jealous
when frustration and love
sing their siren songs it pulls
me closer and says its my
guardian says call me angel
says dont bother thinking about things other than me
itll only upset you

it says one day you should let me lead you
down
to a place where youll be more comfortable
says lets go for a swim
where it is always cold and dark
and rotten ichor hangs in your throat
like a word you just cant seem to get out
where we can watch the lost souls pass by
and it smells of discarded emotions and damp mushrooms

it says do you remember how much you love mushrooms
remember the taste of my kisses
the feel of the echoes of my loving whispers
in your ears like the remnants
of the sad mans music
do you remember the harshness of sunlight
do you remember how lonely it feels
when you push me away
They whisper in our ears all that we know.
Small words of malice sounding at the source.
Boil down, break up, be scraps, be parts, be seen.

Greet pain with beauty, sorrow with a glow.
Speak deeply and in all fine things be coarse.
They whisper in our ears all that we know.

Be half the fat that’s filling out your jeans.
Be twice the muscle filling out your shirt.
Boil down, break up, be scraps, be parts, be seen.

Have sweetness, Honey, but always stay clean.
Have roughness, Babe, but only certain sorts.
They whisper in our ears all that we know.

Be eyes that glitter, lips that purse and preen.
Be tongue that calls and hands that take by force.
Boil down, break up, be scraps, be parts, be seen.

Girl, learn to be a wisp, don’t make a scene.
Boy, learn to bear a load, forget remorse.
They whisper in our ears all that we know,
Boil down, break up, be scraps, be parts, be seen.
His frail body is the only proof that he exists. Liquid drips down from his IV bag, and I wonder if it’s quenching his thirst or time’s. Sunlight peeks through the curtains, illuminating his face, with its lines of all the different paths his life could have taken.

Then I just see my grandfather, one of billions on the planet, one of a few hundred I know, and one of a handful in my heart. I see his model ships run by tiny men with grey paint bleeding into their faces, and floating in dust instead of water, the Civil War tomes scattered everywhere, and the grubby Velcro shoes he refuses to replace.

My tears, which his callused hands have caught countless times before, land on his blanket, a flimsy fabric mass-produced in a factory somewhere. The only thing in this room a factory didn’t produce is him.

I feel like one of the machines, manufactured by time and society, the pair destined to kill each other, to conform and contribute. I want to be the time machine from the VHS movies he loved to watch.
But that's just fiction, a thought, ink on a script. But if those words aren't real, how real is the phone call I get twenty minutes after I leave his room for the last time?
God Took a Cigarette Break with Police Officers

Where was God when the church burned down?
Where was God when the congregation let their murderer lovingly into their group only to have their love used to mold a bullet?
Where was God when a White Boy Terrorist decided to be Him?
Or did God decide to be that White Boy Terrorist?

Sometimes I think God is so old, so tired, that He switches up his mask everyday flitting in, out, of all our different conceptions of Him. So maybe He was taking a piss in a gas station bathroom where an ambulance had just whisked away a body taken by an overdose of drugs.

Maybe He was too busy being an orgasm in the back seat of a car with drunken lovers, and breaking the condom. And the next day He was the pharmacist handing over the morning after pill without judgment.

Maybe He’s spending His time at the Pride parades as the 24-year-old Christian woman holding an “I’m sorry” poster, or maybe He’s switching it up a bit and He’s holding “God hates fags” today.

Maybe He’s the CEO putting out more pollution that leaves little black children choking on their own lungs and their spaces of comfort in ashes.

I mean, God has been losing credit in my book for a long time, but maybe He is the heart that restarts in a hospital ward more often than He is in a flatline. It’s not like I’ll ever know.
God stopped answering my texts years ago,
and He turned off the GPS in His cellphone.
But I do know that there are gods answering my texts,
and who held out water to protesters in hot August sun.

There are gods in every broken heart
that came down with the church.
I know where these gods are because
they say that God is love.

So every person who has ever loved
is a god, their own higher power,
our higher power, inside our ribcages.
So I think I have a better question.
Where was God?

Where were We?
Where will We be?
HENRY WILLSHIRE

Martian Standoff

The dusters were already drunk when they wandered in from the edge of town, off cheap beer and bad air. They struggled with their air-masks, leaving them off to take a swig and waiting far too long to put them back on.

The trio wandered past the general store, a converted company building with a fading banner entreating people to “Ride the Lev: Sixty minutes, six-hundred miles.” One of the dusters halted, vomited right next to the front door. When she had finished, she reached for another drink.

A shopkeeper stepped up to intervene, as the sun set behind him.

“Wander out of here, before you cause any more trouble.”

One of the dusters burped in his face, another seemed not to hear him. The last grinned, pulled something out of her pocket. A smartgun, its IQ chip old but reliable. It coughed and stuttered to life and made a threat. The shopkeeper retreated, the dusters wandered on, smartgun visible to all now.

“Where can we get a goddamn drink and some goddamn food?” the one with the gun shouted.

The sheriff stepped into view, as they reached the center of town. Her air-mask was made with one-way glass, her eyes concealed. It hissed as she breathed.

“I don’t like the trouble you’re making,” she warned.

“Nice hat,” the male duster slurred, “give it to me.”

“You have to the count of three to turn around.”

“Nah, you do,” the one with the smartgun said, hoisting her prize in the sheriff’s direction.

“Surrender the hat, ma’am,” the gun warned.

The sheriff sighed, drew her own weapon. It was curiously silent, so instead she spoke:

“One.”

“Is that a dumbgun?” one of the dusters laughed.

“Two.”

“How totally geocentric!” Another chimed, almost charmed by the antiquity.

“Three.”

The duster’s smartgun tried to chirp out a warning, but it
seized and the IQ chip crashed. A bullet whizzed, took the duster in the arm, and she dropped the weapon.

"Shit!"

"Next one goes right between those nervous little eyes, now listen up: lockup’s around the corner, big bronze door. The deputy will meet you. Cells have got air-filters. I’ll send a doctor round for that arm. Leave the piece. You don’t do as I say here, I put you down. You give me trouble tonight, I turn the filters off in the cells and you hope your own air supplies last the night. Understand?"

The dusters nodded, stumbled off in the direction the sheriff indicated. She put her weapon back in its holster, wandered up to the smartgun on the ground. She turned off the IQ chip and let it reboot.

"Reissman Smartguns: Let us do the thinking for you," it said in a confident voice.

"Buddy, you owed them some better thoughts than that."
“Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god!” comes Sarah’s voice from the backseat.

“Jenny…?” I ask. “Babe, are you okay?” I push back the deflating airbag and a stabbing pain shoots through my right shoulder. “Aghhhh, shit!”

Jenny’s nose is covered in blood. She sobs. “I think it’s broken.”

“Fucking deer!” I try to wrap my head around what just happened. “That fucking deer, it just came out of nowhere!”

“GUYS!” Sarah screams. “IT’S MANNY!”

Jenny and I turn around. Sarah’s blouse is crimson. Tears stream down her face, bringing her eye shadow with them. Manny lies next to her in a mangled mesh of metal. His breaths are short and gasped. Shards of what used to be the Jetta’s door are protruding from his leg. His entire leg is drenched, the blood won’t stop flowing. He’s in bad shape.

My vision gets blurry as I feel hot tears forming in the corner of my eyes. None of this was supposed to happen, I think. Tonight was just supposed to be a fun night with friends. Go to the party, say hi, grab beers to go, and then dip to chill back at my place. No one planned for the deer. Goddamn deer...

About an hour later I’m sitting in my hospital bed. My right shoulder still hurts, but I now vividly feel a new pain in my forearm. Dr. Reinman said that in addition to spraining my shoulder I have multiple hairline fractures along my ulna. He finishes setting my casted arm up in a sling and is getting ready to leave.


“Your friend Jenny is down the hall in room 2023 getting her nose reset,” he replies. His voice is reassuring. “She’s going to be fine. The other girl only had a few minor scrapes and bruises. She didn’t need to be admitted, so we cleaned her up and gave her new clothes. She’s in the waiting room.”

“And Manny…? What about Manny?”

The doctor sighs. “He was taken to the operating room on arrival. He had metal fragments embedded in his leg, one of which nicked his femoral artery, a major artery for distributing blood throughout the body.”
“But he’s going to be alright? Right? He IS going to make it?”
I hold the doctor’s gaze in a deadlock. I need him to look me in the eye and tell me that Manny was going to be okay. “You guys are doctors. It’s your job to fix people.”

“Your friend is in good hands,” the doctor assures me. “He’s getting the best help he can. I have to go. Try and get some rest.”

“Wait, Doc.”
He turns. “Yes?”

“My arm is killing me. Can I get a ’scrip for like, Oxy or Percs or something?”

Dr. Reinman gives me a long look, then pulls a prescription pad out of his coat pocket. He scribbles something then hands me the slip. “Here.”

I snatch the slip from his hand. “Wait... This is only a week’s worth. You said it’d take my arm-“

“The worst of the pain will subside within a week. Call your primary doctor if you need more.”

With that, the doctor exits, leaving me alone with just my thoughts. That was the last thing I wanted. For the last hour, my thoughts were a broken record and the one stuck on repeat was ‘the crash. I must’ve played it out in my head over a hundred times. I look over at the clock above the door. 12:23 AM. I need to get up and walk around, anything to clear my head. I grab the left handlebar of the bed and I swing my legs over. The tiles are cold on my feet. My legs are sore as hell. I grab my IV stand and, leaning more of my weight onto it than I am proud to admit, shamble out of my hospital room.

The hallway is deserted. The walls are a light sky blue. Propped randomly against some of the walls are stray wheelchairs and wheeled hospital beds. I continue down the hallway when I hear the light drone of chatter in the distance. It sounds like a TV.

I round the corridor corner and see the waiting area up ahead.

Sarah is sitting in one of the chairs, The Big Bang Theory playing on the television. Sarah is decorated in gauze. At first glance I see two on her face and three on her legs. She’s wearing a man’s forest green sweater and what look like basketball shorts. She’s looking at the TV but it doesn’t look like she’s actually watching.

“Well don’t look at ME,” Sheldon says. The laugh track roars.

“Hey.”

She shakes her head, as if being snapped out of a daze. Her eyes and nose are bright red, and she drops the box of tissues she’s
holding. “Oh my god, Tristan!” She hops up and runs over, embracing me. “You’re in a cast! Are you okay?”

“Yes,” I reply. “Just a sprained shoulder and some fractures. The doctor said I should be better in about six weeks.”

“Thank God,” she says. “What about Jenny and Manny? They cleaned me up in like five minutes and then sent me out here. No one’s told me anything.”

“The doctor told me that Jenny is going to be fine, she just has a broken nose.” I pause. I know that hearing myself say it out loud will make it that much more real. “Manny’s in bad shape…”

“What?!” she bawls. “Manny might die?”

“BAZINGA!” Sheldon sneers.

“No. Manny is NOT going to die.” I wrap my one good arm around her and let her sob into my chest. “They have their best doctors working on him. He’s gonna be fine.”

Sarah’s sobbing simmers down to just sniffles, and she looks up at me. “You promise?”

“I promise.” I try to sound as convincing as I could, not just for her. I needed to convince myself. “Let’s sit down, okay? It kind of hurts to stand.”

She nods at me and we walk over to the chairs. “How did this even happen? I mean, we were driving back to your place, Manny was laughing, and we were—”

“It was the deer! The goddamned deer came out of nowhere!”

“Huh? What deer?”

“The deer on the road. The one that made us crash.”

“I never saw a deer, Tristan…”

I look at her. “What do you mean you didn’t see the deer?! That’s the whole reason we crashed! How did you not see it?”

Sarah stares at me. “Tristan, I just… I didn’t see a deer. I remember we were driving down Spraker Lane, and we came up to that really sharp turn… And then bam, we crashed.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose and sigh. “I jerked the car to the right because we would’ve hit the deer if I didn’t. And I’m pretty sure I hit it anyway. There’s probably still fur stuck in the grill of the car.”

Sarah isn’t even looking at me at this point.

“Why don’t you believe me?” I exclaim. “Why do you think I would intentionally drive off the road?”

“I don’t think you did it intentionally!” Sarah’s face is turning a bright red. “But I saw you chug those beers from Mike’s beer bong, and that was already after a couple shots.”
“That’s irrelevant, though, because it was like an hour after I did that when we left. By the time we were ready to go, I was completely fine to drive. That was the plan, remember?”

Sarah breaks her gaze from mine and looks down, nervously rubbing her shoulder.

“The plan was,” I remind her, “to go to Mike’s, say hi and down a couple, pocket as many beers as we can, then head back to my place to chill. My house is only three minutes from Mike’s. The only way someone could crash during the drive from Mike’s house to mine without a deer being involved is if that person actually tried to crash.”

“Why are you always like this, Tristan?” Sarah groans. “Why can’t you ever take responsibility for your actions? You never take the blame for anything.”

“What?” I stare at her. “Where is this coming from?”

“You know exactly what I mean, Tristan. Remember the night before prom? You and Sally? In Tawson’s Plaza? Yeah, don’t play dumb.”

I’m stupefied. Is she really hashing up old nonsense when one of our best friends is dying two floors away?

“I told you, we were waiting for Jason, but he never showed up.”

“I tried to warn Jenny about you. How she would get hurt if she got with you.”

"You see, it’s this dramatic attitude of yours why we only lasted for a few months!” I can’t believe she is being like this, trying to pin the blame on me. “Instead of just believing me about what actually happened, you’re arguing with me and trying to get me to throw myself under the bus. We should be talking about what we can do for Manny and Jen.”

A nurse wheeling a tray of IV bags and towels walks by. She scowls and moves one finger to her lips. We go back to our argument, now in harsh whispers.

“None of us would be here right now if it wasn’t for you! You were the one who crashed the car!” Sarah snaps through clenched teeth.

“I’m fully aware of that,” I retort. “I’m not denying that I was the one driving the car when it crashed. But I’m saying that the REASON we crashed was because a deer jumped out in front of the car. Sarah, I’m telling you, not even a professional NASCAR driver could’ve evaded that deer.”
A waterfall of tears is pouring out of Sarah’s eyes. She’s choking on her words. I take a deep breath and exhale slowly, gathering myself.

“Look, Sarah,” I say, gently caressing her face with my hand and guiding her eyes toward mine. “What happened tonight sucks, okay? Like, not a single one of knew this was going to happen. But we have to accept that it happened, and we have to stick together. We need to have each other’s backs.”

“Sti-stick together?” Sarah stammers through sobs. “W-what do you mean?”

“I mean that we’re going to have to be questioned by the police or some sort of officials at some point, and if they’re not convinced that we crashed because of a deer and Manny dies, I could get charged with involuntary manslaughter and you and Jen could get charged as accomplices. We could all be facing jail time.”

“Bullshit,” Sarah responds. “Only you’d be fucked, Tristan... Right?” Sarah stops to think for a minute. “Yeah, there’s no way Jen or I could get in trouble. You were the one driving. That’s on you.”

“I don’t... I don’t know. Okay. Maybe you wouldn’t get in trouble, I don’t know.” I take a deep breath. “Sarah, that’s not the point. I don’t know the legal bullshit. But do you want to risk it?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean why risk one, maybe all, of us going to jail? No one has to get in trouble.”

Sarah’s eyes travel around the room, looking for something that can give her an answer.

“You have to trust me,” I say. “There was a deer. And in a deer accident, no one is at fault except the deer.”

Sarah sniffs. “You promise there was a deer?”

“Yes, I promise.” And for a moment, I truly believed there was a deer, too. “Now come on, let’s go talk to Jenny and get our stories straight.”
It’s a Subtle Thing

It’s hard to go against society. When you are told your whole life that you are a girl, why go against it? As a child, a teenager, it’s just easier to go with the flow sometimes. I had never even come across the term or even concept of transgender until late high school. The only hints I’d had were those in TV, and even then it was only transwomen. In those days, it was comical, or unthinkable, for a man to become a woman. Degrading even. So, in my mind, even though I didn’t understand why a man would want to be a woman, it never occurred to me that a woman could want to be a man. When I learned and continue to learn about what it means to be transgender, the complexity of the identity made me realize that just as no two people are exactly alike, the same goes for the stories behind the stories of gender and sexuality. As such, my story and experiences are unique to me despite similarities to others.

YouTube was a regular part of my life in high school. Naturally, I found a person whose personality I felt connected with. We were similarly outgoing when interacting with our friends and I thought she was an inspirational character, someone I’d like to embody. After a period of not being able to follow this person, upon finding her again, I saw that she was now being referred to as he. I can still remember the strangeness and confusion that I felt when looking through his transition videos. The way his voice lowered, his physical transformation after getting chest surgery. It was all...strange, for lack of a better term. I didn’t know what to make of it. I felt neutral about the transition, but full of confusion and lack of understanding. At that point, I didn’t even know whether to call him he or she.

But one point that he made clear during his early transition was that he didn’t hate his body. He would look in the mirror and see a beautiful woman, but it didn’t agree with him. It just didn’t fit who he saw himself as. With many stories that I would end up reading later, hating one’s body becomes a normal occurrence with transgender persons. I thought boobs were just these weird mounds of skin and fat and tissue and didn’t really have any purpose, but my body wasn’t strange even though society tried really hard to make me hate the excess fat that I carried on it.

I started wondering, if he felt like a man, could I feel like one too?
I was never a tomboy, but never a girly-girl either. I mostly befriended other girls and didn’t quite know how to interact with boys because of growing up with my mother and sisters. I did some researching and realized that gender identity was not so much as boy or girl, but a broad spectrum. I tried to piece together my life, make connections, find some moment that could prove to me that I wasn’t a girl. But my family and society continued to insist otherwise. I didn’t have to necessarily be a tomboy, or girly, but I could still be a girl.

I internalized this and just settled with the thought that I could just be my own category of girl, whatever that category might be. But I never could shake the thought: what if I’m not a girl? It took well into my time here at Ursinus before I finally started to feed the notion.

The defining memory I still hold onto is when I had to get dresses for both my mom’s and sister’s weddings. Two dresses. That was all I needed to get. Naturally, I battled with my mom the entire time. I still remember looking at myself in that long mirror. Seeing the way the dresses fitted my curves, giving me a pleasant silhouette. I started to like them on that body I saw in the mirror. I looked up to see that my face was attached to that body. It felt jarring, disconnecting to see that I was the one in those dresses. It’s hard to explain what happened in that moment, because I know that it was me the entire time. But when trying on the dresses, I had unknowingly removed my face or not looked any higher than my neck. Finally seeing myself, really seeing myself in that situation felt...wrong.

I couldn’t understand why that moment felt so wrong when I had grown up wearing dresses before and didn’t have much problem with it. True, as I grew up I tended to stay away from anything girly, but I still thought that dresses were pretty, I still wore necklaces, I still liked cute stuff. I thought I was still too “feminine” to be a man. It was a battle. A constant mental battle of who I am, who I should be, who I could be. I didn’t know. My grades suffered that semester.

Finally, last winter break, I made a decision: wondering would get me nowhere. I had to somehow end it once and for all. So, I started small. I asked my closest friends to participate in an experiment where they would call me a different name and use different pronouns. I gradually included other friends and even some of my teachers. Nothing stood out to me though. I didn’t feel different.

If anything, it felt even stranger because it felt like I was disguising myself as a different person, that I was just playing a role. My mother came through for me though. Being called ‘little girl’ after
getting used to hearing ‘he’ and ‘him’ sent an inward cringe down my spine.

Being transgender is first, and foremost, a mental transition. Since accepting my identity, and changing my hair and clothes, that cringe has become more prominent, looking at myself in the mirror has become harder, and there are still times when I question my identity because society and my family still sees me as a girl. But the ability to walk with my head held a little higher, the ease that now comes when talking with people, the lightness in my shoulders, the little flutter of joy I feel when I hear my real name and pronouns are things I would never give up after finally obtaining them. Being transgender is not something you can prove or continue proving. It’s a subtle thing—but one that can have a huge impact.
Dear Kent

I
Dear Kent,
How is Dakota? Is he well? Are you?

II
Dear Kent,
I wrote you something, a poem, that I think you may enjoy. It’s called "Militant." It’s an ekphrastic based on Delacroix. Would you care to read it?

III
Kent,
I immolated my poem; it was a lost cause.

IV
Dear Kent,
How is your second wife? Sheryl, right? Does she treat you as well as Sandy? Do you love her just the same? Or is second love only half as potent?

V
Dear Kent,
Thank you for being there. Thank you for being distinct and discrete. Thank you for being emblematic of self-definition, self-reliance, resilience and solitude. Thank you for lending us the sun from over there in Millvale—the iron mills don’t need much lighting. Thank you for being succinct. Thank you for being decisive.
Dear Kent,
How is Samantha? Does she care for the kids? You?

Kent,
If you had to choose between a the ivory-billed woodpecker and the chickadee, which would win in a cock-fight? The chickadee is quick, but flighty, the pecker is elusive.

Kent,
Do you remember when we first met? I was maybe twelve, a few years older than Dakota— he was still getting used to calling my dad “Uncle” and wanted to know why I was always frowning—and you let my dad and step-mother sleep in your bed while you and Samantha slept on the couch.

Kent,
My name is Collin.
SOLANA WARNER

Hanako-san

1
I was playing hide and seek at the time. 
Nervous fingers spooled hair behind my ears, 
adjusted my little red skirt over tender thighs, but 

the bombs did not give me a choice. 
They fell, oil slick cranes with mouths of ash, 
from the eight heavenly clouds above. 

They did not pause to hear my pleas as I crouched 
in the third stall of the third floor and the 
flimsy metal doors shredded like the paper 

coiled around my feet. 
They did not wait for the ume blossoms to melt 
off their branches like candied tears before the spring. 

The bombs did not count to one hundred before finding me. 
Fiery metal ate holes in Tokyo towns with each sharp exhale, 
and when the spring finally resurrected to haunt us, 

so did I. 

2
Another body hits the tiles. 
Another child lost to adrenaline highs 
and dare-laden tongues. 

Three knocks, they say, it’s just 
three knocks and you win if you can 
open the stall door. 

“Are you there, Hanako-san?” 
No, I want to scream, I’m not anywhere 
near this molding room, I’m 

skipping stones in Karuizawa
with Toshio-kun and other friends.
“Would you like to be my friend?”

I mutter retrospectively, sullenly,
and when the girl before me shrieks
“yes” and deigns to beg, I deign
to chop off her leg.

3
These girls, these beasts, I’ve heard it all.
Heads too small and lips too wide,
they build themselves in pale reflections.

Complaints drip down their chins like stray B-29s,
all firetails and spit, and I peek through my stall as they
strike poses for greasy bathroom screens.

Time and again, their grubby preteen hands smear
jagged lipstick across my mirror
so everyone can know that

Yuki is a dirty slut.
They rip each other to ribbon,
red unrolling like torii gate paint, not realizing

they are leftovers,
girls picked clean by vultured peers,
a pile of polished white bones, and

can you really blame me for dicing up the pieces?

4
These girls have eyes like lilting flames to
burn this school from the third floor down.
They pace the tile with gloating steps and

throw punches like Setsubun rice to
keep the demons out, yet
here I am, feet stuck to the same linoleum.
One girl folds like cracked cement, 
rushing towards the ground like jet byproduct. 
The other puffs proud, with a shoe souvenir.

The bombs did not give me a choice or 
time or justice, but this victor had a chance at both. 
So I slice another girl

who holds a little stolen shoe 
with three efficient cuts, 
shut the stall door softly,

and let the rest slide down the drain.
A Brief Interlude

You sing and I listen.
You yelp and yowl like a radiator on fire.
Your jittering billy-goat bray sets my heart a-hopping like a Slinky.
You shout, you scream,
You are a bird writhing and sputtering in the wave, you are a
caterwauling jackass in a dark desert.
You dream of death metal and the Bible and pro wrestlers and H.P.
Lovecraft and lousy fathers.
You’re a creative writing assignment on smack, bursting with angst
and blood and water and life and anger and pain.
The pain—
it never really goes away, does it?
Not all of it.
It snakes its way slowly through the tiny cracks in your hands.
It spurts out of every synapse in your brain.
It floats, it floats through your haunted throat until there’s nothing you
can do but scream.
Keep screaming,
keep singing the pain out, keep on straining and striving
Until you’ve wrestled it to the ground.
On Fencing, Gummy Worms, and My Inescapable Fear of Living in the Moment

“‘You’re never happy where
You are,’” my mother says, and
I start crying. We’re in
Baja Fresh, and I haven’t
Cried in public since I didn’t care about
Crying in public.

It is the same Baja Fresh
We used to go to on Thursday nights,
After Girl Scouts and before fencing lessons.
On the way to fencing
I would eat the congealed brick
Of gummy worms in my mother’s glove
Compartment, and contemplate
Running away, hiding
In the Eddie’s supermarket
Down the street, and drinking
Pomegranate pear juice until
It was time for my father to pick me up.

I never did it—
I just went down the steps
To the basement room, said hi to
Ivan and the girl whose name
I forget, went to the drafty
Bathroom, stepped into the white shirt
With the strap that went between your
Legs, then the shiny metallic vest,
Then a battered glove, and lastly
The wire helmet.

My father would pick me up and
Ask how it went, and
I would say that I lost or I won, airily,
While looking down over the edge
Of the highway, at a soccer field below,  
The sharp white lights burning through  
The night.

“Why are you crying?” my mother asks,  
And I shake my head, gulping,  
Trying to regain my voice.  
I’m crying because one time  
We went to the Redwood Forest  
And I worried the whole time that  
I was not appreciating it enough, because  
I am ungrounded, because home is  
Not what it used to mean to me.  
—I do not tell her this.

Instead I say, “I hate crying,” and  
Burst into tears again.  
“No, no,” my mother says, “crying  
Is good. Crying is real.”  
She gets me more brown napkins  
From the counter to blot my eyes.

Outside the dark window I see  
My nine-year-old reflection:  
Eating a chicken burrito,  
Fearless and shy, uncomplicated  
In a way that still wished to flee fencing  
Lessons and hide in Eddie’s.

I am crying because  
I wish it was summer and I  
Was sprawled on Russ and Damien’s  
Lawn, in the patches of  
Exceptionally soft grass  
Under the maple trees.  
I am crying because  
Nine-year-old me is gone.

The little girl outside the window,  
In the red Converse and the plaid  
Button-down shirt, wraps her
Arms around me.
“İ wear makeup now,” I tell her.
“I got my ears pierced. I wear dresses.
I get drunk at parties. Sometimes
I fight with Dad, sometimes
I write poetry like the pretentious asshole
You never wanted me to be.”

“What is it like,” she asks, “to be so radiant?”
She turns and walks away, her
Ratty hair caught by the breeze,
Her strides long, her big hands
Stuffed in her cargo pockets.
And I sit in the Baja Fresh
And I cry
And my mother holds me.
Forgive me father for I have sinned, 
can’t stop walking in dark circles, 
it’s been twenty years since my last confession 
and I can feel Satan’s slender fingers 
sliding into my skin, gripping, tearing, bursting, 
pulling out what’s good, working his 
way in.

Father, I had a dream last night, a gruesome 
man with burnt flesh sliding from his face walked close 
to mine, smiled and spoke foul-breathed words 
I couldn’t understand. With a twisted grin he grabbed 
my nose, pulled it down like a zipper, slicing in half 
my skin. I couldn’t scream, father, just a body 
frozen, filleted, open like a door dripping organs on 
the floor. Holy sir, he stepped back, peeled away 
his burnt cover, then, glistening, a form of grotesque 
flesh, moved closer.

You should’ve felt his body quiver, priest, son of god, 
when he tried to scream. He didn’t even get to the best 
part. I pried open his chest, should’ve heard it splinter, 
seen his limp liver quiver. Father, pious priest, after 
I unhinged him, I took my left leg and stuck it in; 
oh the sounds, priest, it squished and blood oozed, 
until his feet were my new shoes, then I snuck all 
the way in, priest, zipped him back up.

Help this man, father, he needs god. 
I need God, father, help me. 
Help him, priest, hear his plea. 
I think he’s all the way in.
Before the seven angels sound their seven trumpets, our pieces will perform their danse macabre on the board, maneuvering about to avoid Conquest.

He has never seen defeat; the pallor in his skin matches his eyes, which have overseen millions of checkmates, and the inevitability of my own will bring the end of this War.

The moves I make are not to win, but to delay, for a dance like this is not one that can be won. But I stall to help the others who wither away in their Hunger.

My opponent’s bony hand moves with swift certainty; his black cloak flows as he directs his pawns, his bishops, his knights; they corner my pieces as I scan the face of Death.

Opponents before me have tested his ability. In their white robes, they stared him down in this dance. Forcing them into checkmate, he took these undeserving Martyrs.

Our game approaches its end, and the sun goes out. A gleam of red trickles into my eyes; the moon turns the color of blood. The ground quakes as our board is blanketed in Darkness.

Flanked by his King, his Queen stares down my King. I shake his hand, cold to the touch—a coldness that fills my body. Dissonance pours from bowls, sounded by Seven Seals with Seven Trumpets.
KEVIN CHOICE

Mortem Meī Fratris

I
We've been soaked up into a coked up life,
Oversaturated with guns and liquor.
Smoked up amidst this black on black strife:
Click clack when niggas bicker.

II
My hood was left in the shadow of neglect.
Separated from the rest, we were forgotten,
But they remember the projects when it's time to collect
All of Massa's cane, chew, and cotton.

III
We've been lost in this cyclical maze;
My homies and I can't get work.
We're seeing day to day that only crime pays
By the way that they treat us like dirt.

IV
My brotha was making bread stationed at the corner
Then cops came with a quota to meet.
And now my brotha's laying dead at the coroner's:
Another nigga resting in peace.
St. Anthony and I were sitting by a rainy window and I told him to un-title me—that’s what I said. I said “St. Anthony I want you to un-title me, un-find me, make me one of your lost things. Scrub me out of mirrors and riddle my Facebook profile with artifacts and broken links, unwind my chromosomes and iron the strands of my DNA into shoelaces because I want to be un-found.”

To this the friar replied: “You can’t un-grow a tree.”

I said “No, but I can chop it down.”

Anthony, I bluffed. Haven’t you seen me wobble under the axe? I couldn’t break a twig over my knee. Forgive me father for I have sinned and told a lie, and maybe I’ll knock Heaven on its side and crawl through a window to get in because I can’t look down. I’ve got a fear of heights and bruises on my inner thighs, and at the base of a ladder I don’t know where to begin. I’m afraid of needles and meat and viscera under my skin. I’m afraid of purple storm clouds welling on trembling fields, and hands, my height and weight in manila folders, dark streets and forests. I’m afraid I’ll get lost in the ocean and they won’t find me. I’m afraid of dogs.

Forgive me father, for I have sinned. Once I drank coke from a glass bottle in the parking lot of an Exxon Mobile and watched the clouds clench like a fist and shudder faint raindrops into the whipping corn. The sound rose like trumpets on high—Anthony, I’m afraid of death and angels with a thousand eyes. I’m afraid of angry machinery and I don’t know if I want a cyclone of archangels or teeth on steel combines, or loud metal or dog bites or some maw dark and red.

Anthony I need to tell you what happened. I need to tell you what I did.

Well, first the horizon gave birth. A broken zipper of lightning ripped open the belly of the sky, and water broke on the dirt. Whisply little fires in the brush crept around the Exxon like wolves. Father, I sinned: I anointed myself in a puddle of oil and offered them my hand because I’m afraid of dogs but wolves don’t hide their teeth, because I was baptized first in water but it didn’t catch.

This is how the world ends. Not with soot falling from the blacked up glass architecture of the sky but in the blurry sounds of night traffic and creaking, oblong shape a weight impression and skin. The world ends with nothing at all, with pills like bread crumbs scattered through
a dream, pulsing in the bedrock at the bottom of the ground. Anthony, don’t shine your flashlight through my cracks: it’s fault lines all the way down.
Verdant, supple monoliths rise from the Hudson river, skeletons of granite shearing razor-edges into wispy clouds in the azure sky, where the puddle-jumper piston planes land in soccer fields in the wildflower valley, the sheen of freshwater glass painting snapshots in neurons and dendrites.

Where the eye traces the top of the evergreen treeline like fuzzy hairs on the surface of arms, cheeks, the intoxicating smell of fruit and flowers the aromatic cloud emanating from the wind-swept French braids in springtime, summertime, careless, as the fermented sacrament that reddens our lips stains with the chiming of the church bell; laughing, smiling, eyes interwoven while the bell tolls the end of our time in the Adirondacks.

And whilst I yearn for the foliage of the mountain, in its shade, where I make my hollow, pretentious proclamations, running evergreen leaves, and soft, silklike hair through my fingers, engorging on the scents, the sights, my senses intoxicated in the splendor, pressing your soft lips on mine, in the cradle of evergreen trees, the scent of maple and the taste of pine radiating through our bodies, we breathe and laugh, and briefly feel alive.
KARA TRAVIS

Atom and Eve

In the beginning, when God created the universe, it was done so enthusiastically and haphazardly that God ended up with a bunch of unorganized shit everywhere. This was a Holy Error (uh oh).

God observed that some of the particles, though different sizes, reacted with each other. Some of the large ones were attracted to the little ones. So God said, “Let there be protons!” and “Let there be electrons!” God spent hours sorting the positive forces from their negative counterparts (which would have been impossible for anyone but a god since like charges repel each other) until God fell asleep. This was the first day.

On the second day, God woke up and realized that even though there were indeed protons for positive particles, and electrons for negative particles, uncategorized matter remained. Finding the charge of these particles to be zero, God proclaimed, “Let there be neutrons!” Now there were three massive, semi-organized piles of shit in the universe.

God was still bothered by the mess; so, on the dawn of the third day, God commanded, “Let the protons and neutrons be condensed into a single being, called the nucleus.” God experimented with different groupings of protons and neutrons as if they were pieces of earth being molded into animals (or humans, but that’s another creation story). By the time God went to bed, there were only two piles of organized shit taking up the entire universe. This was called progress.

On the fourth day, God decided to merge the nuclei with the electrons and all hell (figuratively) broke loose. Sure, the electrons naturally orbited around their nuclei, but they refused to move in orderly rings. Rather, the electrons carved out their own niches and created their own pathways. “Fuck it,” God said, and let it be.

God woke up on the fifth day and realized there had been another Holy Error. God had not made each and every nucleus the same. Some had more protons than neutrons; some had more neutrons than protons. This, in turn, affected the electrons so that groupings with more protons tended to have more electrons. Now God once again had a bunch of unorganized shit everywhere.

God prayed (aka called Mom) and came to the decision that diversity is a good thing. To reflect this change in attitude, rather than
referring to the materials as "shit," God began to call to each of these groupings "elements."

On the sixth day, God said, "I love you, elements, but I still must organize you in some way." God created the periodic table as a means to do so. God sorted the elements based on how many protons they had, because while the amount of neutrons or electrons seemed to be fluid, the number of protons served as the element's distinguishing feature. God had always been a math whiz so this only took about an hour. God spent the rest of the day giving the elements cute little names because it felt dehumanizing to refer to the creations as numbers.

On the seventh day, God felt that something was off. The elements were carefully restricted to their kinds, and God realized that made them unhappy. So God announced, "I free you from your restraints, elements. Unite with those like you, unite with those different than you--I don't care. I adore you anyway. Make something new and be glad."

God had a beer and watched as a second wave of creation overtook the universe completely outside of divine control. "Well, damn. I never even thought of that!" God was amazed with the results.
The Baerie Queene

I
We scholars, in the hall of Bomberge,
Do call upon our Muse t’instill’s with zeale
Th’illustrious, new founde, most noble Blomberge
From whome we seeke in intellect to steale
That lore of Ursine most faire and most reale.
Most fit, most rad, rare Califoraen
With fyre he seekes our endowment, to heal
That students ‘void the need to rati6n
The fruit from Wismere stol’n in fruitless fashiôn.

II
On college campus does our tale unfold.
They hail to their respected mascot Beare
And noble crest of dazzling red and gold.
The halls of learning and discussion faire
Do impart knowledge with such learnèd care.
The pupils learn responsibility
And challenge their own views if they do dare.
With written texts that test ability,
Professors work to challenge all stability.

III
A gentle youthe of fresh naïveté,
Ycladd in lanyard pink and hoodie red
Upon which stood the shield of Zacharie,
Bag filled with books ybought from store unread,
Heads to xir room, and flops down on the bed.
And shuts brown eyes for just a moment’s rest,
Xir hair forms halo, brightly dyèd red.  
Disturbèd sleep, with dreams that made xir stressed,  
Awoke with start, recalling xir forgotten quest.

IV  
The reading for this task presents no ease:  
Tomes piled high, ybound in paperback,  
Of Plato, Abelard and Heloise,  
And Sappho’s works, but none of them attract.  
And paper writing, xe could not attack.  
The looming deadline gan to creep so close;  
Ideas were of inconvenient lack.  
Xe spouted nonsense, wordy and verbose,  
But looking back, it gan to seem so very gross.

V  
Xe could not write with belly so unfull.  
The halls of Wismere had their doors yclosed,  
No more would they submit to push or pull.  
On High Lord Wismere, xe could not impose;  
The hour to eat is gone, and this xe knows.  
And barren was xir mini chest of ice  
And with the darkness, eke xir hunger grows  
Xe’d settle for one lonely grain of rice  
A trip to double-Wa does gin xir to entice.

VI  
Hungerèd, the student’s stomach doth growl,  
So the decision made, now Wawa bound.  
Down treach’rous Main Street drunken students howl,  
But our hero plods on, not lost but found.  
Out of the darkened night, car lights all ‘round,  
Xe hastens in hopes to arrive and find  
A peaceful place in this small college town.  
With single purpose to all else is blind  
Our scholar waits beside the street with cars in mind.

VII  
The metal beasts roared down the paved lanes wide  
Our hero waiting long for pause to come:  
The engines yawl, not stopping, time to bide.
Xe glared each way the beasts doth journey from. 
At last, it seemed a docile creature thrum, 
An engine calming, roar soothed down to none, 
Thanks to one whose own heart’s depths did plumb. 
Xe, hero brave, did step now cross Lane One. 
Progress at last, the journey ‘cross was now half won.

VIII
Lane Two of Main the student must now cross,
But cars still rush past in a careless way. 
Of Wawa trip our scholar fears a loss, 
Yet now a second car for xir does stay. 
Xe cryeth “Yes!” all hope not lost this day. 
To cross xe moves, but stopp’d is xe by sound 
That issues from the driver, who doth say, 
“Oh scholar beautiful, I’ll show you ‘round.” 
Alarm’d, our hero flees, feet echoing on ground.

IX
Determinèd, the scholar plods ahead 
Ycladd in layers, for the way is long. 
And let us hope xe is not found misled 
For treachery awaits those who aren’t strong. 
With many distractions one can stray wrong, 
Especially at night when all’s in shade. 
Of danger knows the student all along, 
The obstacles xe is sure can be slayed 
Soon ending in a pure reward from Wawa paid.

X
Xe saw a stately House of squarèd brick, 
Which cunningly was without mortar laid, 
Whose walls were high but nothing strong, nor thick, 
And proud Greek letters over all displayed 
Fraternity which GDI’s dismayed. 
High lifted up were many lofty towers. 
Rich drinks were offered to the underpaid. 
The beer flowed forth in lovely golden showers. 
Students here in revelry could pass so many hours.

XI
And then xe stood afore the tow’ring hall.
Its rev’ler’s din poured swift from door to street.
Its smoke-wreathed porch shook with the deaf’ning call
Of drunken white kids clapping off the beat.
Eftsoones, xe minded less xir two left feet
And thoughts of Bacchus’ vice ygripped xir head
So on the door xe pounded, seeking beer.
Emergéd then a fratstar nearly dead
Who stagg’ring eyed our hero with a leer
And with a squint asked, slurring, “Who do you know here?”

XII
Approached by bro in letters Greek and bold,
Xe felt a fright flow full from face to toes.
Now markèd by one clad in red and gold
Who reeked of ale so foul it did oppose
The scent of all good things, from new to old,
Which wait like flocks of sheep, by stench be culled.
Upon the frat-boy’s head, xe saw, did sit
A hat adorned with cans, and straws that pulled
That vile and hateful devil’s brew to hit
All thoughts, all acts, all words, and all a student’s wit.

XIII
And in that prideful House of Shreiner Hall,
That court of drunken chambers with beer’s scent,
Where sin so lewd and lustful fills them all,
When then xe sees ytangled gal and gent
Upon one course of action their minds bent.
In agèd futon of unflushèd stall
Met lip and lip, a sight so repugnant
Xe sickened was to see their lustful gall,
But vomit xe could not, the bin thus filled withal.

XIV
And right beside that sick and sinful sight
There sat a sad and skeevy man of frat
Who stared with wistful longing to his right
With vulture eyes and hunger of a rat.
And him, for story’s sake, we will call Pat.
So Pat let hand reach out to give a tap—
That is to say a shoulder Pat did pat—
To ask if join he could their lustful wrap
Lest all alone he be that night to lonely fap.

XV
Y sprawled at length across another couch
Was one in slumber thoroughly drowned
And Smirnoff, choice of slothful long debauch,
In vapor form did weave him all around.
Y snoring he did make a doleful sound,
And dead to lusts that raged at fiery pace,
And all the vice that elsewhere did abound,
His stupor thick no ruckus could displace.
A rod was crudely drawn upon his senseless face.

XVI
A figure clad in bear’s unwieldy head
Came weaving then through Shreiner’s open door
And raised in all a dark unholy dread.
With clamor knocking glasses to the floor,
In mask, he menaced all in rageful roar
Of drunken threats that Miller’s had ywrought.
With bear our scholar took xirself to war
Our hero now to defend Shreiner thought
And, winning, then to quit the hall xe quickly sought.

XVII
Xe walked down Main Street eke in fear of death,
Xe dreamt from Wawa what xe soon would eat.
Sirens blare, cops arrest for crystal meth,
T’was scary though xir mission incomplete.
Xe stomach roars, yet xe continues on,
Sprinting fast, out of breath, paradise near.
Bright lights beacon close, hunger soon subdued,
Eyes shine with triumph, xe lets out a cheer.
Walking in, gripping pride, xe’s happy to be here.

XVIII
And stepping o’er Wawa’s threshold xe beamed,
Such blinding lights illuminate the treats.
A choice that made xir internally scream,
Xe faced the worst dilemma: what to eat? Finding friends, they talked of sandwiches, meats, And fatt’ning snacks that would soon soothe xir soul. Xe yearned for chipped cookies, so soft and sweet, Yet knew they would not fill xir stomach’s hole. “Peruse the store,” said xe, “that is my only goal.”

XIX
With awe xe wandered, looking ‘round the store. Look ho! At chips of corn and Frito Lay And drinks enough to fill the Eastern shore With monsters’ rage kept in a can at bay. The smell of fresh-made food drew xir away. Hot cheesy mac and quesadillas call Xe happily spotted hoagies on a tray. A line of people stretched long and tall For fest of hoagies, far and wide enjoyed by all.

XX
At last our hero finding fine cuisine With coins approached the salesman fair and true And prayed the coins would match the price xe’d seen When choosing the hoagie and mountain’s dew. “For those I ask five bucks be paid by you,” The man declared with filthy arm stretched out. With one swift move xe payed and off xe flew Past exit made of glass, traipsing about, Xir heart alight—with thoughts of food, no doubt.

XXI
Embarking now on lengthy journey back, The way once fraught with peril now seems straight. Xe quickly reaches home and eats the snack, The paper writing can no longer wait. Four pages must xe have by morning’s eight. Xe types and types and types through sleepless night, Mad dash to class—alas! Two minutes late! The paper in, xe looked at Prof. in fright. “You’ll lose a letter grade; I care not for your plight.”
Two days pass, now in Hall Bomberger,
On desk ygraded page of CIE
Is back in half yfolded hamburger.
Unfolding it, xe sees a sea of C.
Crestfallen, xe had hoped at least a B.
Sulking back in dorm, time to reflect
How could the Prof. give such a cruel decree?
So sure xe was that all was writ correct,
But thinking back, so much xe did had grand effect.

XXIII
If only xe did not procrastinate
Xe would have had more time to plan and write;
And not going to Shreiner would abate
The errors caused by writing through the night.
No trip to Wawa needed for a bite
Would not have forced xir further to condense.
Without these factors, t’would not be a fight.
This time around, accept the consequence;
But for the next paper, xe will have better sense.
Contributors

Adam Anderson is a junior from Abington, Pennsylvania majoring in Biology/Pre-Med with a Neuroscience minor. When he's not serenading the masses with his saxophone, one can find him pursuing his true passion of training penguins to become effective politicians.

Allison Arinaga is a junior Chemistry major and Spanish minor from Bethesda, MD.

Kathryn Borman is a sophomore art and art history major and German and museum studies minor. She’s from Flemington, New Jersey and stays super involved on campus through the Bonner Leader Program, Peer Advocates, UC Unicef, Tour Guiding and studio assisting.

Madison Bradley is an English and Media and Communications double major, who enjoys drawing and reading.

Alyse Brewer is a junior studying Neuroscience and English, with a minor in Spanish. She loves puns and poetry and can also recite the alphabet backwards.

Brandon Carey is a sophomore English major, with double minors in Creative Writing and International Relations. He is currently trying to find the meaning of life through dank memes and political satire.

Faith Carson is a freshman English major whose hobbies include breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

Kevin Choice is a sophomore who is interested in bringing his poetry and music into the world. He loves to share his art and experience the works of others.

Kristen Costello is a senior Media and Communications major who enjoys traveling, fuzzy blankets, chicken nuggets, blue sea glass, the smell of bookstores, and thunderstorms with more thunder than lightning.

Julia Crozier-Christy is a sophomore English Major who fears bees and capitalism.
Sarah DeFelice is a freshman Biology and Spanish double-major with an art minor.

Courtney DuChene is a freshman English and Media and Communication Studies double major with Creative Writing and Film Studies minors. She likes dogs and elephants.

Sophia Gamber is a sophomore Religious Studies major. Her YouTube playlists are largely comprised of indie folk covers of Taylor Swift songs, which makes her so basic that she now qualifies as a 12 on the pH scale.

Lauren Geiger lives for food carts, foil balloons shaped like stars, and earnest poems.

Sarah Gow is a sophomore English major who lives in her oatmeal fort in the Arts and Writing House. She shares her living space with Paige Szmodis and their gigantic cat named Pumpkin-Spice who lives in the closet. She has a bird-enthusiast for a muse.

Jada Grice is a freshman English major who comes from Philadelphia, bedtime stories read by Antonia and Edward' Grice, and the love of three siblings Jessica, Jillian, and Joshua Grice.

Albert Hahn is not a Math major, is not good at basketball, and is unable to tell you about the cultural and/or historical significance of the fake Asian artifact in your house.

Michael Heimbaugh enjoys the following: David Lynch, comedy podcasts, 70s R&B, surrealist fiction, Food Network, the void, the never-ending void, the void consumes all, there is no escaping the void.

Mario Heitman is from North Carolina; all his work is A1. Follow him on Instagram @Redlion. Catch him on your girlie’s twitter cause he doesn’t have his own.

[Image of Plankton] Alexandra Hemp doesn't know. She didn't think she'd get this far.

Darrah Hewlett is a senior English major and Creative Writing minor, and an East Asian Studies enthusiast. Her favorite color is mint
green, and her ideal type of weather consists of gray skies, heavy snowfall, and a chance of thunderstorms… just a chance.

Linden J. Hicks grew to maturity under the watch of the vulture tree in Woodburn, IN. He attributes his success to his unbelievable parents, relatives, and friends. By which he means that they are not to be believed.

Rae Hodenfield is a sophomore who is passionate about the written word, animal onesies, and feminism. She would like to thank The Lantern for publishing her work and looks forward to working with the staff again.

Jordan Hodess is a junior pursuing a degree in Theater and a minor in Philosophy. He laughs in the faces of those who tell him his chosen studies are useless. He hopes one day to own three cats named Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud.

Joshua Hoffman is a senior Environmental Studies and Math double major. At the time of publication, he is taking a semester off from Ursinus but shall return greater and more terrible than ever before.

Mary Holmcrans did a series of paintings in high school reflecting on the process of leaving a familiar, loved house, which she thinks about now, writing a Lantern bio on her phone in the car 11 hours before she boards a plane to Madagascar.

Giselle Horrell is a sophomore majoring in English and minoring in Creative Writing and Business, and is honored to be here. The creative part of this bio is written in invisible ink. How unfortunate.

Ryan Ferguson is a senior who majored in International Relations and Politics with a minor in Spanish.

Sean Kenny is a freshman at Ursinus College with a lifelong dream of being an author. He would like to thank his family and all his friends for their support and inspiration.

Mara Koren is always asking “Remember?” She is way too sentimental.
Dana Kluchinski doesn't even go here. She just has a lot of feelings.

Alexander Kramer is a junior Biology major with a bio-stat and a psychology minor. He is involved on campus as a member of the Bearitones and Wrestling Team.

Chukyi Kyaping is a History major who wonders what the annual salary is for being an ancient astronaut theorist. She recently changed her favorite color to burgundy.

Blaise Laramee: Roger tower. Excuse me a second. I'm going to turn out those floodlights. I wanted to show—When I turn out all the lights, you can see thunder and lightning on the horizon. Sure as hell can.

Morgan Larese is a sophomore History major with Museum Studies, Studio Art, and Chinese minors. He enjoys photography, juggling, and wearing flannels.

Brian Leipold is a junior Junior major, with minors in Juniority and Junior Studies. His extracurriculars include junioring, being a junior, as well as working as a Junior at Juniors, Inc. He would like to thank the Academy.

Juan Lopez serves the void and preaches its gospel. All hail Cthulhu. Sent from my iPhone.

Chi-E Low is a senior Applied Economics major born and raised in Malaysia. Her all-time favourite movie is Jurassic Park.

Alexzandria Luben is a Psychology major and African American and Africana Studies minor.

Mary Kate McGrath is a senior sociology major who wants to be friends with all the pigs in the world. They drown the sorrow that this isn’t possible in Dr. Pepper.

Johnathan Myers is a class of 2019 Business and English double major from California. He wants to live in a library.

Kevin Moore: side effects may include headaches, nausea, vomiting, excruciating separation of the soul from the body, irrational fear of fire
hydrants, the number 14, itchiness in the one spot on your back that you can’t reach, and—in rare cases—death.

Temi Olafunmiloye is a sophomore earning her degree in Neuroscience. Every day she falls more in love with poetry as she grows to embrace her essence in this breathtaking escapade that is life.

Valerie Osborne has a severe skiing allergy and terrible posture. She would like to be a folk singer when she grows up.

Anne Rus is a junior history major who thinks that readable poetry is derivative.

Serena Schaefer is a freshman who would like to thank her parents for her alliterative name, her dislike for peas, and her existence.

Nicolas Shandera...junior. English major. Creative writing minor...is often full of something...maybe an expletive?

Emily Shue saw Kylo Ren take his shirt off in the shower and she said that Kylo Ren has an eight pack. That Kylo Ren was shredded.

Amanda Sierzega is a senior English Major on the cross country and track and field teams. Amanda’s piece is dedicated to a wonderful woman, her fighting spirit, and the many lives she touched.

Samantha Straughn is a junior Psychology Major with minors in Creative Writing and Art History. Her interests include coffee and being really bad at Mario Kart.

Paige Szmodis is a sophomore who fulfills all of the English major stereotypes with her aversion to math and obsession with cats.

Hear Collin Takita roar; or perhaps just read his poem—it may be the only poem not about numbers written by a mathematician that you'll ever read.

Brian Thomas has never had the opportunity to use a fire extinguisher, but imagines that it must be invigorating.

Mayuko Todaka is an exchange student from Akita International University in Japan.
Andrew Tran, a Republican lawyer from Vermont, worked his way up the ladder of Massachusetts state politics, eventually becoming governor of that state. His response to the Boston Police Strike of 1919 thrust him into the national spotlight and gave him a reputation as a man of decisive action.

Kara Travis is a carbon- and happiness-based life form who delights in her English and Education track undergrad, tap dance, and puns.

Leo Welsh is a freshman who’s inspired by the artistic endeavors of Ingmar Bergman and Chief Keef.

Solana Warner reminisces fondly on her days hissing at boys on the playground in elementary school. She now spends her time trekking up the endless staircase to the 3rd floor of Olin for English classes and partaking in joyous falafels.

Henry Willshire is a senior English major, grateful to Ursinus and the Lantern staff for their guidance and to be making his third appearance in this journal.

Jason Varma is a senior Biology major and Japanese minor anxiously awaiting the day he can start hormone replacement therapy (HRT)!