



The Mercury  
The Student Art &  
Literary Magazine  
of Gettysburg  
College

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Volume 2017

Article 1

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2017

## The Mercury 2017

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The Mercury 2017

Author Bio

# THE MERCURY

The Art and Literary Magazine of  
Gettysburg College  
2017

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*from "A Dark Passage" by Erica Schaumberg*  
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## **History & Process**

*The Mercury* is a student-run art and literary magazine released each April. It has been published annually since 1899 at Gettysburg College. All students of the College are invited to participate on the staff and to submit their work for possible publication. Editors are elected annually by the entire staff. Submissions are reviewed and selected anonymously by the staff each year during winter break.

## **Events**

*The Mercury* holds a publication reception each year and participates in campus events such as the Activities Fair, Get Acquainted Day, and co-sponsored events with Sigma Tau Delta, the English Honor Society. In 2016, *The Mercury* hosted its fifth annual Write Night, an opportunity for students to read their work in a formal setting.

## **The Mercury Prize**

Each year, the staff awards a monetary prize to the best piece of work published in each genre. We would like to thank the judges for 2017: Kathryn Bucolo Hill (Fiction), Marina Crouse (Nonfiction), Ela Thompson (Poetry), and Anika Schneider (Art). *The Mercury* Prize-winning titles are bolded in the Table of Contents. This year's winners are: Jhanvi Ramaiya (Fiction), Kathleen Bolger (Nonfiction), Brynn Hambley (Poetry), and Erica Schaumberg (Art).

## **Publishing**

*The Mercury* was printed this year by The Sheridan Press in Hanover, Pennsylvania. We would like to thank The Sheridan Press, especially Kathi Ortman, for their support this year. This is the eighth environmentally-friendly edition of *The Mercury*, printed on paper from sustainable-harvest forests with soy-based inks. *The Mercury* is part of The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College, an online, open-access repository hosted by Musselman Library.

## **Acknowledgements**

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# THE MERCURY

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## Daily Bread

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The news anchor's voice buzzed from the television: "Twenty-six-year-old Clarice Thompson and her son, three-year-old Kenneth Thompson, were found dead yesterday morning in their home on the fourth block of Hazlett Street. Police have ruled their deaths a homicide. Neighbors report hearing shouts the prior evening, and at least one witness claims to have seen a car drive off sometime around midnight. After noticing a car still in the driveway, next-door neighbor Karen Heller went to the house to check and see if everything was okay. Mrs. Heller found the front door open and walked in, only to discover the bodies of Clarice and Kenneth Thompson lying in pools of blood on their living room floor. We go to Nate Jarrett at the scene of the crime for more on this story."

I let the reporter's voice turn to a dull hum. This segment aired this morning—domestic affair, the usual suspect, suspicion of the victim's on-and-off-again boyfriend and her son's father. The guy never showed up for work, probably skipped town. Family members of the deceased plastered "Wanted" photos of the fleeing lover-turned-killer across Main Street, desperately holding them out for passersby to look at.

Six others people sat in the waiting room. Four stared over at the TV. A man with a growing bald patch on the crown of his head he kept lightly patting, as if he could smooch hair onto it, his gold watch glinting out from his buttoned sleeve as he did so, sat three seats toward my left, at the edge of the row of seats and directly across from the TV. A short, thick man in a flannel, light wash jeans, and concrete-crustrusted work boots, whose thin mouth and deep-set eyes gave a somber air, sat diagonally to my right, close to the receptionist desk, so he had to crane his neck to peer at the screen. A woman, whose age could have ranged anywhere from thirty-five to forty-five, with a dirty-blonde bob and high-set rim glasses, and, presumably, her daughter, who had her mother's face and either her father's or her mother's (natural) hair, sat close to the TV, across from the balding man. The only two people who didn't gaze at the screen were myself and an elderly man directly across from me, who buried his face inside a newspaper with the front-page headline "Terror in Syria—Aleppo Street Turned to Rubble," underlined by a photo of dust-coated silhouettes standing around a collapsed building.

The door to the back hallway swung open. "Hunter Everett," called out a young nurse, glancing down at her clipboard through a pair of glasses perched on the edge of her nose. I stood up and strode over to the door. "Follow me," she instructed with a friendly smile. Her mahogany curls bounced as I trailed behind her.

The nurse—whose nametag read Mary—took me down the cream-colored hallway with linoleum tiles, past a few doors, and through the usual introductory process of taking my height and weight. Then I followed her again, around a corner which led to more hallway and more doors, stopping at the second on the right. The room looked like all doctor's offices: cabinets and a small

counter lining the wall opposite the door, a couple of customary office chairs scattered around the room, a navy exam table topped with a thin roll of paper, and health-related posters plastered along the walls.

"I have to take your blood pressure. Could you please roll up your sleeve?" I obeyed and then sat silently as Mary squeezed the air pump until the velcroed wrap tightly constricted my arm. Pen scratched as she made another note on her clipboard.

Mary announced, "Okay, all set," and swung open the door. "Could you please remove your shirt? The doctor will be with you in a minute."

After waiting, shirtless, for a few moments, mindlessly swinging my legs over the edge of the exam table, the door opened. "How are we today?" asked Dr. Robinson, her brown ponytail swinging as she shut the door behind her.

"Okay, I guess," I answered. "How are you?"

With a slight grin, she replied, "About the same." She sidled into the rolling chair next to the counter, grabbed the clipboard, and slid over across from me. "So what brings you in today, Mr. Everett?"

"I've been having chest pains." I put my hand against my chest, directly over my heart. "Right around here."

Dr. Robinson pulled her stethoscope from around her neck. "What kind of pains?"

"Maybe 'pains' isn't the right word. More like a tightness, sometimes with an intense pounding. That pounding can get pretty strong, like my heart might beat outta my chest."

Dr. Robinson nodded and rolled over to me. "Okay, can you take deep breaths for me?" My skin broke out in goosebumps around the cold metal of the stethoscope. "In. Out," she repeated as she placed the instrument against my chest, back, sides.

She finished and flipped through the clipboard notes. "Your blood pressure looks normal, and your breathing sounds fine." She glanced up at me. "Do you experience this tightness at any particular time or while doing anything in particular?"

"No, not that I can think of." I shrugged. "It seems pretty random." Trying to think back, I mused, "Maybe most often while sitting and watching TV."

"Do you eat anything beforehand?"

"Sometimes, but not always."

Dr. Robinson put the clipboard back down. "Do you exercise regularly?"

"No, not really."

"I suggest monitoring your pains over the next two weeks or so. Pay attention to what you ate beforehand, if you ate at all—perhaps keep a food log. Also, do some very limited aerobic exercises, maybe even just stretching, the first couple times you feel the pain. See how that affects how you feel. If it makes you feel worse, stop right away. You may want to buy some antacids if you don't already have any at home." The chair rolled backward a bit as Dr. Robinson stood up. "If you keep experiencing this pain, schedule a follow-up visit and we'll discuss where to go from there. You might need to see a specialist at that point, but, with luck, we won't get to that point. Small adjustments to your diet and exercise habits may fix the issue." She held out her hand and grasped mine. "I'll see you in a couple weeks, or hopefully not!" she chuckled.



“Have a nice day!”

“Yeah, you, too!” I reciprocated, sliding my shirt back on.

I trailed Dr. Robinson out the door and strode back to the door to the reception room. After relaying to the receptionist what Dr. Robinson told me, I left. I swung my car door open, slid the key into the ignition, revved the engine to life, and drove off toward the local dollar store to pick up the antacids.

Bells chimed as I walked into the store. Other shoppers slowly wandered around, glancing up and down aisles. A sign directed my way as I ambled over toward the medication and hygiene section. I scanned the shelves for the antacids and, with a shrug, picked out the cheapest bottle and headed back toward the cash register near the entrance.

A family stood in front of me in line, waiting for the elderly couple checking out to finish their slow process. The dad, a squat man with a head so smooth the artificial light gleamed off it like polished marble, wore a pair of sports sunglasses, a blue booster club football t-shirt, and a pair of gray shorts. The mom, with her chestnut curls, dressed a bit more sensibly for the autumn weather: a crewneck sweatshirt, also blue and sporting booster club football type, and khaki capris. Their son, around nine or ten, stood between them, still in his grass-stained padded pants and undershirt, cleats clacking every time he shifted his weight.

The dad spoke on the phone while his son stared fixedly at the boxed television behind the cashier counter. Music of a popular detective show theme song quietly hummed as panoramic views of New York City flashed across the screen, partially covered by names.

“Yeah, I can’t believe it either,” the dad said, waiting for the voice on the other end of the line. “A new shooting every week, every day almost.” He shook his Mr. Clean head. “I don’t know what this world is coming to.” He fingered a magazine cover with photos of schoolchildren filing out of a brick building, hands over their heads, led by young adults. In bold, plain script, a title proclaimed, “CHAOS IN WEST NORTON: ANOTHER SCHOOL SHOOTING.”

My chest tightened a little bit. I hadn’t eaten anything since this morning, so I made a mental note of that. I tried my best to ignore it.

The boy tugged on his mom’s sleeve and pointed at the television. “Hey, isn’t this the one where the girl’s brother kills her over their dad’s money? The one we watched last night at dinner?”

The mom followed his finger and nodded. “Yeah, I think so.”

“I wish they would play different ones. It feels like we’ve seen them all,” the boy whined, the clack clack of his cleats echoing off the high ceilings as he stepped forward with his parents, the elderly couple grabbing their bags to leave.

My chest grew tighter and a dull throbbing began. A noise, like distant drums of war or rushing water, pounded in my ears. I had the sense of getting swept downstream.

My mind turned inward to focus on my breathing—in through my nose, out through my mouth—and I didn’t hear the cashier call, “Next,” until the second, slightly impatient time.

I placed the antacid bottle on the counter, pulling a crumpled five from

my pocket. “That’ll be \$3.89,” the cashier announced in the graveled tone of adolescence, hints of breaks cracking through. I handed him the bill, got my change, and went on my way.

As soon as I got in my car my chest loosened up. Sucking in an unlabored breath, this time through my mouth, I drove home.

I slung the single-item plastic bag onto the couch and plopped down beside it. I reached for the remote and clicked the TV on. A golden H underlined by red reminded me that I left the History Channel on last night. On the screen, an older man sat in a wooden armchair in a darkened room, surrounded by bookshelves on every side. His glasses slipped a little down his nose as he leaned forward with extended hands. “After around eight years, construction of the Colosseum ended in 80CE after Titus inherited the project from Vespasian.” The screen fluctuated between old paintings of the enormous monument and modern film. “The brutal gladiator contests and battle reenactments that took place at the Colosseum comprised one part of the ‘bread and circuses’ tactic. Roman leaders figured that the spectacle of death carried out in the center of the Colosseum would, through entertainment, provide a venue of escape from daily life. This ‘circus’ portion combined with the public bestowments showered upon the people to pacify them with prosperity, and served the political purpose of placating the masses.” Gory images popped up on the screen as modern day actors dressed in gold-colored armor swung swords and spears at each other in dramatic reenactments. The historian in his office reappeared. “Of course, we have moved beyond these barbaric forms of distraction, but some would claim that contemporary sporting events serve a very similar purpose.” A narrator’s deep, movie trailer voice filled the void left after the historian’s exposition, describing the fights that went on in the arena as actors continued their reenactments.

My chest tightened up again, so I reached over and popped open the antacid bottle. I grabbed a glass and ran the faucet to fill it with water. After swallowing the tab, I went back over to the couch and grabbed my laptop, intent on once again searching through my symptoms.

I flipped open my laptop and plugged in my password. My Facebook feed, left up when I last closed it, stared back at me. The first post was a photo, with a caption that read, “POLICE SHOOT UNARMED MAN IN GRAND RAPIDS!” The grainy image made it hard to make out details, but I could see a heavysset black man sprawled on the pavement. A dark puddle pooled around his torso.

My chest constricted harder. My heart beat as if it wanted to burst through my ribs and leap from my body.

I typed “chest pain” into my search bar. I glanced through the results, clicking the next page button till I arrived at links not already purple. After I read through a few sites, most unhelpful, all repetitive, I stood up to make a sandwich. I grabbed two slices of bread, a plate, a knife, jelly, and the peanut butter. I sat back down, plate next to me, and clicked on “images.” With one hand wrapped around my sandwich, I scrolled through the photos – some of hearts, some of people; some fake, some not.

My heart’s pounding slowly grew to a ferocity that drowned out the background noise from the TV, the rush of blood sounding in my ears like a small

river just beyond sight.

Grabbing the remote, I stood up to do some stretching. After flipping through a few channels, I stopped on some action movie, an explosion on the screen grabbing my attention. Fleeing people poured out from the rubble as screams filled the screen. A famous Hollywood actor, bright-eyed, cut-jawed, and thick-framed, kneeled over the body of a young woman, unconscious with a trickle of blood running from her temple. He stared at her as the anarchic scene rolled around him.

My hands above my head, my chest constricted even harder. I put my arms down and stopped stretching, per Dr. Robinson's suggestion. But did the stretching make it worse, or something else?

Confused again, I sat back down and grabbed the laptop and my sandwich, scrolling through the images again as my heart beat harder.

## Meditation on Reading

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In February of 1959, nine experienced Russian hikers were found dead in the Dyatlov Pass of the Ural Mountains, scattered in various directions within a one-mile radius of their tent, which had been torn open and abandoned. Despite the freezing temperatures and high winds, the campers had fled the safety of their site in a hurry, some of them not even pausing to put on their boots. Unsurprisingly, six of the members of the party died of hypothermia. Surprisingly, one victim had a fractured skull, another died of brain damage without any sign of head trauma or wound, and yet another had traces of radiation on her body as well as a missing tongue.

Fifty-six-and-a-half years and five thousand miles away, my ass grew numb from immobility rather than cold, and I shivered despite the August heat. I had begun reading *Dead Mountain* by Donnie Eichar earlier that day, dragging a chair to the edge of the shore and letting waves tickle my toes. Aside from adjusting my position when I'd first settled in, I hadn't moved or spoken more than a few words in hours, not even as my mother attempted to drag me into conversation with my cousin. She should have understood after so many years of raising a reader that I was investigating in the Urals, not sitting on a beach chair in Manasquan, New Jersey. It's dangerous to disturb a sleepwalker because of the unintentional harm they might do to themselves or to the person waking them. It's dangerous to disturb a reader because the book might be a hardcover.

Such is my routine at the beach. Arrive, lather on sunscreen, pick out the day's adventure, bring a chair to the edge of the shore, sit down, decide the chair is too high on the shore, adjust, decide the chair is too low on the shore, adjust, sit, read. And read and read. About two hours later, when the sun has all but scorched my skin, I bring the book and the chair back up to our beachside treasure trove—towels and bags and food, whozits and whatzits galore—before diving into the waves and forcing myself to think of *The Little Mermaid* instead of *Jaws* whenever a piece of seaweed brushes my foot.

Having repeated a similar process many times in a variety of settings, I have mastered the art of escapism, the tendency to surround oneself with distractions for the sake of relief from unpleasant events. It encompasses any form of entertainment that allows one to forget about their real life problems. I'd first heard the term my freshman year of high school, when we read *The Glass Menagerie* in Mrs. Ford's English class. She wrote the word on the board in big letters—E-S-C-A-P-I-S-M—and we all dutifully copied it down, stowing it in our minds for the inevitable test at the end of the week. Mrs. Ford used "escapism" to describe Tom Wingfield's obsession with the movies as a way of getting away from his family. As she talked, I pictured the corner of my bed, where I kept the three to seven books I was working on at a given moment, and I thought, *Yeah, I get that.*

Tom's withdrawal into the cinema more than resonated with me, and, hav-

ing learned the official title for this flight from reality, I began to see myself as an escape artist. Beach reading is, of course, the best kind of reading because it implies a double-layer of escape. German explorer Alexander von Humboldt referred to traveling as “an uncertain longing to be transported from a boring daily life to a marvelous world.” The beach is a great big reading nook—despite the obvious total lack of privacy—complete with a foot massage, soothing nature sounds, and the occasional dolphin sighting. It is its own marvelous world. So why do I so eagerly leave that world in favor of a somehow better one that only exists in my head? Psychotherapist Robin Rosenberg attempts to explain the psychology behind the perfect beach read, saying vacation heightens our capacity to immerse ourselves in the story. When the sun and the sand melt away the time restrictions and pressures of our daily lives, we “have time to wonder, to let your mind wander, to be really curious, to be introspective if you’re an introspective person.”

*Dead Mountain* came to save me from boredom in August of 2015, but Rosenberg’s theory was much more applicable to my life earlier in the summer of that same year. By July, I was waitressing over forty hours a week at a tacky Irish pub in my hometown. On a good day, I sloshed half a gallon of beer down the front of my spinach-colored polo, got honey mustard highlights in my hair, remembered to ask customers how they wanted their burger cooked *before* I put the order in, and managed to keep everyone so glugged with booze and fried food that they didn’t have time to complain before I dropped off their check. All of this kept me too tired to establish a regular reading routine when a seven-day stint in Ocean City, Maryland arrived. As my family drove down I-95 from New Jersey, I slowly sloughed off what Rosenberg refers to as the “cognitive load”—the information people take in and compartmentalize on a daily basis as they navigate work and the gas station and the supermarket. My personal cognitive load was forty different draft beers and whatever amalgamation of ground beef, bacon, and cheese the restaurant had dubbed the Burger of the Week.

We left for Ocean City on a Saturday. By Tuesday, I’d gone through all three books I had brought with me, thanks to seven-hour days at the beach and a keen desire to purge all thoughts of the Cloverleaf from my head. I got up early to buy more books before hitting the beach for the day. Having already visited Westeros, a version of Reconstructionist America populated by vampires, and a small Midwestern town experiencing a series of child murders, I entered the bookstore as a literary tourist consulting my travel agent about the next destination. I bought three more books. I had nothing to read on the ride home the following Saturday.

Paradoxically, the stories I have clung to most fervently during unpleasant moments in my life have themselves been quite despondent. If misery loves company, I was the best hostess a pity party could have asked for. As a child, I turned to *A Series of Unfortunate Events* in the months after my grandmother passed away. The struggles of the Baudelaire orphans lifted my spirits through the simultaneous realizations that *I’m not the only unhappy person* and *it could*

*be so much worse* (perhaps not the healthiest way of dealing with grief, but it did the trick when I was eight). In Ocean City, bemoaning my sad fate as an unhappy waitress, I accompanied Louis Zamperini into the Japanese-occupied belly of the beast, the Marshall Islands during World War II in Laura Hillenbrand's *Unbroken*. Later that summer, after more waitressing mixed with back-to-school anxiety, the scientific conclusion Donnie Eichar reached at the end of *Dead Mountain* restored a sense of calm in me, despite the fact that the story of the nine hikers was as chilling and bizarre a story as could be conceived, all the more so because it was true. Reading allowed me to tie up literary loose ends while temporarily ignoring the fraying threads in my own life.

In October of 2013, one of my closest friends texted me to say her mother had passed away. The author of *A Series of Unfortunate Events* once said, "Reading is one form of escape. Running for your life is another." That night, after I'd exhausted myself from crying, the two were synonymous. I cleared my eyes enough to distinguish black squiggles as words on a page, laced up my metaphorical running shoes, and opened Gillian Flynn's *Gone Girl*. If I was talking to someone who was just beginning the process of mourning, the last book I'd suggest to them is *Gone Girl*. But as I turned the pages of the novel, I dematerialized from the floor of my bedroom and ended up in the middle of a murder-mystery media frenzy in Missouri. My breathing began to return to normal. Days and months were passing beneath my fingers in a matter of minutes, just as the Pevensie children were able to hide out in Narnia for years and years while war-torn England stood still outside the wardrobe. While I had mastered the art of escape, reading was more of a pause button than anything else. It gave me something to do until my thoughts stopped crashing into one another like members of a clumsy marching band. Even as I refused to think about what was happening in my life, dedicating myself entirely to finding out what happened to Amy Dunne, I was subconsciously relieved to know that when I closed the book and came back to New Jersey, everything would be as it was when I had left. And I would deal with it as soon as I was ready.

## movement

---

a friend once told me  
to *stop and enjoy*  
*the traffic* but as i  
sit here i realize that

i don't want to be  
still i want to run  
across the car tops and end  
the choking of the fabric  
across my chest and  
belly

i need to be in motion before  
i am pulled back into my  
seat

i don't want to know  
what happens when we stop  
moving

## Presence and Absence

---

1. Just because he wasn't here anymore didn't exactly mean that his company faded as well. Everywhere you went he would be staring back at you. He was on the refrigerator, in the family pictures; I could still feel him. Not literally, of course, because that would be weird.

I always called him my uncle, though technically he was great-uncle, and only through my great aunt's second marriage. I could have sworn he came from the west, with his shiny boots, dusty flannel shirts, worn blue jeans, and propped hunting rifle.

Even his beige, old-fashioned cowboy hat was brought out on occasion. He smelled of hard work—it wasn't a bad smell, but a smell that said even though he was seventy-eight years old, he would get under the porch to fix a leaky pipe.

2. I was there for the first one, but not for this one. It wasn't as exciting for some reason. The first one meant I was going to be an uncle at thirteen—that was something I'd go to school and silently beg one of my friends to ask me about. They'd start by asking how my weekend went.

Being the cool teenager I was, I'd act nonchalant and say how nothing big happened, other than I had a nephew and was now an uncle. Then they would stare at me, mouths wide open, impressed at a designation I was given not through my own actions, but my sibling's.

At seventeen, though, when my second nibbling was born, it was more common to have nieces and nephews. I wasn't really anything special. My niece's birth though, was very important to me, even if I wasn't there or excited about it. Her older brother was from a different father—her father worried she wouldn't turn out as smart because of his Polish genes. I questioned why he'd point out his lack of intelligence so often, but stopped questioning when he took it upon himself to tell me I was going to be her godfather.

3. I'd always admired my uncle's will to live. I understand most people have a will to live, but his was something else. He'd never slow down, always working on jobs too dangerous for him. He got his pacemaker when he was about eighty years old and I worried greatly for his health.

He didn't sweat it though. He leaned up from his reclining chair, his dulled teeth grinning at us, proclaiming how his new heart would just give him eighty more years to live. I had to keep up with him, I had to match his grey-stubble, deer-hunting ways.

To stereotype, he was a man's man. He was strong, courageous, never asked for directions, and fixed everything that broke in the house. His repairs emphasize



his existence the most.

The patch on the roof in the bathroom, with a slightly brighter white color than the rest of the ceiling, was him. He moved into an expansion built on the back of our house to keep him and my aunt closer—and of course he helped the construction workers build that, happily sweating away the years of retirement he earned. He'd pull out his dirtied construction belt from his youth and equip it with hammers, nails, and screwdrivers for any little occasion. The reason my new room was orange and black was because of the work from his old, calloused hands.

The blood on the floor underneath the black, puzzle-shaped carpet was his when he angrily refused to climb down from the ladder. His pride couldn't kill him if it tried—and believe me, it tried.

4. I hate when people hand me a baby; I always worry I'll drop the poor thing. When the child is your goddaughter, people want pictures, and this means you have to hold her.

I'm not one for pictures, but my niece definitely was. She'd smile her toothless smile, wave her cartilage-composed, floppy arms, and wail some incoherent babble. We loved it. She livened up the room. She calmed my heart, and when I held her, as the room was brightened by the old church people not knowing how to turn their flash off, she calmed my nerves.

Seeing her made you smile. Her big, blue eyes engulfed your person, and her pudgy face fought many grabs. She made our family happy, filled a gap that we didn't know was missing.

5. My warm hands held his own and my great aunt's, as we silently gazed at him. Lying in a bed in a hospital gown, with a blanket up to his chest, his weak breath puffing him up and down, his wide white eyes met the ceiling's tan glare. He was physically home, but he didn't feel at home. He was supposed to be stronger than this—a man's man.

I saw him pass, right there. He didn't go peacefully, but I didn't expect him to. I knew he'd fight it all he could, and he did.

It seemed unreal to watch him go, mainly because of his overwhelming company. I laughed at his jokes, helped him repair the house, and visited him, every single day. I was frustrated that he chose to leave me like this, especially when he promised me another lifetime.

6. Her name was Cora. I thought it was unusual at first, but now it sounds beautiful to me. It rolls nicely. I said it to myself in my room when I was told she was born. Your mouth "ooh-ed" in the "Cor," and "ahh-ed" in the "a." A child so fabulous deserved a name that represented that.

She was too young for my godfatherly impact to matter. She didn't even really know who I was. But I would always throw my backpack off, rush to the living room, and slowly peer in, until she noticed some new entity in the room, her brain chugging along until she turned back to look.

Her gorgeous stare toward the new-to-her being in the room created an even bigger grin on my face. I felt humbled to know this little girl who flaunted her natural ability to grab others' attention was allowing me a chance in the spotlight, even if only for a second or two.

7. His passing left me emotionless for a few days. I gloomed around the next few days, in disbelief of what I saw. The sadness that emitted from my elderly great aunt and the rest of the family affected me more.

I stared at nothing, reflecting on nothing, feeling nothing. He always made me realize I was important. I valued him, and he valued me. I wasn't his nephew, not his grand-nephew, and technically not even his great-grand-nephew, but he made me feel loved. I could feel my stomach and heart swell a few days after his passing, and I had to hide away.

I saw all the boards he built around the house. I saw his joyous smile reflected in a picture, right above a picture of my nephew, and right below a picture of my niece. I saw that one out of reach spot that he extended his arm toward to finish painting.

I didn't take his spot at the dinner table. Physically I might have, but I could not fill a gap that big spiritually. My father now had more responsibility around the house, and so did my brother and I. It was fitting that it took three men to fill in his rough, brown cowboy boots, hidden in a closet behind his button-up shirts and tightly-framed glasses.

8. Going to college has brought me farther away from my niece, but going home she is such a sight to behold. I gave my room back home up as a spot for her crib. I couldn't even be jealous when I first came home, walked up the wooden stairs, through the white door my uncle helped paint, and saw her leaning on the railing, smiling back at me.

She made me forget my troubles. I was wrapped in with everybody else—this one-year-old stole my time when she was around.

Whether it was the godfatherliness I had to live up to drilling in the back of mind, or the actual love she drew out of people, I slowly raced toward her and swung her out of her crib.

9. I cried a few days after his death, hidden in the empty room he helped repair, the one my niece would soon fill. I didn't let anyone see, because he wouldn't have if he was in my position.

He was a teacher to me—his rugged words escaping his wrinkled mouth in a powerful and commanding way. His shapely muscles complemented his extended gut. This feeling wasn't sadness for his absence, but gratefulness for his presence.

But most of all, it was his elderly, wrinkled smile, his rough hugs, and firm pats on the back when I managed to screw that tough nail in that allowed me to survive through my day.

10. Nine months after my uncle passed my sister announced she'd be having a child. I would soon have another nibling to look after. I widely smiled a few days after her birth, in the living room she would soon overtake with toys. I tried to act cool about it, but others clearly saw as I reached out to gush over her. After that I couldn't help but adore her presence, though I hid it well from the family, like the edgy teenager I was trying to be.

She was a student to me—to be properly raised morally and religiously. Her chubby face mimicked mine, complemented by her double-chin. When she left with my sister, I wished for her return, not in sadness of her departure, but in gratefulness that she'd return.

But most of all, it was her youthful, smooth smile, her loving hugs, and playful pushes at my arm when I managed to knock her dinosaur down that helped me endure each day.

## Planets

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Suppose you have no meaning,  
Suppose you cannot sleep,  
Imagine planets motionless  
In great absence of heat.

Make no mess of schedule,  
Clear mind, bathe in ache,  
Rid yourself of your agenda and of  
Lies that start to cake. . .  
To crust, to bind, to crumble,  
A cell in duplicative form,  
Suppose you have no idols for which  
You should adorn.

Suppose you're brave beyond that,  
No sugar pills to take.  
Take your chance,  
Lie beside me,  
See what I create.

## Haunted

---

*Children, Broadripple is burning and the girls are getting sick off huffing glue up in the bathroom while your boyfriends pick up chicks.*

*And darling I'm lost.*

I like to imagine it's him singing to me. That he's sorry and he misses me. That he didn't mean it. That he needs me. Because I need him. I need his warm breath tickling the inside of my ear when I wake up and find his arms around me. I need the 'I love you' he tells me every morning as I leave for work. I need the horrible British accent he attempts now and again to make me laugh when I'm mad at him.

*I heard you whispering that night in fountain square. The trash filled streets made me wish we were heading home.*

I miss him so much it hurts. Even more than the six stitches holding together the stab wound I took to the gut. I just wish she'd let me see him again. Let me touch his cool skin, look into his lime eyes and be allowed to be in love. I don't know who I am without him, and I lie here growing homesick. I think I feel him next to me, but then I realize it's my mind. And I try to get out of it but I can't; it just keeps running on and on and on...

*There was love inside the basement where that woman used to lie in a sleeping bag we shared upon the floor almost every night. And darling I'm drunk, and everything that I have loved has turned to stone. So pack your bags and come back home.*

We were in the basement. I was putting my bike away after my ten-mile ride when he came home drunk. He did that a lot. He'd get scared, and get drunk, and lash out. It wasn't his fault; it was the alcohol. That's why I never told anybody. But that day he'd lost his job. I didn't know. And when he saw me happy he couldn't take it. He took the scissors off of the table and drove them into my stomach. I dropped to the cold, concrete floor in that dark cave and felt as if I'd be stuck there, in that moment, for the rest of my life. I was clutching my gut and looking at my hands as they turned red. When I saw the scissors clatter to the ground in front of me I looked up to meet a gaping black hole and doe eyes. He couldn't believe what he had done. "I'm sorry...I'm sorry...I'm sorry..." he muttered as he paced back and forth, clutching his hair between his fists. "It hurts," I said, trying to bring him back to me. "Will you help me?" He rushed over and scooped me into his arms.

He laid me in the back seat of his pick-up and we drove to the hospital. I stared at the grey roof, growing confused as it gradually became pixilated. It was difficult to keep my eyes open. But once we were inside and he stood there with me in his arms, the image of distress, and the nurses came running, I knew I didn't have to anymore. He did it, he loves me, I could sleep.

*And I'm wasted. You can taste it. Don't look at me that way, 'cause I'll be hanging from a rope. I will haunt you like a ghost.*

We lied to the doctors, but I told my sister. And she made me leave him. Really though, she went into my house, packed my bags, and set me up at her place—I wasn't given a choice. But I just want to go home. I want to see him again, to be with him. I miss the way he used to say my name—I didn't need to

hear symphonies, or birds chirping, or sleigh bells ever again as long as I could hear him whisper ‘Maria’ to me every morning. He was everything. He still is everything.

*If my woman was a fire, she’d burn out before I wake, and be replaced by pints of whiskey, cigarettes, and outer space.*

They tell me I need help. I need to get out of bed. I need to talk to someone. I need to get over him. I need to eat. I need to stop playing *Broadripple is Burning* on an endless loop. Don’t they know that even if they turned it off it would keep cycling through my head? I need it. I need it to help me forget—to help me feel. All I am is numb. Thinking hurts. Speaking hurts. Living hurts. So I let *Broadripple* play through my mind again and again and again.

*Then somebody moves and everything you thought you had has gone to shit. We’ve got a lot. Don’t ever forget that.*

We were happy. We would go for bike rides together, laughing as the wind blew back our hair, smiling as we pedaled past the gardens filled with roses and lilies and daisies and flowers of all colors. Then we’d stop and rest our bikes against the sea wall, take off our shoes and tuck our socks inside of them, and he’d grab my hand pulling me up onto the wall, and together we’d jump down and run through the sand, leaving footprints as the grains stuck to our skin. When we got to the shore we would stand there, the tide rising and falling over our feet which were gradually going numb, and we’d just stare out at the wide, expansive, mass of blue, never more aware of the other’s presence or the hand that was tucked inside our own.

When I was sad, he’d sit and hold me, my head against his chest, his hand running through my hair, my hands playing with his shirt as his voice was making me melt. He’d be reading me *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, a book that never failed to make me feel better, for hundreds of reasons, but primarily because how can a book that ends with the line, “And even if somebody else has it much worse, that doesn’t really change the fact that you have what you have,” not make you feel better? Or at least allow you to accept your sadness for what it is.

He was amazing. It was only when he drank that he got bad. But should I have left all of that love because of the one time I overcooked the chicken so he pushed me down and I got a concussion? Or for that time I forgot to mention that I bought a new pair of shoes so he slammed me into the wall and I broke two ribs? Or for all of the times that he was so angry with himself that he’d get so close to me his spit was hitting my face and his hands were gripping my arms so hard they left bruises? I don’t think so. Because every time after he’d break down crying, and I’d cradle him in my arms as he mumbled, “I’m sorry...I’m sorry...I’m sorry...” over and over and over again.

*And I wrote this on an airplane where the people looked like eggs. And when a woman that you loved was gone, she was bombing east Japan.*

I never should have told my sister. But I can’t lie to her, she can read me too well and would’ve forced it out of me. So I lie here in bed and don’t leave. Their lives were better before I got here, now I’m all they think about. They whisper about me—I can hear it through the walls—they’re worried and they’re tired. They don’t know if I’ll be able to make it on my own. Every few hours someone comes in with a plate of food and a monologue, thinking that eventually I’ll

get up and move on. I think deep down though they know they can't let me off on my own, I'll just run back to him. I just want to go home to him, I never should've let them make me leave.

*And don't fucking move, 'cause everything you thought you had will go to shit. We've got a lot. Don't you dare forget that.*

I remember our wedding day. We were so happy. His parents were still alive back then. Four and a half years ago they died in a plane crash on their way to visit us, but that day they were very much alive and swinging. And the smile on his face was bigger than that of the Cheshire Cat's when only his grin remained. And mine made a matched set. I never felt warmer than when his hands held mine and we each said "I do," or happier than when he spun me around on that wooden dance floor.

*And I'm wasted. You can taste it. Don't look at me that way, 'cause I'll be hanging from a rope. I will haunt you like a ghost.*

He's all I think about. He's all I want. He's the only thing in life worth living for. I don't even notice my stitches because of how much larger the hole from missing him is. I just want to go home.

*And I'm wasted. You can taste it. Don't look at me that way, 'cause I'll be hanging from a rope. I will haunt you like a ghost.*

The song ends. But it's still here. Just like he's still here. These things, they stay with us, never really leaving, never really providing a definitive end. Can our hearts really completely let go of something that was once all we needed to survive?

## Beige

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“While here I stand, not only with the sense  
Of present pleasure, but with pleasing thoughts  
That in this moment there is life and food  
For future years.”

—William Wordsworth, “Tintern Abbey”

At Beachy Head, where pastured countryside rolls and rolls until it meets a sudden drop-off into the English Channel, I understood what I missed about England. I had never visited the chalk cliffs, but already they felt like a familiarity: dogs without leashes making dashes for thrown toys, words tinged with British accents tossing around in the wind, a sunburn beginning its slow crawl across the bridge of my nose. I lunged readily into an old happiness. Up until the moment I requested a ticket for Eastbourne at the London Bridge station, I was still deciding whether or not I wanted to spend my day trip from London exploring a new part of England or returning to the one I had committed to memory. In choosing the cliffs, I would sacrifice Bath.

It was my junior year of college, and I had been abroad for two semesters, with barely a month at home in Pennsylvania wedged between. I’d spent the fall in what many Brits consider England’s smallest city, a utopia of teashops and bookstores and Georgian townhouses all carved out in beautiful beige stone. Named for its historic Roman Baths (which still exist, though the bathing pools have taken on a questionable green hue, and you can’t swim in them), Bath has the nobility of a city that has carried with it a multitude of reputations throughout the centuries, not all of them good. Pick up any late eighteenth- or early nineteenth-century British novel and at some point you’ll find a scene where a cohort of anxious, upper-class women advise a character with a minor cold to “take the waters” in Bath to avoid certain death. In the same novel, sometimes on the very next page, some wizened character will hit you with a rant on the dangers of Bath’s society, how its rakes and social climbers and drunken gamblers spell ruin for the naïve, teenage country girl visiting the city.

Although attitudes toward Bath have shifted since then, Bath is well-preserved, and not just in the sense that you can feast on Bath’s famous Sally Lunn’s buns—larger in circumference and tastier than regular hamburger buns—in a house that is over five hundred years old. I think I knew, certainly before stepping off the train at Bath Spa station, perhaps even as far back as filling out the study abroad application for Advanced Studies in England, that I was going to Bath to be healed, to “take the waters” in my own way. After four months in Bath and then another four months in Copenhagen, Denmark, I was worried that Bath had doomed rather than cured me.

A few weeks before the end of my semester in Denmark, I was planning a two-day trip to a tiny Danish island called Bornholm with a close friend who was also studying in Copenhagen at the time. This journey would mark many lasts: my last opportunity to explore an unfamiliar region of Denmark, my final



weekend excursion to a European destination, my only chance to spend more time with my host mother's parents, who lived on the island and were eager to have me as their guest, though they spoke very little English and had only met me once. The friend I'd invited along had been in Denmark for the entire year, so I'd be depending on her to make sense of the Danish words I couldn't understand (which included every word in the Danish language besides *kanelsnegl*, or "cinnamon roll").

When my friend couldn't go on the trip last minute, I struggled with possible alternatives. I could journey to Bornholm alone and push myself to work through the inevitable bouts of silence and misunderstandings that come with language barriers, which was no less than what I'd been doing the whole semester. But the trip had suddenly lost its luster in the disappointment of losing my travel companion. I could book a cheap flight to Stockholm, which I wasn't too desperate to see. The other option, one that I'd waged a constant and internal argument against for many months, was returning to England.

In the time since I had left Bath and forced myself to readjust to a new culture and country, I traveled as much as possible, mostly on my own, sporting a hiking backpack with a complicated system of straps that crisscrossed my body like seatbelts. I fell in love with everywhere: the fjords of Norway, the Bavarian countryside, Edinburgh's pubs and icy beaches, the old subway cars in Budapest's underground. The eventual return flight to Copenhagen and the long train ride to my host family's house in suburban Køge should have felt like coming back to home base. But by mid-semester, I was choosing secluded seats on the train where I could cry into my grey scarf unnoticed. Worse than my sadness was my guilt in not being able to pinpoint its source. Nothing about Denmark—ranked 2016's happiest country according to the World Happiness Report—should have been disappointing me. And nothing was disappointing me exactly, only that Denmark was not Bath, and I was beginning to feel that the self I had cultivated during my time in England had, in Denmark, been misplaced.

I soon became paranoid that this was not a small sadness but the clinical kind, the same anxiety-infused depression I had chronically struggled with for years and thought Bath had shaken out of me. I could claim almost literally that it must have been something in the water, for in Bath, I hardly recognized myself. It was in Bath (or more precisely, in the nearby Bristol Airport) that I had conquered my fear of flying. On a program trip to Oxford, I had harnessed some previously unknown confidence and told one of my Bath housemates that I had feelings for her. And when our relationship ended poorly some months later, I read my writing aloud for the first time in front of a crowd in a Bath pub, channeling a private grief into an open-mic night confessional.

I was thinking of this version of myself as I, in panic, typed up an email to the care team at the Danish Institute for Study Abroad. A few days after, I found myself in a room the Danes would call *hyggelig*, a cozy space with soft lighting, across from a DIS staff member named Anders, who I trusted had some sort of psychological credentials.

"It doesn't sound like depression," he said thoughtfully, running a hand over his nearly bald scalp. "I would say you're just feeling beige."

"What do you mean?" I asked, though this assessment was an immediate

relief to me.

“Because you have a high emotional range, you’re used to either being at a one, extremely sad, or at a ten, extremely happy. England was a ten for you. It sounds like Denmark is more of a five, an in-between state. A beige color. You have to get comfortable with being beige. Most of life is beige.”

Already my mind was fighting his logic. *Beige doesn't give my life meaning*, I thought. What I wanted was England’s chalk cliffs, toothy white against the blue water. The mollifying gray of British clouds making up their mind on whether or not to rain. The brilliant green landscape of the countryside, interrupted only by the white bodies of sheep. Bath is beige but made me feel, in my time there, the opposite of beige, an emphatic ten on the happiness scale. What I felt for England—love in its extreme—had developed into an absence of feeling in Denmark.

But I was terrified to return to England too soon, to renew the sense of loss when I left for the second time. I thought it better to return in five or ten years when I could form new and separate memories rather than risk corrupting the ones I had. A part of me was also worried that traveling to England by myself would intensify my loneliness. Of course, the seven Americans I’d shared a house with in Bath and roamed England alongside had long been back in America. If I went back to Bath, I’d have to stand in front of 1 Pierrepont Place and accept that my old home was now inhabited by strangers.

I elicited advice from friends in Denmark and America in the hope that they would validate my concerns and tell me to travel someplace else. Instead, they offered lists of pros and cons without leaning one way or the other. When I called my mother and asked what she thought, she let out an extensive sigh. “Just go where you want to go,” she said, and I hung up feeling even more frustrated.

Then it occurred to me that if I went back to England, I didn’t have to return to Bath. I could name a dozen British sites I’d wanted to see but hadn’t gotten the chance to the previous semester. Bath would overwhelm me, I reasoned, but if I stuck to London and visited the South Downs, a series of chalk cliffs on the southeast coast, maybe I could relearn myself in a way that wouldn’t be overrun by nostalgia. Where I wanted to go was England. The only person telling me “no” was myself.

Walking down the promenade in the seaside town of Eastbourne, I bought a cheese toastie before hiking up the grassy hillside leading to the South Downs. At 162 meters, Beachy Head is the highest of the cliffs, the ideal spot for family picnicking or selfie-taking or drone-flying, all of which I observed. As I wandered along the grass, I saw a cluster of white crosses near the edge of the cliff. I had read in a guidebook that Beachy Head was one of the top suicide spots in Europe, though I didn’t want to imagine the cliffs in that way, a site where tranquility might be broken, where a life might reach its end. Looking out at the people dangling their feet off the edge, laughing for photos and carefully peering down at the red-striped lighthouse far below, I was reminded how much it meant to me to *not* want to jump. I was not in Bath, and I was okay. The next day, I would be back in Denmark, and in a few weeks, America. I would be leaving England, but I would be taking my happiness with me.

## Small Thought

---

Begin reading. Hear  
 it?  
 So can I—

the voice

in your mind. Can you imagine...  
 a tree, any tree ?  
 What do you see?  
 My tree's an evergreen  
 which reminds me  
 of Christmas:  
 how air that is crisp  
 smells subtly distinct or  
 sitting in the parlor breathing in, stiff,  
 whiffs of waxed cinnamon but only when  
 I ran out of held oxygen.  
 The scent of those candles always lingered. Why,  
 I'd say because it was nostalgic or  
 just tragically too thick to lift during the yearly intermediate  
 but you remember this,  
 yes?  
 ...  
 I do.  
 ...  
 You don't have to lie.  
 We can discuss something else,  
 anything but politics or religion.  
 Though, I broke that rule when I mentioned X-  
 mas but see, I've fixed it:  
 "X"  
 marks the spot where the Word was hidden.  
 Hm, I feel like I've been doing all the talking...  
 just let me know when you're ready to. Button—  
 I found one the other day on the floor,  
 some people collect them. Some people collect coins.  
 I've told you about the time I found a buffalo nickel,  
 no...?  
 Well, it happened during recess in the second grade.  
 Those days are so far away,  
 yeah?  
 ...  
 They are.  
 ...  
 You don't say much, but I can  
 tell you think a lot which is fine. Sometimes,

*The Mercury*

it takes something completely ordinary  
to make me feel extraordinary—like this  
conversation  
is the longest discussion I've ever had  
without being interrupted. It's tempting to  
go back and time it. You know, it is  
nice when someone's not only listening but thinking  
about what I'm saying. Even if it's only  
for the duration of this poem. As a token  
of my appreciation,  
I'll let you go. A head now  
listens. After all,  
it's only fair if I give you a chance  
to lead this time. Tell me,  
...

what do you think?

## Karma & Consequence

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### *1 / Desert*

As a young woman, Indira imagines herself having a long life. She also imagines herself smarter and more lackadaisical than she truly is. So when scars start appearing on her body, she cheerfully carries on. When she is pushed down the stairs, she will say she has fallen. And when she becomes pregnant, with triplets nevertheless, she carries on and pretends it isn't happening until she cannot ignore it any longer. In her mother's rickety wooden home, built on stilts by the river, Indira, for the first time but certainly not the last, feels numb. She leaves her mother, but packs the scars that Mummy gave her next to a photograph of the last time they were together, and walks.

### *2 / Desolate*

When she gives birth, just over two months early, Indira does not feel care-free. Indira feels like her entire world is about to implode, starting with her cervix. Who knew the pain would be so biting? It is as if a million bullet ants are sitting in her uterus, conspiring against her. Sitting in the waiting room of a small charity hospital that is quickly running out of beds, Indira hopes that she might die. She dreams of that place that is heaven, and thinks that it might feel the opposite of what she is feeling right now. The reverse might be that orgasm that Nikhil gave her—after all he came in, and clearly, a part of him stayed, but it was fighting to get out now. That was a part of science, if she remembered correctly: what goes up, must come down. Therefore, what goes in must come out. Indira hopes that this is what happened, because karma is real and Indira wants her retribution to be over.

When Indira first learns about karma, it is at five years old. While Mummy airs her grievances about not having birthed a boy over the telephone, she takes a coin from her peeling leather purse to buy herself an ice cream from the ice cream man. When her mother asks her why her face is so sticky, she tells her. Her mother tells her she is a thief, and explains that she must punish her so that the world does not. Mummy wanted cigarettes, and what had she done that Indira had stolen her cigarette money? This was her karma, too.

"This is karma, Indira. You do bad things, and bad things will happen to you," Mummy says as she pulls out her stick and begins to smack Indira's small body.

To Indira, karma is the spectrum between red and purple and lives like a sequence of painful galaxies on Indira's back for weeks afterward.

### *3 / Empty*

When Indira tries to leave the hospital with her three (three!) daughters, she cries. She gets up, tries to carry all three premature bundles in both her hands as she walks, spread-legged, out the door. After her second daughter was pushed out, the doctors say she passed out. She passed out again after her placenta came gushing through. Her womb feels as though it's sagging in its emptiness. Her arms are so full, and her hopes are so crushed. Three daughters

born early is not a recipe for success when you do not have the money to raise them. Three daughters are definitely not a recipe at all when you have barely enough to feed yourself. Indira is made up of half-used ingredients that are close to expiring, splattered over countertops and across the walls.

*4 / Homeless*

Indira has managed to pay a little rent on a room that sits over Mrs. Childs' garage. Mrs. Childs is an old woman whose life had been full and filled with family for the most part. She is worried about Indira having none. She is worried about Indira in the streets and what men might do to her. Mrs. Childs is not a philanthropic woman by any means, but she thinks she can recall a time that she herself did not have a family because her mother was cutting off any and all ties that bound her to the idea of home. Her mother fought with her grandfather and there was yelling and maybe it was not the best time, but her mother came and hugged her for days afterward. They sat together in a shelter, huddling against a wall with their meager belongings and didn't move because they were afraid. Mrs. Childs does not want Indira juggling three (three!) little girls on her lap in the corner of a shelter. It is bad karma to leave a mother and her children in the streets. (Her grandfather should know. He was run over by a truck, or so her mother always told her).

*5 / Isolate*

By the seventh time one of the girls has pooped in her diaper, Indira knows what to do like it is muscle memory. She pulls tiny feet toward her, and deftly unsticks the diaper and wipes gently with scratchy toilet paper. She understands why they cry when she does, because she tears up when that toilet paper touches her vagina. Wipes are a luxury she cannot afford her girls. She has to stand in line for hours just to get them some diapers. It is a good thing that Ma'am from the bookstore where she works understands. She has said that Indira should take a break. Indira likes her, she works hard for her—always cheerful on the outside even though that cheer has been spreading through her body less and less as her belly grew heavier with her triplets. Indira sits back with that diaper done and picks up the one who is screaming. Her eyes are heavy and so is the child in her hands and the weight in her heart but she has to carry on in this little room.

*6 / Seclude*

Two weeks into heaving around the triplets like precious bags of lard, Mrs. Childs asks Indira to move downstairs.

"A girl and her children shouldn't be so alone—let me help with them."

Indira cries. She sobs, and she cannot stop. She has been so numb and now is starting to feel a thaw in the ice that had spiraled wildly through her body. Mrs. Childs holds her against her shoulder—like she has done for two weeks for her daughters. Indira thinks that this is what it might feel like to have a mother who loves you. She decides then and there to be a mother that will always use her shoulders to carry everything they need her to.

*7 / Forsake*

When they are one month, old Indira informs Mrs. Childs that she has

finally picked out the three names she wants for her daughters. The next day, Mrs. Childs has put up three hanging strings with blank pennants hanging down.

“Tell me their names, then?” she asks.

Indira runs to the room that she now calls her own with her three daughters, and she grabs a marker, comes back and very carefully, to make sure she’s absolutely right, writes out their names, one pennant at a time.

Lalita.

Mastani.

Sindura.

She worries that now that they have names, they will mean more to her. More gained is more to lose. She does not feel an immediate change. The weight of motherhood has knocked her to the floor already; she cannot feel the imperceptible daily additions of the weight of love. She wants them to feel the weight of love—she cannot bear that they might become her.

#### 8 / Renounce

Lalita, Mastani, and Sindura are six months old when Indira decides to finally write to her mother. She has learned that she can get a box at the post office so that her mother cannot find her. She does that, and tells her mother everything. *Everything*. She recounts Nikhil (*Mummy, remember you told me not to go to the circus? I went. I met a boy there, I know you’d hate him. He was so nice to me. He gave me butterflies. Someone that handsome giving me the time of day would surprise you. I’m living with his daughters now. Karma, yes?*), she recounts leaving (*I didn’t want to disappoint you, so I left. You know, I tripped down the stairs when I left. I pressed the bruise on my cheekbone from that fall for a week afterward when I missed being at home*), she recounts giving birth (*You never told me how hard it was to have me. I shat myself. Did you do that, too? The nurses told me not to scream the whole time so that I would have more energy to push. I was quiet through the whole thing, just like you taught me*), she recounts living with her babies (*My babies are growing so fast. I want you to meet them. I didn’t even know how to hold them at first. Now I can change a diaper in under 40 seconds if they’ve only peed!*). She sends the letter home, and at six months realized she has waited long enough for something else, too. Indira waits up for Mrs. Childs, even though her daughters have gone to sleep and that means she can too. When Mrs. Childs comes home, Indira has made her a strong cup of *masala chai* and is waiting at the table.

“Will you be our godmother?” She is nervous asking this because for the first time in her life, she has a mother who leaves lipstick marks on her cheek instead of bruises. She wants to keep her forever. She wants her daughters to have her forever. Indira knows that she will not be a good mother.

Mrs. Childs smiles and nods, chuckles a little, “I don’t have much of a choice in this matter, do I?”

Months later, Indira’s mother (bound in memories of bruises and spilled alcohol) responds to her letter. Indira cannot bear to read it, so Mrs. Childs reads it to herself and then lets it catch flame over one of her many scented candles. The scent of peaches brings about the death of her mother for Indira.

9 / Destitute

When she receives her third grade homework, Lalita gets a little furrow in her brow; she bites her bottom lip with her two front teeth. These two teeth have a delicate gap between them that Mastani has always envied. Sometimes when they go into town, and Mastani holds Lalita's hand, she looks at girls with metal in their mouths and laughs. Mastani is laughing at the strangeness of having metal in your mouth. Metal is for forks and for the sills of windows. Lalita grips her hand tighter, and pulls her along. One day as they are getting ready to walk through town to compare the lowest prices on food, Lalita stops her.

"Please stop laughing at me," she pleads with her wide eyes.

"Okay," Mastani does not know what Lalita means. She starts to suppress her giggles whenever she remembers this.

10 / Apart

The years pass by in the same way braces tighten in the mouths of the girls that Mastani laughs at, everyone gets themselves straightened out and in line. Except, in some ways they are teeth being pulled apart. Indira's face cracks a smile in relief every single day when she arrives home to Mrs. Childs' house and sees the old woman wrapped up with her three girls on the couch. Mrs. Childs has become their grandmother, and Indira has never been more overworked and grateful for Mrs. Childs.

Tonight, Mrs. Childs eases Mastani off her lap and tells her to go to bed, "I'll send your sisters up after you," she promises of the sleeping pair. Mastani runs to hug Indira, and refuses to unclench herself from her mother, even at ten years old. They spend more time without one another than with one another. Indira is afraid that they do not know how much she loves them. She reminds them when she can, but she is not home enough to do it. She is working hard, still at the bookstore where she started, and now runs the place for Ma'am. But she can pay her bills now, and she can buy her daughters clothes, and she does what she needs to do to make their lives move forward.

Mrs. Childs is silent for some time after Mastani finally goes upstairs, and as Indira begins to prepare herself a cup of *chai*, begins, "Indira, this is serious."

"What? I know I'm not home enough, I'm trying to cut back my hours but—" Indira begins a protest, mostly to herself. She knows her faults.

"I'm old. You know I might die soon. And they won't know who you are, but you'll have to teach them," she starts.

Indira gives her a blank look.

"It's better to start now, don't you think?"

Indira takes weekends off. She starts coming home early (hugs and constantly brushing her hands over them anywhere she can reach them).

11 / Hope

Indira has finally saved up enough money to take her daughters on a little holiday. They are sixteen years old, smart, and loved. It is very important to her that they are loved. Mrs. Childs is still alive (seventy-nine and still going strong), but Indira is thankful that she had started to spend more time with them.

She takes all five of them to a tiny inn in the woods where the owners



have promised that a lovely homemade breakfast will be served promptly at nine a.m. every morning. On the second morning (definitely before breakfast, because Indira has become accustomed to waking with the sun), Indira wakes up and brushes her lips across her daughters' foreheads. She decides that they are the most lovely women in the country; she is pleased that they have been raised well.

Indira decides to go on a walk that morning. The forest has more greens within it than Indira has ever before seen in her life. She decides to bring her daughters with her later in the day when they've really woken up, to bring them out to see the sights of this gorgeous, lush place.

Indira has noticed that she has been making decisions more confidently lately. Probably because they have all led to her daughters being who they are. Lalita is focused and steady, Sindura is fragments of fun nestled within hope, and Mastani... Oh *Mastani*. Her dear little girl is not *quite* normal, she can tell. She speaks a little more slowly than she should, and she drenches herself in everyone else's emotions. But that wonderful girl is Indira's gem. She will not admit to having a favorite out loud ("you're all my favorites") but Mastani's genuine caring for anyone and the kitchen sink makes Indira's heart blossom (truly, she has collectively spent at least a day of her short life standing over it and scrubbing as hard as she can to make it shine).

Indira decides she is happy now. She sends a hello up to Nikhil as she wanders the woods; she does not know where he has gone, that charm-you-out-of-your-panties circus boy. Likely he is in another town, putting on another show. She knows now why her mother told her never to trust the *circus-wala*. Indira does not regret going now, years later, because that *circus-wala* helped her fall in love. With Nikhil? God no. She decides that her triplets (triplets!) are the loves of her life.

Perhaps she wonders if it were him when she heard that the circus was coming around again. Indira never pursued him; Indira is irrevocably in love now and has decided that she does not have space for another in her heart.

In this forest, Indira finds a babbling brook—smooth rocks spill clear water down the hill. She pauses to splash water on her face and as she does, she knows that she will be okay.

Indira cannot find that brook again, no matter how hard she searches with her three gems (Mrs. Childs sits in the inn, her legs are too old for this jungle. She scowls).

Indira knows now that her daughters were never result of bad karma for sleeping with Nikhil or doing bad deeds. They were good karma for enduring the lashes that Mummy disguised as love for so long. Oh, how angry Mummy would be to see her happy now.

## The Night Bird

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“We had to stop the car because the herd of wild pigs was so huge. At the end of the line was this boar, all scarred up with these huge tusks.”

I could only see the back of Daren’s head, dark wavy hair that far surpassed the length of mine and skin the color of damp clay. He drove as he spoke, and the road over which we passed was composed entirely of red dirt which created opaque clouds behind the Land Rover as it bounced along. The trees were scraggly with bark blackened by fire, and the landscape was pock-marked by termite mounds taller than most humans. Heat distorted the air above the hood of the car and made me all too aware that just outside of this air-conditioned vehicle was the scorching Australian outback.

Daren chuckled as he encountered our silence. “You girls don’t talk much, huh?” I assumed his experience with American girls from previous college groups gave him a different impression of who we should be: loud, bleach-blond, vain, and weak.

I spoke, if only to provide a contradiction to his assumption. “It’s just been a long day. We’re probably tired.”

“Well, not too tired, I’d hope. We got a camp to set up when we get there.”

Daren resolved that he should continue his story. The boar had turned toward the vehicle, pawing at the ground with the intent to charge. Daren had retrieved his rifle and shot the pig square in the center of its forehead. It did not fall but charged, ramming its huge, bloody hulk into the car. Daren took aim again and laid three more bullets into the animal before it fell. Then they took it back to camp to be eaten.

“My mother used to go to school this way,” he said as if the end of the boar story contained some sort of sequitur. “She used to see this monster who lives out here. Looks like a man but all hairy and very tall. Would scream at night. I saw it too, once.”

The three of us in the back seat exchanged wide-eyed glances. “Wow, man,” I mumbled, if only to provide something to fill the stunned silence.

We arrived at a squat ranch house. Two horses dotted with flies nibbled on stiff grass in the front lawn. We were the third car in a convoy of four vehicles that pulled up to this place. Jack, a skinny Irishman with a Crocodile Dundee-air about him, shook the hand of a dirty-faced woman who emerged from the house. As she and Jack spoke, a few girls climbed out of the cars to harass the animals. One walked directly behind a horse while the other seemed determined to stick her fingers up the animal’s nostrils. The horse snorted indignantly and stomped off.

“Oh my god! Showers!” one of them shouted as she spotted the bathhouse. “We won’t be too far away, will we?” I had climbed out of the cool air of the car to try my luck at seducing one of those skinny horses. It sniffed at my hand tentatively before determining I had no food to offer it, then returned to tugging at the grass. Jack informed the convoy that we would be driving to the other end of the ranch to camp, much to the shower-girl’s chagrin.

There were nineteen of us students. We were all upper-classmen at Ameri-

can colleges, most aiming for a degree in some scientific field. Australia was a fairytale for many of us who had only dreamed of such a place of natural beauty. Others had come on the trip just for the novelty of the situation. And still others had no idea why they decided to come to such a hot, dirty place.

The first order of business was to go camping as a team-building exercise. We would be spending the next three months together, after all. A family of Aboriginal Australians was accompanying us with the intent of sharing their culture and knowledge: Uncle Russ the elder, Daren, his hunter-extraordinaire son, and Jared, who was Daren's more modernly-educated progeny. Jack would be there to supervise us, and Meryl was coming to make sure we did not starve to death. That brought the count up to twenty-four people, which was, essentially, a tribe.

We set up camp in a grove of trees flanking the river. The ranch house from earlier had long since vanished into the distance. Instead, termite mounds and snake-infested hovels overlooked our grassy oasis. The eucalyptus trees were tall and ancient sentinels that shaded the grotto. Cicadas rattled from high in their branches, and cows lazily plodded on the outskirts of camp.

"Go for a swim," Uncle Russ encouraged as he strummed an acoustic guitar from his shaded camp chair. "The freshwater crocodile won't usually bite." A few of the girls giggled as they tried to coerce Jared to accompany them into the water. He was classically handsome and fairly fit, aiming for a career as a professional rugby player. But his demeanor was shy, and while the screeches of horny college girls may have intrigued him, he had no clue how to react. I caught him once sitting in a tree overlooking the river in complete silence. We chatted about the lack of jobs for his Aboriginal friends and how his father felt like a hypocrite for working at a Catholic school that provides free education for natives as long as they practice the designated religion. Daren had a few sharp words for that place, but Jared reacted with a quiet truth.

At night, Uncle Russ would build a fire in the middle of camp and tell us stories. He told of the Rainbow Serpent, guardian of the rivers, who devoured two wasteful youths who killed more fish than they intended to eat. He told of the seven sisters who escaped into the night sky to become stars instead of letting the youngest marry a cruel man. He told of the injustices that his people have endured ever since white settlers arrived. He told of the death of his wife. He told of his lost culture. He told.

And one night, he gave us our names.

"You should be the dingo," said one of the students to me. "You're always playing with those farm dogs." Indeed, I gravitated toward the quick, sharp-eyed herding dogs or the two pad-footed puppies who would grow up to be monstrous white beasts. But sticks were easy to throw, much easier than holding a conversation with a distraught college student who is sick of peeing behind termite mounds and just wants to check Instagram.

The moon was full that night, but its pale, blue light could not penetrate the warm orange glow from the fire. We formed a circle around the burning log, some of us curled up on shared blankets, others huddled with companions for warmth. I sat downwind from the fire, and the smoke and ash blew over me with every gust. "Guyibara," he said to me. "The Curlew."

"Why?" I said to his shadowy form sitting on the opposite side of the fire.

“Because you’re quiet. You stand at the back, and you listen,” he responded.

I pursed my lips and whistled the curlew’s distinctive, eerie song; a minor tune that starts with one sustained pitch followed by another higher pitch which vibratos downward. A distant curlew, a slender-legged night bird camouflaged in the dark and dappled grass, whistled back. Uncle Russ nodded slowly at this exchange but said nothing. I imagined the wide-eyed bird pausing, listening for another whistle to break the night and ensure it that it was not alone. I obliged it one final time.

I awoke the next morning in a plastic tent to the sound of the neighbor boys swatting a large spider from their roof. Breakfast consisted of the same corn-based cereal which I ate every morning while sitting in the grassy clearing. “This whole trip just makes me really anxious,” said one of the students. “We’ve been here for four days, and there’s nothing to do. I feel like there’s work that I should be doing.” I chewed my cereal pensively as I considered her concerns. The girl frantically scribbled in a notebook, as if the afternoon swims and guitar serenades would be on the test. My own academic notebook remained untouched through the whole camping trip, but the pages of my personal journal were full. I ignored her reasoning and resolved that I would go and try to hone my boomerang throwing skills.

The nineteen of us had been thrown together just weeks before, and we had huddled together to protect ourselves from the strange culture we had been introduced to. But that time had passed. I was almost offended by those that had giggled at their Aboriginal name and passed it off as a cute cultural souvenir, or had griped about the damp ground and huge insects. They appeared to have come here to be “tourists”: culturally impenetrable, content to watch as if this experience was a movie they had paid to see and then leave behind at the end of the night.

After we returned to the city, the rest of our Australian experience continued to play out before us. Some chased boys, others discovered clubs, but I found a patch of grass to lie in and watched the stars. The tribe did not last. It broke up into smaller and smaller groups as each clique found what they coveted the most, be it alcohol or cheesy tourist photos. Eventually, we all went out on our own. But I was a curlew, alert and resourceful, too busy watching and listening to be bothered by loneliness. Uncle Russ said that we are all guardians of our namesake animal, forever a member of that species’ tribe. And while most in the group will slowly forget their names, I will forever be a night bird.

## Brecon Beacons

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I felt the gods in the hills of Wales  
and sang their songs to the foggy peaks,  
the reedy grass swinging with the icy breeze.

I have never known such a striking shade of citrine  
as my discarded raincoat on moss-covered rocks,  
ascending the mountain one stumbling, heavy step at a time.

Wild silver ponies look on with  
watercolor eyes, watching us climb,  
hiking boots shifting pebbles  
and creating a haunting sort of xylophone.

I am reminded of words from lifetimes ago  
that rest on the tip of my tongue like  
the sting of sour candies I ate  
when my mother and I would go to the movies.

This is the tang of letting go,  
of looking into a misty hidden sun  
and feeling earth that knows  
where I have been.

## The Streetlight Bled Through the Shades

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I can still feel her nails digging into my back—the pressure of her manicured claws gripping me. I still feel the pull of her trying to tear me open even though I already opened myself up to her as far as my head and heart let me. She had no words. She let out no sound other than her breath, and she did not touch me with her hands except to scratch. She kept her fingertips pulled back and instead led with her harpy's claw.

I can still taste the wine on her lips, but it tasted more expensive on hers than it did on mine. I remember noticing the softness in her kiss. I mean actually stopping to notice. It was almost as though she was sleeping, and we were both so drunk I worried I'd be waking Aurora, but she continued to scratch and kiss back, if only just to let me know she was still there. There was a level of peace, of sleep, that I can't even begin to describe. Kissing her was like stepping into a cathedral.

Hours later, in the middle of the night, she rolled over and shook me. Her voice was quiet and her breath still smelled of wine. She was calm. "W-we messed up." Her eyes started to well up just a bit. Her lips pursed just a touch and her face grew half a shade more red.

"No, we didn't. We're going to be fine." I touched her face as soft as my half-drunken brain would let me.

"I...I do feel something for you. I do," she paused for what felt like an hour, "but we can't tell anyone about this, and this isn't going to become anything."

"Okay."

"I'm sorry, it's just," she waited again, "I know you'd be good for me and when I'm with you I feel better about myself and about everything but for some reason I just—"

"It's fine." I kept quiet and held every argument I could back. "And what would our friends even say? And what would they do if they found out? Oh my God they're going to find out eventually...I'm awful, I'm so stupid." She grew more and more frantic, more and more anxious, with each passing word. Her breath shortened and her face tightened again into tears, until she stopped, took a deep breath, and shook her head to collect herself. "No one is ever going to find out about us. No, not 'us.' There is no 'us.' There can't be an 'us.' Okay?"

"Okay." She rolled back over away from me and started to drift off back to sleep. I leaned over and kissed her. "Sorry," I whispered as we pulled away, "I just wanted one more."

As the sun came crawling into my window a few hours later and her alarm went off, I ran through every last reason for her to stay just another minute; the combinations and permutations of words I thought I could say to make her stay glazed over my eyes, and before I had anything real, all I could mutter was, "Okay." I still feel the gravel grind in my throat as I let it out. She stood up and put on her clothes with methodical reverence. She moved slowly, as not to make a sound, or maybe just to delay even for another second having to face the world outside that small college apartment. Still though, she continued on toward the

door, stopping only once she was out in the hall.

"I'll uh, see you later, I guess," she was quiet then, her eyes down, "maybe we can grab lunch or something." I nodded.

As she closed the front door to the apartment, the blood finally rushed like the breaking of the Hoover Dam back up to my head, and I was met with sober, unadulterated clarity. It's just as likely that as soon as the door closed we both stood on either side of the door and sighed knowing the mistake we'd made. She might've cried. Knowing her, actually, she probably cried.

I tried to go on about my day with some semblance of normalcy. I slid back and forth between self-hatred and pride about five thousand times, each with a different reason to feel each way. I tried to slip back into sleep and pretend like it was a dream, but every time I closed my eyes I saw her there, every time I rolled over toward the wall I felt her behind me, and every time I walked into the room I half-expected to see her tangled in the sheets and bathed in the streetlight that bled through the shades, just as she was before. But of course, there was nothing. She left a ghost in my apartment, a demon that I didn't yet have the experience to excise.

We met later that day to talk about what happened the night before. We tried to piece together the little pieces we had of the night, like building a jigsaw puzzle where we both had half the pieces. We looked through our phones trying to find out how it came to be that she got to my door. She looked through our texts and our calls; she sat and worked with Bobby-Fischer-like focus trying to rationalize why she'd come over. She was investigating our night like a plane crash.

When she knocked on my door that night, I honestly couldn't tell you if I was expecting her or not. I don't remember if I invited her over, or if she came on her own, and it doesn't matter to me at all. I know I'm guilty for what I've done. I stuck a pin in my arm and shock collar around my neck to keep myself from being as stupid as I wanted to be, but damn, the second I saw her in my door, her hair and shoulders wet from rain, everything just went cloudy.

The first thing I saw was the cresting of her shoulders when she got inside and tried to get dry. She turned and started to pull off her sweatshirt, setting off the alarms and neon signs to confirm every expectation I had for the night ahead. I closed the door slowly, my conscience fighting the rest of myself; my id beat my superego and viciously stomped out its teeth. Clarity begged the fog of misattributed lust to stop its psychotic advance but it simply wouldn't. We moved toward each other like dogs.

Now, days later, she's still all I can think about. Having to act like nothing ever happened is pins and needles—torture, even more so when we and our friends spent every waking moment only seconds and steps from one another. We tried to have our stories straight, she and I. We talked for hours about how to explain where we were, why we didn't answer our phones, why she wasn't in her bed, and why they saw her leave my building the next morning. We poured as much water onto the coals as possible to cloud the room but all we did was smother the smoldering flame out entirely.

They suspected us. They knew without knowing. They saw the guilt tattooed on our faces and the taps of our nervous hands spelled out our stupidity

on the table like morse code. They were so close to finding out, so prodding with their questions, that she started to break.

She sat in my room, nervous as all get out, eighty-five percent of the way to tears. "I think we should just tell them," she shook like a bad day in California as she let it out, "they're gonna find out eventually."

"I'm fine with whatever you want to do," I sighed, "but you know they're going to expect us to be together if we tell them."

"I know."

"That doesn't mean we have to, though. It really doesn't. I couldn't give less of a shit what they think. It's none of their business."

"I-I have to think about it. If we do tell them, then I guess the biggest problem with us dating is gone... if they already know, they're already going to judge us, and that's what I wanted to avoid."

"Okay."

"I don't want you to think—"

"No," I said, almost under my breath, "it's okay. I get it."

That night, as all of our friends sat in the same small dorm room as always, in the same spots, drinking the same drinks, and gossiping about the same people, she looked okay. I mean, beautiful as ever, but she finally didn't have that terrified glaze over her eyes. Her hands weren't shaking and she didn't look like she was about to throw up all over the floor. The conversation shifted as it always does, and eventually someone decided to warm cold cases.

"Hey, so what happened the other night? I came looking for you and you were gone!"

"Oh," she thought for a second, "I went over to Jack's for a bit."

"Wait, why?"

They all froze and twelve eyes stood at attention right on the both of us. We both ran through, silently of course, every second of what happened. We thought about every implication of what could happen if we came clean, and we tried to relive, albeit painfully, the seconds right up until the crash.

Her eyes went down as she collected her thoughts. She bit her lip, and opened her mouth to speak. As she did, I felt the entire crash again before me. I heard the pilot and the flight attendants shout for us to brace. I heard the engine rumble and cut to silence. I saw the water grow closer and closer to the belly of the plane. I heard the crack as the plane struck the water, and watched the glass of the windows shatter all around me as I saw her begin to tell them why she came to my apartment the night before. The cracking glass slowed from its instantaneous lightning bolts right down to flowing honey. The bits of shrapnel hung motionless in the air, and everything stood absolutely still and silent, even among the chaos, as she spoke. "Just to hang out, I had to get a guy's perspective on something."

They all nodded and laughed, making the same basic jokes about how 'stupid boys are' and about our lack of emotional availability or maturity. She shot a glance at me, her blue eyes shining like searchlights in the lamplit room. I pulled my face into a smile, using every ounce of my strength to hoist the corners of my mouth upward, and laughed along with them. I deflected the light away, demanding silently to be left to drown.



## Slipping Under

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My fingers get all itchy and hot. I need to climb above the monkey bars before I slip and fall. I swing my legs until they're hooked onto the last bar. I let go with my hands, and my hair falls, and I can see my classmates upside down. Life is more fun with the world upside down. Everyone is silly, and they don't even know it. I know it, but I'm special that way. I can see them frowning instead of smiling, and that makes me happy.

They play with each other upside down, always stumbling around, laughing. Today, most of my classmates play tag—you're it! But I guess the monkey bars are right for me. They keep me good company.

I look toward the slide and see the regulars. Emily will push Amanda down like she does every day, over and over and over again. I wonder if maybe Emily wants to be pushed down the slide this time...

Nope, it's Amanda's turn again. Down she goes!

But really, Amanda and Emily are boring. They never do anything different. Michael over by the swings does the same thing, too. He just swings back and forth and occasionally jumps off mid-air like he's cool or something. Everyone can do that, though. Well, at least I can do that. But I know it, and that's enough for me. I don't need to show off.

My vision blurs, and everything hides behind the black spots I see when I'm upside down for too long. I grab the second bar with my hands and slip between the two bars, up and up until I'm sitting across all of them. They're not running around upside down anymore, but at least I can see them all more clearly than before.

The monkey bars are my turf. The world in every angle—all mine. If I ever left them, someone would take them from me. They'd take it and never ever give it back. I'd be over in Michael's seat right now if those weren't the rules of the Big Toy. Take what's yours and don't cross any lines.

Once, I sat on the swings, and Michael called me a butthead.

I looked in the mirror when I got home. I went into my mom's room where she had one of those big tall head to toe mirrors to see if Michael was right. I saw the resemblance and everything.

"Recess is over!" Mrs. Moriarity shouts.

I join my classmates in a single-file line. We march toward our classroom and sit in our assigned seats. I've been sitting in the back of the room for a few years now. I actually like the back.

I lift the top of my desk and pull out a pencil I got from the Museum of Science. The tip is messed up, the lead pushed back with force. It was probably Amanda again.

I get up and walk over to the manual, revolving pencil sharpener. Brittany is just finishing her pencil. She checks her progress every few seconds until it is perfectly pointed.

She looks down at my pencil and asks, "Did someone break your pencil?"

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Right as I finish my laps around the bars, I swing back to the top. Michael hoards the swings again, and Amanda and Emily hang out above the slide. Everything is as it should be, no crossing borders or starting up trouble.

“Do you want to know what color underwear I’m wearing today?”

A familiar voice grabs my attention. Brittany looks up at me, waiting for an answer.

“Yeah,” I say, ignoring how crazy she sounds.

She stretches the top of her sweatpants and stares down.

“Blue with white stripes!”

That’s funky. Neither colors that I love, but her face is too excited to even notice. Blue with white stripes, she says. Her shirt is also blue. Her eyes—bluer than her faded top.

“Wanna come up here?” I regret asking right away. I know better than to invite someone into my area, but I did it anyway. She starts the first bar.

“What about you?”

“Just green.” I’m tempted to check, but she won’t notice if I were wrong, would she?

“That’s my favorite color.” Her eyes grow bigger. She keeps swinging toward me on the monkey bars. I was wrong. Her eyes are green. “Can I come up top?”

I scoot over, giving her space to join me in the place that’s always been mine.

No, not just green. In the center is a yellow sunflower inching toward the edge of the green borders. My eyes are brown with a black dot in the middle. I’m common.

What should I say now? Her favorite color is green. But if I don’t talk, maybe she won’t have a reason not to like me. But then she also won’t have a reason to like me. I feel sick inside. She keeps staring at me, waiting for me to say something.

“My favorite color’s yellow,” I spit out.

Her face squishes, “Ewww.” I’ve said too much. “Yellow’s gross.” Yellow—the sun. Yellow—the dandelions I pick for my mom every day. “That’s what my pee looks like.” Or yellow—the color of pee.

“You’re right. My new favorite color is purple.” Purple is a far more reliable color. I’ve double-crossed Yellow. I’m a liar.

“That’s a pretty color,” she smiles. I am filled with relief. I could get used to purple, I think. Purple—the rim around our salad plates. Purple—lavender that grows in our backyard.

The unmistakable smell of lavender clouds my nose, and my body aches. I’ve just remembered: I hate lavender. My dad, who sleeps on a pillow lined with crushed, dried lavender, can’t get enough of it. He’d drown in it, if he could. Purple—the *destruction of my family*.

“It reminds me of a toy Granny gave me before her accident. The whole thing is purple, even the hair.” I think I’ve seen that toy before. I didn’t realize it was hers until now.

The rest of the conversation keeps rolling, one thing leading to another. I can’t even really remember what we talk about because we talk about this and that and everything. It seems like everything, but it can’t actually be everything because that would definitely take forever to talk about. By the end of the day,

I call her my friend.

*Friend. Best Friend. Best friends for life.* I've found her. She's the one. Brittany and Lori. My teammate. My ally against all things unpleasant. Her underwear: blue, green, pink, purple with white dots, turquoise, indigo, sea-foam green, magenta, brown, tangerine-orange, rose-red, white.

The year ends.

This is the first summer I'm leaving something behind. My heart feels all funny, like it's twitching.

Brittany leaves me and goes to summer camp. I leave her and go to summer school. She sends me mail. Her rock-climbing is apparently really awesome, and she misses me.

My mom helps me buy a BFF charm bracelet. I'll give it to her the first day of 4th grade. She'll wear it forever, and I'll wear mine for longer.

September 2nd: the day after Labor Day. Ms. Holmes welcomes us to a new year, a different year. Our class is bigger now, and that means we have to separate into two separate groups, but I feel unwelcomed when they tell me my group doesn't include Brittany. They must have known and purposefully separated us, something about "socializing" and making new friends. It doesn't matter, though. Once I give her the bracelet, we'll be complete.

After a class called "Biology," we are taken out to the Big Toy. This year is different. We only get 10 minutes instead of 15. I begin to run over to my favorite spot. The people from the other group must have finished their class early, as they've already begun running around, laughing and screaming.

Michael glides back and forth on the swing. The closer I approach sanctuary, the more I see. Brittany waits for me on top of the bars. There's another figure next to her, but I can't make out who she is. Her back is turned, and she's just sitting there, not doing anything.

It's Amanda sitting in my spot beside my best friend. When I get there, I raise my arms to feel that burn around my hands as I did every day last year.

"What are you doing?" Amanda snaps.

"Coming up top," I look over at Brittany. The remains of a sunflower stare back at me.

"No, you're not."

My hands drop. I motion Brittany for help. She's just staring at me. Why is she doing this? Why isn't she *helping* me?

"I thought we were friends." *Don't cry.* Amanda glares at me. *Not now.*

"We weren't friends. I was just pretending because I felt bad for you."

Amanda's scorn turns into pride. Her face is beaming.

Walking away from the monkey bars, I search for an empty patch on the field, a place no one has taken. I decide on the spot where Mrs. Moriarity used to call us back into class.

Green and dark brown separate me from the Big Toy. I can cry now; nothing's stopping me. But before anything comes out, I see a familiar figure in the distance dressed in purple swinging viciously across the bars.

## Doors Opening

---

Upon taking your seat to my right you acknowledged me in the most curious way,  
breaking in affirmative rebellion every silent declaration of DC transit:  
an unabashed smile reserved for ancient women with foreign minds and homely bodies.

The other passengers, blurs on an old tintype,  
melted away toward Brookland and Tacoma and trickled down hill and stone stair to homes in  
passionate, violent suburbs or sidewalk mattress fortifications;  
they left no poems in their seats, but you remained beside me.

You and I will always carry in the skin about our neatly groomed eyebrows  
some portion of the same worry when we board the train car—

Written in the name of Adam,  
the first man,  
by whom the course of blame would never divert,  
not by the efforts of my prophets or yours—

We will carry gentle imprints on our fingers where we reached inside our purses  
to clutch  
a travel-size can of pepper spray when the men with the briefcases  
and unknotted neckties pace  
just close enough to trigger the preemptive flash of potential headlines:

*Woman murdered, raped, accosted, harassed, stared at on DC metro, red line*  
*Woman uses mace to fend off attacker on DC metro, red line*

they will dust for thumb prints and find a worried mother's gift  
to her only daughter and an insistence to keep it on her person at all times, and

“Call me when you get there!”

I guess that's why you chose the seat beside me.

I'm glad you did. I'm glad you smiled, a shallow smile,  
visceral, though lacking no genuine hello  
I'm glad you smiled of your own will and not that of a bitter man's teeth,  
a bitter man's mind that passed a note down his bloodstream saying,  
“It would be a good idea if you told her she'd be prettier—  
her brown skin would be brighter—  
if only she'd smile.”  
I'm glad you're brave enough to show me that you have a place beyond

the metro chair, the dentist's chair,  
and that I am welcome to guide myself around the map of all your chairs in  
wonder.

Why do I study America and not the way you've shaped it?  
Why am I not stopping strange high heels outside of Chinatown and asking if  
they find it funny  
to see your Armani bag begin at the end of your skirt?

I admire the memory of you and the box of masks that you lent me  
to dress you up in voices and auras and neatly scripted character trains from my  
sixth grade notebook.

I can draw you in a spaceship or in a pregnant belly.  
I can reconstruct the eyes that fall like lead rain upon your smile.  
I can scribble out the male gaze that you and I,

Two smiling women, strangers, beside each other on a subway,  
wear as outdated perfume.

You said goodbye at Tacoma Park, an echo of your earlier affability:

Braces in middle school, lost children's teeth, a ghost of bushy eyebrows  
crinkling that have since been severed from brown pores.

You said goodbye and walked off with your mother to a home, perhaps,  
where the Armani bag would blend in with cream carpets and gold detailing;  
or maybe a home ravaged by hate so loud its very spirit lay shattered and piled  
up  
in corners of rubble and jetsam,  
a word I learned in fourth grade.

## A Meeting with Azrael

---

Aldgate Parish, London 1665

They say we should not venture out after sundown. They are most likely right. I walk with brisk steps down the very middle of the street, a common practice now that the carriages have all gone besides those carrying the dead. My only companions are the ghosts of cries I can hear from neighboring houses, so common to me now as the sound of crickets in the countryside. The red crosses partially covered by the presence of stern-faced watchmen are turned to bloody stains in the darkness. In a perversion of the Hebrews, these sanguinary marks declare damnation rather than salvation to those within.

A faint glow leads me onward even as it is threatened on all sides by the shades of night. It beckons me forward to my destination. Suspicious looks glare at me as I pull open the door, but the barkeep nods at my appearance. The few other occupants loosen the tension of their shoulders like puppets whose strings their master has let slacken. Is that not all we are these days—puppets waiting for our strings to be cut?

Places like this should not be open any more by the express order of the magistrate. However, a few such as these invite in old friends until the imposed curfew. Places of entertainment were to be closed in a late attempt to prevent further spread of the sickness, with the added benefit of forcing citizens to dedicate all of our fleeting time to preparing our immortal souls. Perhaps it was these spiritual contemplations I was attempting to escape, even if only for the space of an hour.

I make my way over to a corner table with a lone occupant some distance away and receive a small glass of ale for a proportionally small coin. I take a swallow as my eyes float over to the occupied chair. The man sitting on its edge is slumped over in a parody of a cat's arched back. Not that anyone saw many cats, or dogs for that matter, these days. They had all been killed. From the dirt that he wears as a second layer of flesh and the sores on his hands, I can guess the man's profession. The empty, starved look in his eyes only confirms my suspicion.

Morbid curiosity and attempting to escape the constant nothingness that had been my sole companion for many months now, drive me to lean down and ask, "How many today?"

"undreds," he says. His voice is grating as if his mouth is a creaking door finally put into use after having been sealed for years. In the silence that follows, his ponderous head turns at the neck to search in my direction. It gazes, but does not see. As if my question had wound up a music-box, the gravedigger continues to speak. It is a song of death, eternal, unable to be silenced, and determined to be heard.

"We've got carts of 'em. Carts full of 'em. Some wrapped up, some bare as they came into the world. We got all kinds. Sometimes it's one from the street, sometimes it's an 'ouse-full we got to get one by one. You'll find 'em in the damnedest places too. A few I 'ad to crawl to grab—'ad to carry the poor bas-

tards back to the cart. The worst are ‘em ones ‘at been sittin’. The stench is ‘ow you tell. I’ll tell you ‘at cart starts gettin’ real ‘eavy. So damn ‘eavy. Your voice gets raw from calling to bring ‘em out. I still ‘ear that damn bell ringing now, always banging about between my ears.” He points with his stump of a finger to his temple. He takes a pause here to touch some ale to his lips.

I start to hear his bell pounding in my own skull, ringing with the throb of my chest. Under the weight of his eyes, seeing but not seeing and in a way seeing something beyond me, I shiver. It feels as if all the warmth of my body has fled to my head, leaving the rest to suffer in the chill.

“But what really gets you,” he continues, “is the pits. At the start, we never dreamed we could fill ‘em. Looking down in is like staring straight down into ‘ole Lucy’s eyes, into the very stuffing of darkness. Boy were we wrong. These pits, they weren’t deep enough. We toss ‘em in, pack ‘em in, but there’s always more. ‘Times I wonder if we got enough dirt to cover ‘em all.

“Times I wonder if the day will come where I’s all that’s left, me, my cart, and my shovel, burying the world.”

The weight grows heavier, too heavy. I press the heel of my hand over my brow as I examine the sickly yellow in my glass. The chill in my fingers basks in the extreme heat that gathers on the skin of my forehead. I take a sip in an attempt to cool the fire burning in my throat, but it sits angry in my stomach. Fear of retching makes me cover my mouth with the back of my hands, but it is to no avail. I quickly lose the contents of my stomach in the corner.

“Ey that man’s not right!” a voice calls from across the room.

“He isn’t sound!” another takes up. Before I can even collect myself, “plague” is being whispered all about.

“We got to git ‘im outta here or else we’ll all be locked in!” someone else adds. Some immediately flee, fearing being shut up. Those that remain look toward me with a mix of terror and hatred.

“I have no plague,” I manage to say. They are clearly unmoved. I can see by their expressions that I am already condemned and nothing I can say will persuade them otherwise.

“What should we do?” says the barkeep, someone I considered a friend.

“You know me George, you know I’m sound!” He does not look in my direction and does not acknowledge my cry besides a slight grimace that stretches his lips wide.

“I ‘ave my cart,” says the grave-digger. I try to run, but my body is so weakened by my previous episode that I struggle merely to stand. Soon I am taken up on both sides by large hands with strong grips. Before I can even fully grasp the horror of my situation, I am thrust out onto the street and laid upon a stretch of rough wood, hard upon my spine. I am soon wrapped up in a stiff material that I drench in sweat and the hot tears that ravage my cheeks. Something shifts below me as I realize that I am in motion. I scream, but in these times I am simply adding to the dirge of night that is now the anthem of this dying city. No one would dare risk themselves for one who could be infected. No one would risk leaving the safety of their home.

“Hush now, we’re nearly there,” says my captor, the grave-digger. I scream with renewed vigor, even though I know no one will come to my aid. I call out to God and beg with pleas to spare my life.

“Who’d you think sent me?” says the grave-digger with a low, hollow chuckle. Struggling with the cloth, I find myself tightly bound and severely weakened. Could I indeed be infected? I had heard rumors of those poor souls that died in hours from the distemper with no previous sign. Am I one of those souls?

We continue our rocking journey, and my screams fade to whimpers as I begin to process the likely destination to which we head. The ride becomes less wild, but the grave-digger struggles to push me further, alerting me to the fact that we now travel over grass. I have mere minutes to make my escape. I writhe with all my might, but the effort is useless. I am bound so tight that I might as well be chained. The cart begins to slow and with a sickening sensation, I feel the top part of the cart begin to rise.

“I am glad you kept your appointment with me. I cannot be kept waiting, I will always come,” the grave-digger says, but it can scarcely be heard over my cries. I try to push up and keep myself on the cart, but I feel the tilt start to slide me downward. With no limbs free to attempt to stop the pull, my body succumbs without my will’s volition. I look into the pit and begin my descent.

There is a brief moment where I am suspended, both with the living and the dead. This ends and I fall onto something cold and surprisingly stiff. The next thing I am aware of is the stench and I rotate my neck, not wanting to see, but having to see. I make out the shape of a jawbone to the left and just above, a pair of glassy eyes seeing nothing of this world. The grave-digger’s words come back to me, Ole Lucy’s eyes. Cold, soft dirt begins to fall like snow upon me, catching in my wide open mouth and blocking my cries.

“There is no escaping me.” It rings and rings in my ears like a bell. Lord have mercy on my soul.



# Basil

---

I wanted to kill it, dreamt up  
various fates for your basil plant,  
resting in its purple-potted throne,  
smugly gazing out each day  
upon a bank of smooth stones  
and happy bicyclists and the distant  
church spire, bells heralding another hour  
in which the basil plant had again  
evaded death.

I watched it grow, leaves opening  
like the greedy palms of children—  
translucent, cupping sunlight.  
You tenderly trimmed and pruned  
back the dead bits. I prayed  
for a drought, for your memory  
to stutter, for the soil to dry up  
and crack, like your lips in wintertime.

When you made caprese salad,  
I savored every bite, relished  
in our placement atop the food chain.

Later, its scent came to me  
as I slumbered beneath the windowsill:  
all herb, pure ingredient, unfinished dish,  
taunting me, boasting of its favor.

And when a crack in the glass  
sent chills down its branches,  
I consoled you  
as your tears watered the soil  
for the last time. It was then  
that I knew that my love for  
you would never invite sunlight,  
evoke watering, bud into  
small blossoms and bloom  
in the air around us.

That spring,  
you planted basil in your garden,  
alongside the cilantro,  
the parsley, and the lavender,

*The Mercury*

which I keep, now, in a small pouch  
beneath my pillow, to calm me  
on nights I cannot sleep.

# Harvest

---

We wore stained shorts and ate fresh-picked nectarines,  
juice dripping on our knees, porch swing creaking  
under the weight of three. A swell of heat

gave way to sheets of rain, hitting the tin roof  
with a sound like marbles on glass. We bared our shoulders  
to the cool breeze and let the sunny haze of late afternoon

fool us into believing that this summer of thunderstorms,  
cleansing in its chaos, would be unending. Though at one time  
a child who cowered at the sight of lightning,

I pretended to trust as you lowered the rope, slick with rain,  
and taught me to grip with tight fists and run  
and jump and curve my bare feet around the knot,

and let the rope swing like an out-of-sync pendulum.  
Palms stinging, I shrieked as you pushed me skywards  
with hands to my waist, back and forth,

back and forth. Shivering from the wet, I slipped  
and slid into the mud, and you lent me your sweater,  
all warmth, frayed cuffs pooling around my small wrists.

Dizzy and laughing, we limped back to the porch,  
and one woman said, *You just adore him, don't you?*  
Out of earshot, you scooped up a handful of blueberries

as I rolled an apple, back and forth, across my lap.  
And the rain kept falling, tripping over leaves, watering  
the overabundant cucumber patch in the backyard—

the harvest that year so plentiful, we all knew it wouldn't last.

## High School Bar Hoppers

---

### *Didi'z*

Up the hill from my wealthy international high school on the peninsula of Dar es Salaam was Didi'z. My seventy-five classmates and I started our adventures there in the eleventh grade, escaping the guarded campus for an hour or two at a time during free periods, flashing our upperclassmen IDs like badges of honor to the *askaris*—security guards. It was only five minutes away by foot, but that didn't stop us from calling over a *Bajaji*, a three-wheeled open taxi, to take us up the hill for a *thousand shillings*, forty cents. We stepped out into the hot sun, whichever of us was up to pay on our rotational basis paid the driver, and we broke into sweat in the ten feet between the *Bajaji* and the start of the Didi'z *banda*—a semi-permanent tent with dried, braided palm leaves for roofs—that protected us from the direct sun rays.

When we walked inside, the darkness swallowed our vision. I can only remember making out blurry shapes in the minutes after we arrived. No one spoke to us, our uniforms marked us off as members of the elite, and so we were safe from the alcoholic uncles out for a before-noon beer. There was a small corner in the back of the bar, a separated section with three tables and stacks of chairs. We sat there, passing around the last ashtray (we had broken the rest, I assumed), grousing about classes, teachers, or other students. Aman was usually the first to arrive, and after him we would pile in one by one and start stacking the table with packs of cigarettes, beer bottles, books, papers, calculators, rumors.

After a year the rumors built up in that place. *Did you know, last week, Jana gave Yannik a blowjob behind the bathrooms and they got arrested? They had to go to prison, but of course their parents paid it off. Also, Abda broke up with her boyfriend by flipping him the bird and making out with another guy while they drove off—she's insane. Straight up crazy.*

Even in these white neighborhoods, conservatism reigned with a strict whip in this nation built half of Muslims (converted by the Persians) and half of Christians (converted by missionaries). As untouchable as we felt we were, we weren't.

In colonial Tanzania, the city had been divided into three clear areas by the British; there was a section called Kariakoo (name derived from the Carrier Corps, groups of men used like pack mules for the colonialists) for the black majority, Upanga for the brown folks, and the peninsula for the wealthy white. As the neighborhoods became whiter across the face of the city, they also became richer. The richer it became, the more freedom the rich had—bribery was a form of sport that we exchanged stories about after the fear of encountering a police officer faded.

We would take shots of everything during our daily breaks at Didi'z. We would take shots for luck, for students having to go back to class, for students who were happy with a grade, for breakups, for hangovers, for problems at home, for deaths in the family, for finally getting laid.

They renovated that bar the summer between the 11th and 12th grades,

a product of the heavy spending we did in our off hours. We drank a shot to that, too.

### *Tom and Jerry's*

TJ's was a tiny hole in the wall in the brown part of town, Upanga, that us Asian kids snuck out to after-school in the blustery month leading up to summer. Fatimah begged her driver Patience not to tell her parents where she was going every day. The boys didn't have to make excuses. I tagged along for the experience, sucking down cigarettes and shots as I was offered them.

Things had stayed about the same in Upanga since colonial times, with a touch of social mobility: TJ's was run by a black family. But still, they lived in squalor.

Even though slightly richer, we couldn't forget, out of Swahili coast politeness, to say "Vipi mama?" *How's it going, ma?* to Mama Vicky who ran the place.

To which she would respond: "Poa tu!" *Pretty damn average.*

As one of our friends, Neil, parked his car on the dirt road outside, the rest of us entered. We walked in through a literal hole in the wall, a palimpsest of the door that once existed clearly echoed in the frame. We weren't concerned if chipping paint fell into our hair or snagged on our clothes, that was just part of the experience. These poster-plastered, paint-chipping walls would lead our weary bodies into a walled courtyard. Three *bandas* each held a plastic Coca-Cola branded table and chairs in red, white or blue (our patriotism to American consumerism clear). We brought our textbooks, sat on wobbly seats, and read through mild chattering in Kiswahili that filled the air like bird calls. Our teenage voices fell to a quiet hum after the first half an hour; we tried to avoid being heard from our homes which sat just on the other side of the wall. We brought these books to entertain ourselves, because no one else was volunteering to do it—we were all worried about our constantly impending exams.

About ten minutes in, Fatimah would order *chipsi* - fries loaded with oil, salt, and supplemented with a smattering of what I can only describe as a tomato salsa, because we had all skipped lunch at home. Kushal, famous for his ability to hold his own with our drunk classmates while remaining surprisingly sober, would break out his pipe—"I swear, it's not *ganja*, it's just tobacco, *bwana*—man." The dust rose and settled onto our bodies the longer we stayed there. This layer would be accompanied by another composed of smoke; we used to inhale and exhale ash-colored fumes from our spent lungs for hours until the darkness settled, at which point we'd ask for a round of shots of anything. Our last drinks of the school day were to face dinner at home with our families, and to prepare us for more sleepless nights of work to be done.

### *Maganga's*

Didi'z and TJ's were in and after-school watering holes; Maganga's was where those of our class of seventy-five with the most liberal of parents went to pregame the nights.

The only time I remember going to MG's was a Friday night with Jazmine. Her parents had moved out of town, her friend that she had been living with had kicked her out, she was living with Fatimah, and thus we became friends by default. MG's side *banda* was a space diagonal to the main bar across an open

area and was made for smoking from elaborate hookah pipes in groups. The space was lit by a candle and a cheap red light when I first entered this claustrophobic space. A small section (the size of two beds pushed hastily together) was where we sat to smoke *shisha*. Clouds bloomed out of our fanned tent, moving the tapestries along the walls and in the door. A bottle of vodka stood open on the floor next to the crate where the *shisha* sat.

A crowd of boys that we knew vaguely from school surrounded the room, sitting on crates covered in pillow-tops. They all looked up as we entered, but one refused to break eye contact, and patted his chair, telling me to sit with him. I complied, asked for a cigarette, and looked away from his eyes because it was too much attention. I sucked down smoke until I was lightheaded and feeling that rush that only comes from being away from a cigarette for a couple hours when you've become addicted. The candle lit up his brown eyes as he teased, poking me in the side to enunciate, and I broke into laughter like only girls who are trying to flirt can. He said his name was Daniel. He tried to pronounce mine for thirty minutes.

The night was filled with blurry smoke, and we walked out in a flurry of activity to the main bar, chattering like we had known each other for years. We made introductions with mutual friends; I found out Ben had graduated a year earlier but we hadn't known each other. The bar was packed; the place was throbbing with energy. Questions were raised along with glasses, and as they clinked, I swear I could hear: *Where will we go next? What will we do?*

## Solitude

---

Franklin awoke on a small, well-kept cot that was clean and uncomfortable. He sat up at the edge of the bed, crossing both hands and reaching forward and cracking his neck. The room stank of mothballs camouflaged by a sickening combination of orange and lemon. He straightened his back and stood up, immediately turning to tuck the sheets underneath the mattress, smoothing away the creases. His fingers were frail, archaic in spite of his youth, and wrought with arthritis.

Stepping into the bathroom with a thunderous yawn that rang throughout the corridors, Franklin scratched away a speck in the lower-right corner of the mirror with a short fingernail. Reaching for a toothbrush long overused, he topped the bristles with a pea-sized speck of paste. He counted in his head for each stroke, switching from bottom to front after sixty seconds precisely. He ran the water for three seconds, wetting a comb and carefully parting his dense chestnut hair. His beard was similarly haggard, but as well-kept as a pair of office scissors allowed. He looked into his own hazel eyes. His sister had always made fun of his big nose. Franklin blinked and walked into the compact kitchen.

Grim fluorescent lights flickered on as he entered, whimpering with a dull electric hiss. The room was tiny, barely high enough to hold his almost six-foot frame. Grasping a spotless non-stick pan, he twirled it in his hand, whistling "*Imagine*" as he popped open a can of baked beans and imitation egg he had left out the previous night. The table behind him was already set, with one chair looking at an iron door sealed down the edge by locks. Franklin sprayed the pan with fake butter, lighting the burner with a match and starting the omelette. A vase without water stood next to him, the crimson roses glaringly plastic in the luminescence. He frowned, longing for actual, living plants, but they had died weeks after isolation began.

Franklin flipped the omelette in the pan: no spatula needed. He had taught himself many little tricks over time. His father could always do that in mornings while he and Evie would cheer in wonder. Then his father would smirk and toss it onto a plate, coated in cheese even though Franklin was lactose intolerant. Then he would wink and mention that they would make sure their mother could blame the farts on the dog; Franklin had a fatal weakness for cheese.

He smirked at that memory, filling the other half of the pan with baked beans. In place of the full can, this ration ended up being a quarter. With ribs jutting out enough to count, he focused instead on survival rather than the blackhole of hunger encircling his stomach. In front of the chair sat his plate. Franklin was setting up his feast alone yet again. He pulled up, his appetite quivering as he folded his napkin onto his lap and slowly cut the eggs into pieces. Franklin always ate in parts, counterclockwise from one part of the dish to the next. The sound of a fork scraping against the porcelain rang out at a high pitch.

After licking the plate clean, Franklin set the dishes into a filled sink. As they sank, an unnaturally metallic thud filled the chamber. At first, Franklin

thought perhaps he had misheard, but then the noise repeated. Three times, desperate, but not from the kitchen whatsoever. He turned toward the source, eyes wide as he realized that the rapid, successive, crashing knocks were coming from outside of the door.

“Oh god, oh fuck, help me! Help me!” a woman called loudly. Franklin barely heard the voice, the hammering against steel boring deeply into his skull as he fell to the ground, covering his ears with mangled hands. His heart could not decide whether to race or to shatter. Loud breathing met with the desperate cries, as he did his best to inch closer to the gate.

“H-hello?” Franklin jumped at his own voice like a deer at a gunshot. It had been around two years and four months since he had heard himself speak. It still contained a familiar English twang, something he kept even as his father’s own accent vanished. He did his best to claw his way up to the small glass panel at eye-level, closing one as he struggled to still himself. A young woman who looked incredibly like Evie cowered outside, frantically turning back and forth as though something pursued her with bloodlust. Her green shirt was tinged with crimson and her skin—normally lighter—was dusted with debris. Her hair was chopped off almost entirely. Her fingernails had even started to chip away as she pounded with desperation.

“Oh my—fuck me, let me in! Let me in, let me in please!” she pleaded with animalistic desire.

“Who are you? What do you want?”

“What the fuck does that matter?! Let me in, come on! Show some fucking humanity!”

“How can I know that you aren’t armed? You may as well bloody rip me apart!”

“Why would I—what?! You fucking bastard, you’re killing me right now! Let me in, please!”

Franklin felt as though his heart were about to detonate. He strived to see another person and to actually have a friend. The eternal silence of the bunker had grown deafening as monotony clawed at his soul. It stopped being an issue of survival and began to be more of a question: was it worth it?

“Show me your waist.”

“I don’t— “

“That wasn’t a *fucking* question!”

The severity of his voice caught her by surprise, so she backed up and lifted her shirt and spun around. He caught a shining piece of metal at her hip; the friendly onyx glint of a handgun that Franklin had grown all too familiar with. He frowned at her. “Throw the gun aside.”

“No!” she practically laughed. “Why would I even think about that?”

“Look, miss,” he sighed. “What’s your name?”

“Alexis.”

“Franklin,” he muttered. “Look, this place you see here? This is mine. I don’t know who you killed to find it, but it’s not a bloody hotel. It’s salvation. I make the rules.”

“Rules that’ll get me slaughtered. How do I know that you’re not bat-shit yourself?”

“You don’t know what I am, but I’m not the one who’s knocking.” He



coughed heavily; years of silence had thrown his throat into a chaotic mess.

"I'm keeping the gun."

"Then I'm keeping to myself." He frowned as he saw her grow enraged. She turned her back on the door, throwing a tight fist into a tree without acknowledging any anguish whatsoever. "Who's after you?" Franklin asked.

"What do you care? It may as well be you, you fucking bastard. You're feeding me to them on a goddamned golden platter." She stepped away and pressed her back to the door, the gun in her hand but clearly for comfort rather than for use. Franklin frowned.

"Look, Alexis, you've gotta understand that I need to look out for my own first."

"What the fuck do you think I am, some psychopath?"

"I don't know, and that's almost scarier." She paused, the barrel of the pistol lowering slightly, and her ears perked up. She turned to acknowledge him further. "Look, I had a family before all of this too. A dad, a mum, a sister."

"What happened to them?" Alexis asked. Franklin sighed loudly, a soft tear welling in the corner of his eye.

"Well, mum was in the military... Dad tried to go find her, left me in charge of Evie."

"Evie?"

"My sister."

"What happened to her?"

"...Doesn't matter. Truth is, I'm all that's left in here." He paused, pondering what he could say next. "Time has taught me that I need to be careful with whom I can trust. Especially those of you out there. I need some sort of proof that you and your lot won't slaughter me if I unlock this door."

"I don't have a 'lot'; it's just me," Alexis sighed. She turned back toward the door, scratching at dried blood over her eye. "Four years ago when all of the shit hit the fan, I had a family who tried to keep me safe too. It didn't work; I fucked up, they fucked up. I'm the only one left now."

"I'm sorry."

"Aren't we all." Alexis scoffed, slowly replacing her weapon in its holster. "Look, you can't trust me, alright? You can't trust anyone right now. It's just your decision whether or not you want to let me in."

"I'm very aware," Franklin chuckled. "You don't have any mates out there waiting to take over?"

"I already said I didn't... but no. Nobody."

"Alright, give me just a moment and I'll unlock this." Franklin sighed. "I'm grabbing my gun first."

"Okay, please hurry!" Alexis pleaded. He watched as she withdrew her own weapon, scanning the darkening horizon for any forms. Franklin pulled back, seeing the one door he no longer went into. He had debated welding it shut, but could not bring himself to. He inhaled sharply, rushing inside of the enclosed living space.

On the coffee table was a silver handgun, the clip missing two bullets. The awful beige carpeting still reeked of bleach and the radio had shattered to pieces, recklessly stuffed into the corner. Two single, thin holes were poorly sealed in the sofa. Franklin was careful to shut off all of his senses and empathy,

fumbling with the weapon as he grappled with himself. As quickly as he could, he returned to the door, finally noticing a frantic, emphatic knocking.

“Franklin! Franklin, open the fucking door. They’re coming!”

He dashed to the locks on the side, dropping the gun and pulling them aside one by one. His joints could not support it and he felt them cramp. Each bolt made him recoil more. He stumbled over each more and more. The knocking continued, in tune with frantic gunfire. Desperate cries became frenzied and violent. Franklin practically heard her knuckles shatter on impact with the steel door.

“There’s too many! I can’t—fucking fuck!” He heard a finger crack as he grasped a padlock.

“Hang on!”

“They’re coming!” He cursed to himself, flexing his hand into a fist and relaxing it.

“Alexis, I’m almost there!”

“Please! Please, Franklin, please!”

“Just a bit longer!”

“I can’t, I—” She was cut off in the middle of a breath. The sound of severing steel broke through the middle of a sentence. A torrent of liquid splattered against the hard exterior of the bunker. Franklin thought he could make out a faint prayer for some god mixed with urgent tears. A few footsteps followed and the appeal grew.

“Oh god, please! Please!” Franklin did his best to dull his senses. “I can’t, no, please! I’ll do anything, please!” A slow, silly giggle began to evolve into a satanic cackle. Franklin sighed and began to seal the door again. The laughter bore into his brain, crushing all other senses and thoughts. He became slow and methodical as the amusement became a howl, intermingled with spilling blood and blunt strikes.

Eventually, Franklin had managed to close the door entirely. He had no desire to look outside. He realized that he was shivering even though it was still humid inside. At some point, he had practically bit through his tongue. Noticing the taste of blood, he vomited into the sink. When he eventually recovered, he noted the resumed knocking.

Instead of quick and hurried, this time it was deliberate. Rhythmically, one beat followed the next with about two seconds in-between. After a moment, a second fist joined in the sardonic melody, the force and violence mounting. Then the laughter resumed, as though what had just transpired were a comedy. It seemed to double and triple in time with the collisions against the door as a chorus barraged his home. The door seemed to even quiver with each growing attack. All at once, as though with a conductor’s stroke, the laughter ended.

In keeping with the rhythm, one vile voice rang out. It was disgusting, as though it spoke with too much liquid in its mouth. It did not resemble anything human, rather a heinous beast. Each word was emphasized and elongated as though the speaker relished in each syllable. “Little pig, lit-tle pig, let us in.”

Franklin turned away from the door and walked back to his bedroom. The choir of animals continued. “Lit-tle pig, lit-tle pig, let us in!”

He began to desperately hum as tears welled up in his eyes. He climbed into his cot and wrapped the covers around himself. They became his shelter for at

least the moment. “Lit-tle pig, lit-tle pig, let us in!”

He frantically dried his tears and began to sing to himself. He always used to sing to Evie to calm her down when this place became too much for her. “Imagine there’s no countries... it isn’t hard... to do... Nothing to kill or...” He practically choked on the next word. “Die... for...”

“*Lit-tle pig, lit-tle pig, let us in!*”

“You may say I’m a dreamer, but I’m not the only one.” The tempo escalated. “I hope someday you’ll wake up—”

“Oh, is this your sister out here?” Franklin froze. “We don’t use guns, no. Quick is bad. Slow... mmmmm. Why’d you do it? Want a little home to yourself? Shame too, she was so young. Come on piggy. *Let. Us. In.*”

He finally got up and reached the door to his bedroom, sliding it closed. Franklin could still make out the voices and everything that they said echoed in his mind as he drifted slowly off to sleep. He hoped that the nightmares would let him be tonight. Inside, he knew they would not.

Franklin awoke on a small, well-kept cot that was clean and uncomfortable. He sat up at the edge of the bed, crossing both hands and reaching forward and cracking his neck. The room stank of mothballs camouflaged by a sickening combination of orange and lemon. He straightened his back and stood up, immediately turning to tuck the sheets underneath the mattress, smoothing away the creases. His fingers were frail, archaic in spite of his youth, and wrought with arthritis.

Stepping into the bathroom with a thunderous yawn that rang throughout the corridors, he looked into his own red eyes. He could count the veins and arteries in the whites. For a time, he did just that. He remembered the handgun on the kitchen floor, knowing how easy it must be to pull one trigger and escape forever. Maybe he could finally figure out where his parents had gone. Maybe he could return to a normal life. Maybe Evie would accept his apology. Maybe she would understand how hard surviving is.

Reaching for a toothbrush long overused, he topped the bristles with a pea-sized speck of paste. He counted in his head for each stroke, switching from bottom to front after sixty seconds precisely. He ran the water for three seconds, wetting a comb and carefully parting his dense chestnut hair. His beard was similarly haggard, but as well kept as a pair of office scissors allowed. His sister had always made fun of his big nose.

## Feeding Him

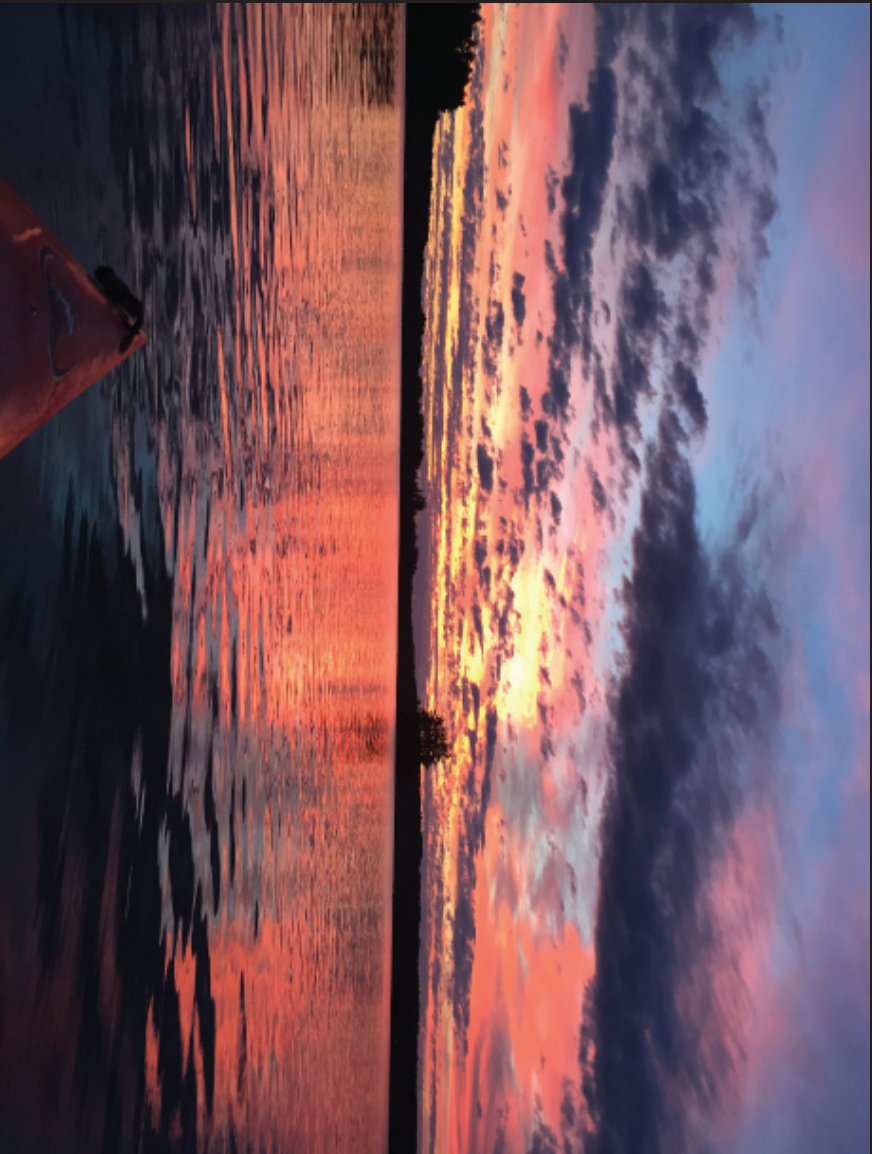
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Today you left me  
With soggy ladyfingers,  
Cold sighs, and scalded cream.  
I forgot how to say  
Pralines  
And beignets  
While I poured your favorite drink.  
I prefer  
Café au lait (better  
To dip donuts),  
Yet the ancestral kettle screamed,  
“Teatime is at one!”  
The horse-faced mother  
Asked if I was well, and  
I smiled well-enough away,  
My powdered face  
Sugar-coating the sting of  
Newly bridled tastes.  
*Yes, Darling!* I neighed,  
Above the bone saucer  
I called a plate.  
‘Till late afternoon  
I drank this shit  
For you:  
Steeped Earl Grey.  
In truth, it tastes sour and  
Never pleased. I  
Fell like crumbs when  
You jumped up,  
Crocheted linen  
Across pleated knee.



Farm near Almindingen, Bornholm,  
Denmark  
*Photography*

TOM SEGERSTROM



View from a  
Kayak  
*Photography*

JESSIE MARTIN



The Golden Hour  
*Photography*

JESSIE MARTIN



Sachsenhausen  
Concentration  
Camp

*Photography*

JARED RICHARDSON





# Viktoriapark

*Photography*

JARED RICHARDSON



Green Thumb (The White Rabbit)

*Watercolor on Paper*

ZOE YEOH



# Freshwater Migration

*Watercolor on Paper*

ZOE YEOH



A Dark Passage  
*Photography*

ERICA SCHAUMBERG



Seven

*Photography*

ERICA SCHAUMBERG



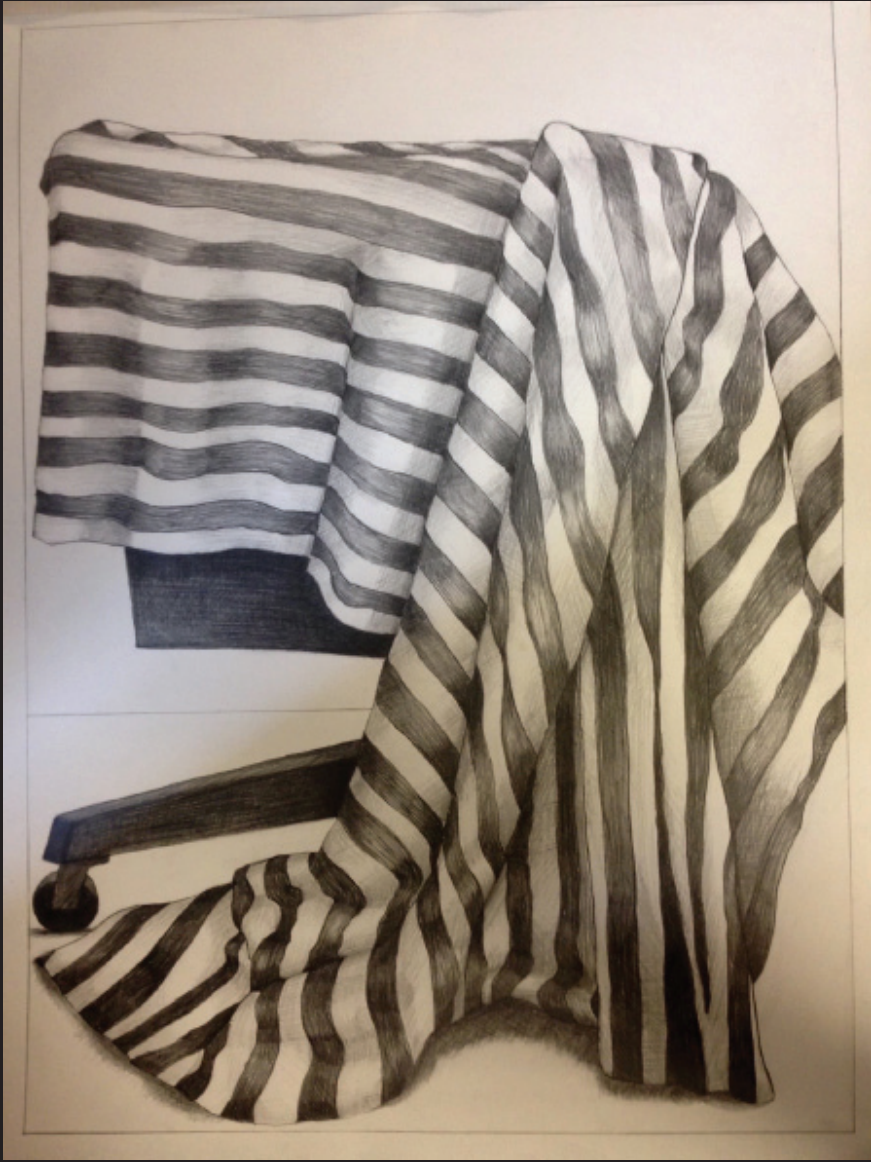
Working  
Hands  
*Photography*

MELISSA CASALE



Battlefield Run  
*Photography*

KATHLEEN BOLGER



## Draped Chair

*Charcoal pencil and compressed charcoal*

JOSEPHINE MEIER





Bust, Palette, and  
Glass Jars  
*Charcoal pencil and  
compressed charcoal*

JOSEPHINE MEIER



# A Little Help...From My Friends

*Photography*

VERA EKHATOR



High and Dry  
*Photography*

KHUN MINN OHN



Nordkette 1

*Photography*

DANIELLA SNYDER

## This Story Is Not a Monument

---

In the hull of a trembling trawler, Oscar and Anna sat with their fingers threaded together. They whispered in unison the words to a prayer neither had believed before right then.

The water seeping through the planks above them wetted their upturned faces, making it easy to pretend that neither of them was really crying. Anna slid her hand out of Oscar's so that she could cradle her stomach.

"I wanted them to grow up like us," Oscar sniffled, resting a hand on her belly.

"They will. I'll teach them all of my mother's recipes, and we'll tell them about our childhoods, and everything. They'll be just like us," Anna said.

"They won't be happy like we were. They'll never know the camp."

"I don't *want* them to know Westerbork."

"But it's where they belong. We were happier than we've ever been, we were close to your parents, and we spent so long on the nursery. It's what they deserve."

Anna shook her head. "They wouldn't want to share a home with so many people. Everyone was always coming and leaving, it smelled, everyone was dirty...God, who were we to think that was a good place to raise a child? Maybe this is for the best."

"For the best?" Oscar sputtered. "How could you say that? This isn't *fair*, we don't deserve this. They'll grow up thinking they're a refugee, not a—"

"Shh! Don't say it."

"I—I know." Oscar clamped down on his lip, shaking with a renewed vigor. It looked as if he might start sobbing, and Anna wasn't sure she could handle that.

"Hey," she said gently. "We might go back someday. If not to the camp, then home."

They both knew Anna didn't believe that, but he nodded nonetheless, pretending to be comforted. Oscar shoved his hand into his pocket and kneaded the wad of falsified papers there. The only thing that distracted him from the shuddering trawler was the thought of landing on American soil as William Woods. *William Woods, William Woods, William Woods*. He repeated the name over and over in his head, hoping that Oscar would become alien to him. But Oscar would always be Oscar at heart, and Oscar was not an American.

The trawler lurched dangerously toward the water, causing the bags at Oscar's feet to slide across the deck.

"We're going to die," he whimpered.

"No, we aren't. Go ask what's happening."

"Why can't you?"

Anna gestured to her stomach with a look of frustration.

He blanched. "Oh. Right."

Oscar staggered across the slanted deck, leaning against the wall for balance. He'd thought the relentless rocking of the ship was bad, but it was nothing compared to what awaited him on the main deck.

It took him awhile to figure out what was happening. The rain blinded him, and beyond the ship was a light so bright that he could make out nothing else. He seized the arm of a smuggler racing by him and cried, "What's happening?"

The man jerked his arm free and smoothed his sleeve where Oscar had rumbled it. He muttered something about ungratefulness, pulled his hood tighter over his head, and stomped off in the direction of the light.

Oscar tried asking a few other crew members, but none of them would answer him. Shivering but unwilling to return to Anna without an answer, he shuffled to the bow and squinted into the light.

The light was coming from a ship triple the size of the smuggler's. Oscar held up his hands to blot out what light he could, but wished he hadn't as soon as he'd identified the ship. *H14* was emblazoned on the side of the destroyer.

Oscar sprinted back to the hatch, slipping on the brine-soaked deck and cutting up his hands in his panic. He secured the latch behind him, but his bloodied fingers shook so violently it took four tries.

"You're soaked," Anna said as he staggered back to her side.

"I know," he replied, but his teeth chattered so hard that there was no way she understood him.

Anna took ahold of his hands when he collapsed beside her. She lifted them up so that he could see the blood dripping down them, but she didn't say anything. She looked up at him imploringly, which was somehow worse than if she'd chastised him for getting hurt.

"They're following us," he said.

"Can we get away?"

"I—I—well, they—"

"What kind of ships?" Anna snapped.

"Destroyers. Oh god, oh god, oh god, no. They can't." He curled over her belly, unable to manage any other words between sobs.

There was an awful screeching above them, but whether it was the ships scraping each other or the storm or the crew, neither of them could be sure. Anna let Oscar cry, oblivious to the blood he was smearing across her dress, but only for a time. She was planning their next move, and as he slowly lifted his head to ask why she wasn't crying too, Anna knew what she was going to do. It was in that moment that she decided their family would not die in the hull of a putrid trawler or whatever prison their pursuers wanted to cart them off to.

"Come on, now," she said, holding Oscar's shoulder for balance.

"Where are we going?" he blubbered.

"Would you rather we all die here or wherever they take us?"

"I don't want us to die."

"Well, you don't get a choice in that. But I want us to try to live, or at least to go together, on our own terms."

"I don't understand. Go where?"

"We'll take the lifeboat."

"No, God, no, we'll drown."

"I hear it's pleasant. More pleasant than other ways of dying, at least."

Oscar clasped his hands over his mouth and shook his head. He would not give up easily, but that much Anna had guessed. She was about to open her

mouth to argue when there was another horrible scrape above them.

"Do you hear that?" she hissed. "They're coming. We have to go now, Ozzy. You know we do. We'll pray and we'll swim if we have to, but we're going to do something. You can die here if you want, but this baby and I *will not*."

He hiccupped little sobs instead of responding, but didn't fight Anna when she nudged him toward the hatch. Oscar climbed up first so that he could help Anna ease onto the waterlogged deck.

They were both gasping, the fear and the storm and the exertion of heaving a pregnant woman up a ladder leaving them breathless. They were so distracted trying to breathe and keep their balance that it took them awhile to realize something was amiss. It struck them at the same time that there wasn't a man in sight, and there certainly hadn't been any down in the hold with them. Oscar paced the length of the deck to be sure, but no, they were really gone.

"They took the lifeboat!" he cried.

"So they did," Anna said, squinting into the light so that she could see her husband.

The light cast by the destroyer silhouetted Oscar, which somehow made him seem tiny. Pudgy, scruffy Oscar had never seemed so before. He looked so small, so helpless, as he turned in circles and yanked out his tangled hair in knots.

"Oscar!"

If he heard her above the roar of the storm, he gave no indication. He was still spinning around in despair, arms bowed over his head, performing some sick sort of ballet for their enemies. Anna would've asked Oscar if he wanted to jump, but the shame of watching him dance in the light of the destroyer was too great. In one swift motion, without daring to pause and second guess herself, Anna shoved Oscar overboard and dove into the water after him.

Oscar was almost drowning Anna, frantically grabbing at her shirt so that the waves didn't pull them apart.

"I'm here, I'm here," she said, leaving her no time to catch her breath before a wave swallowed them.

Under the water, for one fleeting moment, there was silence. Anna and Oscar and baby were together in the quiet and ice, but then they were caught in a trough and forced back into the air. Anna closed the few feet between her and Oscar so that they were caught in an embrace when the next wave crested upon them.

"You were right," she said in their native tongue as soon as they'd returned to the surface. "You said we were going to die, and we are."

There was another wave, another trough, before he sobbed, "I hope we drown before we freeze."

"I hope the little one stops kicking soon."

Oscar shook his head. "Pity us, not them. They won't feel anything."

"Won't they?"

"I only care about us."

"You know, we should name them now. Have a first birthday party."

"Okay."

It took a few more waves before Anna eventually said, "So what if it's a boy?"

"I like Peter—" Another wave. "Peter, or maybe Paul."

"Peter Paul has better ring to it than Paul Peter," she said.

"Yes."

"And what if it's a girl?"

"You pick this one," he said. Anna suspected he was only offering because he was so overcome with emotion that he could hardly speak.

They slipped beneath the waves half a dozen more times before Anna made up her mind. "We could name her after our mothers. Good, strong role models for a girl. Maria Elisabeth or Elisabeth Maria, do you think?"

"Elisabeth Maria. Then she could be baby Lizzy."

"Okay."

Anna laughed so hard that she ended up with a mouthful of seawater when the next wave hit. Oscar stared at her in disbelief at first, but soon, he was laughing too.

They were, in the vaguest sense, aware of the British destroyer searching the trawler and then scanning the waters for a lifeboat. But it was hard to be afraid when they were drunk on something and too cold to care.

"Peter Paul Refugee and Elisabeth Maria Refugee," Oscar said after awhile.

"What's that?"

"I'm just imaging what their life would be like if we'd made it to America. Would they have last names? Would they get to keep ours? I think they'd just be assigned new names, or maybe they'll just call them Refugee. That's the English word, isn't it?"

"Oh, Oscar, I don't want to die sad. Peter or Lizzy doesn't want to either."

"What's sad about dreaming?"

"Didn't dreaming get us here?" Anna was shivering so violently that she was surprised her words came out intelligibly.

"I suppose."

"You know," Anna said, her colorless lips pressed into a hard line, "We're good swimmers. I bet Peter or Lizzy would be too. If we all swim together, maybe we'll swim off the edge of the world. Or to America. But we'll swim until we find something."

"Or we could freeze here together."

"No. This is death, but swimming? Who knows what happens if we swim?"

So they swam. Taking breaks, sometimes overcome with fits of hysterical laughter, they seemed to go on for eternity. But every time Oscar shot a glance back over his shoulder, *H14* was still visible. In fact, Oscar was pretty sure his family died within sight of the destroyer. The unfairness of that was undoubtedly one of his last living thoughts: how his whole family had perished in the middle of an ocean for nothing. He wondered if there would someday be a glorious memorial or monument or something for the patriotic, upright Langs of Camp Westerbork. But Oscar doubted anyone would remember them outside of their families. There were men being shot, blown to bits for their cause—real heroes. Then there was Oscar, who'd just done paperwork and menial labor for his country because he believed in it. He probably believed in their mission more than any terrified, confused young boys on the front lines, but the strength of his conviction was meaningless. No man had ever gotten a monument for shutting up Jews in boxcars.



# Heart of Silence

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## What Happens When Your Person Finds Another Person

---

We all have that one person  
Who you do everything with.  
They're always there  
To eat with, to play with, to just sit and relax with.  
In the beginning, it's your mum.  
The two of you are practically  
Inseparable.  
She can't even go to the bathroom without you,  
You are all she pays attention to.  
Until one day, you aren't.  
Until one day, she brings home another person—  
One even smaller, even more dependent on her  
Than you.  
And you start to realize  
That you can get along by yourself.  
You learn to feed yourself,  
You learn to bounce a ball off the wall  
So it comes back just like your mum had rolled it to you,  
You learn to sit and color  
Without her there telling you what a good job you're doing.

Then you go to school,  
And you meet another person  
With the same Winnie the Pooh bear as you.  
And you become best friends.  
You pass notes, you share lunches,  
You talk about Collin,  
The cute, little blonde boy you both have a crush on.  
You sign up for soccer together,  
Because you wouldn't want to play with anybody else.  
But then one day, she moves to Michigan,  
And you find out  
That it's not a five minute walk to her house anymore.  
She tells you that  
Her new neighbor plays soccer too,  
And even though she's a year older than you  
She's in the same grade, isn't that cool?  
You have to go, now,  
To soccer practice by yourself,  
But you realize that you still have  
Just as much fun.  
You learn how to juggle, and how to hit it with your head,  
And you find out that you're really good.

So you try out for a club team.  
The coach tells his son to be the goalie.  
He blocks ball after ball,  
But you bet that you can score on him,  
And after you do, he asks you to the movies.  
He lets you pick the movie, and he holds your hand,  
And you find out you listen to the same music.  
You blast it when you play soccer together.  
He's the person that comes to all of your games,  
He's the perfect boyfriend all through high school,  
But then something changes.  
He really thought he loved you,  
That's what he said,  
But when he met Sara, he couldn't help himself.  
So you're over,  
He leaves you alone.  
You learn that he wasn't the only one  
Cheering your name at your games,  
And your trashcan is just as good of a goalie as he was.  
You learn that there's nothing wrong with  
Going to the movies alone.

Because when your person finds another person,  
You have to remind yourself  
That you can do things for yourself.  
You learn what you're good at,  
And the things that make you happy.  
You don't have to think  
About what another person wants.  
You do what you want to do  
Until you find another person  
Whose lonely habits get along with yours.

## Himmelkos Crossing

---

Aaron crossed over when the sun and moon briefly shared the sky. There was no body, since the funeral workers burned them after. Even if there had been, Adeline wouldn't have had any claim to it. She assumed his ashes were out there somewhere, discarded among the bare trees outside the crematoria. His wife was gone, and his only child died at two, so no one could claim his remains anyway.

Outside, she overheard the ocean stealing the sand. The moon high in the sky, Adeline wondered when the insomnia began, or if it had always somehow been a part of her. Although she sensed him out there, she felt the ache in her being. She didn't have the right to ache for him. Sighing, she pushed her crumpled blankets over her toes. Sometimes when she shivered alone at night, she would only use some of the blanket, reminding herself that being alive means feeling the cold. She liked being uncomfortable.

Grabbing her laptop, Adeline found herself searching for Himmelkos. There were pictures full of tourism advertisements, revealing the mountains of glaciers, ice fishing, the Aurora. Staring at the images, Adeline sensed Aaron was there. Whenever they would walk along the beach, she'd question his sneakers, his unnecessary sweatshirt, the tenseness in his gait. He'd utter some complaint about the beach, the heat, the sand, that the paradise for millions was his prison. One night, they sat along the rocks, Aaron kicking the misshapen pebbles into the sea.

"If you could be anywhere in the world, where would you be?" Adeline asked, her amber eyes fluttering with fatigue.

"Landmannalaugar, Iceland."

"Why?"

"It's cold, it has rocks, character." He brushed off some sand from one of the larger rocks.

"There are rocks here. In fact, I believe we're sitting on some right now," Adeline responded.

"How many others have sat on these in the last few days? Hell, even the last few hours? There's so many people here, Addie. In Iceland, we could be away from people. Away from it all."

"We?"

"I have money, you have money. We really could go," Aaron said, his voice heavy. Adeline knew he meant it, but she also knew it'd never come to pass. She glanced down at the backs of her hands, both products of time. Shaking with arthritis, she couldn't even make out each individual wrinkle.

"In our ship shape condition? We wouldn't even get there," she said. She waited for him to argue, but he remained silent, half-heartedly kicking some more pebbles into the ocean.

The next night, he waltzed up to her along the beach. "Forget Iceland. Himmelkos," he announced, spreading his hands as if he were revealing the first computer. Adeline trudged through her memories, searching for Himmelkos. She knew it sounded familiar, but these days the memories became harder to sift through.



“Remind me, where’s that?”

“It’s not where, but when. A town full of glaciers, snow, rocks, even an ocean. Granted, it’s probably much colder than the Pacific. Think about it, about all of the sights we could see together.”

As he began speaking, Adeline remembered Himmelkos. She looked across the ocean.

“If you don’t have any interest...”

“I’ll think about it, I really will,” she promised.

Looking at the blue light seeping from the laptop, Adeline shook her head. He couldn’t be there. She needed to stop deluding herself. The nights were much longer now without her insomniac friend for company, and in the stretches of darkness, she grew restless, desperate. It was in these stretches of time that she felt the longing stir within her. At times, she thought of Phineas.

She felt Aaron now in her home, meandering about her living room. She noticed him staring at blank walls, some containing only abstract paintings. “No family?” he asked.

She smiled crookedly, remaining silent for a few moments. He took the silence for an answer, constructing his own information from what she didn’t say. As he walked toward the cupboard, Adeline dropped her glass.

“Are you okay?” he asked, rushing over to her.

“Yes, I’m fine. Shaky hands,” she chuckled.

Adeline felt his presence leave, doubting he was even there at all. She was also guilty of creating something from nothing. She found herself at the cupboard, the top drawer open. Inside, pictures of Phineas lay, his amber eyes boring into hers. She picked one up, the one where he sat on the tricycle, one hand maintaining balance, the other holding a stone. Just like Aaron, he always had a fascination with rocks. They’d never discuss their shared fascination, both existing in separate timelines of Adeline’s life.

Even after all these years, looking at pictures of him hurt, and she believed the pain in her heart was what drew Aaron and her together. Although Aaron figured she never had a family, she felt his pain when he described his daughter, Cecily, and her death. No one could understand the loss of a child, he explained. She agreed, but he took it in a different way than she meant it.

He knew her insomnia, the uncontrollable shaking of her hands, her love of cupcakes, her hatred of bread with raisins, and her desire to leave the house she’d felt trapped in for so long. He didn’t know about Phineas, the fact that she stayed up later than usual to spend more time with him, or her inescapable guilt. There could only be so much to learn about someone in brief, structured moments, when both parties have time to sweep emotional insecurities aside. Just as he didn’t know all about her, she couldn’t know all about him.

He barely spoke of his wife, only ever uttering a few words about the woman. When he kissed Adeline, she pushed him away, asking him not to involve her in such pain. He said his wife would never know, and didn’t understand how that made Adeline feel worse. A few months ago, he was absent a few nights in a row. Adeline figured he’d grown bored of her, but as soon as she began questioning him, he showed up. She didn’t ask where he’d been, but as he joined her on the rocks, he said, “She’s dead.”

After that, he brought up Iceland more frequently, and when Adeline fi-

nally shut him down, claiming they were both in far too poor health to make it all the way to Iceland and carry out a fulfilling existence, he mentioned Himmelkos. He never understood her reservations with the idea.

A few nights before his passing, he was describing all the wondrous things they could do there together. “Ice fishing, spas, scenic driving, really, I could go on and on about this place, Addie.”

“Would it be the same?” she asked.

“Of course not, it’d be considerably colder than here.”

“That’s not what I mean.”

He hesitated, and the silence grew longer between them. “I can’t answer that. Can anyone? That’s philosophical, not scientific, and you’d have to decide what makes us who we are. Even if it’s not really us, would it matter?”

“How could it not matter?” Adeline asked, slamming her cold palm against the rock.

“What’s the alternative, huh? Where is my wife right now, my daughter? They’re in the ground, fading into the earth like all the others. Do you really want to be like them? An eternity of nothing?”

“Do we have the right not to be? Your wife had the opportunity, why didn’t she take it? Why wouldn’t she go to Himmelkos instead of rotting in the ground?”

“She was Catholic. She thought it was unnatural to abandon your body like that. She said uploading your ‘soul’, or consciousness, in that technological world was immoral, that it went against God and His creation. Instead of God, we become the creators of our own heaven. She thought that was a horrid idea. Part of me hopes she’s with Him, wherever that may be, but somewhere inside of me I know she’s just in the dirt, gone. The difference between her and me—I have no God, no hope of some heaven to even cling to. People like me, like us, have Himmelkos.” His eyes were moist, and Adeline glimpsed his own desperation.

Sitting in her room alone, shivering, she felt that desperation churning inside of her. She searched Himmelkos again, knowing Aaron was there. She knew he couldn’t pass up the chance for his own slice of heaven. The first night she got the courage to talk to him, after many nights of watching him walk the length of the beach alone, he ignored her at first. Instead, he began walking toward the largest pile of rocks, knowing she would follow.

## An Adult of Divorce

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Growing up, the main basis that most people have for relationships comes from two places: first, the portrayals on television and movies that are simultaneously idolized, idyllic, and utterly ridiculous. The guy (who is a little bit too forward) always gets the girl and they live happily ever after with two kids in the countryside; naturally, if that were true, our society would be somehow even more misogynistic and patriarchal. The second place is from our parents.

When I was a kid, I never realized the influence that my parents would have on me. They had married very young—my father was 25 and my mother was going on 21—and I was born roughly two years after that. Pictures of the three of us fill the photo albums we have locked away in storage somewhere. I was a well-behaved child, which is a habit I have managed to keep to this day. My brothers were born later and three kids can certainly be stressful, but my family managed to hold itself together well. My dad picked up some extra shifts so that we could afford our new house and, when we were old enough to go to school, my mom managed to get a day job in retail. It was not an ideal situation and we never had an incredible amount of money, but we got by as well as we could.

As easy as I was to raise, my brothers were not so. As soon as I could work and drive, my parents did not have to worry about me whatsoever. I always had steady, full-time employment from then on out and I was toward the top of my class. I handled college applications myself and designed my own trips to see my prospects. I was athletic and fit, a solid writer, and managed to juggle everything like a circus clown in a business suit. My brothers lacked that fire of motivation that burned in my stomach. Between all of my parents' own work, they still made time to go out to dinner themselves. They thought my brothers could figure everything out. I did my best to help them decide what to do and where to go, but they were a bit too focused on the Internet and marijuana. When I left for college, my dad cried on the car ride home.

In that first year while I was gone, my brothers managed to figure everything out. One went into the military, which may not have been the most popular decision with my mom but he enjoys it. The other went to college for a semester and worked while on probationary acceptance. The only downside to that acceptance was that—when he was found with a box of weed in his room—they kicked him out. He became a full-time kitchen worker, gave up on school, and I cannot even talk to him without feeling disgusted. He has a hat that says “Thank You For Being a Slut.” When I was with my girlfriend for over a year, he asked me if I thought she was crazy yet. The problem child becomes a problematic adult.

My mom got a job offer across the country after my dad got a new position in his company. He had gotten better hours and benefits for less pay, but he promised to help her move out there and come along as everything wound down. She left in February and my dad sold our house quickly; he did not need a home like that for himself and two cats. I promised him that I would return for the summer to help him move everything to a smaller apartment for the transition.

The move was quick. My brother was back from basic training to help as well, so it only lasted about three hours. Everything that was too large was put into storage or given away to charity. I spent the summer at work and helping my dad. My brother had to leave; he was stationed in Japan for the next three years and given limited leave. The more problematic brother was not very involved anymore; he was never a fan of criticism. My dad never let him smoke weed in the house and he took that the wrong way.

One day I got off work early and was sitting in the apartment. My dad came home slightly later. He looked disheveled and upset. I asked him if everything was okay. All that he said was that it was not, and that I should ask my mom instead. When I left for a little while, I called my mom, nervous that someone had died. Instead, she mentioned that she was enjoying her time alone more than she thought she would.

They separated about a month later. I do not know if they will ever get back together. I still don't know why it happened.

I avoid the topic with my brothers whenever I talk to them; it is a sort of a mutual understanding. We all kind of grew closer, almost out of necessity. I find it hard to talk to my mom sometimes, even though I know she must have her reasons. It can be really hard to stay unbiased when you sit up awake at night because your dad is too, trying to cry quietly. I do my best to avoid bringing up their relationship with either of them. For a while, just thinking about my mom would bring tears to my dad's eyes.

My grandmother had similar issues with her first husband. Whenever I talk with her to check in on my dad, she mentions how hard it must be. She tells me that I should know "It isn't my fault." I never really considered that it could be, to be honest. I talk to my girlfriend about it sometimes, too, and she tends to ask if I am alright. I always say yes, but the real answer is that I cannot tell what I am.

Growing up, the main basis for relationships I had was my parents. They fell in love young, had a successful marriage and raised three kids. They may not have been overly wealthy, but they loved each other. Looking at my friends who had divorced parents, I was very glad that my parents had a wonderful romantic relationship. They teased each other, they kissed frequently, and they would always hold hands when we drove anywhere. People have asked me if this whole process has made me question my own relationship.

No: it has not. I am not a child of divorce; I am smart enough to know what love is and what it is not. My parents did love each other—they likely still do—and I know that they would never take back the past twenty-one years. My girlfriend and I love each other, but that does not mean it will fade away like it has with my mom and dad. The main benefit that I have over my friends back then is that I have my own adult opinions. My own relationship is different. I know this is not my fault. I know that things change, but that they do not have to. Right now, I do not have the time to think about it and what it means. Instead, I will help take care of my family. That is all that I can do.

## Race

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*At the beginning of it all is a gun,  
loaded with  
blanks.  
Just a little sound  
and a little smoke.  
Then,  
a real explosion.  
This time,  
from within each runner's limbs.  
They're driven by the pressure  
not to come in last place,  
but the gun is  
fake.*

## Lakeside

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If Seneca Lake is considered to be one of the Finger Lakes with an area of about sixty-seven square miles, I think it'd be fair to call Waneta Lake a knuckle. Just three-and-a-half miles long, it's situated in the middle of Nowhere, New York, surrounded by mountains just tall enough to remind me of my own smallness in the Grand Scheme of Things. But what did I care about the size? I had never been to a lake. Previously, "vacation" had always been synonymous with "beach" in the Bolger household. Sixteen-hour drives to Hilton Head or the Outer Banks were a breeze down I-95, despite its many attempts to mire us in traffic. We had nearly perfected the essential road trip skills, including listening to our own music through headphones while Dad's music played over the radio at an absurd volume, not throwing up even though there were no air vents in the third row of the Explorer, and holding in our pee for extended periods of time. But this was summer of 2016; the Bolgers had fallen on hard times (had been falling for years) with Erin fresh out of college, me in college, Brian six years behind me in private school, and Thomas bringing up the rear in a public middle school, and beggars couldn't be choosers, so there would be no such drive to the Carolinas.

If we were the beggars, the choosers were my aunt and uncle, who had no children and no mortgage, and had graciously invited us on vacation for the second year in a row. Last year, the six Bolgers, two Albrights, and my dad's brother, Frank, had spent a week one block from the beach and right on the bay in sunny Ocean City, Maryland. Last year, Aunt Mary hadn't gone through chemotherapy for breast cancer, and Uncle Glen's donated kidney wasn't failing. Last year, we could all get drunk on sunshine, and we didn't care where the nearest dialysis facility was. Last year was not this year. But they insisted the eight of us go on vacation together anyway—this was *summer*, after all—and my family didn't have much of an alternative. So we packed up in New Jersey and pointed our cars north instead of the usual south, heading for a lake instead of a beach.

After five hours in the car, our caravan arrived at Waneta Lake. To me, anywhere that wasn't the City was "upstate New York," but just 150 miles from Canada, Waneta Lake was *actually* upstate New York. The owner of the dark red lake house, a squat man named Tim, began giving us a tour. As he led my mom and aunt inside, my dad and uncles dropped into the chairs on the deck facing the lake; I imagined seven days passing without any of them moving. With Uncle Glen's kidney+asthma+pair of broken feet, it was understandable on his part; my dad and Uncle Frank, on the other hand, just enjoyed sitting down, usually with some cigars.

Looking east down the sloping lawn, a tall screened-in porch hovered above the shore—a perfect reading nook, I noted. The whisper of water lapping at the land and a glimmer of sunlight hinted at the proximity of the lake, but the trees surrounding the house made it difficult to see anything. I looked at Brian; he'd gotten much taller in the past year, although he still didn't quite reach me at five-foot-six (no matter what he said to the contrary). Somewhere in between

last summer and my year away at school, the beginnings of his transformation from little kid into actual person had escaped my notice, taking root in the new way he carried himself, shoulders back and head high.

“Let’s go,” I said to him.

“Where?” he asked.

I rolled my eyes and began walking down the lawn toward the dock, my legs happy to be in motion instead of tucked underneath me after the long drive. Hurried footsteps told me Brian had decided to follow. Maybe in places like school and work I was timid, waiting to see what others did before I acted, but among my siblings, I was the go-getter, despite my position as the second-born instead of the oldest. Jogging down the stone stairway and then onto the metallic dock—*clang clang clang*, it rang out with each heavy footstep—I purposefully kept my eyes cast down until I reached the end; another step would have propelled me into the water, which I could see wasn’t deep this close to shore.

I looked up to take in the panorama and immediately decided I liked lakes. Perhaps not as much as I liked the beach, but I definitely liked lakes. The mountain in front of us served as a barrier from the rest of the world, as if the houses lining the edge of Waneta Lake were the only witnesses to its existence. We alone were privy to this secret place, and the windows of the houses across from the dock looked at me with blank expressions, as if to say *Alright, you’re here now, you’ve seen it, and it belongs to you, but you mustn’t tell anyone else*. A shade being drawn winked at me, acknowledging my initiation into this secret society. I nodded, my eyes sweeping from one end of the lake to the other. If I stretched my arms out, I thought I could embrace the entire three-and-a-half miles. The sun was beginning to dip behind me; it had waited until we got here so we could get our first glimpse of the landscape under its warm gaze, but now it was getting tired, going to rest behind the mountain on which our house sat.

The middle of July meant I had spent two months waitressing and had a little less than a month before I went back to school; this was the first time all summer the air around me felt breathable. Maybe while we were here, in this strange-but-beautiful place we’d never heard of, we hoped to forget about everything else, what came before the trip and what was yet to come. None of us expressed as much, but this vacation was not a week of “R&R”; we were way beyond that kind of help. It wasn’t as if at the end of seven days, we’d go home, and the anxious crease in Mom’s forehead would have been smoothed, or there’d be a job for Erin waiting on our doorstep. No. Being at the lake wasn’t about going somewhere or attaining anything; it was about getting away, as if all the troubles from home wouldn’t follow us here, or perhaps they’d resolve themselves in our absence.

At nine o’clock the next morning, I popped out of bed, excited to lounge and read, read and lounge. I rifled through my suitcase and hurriedly changed into my swimsuit, stopping in front of the mirror. I’d been doing a “Skinny Mom” workout I’d found on none other than Pinterest; in addition to the ridiculous amount of walking I did as a waitress and my daily runs, I was looking pretty good. Which made me feel pretty good. I examined myself a moment longer, considering today’s date. It had been exactly four weeks since my break-up; I had only cried once, mostly due to the fact I was working more often than

not and partially due to the fact he wasn't much of a loss. Fortunately, I hadn't heard from him since. Offering a small smile at my reflection, I darted upstairs.

That afternoon, after getting through my first book and floundering around on an inner tube with my siblings, I trekked through the grass to get lunch. My uncles and dad were sitting on the deck and observing the lake. I was surprised to see a fourth spectator had joined them.

"Whose cat is that?" The creature had long brown fur with copper stripes, matted in some places and sticking up in others. It looked like it had just crawled out of a dumpster.

"We don't know, but I named him Eddie," responded Uncle Glen. As I got closer, I noticed his open palm, from which the poor excuse for a cat was eating leftover hamburger meat. "Don't pet him, though; your father thinks he might have ticks."

I scrunched my nose in repulsion and drew my hand back. The cat glared at me with its creepy glowing eyes as I wrapped my towel tighter around my shoulders and slipped into the air-conditioned house.

"Erin, can you just bring me your credit card?" My mom had her hand over the speaker of her cell phone.

Erin looked distressed. "You've already used it twice this month, you said you were gonna try not to!"

"Yes, I'm still here, one moment," Mom said into the phone before replacing her hand over it. "I didn't realize we'd have to pay for the dinner cruise up front," she responded to Erin. To celebrate my dad's birthday, we had decided on a boat ride around Seneca Lake. My sister begrudgingly got up from the table and disappeared into the basement, reappearing a moment later with her wallet. My mom gave her a thankful but apologetic look. Erin crossed her arms and looked across the table at me. I offered her my best sympathetic expression, but I'm not sure how strongly it came across—Mom owed me quite a bit of money as well.

"Cath, we could've just paid for it," Aunt Mary said as my mother hung up the phone.

"It's fine," my mom answered, smiling. "I'll pay you back next pay cycle," she said to Erin.

"What're you gonna wear for the cruise, Er?" I asked my sister to change the subject.

She looked sullen for another moment before she started telling me some of the outfits she was considering.

Ultimately, she decided on a striped maxi-dress while I wore one in floral print, and the two of us stood on the deck of the ship following dinner, giggling with our brothers as we made Mom take our picture. We kept quoting *The Office*, and some other passengers laughed at us when we posed on the bow as Jack and Rose from *Titanic*. Aunt Mary poked her head out to tell us dessert was ready, and everyone began making their way down the stairs.

"I'll be right down," I called, glancing at my phone for the first time all night. My heart sank as my ex-boyfriend's name flashed across the screen—he had a knack for poor timing. I looked desperately up at the rhinestone-dotted sky; the stars flashed in condescension, as if to say, *You really think you're the only*



*person who's ever heard from an unwanted ex?* I turned my gaze to the black water beneath me, hoping for a bit more sympathy; it was unmoving but for the wake of the boat, like a block of onyx waiting for me to make some sense out of it with the skill of a sculptor. I considered throwing my phone into the darkness, tempted to interrupt its serenity the way mine had been interrupted by a stupid text message. I opted instead to slip my phone back into the pocket of my dress, text message unopened, before going downstairs to sing "Happy Birthday."

Erin and Uncle Glen both enjoy lively discussions, because somehow, miraculously, neither of them has ever been wrong in their lives, but the next day at lunch was different; they were arguing. The three of us had been having a conversation that had somehow disappeared into anger, flaring up so unexpectedly that the rest of the family froze around us.

"That's what you two do," Uncle Glen said, pointing a finger at Erin and me and raising his voice. "You start these discussions, and you both think you know everything, and it's starting to piss me off!"

We'd been talking about Zelda Fitzgerald and her cause of death, debating the details; as one of my favorite historical figures, I'd studied her life and written a collection of poetry about her. I felt the need to defend her when my uncle blamed her for the fire that burned down her sanatorium. I held fast to the idea that a "reformed" patient of the hospital who'd been promoted to security guard started the fire that killed Zelda Fitzgerald and eight other patients. But the argument was so asinine, and I was so uncomfortable, I would have agreed with my uncle if he'd said Godzilla had set the fire.

"No, I was only trying to say Kate *just* did a research project on this, doesn't that count for anything?" Erin asked incredulously, also unsure of why he was being so confrontational.

"Obviously it doesn't," I interjected, pushing away from the table, dumping my dish in the sink, grabbing my book, and hurrying outside. My footsteps pounded the dock, disturbing what had been a peaceful scene, as Uncle Glen's words ran around my head. My face was red in shame—*maybe I didn't know what I was talking about*—and tears ruined my view of the lake. I noticed a strange sensation in my hand and was surprised to see a knife and fork held tightly in my grasp; in my haste, I had forgotten to leave them in the sink with my plate. The knife's serrated edge bit into my skin. I set the utensils on the bench beside me and cracked open my book, attempting to disappear into the Pacific jungles of the World War II memoir.

A half hour later, my mother had joined me, and we were reading silently. Behind us, I heard someone coming down to the dock, but it wasn't the eager footsteps of my brothers or the slower but definitive tread of my dad. I turned to see Uncle Glen walking carefully toward us; he hadn't walked further than the distance from the house to the car the whole week, but I hid my surprise, determined not to acknowledge him. He stopped next to me, put his hands on his hips, and took in the view of the lake, inhaling deeply.

"I owe everyone an apology," he said. "Yesterday morning, when Mary and I said we had gone out to see the sunrise... we were actually coming back from the hospital. I'd had an asthma attack in the middle of the night."

"Really?" Concern colored Mom's voice, but I was determined to stay cold,

still not looking up.

“They gave me a heavy dose of steroids, and clearly, it affected my mood. And so I’m very sorry for that, Kate.”

Having been addressed directly, I finally met his gaze. “It’s okay,” I murmured. For some reason, I felt more ashamed after hearing this explanation. He extended his arms, and I dutifully stood and gave him a reconciliatory hug before sitting back down and staring at my book. Uncle Glen took another look around the lake; my mom jokingly asked if he wanted to get in the paddle boat. He laughed jovially, the kind of laugh that would have shaken his belly last year when he was twenty pounds heavier.

“Can you take our picture?” I yelled at the random teenage boy over the sound of rushing water. I was grinning broadly, aware of how insane we all looked, wet faces peering out of the hoods of thin blue ponchos. He nodded, and I backed up to join my family on the bow of *The Maid of the Mist*.

We had wandered around Niagara Falls State Park for over an hour, losing Uncle Glen and Aunt Mary as they’d stopped to take a break, losing my father as he continuously ventured off without saying where to, and losing our patience as we looked for the damn entrance to the stupid boat ride. Upon reuniting, we’d all sat around eating Dippin’ Dots and debating whether it was even worth it at this point. Then we noticed the ticket kiosk for *The Maid of the Mist* right next to the Dippin’ Dots stand.

Putting our ponchos on over our various hats and backpacks, we laughed at the bizarre blue forms our bodies took on. Rainbows bounced off every surface of the falls, and we excitedly pointed at lines of ducklings as they swam by. I looked at my mom and Erin, and I couldn’t stop laughing. Erin tried to ask what was so funny, but it wouldn’t have mattered even if we could have heard each other; I couldn’t explain what I was feeling. The journey under the falls purged all thoughts from my head; everything was pure joy. One of the most astounding places on earth, and all I could do was laugh in its face.

The next morning, our last at Waneta Lake, Erin and I stumbled out of bed and down to the dock, where gossamer threads of mist rose off the lake, evaporating into morning light. The mountain across the way was one long dark shadow, guarding the gleaming sunrise that had begun an hour ago. Wrapping my arms tightly around myself, I breathed deeply, trying to keep all thoughts of returning home from running through my brain. The tumultuous past week spread itself out like the fog over the lake; all the illness, financial anxiety, and ex-boyfriends that were supposed to stay at home had found their way here, one way or another, but I kept a brave face. I didn’t want the mountains to know that I had polluted this place, allowed the demons to follow us; I had failed to keep Waneta Lake secret. I couldn’t see the windows of the nearby houses, but I imagined sympathetic understanding in their gazes rather than disappointment.

Sunrise was lovely, if not awe-inspiring. I wanted a hundred colors woven through the clouds, bouncing off the ripples of the lake and inspiring me to wake up this early every morning. Instead, dawn reached its hand over the hills with clarity and gentleness, causing the foggy chill to dissipate. I snapped a couple of pictures, stifled a yawn, and waited another moment for Divinity to

make itself known. When it didn't, Erin and I wordlessly slogged uphill and went back to sleep for a couple more hours.

## Eden

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Elijah knelt beneath a bunker, his youthful hands shaking as they improperly grasped a poorly manufactured rifle. Shots rang in front of him, beside him, and behind him. His mind was racing, unable to focus on anything. The dark sky hid the bullets that flew across the warzone, narrowly missing his unstrapped helmet. He couldn't tell whether the screams he heard were ones of agony or of generals yelling commands. Peeking just above the blood-soaked bunker, he made out the enemy lines faintly through the fog, watching dark silhouettes charging and dropping as soon as they leaped beyond the safety of the dirt trap. A bullet whizzed into Elijah's uniform while another revealed his dark brown hair as it collided with his helmet, which landed calmly below. Elijah's panicking mind brought his hand to his wound, gushing red while his rifle escaped his hand's grip, sticking into the dirt. Sitting with his back to the wall, his mind reached for the thoughts of his newly born son, his wife, his family, until his widened eyes peered to his right, meeting the gaze of his dead friend.

Elijah stood on the wooden planks outside the front door of his house, gazing across the vast expanse of sand. His small town was located in northern Turkey, surrounded by hues of yellow and brown. These two colors engulfed the town, from the mountains and hills on the horizon, to the sturdy wooden poles holding up the roofs of the houses. The sun's rays relentlessly struck the village, forcing most of its occupants inside to escape the heat. Elijah's black shirt fit loosely around his person, the fabric swaying back and forth as he limped forward, out from the safety of his awning, and into the heat.

Elijah grasped his cane with both of his hands, the golden metal head connecting to the black wooden rod digging into the ground, following the path established by his previous walks along the rough ground. He soon stepped into a vast forest of color, a luscious green garden, despite the conditions of the scorched town. Not many people of the town could grow such gardens in the unfertile ground. The light brown earth was always either too dry or too rough to properly grow plants, yet Elijah found a way to make peace with the land, producing baskets after baskets of fresh fruit and vegetables.

Rows of red, purple, orange, even spots of blue and pink, decorated the carefully crafted garden. The tall vines wrapped around wooden poles, rough leaves sticking out of the intertwined stalks. Elijah merged into the colors, his brown dress shoes soaked in mud and water. He waddled through the vines until a large, red fruit grabbed his eyes. Reaching out, his shaky hands clutched the smooth tomato. Ignoring the increasing heat of the blasting sun, he knelt into the wet dirt, his eyes swishing left and right, inspecting the captive produce.

A roar of footsteps pulled Elijah away from the fruit, planting his eyes on the hill just beyond the village. Carefully releasing the tomato, he began pushing his cane deeper into the dirt, hoisting himself upright. His hand rested just above his eyes, providing the proper shade as he squinted, looking closer at the hill. Soldiers clad in camouflage sprinted down the hills, sand kicking up beneath their military boots. The few residents remaining in the heat quickly

broke for their houses, panicked faces rushing for a false safety. The soldiers grew closer and closer, escaping the dangerous sand and entering the comfort and serenity of Elijah's garden.

Firmly standing, both hands still wrapped around his cane, Elijah frowned as the heavily clad soldiers marched closer toward him. The soldier who looked like leader of the group lifted his hands, manipulating his fingers and arm movements to give various signals without speaking a word. His sunglasses reflected the sun toward Elijah as he paced forward, his left hand gripping the downward-facing rifle. His frown matched Elijah's, his eyes staring intensely. Elijah's focus was drawn to the other soldiers, who began to spread out, some banging on the wooden doors, others taking aim and firing at the frames and forcing themselves into the stone homes of his fellow townspeople. His attempt toward them was stopped by the soldier's strong, gloved hands, gently pushing him back to meet his unpleasant gaze.

"I'll take it you don't remember me," the soldier's voice was rough as he spoke up, his feet shuffling in place. The gloved hands of the man grasped his blackened glasses, removing them from his scarred face. The blue eyes of the leader focused intently on Elijah. The soldier's face twisted more uncomfortably as his eyes seemingly grew angrier. "Well? Nothing? It's only been a few years, old man!"

Elijah's bones ached throughout the day, making the mornings even more difficult to rise out of the comfort of the sheets on his mattress. Scars were tattered along his uncovered arms, brutal reminders of his militaristic past. Eyes half-closed, he gazed at his night table, toward a small golden jar, containing the ashes of his wife. His hands reached out, feeling the cold, smooth surface of the object. Breathing deeply in, he heaved himself out of bed as he exhaled. His shuffling feet slowly paced through the interior of the house as Elijah mindlessly moved toward the kitchen. The natural light and smell of fresh vegetables growing in his newly formed garden were not waking him up this time. A headline on a newspaper caught his attention, sticking out from the usual dark brown of the chairs and table: "Turkish Economy Boom as Oil Trade with U.S. Increases." He disappointedly glances through the article, eyeing key words and phrases, such as "millions of dollars" and "oil dependency." His eyebrows slowly furrow together as he absorbs and processes more of the article. Those wars he fought in, were they truly just for more negotiations with foreign countries?

"People just can't seem to find peace with what they have anymore," Elijah grumbles out the side of mouth, turning and folding the pages in the print.

Slipping out from the newspaper, a white sheet landed on the tiled kitchen floor. His tired hands, covered in small cuts from the thorns in his garden, lazily swipe up the paper as his eyes dash through the markings along the page. *I'm out, old man. I told you this would happen, now that I'm finally old enough. I know you said "no military work," but you can't stop me. Maybe you're through with this fighting, but I'm not. Ma passed because our "allies" couldn't send backup in time. This town, this country, this whole planet is disgusting. Your stinking garden can't fix anything, but I can, whether you want me to or not.* His eyes could not prevent the overflow of tears approaching. *I'll go somewhere they'll take me in as the soldier I was born to be. Sitting here in this trashy town won't do nothing*

*toward helping that. For both of our sakes, let's hope we don't see each other for a while. Your son...*

"Noah?!" The name rushed out of Elijah's mouth, breaking the momentary silence. Elijah gazed at his son, standing tall before him, impatiently swaying his rifle back and forth.

"Bingo," Noah responded, pulling the rifle over his shoulder, re-covering his eyes with the sunglasses. Elijah's mouth hung slightly open, his mind not quite comprehending the scenario. Noah angrily glared longer at Elijah. "Well, hope you've been good, I've been just swell." Noah brought the gun back across his torso, his right hand gripping underneath the front of the device. "Now, I've some work to do. Some of your workers in this town aren't seemin' to get the importance oil has to good ol' Uncle Sam." Quickly turning and running brutishly through the garden and toward the center of town, he began to shout some military jargon, words like charlie, foxtrot, tango. Words that Elijah once knew the meanings of by heart but now barely recognized, his hand extended toward where Noah once stood. The unbearable silence only brought him more distress.

As Noah disappeared behind a building, rapid gunfire rang out; however, these sounds were not reciprocated with the breaking of a wooden frame or stone wall—rather these sounds were accompanied with yells of terror. Elijah jumped as his heart began thumping faster and faster. Regaining his state of mind, he slowly made his way forward, his soiled shoes kicking up dirt and sand as he reached the edge of his garden. He noticed dead plants, trampled and crushed, the insides of fruits and vegetables scattered as the footprints of boots layered on top of the unpolished food. He felt pained and saddened, but he ignored his ruined work and continued making his way out to the center of town.

His pace hastened as he pulled around the crumbling corner of one of the stone houses, peering into the middle of the simple town. Soldiers of light brown and green shades pushed violently on the loosely clad folk of the town, but the sheer number of the citizens overwhelmed them as a circle formed around one remaining soldier. Pushing his cane even more violently into the ground, Elijah worriedly hurried forward, his muscles aching as he pushed himself.

Noah stood in the center, his black rifle aimed at two men, a woman, and a child, bruised and collapsed on the ground. His sunglasses hid his piercing eyes, yet his gaze was more frightening to the endangered family than his weapon's barrel. Shaking and sobbing, the family held their hands up, pleading for the soldier to reconsider his actions. Elijah carefully eased through the crowd, using his small stature to slip around the citizens, eventually breaking the imagined line separating Noah from the people of the town. A disappointed sigh escaped his mouth as he saw his son shouting incoherently at the family. His cane fell to the sand, the metal head shining half as bright as the sand surrounded the object. His trembling arms were stretched outright, his lopsided, black shirt coated in sweat as he inched closer to the place in between Noah and the victims.

"Noah, son, what are you doing?" Elijah's calm voice hushed the uproar of the pleading crowd, yet Noah held no restraint in his actions. "Noah, after all these years have passed, you must remember all I've told you... These wars are not for me nor for you." Elijah continued to move closer, his face pained from

his hustle. "I've missed you so; can we not at least talk?" Noah's emotionless and unmoving response prompted Elijah to continue pushing forward, eventually placing himself between his son and the threatened family. "Noah, I thought you wanted peace..."

The circular crowd was separated as soldiers shoved and forced their way through. Elijah turned to look toward them, his quivering hands lowering from exhaustion. The heat belted down on him more and more, sweat pouring down his face. As he glanced back at Noah, he saw that his son had aimed his weapon away from the family and now at him.

"You never quite understood war, old man." Noah heaved the rifle backwards, then thrust it forward into Elijah's stomach. Elijah was knocked off of his feet and onto the rough sand below him. Gasping for breath, he gripped his stomach. His shut eyes saw only darkness, but his ears picked up short bursts of gunfire. The pain in his stomach grew unbearable. Screams for help rang out even louder than his own gasps for breath. The heat was the least of his concern, but its intensity could not be ignored. Blurred people dashed all around him as hidden soldiers fired left and right, some pushing members of the crowd down and others running back to regroup. The pure sand around him was soon painted red. His widened eyes rapidly surveyed the area, eventually meeting the gaze of the murdered family behind him.

Gasping even harder for breath, Noah's black silhouette covered the sun in front of him, providing momentary relief from the rays. Noah knelt down, reaching inside his padded and bloodied uniform. He pulled out a golden necklace, shining in the sunlight, with a heavy cross dangling on the end. Roughly pulling Elijah's hands off of his stomach, his strong fingers forced Elijah's weak palm open, placing the cold golden chain in his hands. Noah frowned, his teeth showing, as streaks of red were splattered across his face. He glared back toward Elijah, the sun peaking beyond his unstrapped helmet.

"You better hope for salvation, old man. You'll need it more than I will." Noah sadly stared at Elijah's face, which grew increasingly more pained and uncomfortable. "I was hoping I wouldn't run into you here. This oil, it's just like our, uh...our forbidden fruit, so to say. So well, let's just hope this doesn't happen again...and, uh, sorry about your garden..." Staring into nothingness, Elijah's eyes slightly swayed back and forth. Frowning, Noah turned, yelling back to his troops more military words that Elijah didn't have the time or ability to make out. His head falling back onto the sand, he caught Noah returning to his feet and running out of the view of his collapsed head, as the blue sky and town turned from hues of yellow and brown to complete darkness.

## Regifted

---

You left me gifts I couldn't return:  
A gray sweater, a stolen street sign,  
Silver necklaces engraved with the epitaph to my ancestor virginity,  
"Here lies the choices she had no choice to make,"  
Gone, but still trying to forget;  
A bag of mints.  
Broken blood vessels on my thighs where your knees spread their evil empire,  
Their hushed  
Plague visible only beneath the tissue where muscles writhe before  
A cocked gun barrel.  
A pumpkin muffin that I threw up after you grabbed my breasts in the line at  
Panera and laughed  
While my high school teacher's wife stirred her soup in a booth a few feet away  
And laughed harder when I told you to stop but you grabbed me again  
And laughed again when I smacked your hand away.  
You left me prescription notes and doctor's appointments and a gynecologist  
That asked,  
Could you try to relax a little bit?  
You left me inside the model CR-V at the Honda dealership to get myself  
Together while you went off  
To look for windshield wipers,  
Inside your Buick at 4am on a Tuesday because you would not tolerate the  
Absence of  
"I love you."  
Your semen on my chest that you did not have the courtesy to wipe off after you  
Forced my loss of innocence, my mockingbird killed,  
A quota:  
Five more times before next week because you're leaving me,  
And of course I said no, but what can my dissent weight against your guilt?  
There was never any respect for that word.  
You left hollow soliloquies, battlefield gothic too audacious for locker rooms to  
Rot between my teeth and slither round my neck until the suffocation felt safer  
Than spending time with you.



## The Finest Coffee in All the Land

---

Training began at a young age. My brother made the coffee nightly. He had the honor for a good chunk of time, and I was jealous. My job was to bring the coffee into the living room, where my parents, my aunt, and my uncle sat, watching TV and waiting for their order. It would come in cups neatly lined on a tray, and I was not to spill a single drop from the kitchen to the living room. Hold my body straight and glide. Don't look down. Glide. No coffee would spill. I was itching for the more dangerous task. The kind that made them smile and comment that it was good coffee.

"You can not make the soorj," my mother said to me in Armenian, "because you can not see the soorj on the stove-top."

Mothers are rarely right, but she was right. I could only see the edge of the counter.

My brother didn't rebel. He did as he was told. Instead, he cleverly waited until my age seemed about right to pass on the chores to his little sister.

"Mom," he said, "I think Lori is old enough to learn now."

"You are right," she acknowledged, looking at me, un-phased by my excitement. "Teach her how to do it. We want good soorj after dinner. If it's bad, you start again."

I knew I could make good coffee if I wanted to. I knew I could do better than him if I wanted to. I just needed to learn. He brought me to the stove. Pulled out the tray on the side of the counter, lined up petite saucers for the petite coffee cups to sit on top of them.

"Look," he explained, "they are four people, so four cups. Take one of these cups, fill it with water, and pour it in the chesve." I watched as he emptied out the water into the curvaceous, metal pot, the handle pointing upward, diagonally toward the sky. "Four times," he continued, "Four people equals four cups. Six people equals six cups. Understand?"

Of course I understood. Four equals four. Six equals six.

"Once you have all the water in, you want to boil it."

He put the heat on high. Watching the water made it boil faster.

He pushed me backward. "Don't lean over the water. When it begins to boil, it could hit your face. Your face will melt off. Do you know what it's like for your face to melt off? Don't do that, and you won't find out."

I stepped back, saddened by my break in concentration. It took ages to boil.

He pulled open the silverware drawer and removed a long-handled spoon.

I reached for the tin by the stove. Beneath an image of a bald man sipping coffee were the words *Mehmet Edendi: Türk Kahvesi*. My poor Turkish linguistic skills prevented me from translating it. It must have been one of my father's treasures that he brought from Turkey after his visits.

My brother took the tin from me and opened the lid, explaining, "One loaded spoon for each person," and the fumes of ground, Turkish coffee penetrated my nose. It made me sneeze. He held out the open tin to my face and extended the spoon in the other hand. "Show me how you're going to do it."

I wanted to take a moment to touch the finely ground coffee beans. The smell made me dizzy, but it looked just like the chocolate powder I use to sprinkle over my omelets in the morning. I licked my finger, poked the particles of Turkish dust, and quickly returned it to my tongue. My body went into a coughing fit.

My brother grinned at me and forced the spoon in my hand. "Feeling better now?"

I refused to look at his face and scooped four heaps into the boiling water.

"Now stir."

And I stirred.

"Good, now stir every few minutes. You know it's ready when it starts to boil around the rim," he points toward the edges, "And the outer circle closes in to the very center. If you don't watch it, it will boil over and spill everywhere. Then you're going to have to clean it up, and Mom will yell at you."

I stirred, and I watched for any signs of bubbles.

It started with tiny popping sounds. One after another, the size grew, and a circle of bubbles formed around the rim. The circle grew thicker. Thicker. Thicker until it approached the center. My fingers were ready on the knob that controlled the heat on the stove. Just a little longer. A little closer. A little more, and my fingers tightened around the heat control.

My brother's hands pushed my fingers out of the way, turned off the heat, and lifted the pot up in the air.

"You waited too long, stupid. Get the paper towel. You're cleaning this up."

After five minutes of cleaning, we restarted the process. My uncle shouted from the living room, "Is the soorj nearly ready?"

My brother and I looked at each other, and neither of us responded. I stared at the cesve again to make it boil faster, stirring and staring until finally the bubbles just about covered the entire surface, and I shut the heat in time before another mess was made.

"Good, now pour it in the cups slowly."

One cup filled. Two cups filled. Three cups filled. Four cups filled. A little remained in the cesve. I grabbed a hold of the tray and lifted it up. Stare straight ahead, don't look down, glide, and arrive in the living room. My uncle was watching soccer on the television while my mother and my aunt crunched on sunflower seeds, talking to each other about the people in my brother's generation. My father was asleep on another couch.

I smiled proudly as I set the tray on the coffee table. "Turkish coffee isn't as easy as it looks," I said in Armenian for my entire family to understand.

"You made the soorj?" my uncle asked.

I nodded enthusiastically while giving him his coffee first.

"Lori, did you say *Turkish* soorj?" my mother's displeased voice perplexed me.

"Yes. That's what you wanted. That's what you drink every night. Did I do something wrong? Did I make it wrong?"

"This is *not* Turkish soorj. It is *Armenian*."

"But it's Turkish on the tin."

"Because the Turks stole it from us. It is originally our coffee. We drink Armenian coffee in this house." My mother spoke more crossly.

I searched the room for my brother. He stood near the doorway between the kitchen and the living room watching me. We made eye contact, and his head shook in response. I returned my concentration to my mother, who had just taken a sip from her coffee.

“Not enough sugar. Try again.”

## A Deliverance Story

---

Mrs. Wortlack looked down her beaky nose. Her nostrils flared. My teacher's expression, already intimidating, was especially accentuated by today's full Queen Elizabeth regalia. Hoop skirt, powdered white face, ruffled white collar—Wortlack had everything short of the red wig. I gulped and rubbed my neck, resolving to enjoy my last few moments with a head. Her face really did look like a powdered donut, but I immediately regretted saying as much out loud. She began to stride over to me, but stopped as her deep red hoopskirt thunked against a desk like a clumsy spirit. She tilted her head so far back I couldn't even see her eyes. All I could see were those nostrils.

When displeased, the tip of Wortlack's nose would align with whoever it was she didn't want to see or, as it appeared from her disgusted expression, smell. I wondered if Trevor was really absent today or if he was imprisoned under the hoopskirt, released only at night to feed the class rat. But I shook myself out of my trance. Queen Elizabeth was a substitute; Wortlack was gone. Anyone who mistakenly addressed her as such felt the full brunt of Elizabethan wrath.

When pressed, she had told us that our teacher had left for the day due to "most dire circumstances of an unforeseeable nature."

"Hey Mrs. W., is it a last-minute funeral you're at today?"

"Methinks thou art confused."

"What? A wedding then?"

"I am Queen Elizabeth the First. You can—I mean, Thou canst refer to me as 'Milady', 'Your Worship', or 'Majesty'. I am not 'Mrs. Wortlack'."

Wayne, who sat in the desk next to me, raised his hand. Elizabeth primly called on him.

"Well, Your Worship, I guess we're all wondering what happened to our favorite Science teacher ever. We want to know if she's all right, and will she come back soon?"

"Oh yes, Lord Wayne, how sweet of you. I assure you—thou be assured—that Mrs. Wortlack shall return."

"If they can spring her from the asylum, that is," Connor, the class subversive, whispered to me from his desk behind Wayne's. I started to chuckle and couldn't hide it. I felt those regal nostrils pivot in my direction, but Wayne saved me.

"When will she be back?" he asked, his face a portrait of cherubic innocence.

"Tomorrow, young Lord! Do not fret!" said Elizabeth, her smiling maw nearly as wide as the English Channel. She explained that due to those "unmentionable dire circumstances," O'Shanasy had given her a quick call, Principal Reinbach had pulled a few strings, and voila!—The Virgin Queen was here to teach us a lesson on etiquette. Pleased with her story, she swiveled to the chalkboard and began to write words like "chivalry," "manners," and "class participation" in flowery calligraphy.

"Lord Wayne, teacher's pet," whispered Connor. Wayne gave him a withering glare, and I tried to diffuse the situation.

“Her face looks like a donut!” I said, louder than intended.

“LORD JOSEPH!”

“Oh gosh Mrs. W! I’m so sorry!”

“Your Majesty. And that is no way to speak to a lady!”

“I’m sorry! Like real sorry! Can I go to the bathroom?” I needed to escape.

“Lord Joseph! One doth not say, ‘Can I go to the bathroom?’ One says, ‘Pray may I go to the privy!’”

I had no idea what the heck she was saying, but I was sure it wasn’t in English. I gawked at the towering figure. Wayne, my moonfaced compatriot, nudged me.

“Try it: Pray may I go to the privy.”

I was still gawking at her nostrils.

“Thou hadst better—”

“But I have to PEE,” I said.

Disdainfully, Wortlack gestured toward the door. At her command, I stutter-stepped to grab the hall pass. The pass was like the key to Narnia, or at least an escape to a world where I could catch up on the day’s news and practice WWE wrestling with Connor. I would clutch that white pass so tightly it left purple lines on my palms. It always looked otherworldly and fluorescent against my grubby fist. My hand went numb and I checked to make sure the pass wasn’t drawing blood. As I got closer to the fifth and sixth grades, I heard the sixth grade teacher, Mrs. Nairdly, screaming at someone.

Nairdly was squat and compact with a neck as thick as a linebacker’s. She taught geography to the fourth, fifth, and sixth grades with the watchful eyes, iron talons, and plump torso of a mid-sized screech owl. She was quite partial to denim dresses with floral prints, but her bright red buzzcut was her most distinctive feature. It was fittingly militant, as to give even her own hair half an inch of leeway was not in Nairdly’s nature. The screeches were from within the classroom were harrowing, but things could have been worse. When particularly mad, Nairdly would swoop in and grab the offender by the arm, carrying him or her off to the nurse’s office to shout.

“YOU THINK PHILADELPHIA IS THE CAPITAL OF PENNSYLVANIA?”

“I thought—”

“MY GOD! ARE YOU INSANE?”

“No.” The voice was the most piteous sound I’d heard since the last week’s victim’s sobs.

“IGNORANT, IGNORANT, IGNORANT!”

I could almost hear the foam forming on Nairdly’s rubbery lips, and see her bulging, watery-red eyes straining in a contest to spring from her skull. I pressed on as Ms. Mulder, the insubstantial, quiet religion teacher, tiptoed out to close her fifth grade door, flinching from the screams. I darted around her, dove into the bathroom, and peed for about five minutes.

Fear is a large part of what I remember from that day. But, I will never forget the day because of Connor, not the teachers. He was the most hyperactive, violent, and unhinged person I ever met. As something of a fly-under-the-radar, hold-grudges-against-teachers kind of a guy, I was enthralled by my classmate—how he’d back talk any authority figure and never hesitate to kick anyone in

the balls. He was chivalrous, too. Never violent toward women, Connor would merely steal a girl's backpack or share a frank appraisal of her smell. Queen Wortlack had taught him well.

At lunch, I asked him for an honest opinion of my science fair project—"Overall, good. Needs some flesh-eating aliens." The project was on space exploration, and for the piece-de-resistance, I'd made a clay Neil Armstrong and a pipe-cleaner Eagle. The display board bent in half under the weight of about four gallons of dark blue spray paint. The astronaut became crushed and lumpy—maybe the gravity of the school cafeteria was one hundred times greater than that of the moon. Neil's foot fell off.

"Houston, we have a problem!" shouted Connor, grabbing the crippled tiny clay astronaut and throwing him violently into the air.

Later that day at recess, we began a manic game of kickball in the parking lot—the field that once held a decaying convent was off-limits; we were told we'd ruin the grass, and the water from the storm drain by the demolished convent was "unsafe and unsanitary."

The parking lot itself was a death trap. First base was situated on a veritable 45 degree incline. A quarter inch of white-grey gravel covered the lot, making slipping and falling routine. A minute into our game, one of those pebbles lodged in my left palm after Connor tripped me with a particularly nasty slide tackle. The nurse cleaned and dressed the wound, and I was left with an empty hole that gave me newfound appreciation for Christ's stigmata. Desperate to get back to the game, I wept to sway her.

"Be careful not to die out there," she said with a justified eye-roll. She wrapped my hand with more gauze than was necessary. "I know a lot of grown-ups who would kill to have your health."

I was touched by the unexpected sensitivity. "I know. I won't."

Outside, war raged on. It was the bottom of the fifth, and my team was up 4-3. Wayne, Aaron, and I, along with several carefully-selected underclassmen, could taste victory. It was our best chance yet to break a seven day losing streak.

Elsa kicked a screaming line drive, but it went foul and trickled down into the graveyard along the third base path; kickball etiquette deemed this an automatic out. Now if there was one place on the planet sorrier-looking than St. Vincent's tiny parking lot, it was St. Vincent's tiny graveyard. It was somehow built on an even steeper slope than the lot. Instead of little coffin houses, the dead here probably had to live in cramped, towering coffin-condominiums that gave them vertigo.

Connor was up next. Wayne rolled him the ball bouncily—borderline unkickable. It didn't matter. Connor slammed it with his foot and it soared. But not very far, just up. And up. The damn thing just ascended.

Everyone watched the mile-high red speck rocket upward.

"RUN!" bellowed Elsa.

By the time the ball reached its zenith, Connor had already rounded first. Then, the ball started to shoot down.

"I GOT IT!" screamed Wayne from the mound. Connor rounded second.

"NO, IT'S MINE," howled Aaron, sprinting in from left field.

"NO, I GOT IT, IT'S ALL—"

BONK. Wayne got it all right, right on the head. I ran over from first,

faltered between the ball and the boy, and decided to help Wayne. Aaron didn't even hesitate—he fluidly scooped up the red rubber ball, pivoted, and sprinted like a heat-seeking missile at Connor, who was now barreling into third. He could've stopped there, but he didn't. Suddenly, I was distracted by a searing pain in my left hand as Wayne's fingers grabbed right through the gauze. I forced myself not to look away from the legend unfolding.

What happened next was a moment so terribly beautiful that I hesitate to recount it for fear of not doing it justice. Connor, like a speeding juggernaut, veered from the lime-on-asphalt base path to avoid Aaron's desperate lunge with the kickball. Successful, the baserunner tore down the edge of the graveyard, hurdling gravestones with ease. With a little glance over his shoulder, he saw Aaron's last ditch throw fall short and hit an urn. Connor knew he was free. He laughed like a madman.

And then, he saw it. A two-and-a-half foot slab of black granite bearing down on him. With one fluid stride, Connor's left foot struck the top of the gravestone and he launched himself into open space. He couldn't keep his balance or stop his momentum. His arms flailed helplessly. Briefly, the sunlight peeked through the dust-grey clouds, illuminating both toppling stone and student. They crashed down to earth together.

We formed a small huddle on top of the grave. Connor tried to pry his fingers underneath Siegfried Bialystok III's tombstone to raise it, to no avail. Aaron and I joined in, but three sets of fourth-grade fingers wedged between the marker and the February ground succeeded in maybe budging it an inch before it fell. My fingers still beneath the slab, I yelped and wriggled free.

We weighed the options. Just play it off as if nothing had happened? Gravestone, what gravestone? Useless. Nairdly, the self-appointed disciplinarian, would head a full scale investigation, leaving no stone unturned and no child left alive. The recess proctor? We watched at an in-character Wortlack/Elizabeth try to break up a jump rope fight in the distance. Connor would be tried and executed if we went to her. We decided to appeal to a higher power: Father Toomley.

Father had thinning hair, a booming, cynical voice, an enormous stomach, and an ever-present, enormous, coffee mug—more pail than mug. He would occasionally pop into classrooms to commandeer a class with riddles or a delightfully un-priestly anecdote. It was the best in Mulder's. She'd squeak and drop the chalk when Father came in booming, "You know what? I really hate people. God agrees. He just winked at me." As he said this, he would point at the ceiling. Most of the class and I (including Mulder) would gawk at the fluorescent lights.

We dragged him to the graveyard to show him the desecration. Father rested his mug precariously on a neighboring grave and flipped Glebbenshork's back into place. It had seemed almost as effortless as flipping a light switch; maybe repositioning tombstones was a typical day's work for the gargantuan priest. Father rose and chuckled at the terrified faces that formed a frozen semi-circle around his waist.

"Relax! No one's dead...er! Wait 'til the teachers hear about this!"

He ambled toward the rectory, still laughing. We stood in the icy lot, unsure what to do in the final minutes. Aaron bounced the kickball.

“New game?” he said. No one responded.

A shroud of silence hung in the air. The perpetrator silently stared down at the stone that sealed both his doom and Bialystok III’s. Breaking the water fountain, putting his spelling test in Wortlack’s rat’s cage, even nicking staples off Nairdly’s desk: nothing compared to this. I could gauge the general sense of frightened anticipation, but I could only imagine what Connor himself was feeling.

“You’re going to be flogged,” said Wayne, his chubby moonface wobbling with excitement.

“You’re going to get *detention*,” said Elsa. My heart stopped. Elsa was so blonde and so authoritative.

“You’re going to be keel-hauled against the barnacles! You’re going to be drawn and quartered!” I told Connor.

His pained half-smile faded.

“What’s that?”

“Ripped apart by horses. They’ll probably feed the scraps to Nairdly.”

“I’m not worried,” said Connor, barely audibly.

Wortlack loomed in the distance. Her black hooded coat covered all but her irrepressible hoop skirt. She raised the rusty bell meant to signal recess’s termination, and brought it down with a cold clang. Today, the bell tolled for Connor.

We wouldn’t have to face Wortlack just yet, though—we had Religion class next, and she never taught that. We walked up flights of clattering wooden steps and into our little classroom to wait for Mulder and for justice.

Adult stomps echoed up the stairs. Several murmuring voices came closer and closer, then halted. Plastic beads clicked; Connor was using a rosary Mulder had rationed out for religion class—the same one he’d almost broken experimenting to see how many times it could wrap around Wayne’s neck. But the first voice we recognized was not Mulder’s or Disciplinarian Nairdly’s or even Wortlack’s. It was Father Toomley’s. To Connor, it must have sounded like the voice of God Himself.

“So anyway, I handled it. No harm, no foul,” boomed the voice. “But kids have to crack you up sometimes. Graveyard kickball?!” Mulder laughed weakly here, sounding like chalk squeaking on a blackboard. “Don’t you have class, Naomi?”

“Yesssss,” hissed Nairdly’s voice.

We heard the door to the sixth grade slam. Mulder slipped into our classroom, looking shell-shocked. Wordlessly, we opened our religion books to start a unit on miracles.



## Cambria

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My family's blood is rooted in coal,  
our fingers permanently blackened with ash  
and the sounds of shots and bombs that shake  
our sassafras legs, our electric, machine hearts.

I have never been the kind to drown myself in liquid fires,  
burning a way to my soul through my throat,  
so I watch my aunts take another swig,  
watch them learn to breathe again  
their laughter sharp as shrapnel.

They never learn the songs I sing  
the ones that quiet the ringing world.  
So when I part my lips, tongue to teeth  
like two hands in prayer,  
my grandfather stops their screeching games;  
he clears the air for notes of new things,  
his eyes reflecting the metal of submerged gunships  
and wars I have only felt in words.

## Choice

---

“Choose,” the man says.

One door is large and gilded, light sliding across the raised golden ridges like glistening oil. *Choose me, and I will love you*, it hums. The other is comparatively diminutive and wooden, familiar, unassuming in stance.

He sits between them and watches you. Smoke curls up indulgently from the long pipe he’s cradling, framing eyes that flicker between gold and brown. There is no lifted eyebrow, no secretive curl of his mouth. He watches you plainly and you know there is also no trick behind the doors. It is clear which door you should pick.

“That one,” you say, anyway, pointing at the brown door.

He lowers his eyes. Taps the end of his pipe against a beveled glass ashtray. “Then go,” he answers.

You put your hand on the bronze doorknob, oddly warm, and waste no time turning.

Screaching winds and whiplashes of heat strike you at once. Wherever you are headed, it will not be pleasant. You made the wrong choice, but you step defiantly through it.

‘Not pleasant’ was something of an understatement. The flesh is flayed from your bones and your blood mists and mixes with the wind. You’re pretty sure you die before you are in even vaguely meaningful proximity to the house on the cliff.

“Choose,” the man says.

There is, again, the large golden door. Instead of a brown door, this time a red door juxtaposes, roughly the same size and shape as its predecessor.

You know which is the right road to take, you do. (You always have.) But you raise your hand to point at the red door. “That one,” you declare.

His gaze remains inflectionless. It lingers on you a moment longer, then he tilts his head away. “Then go.”

You feel the biting cold before you even open the door. Darkness swallows mostly everything in sight, leaving a small half-moon of frozen ground beyond the door that is just barely illuminated. You can hear fiercely blowing snow in the distance.

There is no hesitation as you cross the threshold. There can be none.

You’re not sure when you died, this time. All you remember is directionless wandering in the dark, feet shuffling on the ice. You remember slowly losing all feeling in your face, your hands.

“Choose.”

He is using a different kind of tobacco, you think. The aroma is stronger, the puffs more opaque. His expression is nondescript as ever, a blank canvas awaiting your next course of action.

You set your sights on the little blue door. It's getting harder and harder to remember the golden door is even there. Your forefinger finalizes the decision, and you say, like clockwork, "That one."

Like clockwork, he replies, "Then go."

If you forget the door, if you forget where you came from, you can almost pretend you are home. Ocean stretches for miles and miles, for as long as the eye can see, surface glittering like gems in the sunlight. You see it, though—far out near the horizon, a structure that is tall and gently bobbing. Relief tastes intoxicating. You contort your body into a pose you've not used in ages, and dive into the crystalline waves.

The water turns to tar after a couple of breaststrokes. You drown. In hindsight, the outcome should have been obvious, the premise of it all too good to be true. Still, you were thankful you got to feel water around you once more.

*Next time, you think. I will reach you, next time.*

He takes a moment to sort his pipe out first. His eyes are a murky brown today, half-lidded as he fiddles with the filter. Something clogging it, you assume. You wait.

The all-too-familiar wisps of smoke finally make their appearance, and he looks up at you. "Choose," you say, before he can.

His mouth twists slightly around the stem. You're expecting a response in the form of words, but he takes a drag instead.

"Well." You eye the green door that's inviting you. What reality lies behind this one, you wonder, which egregious way will you find to die this time?

A pointed release of breath draws your attention. "You do not have much longer." The words come slowly and carefully, chosen like knives.

The temptation to ignore him is strong. You brush it aside. In this limbo, there is but you and he. "I must find—" you start, and swallow. "I promised." You want to add—if you can keep pulling me back, on a tiny sliver of hope, then I can keep looking, on a tiny sliver of hope. (It occurs to you that, maybe, you've been looking at this entire thing the wrong way, but you could not change directions even if you tried.)

He is so steady. If the world were to be shaken up like a toy and dashed against some cosmic pavement, this man would remain exactly as is. "Then go," he says.

The door opens to a jungle. Like the ocean, it calls to you. You smell leaves, morning dew. You smell life. Against your wishes, your heart leaps.

Shadows flit about in your peripheral vision, dissipating every time you turn your head. The sound of footfalls that are not yours rings through the air, then nothing. You trace it by memory, pushing past low-hanging boughs. The deeper you go, however, the grayer things become. You don't die so much as fade. A muted dream that mutes you along with it.

Ah, but you are glad it ended when it did. You didn't think you could stand another moment of watching the colors bleed out.

The door that accompanies the gold is different, this time around. Black

and forbidding. Something deep in your bones knows what this means, what it represents. Your fists clench by your sides. He looks at you. The hue of his eyes hangs in perfect balance between brown and gold, rich and beautiful like honey.

“Please.”

“I must,” you answer.

You don’t add—*say that again*. His voice is as rich as his eyes and so, so deep, settling in your ears like something comfortable. Like home. (You can never go home.) The desire to make him repeat himself is overwhelming, crowding the back of your throat. You hold it there.

His fingertips constrict around his pipe, but all he says in return is, “Then go.”

You walk past him. The black door pulsates like a siren’s song, reeling you in almost against your will. The handle is ebony, molded into the shape of a tightly wound coil. You caress it with the palm of your hand, and catch a glimmer at the corner of your eye.

You have never looked back before, but you do now. The man sits facing away from you, but you can see the tear that travels down his cheek.

Choices. They are all we are made of, sometimes. You made a promise, long ago, and you would fulfill it even if it destroys you. But in that tear...you see the road your heart longed to take. The one you know the golden door that stood proud and true in every repetition would have opened to. All you need to do is adjust your trajectory. Walk the necessary distance.

The coil loosens and shifts under your skin. *Come now*, it whispers. You are too old for these daydreams, my dear.

Choices, you think. You open the door.

## Sunday

---

Do you hear that?  
That's the sound of the Glatfelter clock tower  
reminding me that it's 10am on Sunday morning  
and there's no more justifying procrastination.

Yes, Glatfelter,  
I am aware that the remainder of my weekend  
is slowly slipping from my hands  
Like water that will inevitably leak through my fingers  
no matter how tightly I lock them.

Hanging off the tips of the roof,  
The leftover snow  
is also dripping  
in the day's unexpected warmth.  
Mounds of the stuff sit on every street corner  
Like excess food from last weekend,  
Shoved into the back of the fridge, forgotten,  
Gradually turning brown and repulsive.

And now Glatfelter cries that it's 11  
And that I have made no definitive progress.  
But perhaps if I just wait  
Until 11:11, I can wish on each one of those 1's  
Like birthday candles,  
Standing straight for now, but inevitably melting  
into the gooey mush that is 11:12.  
And 11:22.

And now it's 12:22  
And Glatfelter has probably yelled at me again,  
But I couldn't hear over the chaotic chatter  
Echoing through the dining hall as I ate my lunch,  
Which is necessary for survival,  
So please, Glatfelter, let me be.

Thank you, Glatfelter,  
For telling me that it is now 1  
But I am doing my laundry,  
Something that could no longer sit on its perch  
At the top of my to-do list,  
So I will get back to my work later.

The sun is sitting contently at the top of the sky,

## *The Mercury*

The sky is exquisitely blue,  
It's such a relief to be freed of those ominous clouds  
that at any moment could dump another three feet of snow on you,  
putting the ground a full six feet under  
and thus requiring a funeral for the grass  
That would remain in its grave for who-knows-how-many months more.  
Oh, Glatfelter! Hasn't anyone told you it's rude to interrupt?  
You've now completely pulled me from my train of thought  
And I'll have to start all over.

My words were halted by your warning gong,  
But how can I bring them back when you keep screaming at me, Glatfelter?  
2:00! 3:00! 4:00! 5:00!

You persistently 6:00! Insist 7:00! On interrupting 8:00!  
It's just not my fault. 9:00. I can't be held responsible. 10:00, 11:00.

The only thing I've accomplished today  
Is the angry, red rope burns on my hands.

I promise, Glatfelter, I did try.  
I held onto today for dear life.

## Absconding Machination

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### Revelation:

The cemetery is empty and still. All of his focus is on gripping a cup full of tea that has long gone cold with fingers that have long gone numb. Trudging ahead through the fog, he keeps his eyes cast forward (with all the devotion of you, Orpheus). The cold air causes his eyes to water. When he reaches the grave site, he kneels into the fog and sets down the teacup. Reaching into his breast pocket he pulls out matches and a cigarette. He places the cigarette so that it balances across the rim of the teacup. Then, he gets to work on the matches. It takes him a few tries to successfully light one. When he does, he holds it up to the butt of the cigarette. He watches the cigarette burn down until it falls into the tea, then waits.

### Transfiguration:

Under the hue of the moonlight and streetlamps, the street glistens with the sky's tears. She feels the pair of eyes on her like a hand hovering close to the skin. Her eyes follow her intuition to a man leaning on a lamppost. He's swift in looking away. She stares at him willing him to return her gaze but he does not. She shoves her hands in her coat pockets and grips her case of cigarettes as she walks over.

"Can I bum one off you?" she asks.

"Excuse me?" he says, slightly taken aback at the audacity of the stranger.

She lifts her nose and leans in.

"You smell of smoke," she says. She touches two gloved fingers to her lips twice.

He brings his head in toward his chest.

"I don't," he says.

Silence.

"Smell or smoke?" she asks.

"Both," he says looking around over her shoulder. He pushes his body off the streetlight, ready to leave. She stops him with a palm to his chest. He raises both eyebrows and widens his eyes.

"You do smell and you ought to smoke." She smooths his tie and pats his chest as she looks over his shoulder. Then, she walks away—transfigured by the milky cast of the moon's light. He reaches into his chest pocket and pulls out a silver case, it's engraved with a name and phone number. He opens it to find several cigarettes neatly laid out. He can't help but smile.

She finds the ring in the pocket of his pants. It's a minimalistic gold ring, just as she would want. But does she want? She takes the ring out of the black box and slips it on her finger. The fit is slightly loose. She turns the ring with her thumb, watching as the light dances off the gold. His footsteps echo from down the hall. She pulls off the ring, placing it as she found it, then shoves the black box back into his pocket. She sits and stares down at her hands. Her ring finger feels cold and naked.

“You seem antsy,” he says walking over and grabbing the silver case of cigarettes from her dresser.

She presses her lips tightly together. “What if I don’t want a cigarette?” she says.

He exhales, she’s baiting him. “You don’t have to have one.” He places the case back on the dresser.

“You expected me to want one,” she says.

She can see the gears turning behind his eyes. When he resolves to say nothing she continues, “Maybe I didn’t want a cigarette.”

“Maybe.”

“Now, I feel inclined to have one.”

He grabs the case again.

“So did you want one?” he asks.

“No. I’m inclined to have one now.”

“Because I offered?”

“Because you expected it.”

“Well, if you don’t want one then I don’t expect you to have one.”

“It’s too late. The damage is done.”

“Damage?”

“Yes.” She snatches the pack from his hands and lights herself a cigarette. “How am I ever going to quit if no one expects me to?”

“I didn’t know you intended to quit.”

“You didn’t expect it.”

“Should I expect it in the future?”

She inhales the cigarette deeply and closes her eyes.

“I’m tired,” she says.

“You want to go back to bed?”

“Stop that,” she snaps, throwing the cigarette down.

“Stop what?” He presses his foot to the cigarette.

“Assuming.”

He says nothing.

“I never said I was sleepy. I said I was tired.”

“People sleep when they’re tired.”

“No, you expect people to sleep when they’re tired.”

“Because they do.”

“Because that’s what’s expected.” She stresses each word.

“You don’t always have to do what’s expected.”

“I shouldn’t ever have to.”

“Then don’t.”

He picks up the snuffed cigarette from the carpet and leaves their bedroom.

*Reader,*

*Up until now, there have been just 2 characters in this recount. I have shied away from using their names for privacy’s sake. Yes, I could use fake names but then a piece of each character’s essence would be fake as well. Additionally, if I were to choose fake names, they would be names I felt were fitting for the personalities of the characters. I refuse to do this for two reasons: 1. It would be inorganic—no parent knows a child fully before picking a name for them. 2. As narrator, I have an*



*obligation to be neutral. I cannot let my opinions color the essence of the characters.*

*Reader, I will say this, if you feel that there absolutely must be names for the characters, I give you permission to create your own, but only under one condition—I urge you to choose the names now before you read of these characters any further. This way, they will grow into or away from the names you've given them.*

*Sincerely,*

*Neutral Narrator*

### **Gethsemane:**

In the dark stillness of the bedroom, she stares up transfixed by the smoke detector's blinking light. The alarm clock faintly illuminates the room. She reaches into her nightstand and pulls out a switchblade. Rolling onto her side, she brings the blade to his neck and lets it rest at a throbbing vein. She doesn't apply too much pressure. It's not about power; it's about control. A pair of desperate eyes catch her own, startling her. She tears away from her reflection in the blade and rolls over onto her back. He hasn't so much as stirred.

She walks up the long driveway to the door of her childhood home. She taps repeatedly on the doorbell. Her mother, dressed in purple silk night robes, opens the door—she holds a full glass of wine in her hand.

"The universe's irony. I expected a Jehovah's witness yet here you are—the exact opposite," her mother sways, then gains balance against the doorframe, "or have you changed your devilish ways?" her mother asks sizing her up with a finger.

She pushes past her mother into the large foyer. No family photos. Just several paintings of different crusades and revolutions that bring color to the white walls. She walks into the kitchen and takes a seat at the volakas counter. "I need your help," she says, eyeing a perfectly arranged bowl of untouched fruit centered on the countertop.

Her mother joins her at the counter, her blinks are heavy. "I can't help you."

"I'm in too deep," she says, pulling out a cigarette and lighting it.

"No. Not in here," her mother gulps down the wine until only some remains, "extinguish it," her mother says holding out the glass.

She doesn't move.

"Now," her mother's voice deepens.

She flicks the cigarette into the extended glass

"Why are you here?" her mother asks, tentatively, as she opens the cabinet and pulls out a clean glass.

"He wants to marry me," she says.

Her mother stares at her with narrowed eyes. "Marry him, then,"

"He doesn't know," she says, biting down on her bottom lip.

"That you've been lying to him?"

"I haven't been lying," she says, swishing the cigarette tainted wine.

"Withholding the truth, is a lie," her mother pops the cork off a wine bottle, fills the new glass, then sits.

"I'm not fit for this," she lets her face fall into her palms.

"No one is," her mother says, crossing her legs and leaning back.

"What if I quit?"

Her mother stops mid-sip. "It is not a 9 to 5."

She pulls out a cigarette and makes as if to light it before remembering where she is. "I considered killing him," she says, pensively rolling the cigarette between her fingers.

Her mother leans in with a pair of gleaming eyes, a smirk on her lips. "He wouldn't be your first nor your last."

"So it's all a joke then?" she asks, standing. "I shouldn't have come."

Her mother smiles, leaning back again. "Oh please, I mistook your melodrama for comedy," her mother takes a long sip peering over the rim of the glass. When she still does not sit, her mother rolls her eyes and tacks on, "I apologize."

She places both palms on the countertop and locks eyes with her mother. "Mom, I *need* your help,"

Her mother sets the wine glass to the side, sobered, and cocks an eyebrow. "I'm listening."

### **Golgotha:**

She sits with her father at a small circular table in her renaissance styled loft. The white loft is sparsely decorated and lit primarily by natural lighting which spills in through windows that stretch up to the ceiling.

She sets her cup down and rests her chin in her palm. "Everything tastes bland," she says.

"That's because you smoke," her father says as he adds a third teabag to her cup.

"I smoke *because* everything's bland," she says.

Her father says nothing. She crosses her arms and stares out of the window—at nothing in particular. After a moment, she reaches for the cup and takes another sip, then she sets the cup down as if it could shatter at any moment. He taps the handle of his spoon with his index finger and raises an eyebrow.

"Still bland," she says, shifting slightly in her chair.

He stops tapping and shrugs.

"Perhaps, it's not the tea," he says.

Her eyes flicker for a brief second and then go dull again. She lets out a small sigh and cocks her head, pensive.

"Perhaps, it isn't the tea," she says.

She brings a gloved hand to her mouth and removes the glove with her teeth. Reaching into her clutch she pulls out a silver case, taps out a thin cigarette and places it between her lips. Tilting her head slightly upwards, she leans forward. He lights her cigarette. She settles back into her chair and takes a long drag. He watches as the butt of her cigarette glows orange. She lets her eyes close slightly and exhales a cloud of smoke directly in front of her.

"Perhaps, it isn't the tea at all," she says, this time to herself. She crosses her legs and extinguishes the cigarette in her tea.

The front door bursts open. She doesn't jump. The intruders come in dressed in black and wearing masks. Her father reaches for the pistol he keeps at his waist only to remember that he's left it in his car. He glances up at his daughter alarmed watching as a gloved hand falls over her mouth. She closes

her eyes and smiles underneath the hand feeling as a needle sinks into her neck. “Cleaner this way,” says a masked man snidely, as he nods toward the needle.

The last image she sees as speckles fall across her vision is her father taking the butt of a gun to the head. The world goes black.

Her mother and father walk out of the morgue.

“No mother should ever have to bury their child,” her mother says, eyes watery and bloodshot. She pulls a flask from her purse and begins to untwist it. “And like this,” she shakes her head, “no obituary, no consolation.”

He eyes the flask with a curled lip. “I’d hardly call you a mother,” he says.

She narrows her eyes and turns her head with the utmost care, “As if you can be called a father. She was with you when this happened. Where was your security?”

“She didn’t want any,” he says looking down at his black leather shoes.

“And you listened? Yet, you wonder why I have dependencies. It’s to deal with you and your line of work,” she says pointing her flask.

He snaps his head up, “You never complained about the benefits.”

“I never knew where the money came from,” she says indulging in the contents of her flask. “Business is what you called it. You never specified your top-selling product.”

“Don’t pretend it would have mattered,” he grumbles.

“Rationalize all you want, but remember, you brought her into it and now you have to live with this,” she tucks the flask back into her bag. “I can only hope it ruins you,” she cocks her head, “or did they give you too much credit by leaving you alive?” She walks down the street and hails a taxi.

Once inside, she removes a pair of ill-fitting drugstore contacts, blinking away the irritation.

“Drive around to the back of that building,” she says, pointing.

### **Resurrection:**

The mother enters through the back entrance of the morgue into a narrow hallway with flickering lights. She meets the morgue attendant at the end of the dimly lit hall.

“I owe you big time,” she says.

“That is, if I did not just sign my own death certificate,” the attendant says keying into the holding room.

“Don’t worry, her father suspects nothing,” the mother says, waving an arm dismissively.

The attendant opens one of the chambers. The mother steps closer and takes in the sight of her daughter’s lifeless body. “She looks dead,” she says.

The attendant draws a needle from his coat pocket, “The wonder of medicine,” he says flicking the needle twice. “Nothing to fear, she’s only ‘sleeping,’” he says, as he inserts the needle into her daughter’s vein. He looks down at the body, waiting with a pair of beady eyes.

“How long until she awakes,” the mother asks, stepping between the attendant and her daughter.

The attendant steps backward. “It shouldn’t be too long,” he says, pushing

up his glasses.

“Let’s hope so,” her mother says with a steely gaze. “Or it’ll be me you’ll have to worry about.”

**Reconciliation:**

Mother and daughter stand in the plane hangar.

Her mother holds out a bag filled with bands of cash and 2 sets of new identities. “Now, you’ll come back here with your friend and my guy will take you where you need to go. Understand?”

“Yes, thank you,” she says reaching for the bag.

Her mother moves it slightly out of reach, “There’s no coming back,” her mother says, looking at her sternly.

“I know,” she says nodding.

Her mother hands her the bag and then studies her closely. “Are you going to initiate this hug or do I have to?”

She smiles and hugs her mother for what she knows is the last time. Her mother pulls away and holds her daughter, a hand on each shoulder.

“You’re not gonna cry are you?” she asks.

Her mother scoffs, “Don’t flatter yourself.”

Her daughter mulls picking at the bag’s straps and then says, “Mom, I gotta ask—why’d you do it?”

Her mother stares into her eyes, chewing on the question. “When you asked for my help, I saw something in your eyes I haven’t seen since you were a child.”

“Need?”

“Hope.”

“What if Dad finds out?”

“Why is everyone so afraid of your father,” her mother says, exasperated.

“Well he is—”

“Yea, well don’t forget who *I* am,” her mother says smiling. “You don’t get through hell without making a few friends—speaking of which, yours is waiting for you,” her mother says, tapping her wristwatch and nudging her daughter toward the waiting car.

She stands behind a tree in the cemetery and watches him over her sunglasses. The cigarette falls into the cup—her cue. Coming up behind him, she places her gloved hand on his shoulder and squeezes.

“We should leave this too,” she says, handing him her case of cigarettes.

“I’m not going to make any assumptions but—”

“Yes, I’m quitting,” she says.

He smiles, his eyes fall on the bag she holds. “Our new lives?”

“The jet’s ready and waiting.”

“So you’re really free?” he says rising to his feet and brushing off his knees.

“I am,” she says.

“What’s next?” he asks taking the bag from her hand.

“Something unexpected. In fact, I was thinking we could make a pit stop in Vegas,” she says peering over her sunglasses into his eyes.

He removes her sunglasses and wears them, then gazes up into the sky. “I

fully expect us to only gamble.” He takes her left hand and they begin walking toward the vehicle.

“I fully intend that we won’t,” she replies.

They reach the waiting vehicle and he opens the door for her, watching as she enters.

“Fair enough, there are other things to do in Vegas,” he says one hand in pocket, restraining a smile as he enters in after her.

## Healthy

---

I casually kicked my legs up onto my desk, still barren except for a few scattered boxes pushed to one side. Rough, white walls surrounded me, covered with a few random posters. My feet weighed me down as I glanced over at the tattered gym bag resting languidly beneath my bed. The sun had just begun to rise over Gettysburg; my dorm had begun to cook and swelter as four fans fought to keep it cool. The white heat compared to that of two years earlier, on an August day in a small northeast town.

In my junior year, our high school soccer team dwindled. The varsity team had a surplus of players, but the junior varsity team lacked numbers. With only twelve members on the team, it strained the group to play through one game. One of my friends approached me and asked whether I could play. At first I thought he asked as a joke; at best my athleticism was average. I spent hour after hour inside, scanning pages of books or watching movies. I hadn't touched a soccer ball in years except for gym class. But he insisted, hounding me for days and calling up old favors. Each time he would see me, he managed to bring up the sport, practically forcing me to try it. Eventually, after dozens of text messages, I told him that I would speak to the coach. Perhaps the idea of being active drew me toward playing (or maybe I just wanted some silence from my friend) but I dragged myself outside in a blazing heat the very next day.

A blistering sun draped over the Vermont fields, to the point that looking out toward the horizon blurred the distant sights. Beads of sweat trailed down the back of my neck, snaking into the collar of my shirt. I walked the entire way to the soccer practice, with a small group of players lacing up cleats coated in rust-colored dirt. A middle-aged man looked on with a packet of multicolored papers and diagrams, as perplexed as a toddler. Uncertainly, I approached him.

"Excuse me," I stuttered out, "Are you Coach McQuade?"

"Huh? Oh, yep, that's me," he responded, turning. He carried himself cheerily, a wide grin stretching from one end of his face to the other. His hairline was receding, and a small gut crept out over his waist. "And you must be Jared! I heard that you'd be stopping by here." At the mention of my name, a couple of my friends on the field turned toward me. A couple of them hollered sarcastic and crude phrases to me between fervent breaths, and I shrugged them off. The coach had an odd smile that seemed to stretch across his entire body, like when one offers a dog a treat. "So have you ever played soccer before?"

"Not since fourth grade or so." He nodded, still giving that sort of eerie smile, clearly ignoring whatever I said. The coach had already accepted that his team would not be in any championships, and he just wanted to get a pay check.

"It's great that you're getting back into it though. You'd get plenty of playing time." At this, Coach McQuade turned toward the team with a look of slight disdain, before turning back to me with the same artificial grin. "You feel like joining up?"

I thought briefly about the commitment; every single day, in spite of drowning rains and burning heats, sprinting until exhaustion made me col-

lapse, spending nonexistent money on equipment. But some sort of force urged me to try it and attempt a new arduous experience, compelling me to forget my apprehension.

“I’d love to give it a shot.”

The very next day, I tried to relax in a school bus, heading to our first scrimmage. I didn’t have any idea how to actually play competitive soccer, and figured that my legs would be better suited for stumbling than kicking a ball. The coach only wanted me to watch and learn, but that changed when our last player contorted his ankle and could no longer walk. Coach McQuade had me put on the injured boy’s cleats—two sizes too small for my feet—and take to the field.

As I sprinted back and forth, passing the ball to teammates and struggling to breathe from the effort, I felt truly weak. That night, I could feel my legs creak and groan beneath the covers of my bed. They felt sluggish, as though they were submerged in water. That lethargic sensation nagged at me, practically screaming into my ears that I wasn’t good enough. That I wasn’t fast enough. That I wasn’t strong enough.

I couldn’t accept that.

When I finally felt sleep take me over and pull my eyes shut, I awoke with a newfound determination. I could change, and I felt a driving force take me over. I had plenty of time to get myself into shape. I wasn’t overweight, but I wasn’t thin either. But as I felt the aching pain tugging at my legs whenever I took a step, I knew I could improve.

“What the hell are you doing, Jared?” my friend Logan spat out between gargantuan bites from a Subway sandwich, eating before our practice again. My palms darkened, faintly dusted with maroon dirt as I pressed my chest down into the dirt, breathing heavily in rhythm with the strikes of my heartbeat. With all of the force I could muster, I straightened my arms rapidly, springing into the air and clapping my hands together, sending up a tawny plume of dust.

“Push ups,” I smiled sarcastically. “Come on, I know you’re not the smartest, but you should know what those are.” This happened every day at practice, each of us spitting out insults to each other and then laughing at our own idiocy.

The end of the season grew closer, and a sea of cardinal and amber leaves overtook the trees. Whipping winds had begun to pick up, but they were subdued today, with only soft zephyrs cascading across the field. I casually rotated my shoulder, letting the movement come easily. Instead of aching and sharp, jabbing pains, the only thing that I felt was better.

“Fuck you,” he shook his head. “I mean, why are you doing them now? We’ve got practice in twenty minutes anyways.” I didn’t stop my workout, still moving in a kinetic melody as the chalky dirt flirted with the callouses on my palms.

“It never hurts to get in better shape, man,” I countered. “I’ve lost like twenty pounds since the season started, and I don’t think that’s really awful. Not many of us have the metabolism of the gods.” Logan had a tendency to eat more than anyone I had ever seen, but stayed thinner than a flagpole. He shrugged and went back to his sandwich with a dismissive, “Whatever,” finding turkey and bacon more interesting than exercise. He remained altogether apathetic

toward soccer—only playing because of his friends—and acted as the leader for scoring goals against his own team.

Our practice started like most others; we passed the ball back and forth repetitively until our eyes glazed over, making the actions instinctive instead of methodical. We ran drills over and over until we got them right, almost rehearsing in anticipation of our final game of the season. We improved greatly, but better than bad is still mediocre. At the end of the practice, we lined up around the goal, preparing for sprints. My determination reached its pinnacle as I convinced myself that this would be the day where I finally would finish first.

I felt my legs stretch and creak as I pulled my calf upwards, mostly ignoring Coach McQuade's lecture about "improvement" or something similar. By this point his ambitions and goals had faded entirely, but mine were freshly fostered. My focus lay entirely on the opposite line, parallel to the one my left toes rested upon. Anticipation filled up my chest, tricking my heart into thinking that I began already. I let the coach drone on, my ears only tuned in for the shrill chirp of a whistle.

As the deafening sound filled my head, I took off as fast as I could. My cleats tore up the grass beneath me as my rapid steps lengthened, and the flowing breezes grew to gales. One leg pushed right after the other, propelling me forward and ahead of my teammates. Only one of them barely passed me a few seconds in, his feet precise with each step. I inhaled sharply, and summoned whatever strength I had to surge ahead. Unwilling to look to my side, I worried only about myself, pumping my arms back and forth in a desperate attempt to accelerate. I only let myself slow down when I had finished the sprint.

"Come on you guys," our coach yelled to the entire team. "You could learn something from these two." And that was all he said; ambivalence shrouded whether I had finally won or if I lost again. But that wasn't important to me. As we all sat around after practice, discarding ashen equipment and emptying bottles of water, the pins and pricks of pain that I had felt months earlier were gone. As I tested my feet on the soft dirt, kicking up a ghostly veil, I realized my body was filled with a vigor that I had never reached before. I got caught up in the general revelry of the group, everyone tossing back crude comments, knowing that the competition wasn't important.

About twenty minutes later, I carried two bags to the parking lot, setting them down to wait for my ride home. A bus rested a few yards away, with a group of girls chatting loudly in the back. The windows were shut, but I could still hear muffled laughs and chirps from where I was sitting. I lifted the bottom of my shirt to wipe my face, dabbing off the sweat and dust that started to form a thin mask. When I moved the fabric away and looked up, I saw faces pressed against the windows of the bus, giggling to one another. Simultaneously, they all turned away and their laughs rose. For the first time in what seemed like an eternity, I felt proud.

The rest of my time in high school seemed to drag on. I knew I would be heading to college soon; in lieu of playing soccer again, I had to find a job. When I finally found employment at a local diner, it began to bear down on me. I gained all of the weight back. I had tried so hard just to finish the lap that I was on, straining my body and pushing its limits, but found myself back at the beginning. Now, two years later in an unfinished college dorm room, I



caught my eyes drifting, slowly finding themselves looking at that relic of a gym bag again. It looked at peace, almost as though dust had begun to gather at its straps already. The dark fabric looked onyx when draped with the shadow of the bed frame, and finally, my mind was made. I walked over and pulled it out.

Deftly, I pulled on a pair of athletic shorts and an old t-shirt, then I slid off my glasses and tossed them onto my bed. I tied my fraying running shoes, the sleek sound of tightening laces accompanied by a tight grip. I rose up from my knee, shaking my sleeping limbs awake, and walked outside.

The path to the gym lay ahead, straight and short, with the morning sun still stretching its arms over the small town. I took a deep breath, inhaling the crisp air and letting it fill my lungs as I plugged in my headphones to play some music. The sky was a brilliant blue, cloaking our small school in its expansive cerulean sprawl. A familiar burning torridity cloaked my entire body, summoning a soft sweat to the surface. The blazing white heat reminded me of those months that I spent sprinting across a verdant field, feeling a healthy heartbeat in my chest and a spring in each step as I endlessly pursued the ball. As the waking sun began to wrap its shimmering fingers around the morning—already steaming the morning dew—I let a smile slowly creep across my face.

# NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

NAUFA AMIRANI is a sophomore student majoring in Biology with a Computer Science minor. She is from the archipelago of Indonesia, and she enjoys learning, writing, and most kinds of spicy food.

LORI ATINIZIAN is a Cinema and Media Studies major with a double minor in Writing and English. She loves going to the theaters and watching the Oscar Nominated shorts every year. Films that stimulate her brain and make her question life are particularly interesting for her. One of her favorite novels is *Alice's Adventure's in Wonderland*, which she has read many times ever since she first read it in the sixth grade.

VICTORIA BLAISDELL is a senior Economics major and Writing minor from Mechanicsburg, PA. She has worked on *The Mercury* as a part of the Production Staff all four years here at Gettysburg and is excited to have two poems published in this year's edition. She is still unsure as to her post-grad plans, but a few things you can be sure of: she will be drinking plenty of coffee, reading lots of poetry, and traveling every chance she gets.

MARY MARGARET A. BLUM is New Orleans-born and Kentucky-raised. She sees herself as a philosopher-poet fascinated by regional language and relationships, which often comes across in her poetry. Mary Margaret has loved language from a young age and was even named the 2014 Poet Laureate of her high school (Pope John Paul II High School in Hendersonville, TN). Her other works range in style from lyrical to magical realism (inspired by artists such as Cathy Park Hong, author of *Engine Empire*). Most importantly, she would like to thank Professor Christopher Kempf for being her best critic and biggest fan. Anyone with questions for Mary Margaret or interested in reading more of Mary Margaret's poetry should go to her website at [marymargaretannabel.com](http://marymargaretannabel.com)

KATHLEEN BOLGER is a junior English major with a Writing Concentration with minors in Spanish and Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies. She is from West Caldwell, New Jersey. On campus, she is

the Event Coordinator for *The Mercury*, a Resident Assistant, a tutor at the Writing Center, and a Peer Learning Associate for the English Department. In her spare time, she sings show tunes (loudly and off-key), thinks about the proper use of the semi-colon, and watches *The Office*. Her life motto is "What would Lady Macbeth do?" She has given Gettysburg a reprieve by spending the spring of 2017 in Salamanca, Spain.

RONNIE BRIDGES is a senior Health Sciences major. She is the youngest of six children.

REBECCA CAMPO '19 is an English Major on the Education Certification Track.

MELISSA CASALE is a sophomore Art History major at Gettysburg College. For the past few years, she has enjoyed exploring the technical side of photography as well as the emotions that it can express and evoke.

CHRIS CHICK is a Religious Studies and English with a Writing Concentration double major from Montgomery, New Jersey. He plays offensive line for the Bullets and is a member of Sigma Alpha Epsilon.

THADDEUS CWIKLINSKI is a sophomore English Major, a member of the Gettysburg College Track and Cross Country Teams, and a Bullet Hole employee. He enjoys life in general.

VERA EKHATOR '19 is an English major. She says, "How would I describe my life? By breaking it up into tiny pieces. A few of these pieces are included in this magazine (thank you to the editors/staff). I'd like to thank the following amazing professors: Professor Mulligan (for helping me find my voice), Professor Melton (for teaching me the importance of a voice), Professor Kempf (for helping me overcome my hatred of poetry), Professor Portmess (for opening my eyes to the wonderful complexity of language), and Professor Williams (for showing me how to capture the world through a camera lens)."

KIRA GOODWIN is a sophomore Math major with a double minor in Writing and Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies. Apart from involvement in *The Mercury*, she is Co-President of Students Against Sexual

Assault (SASA) and plays the clarinet in the conservatory. Kira loves cats, the color yellow (because it's like sunshine), and being quirky. She loves writing and is very excited to be included in this year's volume of *The Mercury*.

CARLEY GROW is a senior majoring in English with a Writing Concentration. Before spending her junior year abroad in England and Denmark, she had extreme aviophobia and had never traveled outside of the United States. Now she is a slightly less picky eater and can say that she has been to thirteen countries.

BRYNN HAMBLEY is a junior Theater Arts major with minors in Music and Writing. Theater was her first love, but writing is not too far behind, and she specifically enjoys writing poetry and personal essays. She would like to thank her family, friends, her amazing boyfriend Jared, and Poetry Circle for reading all her bad first drafts and dealing with her anxiety and tea-fueled ramblings.

LIAM HAMILTON is a sophomore Classics major at Gettysburg College. Living about 20 minutes outside of Philadelphia in Delaware County, he's enjoyed writing his entire life but never pursued much of it until he took a Creative Writing class in high school. This sparked his interest to continue writing in college, ranging from fiction to non-fiction, often based on the stories that have affected his life.

ANNIKA JENSEN '18 is an English major with a Writing Concentration and has minors in Civil War Era Studies and Middle East and Islamic Studies. She loves goats, yoga, and destroying the patriarchy. Danny DeVito is her inspiration.

AUBREY LINK is a sophomore English major with a Writing Concentration and a Philosophy minor. She plans on attending law school in the future, and her literary inspirations include Jane Austen and Edgar Allan Poe.

JESSIE MARTIN is a junior Chemistry major and part of the Secondary Education Certification program. She is from Rockville, MD. She is exploring photography as a hobby, and she enjoys nature photography, especially sunrises, sunsets, and silhouette photographs.

JESSICA McMANNES is an English and Anthropology major with a deep and undying love for chai tea, koalas, *The Mummy*,

JM Barrie, and Virginia Woolf.

JOSEPHINE MEIER is a first-year student at Gettysburg College. She plans to major in Biology and pursue possibly a double major in Studio Art. Her preferred medium is pencil and charcoal.

ANDREW NOSTI studies History and English with a Writing Concentration at Gettysburg College.

KHUN MINN OHN is a self-taught photographer and filmmaker from Yangon, Burma. Since high school, he has been pursuing photography as a hobby. At the age of eighteen, he made his first documentary, "Kings N Queens," which was selected for the 33rd Uppsala International Short Film Festival in Sweden. Through street photography, Khun likes to capture life and culture in a candid manner. Lately, he has been experimenting with portrait photography. At Gettysburg College, Khun works as a photographer for the Schmucker Art Gallery and Athletic Communications. He is currently an intern at Communications and Marketing, where he produces video content for Gettysburg College's social media platforms.

ANGELA PARR is a senior Political Science major with a minor in Writing. When not writing, she can be found in the dance studio or out exploring new places. She has previously been published in *Local Wolves* and *Thought Catalog*.

JHANVI RAMAIYA is a senior Sociology major with a Writing minor at Gettysburg College who enjoys short periods of lying down interspersed with long naps. She is currently deciding between MFA programs in creative nonfiction!

JARED RICHARDSON is a junior Cinema and Media Studies and German Studies double major. He grew up in Vermont – also referred to frequently as South Canada – and plans to work in the film industry.

KATIA RUBINSTEIN spends her time on campus at work, APO, volunteering, or reading. She is a double major in Religious Studies and English. At home, she follows her cat around seeking validation and distraction from her impending demise.

ERICA SCHAUMBERG is an Art History major from the class of 2018. From an early age, she has always believed it is important to capture moments that will never exist again through photography. She credits

her father for inspiring her to view life through a camera lens.

TOM SEGERSTROM is a senior Mathematical Economics major and has a minor in Mathematics. His interests include reading, photography, hiking, sailing, studying economic theory, and serving others through his local church. His interest in photography grew while studying in the modern, innovative city of Copenhagen, Denmark, the spring of his junior year at Gettysburg. He plans to pursue a career in the investment management field after college.

SAMANTHA SIOMKO says, "I'm an overenthusiastic biologist who thinks my life is too interesting to keep to myself. I write these things down partially to share what I've learned and partially to help myself remember that the world is a diverse and beautiful place."

DANIELLA SNYDER says of her photo, "This photo was taken during a weekend trip to Innsbruck, Austria. The Nordkette is the highest peak in Innsbruck, and we traveled 7,000 feet to the top. Once there, the fog prohibited me from taking photos of the city, but I was really intrigued by the ominous and eerie feelings portrayed by the lack of human presence."

RHIANNON WINNER is a Political Science major with a double minor in Peace & Justice and Middle Eastern & Islamic Studies. At Gettysburg, she volunteers, makes killer salads at Ike's, and attends meetings for the myriad clubs she is a part of. In her free time, you can find her working on her novel or chasing after people to pet their dogs.

ELLIANIE VEGA is a first-year who is majoring in English with a Writing Concentration. In addition to working on *The Mercury*, she also has her own radio show and loves going to Poetry Circle. She loves all pinks that are not hot pink, Jack Kerouac, Japanese disco/funk music, and going over the word count.

ZOE YEOH is a junior Biochemistry and Molecular Biology major and Studio Art minor. She is the co-president of Biosphere. She is the PR Assistant for the Art Department, a Biology Research Assistant in Dr. Jennifer Powell's lab, and a Chemistry Lab prep assistant. She enjoys working in many art mediums and styles, but is particularly interested in the crossover between science and art.

# JUDGE BIOGRAPHIES

**Kathryn Bucolo Hill** (*judge of the fiction section*) holds an MFA in fiction from Arizona State University and graduated from Gettysburg College in 2014. Her fiction has appeared in AGNI Online, Monkeybicycle, Passages North, and elsewhere. She is the winner of the 2016 Innovative Short Fiction Prize from The Conium Review as well as the 2017 Aleida Rodriguez Memorial Prize. She lives in Arizona with her husband and son.

**Mariana Crouse** (*judge of the nonfiction section*) is a writer and graduate student living in Southern California. She graduated from Gettysburg College with a degree in French and Creative Writing and is currently pursuing her Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing. When she is not reading and writing, she is watching 90s movies or playing on the beach with her black lab.

**Ela Thompson** (*judge of the poetry section*) is a current MFA poetry candidate at George Mason University and is the assistant poetry editor of *So to Speak*. Their honors include: finalist of the 2016 Jane Lumley Prize and winner of the 2015 Marion Zulauf Poetry Prize. Their work has been featured or is forthcoming in *Hermeneutic Chaos*, *The Heavy Feather Review*, and TAGVVERK.

**Anika Schneider** (*judge of the art section*) is a recent graduate of Gettysburg College where she majored in Environmental Studies and Studio Art, and she is now pursuing a Masters in Fine Art. As an artist, Anika now deals with contemporary themes and uses a variety of media to explore humans' connections to each other and to their environment. Anika enjoys pushing the limits of traditional mediums such as paint to evoke narratives. In her work, she creates tensions by juxtaposing different effects of her mediums. Her most recent paintings delve into the images of both news outlets and local landscapes. Her oil paintings use drippy glazes and rough textures to create mysterious and high energy compositions. Anika is currently located in the DC area and has shown her work in both DC and the surrounding Maryland area.

