



*redcedar* REVIEW

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**REVIEW**

*Volume 53*

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# RED CEDAR REVIEW VOLUME 53 STAFF

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# EDITORS' NOTE

ALEXIS ISAAC & MARTHA SPALL

Dear Readers,

We are very pleased to present Volume 53 of Red Cedar Review. Our mission is to seek out and support promising undergraduate writers and artists. We put a lot of effort into selecting the best creative works from across the country and with your support have created another rewarding volume of Red Cedar Review.

One of our goals this year was to expand the diversity of our submissions. We wanted to find unique voices of our generation. Last year, we received 95 submissions; this year, we were able to increase that number to 155. We are proud of the hard work our staff put into extending our reach and thankful that our submitters were so generous in sharing their work.

In our efforts to increase our public reach, we also worked this year to explore and organize our 50+ years' worth of archived material from past issues. We will soon make the RCR Archives freely accessible to the public on our website at [redcedarreview.com](http://redcedarreview.com).

We would like to extend our gratitude to our reading staff and editing team and give special thanks to the following people: Ben Bland, Alex White, Juliette Givhan, and Katherine Stark. We are especially appreciative of Julie Taylor, whose wisdom guided us in our hour of need and made this journal possible. We would also like to extend our endless gratitude to Robin Silbergleid, our faculty advisor, who guided us through every step of the publication process.

Sincerely,

Alexis Isaac and Martha Spall

Managing Editors, Red Cedar Review



# 3 P.M.

CALEB TANSEY

Her fish scale one-piece  
stands across the colored lines,  
like a diamond sail hung from a mast.  
Ballast, she's steady, waist deep.

Her eyes glue to me with timid faith,  
whispering in slow shivers  
a thousand wishes on my descent.  
I jump from the board,  
wings tucked into my breast  
balled midair in the womb of summer.

Each drop of sweat  
rolls upward through my hair,  
as water rises quick,  
plunge into

revolving turmoil and motion.  
My fresh body rolls, wraps  
in chemical fluidity,  
that doesn't care  
for much at all.

I know she stands there,  
in her fish scale one-piece,  
waiting for someone to rise above  
the flashes in the water.  
Even if someone does  
where would they go?

People look around the pool  
and drift from side to side.

# UN / FURNISH

DELANEY HEISTERKAMP

Floral couch sinks barefoot  
in lawn chewed up spit out  
as mud and booze,  
soaking pleated-skirt magnolias

*See how it sags  
in the middle from too many fucks  
kick it curbside and wait for the dump  
truck to haul it*

Floral couch lists to one side  
on stumpy ankles,  
slipsliding in the reek of someone else's beer  
someone else's hand slipsliding  
between cushions and under skirt,  
lifting bottle caps and loose change

Rainwater pools in floral couch's sinkhole belly  
birds shit and splash and search for  
blossoms in the sinkhole belly

find only purple-and-white claws.

# BEYOND ARROWS

RANDY JAMES

He pulled rank with a kitchen knife; inches  
from my stomachache came his show of tough love.

It was night when he came from behind to ask the time.  
My eyes on my wrist missed his left fist, his lack of love.

Asking, “are you boyfriends?” Taking my hand and saying, “we will  
be,”  
with the brightest of lights in the darkest of eyes, he gave true love.

He agreed to “I do” after their prenap.  
A signature consented his legal love.

His sense of humor named a son Randy.  
He did, though he never used the word, love.

# A BODY IN RICE

AMANDA REID

I don't believe in God,  
But mother tells me to pray.  
We don't go to chùa or burn red marks on our backs.  
But we must believe in love.

Ancestral love leans forward expectantly  
Peeking into our cities.  
Hushed tones undercut loud gongs  
That beckon them to come in.

Love waits with ghostly hands beckoning untouched fruit.  
My mother lays down the fresh rambutans,  
The papaya, sapodilla, mangosteen,  
Collect at my feet in bunches.

Feet pressed together on wood;  
Hands folding into erect wings;  
And smoke unspools from the wick.  
Soft fruits expand like lush round geometry.

I lay me down beside it,  
Seeing the fleshy skin wrinkle, dry, and slip off the fruit.  
Floating paper skin folded over itself.  
See how it sheds its plumpness, its softness.

The rambutans decay,  
Untouched  
Smoke clears from the incense,  
and I am still here waiting.

You love the idea of  
This body so without love  
It feels like dry swallowing a pill.

I should be in church  
Or the bed of a boy.

Today I understand  
That love is  
Reflections in a mirror.

A body in rice.

# CATCH

GABRIEL BAMFORTH

Here is the only way I could ever describe what Ricky Delgado smelled like:

Imagine a younger Ricky, before the corners of his eyes creased up and his belly expanded, walking down a cramped cobblestone street between rows of sandy buildings that are old enough to have torch holders wrought into their walls. He is in Europe somewhere, maybe San Sebastián, Naples, Tbilisi—some mixture of the three and every other ancient town built on a mountainside or next to the water. He is walking with a woman who is taller than him, who wears a flamingo-pink dress and a shawl, and her arm is hooked through his. It is dusk; the street is lit with lamps, but there is still a hint of blue in the sky above them.

Ricky leads the woman into an alleyway and stops in front of a small parfumerie. The shop has no windows, only a painted rose embossed in the soft wooden door. He unhooks his arm and uses both hands to push the door open, looking around the shop with a full sweep of his head before nodding contentedly. The woman hovers by the shelves as Ricky saunters up to the counter, where an old man is sitting—he has long white hair pulled back into a ponytail and round little spectacles perched on the end of his nose. Ricky looks him in the eye as he speaks.

“Which of these bottles is the best cologne you’ll ever make?” He says it the way my mother asks what beers they have on tap at Applebee’s.

The old perfumer looks around leisurely, then stands up and hobbles over to a locked closet in the back of the shop. The floorboards creak under his footsteps. He returns with a small black vial, corked and sealed with a wax replica of the rose on the front door, and looks Ricky up and down before handing it to him. They agree on a price without speaking; Ricky lays bills into the perfumer’s open

palm until he nods and walks back to his counter. Ricky exits the shop with the tall woman, smiling because things are as they should be, and nobody else in the world could possibly wear the scent tucked into his coat pocket.

\* \* \*

This is what Ricky smelled like. This is who he was.  
My mother was in love with him.

\* \* \*

Our apartment on South Street had little Sculpey figures perched in its windowsills and along the back of the stove and hiding in kitchen cabinets. Sometimes I opened my underwear drawer and found polymer birds or donuts tucked in between my boxer shorts. The apartment was small, but since it was just Mom and I living there, there was plenty of space for her artwork.

She worked behind the fish counter at ShopRite—right beside the lobster tank—so she smelled like salmon and mussels and shrimp and crab when she came home in the afternoons. I don't think she liked working there, because all she ever talked about to me was men and Sculpey.

"This is art," she told me one day near the end of the school year, cupping a peach-sized ladybug in her hands. The way she said it, with her eyes wide and her voice moving in slow motion, reminded me of the way people point things out to babies in the physical world: *this is a cup, this is milk, this is papa*. I nodded because what she said was the truth, and I loved the smell of baking Sculpey in the oven. I was nine, and I hadn't outgrown her yet.

Ricky drove into town that summer, although we wouldn't have ever known if it weren't for Lena. Lena was Mom's best friend from high school and she worked in a private school cafeteria up on Chestnut hill. "I parked right next to his Winnebago," she said from our kitchen counter. "He's got a flatbed trailer full of things, and when I got off work today he was setting something up in the soccer field. Sherry told me it's a flying trapeze."

"What's a Winnebago?" I was pretty sure it was a fancy car.

Lena spread her arms out to either side. "A Winnebago is like a big bus," she said, licking her lips. "It's got beds and a couch and chairs and a bathroom and a television. And you live in it." I glanced

over at Mom, who was pinching out thin little flower petals of Sculpey. She raised her eyebrows at me, which meant that she was also excited about this thing too. Better than a fancy car.

Lena grinned. "He's a very interesting man."

"Is he single?" Mom asked, frowning down at her Sculpey.

"He's alone."

Mom paused and laughed a bit. "Where is he from?"

"The bus has Florida plates, but Sherry said he's Mexican."

"That's so fascinating."

"He's running some sort of summer camp for kids and he does community classes in the afternoons."

Mom put down the Sculpey and turned to me. "Nicky," she said, in the tone of voice she used when she had a man over and wanted me to go to bed, "do you want to try a trapeze class?"

\* \* \*

I've lost count of all the men my mother brought home. The ones I remember best stuck around for longer periods, but there were plenty I only saw once—faces and names and body odors that I could probably recognize if someone put them in front of me, but had no greater impact on my life or my mom's life than the morning paper did.

The first one I remember was Terry. He owned a food truck called Porkie Pies and had a maze of tattoos up his arms. He smelled like cigarettes and grease and when he came over, he was still wearing his apron. "Nicholas," he said, pointing a finger at me, "your mother's told me all about you." He said it like he was making an inside joke, which I thought was pathetic, so I laughed, and he thought we were both laughing at the same thing, and everything was okay. We ate Porkie Pies leftovers for dinner that night: sloppy pork stir fry and an enormous rack of ribs drenched in sauce that tasted suspiciously like the ShopRite original barbecue sauce Mom kept in our fridge. "Terry," Mom kept breathing in between bites, "this is *delicious*." He spent the night and never came back, but our kitchen smelled like his food for a week.

Then there was Bernie, the animal control guy ("Agent Bernie," he liked to call himself, which I thought was funny until he asked me what I was laughing about). He was a wiry older guy with tight skin on

his face and no hair. Whenever he came over, he asked me if I was happy to see him, to which I could only ever respond with a meek nod because what else could I say? And, in truth, I liked his stories. I think my mom did, too. He had a scar on his bicep, right in the middle, that he got from a water snake in the Amazon River while on a mission to preserve black spider monkey habitats. I loved hearing him describe the way the snake jumped out of the water at him, so fast he didn't even have time to react. He told us about all of the illegal dog fighting rings in Boston (there were over forty) and how once he had to shoot a shrieking fisher cat with a tranquilizer dart because it mutilated somebody's terrier. Bernie sounded sad when he told us that story, like he had been friends with the fisher cat.

One day Mom picked me up from school; she wanted to go down to the animal rescue office to see some cats and dogs that Bernie had saved. When we walked in, he was sitting behind the front desk, and there was a little bronze receptionist plaque that read *Bernard* in front of him. I've never actually seen a deer caught in headlights, but at that age I had heard the phrase enough to know that Bernie's face looked just like that when Mom said, "You're a *receptionist*?"

He shrugged, and I felt bad for him, because the way she said *receptionist* made it sound like she was saying *serial killer* or *kidnapper*, and he wasn't either of those things; he was just a liar. He had never tranquilized a fisher cat, or busted dog fighting rings in the city, or been to the Amazon River. As it turned out, that scar on his bicep was actually from a childhood mishap with a pitchfork at a Fourth of July barbecue.

Mom let me sit in the front seat on the way home and kept stroking my head. "I'm sorry, Nicky. I knew he was garbage." I wanted to ask her why she was saying that to me instead of making Bernie say it to her, but I was scared to make her cry because she was driving.

After Bernie, there was Yannis. He was a welder, or a scuba diver, or something that included both. "I build theengs underwater," he explained to me the first time he came home with her, spreading his thick hands out to either side and smiling down at me. He was Greek and very tall, with a bushy black mustache and dull blue eyes. I liked his voice ("It's so Greek," Mom would say dreamily), especially when he said words like *nitrogen* and *the bends* (pronounced

“dee-benz”), which he claimed to have gotten on more than one occasion. Mom and I both understood that he risked his life every time he clocked in to work, even though he never said those words exactly.

Yannos sounded like Frankenstein when he fucked my Mom. This always happened late at night, when they both thought I was asleep. The walls in our apartment were so thin that I could hear his heavy breathing after the rocking stopped, and sometimes his murmurs, although I never made out individual words. He stayed for six months, long enough to keep his dive helmet in our living room and a bottle of Ouzo in our fridge (I opened it once to smell it and got goosebumps on my neck). I didn’t even know he had left until Mom came into my room and sat on the edge of my bed. It was night, and I was almost asleep.

“He’s gone,” she sobbed, reaching over to my windowsill and picking up one of her figures. It was a sculpture of me that she had made for my seventh birthday. There was a line of them—one for each year of my life. She gave me a new one every time I had a birthday, and I liked to look at them lined up chronologically, like I was watching myself grow up through her eyes.

“He went to Angola and didn’t even tell me until today. He knew about it for *months*.” I was sitting up against my pillows, fidgeting with the edge of my blanket and trying not to look at her.

“What’s he going to Angola for?”

“An Exxon barge or something,” she said, but her tongue caught in her teeth so that *something* came out as *thomething*. “We were going to get married!” she turned to look at me, still holding the little figure. I could tell she was getting excited because her eyes got really wide. “The three of us were going to travel the world together!” Her mouth was hanging open a bit, and I pictured us flying from place to place with Yannos, stopping wherever underwater *theengs* were in need of welding. I didn’t say anything, and for a long time the only sounds in the room were Mom’s heavy breaths. Eventually, those quieted too. “Well, he didn’t deserve us, Nicky.” Her voice was still shaky, and she scooted up next to me and put her hands on my shoulders. “Especially you.”

I didn’t know my father’s name because Mom didn’t know it either. I knew how babies were made; I knew that the sounds coming

from Mom's room were the same kinds of sounds that brought me into the world, and I knew that my father, wherever he was, had been just as transient as the rest of the men she brought home. I knew that my life was different, but it was my life. I knew that some people thought it was sad, but doesn't everybody think that about a life that's not their own? In my mind, it was clear: there would always be me and my mom and our apartment, and men would come and go like garbage trucks in the morning, careening noisily into our life and pausing for a Moment as they conducted their business, and then heading in the opposite direction, leaving behind a gust of rotten wind.

\* \* \*

Ricky was a breath of fresh air. The first time I saw him, standing in the grass under the net with a safety line in his gloved hands, I thought that there couldn't possibly be a richer or more inviting color than the tone of his cinnamon brow in the afternoon sunlight. When he smiled or pronounced vowels, his cheeks pulled back tight so that there was just enough space for both rows of teeth to show. It was the kind of smile that someone like me would have to practice, but Ricky wore it like a hand-me-down sweater. He was short, with graceful bowed legs and arms that moved wildly whenever he spoke. Even though his belly was round, the way he stood made it look smooth and wieldy.

Lena was right; he was Mexican, and his hair was long and reminded me of a lion's mane, except it was black. He helped me tighten the belt around my waist that first class, yanking it deftly and asking me, "Can you breathe?" He said the last word quickly, like the whole question had slowly led up to a single syllable. I had to wear the belt so that, once I climbed up the ladder to the board, Ricky's helpers could attach safety lines to shackles at either hip. The board was about as high as the triple-deckers near our apartment; it hung from a beam that ran across two poles on the flyer's side of the rig. It was eight inches wide and was the only stationary feature. Everything else swung, bounced, and stretched. I liked standing up there, fingers curled around the gauze-and-chalk-wrapped bar, and hearing Ricky bark up at me, "Listo?"

The instant I leapt from the board, I felt suddenly farther from the ground than I ever had before. The net, the board, and safety

lines at my hips all sank to the back of my mind so that I could hear them, see them, feel them, but not believe that they were there. The only thing I was aware of as I took flight was the rhythm of the swing—a downhill rush at the back end, speed and strain at the bottom, and a point of complete weightlessness at the peak—and Ricky's voice far below yelling, "Forward, backward, forward, kick!"

After class, I wriggled out of my belt and ran with a sweaty waist over to Mom. She was talking to Ricky.

"How did you like the trapeze, chico?" he asked, giving my shoulder a punch. Somehow, it didn't feel corny. I looked up at Mom, who raised her eyes expectantly.

"I love it." And I did

Ricky invited us into the Winnebago. There were no shoes allowed, which made it feel sacred. On the walls there were pictures of him from young to old, all over the world. He fetched a bottle of beer for Mom and handed me a can of Coke, winking as he did. We slouched in the big stationary chairs and couches and he told us about some of the pictures, picking random ones from around the cab.

"Monte Carlo," he laughed at one, pointing to a photo of five young people in sparkling white leotards with velvet capes draped over their shoulders. In the middle was a woman holding a golden clown trophy. "We won the Golden Clown in 1978. The Oscars of the circus world." Mom's eyes widened in admiration while he talked. "That's my sister Victoria holding the trophy."

"She's so pretty," she breathed, leaning in closer to Ricky.

"She's fat now," he laughed again, "like all of us."

"Oh, Ricky."

This is how my mother talked to him, and most men. It didn't bother me.

He pointed to another one, a black-and-white one of a kid who looked about my age, standing with his hands on his hips in costume and smiling a big, gap-toothed smile. "My first professional show," Ricky explained. "I was eight years old. Kids in school called me tonto, baboso. I asked my father if I could leave school and be in the show."

The next picture showed him sitting in a fancy restaurant across from a woman in a dress that sparkled more than anything I'd ever

seen. “I dated Sherryl for a couple of months back when we were with Ringling Brothers,” he said. “She was Miss America 1974.”

“And this,” he said, grinning so wide that he looked like his eight-year-old self from the first picture. He was pointing to one of him lying centerfold-style on the hood of a sky-blue convertible. “I was playing poker—you know Texas Hold’em?—with Paul Newman, and he was so drunk he wagered his Corvette. I didn’t have any way to pay for something like that, but I stayed in anyways and won the hand.”

Mom clapped her hands, and I let my mouth hang open in honest amazement. His life belonged in a Hollywood script. I ran my fingers over the leather seat cushion and imagined driving around the continent with Ricky and Mom, setting up the trapeze rig wherever we touched down and then packing up and moving on to the next place, holding constant only the three of us, the Winnebago, and the rig.

After that, Ricky never charged us for another class.

\* \* \*

There was a shelf in our apartment, hung on the wall over Mom’s bed, that she called the People Shelf. The People Shelf held all of the folks she had made figures of: friends, family members, lovers, and some famous artists and musicians she liked. Mom showed me my grandparents from the People Shelf—they died before I was born and it felt good holding them in the palm of my hand like that. Lena was up there, and I was too (at various ages and tastes in clothing). Agent Bernie was somewhere in the crowd, with two little red dots on his bicep, as was Yannos, featuring full dive gear. Terry stood on one corner, done up in an apron. All of the figures on the People Shelf were smiling big smiles, even if they hadn’t done that in real life. I sometimes wondered why she put them all above her bed like that, like she wanted every single one of them to watch her love life unfold, fold back up, then unfold again with each man she brought into her room. Like she wanted them all to know and not have the choice of remaining unaware.

She added Ricky to the People Shelf about a week after my first trapeze class. I was putting pajamas on, and she came bursting into my room, holding his figure in a paper napkin. “Nicky, Nicky, look at this! I made Ricky!” She had outfitted him in a striking white costume

with gold lines running up and down it. He was standing with his chest lifted and his hips thrust forward a bit, arms spread wide—no doubt in salute to a cheering crowd. The white clay she had used for his smiling teeth had warped a bit in the oven, but the figure still looked like Ricky. I wondered for a Moment if she would let me put some of his cologne on his polymer semblance, just to make it that much more real.

\* \* \*

That summer settled into a rhythm; every day we would go to class in the afternoon and sit in the Winnebago afterward. My hands became calloused from the gauze-wrapped trapeze bar, and soon Ricky was calling on me to help him out with the rig.

“Nick!” He always called me Nick, which I liked better than Nicky.

“Nick, go up there and re-chalk the bar.”

“Nick, help me hammer this stake back into the ground.”

“Nick, let me show you how to protect your hands from rips.”

One afternoon in July, just after class had ended, he said, “Nick, we need more Coke for the cooler. Want to come to the store with me?” He spoke the last three words as if they were one: *storewithme?*

I looked at Mom, who was smiling. “Nicky and Ricky,” she said, as if a more perfect duo couldn’t be found in the universe. “I’ll see you boys at home.”

He took me to the beer aisle, let me pick out which one I thought Mom would like the best (I chose one with a picture of a donkey, which made Ricky laugh). I carried the six-pack and he carried a box of Coke, and as we were about to get in line at the checkout he started. “I forgot something—I’ll be right back.”

He returned with a white plastic thing sitting on top of the Coke. I squinted at it to read the label: Right Guard deodorant.

He saw me staring at it and winked. “Don’t tell nobody,” he said conspiratorially. I reached out and uncapped it, brought the cheap green gel to my nose, and inhaled reluctantly. The cobblestone streets and the old perfumer and the soft wooden door to his shop sprang to life as my nostrils recalled the smell, but when I lowered the stick they began to fade and I could not call them back. Instead, I found myself focusing only on the things around me: humming fluorescent

lights overhead, beeping cash registers, a husband and wife arguing in the lane next to ours, and the smudges on the linoleum tiles beneath my sneakers.

\* \* \*

I knew, in a secondhand way, that Mom was a little strange. I had figured this out from other people, the way you figure out that it's not okay to ask an adult how old they are from all of the little glances and averted eyes just after you've asked. I was good at watching the men who came home with her; I could see their eyebrows twitch upward as they took in the living room and saw all of her figures lining the walls. I could see their necks stiffen when she tugged on their sleeves and said, "Say hi to my Nicky!" I could see even Lena throw a worried glance in my direction when Mom talked about her sex life in front of me ("I think I need to go back on an IUD, Lena." I didn't know what the words meant, but from Lena's expression I knew that most kids my age weren't supposed to hear them).

When Ricky came over for the first time, he did pretty well. He walked into the living room like it was the most normal place in the world, and I guess for a guy who lives in a Winnebago, it may as well have been.

"You made all of these?" he asked, in a voice that sounded to me more curious than jeering. He was standing by the windowsill with his hands on his hips, and there were dark stains under his arms; we had come from the rig. Mom nodded quickly, so that her bun bounced around behind her head.

"They're my passion."

Ricky smiled his tight smile. "It's amazing." Some combination of the way he said it—pronouncing the *z* as an *s*, and the light from the window hitting his face so that his eyes sparkled—made me laugh. Mom took Ricky into the kitchen to start making dinner, playing Beatles music from her computer. He said his favorite song was "Across the Universe," so Mom found it and put it on. She set water to boil for pasta and Ricky and I shucked corn over the garbage bin, humming to ourselves in the sticky summer air.

After dinner we sat on Mom's bed underneath the People Shelf. She picked his figure out of the first row and brought it down for him to see.

"It's you."

"Wow!" I was watching him. His eyes were wide, and it took a Moment for his brow to shift from alarmed to excited. I had seen this quick save before, on guys who were either too nice or too scared to tell Mom she was weird. I couldn't blame Ricky, though, and either way it was better than laughing at her the way some did.

A few years ago, Mom came home one night a little later than usual. I was in my room, pretending to be asleep so that when she got home she wouldn't feel so bad, and I heard the apartment door thump open. I could hear two sets of footsteps and some giggling as they entered the living room. Mom said something and then I heard her coming my way, so I put my head down and closed my eyes. I could hear her breathing as she tiptoed into my room. She hovered over my bed for a Moment, running her hand gently through my hair, then walked out, pulling the door closed behind her.

There were other noises—indistinct shuffling and muffled voices, none of which I could really follow until the man laughed from Mom's room, and then things went quiet. It wasn't a nice laugh; it was sharp like he was trying to hurt her. Goose bumps formed on my neck. I had laughed like that before in school, whenever somebody wore clothes that were distinctly strange. It was a laugh that said, *I'm doing this because I can.*

Ricky was telling Mom about Monte Carlo. "It's like driving through a castle, you know?" I liked sitting in the room with them instead of hearing everything through the wall, but when their voices became quieter and the pauses between their sentences lasted longer, Mom asked me if I was ready for bed. From the way she said it, I could tell she wasn't really asking. I nodded, lightly punching Ricky's outstretched fist and scooting off the corner of the bed.

I stayed up, of course, listening from my room, but even with my ear pressed up against the wall I couldn't hear anything from the other side.

The days got shorter. At the end of class, the sprinklers still came on in the field, but the sun hung lower and lower in the sky each time they started their cycle. I began to see red and yellow leaves around, hidden between branches. The Staples on Park Drive had almost sold out on back-to-school sales. Mom still took me to trapeze, though, and Ricky still invited us into the Winnebago after class. He spent nights in our apartment, and life carried on in such a perfect rhythm that, even as time progressed around us, I couldn't see anything changing. Even on Ricky's last night in town, his departure felt temporary—just a vacation.

The rig was gone, packed up on his trailers. I thought the field looked funny without it, but in a temporary way, like they were doing maintenance on it. I was lying right where the net used to be, with my arms and legs stretched out. Mom and Ricky were in the Winnebago, but after a few minutes, Ricky came outside and lay down beside me on the grass, lacing his fingers behind his head.

"What do you think, chico?"

I tried to reply, but yawned instead, which made him laugh.

"Me too. I've got a long drive tomorrow."

"How long?"

"It'll take me three days with all this equipment."

Three days wasn't so long. I knew he was coming back up as soon as he dropped the equipment off. Mom seemed convinced of it, too.

He sighed. "I'm going to miss the nights up here. So cool. At home it's too hot, you know?"

*Home.* He had never said that word in front of me before. I didn't like the way it sounded. It had always been *Florida*, which was just a name, something that he could easily leave behind. But home was something important. Something permanent. "I guess."

"Yeah, too hot."

Ricky's face was relaxed. "Why can't you stay a little longer?" I imagined Mom saying those exact words, in that exact voice.

"I've been away the entire summer, Nick." He chuckled.

"Don't you like it here?"

"Of course."

I paused. "What about my mom?"

“What about her?”

He turned his head to frown at me, looking more confused than anything else.

“Well aren’t you going to—” I stopped, unsure of what I wanted to say. I knew what he was, what was happening between the two of them, but I couldn’t put the idea into words. I wasn’t sure if he knew how important it was that he stayed. “I don’t know. I don’t think she wants you to go.”

“She understands,” he said, looking down. “She gets it.”

The sprinklers cycled back on, sweeping little arcs back and forth over the field. Fast in one direction, slow on the way back, making ticking sounds as they reset. Ricky sighed again and closed his eyes. I looked at him, wondering what thoughts were swirling beneath that brow. I imagined him thinking of home: some sprawling, one-story house with a pool in the back and a garage full of old circus equipment. There would have to be a trapeze nearby, maybe in a field down the street; he definitely lived in the suburbs where there was enough space for something like that. I tried to picture the inside of his house, the golden clown trophy on a mantelpiece, colorful patterns on the walls, and an ancient dog ambling around. A girl my age eating lunch at the kitchen table while her mother talked on the phone in the next room. Was his daughter also in the circus? What kind of woman does someone like Ricky marry?

“Ricky?”

He cracked an eye open at me and gave a little grunt. I wanted to ask him if he had a family. If he would leave them behind to be with us. If he ever actually did win that Corvette in the poker game, and if he had always worn Right Guard. I wanted to ask him if he thought my Mom was weird, and why he decided to spend time with us. I wanted to ask him why, if he had a family, they hadn’t come with him this summer. Why he hadn’t mentioned them. I wanted to ask him if he knew why this kept happening to us.

“You coming back?”

“I can’t say, Nick. The camp didn’t work out so well.” He didn’t bunch up his face the way adults usually do when they’re reporting bad news. He just shrugged as if it didn’t bother him. “It was worth a shot, but I don’t think it’ll happen again.” *Worthashot*. It was all

*worthashot*. The camp, the northeast, Mom and I. All *worthashot* to Ricky Delgado.

I waited for a sprinkler to burst or for an asteroid to fall from the sky and land twenty feet in front of us. I waited for a bunch of police cars to come screaming onto the field or for Mom to run out of the Winnebago in hysterics—what was wrong with her? I waited for anything besides the perfect summer night. The crickets chirping, the cotton candy sky, the cool breeze, the lazy sprinkler arcs, and Ricky’s quiet breathing, so calm that it made me want to slap him.

I stood up and wriggled into my shoes. “I’m going home. See you.”

Ricky lifted his head and frowned at me. “You going to wait for your Mom?”

I shook my head. “I know how to get home. I’m sure you guys want some time together.”

He sat up, motioning for me to come close. When I did, he pulled me into his chest, and I could smell his Right Guard. He patted my shoulder blades. “Don’t forget what it’s like up in the air.”

We separated and he was smiling, eyebrows raised like he was waiting for me to thank him for changing my life. I almost expected him to leap to his feet and take a bow. The thing about it was that if he had done that just minutes before, I would have applauded. I just nodded and turned around, wondering if I should have expected more.

I started walking across the field, and even though I was going home, it felt like I was leaving something behind. I dodged between sprinkler jet streams on my way to the sidewalk, timing my steps so that every time a stream was as far away as possible from me, I’d leap past it. I imagined Ricky and Mom inside the Winnebago, talking, or fucking, or something. Either way, he’d be driving the next morning, headed home to somewhere better than our apartment, and Mom would be curled up in bed, wrestling with herself and unable to win. She would put Ricky back on the People Shelf and it would happen again in a couple of months, with some other guy.

As I rounded the corner onto our block, I had an urge to walk past our building, all the way down South Street to the river and then out to the harbor, where I could sneak onto a boat and go see

the places Ricky told us about. *Look Mom, I can do this by myself. Can't you?*<sup>2</sup> I knew she wouldn't, even if she could. Did that mean she couldn't? I paused at the entrance of our building, dreading the still air in our apartment and the Sculpey figures in the windowsills and Ricky's lingering scent. But I stepped inside anyway, telling myself that at some point before I knew her, she had been different.

# POWER LINES

SHANNON DONAGHY

There are power lines that run straight through campus  
Over my room, right above my head  
Static transferred incessantly up and down the mountain  
White-hot and fizzling  
While I sleep and try to dream  
Wild energy bouncing in the space between  
Me and the stars that watch over me  
My thoughts catch in the wires  
And the electricity confuses them and tangles them together  
A thundercloud of static  
The signals get lost  
I feel every hair on my body stand on end  
It's keeping me from reaching the night sky  
Where my dreams live, among the light pollution stars  
The orange moon watching over  
She sees me struggling  
Trying to push beyond all the energy  
Carrying power for phone calls and TV static  
The spinning blades of an empty blender  
The microwave rads that pop a bag of movie theater butter  
A hairdryer pushing all the water out of freshly showered hair  
Turn the lights off, love  
Unplug  
Hear the noise New York makes when the whole city powers off  
Can you feel it in your bones?  
Peel your bedroom blinds away like sunburnt skin  
And tilt your head back  
Watch the stars move for a while  
It'll help you get to sleep

# FROM A COFFEE SHOP IN WHITE SUBURBIA

MICHAEL SALTUROS

“bacons on it’s way,” says the tall greek  
behind the counter through his thick mustache,  
which i can only guess contains years of scarred choke smoke and  
failed marriage vows, coated in grease that soars in the air  
and shimmies its way into the pores underneath his brown eyes  
like mine, as jewel-osco bags filled with tanqueray bottles  
drag the lids down. his name is probably george  
or gus.

the aroma of my black coffee mixes with  
the smell of the old man’s leather jacket next to me,  
years of closet posing, hanging out on the wire waiting to never  
be washed. the local high school’s hockey team just walked  
in and expects to be seated immediately.

but did you know that if the cup is blacker than the  
roast, when you finish you can see your reflection at  
the bottom?  
can you read my eyes the same way you read your tea leaves?  
it’s not hard. they’re looking for answers, like  
where the hell is the corn guy, blasting mariachi tunes and waiting  
to glaze my pork rinds with his signature sauce?

it’s okay, i still have the tapatio for my eggs,  
so when the bacon fat is done sizzling on the stove, spraying into

george/gus's eyes, i'll be here for my meal, though the  
hockey team will have left by then because  
15 minutes is too damn long of a wait.

i'll be honest with you now:

i'm the darkest one here, and i'm white, or at least that's what  
the blackened bubble on my ACT reads. but i forgot to shave  
yesterday,  
so the old man next to me defiling in his shit brown leather jacket  
looks at me funny, like he's scared i'm going to steal the tip he left  
for the waitress. that's wrong, right? to assume what i'm not:  
a thief, or a mexican. to him, what's the difference, though?

next time someone asks you where the  
white people safe spaces are,  
direct them to the seat my ass is keeping warm for them.

# THIS UNBEARABLE CALM

MADISON EBERTH

Sometimes I think about how she died,  
how her body broke itself down  
into a soft, quiet shell,  
curled together and fetal,  
and I never liked that.

I never liked that reversal to birth,  
I can't accept it.  
I can't hold *it*—  
her body, her mangled bones,  
in my hands and feel natural.

Nothing about this is natural.  
There is nothing sharp left,  
no splintered wood to slice  
out of our heels,  
no molded residue left  
to scrape out of the socket.

You are here,  
and then you are not.

And it's like how she said  
*this bliss is worth dying for*  
and how, now, we are all dying from it  
and all that's left is this rage,  
this purple guilt,

this unbearable calm  
and the acceptance of the  
unacceptable.

This lingering need for something better,  
something warm and breathing,  
to scoop up,  
to sit down,  
to wrap my arms around and  
be held.

And I am settled,  
but unsatisfied.

# BLINDING WHITE

MADISON EBERTH

When we dance, we only use our toes.  
A sidewalk-step between midnight  
and morning with bare feet.  
My parents sleep, and we are in hiding.  
Pressed into your parked car,  
two missed calls and a broken  
wrist. We can't help but make snow  
angels when we kiss. Two chapped  
lips and a sleek coat of snow.

It's winter here and we are burning.

We are yearning and hungry  
for ice. We catch the flakes with our teeth  
when it storms. You lick the residue  
from my cheeks and I snort the lines  
from your skin. I inhale, and we dance  
again. Tiptoe-twirling across  
my front lawn. We blend in with  
the blizzard—we don't care.  
We laugh and spin and  
dip and breathe and we never leave.  
We never grow old here.  
Never want anything more, or less,  
than this bliss, this never-ending snow,  
this blinding white.

# WHEN SHE WAKES

SARAH AL-QATOU

It is this uncontrollable feeling  
like she has swallowed the sun  
deep in the pit of her stomach  
so bright and  
bursting,  
a calm so pure  
comes over her  
and she is  
still  
and she is  
okay.  
There is grinning  
lots of grinning,  
and music  
a symphony  
in the confines of her head.  
She is overcome by the sensations,  
tingling sensations.  
She closes her eyes,  
tilts her chin up,  
lets her neck loosen  
lets it snap  
she laughs  
almost cries  
she is so  
so happy.

# HIDE YOUR LIGHT

KRISTEN KAREM

“Becca, Becca, thank god, we’ve got a problem.” I yanked my roommate in by the arm and swiftly took the books out of her hands to toss onto her bed.

“What? What’s the matter?”

Words sprayed from my mouth like distress signals.

“Apparently someone told the building supervisor that our RA hasn’t been doing checks, and they threatened to fire him, and now he has to do monthly checks, and the first one is TODAY.” Becca’s eyes went wide as she realized what it meant.

“Lyss, we have to get them out of here. Right now, or they’ll confiscate them all, and I have spent too much money for that to happen.”

“I know! Come on, we can put them in our laundry bag.” We spun around the tiny room, gathering and collecting from drawers and shelves.

“Hurry, the check started almost half an hour ago.”

“Oh my god.” I poked my head out of the dorm room door and, to my horror, saw our slacker of an RA standing outside the room next to ours, holding a clipboard and looking nervous, the supervisor behind him. “New plan.” I pulled the door closed. “We keep them in the laundry bag. They won’t look there, right? That’s kind of invasive, isn’t it?”

Becca snapped her fingers together. “We can put clothes over them so that if they look it won’t be an issue.”

“This is why I love you.”

We piled shirts and sweatpants into the bag, then set it back to its spot and hopped onto our respective beds as a dull, lazy knock sounded at our door. I jumped up and opened it.

“Hi, ladies. I’m just gonna do a quick check here. It’ll only take a second.”

“Oh yeah, sure.” I went back to the bed, glancing at Becca’s nervous smile. The silence stole the air from the room as the RA tentatively roamed, occasionally glancing at the stern-looking supervisor. As he edged closer to the laundry bag, my heart sped up, and I had to keep myself from making panicked eye contact with Becca. When he bumped into the bag a second later, I couldn’t help but freeze. He looked confused, his hand inching to open it.

“Mr. Hedging, there’s no need to look in the girls’ laundry.” The supervisor’s clipped voice stopped him as he was about to peer inside.

“Oh, uh, sorry.” I felt a little bad for the guy as he shuffled back to the door. “Everything looks good, girls. Have a nice day.” The awkward pair was gone with a click, and Becca and I burst out laughing.

“I can’t believe that! He almost had us!” Becca couldn’t get herself together, rolling around on the bed.

“I can’t believe us! I feel like usually people get caught for things like alcohol or weed. But not us.”

“Listen, it’s not like we’ll light them. I just want to take them home—and they smell and look good.”

“I know, I know.” I pulled handfuls of clothes out of the bag, then dumped almost twenty candles of all sizes, shapes, and scents onto the ground. We stared at our collection.

“We’re ridiculous.”

# COLORS OF MORNING

BRANDON-BRUCE CRISPIN

There was a murder last night  
and the story crept under dark  
crumbed in street corners and yellow-taped  
project walkways livid and stitched  
dotted with hues from the corner bodega;

pale ghost of a young black hood, fickle navy  
at the crooked ends of shadowed grip  
and firm trigger. The bullet sounds  
with punishing force. Brief, in the air  
like a fugitive between bars

clutched to windows like worried mothers  
looking for lost boys with lost words  
All but one finds him.

The rest hear the morning silence  
between her howls, and hush their boys  
back to sleep. The hope is just a short truce  
from the present day, the next day  
and the lavender-stained window.

# COLORS OF NOON

BRANDON-BRUCE CRISPIN

The man of the house wakes  
breath stiff, tar-like in the eye

under the muddling night, waxing  
into and out of silent architecture.

Something like a king, gray and flush  
within the quiet storm of morning

lavender, then gone. He walks out.  
His woman wakes. His child lives in yearning

for weeks not so much day and night  
not so much a hard, acute sentiment

like black,  
like man, a vandal

at war with the city that keeps him,  
provides the rotten apple

over a fleeting spoon  
and lets him bite.

# THE STONE CIRCLE

DELANY LEMKE

This is not Stonehenge. It will not leap from the woods to sing to you. These stones are scattered through the oak trees like a page of sheet music. You will only hear the song if you take a step back. Take so many steps back that you look at the entire Earth and you can almost see the stars falling out from the center of it all. Now listen with everything you have. If you hear the hum, it will sound like the universe licked a finger and spun it around the edge of the circle so that it rang like a crystal glass. Like some resonance of time, space, and stone. If you still cannot hear it, don't worry. Some songs we are not equipped to hear.

# CHARLES BONNET SYNDROME

DELANY LEMKE

My face is permanently fifteen  
in my grandmother's memory.  
All her possessions  
uselessly small.  
Her glasses  
do almost nothing.

Though sometimes,  
from her window  
she sees dancing women  
wearing floral headscarves  
out on the water.  
She can count  
their eyelashes,  
the petals on the fabric.  
She sees their feet  
striking the jetties  
or their ankles rising  
from the sandbar,  
eyes like teacups  
tasting the lake.

She wonders why these spirits  
would come to haunt  
her dead eyes.

She tells no one.

# HOW TO MAKE SAUCE

IZZY LÓPEZ

On that night, Alex and I knew what we were making for dinner: gnocchi alla vodka. We knew this because we had gnocchi and because we had vodka, and now it was a simple matter of procuring some cream and tomato sauce. It was summer, and we were alone in Alex's house for the night. I was living here with my boyfriend's family because I had stopped speaking to my own parents. Speaking is a loose term for constantly fighting but the newfound silence was the same. I was also living here because I missed Alex. We've been together for three years, but during the school year, we live three hundred miles apart. The distance is lonely and exhausting, but the summer air made it feel far away. But now, as we prepared to make our meal for the night, all that mattered was pasta and sauce and garlic bread.

The gnocchi was thoughtless; we boiled water and salt on the stovetop and tossed into a package of store-bought potato pasta. The sauce required more work.

Recipe for vodka sauce (as told by Mario Batali via FoodNetwork.com):

*-Cook bacon in a pan on medium heat.*

Alex and I are vegetarians and improvisers. We decided that "fat is fat, right?" and heated a large pool of olive oil in his mom's favorite saucepan.

*-Add garlic and tomato sauce until garlic is fragrant.*

This was quick; we burnt the garlic after throwing it on a too hot pan of too much oil. We started again. Better late than burnt.

*-Stir in vodka and allow the sauce to reduce by half.*

Reaching into the pantry, I grasped the glass bottle of vodka that had been purchased for a dinner party several weeks ago. Then, we had forgotten to go to the liquor store and sent Alex's brother out as his mom and I finished sautéing scallops and asparagus. He returned with a fifth of Svedka, far more than we needed for a couple of light cocktails on the porch on a summer evening. Now the liquor dwindled, just a cup or two left of the warming, stinging liquid. I don't remember how it all got used up, but somehow it did.

I grasped the bottle by the neck, like a butcher grabbing a duck, and handed it to Alex. He measured out a quarter cup and added it to the bubbling sauce. It hit the pan with a sizzle and simmered down, infusing the sauce.

*-Add cream and season with nutmeg and salt.*

Returning to the pantry, I looked for nutmeg as Alex tended to the sauce with a wooden spoon. When I pinched the brown powder into bubbling pink sauce, the aroma of autumn spices burst forward. I remembered how my mother always made pumpkin pie for Thanksgiving even though I hated it. It smelled good, but I could never stand the watery squish of pumpkin and crust after a turkey dinner. Once, I made my own pie, a coconut cream with a graham cracker crust. But she caught me, the night before Thanksgiving, stirring my own pot of bubbling yellow. She let me know how much of her time I was wasting as I cluttered up the stove, and I let the pudding burn to spite her. The next morning, a fresh pumpkin pie sat on the counter.

*-Add pasta water to thin sauce, if necessary.*

Minutes passed and the sauce thickened. Alex stood guard, stirring the sauce and staring into its depths, as if it would turn the stove off itself and announce when it was ready. I moved on, slicing into fresh white bread, its crunchy crust bucking beneath my serrated knife, and decorating it with butter and garlic powder. I set the bread on a pan and inserted it into the oven, under the glowing broiler.

I asked Alex if the sauce was done yet. My stomach had been rumbling in annoyance. Alex dipped a clean spoon into the sauce and tasted it. His face scrunched inwards towards his nose. Too bitter.

Minutes passed slowly. The garlic bread browned. I set out plates to fill the time. Alex tested the sauce again. Too bitter. I saw

him think, considering everything he had done, anything thing he had not done.

"I know what's wrong," Alex cried out. "The vodka hasn't cooked off yet! No wonder it tastes bad."

We laughed. Memories of rum-stained basements and gin-scented couches rushed forward. In this kitchen, that college world of plastic bottle liquor seemed so uncivilized. Now we were here, growing up, using vodka to cook rather than to drink. I wondered when I first learned what vodka was. At a restaurant? At home? Did I smell it on my father's breath before I saw it in a bottle in the grocery store? I didn't know the answer.

After a final taste test, Alex declared the sauce finished. Following the technique he saw online, Alex added the sauce to the pasta in one large pot, and coated each gnocchi in its own liquid blanket. For extra flair, he sprinkled parmesan cheese into the pot and stirred it all together into one pink, soft, cheesy mass.

I scooped out oversized servings onto our white porcelain plates and Alex poured us each a glass of white wine. We took our meal out onto the back porch, and sat down at the outside table to eat. Forks poised, we dug in.

The tomato hit like a hug from an old friend and cream coated the tomato like a kiss on the neck. Vodka snapped lightly in the background. I drowned the garlic bread in pink sauce and bit into its crisp and buttery crevices. Butter makes anything delicious.

For a while, Alex and I ate in silence. That was how we ate most nights, not because we were mad but because we were hungry. Our silence was punctuated with exclamations of "Wow, this is so good!" and "Really, this is so good!" and "I can't believe how good this is!"

Soon, the meal was gone, vanquished by our vacuum mouths and stretching the walls of our overeager stomachs. I leaned back and my chair creaked under my newfound weight. I sighed. Alex followed me and leaned back in his chair, balancing himself on the back legs.

The backyard was green like fresh chives and was surrounded by old maple trees, standing tall and proud like soldiers, protecting the yard's insular peace. Silhouettes of birds flew against the setting sun and mosquitos nipped at my ankles. Sitting in the midst of all this,

I realized, somewhere underneath my stomach, how much I wanted all of this to be mine.

In truth, I grew up only a mile from Alex's house, but my house never felt like this. It was also a New England colonial with a fragrant kitchen and a sprawling backyard. My family meals were punctuated with parental accusations of who cheated on whom and who was divorcing whom. Our pantry had whiskey and wine that was drunk for reasons more insidious than a dinner party on a summer afternoon. For a long time, eating a family meal was something I feared.

But here, in this well-gardened yard on a brick porch at a glass table under an orange umbrella, Alex exhaled gently and leaned his head on my shoulder. I asked him if he liked the meal, and he said it was one of the best he had eaten in a long time. Back in the kitchen, a chocolate cake I had made the day before was chilling. I asked Alex if he wanted coffee and dessert. He said yes, but in a minute. I agreed, it was best to wait for something so sweet. I leaned my head on top of his and looked out, at the yard and trees and birds and bugs, all looking for somewhere to go and something to eat.

# HOW TO REMOVE YOUR FEELINGS

NICOLE HURTGEN

She took all the precautions  
and read the pamphlet twice:  
“How to Remove Your Feelings  
When They Just Aren’t Working for You.”  
The procedure sounded simple enough—  
just four stitches  
and back to work the next day.

The receptionist called her name  
and the butterflies took flight.  
The doctor told her to breathe deeply  
and clear her mind as she fluttered  
into unconsciousness.

A small incision was made  
near her pulsing heart and there it was,  
adorned with a blue bow,  
a tiny box containing every one  
of her impractical emotions.

She was given the tiny box  
as a souvenir, and she carefully  
unwrapped the delicate package  
to reveal a humble, pink, fleshy seed.

Cradling it as if it were the dust of a star,  
she knelt in front of her garden of lost loves—  
bushels of roses, lavender, daisies—  
and dug a quarter-sized hole amongst the worms.  
She then placed her pink seed in the dirt  
and tucked it in.

# PROSTRATED PANTOUM

NICOLE HURTGEN

How do you stop the hurt of having to breathe?  
Should I let go?  
The birds have already plucked out my eyes and  
I have weeds growing in my lungs.

Should I let go?  
Let my heart stop beating?  
I have weeds growing in my lungs  
my skin is hanging loose.

Let my heart stop beating.  
The paper bag on my head has finally caught fire,  
my skin is hanging loose.  
How do you stop the hurt of having to breathe?

# WATERSHED

FAITH PADGETT

I wonder why the sun hurts in  
the eyes of my mama's head.

They have not hurt before, did not  
when we ate pink and cream  
circus cookies with sprinkles  
looking for fairies from the front porch.

Her eyes hurt, she says, because  
cataracts have overtaken their insides.

This, like rivers mid-fall, like stops  
or shallows, places where the water  
goes white and foamy, thickens,  
clouds the sight like soap. Mama

my eyes hurt, I say, sucking a  
thumb that is not mine. Mama,

my eyes have your flows in them,  
are blinking so fast, the iris  
bleached with god-seed. The fairies  
had kings, as we have husbands;

my pink, my sweet, given or taken,  
my sight sucked by a shampoo-colored sting.

# QUEEN ANNE'S LACE

REBECCA MEIER

A wildflower that is gentle,  
not dancing to nature's song,  
but, rather,  
letting it pass through her,  
absorbing it and adding her own beat  
as she sways in the breeze.

Carving her own path through the woods  
that have seen every bright bloom  
and every natural neon life has to offer;  
her soft, quiet petals are admired.  
To the untrained eye, they may be glanced over,  
but what a mistake that is  
when gardeners from miles around trek years  
for the hope of a glimpse of such beauty,  
and many never even get the chance.

The story goes that Queen Anne herself tatted this plant,  
bringing it to life with a prick of her finger  
that bled into the flower's center.  
If the Universe stitched breath into the world,  
gave it a heartbeat and a mind  
and bled into its core,  
this plant was no mistake—  
it was a gift.

# SUNNET

REBECCA MEIER

To think the sun could abhor her own rays  
Because the stars twinkle rather than shine;  
That though she breathes life into lively days,  
She is no mountainside, no sea of brine.  
While she raises creatures and nature, too,  
Her only focus is wildfires she sparks.  
All the fault on herself cannot be true  
When she speaks the song of a thousand larks.  
How can a snowflake compare to a flame,  
Or a rose petal to a drop of rain?  
There is no beauty in all things the same;  
You cannot compare each divergent brain.  
And so the sun, though she likes to forget,  
Will always be more than a rise and set.

# CRACKS

REBECCA MEIER

Did you ever notice the cracks in your hands  
that only seem to appear when you're washing them?  
You can scrub and rinse and wash and repeat,  
but the cracks will do nothing but grow.

The blood forever etched into your fingernails  
and the dirt ingrained in your palm lines,  
telling a future clouded by the past  
when you killed  
and then buried.

The only way to remove the cracks is to rip off the skin,  
but then you would see blue veins,  
cold blood lacking oxygen.  
It's hard to breathe when your own hands  
tend to choke you from time to time.

The words you almost said are sewn into your knuckles,  
forever bruised from the punch they left on the receivers.  
Rub them, massage them—  
purple is your new color.

These are your hands.  
You can observe them all you like  
(and write every poem in the world),  
you can reflect on them for days, months, years,  
but if you spend all that time thinking,  
you'll miss the hands—  
small, large, just right—  
that fit into yours.

You'll miss the tears swept away,  
absorbed in the valleys of your skin,  
or the faces that are cradled,  
supported and displayed with the strongest foundation.

These cracks are not a map.  
Don't get lost in them.

# I AM

MADISON MURDOCH

I am four, and as my pigtails bounce in the frigid fall air, my dad teaches me how to fly a kite. I watch, mesmerized at the sight of red, blue, yellow, and green dancing together in the air. My dad is a puppeteer of magic. I can admire the world from his shoulders. My dad is my hero.

I am six, and my dad is gone. He talks to me and my mom on video calls in a beige t-shirt; he smiles while my mom cries. On Christmas Day, all I really want to open is the computer screen to pull him out. I'm not old enough to understand that all I'll get is pixels, little pieces of a mirror image that can't compare to the real thing. I am six, and as I ride in the backseat of my mother's red Explorer we listen to the radio and when "two soldiers die in Baghdad," I think it's my dad. Everything turns black. My life is falling apart.

I am eight, and my mom tells my dad to go fly a kite; I ask if I can come too. She says he's not the same since he came back. I wish I could remember; I wish I could choose. All I know is that while my hero is here, my life is not, and next year my mother is leaving. My dad is the reason.

I am thirteen and I wish. I wish. I wish. I am so jealous of the people around me I am green. I wish to mirror the bodies of ad campaigns. I hate my fucking teeth. I wish for a Prince charming, to sweep me off my feet. I don't have a home. So I build one in hate, and I try to escape. I wish my dad could communicate. I try to run away. I have an innate ability to disappreciate. I am dysfunctionally full of distaste for every flavor of who I am. And I don't know it, but my dad is broken. Because his life has escaped him like a magic trick, my table cloth of a mother has been pulled out from under the dishes

on the dining room table, and maybe the glasses are still there but every little spill stains. All I know is that he makes me clean my room and we argue. My dad is a tyrant.

I am sixteen, and I am torn. Every time I shut the door to the houses behind me I wish I didn't have to. The guilt of escaping is suffocating and I am no longer filled with a buzz at the thought of leaving. Because I feel like I've already gone, and I've never had a place where I belong. And the idea of being an adult sends shivers up my spine, brings darts to my eyes, and staggers my breaths in my throat like a scratched CD. I'm not ready. My dad holds my head to his shoulder, laughing at me. And now that I'm older, I see. My dad is my home. My parents build the barebones of my skeletal body, and even though the responsibility of paying the water bill makes me anxious, I'm glad I get to paint the walls.

# LILITH

KAYLA ANDRY

These nights of August  
Ripped me from my trappings,  
Peeled my skin back inch by inch  
And revealed what lies underneath;  
A broken, fragile, calloused shell of a girl  
Yearning for relief.  
It tore apart my brain, stole cells from their homes and dislocated all  
my bones;  
Restructured blood vessels and exposed my veins to the bright blue  
air.  
I became Lilith, or what you were frightened of—  
That black moon you spent so much time running from.  
I have come to collect you and your organs,  
Gleaming and beautiful in the raw sunlight.  
While I sit,  
Sipping tea and thinking of a past not remembered—  
A past reconstructed to your own liking.  
I ran from you in that past,  
And in these nights of August,  
You ran from me.

# ORE

KAYLA ANDRY

I am made of light,  
Glowing with pain in my eyes  
And vigor in my skin.  
Enlivened by gold, streaked with moonlight,  
And glazed with the scent of past memories.  
Rising eternally through the gruesome mire—  
I am made of stone.  
I am granite ore, shining and hard,  
Shouting, “This is my life song. This is my essence,”  
And Crying into the void:  
Respect me and tremble.

# SELF

KAYLA ANDRY

I turn violent at the sight of my reflection.  
Retching and purple and fast,  
like rapid gunshots.  
I pick my skin apart,  
Each limb a grotesque doll part;  
disposable and fleshy.  
I touch my stomach—  
my fingers come away sticky and wet and smelling like burnt grease.  
I start to spasm, my body shaking,  
crushed by the weight of my own being.  
Burnt and destroyed,  
I collapse—  
An incomplete masterpiece,  
born of singed hair and flames.

# EUPHONIUM

ASAMI TAMAGAWA

Taku died. It was sudden, and an air of shock, speckled with an almost stupid sense of astonishment, rippled through the students. Some people sobbed, some people looked confused, some people asked in a whisper who he was. I sat there, trying hard to remember his face, all the while unable to stop a tear from slipping down my face.

“Did you know him?” the girl sitting next to me asked hesitantly.

“I was in the same club as him in middle school,” I answered, feeling a little guilty as I still could not recall what he looked like. I wiped the wetness off of my face while the head of the grade announced the date of his funeral and went on to talk about friendship and living for him. We left the auditorium, everyone’s footsteps significantly heavier than they had been when we were first herded into the large room.

\* \* \*

“Are you going to the funeral?” a girl from my class walking beside me asked in a whisper, as if it were something that we shouldn’t talk about.

“Probably. I was in the same club as him in middle school, you know,” I said. Her expression saddened considerably and her gaze turned sympathetic.

Only seventeen, many of us were new to the concept of death. Were we supposed to cry? Be angry? If we didn’t know him, were we allowed to laugh, or should we be sad too because it would be inconsiderate of us to laugh at such a time? Confusion hung in the air with the dusty cobwebs, and the teachers tried to swipe it away as they rushed back into their routine schedules. The teachers taught class as always, and the other grades who had no idea what had happened ran around the hallways as they called out each other’s names, their ties and pants loosened fashionably, showing off their place in the school.

Taku was never one of them. If he were, the hesitation and confusion that permeated the air would not have been there. People would have remembered him in some form, whether it be seeing him swagger down the hallway or hearing some rumor about him walking home with a girl. He was at that place where people knew him only if they had been in the same class as him, or, like me, in the same club. For some people, his existence was first recognized by the realization that he was not there anymore, that he would not be a part of the tangled mess that was high school, that some of the strings in this web now hung loose, tickling those that they did not cross with before.

My school was in the shape of a hollow rectangle, surrounding a courtyard, and the walls facing the courtyard were adorned with windows. I opened one of the windows the way I always did and leaned out while talking to my friend, who was peeking out of the window next to mine. We talked about nothing meaningful, and my attention drifted away as I looked at the classrooms on the other side. I'd been telling myself to stop this habit, but I haven't been able to for three years now. He walked out of his classroom to his locker. His hair was messy as always, one part sticking up, probably from sleeping in class. He flashed a mischievous smile to one of his classmates—a guy on the baseball team with no outstanding talent besides his charismatic coolness—as he grasped his books, then headed back inside his classroom. His bad posture was apparent even from the opposite side of the building, and he slouched the way he had since the day I met him, the way he probably will for the rest of his life. He was often made fun of by his friends for that, and they would call him *nekoze*, or “cat-back.” The song that he had recommended to me years ago echoed distantly in my mind, and I returned my attention back to the mindless conversation that I had been having with my friend. I turned toward her and emitted a grunt of acknowledgement at whatever she had been saying. She looked back at me and raised her eyebrow slightly, one of her eyes on the door that he had gone into a few Moments ago. I ignored her and continued the conversation, flashing my best naïve smile at her. She spotted the teacher for our next class walking down the hall, and we hurried into our classroom.

My mother was washing the dishes and I was watching television, the daily ritual after dinner for as long as I could remember. I wondered if I should tell her about Taku. How would she react? Is there even a need to tell her? I didn't know how to start such a conversation, but I went on with it anyway.

"Mom, this guy in my grade died." She asked me if I knew him. "We were in the same club in middle school," I answered automatically. "His funeral is on Sunday, so I'll be out then," I stated matter-of-factly, unsure of how I should act. She seemed to sense my confusion and asked if there was a point in me going.

"Well, we were in the same club so I should, shouldn't I?" She shrugged indifferently and returned to washing the dishes. I went back to watching the television, where a comedian was laughing exaggeratedly at something the host had said.

\* \* \*

Sunday came, and I woke up earlier than usual and slipped into my uniform. I wore it more properly than usual—ribbon tight, shirt buttoned to the top, skirt long enough to brush my knees—and I put on my black cardigan instead of the gray one that I usually wore. Everything else was the same as any other day: I ate a bowl of cereal, wore my faded brown loafers, and took the train that I always did. I got off at a stop that was farther down into the suburbs and stepped off at a small, rusty station. There was more greenery there than around our school, and many students in the same uniform crowded the platform. It was unusual to see so many students together without laughter and loud conversation. Clouds hung dangerously close to the ground as a trail of uniformed students lined up toward the small building. A sign hung by the entrance, his name written in bold black ink. In the entrance of the small building was a framed photograph of Taku and some sheet music marked heavily with pencil.

So this is what Taku looked like. He looked like the typical shy boy, his black hair lying untidily on his head, bangs hitting the frame of his rectangular glasses. He was in his uniform in the photo, the same one that we had on right now. So he had continued being in the wind ensemble, I thought as I looked at his careful notes. Crescendo here, play with emotion, accent on this note. He played the euphonium. I couldn't suppress the smile that touched my face. Even the

instrument he played seemed to show his place in the school. Subtle, but important to those who knew what it was. Its brass shell hides behind the flutes and clarinets, but its reassuring sound reaches the ears of those who knew. As we headed inside, I saw a few of my friends. With nods of acknowledgement instead of casual waves, we gathered together. One of them was a girl who was in the wind ensemble with Taku and me in middle school—French horn. The other was a member of the dance team with no apparent connection to Taku. According to her, she had been in the same class as him once.

While waiting in line for whatever happened inside, Dance Team pulled my sleeve and asked me in a hushed tone if I would be willing to switch cardigans with her. She was wearing a brown one without the blazer, and stood out from the navy and black crowd. I nodded and we slipped out of line, asking French Horn to save our spots. We went to the bathroom with deep brown wooden doors reminiscent of a nice hotel and switched cardigans quickly. I buttoned down my blazer, straightening the collar in an attempt to hide the brown as much as possible, and we left the room to join French Horn.

\* \* \*

When we finally got inside, we were asked to fill out a slip of paper. Name, date, relation to the deceased. Relation to the deceased? In that section were the options: immediate family, relative, friend, other. Was I his friend? Taku, whose face I finally remembered? Unsure of what to do, I circled friend. I looked to either side to see French Horn and Dance Team wearing a similar expression of confusion. They both left that question blank, and we handed the slips in.

Having only seen funerals in movies before, I had no idea of what I should expect. The scene was rather similar to the movies—the photo of him surrounded by white lilies, beautiful and sad—but they did not prepare me for the atmosphere within the room. The air was muddy, and it seemed to squelch as we pushed ourselves forward. A stream of snuffles and the occasional sob decorated the monotonous sutra that the priest muttered. Bow to the family, raise a pinch of black powder to your forehead three times, put it in the second bowl, hands together and bow to the photo, leave. Tears were sliding down Dance Team's face, and I realized just then that tears were clinging

to my chin as well. Since there were hundreds of students, we filed through the room and paid our last respects efficiently and without delay. Soon, we were out of the room. With nothing left to do, we stepped out of the building, taking one last look at the sheet music, which looked back, lonely without its owner.

A slow drizzle of rain was falling. I pulled out an umbrella from my bag. Dance Team took out her umbrella too, hastily wiping the tears off of her face in the process. French Horn looked at me, eyes still red, and asked quietly if she could use my umbrella too. We walked to the station in silence, where we bought some bread for lunch. After buying our food, we realized that we did not have that much of an appetite and headed home with the bag of bread in hand.

At the station, Dance Team and French Horn went to one side, the one heading farther into the suburbs while I went to the other side, the one going back to the city. One of the guys in my grade stood there, head drooping low. It was Baseball, the guy that was always with Nekoze at school. That day, however, his shirt was tucked in, his pants worn properly, and his face an expression of sadness so rarely seen that it looked awkward. It felt weird to see Baseball without Nekoze. They were always together at school. I wondered Momentarily if he would show up too, but swiped the thought away quickly. Not in the mood to talk, I waited farther down the platform, setting my gaze on the damp train tracks.

\*\*\*

Monday showed no sign of what had happened the day before, the only proof of it being the untouched bag of bread in the kitchen and the empty hanger where my black cardigan usually hung. I slept through my alarm, flung on my uniform, and ran into the train just as the doors were closing. Everyone at school was back to normal, uniforms arranged fashionably to fit each student's taste and laughter echoing down the halls. My black cardigan was in my locker, and I put the brown one in Dance Team's. She was with French Horn, and they both waved at me cheerfully as they walked into their classrooms. Classes were boring, with occasional bursts of laughter when the teacher succeeded in cracking a joke. No one mentioned Taku, but I felt like I could see flashes of him, in the shadows of abandoned classrooms after school, the reflecting sunset on the glass building

next door, and the awkward seconds of silence during conversations. Faceless, emotionless, but there.

\* \* \*

The bell rang, signifying the end of lunch break, and I grabbed the textbooks for my next class and headed to the staircase. Just then, Baseball and Nekoze came down the stairs, laughing. Our eyes met. I smiled and waved. He waved back, face scrunching up in a smile. I rushed to class, suddenly aware of how clumsy my feet were. The song played in my head, and beneath the familiar melody, I could almost—just almost—make out the sound of a euphonium.

# GUILTY

KRISTEN KAREM

Everywhere I turn, every place I step, every breath I take reminds me of it. The fall colors seem too bold, the slight breeze too pleasant. I don't deserve it.

"Everything is okay," she tells me. "I trust you. It was a mistake." And it was. A mistake I can't believe I made. She might trust me, but I don't trust myself.

It was hot that day, sunshine mingling with humidity to make the air soup. I was busy. Distracted. Running around trying to get everything together for my presentation. I remember parking on the side of the road, stepping out, and locking the car, no hesitation. There was an unusually large number of people in the store, and I almost walked out, but I needed to impress this potential client. I went in and bought the wine, the stupid wine I thought was so important, and when I came out I saw a crowd circling my black Ford Escape.

And it hit me, and I dropped the brown paper bag, and wine and glass sprayed up around me, and I ran to my car, shards crunching beneath my feet. The green of the wine bottle mingled on the pavement with the clear broken pieces of a car window, and I couldn't believe, couldn't understand. The two things most precious to me, forgotten. My baby boys, in the arms of strangers. The air, so, so hot. I remember her telling me to take them to preschool, and she would be home taking care of the third, who had a fever. She was nursing him back to health, while I had almost killed the two she trusted with me.

# SAN PIERRE RD., APRIL 24TH

BRIAN ECKERT

Flashing signs at the two  
bars on either edge of  
town are the only lights.  
The highway curves right,  
but I hold on and continue  
straight, over the banked  
turn past the fire station.  
A glorified pole barn,  
painted red, attracting  
visitors for fish fries and  
election day. Driving out  
of town, I pass family  
members whose time  
ran out, and the road is  
scattered with potholes  
from the midwest winters.  
The road twists and turns,  
following the driest route  
chosen by the early settlers.  
Past the small group of  
houses and the red truck  
that hasn't moved from  
underneath a fallen tree  
in years is Snuffy's. He's  
also long gone. Over the  
hill, down the curve, and  
past the auto body shop

I smell the Earth, fresh,  
damp, black soil waiting  
to be planted. This night is  
unique, the conditions will  
never be the same again.  
I will never return to this  
road, on this night, to be  
greeted by the same storm  
and darkness, with these  
thoughts that will never  
be contemplated again.  
There will be long nights  
at home again, and more  
hours taken off my life,  
friends I will see again,  
but more that I won't.

# WE DON'T WEAN OFF

NYEREE BOYADJIAN

My mother, Mania, and my father, Depression,  
asked me to get coffee,  
I said, "No, let's go for drinks.  
If we go get coffee, I know Anxiety is going to come  
And this seems serious;  
Let's keep this just us."

Mania downed a Jack and Coke, my favorite.  
Depression doesn't drink; it makes him sad.  
My mother looks me dead in the eye.  
"We're getting a divorce," she tells me.

I will stay with one of them  
Until the other picks me up,  
No schedule, no warning,  
Just: "It is time for me."

Mom loves to dance.  
When I go over,  
She's not sober.  
Different men in her bed every night,  
Leaving when she takes her showers,  
Because mother never sleeps.

They love her in the night time,  
Her energy and sexiness.  
In the daytime, she speaks a mile a minute,

Not leaving room to think or listen  
Or ask how bad she has been hurting you.

at my father's house,  
we don't get out of bed.  
dad sleeps for what feels like forever,

but when i see him eating ice cream to drip glucose in his body,  
my gaze stays on the galaxy under his eyes,  
two purple crescents,  
the veins pulsing like planets under a telescope.

the longer i stay  
the worse he is becoming.  
in those visits i forget that  
you cannot see everybody's bones through their skin,

So when dad stuck a dagger vertically in his wrist,  
And mom crashed her car going ninety-five on a side street,  
They met again in the hospital,  
Eating pills that bring them together,  
Bring them sobriety, sociality, and numbness.

It is all okay,  
Until the nausea catches up.

# CATCH-22

## (THE POEM)

NYEREE BOYADJIAN

It was months after the promise that we would be able to go home,  
She sent me pictures in the mail,  
But it was her voice that helped me sleep  
In the middle of Milwaukee when it was hard because of all the  
crickets.  
Now it's gunshots keeping me awake.

I'm leveling out my blood with nicotine in the hopes  
That my lungs fail and I'm no longer useful.

Either way, when I get home eventually,  
It won't be the same.

A home where my dreams are filled with the faces I've never spoken  
to,  
But improved as God and ended their life because the government told  
me to.  
The government who uses me as a prop,  
Makes me believe I'm defending my country,  
When I'm helping people I do not love  
Just to help them receive more money.

I have taken more lives than a death row inmate,  
Collected more bones than orthopedic cancer.

Think of all the places I could've been instead,  
Like a college classroom,  
Or in bed,  
With you.

# SCARS

NICK VERSACE

When I ran beside my older brother, I sometimes pretended that he and I were connected at the waist by a rope, and if I slowed down, the rope would snap, and I'd lose him forever. I was a freshman, Thomas a senior, and this was the only year he and I could run together. With his training and my talent, I imagined we made a good team. I imagined a lot on runs with the varsity guys, and usually I stayed quiet while the seniors did the talking. It had taken my brother two years to make varsity, and though now he was the fastest on the team, he always hung back and chatted up the middle of the pack during practice. "That's where the heartbeat is," he'd say. But that autumn evening, as Thomas and I drifted together in a pack of our teammates, I said something out loud. Thomas's head turned toward me. He smirked, preparing to revise whatever I told the team—his team, really, as captain—and then I was past him, his body caught by one of the lamp poles anchored to the middle of the sidewalk, the poles we usually floated around without thinking. His arms flew out and his head bounced off the cement. *Thwack.*

Thomas stumbled backward as his forehead spurted blood. Spurted—the purple spray stained the sidewalk for months. His hands clutched at the sides of his neck like he was trying to unscrew his head.

Someone with a phone dialed 911. Steve, Thomas's best friend, sat him down on the sidewalk while Kai, another senior, whipped off his shirt and pressed it against Thomas to slow the bleeding. "Tilt your head back," Kai instructed. Looking at the rest of us, he said, "I have CPR training." Everything processed at a distance, as if I'd stepped off the airplane but my ears hadn't yet popped. There was so much of Thomas's blood. I stood behind the others and rubbed my own forehead to make sure everything was there.

When the paramedics came and removed the shirt from Thomas's head, we glimpsed the damage: an inch-long dent caved

into his skin like someone had taken a baseball bat to a fleshy piñata. “That’ll leave a nice scar,” one of the EMTs said.

On the drive to the hospital, my mother said, “This is going to be some goddamned bill. They charge thousands for an ambulance.”

“It cost ten thousand when my grandpa had his heart attack,” Steve said from the backseat. The guys had let me ride shotgun since it was our car and Thomas wasn’t there.

We smelled up the waiting room while my mother checked on Thomas. Kai, who’d put on his bloody t-shirt, leaned over and explained emergency room procedures he allegedly learned with his CPR training. “They do surgeries down that hall,” he said. “But that’s only if you’re really fucked.”

By the time they let us in, Thomas was stitched and sitting up in bed. He nibbled at his fingernails, a nervous tic passed down from our father, but he jerked his hand away as soon as he saw us. His wound was covered with a fat, square bandage. The guys crowded around, Steve the first to clasp hands with Thomas, and I was pushed to the outside with the other freshman on our team. A nurse walked by and smiled. “Nice of your friends to come,” she said.

“Do we get a group discount?” Thomas joked.

But after the nurse was gone, he exchanged a glance with our mother. He’d offered to get a job when her last boyfriend moved out, but she’d brushed it away. “It’s your senior year,” she said. Then she corralled me with her arm. “Besides, I can always put Tyler to work once you leave.”

Another nurse poked through the curtain and whisked away a tray of supplies from the table beside the bed. “Thomas,” one of the guys said, “how’d it even happen?”

Thomas shook his head. “I didn’t see the pole because I was looking at Ty.”

Ty—that’s what he called me. I’d been Ty for as long as I could remember, and he’d been Tommy until he started high school. Our mother had always preferred Thomas, but I kept calling him by his nickname. He wrestled me over it. I’d whine, “Tommy, quit doing homework and play catch with me,” and he’d storm out of his room and pin me against the hallway carpet. He put his strong hand around

my neck, the other holding me down while his quivering face absorbed the extra anger it would take to squeeze me to death.

“My name is *Thomas*,” he spit out once. I lay beneath him and let a smile linger on my face until he’d run out of energy. Then I slipped into my room and watched in the mirror as the redness in my neck faded. His stubby nails never left a scar.

“Little bro was talking when you hit the pole,” Kai confirmed.

Steve clapped me on the back and said to Thomas, “There was your mistake: paying attention to Ty.” The others laughed.

Thomas said, “That’s why we don’t let freshmen talk.”

That night, I tried to remember what I had said to distract Thomas. But it was meaningless, just something to win laughs, and the exact words faded. As I lay beneath the covers, I saw only Thomas’s head bouncing off cement. *Thwack*.

\* \* \*

Before our father moved to Virginia with his new wife, he used to tell the story of my trip to the emergency room. I was four, though I don’t remember any of it. I fell down the stairs. Our parents were in Thomas’s room when it happened—I’d snuck away. My father came running into the hallway after me, arms outstretched, but not in time. “You wandered off the edge,” he later told me. “Daydreaming, even then.” He said that with a smile. He loved it when I’d go alone for bike rides or hole up in my room to work on sketches. Thomas was a different case. Thomas spent too much time at the same friend’s house, worked too much on his math equations. “Put that down,” our father would say, “and get lost in a book.”

When he sent us his first letter from Virginia, wrapped around a check for our mother, Thomas said, “He sure knows how to get lost.”

\* \* \*

Monday of the following week, Thomas was allowed to remove his bandage. I watched from the hallway, unseen, as he stood before the bathroom mirror and peeled it off. I felt my own forehead again, rubbed the seamless surface of my skin. Later that morning, as we waited in the kitchen for the paper bag lunches our mother still insisted on making, I tried to get a closer look at the stitches. They were

thin as dental floss and seemed too weak to hold anything together. Thomas pushed me back. “Stop gawking,” he said.

His scar became the talk of school. It cut just above his eyebrow—like Harry Potter, people joked. They chided him for running into a pole, but it was the kind of dumb accident that somehow dignified his sharp sense of calculus and his habit of meticulously documenting homework in a planner. Larger groups gathered around him in between classes and by the track after school.

Our next race was that Saturday, an invitational meet in Los Angeles. Thomas was cleared to run by Wednesday and decided he’d give it a go.

“You’re going to let him race?” I asked my mother on Friday night, when Thomas was out with Steve.

She took a sip of the amber-colored drink she’d mixed from her supply of old, sticky bottles under the sink. “Come sit with me,” she said, patting the couch cushion beside her. “I can’t stand it when you both leave me here alone.”

“So Thomas is going to race,” I said again. I had to repeat things after the liquor came out.

“The doctor says he’s fine,” she murmured. “You know Thomas.”

Meaning, *Thomas makes his own decisions*. He had a way of quieting her. A night after we overheard her yelling at our father again on the phone, we’d come home from pickup basketball to find her perched at the top of the stairs, jaw set. It was late and I’d forgotten to respond to her texts. She looked at me and said, “What’s wrong, can’t use your phone?”

I started to apologize, but Thomas cut me off. “Why don’t you blame me?” he snapped at her. “I could’ve texted too.” Our mother turned and walked into her bedroom, and that was that.

\* \* \*

On Saturday night, we warmed up under the lights, hazy yellow beams that disintegrated in the thick fog. Thomas and Steve led us on a warm-up jog around the course. They matched their strides effortlessly, Thomas and Steve, while I struggled through a sharp ache that had crept beneath my ribcage. After the warm-up, we found some open grass and stretched in a circle, preserving a semblance of

camaraderie even though we were lost in our own pre-race nerves, heads bowed. My ache had mostly dissipated. I looked at Thomas. He pressed his fingers against his forehead, probing, but when he noticed me he jerked his hand away.

Coach Ramirez joined the huddle at the starting line and gave us his final notes, including that Thomas should take it easy. We were mashed between the other teams competing in the top varsity race, and our huddle was jostled by runners wedging through to do final warm-up strides. I nudged Thomas. "How do you feel?"

"I'm fine," Thomas said. "Worry about your own race."

We stepped to the starting line in two columns, Thomas and Steve at the front. The starter gave his instructions—toes behind the line, wait for the gun—and Thomas reached out to touch hands with each of us, per his routine. He stared straight ahead when he held his hand back for me. I wanted to let it hang there until he turned around, but the starter raised his gun. I tapped Thomas's hand and he pulled it in toward his side.

The gun sounded. I leapt into a mass of arms and legs, consumed with adrenaline and the task of keeping my footing until the field spread out. Stray feet kicked against my calves and knees. Ahead, Thomas's white jersey flashed under the lights before he disappeared into one of the front packs.

My body was numb by the first mile mark, but my breaths were calm and measured. When I looked up, there was Thomas, only five runners away. He drifted back with each turn of the course. My eyes locked on Thomas's midsection, where the imaginary rope was tied. I surged and began to pull him in. Three runners separated me from Thomas. Then two. My arms pumped with purpose and gathered the rope fist by fist. I was a horse with blinders, faster and sharper than I'd been minutes ago.

And then, when only a stretch of dirt lay between us, Thomas looked over his shoulder. His forehead was red and puffy around the scar. His eyes, finding me, widened in surprise and then narrowed with new intensity. He whipped his head back around, took a violent gulp of air, and slammed his feet into the ground. I tried to match his pace, but it was as if he'd stolen my energy and replaced it with his exhaustion. He disappeared around the bend and I was left alone.

“Good work, buddy,” came a hollow cheer from the spectators to my right. Unfamiliar voice, nameless reference—another boy’s father taking pity. My blinders vanished and I caught all of these sad murmurings, precursors to the disappointment that loomed at the finish. My shoulders slumped and my feet went dead as I slogged through the remaining turns of the dark course.

\* \* \*

On Monday, the guys were back to pounding the sidewalks and cracking jokes. “Watch out,” someone said each time we passed a pole. They laughed and slapped Thomas on the back, and he grinned, too. Saturday’s invitational had been the race of his life; after leaving me, he clawed all the way to the front pack and finished with Steve. His wound had set in and decorated his forehead like a tattoo.

Today, I ran just ahead of Thomas and Steve, locked in the middle of the pack as we approached an intersection. The guys slowed in anticipation. We had the signal, but a car sped toward the corner and prepared to roll through the right on red. It wasn’t going too fast; enough to knock someone down, maybe put him in the hospital.

I detached myself and for an instant fixated on a perverse image: I lay in a hospital bed, the same one my brother had used, speckled with my own scars. Everyone around me—the team, my mother, Thomas—reached out to touch my arm or clasp my hand, worried sick, while I got stitched up.

“Ty!”

The scream registered just before someone yanked my arm and wrestled me backward from the curb. I twisted over myself and fell to the sidewalk as the car whizzed past.

Thomas stood over me, his hand still gripping my arm. “Are you crazy?” he said. The car accelerated and some of the guys yelled, flipping it off. Thomas didn’t budge. “What the hell were you thinking?” he said.

I got to my feet, dazed. I had nearly wandered off the edge. “I didn’t see it,” I said.

The guys continued across the intersection, but Thomas blocked my path and narrowed his eyes like he used to do when he squeezed my neck. This time he just stepped forward and shook

me by the shoulders. “Okay,” I said. “Okay.” The rest of the team disappeared around the corner.

Thomas let go. “Don’t ever fucking scare me like that again,” he said, a slight quiver in his voice. “Got it?”

“Fine.”

“Promise me.”

I paused and leveled my tone. “I promise.”

He sighed and started across the intersection. I jogged behind. I figured I should let him ditch me, run this one unattached. No rope. But when Thomas reached the other side of the street, he looked back and yelled, “Come on,” and waited while I caught up.

# HUNTING

BLAKE LONDON

The rifle buckles the boy's hands,  
the rifle bucks against his shoulder,  
the rifle buck and boy,  
blink of an eye, exhale—  
blur

powder crackling, boy's spine snaps in tune,  
domino-vertebrae sticking ramrod-straight and adult-like and  
he's grown now with a tongue leaking raw; scraped butcher paper,  
dotted leaves now blackening  
with the blood

oiled hardwood so slick and smooth in his hands,  
lock stock and barreling  
down his throat, hunting and shooting: the  
difference between canvas and watercolor

targets can't bleed,  
see

the throat, once cut: smooth  
jolt of silence. sharp squeak of an emptied cartridge.

hungry bullet through the  
papier-mâché hide and heart of  
childhood,  
virile, cherished,

*this is what a man does*

implication left  
in the branches with the carcass.

# THE BLOODSHED

BLAKE LONDON

there's an old shed we built the summer before sixth grade  
we built a fence and he studded it with nails  
the ends clipped off, medieval and strange and he told  
me *it was to keep us safe*

but the shed came later  
the shed came as another chore  
another task for busy hands  
*did he think it was penance?*  
*his or mine or my brother's or his father's*  
*or his brothers' or his*  
*or mine or his*

he kept his tools in there,  
shovels and rakes and hoes  
black iron barrels filled with black iron traps  
bobcat skulls ivory teeth  
ashes and trophies and something always  
breathing

he kept it locked  
pounded more nails into the wooden planks  
pounded aluminum cans into metal disks

he buried her there  
in an old steel drum

while her body rotted in the woods  
he took her—the little pieces  
mixed her in with the dirt and  
bone and studded iron of the soil  
in front of the  
toolshed.

# THE BONES OF ST. VALENTINE

AMEENA CHAUDHRY

I walked through a church with an unholy mouth,  
gazed upon this love ghost, this dead thing  
with sacrilegious eyes  
(they were looking for God, they were looking for you)  
Marble walls nothing without your back against them  
Here, honesty does not pray clean  
or bless politely.  
Here, honesty drips your sweat down my neck.  
Here, honesty begs.  
The pew is a bed, the candle wax is a bed, everywhere is  
a place for you to lay me down.  
I am guilty lips and the wrong veneration.  
I walked through a church with my unholy mouth  
looking for God, looking for the love ghost of you.

# PLAYGROUNDS

AMEENA CHAUDHRY

The first thing she noticed, and the only thing she remembered later, was his hand. Or maybe, it was the cigarette dangling from his fingers, or the smoke furling up, up from its charred, ashen tip. It might have been the complicated wrought iron pattern of the sleek café's patio chair, in which he sat lazily, like he was doing it a favor.

No. It was definitely his hand.

Jia deliberately sucked in a breath through the small gap between her front teeth, resisting the urge to look back up the street. Her mother and brothers were probably still huddled around a map at the circular crosswalk, taking turns craning their necks to look at the fountain on the other side of the street, none of the three having noticed that their fourth counterpart, the smallest of their party, had slowed down just enough to be swallowed by the busy Geneva street and spit out gently in front of a hole-in-the-wall coffee shop with pale gray windows and a sole patron brave enough to sit outside despite temperature. Jia, who had ignored her mother's not so gentle suggestion to put on a coat as they'd left their hotel that morning, shivered in her denim shorts and crocheted cardigan. She felt a stab of panic at her separation from her family, however intentional it may have been, and subconsciously fingered the phone-shaped bulge in her back pocket. Surely, the café had wifi for when she decided to forget about that morning's drama. She always did.

But not yet.

He had to be at least twenty. The boy hadn't seen her, hadn't looked up from his book for the several minutes Jia had been standing there, shifting her weight back and forth and tugging at the multi-colored rubber bracelets on her wrists.

"Your fidgeting is going to get you into trouble," her father always said. He had been proven right the previous month when Jia had sent her homecoming date's boutonniere straight through his

shirt because she couldn't stop moving while her sweaty fingers fumbled with the white petals.

But here, under midday November sunlight, she was free to fidget. The groups of glamorous Swiss women exchanging fluent French phrases laden with shopping bags, the sticky children dragging their tired mothers towards the ice cream shop down the street, and, most importantly, the quiet, reader who paid her no attention.

Jia bristled with irritation. If she wanted to be ignored, she would have continued sightseeing with her family. She pulled down firmly on the fabric of her white t-shirt until it revealed the cleavage her mother was always trying to stifle with sports bras. Jia yanked the hair tie from around her ponytail, letting her hair fall onto her shoulders, before taking the three steps that lie between her and that chair, that cigarette, that hand.

"What are you reading?"

She sounded like a child. She swore internally. The corner of his mouth turned upward before he even raised his eyes, so that when he did, Jia got to watch them widen in surprise. She felt a twinge of satisfaction in the pit of her stomach, the same satisfaction she'd felt under the bleachers at the homecoming dance when her date's skinny hands had found the zipper of her dress. She looked older than she was and acted older than she looked, but under his gaze, she squirmed like a shy schoolgirl.

"*The Kite Runner*. Have you read it?"

His voice, deeper than she'd been imagining, weakened her knees and she had to remind herself that if she fell to them on the pavement in the shorts she was wearing, she would end up with some ugly scabs. It was a comforting voice that reminded her of bedtime stories, but made the hair on her skin stand up in a way that had more to do with the thought of beds themselves than nightlights or lullabies.

Jia shook her head. The question he'd asked was a testament to the fact that he thought she was older than sixteen, and she didn't want to admit to him that her literature repertoire consisted only of her tenth grade English curriculum—*To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Catcher in the Rye*, titles she was sure he'd scoff at.

"Well, don't. It sucks," he said, tossing the worn paperback down on the table before learning back. The new posture allowed Jia

to see more of him. He wore a haphazard assortment of layers that reminded her of something her older brother Zach would wear: black skinny jeans, a lopsided maroon pullover with a denim jacket, a ratty flannel tied loosely around his hips. Her eyes lingered. His jet black hair was effortlessly messy. Jia subconsciously ran a hand through her own.

He finally raised his cigarette to his lips and inhaled, his broad chest expanding slowly. She watched the way his mouth closed around it until she felt dizzy and then looked at his filled coffee, trying to think of something clever to say.

“Why didn’t you drink your coffee?”

Clearly, her brain had taken clever to mean *horrifyingly, embarrassing, might-as-well-melt-into-the-floor-now, lame*.

He didn’t answer, and she really couldn’t blame him.

He watched her as a thin trail of smoke spilled from one side of his mouth. The way his eyebrows knit together reminded Jia of her other brother, Asher—so serious, so quiet that in sixteen years of siblinghood Jia could count on both hands the number of times she’d heard him speak. The most recent had been that morning, his even, low rumble interrupting their mother’s voice which was, as always, playing emotional jump rope between octaves.

“Forty-five,” she’d said, for the third time, for dramatic effect, as the cab driver shifted uncomfortably. “Nearly twice your age! Asher, this is unacceptable.”

“I’ve made my decision,” responded Asher, not engaging with her drama. He had just informed our family that he was planning on proposing to his girlfriend, who none of us had known existed, and who happened to be twenty years older than him. Our mother had dropped her open lipstick on her ironed white jeans.

“You’re a child,” she’d said. “It’s not a decision you’re capable of making.”

Asher shrugged, and Jia had felt a rush of appreciation for his confidence, his ability to let their parents’ words sail peacefully into one ear and out the other. She herself had never mastered the skill. She’d been seven when her toddler cousin had asked if he could keep her stuffed animal, Simba. The one she’d rescued from atop

the monkey bars at the school's playground, having been abandoned there by its previous owner.

"Of course you can," Jia's mother had answered for her smoothly. When she'd noticed her daughter's lower lip trembling, she'd added, "Oh, stop, Jia. He's younger than you. Don't be such a child."

The argument in the taxi took Jia back to that old house with its small rooms, her own lilac bedroom filled with stuffed animals, none of whom were Simba. Her father had come in that night after the thieving cousin had left. He asked which bedtime story she wanted to hear, but she was asleep before she could tell him that she didn't want a story, because she wasn't a child anymore.

"What's your name?"

Her stranger pulled himself out of his lazy slouch and looked away, at the Jet d'Eau across the street. Jia followed his gaze, could make out the boardwalk in the distance and the row of colorful lakeside buildings, stacked side by side like Legos, with tiny white windows that almost glittered in the sheet of sunlight through which she squinted. She'd asked her mother to build an hour into the day's itinerary to cross the river and sit on the boardwalk with a soda.

"No, no, we don't have the time," had been the response. "We're going to the United Nations building today. Something intellectual."

"Jia," she said now, barely loud enough. She had a feeling *he* wouldn't cast off an afternoon under the fountain as 'unintelligent', though he would probably swap the soda for a beer or a bottle of straight whiskey. "What's yours?"

"Mikhail."

His smooth voice broke slightly as he said his own name, like it had hit a patch of gravel.

"But I go by Mickey." He extended the hand that was holding the cigarette. "Would you like to?"

The unfinished question hung between them, heavy with possibility. *Would you like to?* Jia had no interest in smoking, but the hand, and the muscular arm, and the shoulder blade pressing against a denim seam were very tempting indeed.

She took a step closer so that her hip touched the edge of his table. "No thanks."

Mickey shrugged and took another drag before dropping the cigarette and putting it out with the toe of his beat-up sneaker.

“So what are you doing here?”

There was an undertone of boredom in his words, Jia could tell. He was losing interest, and she hadn’t made the impression she’d wanted to. She felt the annoying initial pinpricks of tears behind her eyelids and sucked in a breath. She’d been in fourth grade when her best friend received a flat screen television for getting straight A’s, while Jia herself received a five-dollar bill.

“I don’t even *care!*” she’d insisted to her father, stamping her foot as hot tears spilled down her red face. “I don’t even know why I’m crying!”

Her father had pulled her down into his armchair with him, a signature knowing half-smile on his kind face. Half comforting, half infuriating. It always said, *I know so much better.*

“Shh, love,” he’d said. “My little crybaby.”

Now, her phone vibrated aggressively in her back pocket, the sensation startling her. She put a hand on the table to steady herself.

*So what are you doing here?*

“Anything you’ll let me.”

Bingo. The bold suggestiveness of her own words surprised her. She watched his eyes widen in gentle shock and then narrow in less gentle mischief.

Mickey laughed, like he thought she was cute. He pushed his cup of coffee away from him but left his hand in the center of the table. Next to hers.

The sleeve of his jacket inched upwards as he did, revealing a bracelet made of thick, braided black cords, a silver charm dangling near his thumb. Jia took the fact that he hadn’t openly rejected her advance—though what she was advancing towards, she wasn’t sure—as a good sign. So she hooked her finger coyly through his bracelet, lifting the charm into the sun’s white-yellow rays. A Chinese symbol caught the light, twinkled.

“It means gift of God,” said Mickey, rolling his eyes. He paused, licked his lips, as Jia watched with increasing desire. “That’s what my name means too.”

“Mikhail,” repeated Jia slowly, her American accent butchering the beauty his introduction had had. She snorted. “Your parents really gave you a supersized ego with that name, huh?”

His body responded to her playful tone and he twisted his wrist out of her grip, only to confidently lace his fingers with hers.

“Sit.”

He pulled the empty patio chair closer by hooking his ankle around its leg effortlessly, and Jia’s face flushed at the invitation that was more a command. She sat immediately, as if on autopilot. Mickey smirked, and Jia had a feeling he was used to being met with little to no resistance.

“So why don’t you like the book?” she asked. Between the *anything you’ll let me* and fingering his bracelet, she had quickly depleted her limited reserves of confidence and forward flirtation.

“We’re not going to talk about books,” he said, dropping his voice. He clearly had a larger stash than she did. “Where are you from?”

Jia rolled her eyes internally, because she thought geographical origins fell pretty close to literary opinions on a ranked list of alluring conversation topics, but everything he said sounded mature, and sophisticated, and like it was the right thing to say. Her hand was growing sweaty, interlocked with his and though she felt even smaller than her stature, she didn’t pull away.

“Seattle,” she said, then added, “Washington. America.”

Mickey smirked in a way so reminiscent of Jia’s father’s condescending smile that she was immediately disarmed. She became acutely aware of the metal seat of the chair that was surely leaving criss-crossing indents on her bare thighs, of her mother’s panic being transmitted through the continual buzzing of her cell phone, of the fact that she did not belong here, on this street. She belonged back in that lavender painted bedroom with flowers stickered to the walls.

“Rainy,” replied Mickey in a tone that suggested he knew exactly how basic, how lacking his comment was. He was exerting a great amount of energy to lower the level of his conversational skills to match Jia’s.

Her breath quickened more from annoyance than arousal, but before she could say anything, his grip on her hand tightened and his mouth was on hers.

He *had* to be at least twenty, Jia thought again, more confident this time, because no teenager knew how to kiss like that. His hand fell on the side of her neck without hesitation, and Jia's unease melted, while her body relaxed and invited him in.

"I'm staying at the Kempinski," she breathed when they broke apart seconds later, even as she knew that she didn't have a room key on her, even as she knew how unhelpful the key to a room she shared with her mother would be even if she had one. She hoped her bravado would inspire Mickey to offer a better venue. He probably had an apartment with a view of Lake Geneva. He would probably take her to the fountain boardwalk and kiss her there among tourists and fashionable locals. He would probably make room for her the way her family never could. Even if just for a day. Even if just for an afternoon.

But Mickey shook his head. Laughed again. Pulled away.

Instantly stung, Jia held her breath. They dislodged their hands—she couldn't tell who moved first. Her empty hand looked small, fingers chubby, blue nail polish chipped, childish, ugly.

"I shouldn't," he finally said, moving as if to stand up. "You're just a kid."

Jia blinked once, then twice. She didn't watch as Mickey pulled a lighter from his jacket pocket and then dug in the other one, already looking for something else, already moving on.

The first time Jia could remember being overlooked was also on a family vacation, when she was young enough that her older brothers were still young enough for the play place at the Mall of America, back when family time took precedence over their father's business trips. The kids convinced him and their mother to play hide-and-seek with them while they sipped their iced coffees, tired out from a day of shopping. Jia clambered to the tower at the top of the jungle gym and snuck inside, her pink Velcro sandals squeaking against the plastic. She waited and waited.

She heard a voice carry over the noise as only her mother's could: "Do you have your sister?"

Jia looked out the tower's window to see her parents and brothers striding calmly into The Container Store, assuming she was following, not bothering to double check, onto the next.

Mickey gave up on the search and dropped the lighter back into his pocket. Jia was a statue compared to his controlled flurry of movement.

He stuck *The Kite Runner* into the waistband of his jeans, which Jia found ridiculous enough that it prompted her to move, to adjust her cardigan and unstick her legs from the chair whose black iron pieces suddenly looked a lot like prison bars.

Mickey paused and turned his wrist so that the bracelet, loosened slightly by Jia's feeble attempt at seduction, rotated back and forth. With a smile – the first genuine smile he'd given her—he pulled it from his wrist and tossed it lightly onto the table.

“Keep it.”

Before she could even shake her head, he leaned forward and kissed her cheek, with none of the roughness or aggression of his earlier affection, and said in her ear, “Now it's like I gave you the gift of God.”

She couldn't help it: she laughed. Mickey winked and ruffled her hair lazily before starting off down the street becoming packed with lazy afternoon shoppers.

“Nice meeting you, kiddo.”

Jia finally pried her phone from her sweaty shorts and answered her mother's shrill concern. She kept her eyes on the steady stream of the fountain and the satisfying way the lake beneath rose to meet it each time.

“Stay put, we're coming,” said her mother firmly. “Don't move.”

So Jia didn't. She stayed in the chair, on the patio, in front of the café, moving only to slide to braided black bracelet, the gift of God, onto her thin wrist, once again too small for the situation she'd gotten herself into.

\* \* \*

The phone rang while Jia was fixing her hair, each hand holding a piece in place while her teeth wrestled with two bobby pins. She saw the caller ID flash “Mom” and let it go to voicemail.

Nora appeared behind her in the vanity mirror. Always the first one ready.

“David’s not coming,” she announced, bangles making music as she tousled her own hair, which never needed the time, attention, or product that Jia’s did.

“Shocker,” she mumbled around the copper taste of the hair pins. Nora’s fiancé was notorious for making plans, forcing other people to commit to them, and then bowing out when the time came to actually get off his couch. Or actually, Jia and Nora’s couch. Nora’s (homeless) fiancé was also Jia’s unwanted second roommate.

Her phone glowed again and she reached for it after dropping her tufts of hair and saying a half-hearted prayer that it would settle into a sexy effortless mess by the time they reached the party.

*Mom (missed call)*

*Mom (voicemail)*

*Mom (iMessage) (4)*

“It’s not even really a party,” said Nora, as if she’d read Jia’s mind, falling backwards onto her bed without a single worry that she would wrinkle her silver dress. “Just the opening of this publishing house. A guy David knows.”

Jia didn’t respond. It didn’t matter what the event was. She had already squeezed into skinny jeans and high heels for it, so not going wasn’t an option. She sucked in a breath and scrolled through her unread texts.

You must be busy.

Today is the fourth anniversary of  
my divorce from your father, but i  
haven’t heard from you.

Call when you can.

I’m doing fine, by the way.

Her father’s business trip that had trumped the family vacation to Geneva five years ago had probably been the nail in the coffin of

Jia's parents' marriage. It was her mother who had initiated the process, dramatically bringing divorce papers to Asher's wedding, which she had spent a full month threatening not to attend.

The divorce had played a big part in Jia's decision to attend NYU, wanting to get away from the city that wasn't big enough for two parents competing for their daughters' affections. Zach had been settled in California for years, and Asher had stayed in town after his wedding, antisocial enough to avoid both parents in their singlehood as he had during their marriage.

Jia's mother was so wounded by the NYU betrayal that she'd refused to help her move across the country. Jia and her father had braved it alone, but even their friendship had suffered in the divorce. It turned out that the comforting half of his charmed personality was at least somewhat dependent on proximity, and Jia learned quickly that undiluted condescension was suffocating.

"All grown up," her father had said after hanging up the last poster in her first dorm room, where she'd lived for two years before trading it for a two-bedroom apartment with Nora (and David) for their junior year.

"Come on," groaned Nora now, rolling onto the teal shag rug before standing and wrapping her arms around Jia, tugging. "It's just off campus but I am not about to fuck with parking, so we're walking."

"Hold on."

Jia twisted out of her roommate's grasp and stumbled back to her vanity. Her eyes scanned the mess, vision blurred slightly by the fact that she'd stabbed herself in the eye with a mascara wand only minutes ago.

*Your fidgeting is going to get you into trouble*, her father always said.

She finally found the silver charm and closed her hand around its black cords, sliding it onto one wrist while Nora seized the other and pulled her from the room.

\* \* \*

The pair walked into the small square building with the same entrance they always made—Jia alert and observant next to Nora, a champagne flute of a person. Bubbly. Golden. A smile that lowered everyone's inhibitions.

They'd met at the first gathering of a journalism student organization, which neither of them had actually joined. Jia was emboldened by Nora's constant energy.

"I'm proposing to my boyfriend this weekend," she'd said proudly as they drank soy lattes and shared a blueberry scone after the meeting. Jia was shocked, and impressed, and when Nora asked her to tag along to Target later that evening, she didn't hesitate.

She felt like the dimmer of two lightbulbs as they sidestepped the **GRAND OPENING: WORDSMOKE PUBLISHING** sign and joined the sparse crowd.

Bookshelves lined the perimeter of the circular room, with two tables of refreshments and cocktails placed in the center like an afterthought. Nora made a beeline for the drinks while Jia watched the other attendees, still alert, still observant.

Several were college students, like her, dressed in crop tops and shawls and wearing oversized glasses. Two stuffy professor-types stood admiring a chandelier that looked like it might have been purchased on eBay, while a middle-aged woman with inky black hair and red lipstick sat in one of three floral armchairs, bored, unimpressed.

Jia caught sight of Nora waving a glass at her across the room, next to a modern, winding staircase she hadn't noticed. As she approached, treading carefully on the uneven carpeting, she vaguely recognized the man standing on the second step of the staircase with sandy hair and stubble, conversing animatedly with someone whose back was turned. Matt, David's friend-of-a-friend, who had co-opened this publishing press.

Nora stood waiting to make introductions, impatiently holding out a glass of chardonnay for Jia. She accepted it gratefully and was mid-sip when Matt noticed them.

"Nora! ...Nora's roommate! Thanks for coming."

He leaned around the other man, who didn't turn, and stooped awkwardly to kiss Nora's cheek. "I want you to meet my business partner, the co-owner of Wordsmoke!"

The taller man turned, gave a polite smile, and extended a familiar hand.

"Mikhail," he said. "Nice to meet you."

The wine burned Jia's lips. Too sweet. Too much.

It took a full minute of pleasant small talk with Nora before he realized. Before he even really looked at her. Before she had the chance to speak, to introduce herself in the same timid voice as on that sun-soaked, shivering Geneva street.

The memory seemed to pass over him calmly, without shame or awkwardness, without any of the violence of Jia's heart hammering in her chest. Her half-swallowed sip shone on her lips but all she tasted was the metal of bobby pins.

"Jia." He repeated it quietly. "Of course."

"Do you two know each other?" asked Matt with genuine interest. Mickey chuckled easily. He was slimmer now, in gray pants and a fitted black blazer. His hair had grown, curling unattractively at his neck. Jia looked away.

"Not really. We met briefly in Europe a few years ago."

She was in awe, even in all of her self-consciousness, at how neatly he could wrap the most memorable afternoon of her life into one little sentence.

"Europe," repeated Matt, taking a swig of his beer. "Wait. The chick you banged in Geneva?"

Jia watched it travel across Mikhail's face. The easy lie, one he probably didn't even remember telling. The casual embellishments he'd awarded to that day, because the truth of it wasn't enough. Didn't make a good enough story. She watched his eyes dart to one side with what should have been shame but looked like pride, watched him light a cigarette just to have something to do with his hands.

On her tenth birthday, her parents had fought. All the way through dinner, even during dessert, even while she blew out the candles and wished for the yelling to stop. It hadn't ended until her mother had thrown her drink at her father and he, with his shirt stained red and his glasses spattered, apologized.

Jia remembered thinking how immature her mother was being. How that petulant act of frustration couldn't possibly have solved anything. And yet here, now, sweating through the black silk of her sleeveless blouse, she was tempted to do the very same thing.

Jia lifted her glass to her mouth, taking a large swallow. His eyes followed her hand, narrowed, and she realized her mistake.

"I can't believe you still have this."

His tone was not one of pleasant surprise as he fingered the Chinese symbol. He didn't laugh, maybe sensing how close he was to wearing a glassful of Chardonnay. But his eyes held amused pity, betrayed him as he took a drag and tapped his cigarette over the silver ashtray that lay on the end table next to them.

"Neither can I."

Mikhail was still standing two steps above her and she had to tilt her head back to look at him, still small, even in these three-inch heels her mother had told her not to buy.

Jia slid the bracelet from her wrist. Her eyes burned, but she held his gaze as she extended it as if to hand it to him. He didn't move, and she reached past him, towards the small silver tray, and dropped the gift of God among the ashes.

Nora took her elbow, Nora who knew the whole story, Nora the hopeful romantic who'd been sure Jia and Mikhail were destined for each other.

"Come on," she said gently. "Don't make a scene. So he lied about sleeping with you. Forget him."

Jia supposed it was that easy for some people, but Nora's words felt like fists pounding her chest, beating her heart down, down, back into its place.

She turned away and walked out of the building, wine glass still in her hand.

"Don't be such a child!" Nora called after her, having lost her empathy somewhere in her second drink.

Jia thought of the bracelet in the ashtray with satisfaction, imagined its black threads unraveling, the charm she'd kept so clean for five years becoming charred by embers. It was immature, she knew, and futile. She stepped out of her heels and walked barefoot on the sidewalk, the yellow light of a New York evening giving way to darkness while she watched. It was immature. Futile. Petulant. But a child was the only thing she knew how to be.

# LAMENT FOR THE DEAD

HANNAH SINCAVAGE

Your son isn't crying.

The crowd shuffles along, their suits and black dresses a stark contrast against the bright blue sky and beaming sun. Your wife walks beside you, her face empty and her fingers clenched around sodden tissues. There are thick circles under her eyes; her lips are in a thin line. You turn to her, begging for her to acknowledge you, to share your sadness, but she just lifts her chin higher and quickens her stride.

Your friends and family enclose you, no words said among them, no smiles exchanged. Your baby niece cries out in her stuffy black dress, and your sister shushes her with a quick "no, honey," her face turning red with embarrassment. You remember when the baby was born, when she came screaming into the world, and feel great grief well up in your chest. Your eyes are pulled to the coffin being carried up ahead, to the six men with their heads bent down, the weight of the world on their shoulders.

Blocks of stone rise up in rows on either side of the black parade, looking like solid soldiers, guarding the bodies of the souls that lay beneath the grassy hills. You cannot hear the blue bird that chirps above or the shuffle of the feet. You feel detached from everything, like you're simply observing everything in mute horror. And your son still isn't crying.

The procession crowds around the open grave; your childhood priest stands by the stone. He calls for prayer, and the crowd bows their heads as one, all except for your son. He stares at the head stone, his ginger hair, your hair, like a flame among black embers. His head is held high in protest. Part of you wants to scold him, to throw out a harsh word and shame him into bowing his head, to pray

for the living because the dead are already gone. He embarrasses you, in front of your loved ones, but they are too stricken to notice, too miserable to see one rebellious young boy.

The priest prays over the casket, saying, “O God, by Your mercy rest is given to the souls of the faithful, be pleased to bless this grave.” Words mean nothing now, just flimsy pieces of paper given out to the crowd, as if they will undo the cancer. As if they will make the memories hurt less. Your wife breaks down, her shoulders crumpling under a great weight. You try to wrap your arms around her, to keep her steady like you always did, but she ignores you, completely isolated in her mourning.

The baby cries again as the coffin is lowered into the grave, and your sister joins her, crushing the baby against her chest hoping that could keep her together. The priest tosses some dirt into the grave, asking for peace, and the parade converges, tossing in dirt and flowers, laments for the dead. Your wife struggles to the edge of the hole, looking like she wants to throw herself in, to be buried with the casket, but she just drops in a white carnation. Your mother comes up beside her and ushers her away, letting her sob into her shoulder even though it ruins her favorite black dress.

The crowd moves away, back down from where they came, looking like lost souls among the graves. You stand by your son at the edge of the grave. His eyes are locked on the granite headstone, the one that you picked out when you were diagnosed with pancreatic cancer a half a year ago, a disease that slowly ate you alive without you knowing it. His face is screwed up in anger, in loneliness, in terror. You drop a hand onto his shoulder, but he can’t feel it.

He drops his head and turns away, moving to follow his mother and his family.

He can’t see the tears rolling down your face, or hear you as you repeat to him that you love him. He can’t hear your apologies or your hopes for his future.

Your son isn’t crying.

# REAL THINGS MEN ON TINDER HAVE TOLD ME BEHIND THE PROTECTION OF THEIR COMPUTER SCREENS THAT MADE ME FEEL **CHEAP**

AMBER **SALIK**

Good morning, lovely  
It's nice to meet you  
We matched so I had to say hi because cute girls like you are few  
and far between  
Thank God, I was wondering when I'd see a beautiful girl  
You have a gorgeous smile  
How's your weekend going?  
You wanna eat cookie dough together sometime?  
I would love to take you home baby  
Lemme get your number.  
I like you  
If you were a triangle, you'd definitely be a cute one!  
You're pretty cute for a black chick.  
Are you Jamaican? Because you're Jamaican me horny.  
Your mother must have been a beaver  
Because DAMMMM girl  
You know, I've never been with a black girl before  
Tell me about yourself. Hopefully you're as interesting as your  
picture.  
We should get to know each other. It only makes sense right?  
Hey beautiful,  
You know what goes really good with a marshmallow?  
Chocolate—you look like a Nestlé girl. How much do you love nuts?  
Or look, are you a pizza box?  
Because I can't wait to get your top off!  
Sorry, I'm not good with chat up lines.

Hey wait,  
R u gonna answer me or what?  
I've been messaging you  
I just want to talk—promise  
It would be an honor to get to know you  
Guess no lunchtime playtime for me today  
Can I call you caramel? I love a lil caramel in the morning  
Or are you more of a moca? Give me diabetis  
Do you like gettin' eaten out?  
What can I do to make you snap me tonight?  
I'll literally make a fool out of myself.  
I want to see you.  
Show me dem titz  
And then if you sit on my face  
I'll eat my way to your heart  
I don't know you, but I've never felt this way before  
You seem different than the rest  
Can we go out sometime please?  
If you were a fruit, you'd be a fineapple  
You trynna fuck tonight?  
Because I can make you pornstar famous  
Looks like we both did the **RIGHT** thing when we swiped  
I'm tired of the games being single  
I'm just a nice guy looking for a mean girl to corrupt me  
I love having a beautiful woman around to try on.  
Come cuddle babe  
Let's get drunk and make out  
We should definitely meet up sometime.

# A BLACK WOMAN WRITES LONELY

AMBER SALIK

Somewhere in the corner of the earth  
There is a black woman  
Holding herself together  
Through stubbornness alone  
She sits with no one  
*I am so lonely*  
She whispers out  
To no one in particular  
Her voice cracks slightly, so quietly  
That you wouldn't be able to hear it  
Had you not known the sound of it  
From your own heartbreak

She raises her palms out  
Says *please, I am so tired of it all*  
Writes lonely across her chest  
As the world turns its back on her  
Shields its eyes from her pain  
Unable to witness her rawness  
Unwilling to do anything about it

Lonely Alone I am alone in this  
Flashes across the screen  
*Who supports me*  
*Who loves me*  
Is written over and over on every inch of her skin

Somewhere  
In some corner of the world,  
A black woman writes lonely  
And it is nothing new  
Nothing anyone will bat an eye at  
Nothing to write home about  
Nothing but something else  
For her to swallow

There is a loudness  
A violence that she must confront  
But again  
The crowd is silent  
There is a quiet that echoes around the world

# WAITING GAME

AMBER SALIK

For years, I have sat  
and watched the women I admired  
be torn apart by the men they loved  
As if their ruining was a sacrifice  
they had to pay for his happiness.  
I waited, anxious and trembling,  
For the day a man would come knocking  
to break me  
open into a quivering, unconditional-loving mess  
And when the day finally came,  
I was ready for him.  
I bared my teeth  
And tore him apart instead

# LINE DIVISION

PHOEBE LOW

I blink and golden lines spiral out into the cafeteria, linking clumps of mascara-lashed brunettes, angry-eyed misfits, goons who laugh with their mouths open. A writhing mass flattened into a plain of overlapping triangles.

I sigh. These hallways don't have the sweaty tang of Brookfield. The Asian population seven instead of one including me. I counted in the morning when I didn't have to squint.

But the lines are back. Gone in the morning but now. Why did I expect this to be any different?

An empty spot at the corner table, seat splattered with ketchup. I trudge towards it, poke the golden lines with my pinky finger. They bend ever so slightly when someone glances at me. I wipe the seat with a napkin and sit down and they shudder back into place like plucked strings.

A chord in the cacophony, and I am the silence.

\* \* \*

A curse, they say. When you were born. Shake their heads, shrug. In the end it isn't that bad— children have been bewitched with worse.

Work around them, they say. Ignore them. Nothing you can do.

But I remember a day before, and a day after. In kindergarten, stomping across the playground bridge, the bigger black girl, Casey, cornered me and said, "You're a stupid tattletale, Soomi," her spit flying in my face, and I said quietly, "I'm not Soomi. I'm Kayla."

She looked at me narrowed her eyes. "Really?"

I pointed. "Soomi's over there."

She stormed off. The next day, a golden arc between her and the other black girl, Alicia, and one between me and Soomi like a fishing line, big on my end and tapered down to nothing on hers.

The next year, Soomi moved. My line didn't stretch all the way to Korea so it shriveled like frostbitten grass until I thought I'd only imagined it. Seven years old and I was a big girl now. I knew better.

\* \* \*

Two p.m. I can barely see in the hallway for all the light. Sparks in my eyes when friends or couples collide in front of me, and I blink away the sting. Playing with fire, but they don't know it. I can tell who's done it, who's about to. The ones who have, their lines are thicker, more flare. Supernovas in the janitor's closet.

Sit down in the library. The dense shelves hide some of the light, the only lines thread the two librarians (brittle) and a triangle of seniors, studying. People are not too much for me here. They don't allow sunglasses at this school. Imagine getting suspended on my first day.

I read. AP Psych. The only lines come from the curve of the letters and nerves running up and down the spine, the brain. Reflex. Impulse.

I could say I'm blind. Don't want to freak out the other students. Pull out my wraparound pitch-black shades and fumble around the sticky plastic desk chairs with groping fingers.

Be a complete line-repulsor.

It would be a social experiment. How long can I keep it up? When will I break it to them? Lift up the glasses right before Thanksgiving break, eyes locking on faces: actually, guys, I can see fine. Ha ha.

Be a complete line-repulsor.

I drag my thoughts back to Psych, nerves and the all-or-nothing law: fire if you have enough ions, or nothing happens at all.

\* \* \*

A scraping sound to my right, too close. I dig my fingernail into the end of my last paragraph.

It's a girl, I think. Short, spiky black hair, eyeliner like an anime character, and a leather collar around her neck. One of the seven.

"Hey."

Yeah, a girl, I think. Untethered. Leans back in her chair, her shoulder blades bump the table behind us.

I tell her, "You don't have to feel sorry for me."

She raises an eyebrow. "I'm not particularly."

"Then?"

Bumps back her chair again. "I mean, it's the first day of school, can't a person try and strike up a conversation? What are we, the iPhone-addicted zombie generation?"

She doesn't glow like other people. At this hour most people are the roots of fiery trees. But she is like me. Okay to look at.

"I'm Ella Chiang." She sticks out a hand. A wisp of gray trails from it.

My left hand ventures forward halfway. Wrong one. Oops. She twists her elbow around and we shake, awkwardly. Her nails painted black.

"Kayla."

When our palms part, a thread stretches between them like spider silk.

\* \* \*

"How was school today?"

"Fine," I say and keep looking at the floss at the base of my wrist. Mom drives one hand on the wheel, one tapping the phone GPS.

"Who was that girl?"

"I don't know. Tug on the line between us, stretch it away from my body."

Did you ask her for her name?

I think but don't say it. Ella.

"I don't pay attention to these things."

"Kayla!" She gives up on the GPS. "This is a basic human interaction . . ."

"You know, in some cultures people don't have names."

"That's enough. We moved here so you could . . ."

"I know."

"So you could learn how to . . ."

"I know."

"Interact with people in a safe environment . . ."

"I get it, Mom, don't you think I tried?"

She picks at a scab on her chin. After the move, we both lit up with pimples, lit up like Christmas trees. Dad is still Dad, puts on his creamy white face masks every night even though we laugh.

Then, quietly. "How's your . . . vision?"

Far enough away and the thread snaps. Becomes a jellyfish tentacle waving from my wrist. My chest loosens, the same way it does when it rains and I curl up under my blankets with my sunglasses on, eyelids clamped down against the brightness of the next room. Only books are dense enough—walls won't do it. Maybe it's the words, the stars inside them pushing away the stars outside. Like magnets. Or reverse gravity.

I say, "Same as always."

\* \* \*

In third grade, they got stronger. We stood by the door for recess and Madison angled her laugh away from me so I wouldn't catch the brunt of it. The other girls linked arms but Madison said, "You don't have the bubblegum shirt. Plus, you don't have the right shoes for swinging." They ran off towards the swings in their bright pink tees that clung to their newly bumpy chests and I stayed on the perimeter kicking wood chips until my secondhand sneakers dug into black dirt.

"Did she bully you?" Mrs. Hodges would ask later, but I would just shake my head and say, They had a gold jump rope and they wouldn't share."

"A golden jump rope?"

"It kinda glowed. It was really long. Stretched around all of them. They wouldn't let me have it."

We went to the doctor then. Checked my eyes. Visual acuity fine. Color vision fine. The doctor's hands smelled like soap, the spicy sweet kind you want to breathe and breathe until your lungs are made of it, but when I leaned in, the hands pulled away from my head.

"Have you seen the shaman lately?"

\* \* \*

"I think we're lost," I say.

Mom drives through thick green woods, gripping the wheel. The road the only thing ahead of us, dappled with light. A single

dotted line between two lanes, so she can't stop; someone might hit us from the front or back.

Imagine dying on the first day of school.

"Mom, I think we're lost."

"Well can't you put our address in the phone or something?"

I push the home button. Screen lights up. No bars.

"Oh."

I roll down the window, and the trees smell like a memory of summer camp. I imagine their roots crisscrossing underneath this endless road, messages sparking between them. Lost humans at County Rd. 424.

Not asking for help yet.

Will they?

Not from us.

\* \* \*

The shaman smelled like garlic. He tried to ruffle my hair with his yellowed hands until I squirmed away. When he knelt down to talk to me, his eyes were black, no irises.

"You're a gifted little girl."

I hid my face in Mom's leg.

He stood up again, and he and my parents went back and forth in low voices while I pressed my shirt over my nose so I didn't have to breathe in the garlic smell. After hours and hours, Mom scooped up my hand and we left.

"He's plain crazy," Dad said in the car. "Right, Em?"

Mom was silent. I let my nose peek out of my shirt and breathed cautiously.

\* \* \*

At 8:00 p.m., Mom finally flings open the front door and we stumble in exhausted, and—surprise—Dad sits at the table with a white cake, the candles on top melted to waxy islands in the icing.

"Where were you guys?"

"We got lost." Mom bends towards the cake. "You should have put new candles."

"Well. Happy birthday, Kayla."

The line between us burns so bright I close my eyes. Triangles are the strongest shapes.

“Thank you.”

“You should make the most of these candles. Or whatever they are now.”

I blow out the islands and breathe in the white smoke that spirals towards the ceiling and it smells like fourth grade, the year after we moved, Dad’s face so full of hope as he said, “Make a wish,” and I blew with all my might, spraying spit all over the icing. But with only the three of us nobody minded sharing saliva.

“Did you make a wish?”

“Yeah.”

“Don’t tell me, or it won’t come true.”

I think he always knows what it is.

\* \* \*

“Tell me . . .” Mom pulls up to the high school curb, a network of golden lines. “Tell me if anything . . . feels different today.”

“Now that I’m seventeen?”

“Well. Yes.”

She usually doesn’t hug me, but today she hugs me fiercely, a side hug since I’m sitting in the passenger seat. Her hand awkwardly pats my right shoulder.

The hallway a stream of brightness. I imagine this is what traveling at lightspeed looks like, but quieter. Not as many bodies to bump into. Turn left, pass two classrooms to my locker. My body, the dark space between golden networks.

“Hey.”

*Ella.*

I go still.

“Hey.”

“How goes your morning amongst the zombies?” she asks, and a few strings twang around us in annoyance. I look down at my left wrist. The thread of spider silk pulled taut again but so many other strands here, a river of gold, it looks like it could end anywhere. Taper off like the tip of a needle.

“I’m slowly becoming infected,” I say without thinking, but she laughs. A single high peal. She claps me on the shoulder.

“Me too, buddy. Me too.”

After school, Ella finds me in the library again and reads my Psych textbook out loud over my shoulder. I get a funny feeling in my stomach.

\* \* \*

Mom has the GPS ready today. A map of the new city and we are the pulsing blue dot. A signal traveling across routes.

“So did you make any friends?”

The single white strand pulls at my wrist. *When will it light up?* I wonder. When will it stop breaking? When Mom pulls away from the school?

“And you’re still seeing the . . .”

“Yes.”

“After all this time?”

“Always.”

“But you’re seventeen now.” Her voice breaks.

“So?”

She shakes her head, fingers clench around the wheel.

My voice rises five pitches. “What do you mean?” The odometer inches up forty, forty-five, fifty. We pass a sign that says thirty. My voice is small. “Mom?”

Her eyes are shiny. “He said. He promised us. That it would be gone by now.” Her fingers tap, tap, tap on the wheel.

“Gone?”

“Yes. The curse should have expired. Lifted. Whatever.”

My thread trails through the air, rippled by the AC.

\* \* \*

*Expired.*

I blink, and the cafeteria lights up with golden lines, seven Asians including me. A writhing plane of polygons.

The curse lifted. I can barely lift my eyelids against the brightness. Much less pretend that I am better.

Maybe I’ve been hallucinating. All this time. The neurons between my eyes and my brain sparking so fast they drew routes across my retina that weren’t there. All or nothing and they chose all. But I still can’t see.

Then a tug on my wrist. I look down, expecting the silver thread to pull me forward like a puppet. Instead, it's a hand with black fingernails.

"Hey."

I force my eyes open, and everything else dims a little.

It's her. *Ella*. One of seven. Her eyes unreadable.

"Hey."

"You okay?"

I think about it. "No."

She pulls me to a table that ripples with light and we sit down, right in the middle.

"Tell me."

# HER NAME IS SORROW

ISABELLA BARRICKLOW

She washes her hair with  
blood-red whiskey,  
a mixture of poisons  
she grew up smelling  
on her mother's breath.

She rides to work on  
the Barbie bicycle  
she circled in a Sears magazine  
under a basket  
of weight loss pills.

They're not hers,  
she remembers that.

She works in  
a train station in Detroit,  
whose busted windows  
whistle in the wind,  
a sharp lullaby.  
She waits to see children  
on the cracked slide  
and swings outside the glass.  
They never come.

She was born without a mother.  
It was okay

because she wanted to be a ballerina,  
and ballerinas need  
tragedy  
or an eating disorder  
if they want to go pro.

So when the stepmother  
came, it was disappointing.  
But the stepmother put her  
in the toilet and threatened to flush  
her away.  
So it all worked out.

The stepmother filled her  
*Star Wars* lunch box with  
Twinkies, whose sugar holds up  
even past the end of the world.  
It's true, she's seen it.

It happens on a Tuesday.

Now she still stands calf deep  
in the reeking pot,  
waiting for the courage  
to press the silver level.

# HAIR UNDONE, LIFE UNFOLDING

TIA WHITE

“Tia, come downstairs and bring the comb. It’s time to do your hair.” I panicked. My coarse, thick curls of black hair were my worst enemy, but I grabbed the comb from my bathroom and glanced at the mirror to see the bird’s nest that rested on top of my head. No matter how much I hated getting my hair combed, my mother was right. She always was.

Walking downstairs I looked outside the window to see rain. This was a heavy rain. It felt like it had a purpose. Of course to me, it was because even Yahweh above was weeping for me. He too knew the pain I was about to endure. “Moooooooooommmmm!”

“Yes Tia?” My mother was sitting on the couch in the living room, waiting.

“Did you see it’s raining?”

“Yes, I did.”

“You know what that means? The angels are crying. They’re sad because of you.”

“Why do you think that T-pot?” I couldn’t stand when my mother called me that. Out of all the teacups, she chose to give me the nickname of the fattest vessel in the set.

“Because you’re about to comb my hair when you know it hurts, Mama. Why do you want to hurt me?” I was the biggest drama queen around.

“Oh girl stop it. You know it wouldn’t hurt if you would comb it on the daily yourself like I’ve been telling you. You’re ten. You should know how by now.”

Mom one, Tia zero. I knew deep down that she had a valid point, but my response was nothing short of melodramatic. I pouted

and stomped my way to her, plopping in front of her on the carpet. If only she knew the reason why my hair was such a mess. My big brother was to blame. I couldn't stand him. Most times I would grab his Afrocentric hair and pull it as hard as I could in response to him messing with me. He would tell on me, and we'd both end up getting in trouble. That was the difference between him and me. He would snitch. I would get even.

As my mother was starting to loosen up the knot of hair that surrounded my hair tie, I heard him running upstairs from the basement. **"MOM! CAN I GO TO NICK'S HOUSE UNTIL DINNER?"** Big mouth, loud voice. That was my brother. There was nothing gentle about him. He had the voice of someone who was always longing to be heard.

"Gabe. Gabe, I'm right here you don't need to yell." Mom was always calm, always graceful.

Gabe turned around quickly and to his surprise saw my mother and me. "Oh sorry, didn't think you'd be in here. What are you doing? OH FINALLY! It's about time Tia did something to that hair."

"Shut up bobble head! You can't even talk!" He knew what buttons of mine to push.

My mom cleared her throat, and with that we fell silent. We knew what that meant. "Put on a rain jacket and boots. Be back home at six."

"Sweet, thanks Mom!" Gabe gave her a kiss on the cheek right where all her freckles lie. And with that, she smiled, not even noticing that my brother gave me a not-so-friendly hand gesture before taking off. But like I said before, I'd get even.

Mom had finally gotten the hair tie out of my hair when our house phone started to ring. She sighed at the interruption, and I smiled at it. She got up and palmed my head before saying, "I'll be right back so don't get too excited T-pot." I rolled my eyes at the nickname and the quick reassurance of torture that was soon to come.

While my mother was walking to the kitchen, I turned up the television. The screen displayed some horrific back-to-school commercial filled with happy-go-lucky kids. The commercial was a lie. No kid was ever excited to go back to school. And the fact that they

started showing these commercials already in late June made it even worse.

I was in my own little world when I heard her first scream. I can't describe it exactly. It didn't sound like her at all. It sounded like a little girl. The second scream made me jump. I went on the couch and peeked over the edge. I couldn't see anything. I got up and walked towards the ungodly voice. I couldn't even call it a voice at that point; it was unknown. As I walked closer to that noise, I saw the phone on the ground. Her hands were in her hair, her head in-between her thighs in a position of instinct. She started pounding the ground as if it could rock her world back into place. There was no more calm. There was no more grace. That voice, that noise that I had heard previously, was coming from my mom. I asked what's wrong and went to her. My touch made her come back to reality. She pulled me in closely. Sobbing. Mashing our foreheads together with her eyes closed and tears racing each other down her face. Sobbing. Shaking her whole being. I kept on asking what's wrong mom what's wrong. But I got nothing in return. She was mute with pain.

The phone started ringing next to us. She threw it away from where we were. I got up, wanting to know who or what had turned my mom into someone else, and went to go pick it up. I saw the caller ID and realized it was just my father. When I answered, he filled seconds with so many questions that were never answered. Something in him sounded unstable. He was in the same place where my mom was. I heard honking and cussing that resembled someone in a rush. His voice was cracking. He told me to keep an eye on Mom and to not let her be on the phone. He hung up too quickly for me to tell him that whatever he knew, she already knew as well.

I lowered the phone to my side, and looked at her. *I love you* was all I said to her. No more words were right at that time. This moment was not meant for us. Just her. I knew I would know soon, but for that moment, I didn't have the right. I placed the phone on the kitchen counter and went back to the couch. I lied belly down, right on the carpet, facing her. I wanted her to still be visible to me, but I also wanted her to see me as well. So she knew that I was there. It was just that simple.

I lay there and started picking at the carpet. Its tan, twisted appeal left me in a trance. At that point, Mom's sobbing was just there. It was physical and emotional. It was present. It had lasted for so long that soon it became a part of the house. Like a frame or a chair. It echoed against the walls. Vibrating. You don't know fear until you gather the fact that your parents are human. Yes. They are your heroes, your army, but they too breakdown. Once I recognized that, the world seemed a little less safe than before.

I was so lost in my thoughts that I didn't even hear the garage open. My father forced the door open without turning the knob all the way. The rug underneath him swayed a little, making him glide a few inches. He came inside without closing the garage door, unlike him. He walked on the wooden floors with his wet work shoes still on, unlike him. He was home early, unlike him. His eyes were red and his face seemed sunken. He didn't have to ask where Mom was. He followed her sobbing. He fell to the ground, making his chest caress her hunched back. She dropped all she had left in his arms. This was the first time I'd ever seen my Dad cry. He was a nostril-flaring, tensed muscles, what is fear, type of man. Seeing my parents melt and dissolve to the ground in a shared disbelief had my heart aching. Mom began whispering a name over and over again. I closed my eyes and painted the name in my cloudy mind. Tracy. I knew then why it was raining.

It took an hour or two for Mom to calm down, or at least to stop whimpering. My dad pulled her up and led her to their bedroom. Right at six, Gabe came home. You know when the air just feels uncertain when you enter a place that it makes you tiptoe? That's what my brother felt when he walked in the door. Gabe asked me what happened, and I didn't respond, because how much did I really know? I told him to sit down with me and wait for Dad to come. For the first time, he listened to me. It was a mutual understanding that now was not the time for sibling mischiefs. A part of me felt like the oldest at that instant. We both looked everywhere else besides at each other.

Gabe picked a fresh scab on his knee, and I looked back at the television. There I saw the same back-to-school commercial as before, but I watched it differently now. The kids looked so happy,

and I envied that. I turned my head and looked in the reflection of the glass cabinets that surrounded the television and a smirk appeared on my face. I had forgotten that my hair was still in an uproar. I didn't realize how lost I was without her. I didn't realize the little things that could go wrong without her. It hit me without hesitation or doubt and my smirk quickly vanished; I really needed my mom.

Dad came downstairs after a few minutes and leaned against the television stand in front of us. He said that Mom was going to be sad for a while. He said that her brother, my uncle, Tracy, had passed away early that morning. Something in my father's voice made a notable crack. I envisioned it was coming from his heart. He said that Tracy had been sick. He said that Mom was going to need us to get through this. He said Mom needed us to be sweet. My body must have been numb for a while because when I looked down I noticed that my brother was holding my hand. Some of me didn't understand. I would always hear Mom and Tracy arguing over the phone (later I would realize that it was the drug that took over that Mom was arguing with, not my uncle). My brother and I both shook our heads that we understood, even though we didn't. My dad looked at us and we looked at him. I looked at Gabe and he looked at me. Time left us alone at that moment. My dad's hands were tightening hard against the television stand. His veins popped from his sleeve all the way down to his knuckles. His face, drawn with the views of a matured black male living in America and family roots. I glanced back at Gabe to see that he never stopped looking at me. His eyes were big and soft, reminding me of my grandmother's. His hands were clammy but I didn't care. I mouthed the name *Aquaman* because I would always call him that when his hands would get that way. He squeezed his hand just a little bit, and a tear fell from my eye in response. He let me know that he was there. My big brother was there, and he always would be. It was uncannily quiet, yet my ears were still ringing from my mother's cry. You needed to be in that living room to feel my family. I could feel it all. Our thoughts, our questions, our prayers. I thought about all the things I could do to help my mother. I figured that I needed to grow up a little bit more so that Mom didn't have to for a while. I told myself the things that I would do.

\* \* \*

A few weeks later, my life was different. My family was different. I was different. Sometimes when the phone would ring, Mom got nervous and her heart would race and her knees would go weak. Gabe and I stopped bickering so much. We came to an agreement that having each other wasn't so bad after all. We started building a relationship that would soon become resilient. He showed me how he coped with his feelings through art. Little did I know that my brother was a talented artist. He showed me his first poem, and I fell in love. I'd soon come to realize that writing was my salvation too. I had Gabe to thank for that. Dad noticed our relationship getting stronger. His family is his everything. To see us growing closer gave Dad the fuel he needed. To see him, strong, stern and loving, gave me the foundation that I needed to feel grounded again. I had a pact with myself of the things that I needed to do to make Mom proud. I would make my own lunch. I would do my homework on time. I would pick out my own outfits. I would sweep the kitchen floor. I would even do my own hair. Later, I grasped that those little things that she did for me was the love of a mother. So when she was ready again, when she was Mom again, we met at our usual spot on the couch. She began to run her hands through my hair, the hair that got passed down from her mother. The chills I got running down my spine then, and even now as I write this, is the love from my mom. And I didn't move an inch because I needed that. I always will need that. So I let her love all over me. And I loved all over her. We smiled. I sat there peacefully and handed my mom a comb.

# TOMORROW

SOPHIE JEFFERY

*That's odd*, Erin thought as she scrolled through her inbox, pausing over a curious email. It was from "A Friend" and the subject read: "Erin, Read Now for a Better Tomorrow." She glanced around her cloffice, debating whether or not to open the suspicious email. The room was so small, she couldn't even bring herself to call it an office; it was technically a closet that she had claimed as her own the day she and Brad got the keys to the apartment. There was barely enough space for a chair, let alone a desk, but it was her space, and she loved it. Her cloffice was the one place in the apartment that she could escape; there was no sign of Brad here and she fought every day to keep it that way. Just last night, he'd come home, arms loaded with shopping bags full of clothes for her, and, after forcing her to model them for him, he'd gotten up and said, "I'll clear some space in the closet for your new clothes."

"Oh no, that's fine. I'll . . . um, I'll get to it this weekend," she over-eagerly promised. He picked up on her urgency and insisted again. She'd had to physically insert herself between him and her cloffice to get him to back down, the flicker of anger in his eyes frightening her as she stood her ground tentatively. He had quickly recovered and flashed a sheepish grin. Reaching out to grasp her shoulders, he'd said, "You know I just want the best for you, babe. You spend too much time in that closet... closets are for beautiful clothes, not beautiful women." She'd blushed, and although she was still uneasy, had kissed him lightly and thanked him for the clothes. Crisis averted.

As soon as he left for work this morning, she had filled two garbage bags full of the contents of her armoire, given them to Roger (the doorman just silently and thankfully accepted the bags—he knew the routine), and carefully put away the new clothes from Brad. This was an endless and predictable cycle: the needless shopping, demanded fashion show, and secret purging of her armoire.

She glanced at her inbox again, her mouse hovering over that mysterious email. *It has to be a phishing attempt, right?* Promising herself she wouldn't click on any links, Erin opened the email and read:

Erin,

You're probably wondering who I am, and unfortunately, I can't answer that right now. All you really need to know is I'm a friend, and I'm here to help. If you do what I say, I can help you.

Please, Erin, bring the clothes from your armoire to Goodwill this time, not to Roger.

Until tomorrow.

*Huh*, she thought, unable to even mentally come up with a more articulate response than that. How could this mystery person know so much about her? Her name was one thing, but this person obviously knew way more than she had ever told anyone—they knew about her clothing donations to Roger. *No one knows about those clothes but Roger*, Erin thought as she deleted the email and shrugged it off as some sort of prank. Maybe Roger's family didn't like the clothes as much as he had led her to believe.

Erin put the email out of her mind and continued her day. She picked up her coffee mug and headed to the kitchen. Gingerly sipping her black coffee (last week, Brad said dairy made her bloat, and he'd forbidden sugar long ago), she read off the schedule Brad left for her:

8:30 a.m. - Pilates

10:00 a.m. - Home to shower

10:20 a.m. - Dress in the cream blouse, khaki pants, light grey cardigan, and black flats

11:30 a.m. - Pick up groceries for tonight's dinner: steamed salmon, roasted garlic quinoa, kale salad.

1:00 p.m. - Green smoothie for lunch

1:00–3:00 p.m. - Housework

3:00–4:00 p.m. - Afternoon walk, begin dinner prep

4:00–5:00 p.m. - Free time, but watch for me at the window so you can greet me as usual.

xo,  
Brad

Sighing, Erin choked down the rest of her coffee, grabbed her keys, phone, and wallet, and headed out the door. It was already 8:15 a.m.; she'd have to hurry if she was going to make the Pilates class in time. She knew Amy, the instructor, would cover for her if Brad decided to check up on her; she'd had to do it in the past, but Erin felt awkward asking her to do that again. Other people didn't understand the reasoning behind these schedules Brad left her. He said he was trying to help her become her best self, and over time, she had come to believe him. She was, in fact, in the best shape of her life, largely thanks to these daily schedules and the dietary changes. Without the schedule, she floundered. She became engrossed in her novel, neglecting her health and her figure in favor of her writing. Brad always promised to try and squeeze in more time for writing tomorrow, and so she held out hope. "Tomorrow will come another day," she said to herself as she jogged to the Pilates studio.

\* \* \*

The old woman winced as she lifted herself off the chair, closing the ancient laptop as she rose. "All set for the day?" the man behind the counter asked, his fingers hovering above the tablet that served as a cash register.

"Yes, Saul . . . I think that will be all for today," she replied. "A thousand for the first one, right?"

"Yes ma'am," Saul said, typing the amount into the tablet and preparing the scanner. "It goes up each time though, remember? And the final preparations are much more expensive."

The woman hesitated for a moment before pushing the sleeves of her sweater up, then offered Saul the inside of her forearm. She could see the pity in his eyes as he glanced down at the patch of ruined skin across her arm, shiny and red and still raw, even after all these years.

"It was a long time ago," she offered, attempting to put him at ease. "I'm fine." He scanned her forearm and looked up at her, sadness filling his eyes. She thanked him and slowly made her way toward the door, relying heavily on her cane.

Saul hopped around the counter, still lively although he was close to the same age as the old woman. He reached the door first and held it open for her, smiling as she passed through. She'd been coming to his shop for a while now, asking question after question for years, but today was the first day she had actually used his services. He didn't mind her visits despite the lack of payment; she was great company and always had a story to tell. They had settled into a warm routine over the last few months: he would begin brewing a pot of tea the moment he saw her round the corner of his shop's street. Their chats started quick and hurried, but lately, they would sit and talk for hours. She'd tell him the most fantastic stories, about mystical lands where dragons roamed free and the skies were the color of plums. He'd tell her the only stories he had: the ones that belonged to his customers. He'd tell her of their successes, yes, but she always wanted to know about their failures. She'd wanted to know about them so much that he had been genuinely surprised when she asked to use a computer today—he'd thought she'd been frightened from ever using one of the computers in his shop. So many of his customers spent everything they had here, trying and failing to make a difference.

"Hey!" he called out to his old friend and watched as her long salt and pepper hair was caught up in a stray gust of wind. He smiled as she looked over her shoulder at him, brushing the hair out of her eyes. "I hope she listens!"

"Me too, Saul. Me too," she yelled back and then continued to make her way home.

\* \* \*

The rest of the day was uneventful; Erin followed Brad's schedule to a T and was furiously typing away at her laptop during her freetime. She cherished that 4 o'clock hour; it was the highlight of her day even if it was never a full hour's worth of freedom. She was halfway through another chapter in her novel when her phone pinged at 4:42 p.m.; a text message from Roger read, "He's home, ma'am, and it looks like he's in a bad mood."

*Great*, she thought, closing her laptop and hurrying out of her cloffice to the front door, pausing to grab a beer from the fridge on the way. "Hi honey! How was your day?" she asked Brad as he

walked in, barely managing to keep the anxiety out of her voice. He shoved past her and marched into their bedroom, heading straight for the armoire. He threw open the doors as she followed him into the room, rifling through the sweaters, dresses, blouses, and lingerie he had just purchased for her yesterday. "What are you looking for, dear? Maybe I can help you find it," she tried tentatively, not wanting to push his buttons any further.

"Maybe you can. I'm looking for your plaid blanket scarf, your oatmeal sweater dress, and your caramel colored booties. Know where I could find them?" Panic set in as Erin realized she had given that entire outfit to Roger this morning.

"Hmmm. I'm not sure, darling! I haven't worn that outfit in a while; it's been warming up lately. Maybe at the back of the bottom drawer . . ." she trailed off as she tried to think of an excuse for the missing outfit. Brad always bought clothes in complete outfits, top to bottom. Every blouse had its pants, every dress had its earrings, every heel had its pencil skirt. She had to think of a reason for an entire outfit to be missing, and fast. Trying to stall, she asked, "What do you need the outfit for?"

"Oh nothing in particular. I just saw Roger's daughter on the street and she was wearing the same outfit. Thought it was quite the coincidence. I took a picture so I could compare the plaid on the scarf; if I wasn't mistaken, I'd guess it was yours." Erin's blood ran cold as she glanced at the photo he was showing her. *He knows*. She smiled weakly and turned to continue looking for the outfit that was not there. Brad grabbed her arm and in a low, eerily calm voice said, "Erin."

Immediately she was on her knees, begging for his forgiveness. "Please Brad, I'm so sorry. You just buy me such beautiful things; it's too much! You brought all those clothes home yesterday, and they were so perfect. I didn't have any room in my armoire, so I thought I'd help out Roger's fa—"

She was cut off as he smacked her so hard she fell to the ground. He grabbed her arm again, dragging her into the bathroom as she pleaded with him to stop. She knew it was useless, but she couldn't stop herself. *Maybe he'll listen to me this time*, she thought. *Maybe he'll see how sorry I am.*

He stood in the doorway of the bathroom, staring down at her on the ground below him, begging at his feet like a dog. "You know what to do," he said calmly. She did know what to do.

She grabbed the curling iron from the bathroom cupboard and plugged it in. "I think a medium setting is appropriate for this offense, don't you agree? Your selfish desire to keep your stupid office is somewhat balanced out by your charitable deed," Brad said, still in an unnervingly calm voice.

Erin nodded meekly and, removing her pants, sat at the edge of the bathtub. Her inner thighs were covered with scars from sessions like this; soon she wouldn't have any places left to punish herself that were typically hidden by clothing. Brad never let her cover over an old scar; he said she wouldn't learn that way. Her disobedience pained him, he told her, and she needed to see the pain she caused him every day.

As the curling iron heated up, she timidly asked, "How long?" "Until I say to stop," he replied.

\* \* \*

The woman let out a long sigh as she lowered her body into the tub full of almost-too-hot water. The scalding water was a routine she'd practiced for years; if she could still feel the pain, he hadn't completely killed her yet. She looked down at her wrecked body and felt much older than she actually was. She let her fingers trace the lines on her thighs, remembering each 'lesson' learned as her fingers grazed the damaged flesh. It was an odd sensation, almost as if her body belonged to someone else. She lingered over one scar in particular: the last scar. Running her finger up and down the line, her leg feeling nothing but her fingers feeling everything, she willed that scar to vanish. To disappear. To fade away.

She lay there for hours, just staring at that stubborn bastard of a scar. Finally, when her teeth began to chatter from the cold, she lifted herself out of the tub and pulled the drain. Still hopeful, she wrapped herself in a towel and said to her reflection in the mirror, "We'll just have to try harder tomorrow."

\* \* \*

Erin winced as she dressed the next morning. Somehow, the recovery was always worse than the actual lesson. *Maybe that's why*

*he sticks with burns*, she thought, easing her Lululemon capris up her thighs. She was determined to try harder today—maybe she'd make his favorite meal for dinner: pan-seared duck with a raspberry compote. Surely that would show him how sorry she was for hurting him. It was foolish of her to give away all those beautiful clothes just to keep her cloffice. It was just a closet after all.

A part of her knew it wasn't just a closet, though. It was her escape. She found herself heading there now, closing the door behind her. In that tiny room, she could pretend she was back in college, way back before she even knew who Brad Calloway was. She could close her eyes and imagine flipping through the giant anthologies. She could almost smell the ink on the silken pages as her fingers stroked the edges. Hiding in her cloffice, tapping away at the keys, she could pretend she was hurrying to meet a deadline, working on a short story for class or finishing up another paper analyzing Shakespeare or Chaucer or Austin. In her cloffice, the old Erin could come out—she was still hiding somewhere deep inside her—and Erin wasn't ready to let her go just yet. So no, she couldn't give it up, no matter how happy she knew it would make Brad. She'd just have to find another way to be a better wife to him. She'd have to be so perfect that he wouldn't even care about the cloffice anymore.

She checked her email halfheartedly, not expecting to see anything interesting but also kind of hoping for another email from her mystery friend. She was right about the clothes yesterday; maybe she could give her some advice about how to make it up to Brad today. She almost squealed audibly when her inbox loaded and she saw an email waiting for her, right at the top. She clicked and read:

Erin,

I'm so sorry my email didn't get to you in time yesterday. I've tried my best to get this one out to you earlier in hopes of avoiding the same fate today. I know yesterday was rough, but perhaps we can use it as proof of my motives? I do hope you can trust me.

That being said, do NOT make dinner tonight. In fact, do everything in your power to go out for dinner.

I promise you, the kitchen is not your friend tonight.  
Until tomorrow.

*Hmm, well there goes that plan*, thought Erin. She figured she might as well test out this mystery friend's advice. It's true after all; if she had followed her advice yesterday, she wouldn't be nursing this new burn today. Decision made, now all she had to do was figure out how to convince Brad to take her out. She opened up another browser tab and began searching for a restaurant opening. Brad couldn't resist being the first in the office to check out the newest spot. Taking note of the trendiest-looking restaurant she could find, she hurried to the armoire and pulled out the slinky black dress that had been Brad's favorite the other night. She snapped a photo of it and sent a text to Brad, asking if he'd like to show her off at the restaurant tonight wearing the dress. *If that doesn't work, I don't know what will*, she thought.

Moments later, the reply came through:

Wear only the dress, and it's a date.

\* \* \*

Saul blinked his eyes as he stared at the forearm extended across his counter. No matter how many times he blinked, the skin remained smooth and ivory. "It . . . it's gone!" he said, incredulously. "It's working!"

Erin smiled, the wrinkles at the edges of her eyes rising as the memories of that searing hot pan full of duck fat faded away. "She's listening," she whispered while Saul scanned her smooth forearm, deducting the last of her savings to cover the final details. No matter; as long as that Erin continues to listen, this Erin won't need any of this money.

"It's been a pleasure working with you, Erin," Saul said as she headed toward the door. "Truly, a pleasure."

"And with you, Saul," she replied. "I owe you my life."

\* \* \*

Erin couldn't believe how smoothly everything had gone last night. She had been on her best behavior, and Brad had been in an excellent mood because of it. She was finally beginning to see a light

in their marriage, and it was all because of her mysterious new friend. With her help, she could be the perfect wife—the wife Brad deserves.

She practically skipped to her cloffice, impatient to check her email and see what the secret to Brad's happiness was today. Just as yesterday, the email sat waiting at the top of her inbox. Erin could hardly click it fast enough.

Erin,

Yesterday was a win for us, but the fight is not over. This is not sustainable; it is costing me everything to send these emails and I cannot keep them up much longer.

You have to get out, Erin. If you don't, he will continue to chip away at every part of you that you love until there's nothing left. He'll eventually leave you a widow, but you'll be far too broken by then to recover. I promise you, Erin. You are worth so much more than he deserves. I'm sending you an address; go there at 9:15 a.m. Do not take anything with you; you will find everything you need at the address. Please, Erin. Do this for me . . . for us.

Until tomorrow.

Erin reread the email three times, feeling her heart race faster with every read-through. *What is she talking about? How could this not be sustainable?* Erin couldn't fathom a world where sending emails could cost someone "everything they had" was she talking about money? Something worse? She glanced at her phone and realized it was already 8:45 a.m.; she needed to make a decision soon. *Am I really going to do this?* Erin had never considered leaving before. It terrified her. Her friend hadn't led her astray yet, and as scary as it was to even think about leaving Brad, that tiny part of herself that lived in her cloffice knew it was even scarier to consider staying.

She was already down the hallway, her finger already pushing the button to call an elevator before she realized she had made up her mind. *I guess this is happening*, she thought while stepping through the doors. She said goodbye to Roger as casually as she could manage,

wondering what he would say if he knew this was the last time they'd see each other. She wished she could say thank you to the sweet man, her only friend. She shrugged the thought off as she stepped out onto the street, heading towards the address. It was closer than she thought, just a few blocks away. She covered those blocks in no time, adrenaline pushing her to cover ground as quickly as possible, risking a glance over her shoulder every ten feet. She expected Brad to pop out at any moment, but the coast remained clear, just as her friend had promised.

Erin paused as she looked up at the sign hanging above the worn, green door of the shop in front of her. How had she not noticed this place before? She walked these streets every day, and somehow this quaint little internet café had escaped her attention for all these years. Erin didn't even know internet cafés still existed. She pushed open the door to A Better Tomorrow and stepped inside.

It was even smaller on the inside if that was possible. There were a few computers, most appeared to have seen better days. Toward the back of the small shop was a counter, behind which stood a man about her own age. "Hi there," she tried hesitantly, not knowing what to say.

"Erin? I'm Saul," the young man behind the counter said as he poured two cups of tea. "Welcome to your better tomorrow."

# STRANDED

KERIGAN WILLIAMS

The plane rumbled beneath her feet as it crept slowly down the runway. Alice looked out the window and began to hold her breath as the plane picked up even more speed. Her brown hair fell unevenly across her face, escaping from the elastic on the back of her head. The person next to her was an acne-ridden teenage boy with a cloud of Axe body spray hovering around him.

“Can you believe we’re finally taking off?” he asked her, voice cracking. He was staring out the window as well, watching the ground begin to blur.

“No, I can’t. It’s about time,” she said, exhaling slowly through her mouth.

“My name’s John. John Tait,” the boy said next to her. She smiled at him.

“Alice. Nice to meet you.” They fell into a comfortable silence while listening as the engines of the plane began to roar even louder, shooting the aircraft higher into the sky.

Alice had been visiting her friend in Germany for two weeks, and it was the best time of her life. They had done so many amazing things. She could still feel the waves of the North Sea rushing against her legs, burning her shaved legs with saltwater. The Apfelsaft and Sprudel still bubbled in the back of her throat. She watched as John pulled his iPod out of his pocket and fell asleep. Her eyes went back to the window, and she watched Ireland shrink beneath her. She grabbed a paperback out of her backpack, stuffed beneath the seat in front of her, and began to read, just looking for something to distract her for a while.

The plane flew for an hour and a half before the captain made the announcement. “Passengers, I regret to inform you that we have an ill passenger on board and we must return to Dublin. Again, I regret to inform you that we have an ill passenger on board, and we

must return to Dublin. Please sit tight and stay calm, remain securely fastened in your seatbelts, and the crew will update you when they can. Thank you for your cooperation.”

The plane turned around and began heading east once more. Alice put her book away and bit her lip, fighting a thousand emotions all at once that wanted to burst in a scream. Anxiety, anger, and irritation were the most distinct in the mix, rushing over her in waves. The green island, half-obscured by fog, grew larger beneath them as they descended. The lights of the city were just beginning to turn on, illuminating the haze around Dublin. The plane smacked the ground roughly, tires skidding across the surface of the cement like a skipping stone. She jerked against her seatbelt, and her head whacked into the seat in front of her. The luggage below bounced and shook. It rattled the entire plane.

“Passengers,” the captain came back over the speakers, “I apologize for that mildly abrupt landing, but please remain seated and we will disembark the plane momentarily.” After a few minutes, the seatbelt sign was switched off, and the passengers began piling into the aisle to get off the plane as quickly as possible. Everyone was in such a hurry, rushing to the nearest hotel or pub. Everyone but Alice. She sat and waited in her seat until she was the very last person on the airplane. She got off the plane, and her feet greeted the Dublin soil once again. Her black suitcase with the neon green luggage tag and bright purple bow was the last one on the carousel. The airport staff nodded at her as she walked through the sliding glass doors and hailed a cab. Alice handed her suitcase to the driver and he instructed her to climb in the backseat.

“Where to?” he asked once she was inside the vehicle.

“Downtown, I suppose. I need to find a hotel.”

“Alright, I’ll take you to the Chancellor, right near downtown, yet pretty cheap prices. It’s one of the best in Dublin.” The driver shifted into gear and began to cruise down the highway. “Cancelled flight?” he asked, looking at her in the rearview mirror.

“Yeah,” Alice said, still upset over the whole situation. “Someone on board was sick and needed treatment. So we had to return to the airport, and by the time the passenger was taken off the plane, it was too late to take off again.”

The red taillights of passing cars burned into her eyes as she fought to stay awake. The sun dipped closer to the horizon, burning just a few seconds more. They pulled up to the curb of the Chancellor at a quarter past eight. Alice handed the driver thirty euros and he smiled at her, grateful for her incredibly generous tip. The building stood in front of her, badly needing a coat of paint and a new neon sign.

The car pulled away. The doorman opened the door for Alice and greeted her in a thick Irish accent. She smiled and walked to the front desk.

“Hello,” she said. Her voice sounded small, and she was afraid they’d think she was a child rather than the eighteen-year-old she actually was. “I’d like a room, please.”

“Smoking or non-smoking?” The man behind the desk asked in a voice that implied his thoughts were somewhere else.

“Non.”

“Queen bed okay?”

“Sounds great.”

“Alright, method of payment?” He didn’t look up as she held her credit card out to him. He slid it through a machine, asked her to sign a receipt, and handed her a room key. “Up to the fourth floor, room 432.”

“Thank you,” Alice said, pushing her bangs away from her eyes. Pulling her suitcase along behind, she found the elevator tucked in the back corner of the lobby. She walked into her room for the night and flopped her suitcase onto the bed. The room was quite large, but it looked like nothing had been updated in quite a few years. Someone left behind their power converter on the bedside table. Alice quickly took advantage of that and plugged in her nearly drained phone. She grabbed her wallet that contained seventy leftover euros, her driver’s license, and a credit card, shoved her room key into her pocket, and headed out into the Dublin night.

The streets of Dublin sprawled before her, a labyrinth waiting to be explored. She walked up Kings Street and the street lamps glowed a soft yellow. People passed her going the opposite direction. A blonde girl and a brunette boy, both of them about sixteen Alice thought, kissed on the street corner before parting ways. Alice smiled

at him as she passed, but he was too lost in thought, staring at the girl as she walked away.

Alice took a left and crossed onto a side street. “Excuse me,” she asked the closest person she could find, a woman in a leopard velour tracksuit leaning against a building checking her cell phone, “how do you get to the water from here?”

“Keep walking up this street for a few blocks, hang a right on Wuthers, and you’ll be a few blocks away from the sea,” the woman said, gesturing with her hands as she talked.

“Thank you,” Alice said, walking down the street. Soon, she heard the water kissing the shoreline and the sound of the gulls crying in the air. The water was a dark bluish-gray, and the horizon was indigo as night continued to approach. Alice walked onto the beach and sat on the sand and rocks. She thought about her family waiting for her back in the U.S., unaware of any of the delays.

Her mother was probably pacing back and forth in the kitchen, twisting her fingers around and around, checking her phone every other minute waiting for word. Alice smiled, picturing her mother’s face, kind and warm with short brown hair and light brown eyes. Her sister, Lilly, was waiting in Chicago to escort her home. It looked like she may have to wait longer than she planned to.

Alice wrapped her arms around her knees tucked into her chest, staring at the water. The rhythmic beat of the waves calmed her. She breathed along with the tide, exhaling every time the wave crashed into the shore. Her eyes closed.

Something wet rubbed against her cheek, and she opened her eyes to see a gigantic dog’s pink tongue inches away from her skin. “Láidir!” a man down the beach yelled, and the dog bounded a few steps in his direction. This dog was more like a horse, galloping instead of walking.

“I am so sorry about that, miss. I usually let him off the lead on this stretch of the beach, and sometimes he gets overly excited,” the man said, reattaching the clip of the leash to the dog’s collar.

“Oh, don’t worry about it,” Alice said, wiping her cheek off with the sleeve of her shirt. “He sure is big.”

“Aye, he’s pretty tall for his age. Only six months old, he’s nearly full-grown.”

“That’s not even full-grown? Are you sure he’s not a horse?” Alice asked. The dog sat next to the man and rested his head on his owner’s hip.

The man laughed. It resonated deep in his gut and wrapped around Alice to give her a hug. “Some days I’m not so sure myself,” he said after he stopped laughing. “He has given my niece rides on his back with a saddle and everything.”

Alice laughed. It wasn’t as deep and throaty as his, instead a falling snowflake brushing against his skin. “Then he’s a good sport as well,” she said while the man scratched the dog behind the ears. He looked up at her and smiled. He didn’t appear to be much older than her.

“He’s a good dog, definitely. Anyway, I’m sorry he snuck up on you like that. Let me make it up to you. I’ll drop this mongrel off and take you out for a pint. What d’ye say?” The man snapped his fingers and the dog stood up, tongue hanging out and panting softly.

Alice thought about it for a moment, the hot breath of a canine on her cheek. “Yes. Yes, that would be great,” she said. He helped her up from the sand and smiled.

“By the way, my name is Darcy. Keiran Darcy,” he said. She saw him staring at her hair and dress, eyes flicking up and down her body in a silent appraisal. He seemed to like what he saw because his eyes came back to rest on her hair, brown and straight pulled back in a messy ponytail.

“It’s nice to meet you, Keiran. My name’s Alice. Alice Spruill.”

His eyebrows drew together. “Did you just say your last name is Squirrel?”

“No, it’s Spruill. S-p-r-u-i-l-l.” Alice spelled her last name and watched Keiran’s face relax.

“Oh, okay. I was going to say, Squirrel is an interesting last name,” he said. One hand ruffled through his thick, black curly hair.

“Yeah, it was my nickname all through school. Everyone called me Squirrel,” Alice said.

The two walked back across the beach toward the street. The sand gave way to asphalt, and they turned right onto Dunstable Avenue. The dog walked right beside Keiran, the perfect image of the well-trained pooch. The drone of city life, the buzzing of street

lamps, and the engines of stalling cars obscured the sound of the waves. “That must have been dreadful,” he said, shaking his head back and forth. “In school, once the girls read *Pride and Prejudice*, everyone called me Mr. Darcy. And there was only one Elizabeth in the school, so everyone thought we were destined for each other.”

“Well, were you?” Alice asked which prompted her new friend to turn his head and give her the angriest glare he could muster.

“I hardly think so.” He started to laugh again, the false anger melted away. “For one, she’s a lesbian. And for two, we were never really good friends to begin with, so it wouldn’t have worked.”

They walked in silence for a while; the only sound was the scratching of Láidir’s toenails on the pavement. “I only live a couple blocks away, and then we can head to the pub.” Keiran spoke again.

“Oh, it’s no problem,” Alice said, wondering which pub they were going to. A few minutes later, they arrived at his building, and he left her on the stoop as he ran inside with Láidir. When he came back outside, under the light over the door, Alice was able to get a good look at him. He had a bush of black tightly curled hair on top of his head and also the stubble of a beginning beard. It looked like he’d changed his shirt as well. He now wore a maroon button-down shirt and blue jeans. He had bright blue eyes, fringed with incredibly long eyelashes.

“Alright, let’s go,” he said. He stepped lightly down the steps and extended his arm like an old-fashioned gentleman, motioning for Alice to slip her hand into the crook of his elbow. She did what he suggested, and they walked on the sidewalk, falling into step with one another. Alice looked everywhere, taking in every detail of the buildings and cars lining the street.

“So is this your first time in Dublin?” he asked after she tripped over a cobblestone and nearly smashed her face.

“Yeah, it is. And I wasn’t even supposed to be here,” she said as they stepped into the dark smoky pub. It was packed, people were shoulder to shoulder at the bar as they had glasses of beer that frothed and foamed over the rim onto the counter. It was stained with years of drunken sobbing and spilled ale, turning it a dark unvarnished brown.

“Adds to the character,” Keiran said after he noticed Alice’s gaze. “At least that’s what Casey says. He’s the owner. Took over

when his dad died, and *he* took over when *his* dad died. He said it's been in the family for over 300 years. There's always been a pub on this corner, and there always will be a pub on this corner if Casey has anything to say about it." Keiran's voice was hard to hear over the rowdy conversations of the other people in the pub. "Alright," he flipped through the menu on the table, "what would you like?"

Alice looked at the names of everything on the menu. "I have no idea. I don't drink beer."

His eyebrows rose to his hairline. "Are you serious? How can you be in Ireland if you've never drunk beer? You've never tasted a proper Irish beer before in your life?"

"I apologize for my ignorance, but in America you're not allowed to drink until you're twenty-one, and I'm eighteen. So I have three years to go still," Alice said as a grin tugged at the corners of her mouth.

"Well then, we're going to have to change that!" Keiran flagged down a waitress and shouted that he wanted two pints of some kind of beer; Alice couldn't hear him over the bodhran, fiddle, and flute that were playing traditional Irish music in the corner by three silver-haired men. They began playing a fast-paced reel and the entire room began to clap and drum on the tabletops with the beat. Couples began dancing down the center of the pub; there were shouts and cheers coming from the spectators. Keiran stood up from his seat and grabbed Alice's hand. "Come on!" He dragged her out to the middle of the floor where the others were dancing. Alice's eyes were wide and she shifted back and forth on her feet.

"What are you doing?" she shouted at Keiran once they were in position with the other dancers.

"Don't think. Just follow me." He smiled and they began to move. She gripped his hands tightly at first, unsure of the steps or what she was doing. "Alice," Keiran brought his head close to her ear so she could hear him over the instruments and the tipsy crowd, "relax. You're thinking too much. Just listen to the music and follow my steps."

Alice took a deep breath and felt the beating of the bodhran echoing her own heartbeat. The fiddler's notes were soaring over that, guiding the pattern of their feet. The song seemed to last forever

as the pair danced and laughed and smiled at one another like old friends. When the last note rang through the air, all movement stopped. Everybody clapped loudly for the musicians in the corner. Keiran and Alice were breathing heavily. Their faces were flushed, and after a few seconds of staring at each other, they decided to return to the table. Their beers were waiting for them, thick white foam dripping down the side of the tall glasses onto the table. Alice picked up her glass and extended it toward Keiran's, and they clinked the rims together. She took a sip of the beer, and her first impulse was to spew it all over the table. She forced herself to swallow it and to look happy while doing so.

"Do you like it?" he asked after taking several drinks.

"Yeah, it's pretty good," she said before she took another sip. It was the tiniest sip imaginable and yet the dark bitter taste spread over her tongue, thick as molasses. Alice eyed her glass. This was going to be a long night. Keiran noticed the grimace on Alice's face every time she took a sip.

"Pardon me," Keiran caught the waitress again, "can I get a Coca-Cola and an order of chips please?"

"Of course." The waitress walked away to inform the kitchen staff.

"What did you ask her?" Alice asked, leaning half-over the table so he could hear her over the loud party behind them.

"I asked for an order of chips. I'm starved," Keiran said, hiding a smile as he took another drink of beer. "What were you saying before about being in Ireland?"

"Oh, that. Well, I was only supposed to be here for a four-hour layover, but then my flight got cancelled in mid-air. The airline has no idea when the new flight will leave, so until then I'm stranded," Alice said as the waitress returned with a giant steaming plate of chips and a bubbly Coca-Cola.

"The drink is yours. I kept seeing your face after you took a drink of beer," Keiran said, draining the last of his glass. "I figured Coca-Cola would be more appealing for you." He dashed malt vinegar over the side of chips closest to him and took a bite of the largest one. Alice smiled and took a giant gulp of the soda.

“Oh my God, thank you. I wasn’t going to say anything, but I am definitely not a fan of—”

Keiran clamped his hand over her mouth. “Don’t even finish that sentence. You’ll start a riot!”

Alice laughed beneath his palm. She pulled it off her mouth and tossed it back at him. “Thanks for the warning. I’d forgotten that I was in the pub with a bunch of hot-tempered Irishmen.”

“A stereotype but an accurate one,” Keiran said, stealing her beer. She watched the dark brown liquid disappear into his mouth as he greedily drank it down. They continued eating and talking, having plate after plate of chips, until the clocks read 1:00 a.m. Alice felt very drunk even though she hadn’t drunk enough alcohol to cause that effect. She had been up since 7:00 a.m.

“Keiran, I should really get back to my hotel. I’m about to fall asleep right here,” Alice said, fighting a yawn at the end of her sentence.

Keiran looked up from his beer. “Blimey, is it really that late? Let me pay and we can go.” Keiran stood up from his chair and blinked a few times.

“Is the room spinning around you?” Alice asked, fighting a laugh. She wondered just how drunk he was. She’d lost track of how many beers he had drunk in the course of the night, and she was beginning to think he had as well.

“No, just a bit fuzzy at the edges.” He winked and walked steadily off to the bar to pay the bill. Alice ate the last chips on the plate, collected her items from the table, and met up with Keiran at the bar. They left the pub, arm in arm once more, and he asked which hotel she was staying in.

“The Chancellor,” she said, resting her head on his shoulder as they walked down the street. It only took a few minutes to arrive at the front door of the hotel. The doorman recognized her from before and opened the door for her with a nod. The pair walked in and made their way to the fourth floor where Alice’s room was. She found her key and leaned against the door. “Well . . . it looks like it’s the end,” Alice said. She was surprised that she didn’t want him to leave. She knew she might never see him again, unless she happened to get stranded in Dublin again.

“Aye. It’s been wonderful meeting you, Alice Squirrel,” he said, a sad smile on his lips. “Just wonderful.”

“It’s been wonderful meeting you as well, Mr. Darcy.” They stood in the hallway for a while, just staring at each other. Neither of them willing to turn away and say goodbye, but both knew that the night must end within the hour.

“Well then . . . good night.” Keiran Darcy turned around and walked down the hall in the direction of the elevator. Alice opened her door and went in the room. She sat on the edge of the bed, fighting the silly urge to cry. She stood up and stared out the window at the wonderful view of the brick wall of the building next door. She saw her reflection in the glass. She had not been successful in her attempt; a single tear traced its way down her cheek.

There was a tap on her hotel door. Alice brushed away the tear and any residual mascara with her fingers. She opened the door and he was standing there with wide eyes and the biggest smile on his face.

“If I don’t do this, I’m going to regret it for the rest of my life,” he said before he held her face between his hands and kissed her in the doorway of her hotel room.

\* \* \*

Alice woke up the next morning with a note on her bedside table.

*Squirrel—Apparently I’m such a good kisser that you swooned in my arms and could not be revived or perhaps you merely succumbed to jet lag. Let’s go with the first one. Anyway, your snoring proved that you were in fact asleep and not unconscious or dead (yes, I stayed around to make sure, don’t call me creepy or anything). My number is programmed in your phone. I know you probably can’t use it, but find a way to let me know you’re alive and conscious in the morning. If there’s time, maybe we can do breakfast?*

*See you soon,*

*Mr. Darcy*

There was a stupid giddy grin pasted on Alice’s face that refused to go away. She walked down to the lobby in her clothes from the night before and asked the concierge if there was a payphone around. He pointed her to a small room in the back and she punched in the number.

“Keiran, it’s Alice. When and where?”

# FUTURES

ALIYA CHAUDHRY

## Career Test

Please select the answers that best suit you. Once you click “Submit,” you will receive your results.

### **Pick which one describes you:**

- a. Extroverted
- b. Introverted

### **Which do you prefer?**

- a. Theoretical ideas
- b. Facts and figures

### **Which appeals to you the most?**

- a. Coming up with creative ideas
- b. Finding practical solutions

### **How would you prefer to work?**

- a. In a group
- b. On your own

### **Are you more big-picture or detail-oriented?**

- a. Big-picture
- b. Detail-oriented

### **How would you describe yourself?**

- a. Creative
- b. Intelligent
- c. Proactive
- d. Indecisive

### **What motivates you the most?**

- a. Achievement
- b. Success
- c. Fear of failure
- d. Approval

**How often do you prefer to plan things out?**

- a. I never plan things out in advance—I am great at improvising
- b. I sometimes plan things out
- c. I have to plan everything out—I am uncomfortable with uncertainty

**When making decisions, do you rely more on your:**

- a. Emotions
- b. Thinking
- c. I can't make decisions

**How comfortable are you with change?**

- a. I love trying new things and seek out change
- b. I can adapt well, but I prefer little change
- c. I hate change and I hate new things and I just want everything to stay the way it is

**How hard has it been for you to decide on a career?**

- a. I change my mind every week
- b. I'm considering getting one or more PhDs
- c. This is at least the tenth career test I've taken

**What scares you the most?**

- a. Growing up
- b. Not getting a job
- c. Responsibility
- d. Change

**How scared are you about your future?**

- a. I have a plan and a back-up plan
- b. Nervous, but hopeful it will work out
- c. Scared
- d. Terrified

### *Career Test Result: Artist*

Haley creeps into the kitchen, where I stand, scrolling through Instagram. She reaches her tiny hands up toward the phone. I squint at her over the screen.

“Aren’t you supposed to be getting ready for bed?” I ask.

She nods sheepishly, but without any guilt.

I close out of the app. “Okay, but don’t tell your parents.” I open the games section, trying to find an age-suitable one. “You have five minutes, then you have to go brush your teeth.”

I hand over the phone. She accepts it gratefully and ceremoniously. She looks up at me with wide eyes. “Did I surprise you?”

“You? Surprise me?” I ask. “When?”

“When I snuck into the kitchen. Like a ninja.”

“Your ninja skills need a little work. Maybe you could practice more if you didn’t spend as much time on the phone,” I said, walking to the living room.

I sat down on the couch, staring at the large prints of animals hanging on the walls. Except they weren’t so lifelike. The resolution was so high, it was sharper than real life.

I started browsing through one of the many open magazines strewn upon my aunt and uncle’s coffee table. More amplified images, edited until they crossed the boundary from realistic to fantastical. Haley rescued me by dropping the phone into my lap.

“I’m coming to check on you in ten minutes. And you should be ready by then,” I said.

I resumed scrolling through Instagram. Photos of friends at work, friends abroad, friends at home pretending they were abroad by visiting trendy restaurants and tourist traps daily. Overedited and overcurated.

They were in the pictures; I was just staring at them.

### *Career Test Result: Teacher*

“What year are you?”

“I’m a junior—about to be a senior.”

“Oh, good. What are you studying?”

“English.”

“And what do you plan to do with that? Become a teacher?”

### *Career Test Result: Law Enforcement*

I tested out my ninja skills by carefully walking down the hall, surveying all the details. The bathroom light was out. That was a good sign. I slowly and gently opened Haley's bedroom door.

"Hey, you're in bed!" I exclaimed. "Good job!"

Aunt Nina had offered me money to watch her. My mother made me decline.

"Can you read me a story?" she asked.

"Of course. Which one do you want to read?" I walked over to her bookcase and scanned the spines.

*"Peter Pan."*

"*Peter Pan*? Again? Didn't I already read that to you, like, three times?"

"Only one time. Please, can you read it again?"

### *Career Test Result: Businessperson*

When I walked into the record store, Andie was holding a stack of CDs, aggressively marketing them to a customer, the way she did with all our friends, with every CD.

I pretended to look through the CDs. I saw one that was shelved incorrectly and put it back in its rightful spot.

"Excuse me?" Someone had walked up to me. Andie was enthusiastically talking to another customer at the other end of the store, gesturing with several CDs in hand.

"Yes?" I said to the man.

"I was wondering if you had the new Metallica album," he asked.

"I'm sorry, I don't work here," I replied.

Andie saw me, waved, and walked over, after carelessly placing—almost dropping—the CDs into the display.

"Hey, you came!" she said.

"Oh my God, that guy thought I had a job."

### *Career Test Result: Writer*

It turns out I hadn't read *Peter Pan* to Haley three times. But I had encountered the story three times in the months before:

1. She was right; I had only read it once, about a month before.
2. A friend of mine had wanted to watch it in college.
3. One of the albums Andie had given me was entirely based on the story.

### *Career Test Result: Musician*

"You know, it's no big deal if you don't have an internship," Andie said.

"But it's the summer before senior year. Everyone has an internship. Everyone has a nice, big, fancy twelve-week internship at some famous company or publication in New York. Except me," I said.

"And me! I work in a CD store."

"But you're going to become a musician."

"Selling CDs doesn't make you any more of a musician than putting on a Band-Aid makes you a doctor." She reshelfed a vinyl record. "It's not like it's a straight or guaranteed career path. Like..." She looked at me. "Photography?"

I shook my head. "I crossed that one off the list."

"So what are we looking at now?"

"Professional dog-walker? Painter?"

### *Career Test Result: Lawyer*

Major: English

Minor (optional): None

Year: Junior

Age: 21

Areas of interest: Art, literature, writing, photography, music

Work experience: None. Babysitting, ice cream store, no relevant experience. Minimal.

Skills: Cooking, baking, Photoshop

Languages: English, basic elementary conversational Spanish

Plans for the summer: Inconclusive  
Career areas you are interested in:  
(Please select all that apply.)

- ☐ Advertising
- ☐ Communications, Journalism, Media
- ☐ Education
- ☐ Law
- ☐ Management
- ☐ Performing Arts (Dance, Music, Theater)
- ☐ Social Work
- ☐ Visual Arts
- ☐ Writing

Level of degree you aim to achieve: Unknown  
Where do you see yourself in five years?  
Hopefully not in college, hopefully not in my parent's basement.  
Where do you see yourself in ten years?  
With a job (that I like) and a dog.

### *Career Test Result: Actor/Actress*

In eleventh grade, my friends and I marathoned several Disney movies. It was a big undertaking, taking two days and three boxes of pizza to complete. We came over to Andie's after school and stayed up until three in the morning, and then we got up at nine to watch the rest, until our parents came to pick us up for dinner.

I couldn't tell if we had so much fun because we weren't supposed to do it. That the fact that a bunch of sixteen-year-olds would be entertained by content made for six-year-olds was just funny in itself. Or if it was because we had been wanting to watch those movies, but felt we were too old for them, and so for years had to act like we were too grown up to watch those movies, read those books, wear those clothes. And then when we were old enough that we didn't need to pretend or act anymore, when we were secure enough in our maturity, we could admit that we liked them and enjoy them again.

Andie claimed she never had that phase, where she wanted to grow up or act grown up. She claimed she only got her job selling CDs

in order to pay for concert tickets and more CDs. She also wanted a new, expensive, brand-name electric guitar.

I felt I was still in that phase. Where I felt like I had to pretend.

### *Career Test Result: Homemaker*

### *Career Test Result: Chef*

Andie came over for dinner after she finished up her shift. My mom was tired after work and my dad was working late, so I offered to cook. It's not like I had been doing anything all day. Andie, although she had worked a full shift, offered to help.

Andie can calculate sales prices and tax in her head. She has written articles for her college newspaper. She plays soccer, hockey, and volleyball. She has a job. Andie can't cook, although she does an excellent job of standing or sitting in the kitchen and making supportive comments, only occasionally snacking on the ingredients.

Most of my friends can't cook. The ones who are doing internships away from home, who spent months getting together leases for the summer and are living in real, adult apartments with real, pseudo-adult jobs, are eating microwave mac-and-cheese. My friend sent me a snap. She got the noodles shaped like dinosaurs.

"What are we making for dinner?" asked Andie.

"You mean what am I making for dinner?" I replied. I handed Andie a container filled with shredded cheese from the fridge. She held it for a while, unsure of what to do with it. After a moment, she opened it, looked inside, and began to eat the cheese. I went into the pantry and returned with two jars of tomato sauce.

"Lasagna," I said.

"Isn't that, like, really complicated?" she asked.

I shook my head. "Not really, there's just a lot of assembly required."

### *Career Test Result: Psychologist*

I took a developmental psychology class once, and the professor said that there's this new developmental category for eighteen- to twenty-five-year-olds called "emerging adult." So while adolescence ends at eighteen, you don't reach adulthood until twenty-five.

### *Career Test Result: Con Artist*

"Absolutely not," Andie said over the phone.

"Come on," I pleaded.

"No. Even if I wanted to, I couldn't go."

"What do you mean?"

"I have to work, Maya."

"We'll go after you work."

"It's a kid's movie—"

"I know you don't want to see a kid's movie."

"That's not it. It's a kid's movie, so it only shows during the day, which is when I work. And I have rehearsal over the weekends."

"Oh. Right." I paused. "You don't get a day off?"

"Why can't you just go by yourself?"

### *Career Test Result: Career Test Designer*

Google search: internships english majors Hartford

Google search: career tests online

Google search: quarter-life crisis

Results: 12 Signs You're Having a Quarter-Life Crisis Right Now, 5 Things to Help With Your Quarter-Life Crisis, 8 Things You Go Through in Your 20s

Google search: best graduate schools for english

Google search: movie times near me

### *Career Test Result: Inconclusive*

I rang the doorbell. Aunt Nina answered.

"She'll be right out," she smiled at me. "This is really nice of you to do this. Haley's so excited."

"It looks like it'll be fun for both of us," I replied.

"How's the job search going?"

"Other than the pet-sitting and occasional babysitting, not so good."

"Are you enjoying your free time, though?"

"I guess. I did some painting and some writing."

"That's really good. You know, you have your whole life to work."

At that moment, Haley darted out of the door.

"You ready for the movie, kiddo?" I asked.

### *Career Test Result: Child*

Haley fell asleep halfway through the movie, so I snuck some pieces from her half-finished bag of popcorn.

### *Career Test Result: Career Test Taker*

I went home and wrote up a blog post about the movie. My mom walked into my room as I was about to post it.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Writing a review," I replied.

"Oh, I'm glad you're writing again. How was the movie?"

"It was good. Haley thought it was kind of boring, though."

She looked over my shoulder, trying to read the review.

"It was nice of you to take her," my mom said.

"It was more just an excuse for me to go," I confessed quietly.

"It was still nice of you, but you should have asked me to go with you. I would have wanted to see it."

I smiled. "Next time, Mom."

# JUST A FLICKER OF LIGHT

SHRUTI MUNGI

When Kalyani Rao first saw the bruises on Radhika's back, Radhika was only seven. The child had come home late that day from playing with her friend Madhu and had pranced around the room, evading her mother's embrace. She had tired out eventually and had run into her mother's open arms. After pushing and pulling at the hem of Radhika's crumpled black slip for several minutes as Radhika wriggled in her arms, Kalyani had finally come to face the imprints on her child's back. Regret and anger had simultaneously washed over her, like the overwhelming aftertaste of daru she ever so often used to sneak out to have with the village women. She caressed Radhika's wounds with her rough and calloused palms. She rubbed at them and she scrubbed at them, hoping that her eyes were being deceived.

But she wasn't the least bit surprised.

For long, she herself had lived with the violent repercussions of her husband's unstable behavior. Her parents had decided to marry her off just as she had finished school at the ripe age of seventeen. She was a burden on her poor family of traditional sweet makers in their small town of Rajpur near Mumbai, and her parents had sought her groom faster than they sought customers at their sweet shop everyday.

It was just the right age to get her married, they had said.

Her father had advertised her profile to the whole village like a commodity he wanted to sell. The fact that she wanted to continue learning and perhaps, if the money permitted, wanted to even move to Mumbai to live, was beyond her parents' understanding. It was never a viable possibility. One meeting between the parents, and her marriage to Jayesh Rao, a twenty-year-old shoe factory worker, had soon become a sealed deal. But shock came right after their marriage

ceremony when Jayesh shed the shy, reserved image he had carried on his back for their parents to see. Inside the house, he had turned into a despicable man whose anger knew no limits—the wrath of which Kalyani bore everyday. Life, as Kalyani saw it, had ended at seventeen.

When Radhika was born, Kalyani was well aware of what it could lead to. For the longest time, as an escape from the volatile environment that was their home, Kalyani had tried to protect Radhika by sending her, for long periods of time, to her mother's house or their neighbor's house. Her excuse to Jayesh had always been that their home was an unstable studying environment for any child that young. He reluctantly agreed, glad he wouldn't see the child's face staring at him everyday and glad that not a rupee would come out of his pocket for the child.

But evidently even that hadn't stopped him.

Kalyani had been brought back to the moment by the hues of purple and black that she saw decorating Radhika's back that night. It had assaulted Kalyani with a pain that she had felt deepest in her heart. She looked helplessly at the splotches of stained flesh that stood in glaring contrast to Radhika's beautiful butterscotch skin, tainted forever with senseless anger that knew no bounds.

"Maa, can't we get medicine for this? Madhu's been asking me what they were every time we go to play now," Radhika had asked Kalyani that night, pointing at the collection of bruises her body had put on display. Her expression was plastered with naivety that was incapable of understanding why this was her reality.

Kalyani looked at Radhika's back again and brushed her fingers over the bruises, as if expecting them to be erased with the motions of her hand. They looked like violets, she suddenly thought to herself. Violets, like those she had been fortunate enough to see in books when she was in school. Violets that had chosen to bloom on her daughter's tender, beautiful skin.

"I'm sorry. Really. But we don't have the money, beta. I'll ask Papa, but don't count on..." Kalyani had muttered, ashamed, like she always was, at their circumstances.

Kalyani picked up a bottle of eucalyptus oil, dabbed some onto the bruises, and continued to trace her fingers in circles over Radhika's bare back.

"Does it still hurt?"

"Just a little. It's been over week now, so it's better," Radhika mumbled, poking at and inspecting two round blobs of purple that had settled on her arm.

Kalyani sighed. She turned Radhika around by her shoulders and cupped her face tenderly, trying to soothe Radhika's aching soul as well as her own. What she hadn't given up for this child, she thought as she helped Radhika dress up into her nightie that night. Her heart hurt for the things she knew Radhika deserved but never received. She prayed everyday to the mighty gods standing still in the small wooden prayer box mounted on their wall. She prayed away for some good fortune to come their way, following every fasting ritual and prayer to the minutest detail until, over time, her faith in anything good dwindled.

She soon came to acknowledge that there was simply no hope.

But yet, every time Kalyani looked at Radhika, she was reminded of the miracle that had surrounded her birth. She couldn't erase the tragic story of her baby almost being broken to pieces. Well into her second trimester, Kalyani and Jayesh had visited the government hospital in town. As Kalyani laid on the bed, Jayesh had subtly slipped 100 rupees into the sweaty palms of the attending doctor, bribing him into telling them the sex of their child. Pleased with the money Jayesh had offered, the doctor nonchalantly muttered that it was a girl and, in urgency, with one hand gripping Kalyani's arm as if to convey some sort of consolation for being, unfortunately, pregnant with a girl, Jayesh had wagged his fat finger at the doctor.

"That won't do. Schedule us for an appointment with a hospital in Mumbai, yes? We want an abortion."

His denial had been scarier than anything else to Kalyani. She wanted to argue for this child and tell Jayesh that she deserved to live, but his unpredictability was alarming.

"Who's going to pay for her education? She'll mooch off us for the rest of her life. If we had a boy he could help me at the factory

at least,” he thundered away at Kalyani, when, in the spur of the moment, she had decided to resist.

The absurdity of his claims had her looking up at him in disbelief and question his ideas. He was enraged. He couldn’t fathom how a woman, his own wife, could defy his authority.

“What? What are you looking at? You think money grows on trees? Who do you think works for it? I’ll give you one!”

His booming voice had ended in a biting remark about her uselessness and a hard smack under her ear. He hadn’t laid his hands on her since the declaration of her pregnancy, so the sheer shock that mingled with her remembrance of the abuse she had endured previously had brought her to her knees. She had lain on the floor for what felt like hours, clutching at her aching cheek before she wiped away her tears and adjusting her fallen saree, trying to put the pieces back together for her sake and the baby’s. She had to put food on the table by eight.

The day after, when Jayesh wasn’t home, Kalyani had decided it was enough. This world and the pain that followed her from the moment she married Jayesh had reached unfathomable new levels. The day had come to go to Mumbai and to pulverize her baby girl into pieces. She had reached her limit. In a state of mourning for herself and her baby, Kalyani hung the noose on the ceiling fan in the living room and stood up on the wooden stool. She had said goodbye to the sweet unborn daughter she would never get to meet. She had said her thanks and goodbye to her parents who had brought her up. She thought she was done.

And if it hadn’t been for the Shastris, their neighbors, she would have been done. They found her in time, when nosy Mrs. Jaya Shastri had knocked obnoxiously loud on their door to feed her beets she had found in the market that day, only to be greeted with the mess of a woman standing with a noose hanging on the fan behind her.

When Jayesh found out, he tried desperately to silence the Shastris with obscene amounts of money. But they had maintained that this wasn’t something they could glance over. Two lives hung in the balance and they wouldn’t ignore it.

Soon after Jaya Shastri reported the incident, Kalyani was briskly transferred to a crowded, grimy hospital ward with authorities

crowding around the bed to gawk at her as if she were a museum exhibit. Kalyani knew this could have been her chance to come out with the truth, but Jayesh, throughout her hospitalization, sat firmly on a stool next to her bed, sifting through the nest of questions that the authorities gathered for her.

She sat staring at the blank ceiling with her sweaty hands clenched into a fist and her lips sealed with dread for what felt like days until the doctors finally released her. Kalyani's family had decided, however, that she would live out her pregnancy with them. With her mother by her side and Jayesh out of the picture for the rest of her pregnancy, Kalyani flourished for whatever little time she had at her mother's. She was overjoyed at being given a second chance not only for herself, but for her baby girl.

A few months later, Radhika had finally made it into existence surrounded by people who cared about her. She was a petite and pitiful bundle of misery who, they soon realized, cried infinite tears. And although there should have been something hopeful about Radhika's birth to Kalyani, she constantly felt a restlessness in her heart that pricked away at her being.

Their time to go back came sooner than Kalyani would have liked, and her blissful vacation came to an end. One month after Radhika's birth, she moved back into their home due to Jayesh's insistence.

\* \* \*

After the day Kalyani had come to face the infectious violence that had found its way into her child's life, it had become a struggle to maintain the stability of the home. But time slowly took its toll on Radhika. In the following years, Radhika had grown up to become a quiet and fragile child. Lacking in confidence, she was the kind who would try to disappear into nothingness when she was approached. Because of the constant discoloration on her body and her reserved nature, Kalyani had decided that she wouldn't attend school. Attention was what they needed least, she thought. Instead, Radhika studied at their neighbor's house. The Shastris were extremely well educated and were teachers at the only school in the village. Madhu, their girl of Radhika's age, was Radhika's only friend, and Mr. Santosh Shastri,

Madhu's aged father and an English teacher at the school, had volunteered to teach Radhika for free with Madhu.

Mr. Shastri had long heard about and had sometimes even witnessed the domestic instability and chaos that had enveloped the Rao household—like Kalyani's attempted suicide—but to meddle in their affairs was never one of his wishes.

As long as it doesn't concern us, he always lectured his wife.

He could help the child, however, and so he dedicated his free time to teach whatever Madhu had learned in school that day to Radhika.

For the longest time, Kalyani had to find ingenious ways to cover Radhika's bruises, much like she did her own. In the blistering Rajpuri heat, Radhika was at times forced to wear pullovers and long kurtas that left her continually enveloped in a furious sweat. Thankfully, the Shastris were the only ones she interacted with and with their known ignorance about the affairs of the Rao household, Kalyani knew there would be no problem.

Now, Radhika was sixteen years of age. Although still extremely reserved and lacking confidence, throughout these years, she had found solace in books. A distraction from her pain and the constant bickering that rang through her house, her interest in academics proved to be fruitful. But misery had chosen to accompany her wherever she went, and her countenance showed it. Always ghostly pale as though she had seen something that made her sick, with dark circles below her eyes that made her face sink into the very ground that she tried walking upon, Radhika looked to be unstable both physically and mentally.

The thought of her father and what her home had turned into constantly flogged her mind, making her disoriented and physically sick. Her father was a mean man and she longed for escape. But Radhika and her poor old mother had no choice but to live with him. It was almost as if they were his property, and so he forcibly demanded their respect.

Her love for learning, however, had taken some precedence over this. But she was fully aware of how hard it would be to fulfill her dreams. And so, on turning sixteen, she had fallen to her knees in front of her father, begging him to let her attend school for a mere

two years. She expected him to be furious—and that he was, but somewhere inside her, she still hoped he would agree. He was her father after all.

But it was the exact opposite.

“Get a job. Go do whatever if you want to go to school; I don’t care, but forget about it if you think I’m going to waste my money on you. Do you understand?” he had asserted, his crazy eyes widening at her in warning.

He turned to Kalyani who, while diligently rolling out her perfectly round rotis on the kitchen floor, had looked up at Jayesh in disbelief.

“You! You better not poke your nose in this. And if you think about selling anything just for this girl to go to school, you know what’ll happen right? I won’t have a single rupee spent on this girl.”

He turned to Radhika, stood up, and suddenly whisked his hand at her face, pretending to hit her. “We should get you married anyway right now. Why should I spend anything on school?” He chuckled, his red, tobacco-stained spit pooling at the end of his mouth like a famished animal.

Startled at his brisk movement and expecting to be hit, she staggered backwards and bumped into the wall. She bowed her head down and listened to him, her silent tears flowing openly with no end and collecting at the bottom of her chin as she stared at the floor.

Getting a job as a girl in a town as small as Rajpur, she knew, was next to impossible. She knew that all girls dropped out of school by the age of fifteen and were married off by seventeen. None of them worked the high-paying jobs that the men did, but worked instead by taking care of the house and children or as weavers in the local market. But Radhika knew she wanted to do more and couldn’t bear the thought of being tied down like them. She had to find a way to finish those two years at school or she would have no chance of making it outside of Rajpur. Like many others, she dreamt for an easier life in the hopeful but comforting streets of Mumbai. She had held on to what Santosh Shastri had once told her: Mumbai takes care of everyone.

Soon after, Radhika started to look for the crumpled, brown envelope that she had hidden for years at the back of her cupboard.

The packet contained money, every rupee of which she had saved whenever she managed to get her hands upon any. She had saved all that money for something like this, for when she would need it the most, but also—if she collected enough—to buy her mother a brand new saree. Upon opening the tattered old envelope, she had found exactly four sixty-rupees. Battling with the guilt and excitement in her head, she finally came to the conclusion that she would use it for school instead, buying her mother all she wanted when she got the job she wanted in Mumbai. She was thrilled at finding the money. Since the fee was fifty rupees for each month, it was enough to get her through most of her first year at school. At the back of her mind though was the constant reminder that she had to look for a job. After all, textbooks, tuition, and the daily bus rides she would have to take there weren't going to get paid themselves.

\* \* \*

After weeks of looking for a job, Radhika finally settled on a poorly paying job at the crumbling remains of a beauty parlor in town. And soon after, she found herself sitting on a wobbly wooden bench at the back of a classroom that held forty other children. It was her first day and she was both anxious and excited. She had neatly arranged her books and pens on the desk, and was restlessly trying to straighten the fabric of her white kurta. Although clearly nervous, the feeling of the crisp, white pages of her notebook on her fingers, the mindless chatter that filled the classroom, and the blank, dusty blackboard were objects of her fascination. She looked around her bench in awe, staring at her classmates who were engaged in conversations about the newest Bollywood movies. She had chosen the only empty bench all the way at the back and noticed, soon, that in a class of forty, only about ten were girls.

She turned to look at the clock.

7:56. Almost class time. *Looks like I don't have a bench partner*, she thought, relieved just for a moment, just as the door opened.

The teacher walked in, mid-conversation with a tall, lanky boy who followed him into the room. The boy hurriedly smiled at the teacher, bowed, and then headed toward the back of the room where she was seated.

*Ahh... I spoke too soon*, Radhika thought as she grimaced and held her head in her hands. Don't talk to me. Please, please, she told him silently.

She shimmied over to the end of her seat as he plopped down next to her with a thud. Hurriedly setting his bag on the bench, he turned his face toward Radhika and beamed at her. His eyes were the kind that scrunched up into his face when he smiled, and he had a mop of short, black hair on his head that fell messily onto his forehead. He looked overtly friendly and, unlike the other boys, had this sincerity about him. And no matter how hard she tried, Radhika couldn't tell what his intentions were. While she was busy observing this strangely enthusiastic boy who had taken up her only chance to be alone, he stuck out his hand at her.

"I'm Rishikesh, but you can call me Rishi. You must be new, right?" he asked, with genuine interest lining the creases in his brow.

"Ahh... yes. I'm Radhika," Radhika muttered hesitantly, as she leaned to the front of her seat, more interested in what the teacher was going to say at the front of the class. She had a feeling he was going to call her soon.

Rishi's hand flopped down to his side, and she noticed from the corner of her eye that his smile had dissipated into an expression of over exaggerated hurt after sensing Radhika's disinterest.

"Good morning, class. I'm Anand Sir. Welcome to the first class of 11-B! We don't usually have new students, but we have a new student joining us today. Radhika Rao, please come. Class, please welcome Radhika," the teacher boomed loudly from the front of the room.

Radhika stood up slowly, shaking as she felt the eyes of all forty people in the classroom on her. The walk to the front of the room felt like five whole minutes, and by the time she had taken up the space beside Anand Sir, she had turned into a wreck.

When Radhika reached Anand Sir, she stood beside him for a few seconds when, while trying to catch her breath, she had suddenly noticed from the corner of her eye that he was reaching out his hand toward her, most likely with intent to reassuringly pat her. But she didn't want it. She didn't want to be touched. She didn't want to be gawked at like she was meat by her classmates, all of whom had their

lips turned up in a teasing taunt as she stood at the front of the class. She just didn't want to be there anymore.

If this is what it feels like, I don't want it, she muttered to herself.

As Anand Sir patted her back, her mind spiraled into a flashback of everything that was wrong in her life. Her father's rough palms that always came slamming down on her cheeks, his angry fists on her back, and his hurtful words on her heart. Him staring at her with his bulging yellow eyes and not seeing her as his daughter, but just as a body that had to be robbed of all it had. Her mother enduring all of his taunts and beatings and being left as a shell of her past. Radhika didn't know it was possible to feel this way, but as she stood there in front of the class, all that misery came washing over her and would not leave. She felt her cheeks burning hot with embarrassment and her eyes starting to burn as she heard the taunts and laughter slowly buzzing through the classroom. She tried to gather herself as she introduced herself to the class, but her hands kept shaking and her eyes kept stinging and she knew they could see that.

After the introduction was over, Radhika started walking dejectedly toward the back of the room when a boy sitting in the second row stopped her, his hands reaching outward in a handshake. The same cheap, vulgar look in his eyes had made her sick and had left her feeling filthy. She could see that he was less interested in her actions and instead he was looking her up and down. She dodged his hand, hoping he wouldn't create a scene like she knew those kinds of boys always did, and silently dragged herself toward the back of the room.

A figure of exhaustion and anxiety, Radhika avoided everyone's eyes. And at that moment she wanted to avoid just about everyone. She couldn't tell who was harmless and who wanted to hurt her, and thinking about it made her head hurt. With her hands rapidly shaking and her clunky shoes clicking through the laughing and pointing, she fell back into her seat with a sigh. Everything Radhika did then, she realized, was drawing attention to herself when all she wanted was to be background noise.

Radhika sat throughout the rest of class wriggling in her seat, brimming with anxiety, waiting for the bell to ring. The second the bell finally rang for recess, she struggled against the desire to leap out of the door and race back home. But she waited. She waited on the

uncomfortable, hard wooden bench until the room was simply an empty shell of books and bags strewn about in disorder.

But her peace, like always, was short lived. Just as Radhika reached down to her bag to find her lunchbox and set it on her table, she saw Rishi heading toward their bench. She sighed, her irritation on having her peace shattered clearly plastered on her face.

*Does he suddenly think we're friends because we're bench partners? He's probably just as bad as the others,* she thought to herself, frowning into her lunchbox.

"Hey, are you okay? What happened before... you know? You didn't look good," he asked in all seriousness after sitting down at the bench in front of her.

"Yeah, I'm okay. It was nothing," Radhika muttered under her breath, still looking down at the lunchbox she was now trying to open.

"Listen, if you have any problems, you can tell me. Mother promise, I won't tell anyone," Rishi stuttered sheepishly, holding his lunchbox in one hand and placing the other on his head in sincere promise. "And don't sit here to eat—come out. Come with me."

"No, I'm fine here. Thanks, though."

"Ey, come on. We can sit outside the hall; it's quiet there. Come," he said, pulling the lunchbox out of her hand and standing up. He smiled at her.

Radhika wasn't completely sure, but there was something about his insistence that was genuine. She saw innocence and sincerity in his face, and she realized that she wanted to believe him. She longed for friendship, like anyone else her age, but the thoughts of everything that could go wrong were constantly whizzing about in her mind. She rubbed her face as if trying to snap out of those doubts. For the first time, she wanted to trust someone and, while she could feel her body revolting against this idea, she had firmly decided on it.

"Let's go then," she blurted out loud as she stood up and yanked her lunchbox back from Rishi's hands. "Let's go before I change my mind."

They sat cross-legged outside the dining hall, staring straight ahead at the benches of an empty classroom. Radhika sat stiff and still in initial awkwardness and fiddled with the lid of her lunchbox, praying that someone would break the silence. Eventually, she opened

her lunchbox and took a deep breath as the familiar scents of spicy lentils in curry and rice wafted up into the air and hit her. She was reminded of the safe embrace of her mother's arms as she mixed the food with her hands.

She wasn't surprised when, within minutes, Rishi had disturbed the peace with a deluge of questions that he had clearly taken time to think out for her.

"Where do you live? Where did you go to school? Why did you join school so suddenly? What do you like doing? I could introduce you to my friends if you want? They're not that bad, mother promise! Why are you so quiet? Why do you look so scared all the time?..." He shamelessly went on and on, with curiosity and concern lining his thick brow. Radhika looked on in a mix of incredulity and amusement as he continued to bombard her with questions. She was almost offended.

Radhika started first by answering him in witty one-word answers that were leaving him stumped. She was having fun at seeing him frustrated while trying to untangle her words, but she soon found herself returning the sincerity in his interest with answers.

"What do you do after school?"

"I go to work and then straight home. I have to be back every day by seven."

"You work? Isn't seven too early?"

"Yes, I work to pay for school. And my father set my curfew at eight, so I have to be home then or I won't hear the end of it," Radhika replied, suddenly slumping back onto the wall.

"He sounds like a scary man," Rishi said warily, aware of Radhika's sudden change in demeanor.

"He is."

With that, their conversation had ceased to be. But it set the basis for the many encounters between them that were to come. The friendship that had blossomed out of this had largely benefitted Radhika's self-esteem. It didn't matter to her what Rishi's intentions were. She was just glad that, for the first time, her desire to live to the fullest had returned. She met more of Rishi's friends, who were mostly boys, and while she struggled to first mix with them, she found them to be half decent and somewhat bearable. She slowly found

herself getting accustomed to the class environment and the feeling of being around those her age. More than anything else, she was enjoying school and had risen up the ranks as a promising student.

Radhika was aware, however, of the dread that seeped into her mind everyday as she walked back home. Her father found it even easier to chastise her, when she came back home from work and school, by using her absence from home as an excuse to scrutinize her life. There was no escaping her father and no matter how good Radhika's day had been, she knew she would come crashing down to the ground the moment she faced him.

It was a normal day like this, after two months into the start of school, when Radhika walked out the door to leave for the day. Making her way down the stairs, she found herself excited at the prospect of going to school. She walked up to the road in front of her building and looked around. Her house was a small apartment in the collection of clunky, rectangular building complexes set atop a steep hill. It was surrounded by thick, lush trees and farms that bore flocks of sheep which, to her amusement, constantly blocked traffic leading up to her home. She stopped right outside her home and leaned over the fence, which was on the other side of the road, that looked over a large pond.

She looked at her watch. 6:25. She still had some time before she had to start walking toward the bus stop.

As she leaned back and forth against the fence, she suddenly became aware of a shrill bell of a bicycle slowly approaching her. She turned around, searching for the bothersome sound.

She was surprised to see Rishi driving his way up the hill with big cartons attached to the sides of his bicycle. He was waving his hands excitedly at her with this stupid, wide grin plastered on his face that she had grown accustomed to seeing. He came to a stop right in front of her, breathless in his efforts to cycle and greet her at the same time.

"What are you doing here? We have school in half an hour," Radhika remarked, almost yelling at the prospect of him missing school.

“Ya, I know, but my uncle delivers the milk usually and he’s sick today. So I had to do it. I won’t come to school today. Anand Sir knows, don’t worry,” he smirked at her, still trying to catch his breath.

They stood there for five minutes, catching up and bantering as usual before Radhika heard the strong thuds of footsteps headed right toward her.

“You shameless idiot, what are you doing? Do you know your Dad’s looking at you through the window and creating a ruckus up there? He’s going to kill you,” Madhu, her neighborhood friend, shrieked at the top of her voice breathlessly. “Tell this guy to go. You really have a death wish, don’t you?!”

With her heart threatening to blow out of her chest, Radhika timidly raised her gaze to the building behind her. Just as Madhu had said, her father was glaring at her through the window of her home with eyes so wide open that they were threatening to fall out of his skull. He was angrier than she had ever seen him.

Radhika’s heart dropped.

Her father lifted his finger and motioned aggressively for her to come up. She gulped and walked over to the building without looking back at Rishi or Madhu.

“Wait, what’s happen—” Rishi barked, trying to hold her back. But Madhu intercepted him.

“Don’t. Just go,” she commanded him. “She’s in enough trouble already.”

Radhika’s hands were shaking now as she walked to the entrance of the building, fearful of the wrath of her father’s anger. This was the end for her, she knew. She was fully aware of the consequences of being seen with Rishi, and yet she had made that exact mistake. She knew that she would be berated for being around boys without the intention to marry. It is indecent, the elders would say, that she couldn’t simply be friends with Rishi or any other boy. She could already hear them referring to her Indian culture and religion while calling her out on her behavior and, more than anything, her audacity to want to educate herself and her audacity to become friends with the Shudras. But it was too late now and she knew that her father was going to say the same and more.

No school. No work. Nothing, he would say.

Nothing. Like how she would feel when he was done with her.

Radhika hesitantly walked up the stairs to her home. She was welcomed at the door by the fearful figure of her father enveloped in the door frame. She contemplated turning back and fleeing, perhaps to Mumbai, with whatever little she had on her then, but her father seemed to sense this. He immediately pulled her into the house by her ear, shutting the door with a sound that robbed Radhika of all her energy instantly. She was all too familiar with what was to come.

Inside the bedroom, Kalyani sat on a cot and listened silently to the commotion outside. With her head buried in her lap, she weeped heavy tears for every word and kick that she heard coming from that devil's mouth. Once a woman of some courage, she had now been reduced to a feeble and frail old woman. She could do nothing but listen to the nonsense that Jayesh was spouting in the name of culture and religion.

"You ungrateful little shit. Keep some shame at least! I know you're paying for school with your own money, but what about our reputation, huh?" he yelled into her face, his disgusting, red, tobacco-stained teeth staring at her in mockery and his vile breath stinging her skin.

Yanking her by the ear, he pushed her to the floor on her knees.

"I've heard everything from Mr. Sharma. How you go about the school surrounded by boys. Very nice, huh. Such a popular girl you are. Have you heard about Sharma's daughter? She's married and she sits at home taking care of her children and husband and fulfilling her duty as a woman. But here you are, creating such a good name for our family!"

He dragged Radhika back down to the floor as he saw her scrambling to hide behind a chair. His boot came flying down on the small of her back, staining her white kurta mud brown in the process.

"That boy you just met down there, who was he? What were you doing with him? All day you're out of the house, god knows what you do with him huh! Is this how you pay me back? For everything I've done for you, this is what you do for me? Ungrateful little—" he hissed as he spat at her. A red blob of tobacco spit splattered right next to her cheek on the white tiled floors.

Radhika closed her eyes. She tried to believe that this wasn't happening, a trick she hadn't learned throughout the years. She lay still on the floor, devoid of all energy, expecting his feet to come down thundering on her back at any given second. And soon it came. It came down in an array of punches, kicks and words, but it came.

And then she heard the much-dreaded words that came rolling out of his mouth in rage.

"You step out of this house again, I will kill you with my bare hands. We're going to get you married now. I've had enough of you."

Between the beating and his continual mention of her worthlessness, she went back to nothing several times until she was barely conscious of her body and her mind slipped away into oblivion. And then just as suddenly as it had started, it had ended. It had ended with her on the floor, her body sore, and her mind tired.

\* \* \*

That rainy night, Radhika wobbled up to the terrace of her building. She sat on the bare cot, clutching her knees to her chest. Soon after, she heard Kalyani come up the stairs. The ailing old woman took her spot beside the young child. In that moment, the soft rain drops that fell from the sky caressed their frail, sore bodies and showered their pain with love like no other. The two tired souls looked out to the twinkling lights of the town that stood out brightly in the green nothingness they were surrounded by. They sat there, half in a daze and holding on to each other, until the lights went off, one after the other. Until there was only darkness.

# PEN TO PAPER

GENEVA **GIST**

The wind is ice against your skin. Your arms clasp against your stomach, but you aren't cold. You can't breathe in your tight shirt and push-up, but you're OK with that. The liquor makes your head spin and even though you're aware, you can't control yourself.

Girls mill around you in uniform, and you hate them until you realize you are the same and then you hate yourself. Your friends are talking, but you can't focus on the words, and it becomes a droning around you to which you occasionally nod so they don't get mad.

You walk through a river to get inside. It is hot and sticky, and you can feel, taste, smell the sweat. Couples are making out around you, and you hate them. The dance floor is full of faceless girls, ringed by hawk-eyed boys. Occasionally two will enter the throng and find a pair to grab. It happens to you. Your friend goes along, so you do too. He gets you a drink, but it's strong and your head gets dizzy. You fall, and he laughs, but it's OK because you're kissing and he's holding you against the wall so you don't fall. Now you're in his room, and he already has your shirt off, and you don't remember where the condom came from, but you're hoping he has one on because your Mom hasn't allowed birth control pills, and all of a sudden it's over and it hurts and you're not a virgin anymore. You step out and find your friends who know what happened, and that guy you've been texting with is there too and he can see it on your shamed face and wrinkled shirt, and you just want to go home and sleep, but you can't find the rest of your friends, and the tears won't stop.

Somehow you get home, and the next morning is blanketed by fog, wet with mist, dark. You walk to class sick to your stomach, not able to meet anyone's eyes, feeling judgment radiating around you, feeling like they can tell what you did, that somehow the world can see the impurity written upon your skin.

And the whole time you just keep thinking it's your fault, your fault, and you can feel your mother's disappointment, even though she doesn't know—she can't ever know—and you have to bear it alone, always alone.

# PASTORAL 1

MARK NAIDA

The snow covered her footprints as  
she went, bent against the wind over the field.

Lips part, part the skies, send out thunder  
from my mouth and not this mist

or let my breath freeze into lattice, fall  
and rest softly on the corn knees.

Would that my heart suffer into form;  
would that my voice fissure into mute object.

To caress between my hands  
and set gently in the icebox

beside the bananas, blackened  
and stored for winter's bread.

# TRIFLE

RACHEL MAHONEY

There's a Quantic Dream game called *Beyond Two Souls*. It's a two-player game, where one person plays as a young girl named Jodie and the other player is a protective spirit named Aiden, halfway between an imaginary friend and a guardian angel. I've played it quite a few times, with a lot of friends and family members.

The story changes based on choices, but some events happen to everyone. There is an optional sequence which most players get (you have to make some very seemingly stupid decisions to not get this scene). In this scene, whoever is playing Jodie, age sixteen at the time, sneaks away from home to meet up with friends at a bar. However, the friends don't show, and instead Jodie is sexually assaulted by the bartender and two men. Aiden will stop them before they can rape her, but then the person playing as Aiden chooses how to handle the situation. When I played the game blind, my very first playthrough, I was playing as Aiden, and my friend Lauren played as Jodie.

I destroyed everything. I tore the bar to shreds, I choked one man to death and took a shotgun to the other two rapists. Finally, in the rubble of the bar, the police arrived to comfort Jodie.

I've since played through quite a few times, always as Jodie. Everyone wants to be the cool ghost on their playthrough, and since I'm always showing the game to friends, I always play Jodie now. Every time I've played *Beyond Two Souls* there has been a marked difference in my Aidens. In what they will do to protect me. Each time I've played with a girl, she has rushed in as soon as the rapists throw me onto the pool table and put hands on my skirt. She has always brought down the chandelier, exploded cups of booze off the shelves, made a whirlwind of chairs to shove the men away from me, and then choked one of the men to death and taken that same shotgun I took to the other two. I have never been very afraid as Jodie

with them. They never hesitate, they mash the buttons before control switches from Jodie to Aiden, straining at the leash like an attack dog.

Every time I have played with a boy, it has also been the same. I even played it with my brother. He always shoves the men off, throws some chairs, then stops. Even if I prod, ask him to finish it, he won't. He always becomes uncomfortable at the thought of killing the rapists. He pulls back and waits for them to flee. No amount of pleading from me can turn the judgement, and they are proud of the choice afterward. It's a cool proud, contrasted against the righteous burning proud radiating off my female friends after that sequence is done.

The difference seems to be the women see rape as an offense punishable by death, quantified by the need to protect someone they love and the intensity of the moment. Men seem to see rape as an offense punishable by a few jabs to the face. All this, and people generally go much further in games than they would in real life, not much more restrained. Maybe the boys hold the fact the rape was stopped as changing the level of guilt in the men, while the women don't. Maybe the men think they won't try again, but the women do. Maybe there's a much simpler explanation, or one far more convoluted. Maybe both.

The only thing I know for absolutely certain is that it hurts me, to know if my sister saw me being raped, she would kill the man, but my brother would let him go.

I've never been raped, or sexually assaulted. I'm part of the statistically lucky three out of four. The closest thing to any kind of nonconsensual sexual anything I've ever endured was during a trip to Washington, D.C. I wrote a paper that won that trip, along with students from many other counties of Kentucky. I couldn't tell you a word from my paper or even the topic anymore. It was my first (and so far only) trip to Washington, D.C.

I was literally the last stop on the bus line. We headed east from where I lived and picked up people along the way until the bus was crowded. I knew the other winner from my county, but he was a jerk, so we didn't sit together. I didn't know anyone else, but by the end of the trip I had made friends with two people—a girl who had the face of a Disney princess, and a boy who bonded with me over history when we stopped at Monticello.

This one week in D.C. was one of the most intense events of my life. We barely got four hours of sleep a night, we were all upper-mid teenagers, and we walked all over that city, all day long. It was fantastic. I saw the Ruby Slippers and Kermit the Frog in the Smithsonian and a display on World War II that brought me to tears. I was close enough to the Declaration of Independence that I could have touched it. And the Holocaust Museum? I can't put it into words. I have never in my life seen anything like it. There was one exhibit that was just ... this endless sea of shoes. A fraction of those from one of the concentration camps. And the videos, taken at camps by Russian, British, and American liberators. The fact that people who looked like that could still move. I'll never forget that.

The day we went to the capitol, we had a picnic lunch. History guy and I talked about where we'd been and where we were headed, and I mentioned how tired I was. Without asking for permission, he announced he'd give me a back rub, and proceeded to start to do so. I tried, politely, to get him to stop—saying things like “oh, don't worry about it” and “my back is fine, I'm just tired,” and “seriously, I'm fine” but I couldn't get him to stop. I didn't want to be touched. Nothing like that had ever happened to me before. I always tried to be nice and polite to people, and we were sort of friends, and I didn't know if there was anything actually wrong with what he was doing—only that I didn't want him to—so I said I felt sick and had to go to the bathroom and got up, and he said okay and he'd wait for me. I stayed in the bathroom until I heard the chaperones announce it was time to head out to a new location.

Something like that is so barely comparable to rape it feels laughable.

No, I am lucky. Rape has never touched me personally in a physical sense, but in other ways it has. I care about it strongly, it has damaged so many people I know. I choke on it like second-hand smoke. I guess that makes sense. If you're one of the three, you only bounce off two people every time before hitting that fourth.

My first week at WKU, I tried to go for a run near the school around nine, and a black car pulled up and two men inside told me to come over asking me if I had a boyfriend. I was terrified, but I act, so I laughed and smiled and said thanks to the flirtations, but that I had

a boyfriend (I have never had a boyfriend), waved, and kept going. I got lucky.

I am not a very fearful person when it comes to fights, but I don't run by the school anymore. I run on a residential street full of street lamps on at all hours, houses with friendly dogs, and late-night porch readers who wave at me. I know I did what was smart, but I also know men claim catcalling and solicitation is harmless because girls smile and laugh. I know we don't like it. We don't want to die.

I don't want the guilt of spreading something that allowed men in a black car to pull up and call me over, but I don't want to be raped or killed. Maybe, I should just carry a gun.

I made a friend my first semester at WKU whose girlfriend was raped on a blind date. She can't or won't remember his face. She was so sure no one would help, and that she was alone or at fault, that she went home and hid and that was all. She didn't tell anyone until my friend, several months after they'd been dating. That guy is still out there, answering casual dating app matches. He could be anyone I pass by in the halls.

I would believe her, I would know it wasn't her fault. If I could find out who he is, I would show up at his apartment and fight him for her. Maybe I should try to.

My roommate a semester ago had a boyfriend who was always there, always wanting sex, always yelling at her. I would go to my coffee maker in the kitchen and hear her crying. One day I heard her say, amidst sobs, "Why do you hit me?" so I panicked. I hid a butcher knife in my sleeve and banged on their door and told him he couldn't beat his girlfriend in our apartment, the unintended addition of the words "in our apartment" will haunt me forever I think, and to get out. She promised she was ok, let me check her for bruises. She said he'd just smacked her hand away. I heard her cry and him yell. I talked to her I think three times, alone, usually outside in the cold air. She was so sad and lonely; she thought maybe she would go home. She left a few weeks after the altercation in her apartment, I don't know where. I don't know if she's still with him, or why she ever was. She texted me a goodbye.

I wonder if next time there will be someone to bang on the door with a hidden kitchen knife whose words are better, but I am afraid

that next time instead there will be no knock on the door at all. There were four girls in that apartment, and I had the room furthest away from hers.

Despite what I tried to do, he kept yelling, and she kept crying. Maybe next time I should brandish the knife.

I have a best friend whose boyfriend slipped something into her drink. Her memories are like nightmare fragments—she can't even remember everything that happened, only what she knew he was trying to do when she woke up and puked. Only that he said he'd kill her if she told anyone, and then laughed because he knew no one would believe her anyway. He's well-liked in that microcosm, she's not. And there's no evidence—just her, just what she can't unremember.

People barely want to punish rape, much less something that can't be proven

He will never face justice for that. Not unless I challenge him to a knife duel behind a Wendy's someday at midnight. I think ... maybe I will have to.

I have an uncle who assaulted almost every female cousin on one side of my family, except my sister and me who are blessed to live eight hours from the coast and the rest of them. It went on for years before anyone spoke up, anyone knew, and it extended to his own son and daughter.

His daughter has self-imploded because of it. She's almost killed herself again and again with meth and pills and smoking and visiting him, because he's another bad habit she can't break.

My aunt was crushed with guilt for something she somehow never saw, because you don't expect the father of your children to be capable of something like that. Because people aren't born with a sixth sense for evil. He almost killed another cousin. She spiraled into an ED that still consumes her life. Having dealt with similar issues, all I can ever think is how awful it must be for her to be named Anna.

The dying daughter has two sons, from different fathers. I love them. I don't know if he's ever touched them, but I know they've been to see him. My aunt had so much guilt it took her awhile, while raising two kids that weren't hers, to completely break the habit of husband.

They don't go anymore. But he's never had to face justice either.

He's old, a pacemaker keeps him alive long past when he should have died, but no one wants to lock up and punish a sick, pitiable old

man. No one will take him to court. I can't understand why. He will never face justice unless I take a magnet past the machine in his heart one day in the middle of a fresh spring walk. Maybe I should.

When reading Laura Gray-Rosendale's *College Girl* in a class last semester, it brought a lot back to my mind. The book ends with so many optimistic thoughts. She compares herself after rape to a Robert Frost poem about birches, bent under snow and ice, never able to right again. One of her last thoughts in the book is "Sometimes those birches do right themselves," and she's right. People do overcome sometimes. But she's also right that it hasn't been easy. The fragments her life (and the lives of the girls who experienced her rape secondhand) went into? Trees can right themselves, but they are never the same.

This doesn't mean they can't be happy—my favorite trees have always been the ones that should have died. We used to have one that was completely horizontal, knocked down in an ice storm, and kept living. We made the best playhouses under its branches.

But still, someone broke the tree, and that someone ought to pay. Recovery and awareness are only half of the tasks at hand. People say vengeance isn't justice, and it's not, but they aren't mutually exclusive either—sometimes justice and vengeance go hand in hand. I am not ashamed of that.

I remember reading *Trifles* by Susan Glaspell for the first time. Though it's known for its topic, it wasn't in a Women and Gender class that I first read it—it was for a theater lab. And when we came in, our teacher, a very reserved woman, asked us what the message of the play was. I gave her the answer, and it was one of the only times I've seen her genuinely smile.

The play is a 1916 piece written as a proponent of a woman's right to vote. It's about a woman who kills her abusive husband. Two women accompanying the men investigating the murder figure out what happened and choose to hide crucial evidence to protect the killer because they see why she did it, and they hear the way the men investigating talk about her and themselves, and they know what her fate will be if she's found out.

The message, as I answered my drama teacher three years ago, wasn't that women *should* enact vigilante justice, but rather that if something doesn't change very soon, women will have no choice *but* to do so.

# FORD ESCAPE

CARRIE MANNINO

Cigarette between his lips, the cashier tears off the receipt and says, “Have a nice evening” so gruffly that I think he means it. I push open the door and stroll to the car. The air is sticky and it seems to press me backward. Nathan is still holding the nozzle, watching the gas meter tick up cent by cent. I pause when I get to the passenger side, lean against the window, and stare at him. The machine clicks off and he turns with a questioning glance. I grin back, climbing in.

There’s something about the car that is magic to me. Maybe because it is sealed, because I know I can say things here and not be heard, because even the clear windshield can’t keep us from belting out Carrie Underwood songs at the top of our lungs. Maybe because it’s where his icy breath carried an “I love you.”

We’d ice skated holding hands that night, even though my kindergarten teacher taught me that was dangerous. Once I couldn’t feel the prickles on my face anymore, I shivered into the car, and he put his arm around me and kissed my hair. Then he whispered it, more to the air than to me. He hasn’t said it since, and maybe I keep hoping if I stay in his car he will. That there’ll be a quiet Moment, and we’ll nudge noses and intertwine hands. But maybe I know that’s not going to happen.

“What?” he asks me.

“What?”

“You were looking at me. Is my zipper open or something?”

“No,” I laugh. “I was just looking.”

He flashes me an inquisitive look, words pressed between his tongue and lip.

“You’re kind of cute,” I smile.

It’s not like it’s the first time I’ve said it, but he relaxes when I do. His eyes get that soft quality that melts into them when we talk for a while or when my head is against the hollow area between his

shoulder bones and collar, cushioned by chest muscles, my fingers spread against his neck.

He turns the ignition and I grab for the radio, flipping the stations until I find “Fancy” by Iggy Azalea. He exaggerates an eye roll, but begins rapping loudly as soon as it begins. I scream the lyrics and he opens the top of the car and it’s sunny and the wind makes that fluttering noise it does when you’re driving fast and the windows are down, but it’s okay because it mixes into our voices and melds them into something almost beautiful.

When the song ends, I turn down the volume. My hand drifts to his thigh, craving warmth. His eyes get fuzzy at the edges. I wonder what it will be like when we break up. My fingers curl as if they’re running from this thought, or maybe from him. We’re at a red light and he looks at me.

“Hi,” he says, as if we haven’t been together for hours already.

“Hi,” I say back in my smallest, sweetest voice.

He holds my gaze and I wonder if he thinks I’m beautiful. Not pretty. Beautiful. Pretty lasts for an evening, a summer, a kiss, and a crying end. Beautiful lasts forever. Maybe because it never lasts at all, it’s just seen sometimes, like when birds cast shadows overhead that look like light even though they’re the absence of it, or when a baby smiles at you and spit drips down its chest, and you’re breathing differently and everything’s better and for a second it seems like just living can be enough. I let his hand slip into mine. I hope that’s what he feels when he sees me.

# SUBMERSION

SABRINA QIAO

All my mother  
ever wanted was  
faith, that I would  
turn out to be someone  
she could be proud of

She found it, instead, in  
church pews, in Bible passages,  
the crisp black ink leaving  
smudges on her skin that I  
learned to hate her for

I say psalms for  
the ways in which  
I must have disappointed  
her: my cruelty,  
sharp tongue, everlasting anger,  
promiscuity, the way I  
hold resentments inside the most  
intimate parts of me,  
how lust begets  
lust as bitterness breeds  
violence

The edges of me are razor  
sharp, they draw blood,  
hold the crimson in your  
rosary, *amen*.

I go back to  
church pews,  
look for that stained memory  
of us, the way I watched them  
lay you into  
submission, how your body learned  
to drown, how you floated through your  
faith

I want to say,  
I still dream of  
baptism, that split second  
after submersion: your lungs  
gasping for the sweet hunger  
of air you can't help but  
give  
into.

# SELF-PORTRAIT: SCULPTURE

MORGAN WU

flay off the excess—

oyster knife  
in a thin-knuckled fist

let metal scrutiny run over  
protruding rolls—

let flaking alabaster  
collapse to the floor

slump  
away from flattened whittled bone like

stumbling  
from a spotlight—

rinse, repeat

# MAN IN UNION SQ.

MAXINE **FLASHER-DUZGUNES**

There's a man in Union Sq.  
Who believes he's from the future,  
But they won't take him back,  
"Not yet, not yet," he says.

A man on Lafayette tells  
His girlfriend he knows  
What she did Thursday night,  
And he feels "betrayed,  
Oh so betrayed."

There's a woman in Cooper Sq.  
With a beautiful golden lab  
Singing, her brows invisible  
Beneath the bang line,  
Hoping the tips will pay for lunch.

And there are keys down  
Below the sidewalk  
Where the subway rushes  
Blow-drying my hair.  
I wonder where they fit.

And the cigarettes down  
There, I wonder whose  
Firm lips they rested  
Between, in which cross street  
They thickened the air.

And bottle caps too,  
Little time capsule lids  
Popping off after someone  
Opened up their past too quickly,  
Hoping their twenty dollars would still be there.

# WINDOW SEAT

NICOLE PENROD

you cried on the plane because blue horizon  
because your tender poppy seed heart

you felt tiny and godless and daunted  
by the pieces of you you'll never get to  
explain

you cried on the plane because the sky was  
burning and it made you feel cold

you weren't thinking about kissing anyone  
you were thinking about the day when you were  
twelve and you read a poem that sucker-punched you  
and how you've been chasing that particular brand of hurt  
ever since

you cried because your wobbly chest  
because all of your secrets  
because if you die now no one will forgive you  
for it

there's something brutal in the dark clouds  
you're not supposed to be here  
it wasn't supposed to hollow you out like this

below you, the city, and you cried because  
you thought you could reach out and touch it  
feel the lights burn your fingertips  
let the crush of it splinter you apart

maybe it would make you clean  
maybe all those hearts would deliver  
absolution

you cried on the plane because window seat  
because you've never felt this acutely lonely  
and so much like god  
because the holy in the sunset said creation hurts  
and you said  
i know i know i know

# COFFEE SHOP ON WALNUT STREET

CARRIE MANNINO

The boy with false eyelash spiders  
dripping shiny dew drops  
like the baubles in his ear  
orders a pink frothed cream  
and doesn't  
does he  
think of his father.

The girl with big breasts  
thick legs behind the counter  
compliments him as a word to  
hold onto, steadies the skinny girl  
whose back is bowed  
as an apology for  
all the empty mouthfuls

Her butterfly ring, laced confessional  
tattoos thicker than her flesh

And the fat girl calls her "hot" because  
she knows it means nothing  
but I understand you,  
I understand where  
you are, and it doesn't make sense  
but that's  
okay.

The bent girl blushes crimson—  
the painted boy stares at her  
he should've said it himself—  
she argues instead of accepting.  
The big girl, with a voice so loud it whispers fear,  
smiles and tells her don't worry,

I don't feel beautiful either.

# SUMMER CHILDHOOD

CARRIE MANNINO

it was a cool day  
in summer  
and i was fixing  
the gears  
on my bike when out of nowhere  
jonathan riker walked up and stuck my hair with chewing gum.

well i got pretty mad and it was almost like steam was coming out of  
the fresh new gears  
in my head and i decided his face needed fixing  
and in that afternoon in my last childhood summer  
i socked that boy and went to buy some peanut butter to deal with  
the chewing gum  
and it smelled for days  
but it didn't matter because i didn't go nowhere.

then it was two more summers,  
the months after i decided my picture needed fixing  
and my eyes were raccoon's and my skirts were short and i'd never  
in a million years touch a gear  
on a bike or any other dirty thing, and i went through chewing gum  
lickety-split because it seemed so cool in those days,  
and i was walking and suddenly i saw jonathan riker going nowhere  
fast.

we looked at each other, i saw his face definitely had gotten its fixing

though it wasn't from me—it was from growing and all the passed days.

his pant leg was stuck in his bike gear  
and he was pulling it loose as i smacked my chewing gum  
and then it was free and he stood and we looked nowhere  
except each other for a while until he silently rode off and left me in  
the empty of that summer.

that afternoon i threw away my chewing gum.

i unfixed

my face and made it ugly and bare again and wished to take back all  
the days

and find that summer

turn back the gears

of myself and find the anywhere i'd have gone if i hadn't gone  
nowhere.

i pushed outside, unlatching the gears

of the door and ran into the past-day

dusk because i realized i needed fixing

not my face, but the girl i'd lost in that summer

of the chewing gum

and i knew down deep that she had gone nowhere,

not really, just playing hide-and-seek again

kicking the pedals on her bike and always getting stuck in the gears.

# HANDS

CASSIDY GRAHAM

I always looked for good fingers, perfect fingers;  
Dainty, manly hands.  
Hands with hair before the knuckles and freckles and  
Clipped, square, milky nails.  
Hands that could hold a pen and write, or type with ease on a  
keyboard,  
That could wrap delicately around a diner coffee cup  
And swirl a spoon. Hands that I could grip and study,  
And would in mine stay firm, yet still, as I went  
Turning them over, examining them, feeling the bones beneath the  
skin.  
Hands with discernible improvements from those that came before;  
Hands attached to the person I thought I loved.

I never liked my own;  
I pick at the thumbs, curl the fingers too much,  
And crack them against my chin; one day they'll be claws,  
I think. I keep them in my pockets and cover them with rings.  
Only now do I see their freedom and dexterity.  
In that picture they are just as good, and real,  
And I can clasp the fingers together whenever I feel.

# WORDS

CASSIDY GRAHAM

Words are quick and benign; unsupervised  
Stuffing for modern space and time.  
They spill from breathy mouths, melt in midair, and  
Sweep away in evening rooftop crowds.

But your words aren't weak like these;  
They're declarations and grand decrees.  
The rhythm of your voice engraves them into stone;  
Your wild, magic gestures make them freeze.

You hang back watching; I wonder how you feel.  
I hear my name in your mouth,  
And it makes me feel more real.

# SCARS

LAURA FITZGERALD

A faint half-moon scar, about the size of a quarter, sits on my lower back from when my body slammed into a door hinge.

A little dimple, like my skin had been scooped out with a tiny spoon, rests in my upper thigh from when my body slammed into the hard-packed dirt.

My right thumb is a perpetual craggy landscape, raw, skin ripped open from the nervous habit I have of picking at it. My thumb hasn't been fully healed in years.

The half-moon scar is from violence. The dimple in my thigh is from an accident. And my ragged thumb is self-inflicted.

\* \* \*

My bedroom in my apartment is the messy squalor that I have been living in for most of the semester. T-shirts and leggings and dirty socks strewn across the floor, old assignments and random food wrappers littering every surface, makeup and books scattered across my desk. But the boxes on the floor, already packed with picture frames and desk knickknacks and a few bowls and plates, are new. I have three weeks before I move out, but I am already packing.

\* \* \*

The hard-packed arena dirt, gray and usually wet, has a habit of cementing itself into the bottom of horses' hooves so well that digging it out with a hoof pick requires real muscle. The coach's shouts, thudding hooves, and near collisions of horses and riders in the riding arena at the Miami Equestrian Center make up my sanctuary.

\* \* \*

I don't know when the nervous habit started. I can't remember the last time my thumb was healed, or even without any scars. If I am in the presence of my parents, and they see me absentmindedly

picking at my thumb, one of them grabs my hand. “Don’t pick,” my mother says. Her thumb is also scarred.

\* \* \*

I lived alone for the majority of that first semester of junior year in my apartment. Between depression and her parents’ divorce, my roommate was having a hard time, so she abandoned her life to live with her boyfriend in Indiana. I worried that she wouldn’t come back the next semester and my parents would be stuck paying her half of the rent on our joint lease. I didn’t want to trouble my parents when they were dealing with their own problems, so I left a nasty voicemail. I asked if she was paying her rent and threatened to call her parents if she didn’t.

When my roommate came back after disappearing for two months, boyfriend in tow, I avoided her, locking myself in my room when I heard the apartment door creak open. How easily she could leave her life when I had always felt duty-bound to school.

One night, about a week after she returned, I saw a text from her when I was getting out of work from the stables.

“If you threw something away in the mail that was addressed to my boyfriend, don’t fucking come back,” it said.

I stormed to my car, slammed the door, and sped down the road, driving way too fast and shifting much harder than is necessary in a manual transmission. I am not normally an aggressive driver.

\* \* \*

That day, I got a horse I had never ridden. His withers were almost as tall as me, and I am about five-foot-ten. He started out at an easy pace, if a little excited. But the horse became faster. Too fast, galloping around the arena so fast the dirt was only a gray blur beneath me. I knew I had to get off. The horse swerved suddenly, I lost my balance, and I was in the dirt, fire spreading through my right side. The arena went black.

I showered in my dorm bathroom after someone drove me home from the stables, scrubbing off the arena dust that covered the right half of my body. I cried because of the pain as the water burned my right arm, and the skin ripped off to reveal the pink and red patchwork beneath. I cried for the pain in my hip that prevented me from walking straight. But only as I looked at my arm in the mirror did

I notice the blossoming purple bruise on my left thigh. Later, that bruise would heal into a dent.

\* \* \*

My roommate was in her room when I came home from work at the stables. I marched into her room and started screaming, hurling all my frustrations like arrows from my barbed tongue. She got up from her chair and shoved me back with such force I slammed into the doorframe behind me. I slumped on the ground, stunned. But then I clambered back to my feet and screamed, "Don't touch me, bitch!"

After her boyfriend separated us long enough for us to calm down, my roommate began to rant about how hard her life was, struggling with depression and her parents' divorce. Her tears calmed me long enough for a temporary surge of sympathy.

"I'm sorry I pushed you," she said. We had made up, or we had made up the best way we could after she slammed me into a door frame and I called her a bitch. I hugged her and said I was sorry she was dealing with so much, then retreated back to my bedroom. That night, as I was brushing my teeth in the bathroom, my back twinged with a tiny dot of pain as I bent over the sink to spit. I lifted my shirt up and saw a small half-moon of blood surrounded by yellowing bruises. I felt the pain then.

\* \* \*

Now, I like to freak people out with my dimpled thigh. "Did you know I have a dent in my thigh?" Sometimes, I run my hand over the tiny indentation, like a child clutching at a ragged security blanket.

\* \* \*

My roommate's boyfriend was in the room when she pushed me. He separated us when I towered over her short frame. I glowered down at her, screaming obscenities and leaning against her boyfriend. I don't know if I would have hit her back.

I'm not a violent person. I think.

I'm not an angry person. I think.

Every once in a while, I stare at the curve of my naked back in the mirror before I shower, just to see if the scar has gone away yet. I wonder if it will ever fade completely, or if I will carry it on my back for the remainder of my life.

\* \* \*

My arm healed completely from the fall at the stables. Half of my right forearm was an open wound, oozing pus and shiny blood. Now, the skin is smooth and unblemished, no hint of the carnage that was once there. It's funny, which wounds choose to heal themselves without a scar and which don't.

\* \* \*

I dig into my thumb when I'm bored, sitting on the plaid couch in our apartment watching Netflix on my laptop. I dig into my thumb when I am studying for a test. I dig into my thumb when I am crying over a boy. I dig without knowing I am doing it, until I look down and my thumb is running blood. I tend to hide my right hand.

\* \* \*

If I could choose to erase my scars, would I?

\* \* \*

An outside trainer hosted a jump clinic the weekend after my fall, and a girl from the team took pictures. In my favorite picture, I sit on my favorite horse, frowning in concentration, my right arm wrapped in a bandage. When I walked to the arena for that Sunday morning ride, the claws of fear were soon overtaken by the familiar happiness that only riding brings.

\* \* \*

At first glance, I seem unblemished. But look closer and you will see the curve of my thigh if I am standing the right way and in the right light. If you catch a glimpse of my back, you might notice the purple crescent. If you look closely at my hand, you will see the worn patchwork on my thumb. Dents and ragged skin and half-moon marks.

# THE COMING STORM

BRODY HUGHES

Your arms strain forth,  
Seizing cosmic cloudy breath.  
Clasp, cluster what  
Was cold and formless.  
Your melting, murderous appetite  
Devours all you grasp.  
Hungry brutality constructs your  
Composition: eclipse colossus.  
Your insides churn, freeze,  
Assemble, grow. Gravity  
Beckons tears, calls for  
Lament, your destruction's  
Deadline. Surrendering sobs  
Thunder and pierce heavens.  
Each drop falls and melts away  
Another piece of your form.  
Hunger was your destruction.

# DRUG BUST

BRODY HUGHES

She was queen of her blue crystal palace  
Its pillars grasped clouds like redwood trees  
She swore she loved me more, her pulse callous  
When she lost her glass halls her heart it did seize

Its pillars grasped clouds like redwood trees  
The day blue men smashed through our door  
As she lost her glass halls her heart it did seize  
Our icy house was what her last whispers were for

That day blue men smashed down our door  
I was only a child who didn't know why  
I was not who her last whispers were for  
And as blue men lead me to stand under sky

I was only a child who didn't know why  
She lied, "I love you more." Her pulse callous  
And as blue men lead me to stand under sky  
She was no longer queen of her blue crystal palace

# CONSERVATORY

ANNA GIRGENTI

Frantic in their house of net,  
the butterflies must be tired,

unable to cease the rise and set  
of their horizon-colored wings.

Here they orbit us, strange uprooted  
trees moving through a painted forest.

I have been the butterflies before  
in my city apartment late at night,

and what orbited me was a heavy scent  
of blood over the kitchen sink,

rusty red under my fingernails,  
and a certain kind of loneliness

requiring a severing, a release  
which also maims, the way a hook

sits and rusts in a fish's jaw long after  
the line is cut. I also swim on

or shrug my wings among a human  
species and pray that one might  
bend to study me, the quiet insect.

But here inside the screened room,  
I do not know if the outsider is me

or the butterflies. I walk

a short distance, bound to earth's dirt,  
the distance between tonight and sunrise,  
roaming the traffic between planets

in the absence of butterflies.  
Maybe their presence means less than  
the empty pockets of air they leave.

I wonder, is it worth it to be conserved?  
The flight from one cage to the next  
is painful even for those of us with wings.

I have smuggled one out on the back of my shirt,  
out of the glass building to flit and worry in the

larger world of sunset behind rotting trees.

# NATIVE

ANNA GIRGENTI

As much a stranger here  
as I am in my own country,  
I try to walk soundlessly in Venice after dark.  
An old woman once told me, on this continent,  
you will know an American by his walk,  
the brave plunge,  
the pounding through unfamiliar streets.

So I slow my step, order wine  
in my best Italian, but I cannot unearth  
what my bones have grown around,  
what textbooks on coffee tables have

carved into the subconscious of a nation  
so distant from this sinking city built on  
one hundred sunken islands.

Yet here, a traveler, I learn  
I'm never the first or the last  
on a single piece of land,

and back home in Wisconsin, a howling  
comes at night from some deep grave  
in the woods. The earth remembers it all.  
Those trees stretch over land so vast it  
cannot be mapped, fenced, shaved, and sliced,  
though we try.

And in this land, a small boy plays in the dirt;  
He was born with a drop of eagle in his blood,

because his great-great-grandfather  
took a woman who  
was not his to take.

He crowns himself with a headdress,  
“I am king of the creek,”  
the feathers plucked from a  
drowned pheasant.

I would like to learn a language that is not  
my own, but what is mine to speak?

# CONTRIBUTOR BIOGRAPHIES

ALIYA CHAUDHRY is a fiction writer, poet, and journalist. She has lived in the United Kingdom, Pakistan, the United States, and Kenya. She is currently a senior at the University of Pennsylvania majoring in English and minoring in political science. She covered arts for The Bi-College News and music and tech for 34th Street Magazine. She is currently working on a fiction project exploring communication, memory, and long-distance friendship through various forms including Skype messages, personality quizzes, and math equations.

AMANDA REID is a senior at the University of Pennsylvania studying fine arts and English.

AMBER SALIK is a Taurus and a New Jersey creative studying creative and alternative healing at New York University with minors in child and adolescent mental health studies and creative writing. Her concentration focuses on both the practice and study of various art forms (namely photography and writing) and all the ways that art can heal the soul. Her art has been featured in the Gallatin Arts Festival, Confluence Mag, and the Gramercy Arts Showcase.

AMEENA CHAUDHRY is a 21-year-old Pakistani-American writer studying creative writing and gender studies at the University of Iowa. She enjoys breakfast foods and thinks no one should have to choose between being a dog person and a cat person. Her work has been published by Ink Lit Magazine, the Oakland Arts Review, and Words Dance Publishing, and she is currently working on her first novel.

ANNA GIRGENTI will graduate in May 2018 with a BA in English and creative writing from Loras College. Her work has been published in Remington Review, Susquehanna Review, and Midway

Journal. She was also a recipient of the 2018 Iowa Chapbook Prize, and her published chapbook will be available at Prairie Lights Books in Iowa City.

ASAMI TAMAGAWA is a junior majoring in psychology and minoring in creative writing and entertainment business at New York University. She calls Tokyo and Greenwich, Connecticut her hometowns and hopes to integrate these two cultures in her stories. When she is not struggling with homework, work, and life in general, she can be found binge watching Japanese dramas and thinking about her dog.

BLAKE LONDON is a student at the University of Pennsylvania and is originally from Gillette, Wyoming. His work has appeared in *Euphony Journal* and *eFiction*. Blake was the 2013 recipient of the Wyoming Young Authors Prize in Poetry and currently performs spoken word poetry with The Excelano Project.

BRANDON-BRUCE CRISPIN was born in The Bronx, New York City and spent his childhood between the big city's inner city and the barrios of Santo Domingo, capital de La República Dominicana. He is currently a senior at New York University's Gallatin School of Individualized Study, concentrating in politics and narratives with a minor in creative writing.

BRIAN ECKERT is a third-year English major at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio. In the future, he plans to complete an MFA program and continue writing while pursuing a career in the humanities. In his free time, he enjoys returning home to a small town in Indiana and traveling around the Midwest.

BRODY HUGHES is a 23-year-old who has recently graduated from Southwest Baptist University with a degree in biblical studies. He lives in the Midwest in Springfield, Missouri with his wife, Ashley Hughes. He works both at a coffee shop and a website design company.

CALEB TANSEY is a sophomore at Boston College and plans on double-majoring in history and English. His work has been published in the Parkmont Poetry Festival and the Susquehanna Apprentice Writer.

CARRIE MANNINO studies English at Yale University.

CASSIDY GRAHAM is a senior at New York University majoring in English and minoring in economics.

DELANEY HEISTERKAMP studies creative and professional writing at Miami University. After a short lifetime of writing flash fiction and creating surrealist drawings, she now explores poetry, creative nonfiction, and paper sculpture.

DELANY LEMKE is graduating from Central Michigan University in May 2018. Her poetry has been published in *Temenos*, *Audeamus*, and *Juxtapose*. She is the editor-in-chief of the campus literary publication *Central Review* and an employee of the CMU Writing Center. Her passions are watching *Dirty Dancing* while trying not to cry and drinking sugary coffee even though she knows it'll just make her anxious.

FAITH PADGETT was born and raised in the suburbs of Texas and attends the University of Pennsylvania. Her poems have appeared in *Hanging Loose*, and she confesses to having attended Poetry at Round Top twice, much to her bewilderment. She has previously worked with the *Southwest Review* and *Spry*. She is a letterpress assistant for the Kelly Writers House through the Common Press. When not working or writing, Faith can be found sipping tea with a book or walking through the prairie with her four adopted mutts.

GABRIEL BAMFORTH lives in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where he is pursuing a dual degree in civil engineering and creative writing at Carnegie Mellon University. While not in class, he can be found on a diving board, in the library, or attempting to repair his perpetually broken car.

GENEVA GIST is a student at UCLA studying American literature and culture as well as Spanish. She is very involved in her school's environmental club and is a mentor for other UCLA students. Outside of school, Geneva enjoys playing music, practicing tennis, and exploring the outdoors. She is currently experimenting with many writing styles, inspired by Vonnegut and the various authors she reads in her literature classes.

HANNAH SINCAVAGE is an undergraduate student at Georgia Southern University in Statesboro, Georgia. She is majoring in writing and linguistics with a double minor in economics and history. Even though she's never attended a funeral, the idea of life after death was an appealing prospect after the death of a high school friend. In her spare time, she enjoys painting, drawing, writing, and existential crises.

ISABELLA BARRICKLOW studies English literature, language, and writing at Central Michigan University. Her work has previously been published in the Central Review and the Slag Review.

IZZY LÓPEZ is a junior at the University of Philadelphia studying English and creative writing. She is a writer and performer whose work focuses on identity, relationships, and home. Her work has appeared in Penn Review, F-Word Magazine, and Rkvry Quarterly Literary Journal.

KAYLA ANDRY is a second-year English student at UCLA. She is currently an editor for UCLA's FEM magazine and likes to write poetry in her spare time. Her other interests include film, Fleetwood Mac, and food.

KERIGAN WILLIAMS is an English literature, language, and creative writing major at Central Michigan University.

KRISTEN KAREM is pursuing degrees in English and creative writing and theater at the University of Kentucky.

**LAURA FITZGERALD** is a senior at Miami University studying creative writing and journalism. She plans to pursue a career in journalism after graduation. Her journalistic writing has been published in Cincy Magazine, Dayton Magazine, Patch.com, KosovaLive360.com, The Miami Student newspaper, and The Miami Student Magazine. Fitzgerald enjoys riding horses in her free time and is a native of southwest Ohio.

**MADISON EBERTH** is a senior at Central Michigan University double-majoring in sociology and youth studies and child development with a certificate in creative writing. She is an editor of Central Michigan University's undergraduate literary magazine, the Central Review. Her work has previously been published in the Central Review.

**MADISON MURDOCH** is a first-year student studying art and design and political science at the University of Michigan.

**MARK NAIDA** is a writer living and working in Hillsdale, Michigan. His work has appeared in the Detroit News, the Federalist, and Acculturated.

**MAXINE FLASHER-DUZGUNES** is currently studying as an undergraduate in the dance department at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts and the English department at the College of Arts and Science. She is a contributing writer to The Thread Mag, inbtwn., and NYU Under the Arch, with poetry featured in the youth anthologies of Live Poets Society of New Jersey, Third Annual Bay Area Book Festival, and Marin Poetry Center.

**MICHAEL SALTOUROS** is a senior at Bradley University studying English and philosophy. He is originally from Chicago, Illinois. Post-graduation, he will be working with Teach For America in Indianapolis. Currently, he is wondering if/when the Starman will reach Mars.

**MORGAN WU** is an Asian-American writer born and raised in New York City. She is a recent graduate of the University of Pennsylvania,

where she studied psychology and English literature. She works in clinical psychology and theater in New York and Philadelphia.

**NICK VERSACI** is a fourth-year student double-majoring in English and statistics at UCLA.

**NICOLE HURTGEN** is a senior studying English language and literature at Central Michigan University. After graduation, she hopes to attend and earn a Master's degree at New York University. She has previously had work published in *Display Magazine* established by Grand Rapids Community College, and her hobbies include baking, watching romantic comedies, and writing. Nicole Hurtgen currently resides in Holland, Michigan.

**NICOLE PENROD** is a full-time UCLA student, an explorer of Los Angeles, and a proud member of a family with a great dog.

**NYEREE BOYADJIAN** is a creative writing student at University of the Arts in Philadelphia. She is originally from Queens, New York and was raised with an Armenian family. Nyeree is also a proud member of the LGBT community and mom to a beautiful cat named Dakota.

**PHOEBE LOW** studied English at the University of Pennsylvania. Her essays and short stories have won Scholastic Art and Writing National Gold and American Voices medals, and she has written for *The Pennsylvania Gazette* and *Filament Magazine*.

**RACHEL MAHONEY** is a senior at Western Kentucky University.

**RANDY JAMES** is an English creative writing major at UCLA with an art history minor. His poems have been published in several print publications, including *Myriad* and *Westwind*.

**REBECCA MEIER** is an English major at Bradley University with a concentration in creative writing.

SABRINA QIAO is a junior at the University of Pennsylvania, where she is pursuing a degree in English with a minor in journalism. She is a Philadelphia native, and in her free time she enjoys long drives in the cramped city traffic. She also writes for the Penn campus magazine, 34th Street.

SARAH AL-QATOU, otherwise known by the pen name “saq.,” is a third-year English and film student at the University of California, Los Angeles. Sarah believes memories and stories are the basis of relationships. She hopes to transcend historical ideals surrounding surrealism by creating work that is both out-of-body and grounded. She currently works for Paramount Pictures in Domestic Publicity and National Advertisement.

SHANNON DONAGHY studies English education at Montclair State University.

SHRUTI MUNGI is from Nasik, India and is currently a junior at Knox College, Galesburg. She is majoring in creative writing and hopes that one day, she will have all the time to simply write her day away. She draws inspiration from writers like Sylvia Plath and Virginia Woolf and draws on themes she finds apparent in life back home. She looks forward to the day she can live in a quaint little town she can call her own and be surrounded by cats and her books.

SOPHIEJEFFERY is an English literature and creative writing major at McKendree University. An aspiring author, Sophie enjoys reading, starting (and sometimes finishing) crochet projects, playing video games, and spending time with her husband and two children.

TIA WHITE is a junior at the University of Wisconsin Eau-Claire. She is an English major with an emphasis in creative writing with a psychology minor.