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The Mercury 2018

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The Mercury 2018

Author Bio

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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 2017, The Mercury hosted its sixth 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: Thomas Bender (Fiction), Austin Clark (Nonfiction), Emily Birx (Poetry), and Anika Schneider (Art). The Mercury Prize-winning titles are bolded in the Table of Contents. This year’s winners are: Andrew Nosti (Fiction), Ellianie Vega (Nonfiction), Caleigh Flegg (Poetry), and Zoe Yeoh (Art).

Publishing

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The Mercury

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The Importance of Spoons

Would you keep a secret? I know I don’t have an alibi. I know that I am technically doomed. After all, here I sit, right? This place…it disgusts me. Doesn’t it hurt you to stay? Doesn’t it make your heart feel strained, grimy, tainted just to walk through those doors? It hurts, doesn’t it? I know it does. It hurts me, too. I bet you can’t wait to take a shower when you get home, scrub the hopelessness from your skin, wash the tears from your hair. I don’t blame you, of course. It’s this place. It’s full of small-minded people and dirt. I’m not allowed a spoon, you know. Or a fork, never mind a knife. And I know that I can’t escape this place, probably not for as long as I live. Because I have an alibi, but the only person I’m going to tell is you. And you’re going to keep my secret, because you promised. You promised.

I know that I was in that dining room, with the weapon in my hands, the victim’s blood on my skin, the body at my feet. But darling, don’t you see? I’m innocent. I didn’t kill my father. He killed himself. Don’t you see? Ah, well. I suppose not. The trouble with the world is that everyone has such small, narrow-minded perspectives. So closed-off to reality. Or to imagination. Would it kill you to let a bit of imagination in, to open those dry-rotted shutters in your mind and see the light? It killed him, I know. See, that’s the trouble. Doesn’t it hurt you to stay? It hurts me.

Did you know I’m not allowed a spoon here? I have to tilt the bowl in my hands to drink the soup, which isn’t very good, mind you. Just broth. I tilt the bowl, and some of it trickles down my chin and stains my dress. It’s hot on my skin, like tears. They don’t regularly wash my dress. It’s not even pretty. It’s white and baggy and made of a fabric that isn’t exactly soft but it isn’t rough, either. It’s like a plastic. I’ve looked in the mirror a few times since I’ve been here, and the dress is so enormous on me. I’m drowning it. My legs look like brown twigs, my bones casting shadows over my skin. My arms are the same. My body is so distinct here. I can see every bone, every joint, every ligament, every muscular band. My collar bones jut, my shoulders arch aggressively, my skin is taught against my cheekbones. I imagine that I would be a perfect subject for an artist, a figure-drawer. Somebody trying to document the anatomy of the human form, spot-on, with every bone shaded and defined. Ribs like piano keys, or bars on a bird cage. Knees like the peaks of a mountain. I like the thought of being art. But I like how I looked before much better.

My cheekbones used to be layered with a bit more flesh. My bones weren’t so clear, and I was smooth, not so angular. That night, I remember looking in the mirror. I had painted my lips so meticulously. They gleamed scarlet. My hair wasn’t ragged and short as it is now. Try to imagine it platinum blonde, soft and curled. Eyes bright; unfocused, but not lost. A dress very different from the one I have on now. It was navy blue and printed with cherries, fitted at the waist with a narrow red belt, the Peter Pan collar opened a few buttons to seem relaxed but elegant. I was such a strange creature then. I wasn’t sure what I was going to do that night. I had made dinner for my father, who had come home the day before, and I knew I was going to do something about it, but I hadn’t
come to a decision.

It was the first time anybody had come to the house in a long time, you know. Father hadn't let anybody visit for months. I'd lost track of how many. But it doesn't really matter, does it? The time always spirals away in the end. What matters is how it's spent. And mine was spent alone, behind doors that were locked tight. Time always spins away from us. It will pass, whether I sit here in this plastic dress with my bones sharp enough to slice, or whether I rejoin society with lipstick and spoons, or whether they put me on an electric chair and switch my life away. Time will pass.

The dinner was soup. And let me tell you, it was much better than what I have here. It had lumps of meats and hearty chunks of vegetables floating in the spiced heat. I used a spoon. I think it's rather ridiculous that they don't allow spoons here. I'm allowed other things to eat with: cups, bowls, plates. I could just as easily break a shard from one of those and slit my throat. If I wanted to kill myself, I would have done it. See, that's the trouble. People are so small-minded. That's why they don't understand that I am innocent. It hurts you, doesn't it? Staying here.

Just look at you, shifting around on my cot like you want to stand, but your legs are frozen in plaster. You can't even grasp it, can you? Well, try to. My entire life will be lived this way, ending each day on the exact place you are perched. But it doesn't matter, because I am innocent. I know this, and you will, too, and nothing matters so long as someone understands.

I ate my soup with a spoon. My father did, too. He always slurped, and it was so tiresome. I had used my finest china and lit an enormous candle in the center of the table. I'd even laid out a tablecloth. I'm a good daughter, you know. I always do my best. I was wearing lipstick. Did I tell you that? Well, I was. It was red. So, so, red.

My husband never liked me to wear it. He said I was beautiful without “all that garbage” on my face. But he wasn't there that night. He was dead. I'm sure you know that because you've undoubtedly read my file. I bet “widow” is written all over it. Big, blocky letters, red like blood. Red like lipstick.

My husband never liked me to wear it, but my father did. The more I put on, the more lovely he said I was. When I stopped putting it on after John died, father said I looked like I had given up. I had. But you know that. You've read my file. I'll bet it's big. Lots of papers. I'll bet it smells like ink and dust. I love that smell; I could eat it up, I think.

Lipstick. It left crimson blossoms on my spoon when I sipped, all sticky and unnecessary. I never really liked makeup, but father needed to know that I was trying, or he'd get mean again. And I just wasn't ready for that. I never was, but that night especially. Something felt different. I felt balanced on the wispiest of strings, tottering but fearless. I think that maybe I was preparing to be the mean one that night. I put on my makeup that night so carefully that it was almost cruel and tightened that belt around my waist so slowly. Father needed to know that I was trying, or he'd get mean again. And then I would have to get mean. And I am much better at it. Or at least, I am now that John is gone.

I had cleaned my house. Or, at least, the kitchen. I had lived alone for so long, I'd forgotten what the floor looked like. So I shoved everything on it upstairs and locked the door. Nobody should have to know, nobody should
have to see. It doesn’t matter what kind of things I’d let accumulate around me, like great snow drifts. Father didn’t let anyone visit, so who cared? I could run screaming if I wanted. I could claw my flesh raw with my own nails. But now father was back to visit, and I had to make it seem as though nothing had ever happened, so that maybe he would chip the cement from around the doorway. Father said that I was looking much better, and how was I feeling? I lied. I told him I felt spectacular, never better, on top of the world. He smiled, that rare, slow-spreading smile. He told me that he knew I would be better without that troublesome husband, anyway, that his death was God’s gift to me. God’s beautiful gift.

I wanted to scream, wanted to tear my hair out from the roots. But I am a good daughter, and I granted him a thin, dainty smile. I told him he was right, he had been right from the beginning, as he always was. He seemed so pleased at this. I wanted to vomit.

“God is good, father,” I said softly.

“That he is, my darling. I knew that man was going to run you straight into the poor house, with all his fancies of helping the homeless and donating to soup kitchens and the like. I told him, I did. Hadn’t he read Darwin? Revolutionary stuff. The poor are only poor because of natural selection. The best thing to do is to let nature run its course. You can’t lift a ruffian from the dirt any more than you can stop a tsunami or an earthquake. I told him, I did. Revolutionary stuff,” he blabbered, slurping his soup.

“Revolutionary,” I said numbly.

“But then he had to go and get himself killed, contracting the illnesses of the beggars and spreading it into my home. Exposing my daughter. I knew then that he never loved you, or he wouldn’t have put you in danger. I prayed every night for that ailment to stop his heart, and it did, bless. God is good,” he exclaimed. He examined his reflection in his spoon, and I realized how ugly he truly was.

Wrinkled and pallid with iron-gray hair and cold little eyes. He seemed to like what he saw in his spoon, because he smiled. His teeth were crooked and very white. He hadn’t gotten mean yet, but he was steam-rolling in that direction. I wasn’t afraid, however, because John was gone, and I was meaner. I was meaner than my father.

I’m not allowed a spoon here; isn’t that strange? My spoon quivered in my hand that night, and I remember watching my own reflection bob up and down, as if in slow motion, all smeared with red lipstick and wet with the soup I had made.

“God is good, father,” I had said, my lips cold, as if all blood had deserted them.

“Right, my girl. Right. But the worst thing he did was done after he was six feet under. He made you think you were ill,” he slurped. “An illness of the mind. He must have planted that idea in your head long before he choked, but you were so sure you had...what was it? You were silly. Silly, silly, silly girl. It’s a cry for attention. But you know that now, and everything will be lovely again. You aren’t poor. You were born rich and powerful, chosen by nature.” Here, father looked so blissful in all his meanness, all his ugliness that I almost sobbed. Chosen. His lips, thick and chapped, formed that word with a kind of
“Something as silly as a made-up mind disease can’t take you down. Darwin proves it. Revolutionary stuff,” he continued.
“Revolutionary.”
“But I saved you. I prayed, and I told the doctors to ignore you, that you were just playing, that your dead husband had infected your heart with the will to cry for attention, to be silly. Silly, silly, silly girl.”
“Silly,” I repeated. I stood, removing my empty soup bowl from the table and gracefully taking father’s as well. I left the spoons on the folded fabric napkins, poised for dessert. A perfect lady. His beady eyes watched me, and I smiled serenely.

He loved to tell stories, especially of his own successes. And keeping me locked up was, in his mind, his greatest success. Instead of thinking about that, I decided to categorize the things upstairs, bulging against the closed doors, cloaked in dust. A magical place, where everything used and lived in and worn could pile up to be at home. I tried to list the objects right above my father’s head, smiling wanly.

“And the doctors heeded me, and they left you alone.”
...Two clocks, their faces pried open, their metal innards spilling out. One nightstand, the legs wrenched free and gashed with the marks of strong teeth...
“You see, I knew you simply needed some time on your own to realize what a pestilence that man had been, and then you would see reason.”
...Seven dolls hanging from the ceiling fan, twenty six photo albums with vicious ink blots over every pair of eyes...
“I prayed that God would give you clarity, and he did, bless him.”
...One cat, not moving. Or was it two? I couldn’t be sure; I had to count again. Of course, my mother’s old collection of spoons. There must have been a million spoons up there, and I kept them glistening and polished and laid out in lovely rows all over the floor! The only thing I really kept in order. Silver, cradling, like melted crescents of moonlight. Was it one cat or two?
“God is good,” I agreed.
“God is good, girl, my silly girl. God is good. And now here you are. You were chosen by nature. Darwin says it.”
“Revolutionary stuff,” I murmured, placing the dishes in the sink and turning the hot water on. It burnt my fingers, but I was so much less susceptible to pain then. I ignored it. It hurts me to stay here. It hurts you, too. It hurts us all, though. Get used to it.

I’m not allowed a spoon, or paper, or to read, or to have more than one visitor a month. They say human interaction could frazzle me or damage my fragile mental condition. But I’m not crazy. I have an alibi.

The trouble with people is that they’re so small-minded. Unimaginative lumps of clay waiting to be molded, but they’ve made themselves so cold that nobody can change their shapes. They had potential, once upon a time, to be free, to be open. But they’ve formed themselves into such stiff beings.

I’ll bet my file is a beautiful thing to behold. Huge, teetering stacks of paper, like a throne of information. That’s the sort of thing that I dream of nowadays. Stimulation of the mind, and lots of it. I asked once to hold it, to read it, but, you see, I’m not allowed reading material. It could shake me. I am
a lady with a delicate composition, they say. I laugh at that. Delicate! I am many
things, but delicate is not one of them.

Maybe I was at one point. Well, no. I don’t think that’s quite right. I’m not
who I used to be, but I was never delicate. I had a fierce mind and a quick wit
and flesh on my bones and silky hair and a spotless house. I had a husband with
a heart on fire for helping people who didn’t have all that I had, and I had a
life. I didn’t have lipstick. I didn’t appreciate mother’s spoon collection, either,
I don’t think. Did you know, I’m not allowed a spoon here?

Spoons are more important than one might think. Essential. Crucial. They
have many purposes, you see. And without them, you have to face the boiling
droplets of spilt soup. They are more than just utensils, don’t you see? They
are symbols. You could be drinking soup by tilting the bowl, but a spoon is a
luxury. The pinnacle of refinement. Spoons are evidence of a person’s worth, the
product of the unique ability of humans to adapt their surroundings to them
instead of simply bending to nature. Lifting the bowl and pursing your lips
around the edge; now that is bending. But picking up a spoon. That’s defiance.
That’s showing nature that nobody can control you, that you are free from the
restraints of the world. Free from the cement seal on your door, from the boards
on your windows.

You’ve read my file. Could you sneak it to me? If you can even carry it, that
is. I bet you can’t. I bet it’s a spectacle. Sew it into an enormous quilt and bring
it in at night, creeping like a shadow. I will tell the guards that I am intolerably
cold, and that you are my cousin. You bring me the quilt, and I’ll read it, I’ll
read it all. When I’m through, I’ll eat it, so that nobody can ever read it again,
and so they don’t realize what we’ve done. I’ll devour it, every letter, so that it’s
a part of me, and I of it. It is my file, after all. Won’t you do that for me? You
are so sweet, so kind. Would you keep a secret? You promised.

I didn’t return to the table with dessert. I had planned to, but my hands
were somehow empty. After John died, something sick grew inside me. Father
didn’t believe me; he didn’t allow me to heal, to purge myself of the sickness. He
told me I was silly and brushed me off. Made me put lipstick on. So I did, but
the sickness still festered, and it was his fault, all his fault.

Red is such a garish color. I felt clown-like with it applied all over my lips.
Not like a lady at all. Especially not one with a delicate composition.

I’m not allowed a spoon here. It would be easier to eat if only I had one.
I could be smooth again, and perhaps my hair would grow silky and wave just
so. And perhaps once they saw that I am as beautiful as a siren, I could coerce a
doctor into bringing me that dress, the one with the peter pan collar and cherry
print. Not the leather belt, though. I never liked that addition. Leave the lip-
stick behind, as well. John never liked it, and neither did I.

I picked up the spoon from the napkin and tried not to look at my father.
He was so incredibly ugly. I don’t know how I didn’t notice it before that night.

“I’m proud of you, my girl. Proud that I am the reason you are the way you
are today. It is my fault you are where you are. All my responsibility, and I am
so glad, so proud. My daughter, so beautiful and healthy and strong, all thanks
to me.”

“Thanks be to the Father,” I whispered. My fist curled around the spoon’s
handle, and in the swooping curve of it, I could see my face quite plainly. I
didn’t look right. Distorted and hideous, my face all out of proportion. It was the lipstick, I was sure.

“All because of you.” I murmured, as softly as wind. Father’s smile faltered, but didn’t fade.

“Yes. Because of me,” he affirmed.

I was disgusted by my face in the reflection, so I stood, my chest heaving.

“You didn’t think that I was sick, so you left me. You isolated me. You boarded my windows and cemented my door,” I said dryly, moving towards him gracefully. I was like a swan, like a lady. Delicate composition, no.

“Yes. And aren’t you glad?”

“I am what I am today because of you. You’ve done this to me. You’ve made me this way. So would you agree that you are now responsible for all of my actions?”

“What an odd sort of question, my girl.”

“Would you agree, father?”

“I suppose I would.”

“That’s rather a shame. Everything I do now is your doing. Because you didn’t believe me.”

“I left you alone to sort out your silliness.”

“And now? If I am silly now, is it me who is being silly, or is it you? You are responsible for everything I do. So which is it?”

Father looked distinctly uncomfortable now. I had reached his side of the table, and stood directly beside him, clutching my spoon. My knuckles were strained white around the handle, the metal cool and smooth.

“...I don’t know. I suppose it is me, because I am the reason you are the lovely lady you are now. I don’t believe you would be silly again. God is good, after all. It is I who you have to thank for your condition,” he smiled, blissful once more.

“Thanks be to the Father,” I said crisply, and I pushed his chair backwards onto the floor. I heard wood splinter as he crashed to the ground, his ugly face a mask of shock. I was graceful as I bent over him, strong as I pinched his nostrils shut, assertive as I shoved my lipstick-stained spoon down his throat. I was patient as I listened to the gargoyle of his saliva, the struggle of his throat muscles against the metal as he choked. It was rather like slurping. He always slurped. I was firm as I watched blood trickle from the foaming edges of his mouth, his eyes lose focus, his face purple in the candle light. In essence, I was a perfect lady. Lady, I was. Delicate, I was not.

He clawed at my arms, but just as he was stern in not letting doctors near me, as he was stern in cementing the doorway and nailing the windows shut, I was stern with my spoon.

When he was still and his body was rigid, I withdrew the spoon. The red of my lipstick was mixed beautifully with the red of his blood, and I rather liked the color. John would not have liked it. He didn’t like me to wear lipstick. But father did. So, for him, I carefully painted my lips. His eyes watched blindly as I rubbed the spoon against my mouth. It was hot, but comfortably so. I lifted my hand from his nose and slid his eyelids shut. His eyes weren’t so cold anymore, now that his spirit was gone from them.

Don’t you see? I’m innocent. I have an alibi. But you mustn’t tell. Could
you bring me my file, please? Father didn’t let me have reading material while I was ill, either, and the sickness festered. I truly believe reading would make me better again.

I am innocent. My father killed himself. Don’t you see? He killed *himself*. You understand, don’t you? Look at you, so sweet, so kind. Listening, like nobody has ever done before. I have an alibi. But you *must* keep it a secret. Because if John knew what I’d done, he would want me to be locked up, too. He would understand, but he would think that it’s only right for me to be here. So please, don’t tell. For John. It hurts to stay here, doesn’t it? It hurts me.

Did I tell you, I’m not allowed a spoon here? A *spoon*, for goodness sake. It’s just so *silly*...don’t you think?
Cave Colored Smile

MEGHAN JOYCE

Age: 3
It’s hard to see. The teacher closed the curtains again. She’s telling us to sit in a circle. We’re not very good at making circles. She doesn’t care. Keeps smiling. We’re going on a bear hunt, she says. I don’t know why. No one knows why. She puts in a tape. The music starts. We’re going on a bear hunt. We’re going to catch a big one. Everyone’s singing and laughing. The hunt is a game. An adventure. Finding the bear is fun. Not to me. I’m not scared. I sing along even though I am. Because I can see it. Black fur. White teeth. Red eyes. Like in Fox and the Hound. Breathe in and out and in and out and out. My eyes hurt. My chest hurts. She walks over. “I’m not crying,” I say. She doesn’t believe me. I’m taken away. She kneels down. Says everything’s ok. The music is gone. I still feel the bear.

Age: 6
School starts later for me. Around a year. Mom and Dad told me I needed an extra year of preschool. I was surprised. I got good grades and had friends. Why couldn’t I go with the other kids? They don’t say why. It’s probably the crying. My teachers always called them when I cried. I tell them I’m ok. That it just happens. That I’m happy. I think they believed me, which is good. I’m happy, but the bear still hunts. His cave is my stomach. He runs around and around until I feel queasy. Sometimes, the bear bats my lungs, just like my cat when he plays with his toys. I think it’s fun for them. What I hate the most is when he’s awake. When I’m alone, reading a book or watching a movie, he’s asleep. Wet breath tickles my insides, but, for the most part, he’s quiet. When I’m at school he wakes up. The bear has made me his home, but he forgot the welcome mat.

Age: 10
We’re starting long division in math class. Math has never been my favorite subject, although I solve the problems. There’s only ever one answer. To pass the time Christina and I start doodling on each other’s worksheets. She draws a flower, while I draw an eye. She’s better than I am but it’s fun making something together. Then a name is called. My name. I turn away from my doodle to see my teacher staring at me, holding a stick of yellow chalk. A division problem, 192.5 divided by 7, is on the board, written in that same color. The problem is mine to solve. If she chose me randomly or because of the drawing I don’t know, but I stand and walk to the board. The chalk is in my hand. The problem in my head. Ok, so I know that 7 goes into 19 two times so the 2 goes on top and 14 is subtracted from 19 and 19-14 is 5. Forty-six eyes watch my hand move. I was drawing them, now they are drawn to me, and I know two more eyes are starting to open. You write down 5 then you bring down the 9 in 192.5, and that makes 59. Twenty-five hearts are beating. Two have the same rhythm. How many times does 7 go into 59? I start from 21 because it’s the last multiple of 7 that I can remember, and I start counting from there in my head and on my fingers because that helps me at home. 22, 23, 24, 25... He’s banging into
my small and large intestine and *did you know that the small intestine is actually larger than the large intestine which makes the naming really, really strange and why can’t I be in science class right now because we’re learning about the digestive system and I actually know that answer instead of whatever 192.5 divided by 7 is.* He’s running up my chest and into my lungs, chewing until I can’t breathe, then he’s running again, scratching my throat at the same time he scratches my eyes until I’m sobbing in front of twenty-two kids and one scared teacher. I’m forced into the hallway, and she asks if I want the guidance counselor. I try to smile. I say I’m ok. That I’m used to it.

Age: 13

Mom and I have been in the car for over twenty minutes when we reach our destination: a white house with shutters slathered in blue paint. Pigmented flowers thrive beneath the windows to create an inviting garden, if not a bright one, and the graveled driveway crackles under our feet as we hop out of the van. Despite my misgivings, there is a charm to the place that is undeniable. I’m still not thrilled about the visit, though. I know I have a problem, and I don’t need this flawless house to remind me. Mom glances back at me, probably making sure that I’m following her. With that one look I fall back into form. Standing straight, eyes alight, smile on. She seems satisfied, and I am again reminded why I’m here. For her and Dad. Because I hate feeling their pain every time the school calls home or they find me crying over a homework problem, or worse, over nothing. I hate hearing their whispered worries, the what to do’s and what can they do’s. That’s why I hide it now. Being honest only leads to stifled tears and hollow silences. I love them too much for that. It’s better to stay quiet and talk to someone else than talk to your parents and watch your crazy needle into them like starved mosquitoes. Better my blood than theirs.

Mom and I reach the door, the color of fresh cream, knocking politely, or however politely ramming a fist against wood can be. The wait is excruciating, a tooth-pulling torment, until finally the door opens, revealing the home’s owner. She doesn’t seem too judgmental. A bit older, maybe sixty, grey swirled into nutmeg hair. Her eyes are kind as she eases into a smile. They are paper lanterns in a summer sky. Mom waits in what I assume is the living room while Maria--I learn that’s her name--and I walk to her office. Once I sit down, we begin the standard introductions. Our names. Ages. Hobbies. Our conversation is just that...a conversation. I relax, answering her questions freely. Then Maria mentions why I’m here. If I know why I’m here. *Water burns my throat. I’m swimming through the river, the deep, cold river. She’s waiting for my answer, and, dear God, what if she tells Mom what I tell her? My feet are stuck in thick, oozy mud. I have to go through but with a squealch and squerch I’m pulled under. If Mom knows then Dad knows then their fear will grow, and I can’t live knowing my parents fear me. I stumble and trip in the big, dark forest. My head hurts, pounding on and on through the forest. Words aren’t coming. I don’t know what to say. After all, I just met this woman, and I can barely talk about this stuff with my parents, so why should I talk to her? And even if I do talk to her, what if she doesn’t believe he’s real or she thinks I’m crazy because maybe I am, and that’s one fact I do not need to learn today. Tiptoe, tiptoe keep yourself quiet. I can always talk to her next time, say what’s really bothering me. A shiny nose*
and a goggly eye and a voice that's not my own. Our discussion turns to school, my favorite classes, my friends, and other mindless topics. Mom is reading a magazine when we exit, lips twitching up seeing me intact. I thank Maria for a good session and head to the car. There was a time when the bear only destroyed my thoughts. Now he creates new ones.

Age: 17

I receive my driver's license later than my friends. Most of them got it when they were sixteen or seventeen because they didn't focus on the consequences. Driving is a freedom, a way to escape the mundane household and enter into a diverse world. For me, at this moment, driving is man's worst innovation. I mean, yeah, we invented the wheel for a reason and, sure, cruising around without adult supervision sounds like a fucking fantastic time. Then I hear the consequences murmuring in my mind: injuries, death, casualties. How a single mistake could cost everything. The thoughts aren't as loud as they once were; I try to ease them out, but they still appear in the most inopportune moments. Like right now.

I am convinced that the DMV is modern man’s solution to the rack, except instead of stretching limbs it stretches time. Every second feels like a century, each customer either on their phones or admiring the curve of their cuticles. Mom’s chatting with an older gentleman, something about a Celtic festival, while I break out my go-to nervous smile and wait for the instructor. The room smells of wasted time, that musty aroma encompassing moldy exhales and erupting brain cells. For over twenty minutes we wait, which is funny considering we were running late. Twenty-six minutes and at least eight sighs later the instructor walks over to shake my hand. He’s in his latter years, mid-sixties or so, with no-nonsense eyes and equal shares enthusiasm and hair, that is to say none. We meander through the standard procedures as I introduce myself and give him my insurance information. In a matter of minutes the two of us enter the car.

He wants me to use my turn signals. I do. He wants me to check my hazards. I check them. My windshield wipers wipe, my horn honks, my head squirms, and all I can think is not today dear lord not today it’s been ok why does this always have to happen at the shittiest times. He tells me to back out, head over to parallel parking. I can’t make it that far. Memories blur, then I realize I’m sobbing as an elder woman leaves without my insurance information but with a slight dent in her car.

I can’t stop crying. We’re driving home. The tears won’t stop. My chest is raw from the dry heaving. Mom is angry. Not about the car or that I failed. She’s livid because of me of my “reaction,” she says. What am I going to do when something really bad happens, how will I handle catastrophe when I can’t work through a failure this simple? She keeps asking, demanding for an answer I’ve never found. I’ll be fine, it’ll be ok, I didn’t mean to overreact. Whatever I say she won’t believe. There’s nothing left to hide. So I just sit there, wailing into my lap, longing for a solution.

Age: Unknown
I don’t know how old I’ll be when I’m better, when the bear grows sick of hunt-
ing, when he forever sleeps in my chest, my mind, or wherever his cave might be. I don’t know how old I’ll be when I’m calm, when I don’t enter a crowded room and feel his claws raking into my sides every time words pinch my throat. Honestly, such an ideal world may not exist. I may be as I am forever, balancing highs and lows with the in-betweens, and that’s fine. That’s alright.

A bear was born to hunt, after all.
An Orchard Next Time

I grew a forest inside my chest
Of pine and cedar and all the rest
And I thought that we could rest together
Beneath their shade.
I was so impressed by what I had made
I forgot to account for fire,
Which with one spark took over
And rapidly eradicated
The whole forest I had fabricated,
Leaving me dashed in a desert of ash
Alone beneath the overbearing sun.

So the next time I built a nest.
I found all the finest pieces,
Twigs and popcorn,
Licorice and twine,
And I designed it
So that this time you would stay,
And I sat on that hope,
Round and robin’s egg blue
And I kept it warm so that it grew,
But when it hatched it only flew away
And left me empty.

I think I am through with forests,
Which I only ever miss for their trees,
And I think I am done with nests,
Whose inhabitants only know how to leave.
I am weary of the grief
Which only comes from losing
What never could be.

An orchard next time,
I want to grow an orchard next time,
Sowing apples and peaches and pears, pouring
From tall trees that two tortured souls can climb,
And we’ll find ourselves reclining there
beneath the open sky
As we sink our sweet teeth into the fruit
Of our labor.
We’ll care for our garden together,
You and I against the weather;
We’ll have all the wherewithal
And with all the time we need.
I want to grow an orchard—
My heart is a seed.
Shedding Stars

Brown danced against black, polluted dust staining space. Sludge, the exact color and consistency of a fresh hairball, tumbled down and collided with a neighboring star, dampening its already dull shine. Long ago, when land had power and space was but a dream, those stars lived. They painted stories, inspired worship, offered sight. Now, they were gone or, at the very least, corpses wasting their closing breaths. And yet, sludge trickled on. There was work to be done.

On the station’s waste level, no one noticed any desecration, their thoughts drifting to more pressing issues such as breakfast and expiring shifts. Just after the last bit of ooze toppled into oblivion, a siren blared over the intercom announcing the completed task. Workers, accustomed to the sound, gathered their supplies, clocked their hours, and proceeded to the lift. Levels blurred: waste, electrical, engineering. Catcher. This is our stop, dear reader. This is where it begins.

Approximately 5,568 people inhabited the Artemis 4, over a thirtieth of its residents being Catchers. The level was, therefore, the smallest, containing a single kitchen and common area. Every surface, including the ceiling and floor, were coated in an aluminum-like substance, glossy in appearance yet brittle in texture. Officially, it was an insulating mechanism and lauded as such, Mayall Corp adverts promoting “rooms equipped with specialized heating technology.” Pretty words spent on discount wallpaper.

The level also housed Catcher chambers, the sole area with a respectable budget. Each chamber housed six control panels, energy storage, collection tubes, and a cleansing hall, each lined with a heat-resistant alloy. At the center, six foot high cylinders housed remnants of the previous day’s efforts, light wisps tickling their prison. The haul was acceptable, a few dwarfs and a giant, enough to power the ship for a few more days. Command seemed uneasy; understandable, considering that no one had caught a sun in weeks, and Mayall demanded an additional three to reach quota. Hopefully the gods would grant good fortune.

A series of six hallways adjoined a single chamber. The walls were coated in the same aluminum substance found in the other rooms, though mustard numbers were carved above the doors. Room 3-08 stood identical among its brethren. Inside, there was but a table, bed, and bathroom, a synthetic aroma saturating the air.

Then fluorescence eclipsed starlight, leaving the room an inflamed red save for three black numbers pulsing against the ceiling. A guttural shriek accompanied the light until, finally, a groan escaped under a pile of sheets. The shrieking ceased, replaced with a mechanical voice.

“Catcher MS-35. Time: 730 hours. Location: 3,084 miles outside Eridanus system. Arrival: 30 minutes. Acknowledge to receive schedule.”

Another groan echoed the first as the walls returned to their normal platinum, fresh light spilling through the window. A head, then two arms, then a
body emerged from under the sheets and stretched upwards, trying to chase away lingering fatigue. The body belonged to one Myra Saros, a brunette breaking in her twenties. She stood to her full height, though that’s not saying much, and walked over to the bathroom, grabbing her uniform along the way. Draped in a baggy shirt and pants—the manufacturer maintained a firm “no exchange” policy—Myra’s mind diverted from her routine, lingering on the day’s assignments. She clutched the still-warm assignment sheet between her fingers, eyes and mind memorizing every event, including the one she’d rather ignore.

It’s not that she didn’t like service. Well, she didn’t, but not for lack of trying. Back home, with exports including milk, sugar, and suffocation, attendance was required during the four threaded days. Mayall Corp professed a mandatory service policy, and if Myra understood anything, it was that any mandatory event was automatically a chore.

Myra glanced at the mirror. Her hair hung limp at her too-thin shoulders as azure eyes met azure. She was scraggly in ways right and wrong, yet she couldn’t hide a budding smile seeing herself in uniform. Because yes, the rooms were cramped and the food was often stale and her colleagues wrung her age like a leash, but damn it, Myra loved her job.

After all, how many people have cradled a star?

Myra spent a minute on her hair before racing to the kitchen. The schedule mentioned hard boiled eggs, a delicacy she could not afford to miss. Thankfully, the line was short, and within a few minutes Myra sat victorious, her trophy adorned atop a plastic throne. She grabbed a butter knife, aligning its sharp edge an inch or so from the egg’s center. Then she sliced the knife into the egg’s flesh, discarding everything but the yolk. Pressing her thumb and index finger around the golden morsel, Myra cushioned the delicate yoke, ensuring its protection. In a way, she admired her food. Between her fingers was life, unborn but once overflowing with potential. She placed the yolk on the tray’s lower right corner and continued her meal, eating egg whites and an apple then downing a water bottle. When breakfast ended, she stacked her tray above another

The yolk remained untouched.

“Darkness is always the start and always the end, for light cannot form nor die without its intervention. People, in their blindness, forget that neither force is inherently good or evil. The world must begin with one and create the other, as it is in this way the first god grew, molded in shadow. The inky sky birthed him, a being coated in celestial essence. His fingers bled planets, his mouth breathed life, his mind opened to all. He did not know how he came to be. Rather, he understood who he was, and upon his creation a name echoed into silent eternity: Batu, the sky weaver. Despite his beauty, solitude wheedled its way into Batu’s soul and, in his folly, the god wished for a fellow wanderer, someone to stay forever at his side. Alas, such a thing was beyond even Batu’s power. Despair burrowed further into Batu’s soul until the pain brought forth the world’s first tears, staining the night gray. Pitying the fledgling god, the sky consumed Batu’s tears, and once the last drop was drunk, a new god was born.

She was different than her counterpart, skin the color of molten silver, melded on limbs destined to dance amongst the cosmos. Only her eyes were the same: a universal reflection.
And as those identical eyes met, a moonlit string weaved itself along the gods’ wrists, tethering their destinies forevermore. Batu clung to his partner, naming her Lueda, the light stitcher. Together, they weaved the cosmos into a quilt stitched in their love, but cons unraveled the patterned cloth. There was a prophecy, you see, understood since Batu’s existence, foretelling a child swaddled in stardust and born from false hands, destined to usurp the sky weaver. There was one possibility: Batu’s own child. Knowing her children’s executions were assured, Lueda fled from her lover. She still loved him, yes, but she could not ignore new life stirring. It was this love that betrayed her. The string, that lustrous string, trailed behind her every step, as did Batu. What they said is unknown. Perhaps Batu promised mercy. Or perhaps he did not. It is known Lueda flung herself into the abyss to save her unborn children. Their location is lost even to the most ancient orders, but it is through our faith these gods live on, their sacrifice mirroring our degeneracy.”

The priest fell silent, lusting after his patrons’ enthusiasm. The loyalists, those “true believers” perched in the front rows, jammed their hands together, as if each clap elevated their heavenly standing, while everyone else offered a polite applause. Myra’s smile twisted into a poorly drawn caricature as she greeted fellow Catchers.

“Hello, yes, yes, today’s service was beautiful, I wish we didn’t have to leave; oh, I hadn’t heard Lira has a tricep burn, I hope she feels better; we should really catch up soon,” Myra droned. Planting her eyes on the shimmering floor she fled from the niceties towards reality. Chamber Three was empty except for Alde, Myra’s boss and occasional ally, who greeted her with his rehearsed mutterings.

“Same service every day. Bunch of bullshit. Lueda’s womb. That’s what that prune loves. Lueda’s fucking womb. I swear…”

“You swear you’ll stuff the priest in Lueda’s womb if he mentions it again. C’mon, Alde, you could at least change it up every once in a while.”

Myra received a curt nod in return. She wasn’t surprised. Alde was a quiet man. Maybe a little odd for some but not for Myra, who found his honesty endearing.

“Approaching species E-793. Within 1000 feet. Get started early. Good?”

Myra returned Alde’s words with her own curt nod as she grasped the control panel. The star edged closer and closer into the view, its scarlet rays like blood streaked on glass. Myra positioned the excavator, aligning it just outside the star’s core. Then she sliced the tool into the star, clearing everything but the core. From Myra’s seat the core resembled a cinnamon jawbreaker, its sweet coating masking an overpowering flavor. She was ready for a taste. A few button pushes converted the excavator from “clearing” to “handle” mode, two mechanized hands cupping the splitting star.

...Splitting? Yes. Two fissures bred three, five, seven, more and more, ethereal light stained the sky twilight, named and nameless colors painted an eternally black canvas, sparks whizzed and shouted and sang and jeered a celebration reserved for celestial observers. Yet, the metal hands did not break. Myra and Alde were still, save for their lips miming a prayer.

*Oh Lueda, stitcher of skies, eternal mother, in your name we pray.*
Oh Batu, weaver of skies, first of your kin, in your name we pray.
Oh children, lost to shadow, bestow protection like your mother before you, in your memory we pray.

The fourth recitation harkened its first breath.

CRACK

Scarlet mist blanketed the creature as star fragments embedded in skin, shimmering in the darkness. Its body morphed and stretched under a sculptor’s touch, creation blurred by indecision. Finally, it chose. Skin hardened into starlit scales and the body shrank. Two limbs extended towards lidless eyes, appreciating its handiwork and smoothing imperfections. Satisfied, its eyes found Myra’s, galactic meeting azure.

And, for a moment, the stars flourished.
A Stain on My Page

As I flip a page in my book, I noticed an orangish splatter on the new page: the remnants of a life squashed. I have killed a bug. No appendages or wings or flattened body remain, so what kind of bug I’ve killed is a mystery. The kind, frankly, is insignificant. Whatever the bug was, it is now dead.

Hesitantly—who wants to touch guts?—I place my thumb on the stain and rub. It doesn’t come out. I lick my other thumb and rub again. It’s still there. A mixture of sadness and annoyance has surfaced; these emotions are maybe one-fifth for the bug and four-fifths for the page, which will never again be white and pure. Mostly, though, I feel surprised. How often do I kill without intent? Often, I’d wager.

Human traffic—whether bipedal or vehicular—constitutes the greatest daily threat to world life. Each movement, especially steps, has the power to crush and crunch. Antz is the greatest artistic rendering of this fact. And I’m currently taking step after step while walking down Beauford Avenue in Gettysburg. Had I stepped on the bug, unless the crunch of its shell alerted me, I wouldn’t have noticed that I killed something. I’d estimate that I don’t notice at least ninety-five percent of bugs that cross my path, whether they pass unharmed or otherwise; the stain is the only reason I noticed the one that landed on my page, albeit posthumously.

Surprise and annoyance have subsided. Regret now grows; this stain is stubborn. I have tried to finish the same line four times now, but, before I reach the period, the orange dot the size of a thumb tack steals my attention.

I close the book, keeping my index finger between the pages to mark my place. This line must wait.

My relationship with bugs, like most people’s, has never been the best. While most of my insecticide has been unwitting, a fair portion of it has been deliberate.

Last night, for instance, I was in my friend’s room when she noticed a cricket on the floor near her fridge. While I have nothing against crickets (as long as they don’t touch me), my friend has mild orthopterophobia. The word phobia is slightly disingenuous; all phobias are a form of bigotry. This cricket was the third I’d encountered while in her room. As with the previous three, I took my shoe, moved towards the cricket, and smacked it with the sole. The cricket’s crunch was decisive and divisive; the sound induced satisfaction and a fleeting pang of guilt. I picked up its oozing body with a paper towel, wiped away the yellowing goo on the floor, and flushed it down the toilet. Throughout this process, I was careful not to get anything on my hand.

My recent cricket-killing was nowhere near the most gruesome or vile of my sprees. The worst, by far, came in the summer of 2007, the summer after sixth grade. Tent caterpillars had infested Eastern Pennsylvania. Infested, if

1 For the curious, I am reading William Hazlitt’s “On the Pleasure of Waiting.” I can’t make this up.
2 More specifically: eastern tent caterpillars, or Malacosoma Americanum. These
possible, may even be an understatement. Tent caterpillars overwhelmed the region so completely that it was impossible to find a tree without a swarm of them. Some trees were so covered by tiny-haired, black-and-yellow bodies that their bark vanished, replaced by a slithering, fuzzy surface. Driving along the road to my house included a cacophony of pistol pops as our tires exploded caterpillar bodies across the blacktop. Silky, white cocoons like cotton-candy covered whole swaths of boughs, making a new canopy of their own.

If Tacitus lived today, he would mark that summer with one word: rampage. Each day I went out and slaughtered tent caterpillars en masse, sometimes with an old, rusted hatchet, sometimes with a stick, sometimes with a rock. An interest in how long I could kill raged inside me, and, like Carol Oates, I learned I could kill for a long time. I scoured my property and slaughtered all I could find until I grew bored with my power and went inside; after some hours, I would feel reinvigorated and renew the cause, piling new mounds of bodies before the old ones disappeared. Decapitation, dismemberment, blunt force: these were my primary means. I derived distinct enjoyment from one manner of killing. I placed a rock on a caterpillar’s tail end, applied pressure, and scraped across the abdomen and ended at its thorax, bursting its yellow-green guts from its head in a pop. The induced feeling was singular: satisfaction. In one especially sadistic case, I tested the limits of a caterpillar’s life. I dropped the caterpillar in a puddle that had pooled in the bed of my mom’s black pickup and held it there until it stopped squirming. Then I pulled it from the water and set it down. Kneeling in the bed of the truck, I prodded and poked the caterpillar, daring it to move, to display some sign of life. Invariably, it moved. After this sign, I placed the caterpillar back in the water and held it under even longer. Only when the caterpillar failed to move for several minutes did I end this torture. Whether it drowned or grew too exhausted to move I’ll never know, for I took my rock and severed its head. It didn’t wiggle while I did this.

My parents cheered me on in this endeavor. Tent caterpillars ate trees, and this new infestation threatened to engorge on whole forests one millimeter bite at a time. I was the sylvan savior.3 Genocide, of course, always has its roots in the belief of self-preservation.

Mostly, I killed the caterpillars because I enjoyed it and because they were so different than me.

I have made it across the road and turned past the Post Office. My book remains wrapped around my finger, the line unfinished. Railroad tracks spread in either direction before me. Somewhere nearby a cicada buzzes, and I scan the ground, without stopping, in a small effort to ensure I don’t step on it.

Between that summer of tent caterpillars and last night’s cricket, I’ve come a long way. I no longer wholesale slaughter insects of any variety. I generally do what I can to avoid them, but, of course, this is an unachievable task; bugs are numerous and everywhere. Two chief aspects of the encounter factor into my response to insects, decide whether they live or not. The first is where we meet.

caterpillars are most noteworthy for their social nature.

3 Eastern tent caterpillars have been linked to mare reproductive loss syndrome, so I was also saving any nearby horses’ chances of procreation. I didn’t know this at the time and won’t lie about my motivations.
If I encounter an insect outside, like the cicada, I’ll almost always avoid it. The only exceptions occur because a bug has come too close, touches me and/or surprises me, or poses a threat. In these instances, I do my best to remove myself from the situation, whether that means jolting out of a seat, schizoidly slapping at my forearm where the ant managed to climb, or wandering away from the bug’s vicinity. In extreme instances resulting from the listed exceptions, I may still end up killing the bug, such as slapping the ant on my arm too forcefully in my panic.

If I encounter a bug inside, I rarely ignore it. I won’t always kill it, though. Instead, I may try to move it outside. Inside, no matter what, is unacceptable for the bug.

This effort to move the bug outside has its limitations: I must be able to catch and transport the bug within a reasonable distance and timeframe. If removing the bug requires too great an exertion, I kill it or ignore it, dependent on the bug and its proximity to me; I may also ignore a bug for a time before killing it, as its persistent presence may become bothersome—a fly’s buzzing, for instance, will erode my patience. Some bugs, such as stink bugs, are exempt from any form of mercy and must always be killed and/or flushed.

This latter point brings me to the second principal factor in my response to bugs: my value judgment of the bug itself.

4 With a tissue or through a window, of course. Skin contact is still a no.
5 Ignoring it, over the long term, effectively dooms it to die as well.
6 The flushing obviously kills it, too.
7 Here’s a rough, representative hierarchy of bugs, ranging from the best (ones I find least offensive) to worst (ones I find most offensive):

- **Ladybugs**: This is the only bug I will seek contact with. I will still slightly spasm and huff/grunt if surprised by a ladybug touching me. Butterflies belong here as well. These are the only bugs I ever willingly touch.
- **Praying Mantis**: They’re just neat. Seriously, have you seen one lately? There’s a whole style of Chinese martial arts that mimics the mantis. Still, I’d prefer if it kept a distance of at least three feet. Most caterpillars belong around here, though typically less cool and/or badass.
- **Crickets**: Not cool or desired but harmless and only annoying if I’m inside and trying to sleep or through my friend’s own annoyance. Flies also belong here, except for horseflies, who join bees/wasps/etc. below.
- **Bees or Wasps or other stingy ones**: Not on the bottom because they rarely make their way inside, alert me when they’re nearby, and will bother those who wear brighter colors than I do. I think it’s clear why they’re here, though, on the downward half.
- **Spiders**: The bigger the spider is, the worse it is. Tiny spiders on my wall can be ignored if far enough away—say a few feet. Gluttonous, rotund spiders must die, no matter the circumstances or the resulting mess. Daddy Long-Leggers (or cellar spiders / pholcidae) are exempt from this position and fit closer in with crickets.
- **Stinkbugs**: The name says it all. That inexplicable stenchingers, man, all around anything nearby. Plus, they have a habit of buzzing just long enough to let you know they’re nearby but not long enough to let you find them. They also infiltrate my house more often than the CIA did South and Latin American gov-
When I say value judgment, I mean a bug’s value to me, not its value writ large. Every bug is valuable in its own way; even mosquitoes, the peskiest of insects, are vital to aquatic environments, as their eggs are a vital food source for other insects and small fish.

My judgment of a bug depends on three factors: (1) threat posed, (2) annoyance, whether through scent, sound, etc., and (3) aesthetics. (1) and (2) are self-intuitive and have already been discussed, but (3) requires further explanation. Essentially, the more aesthetically pleasing I find a bug, the less likely I am to kill it.8 I don’t find many bugs aesthetically pleasing—butterflies, certain caterpillars, ladybugs, dragonflies, and the more decorative of grasshoppers comprise the full catalog. All other bugs aren’t aesthetically pleasing, many being quite the opposite, and they subsequently miss this checkmark on my list, perhaps fatally, depending on their other attributes and the situation.

My sentiments regarding bugs boils down to this: on the whole, I fail to notice bugs, but, if I do notice them, their survival depends on our location, how annoying and ugly they are, and how inconvenient it is for me to help them if inside. Based on these criteria, most bugs I knowingly cross survive, but many don’t.

Somewhere deep inside I know I should care more about bugs, feel guiltier over my apathy towards my unintentional killing of them and guiltier over my premeditated slaughters. Others—people who seem nearly as alien to me as the bugs themselves—have learned to love insects. Some, such as Thoreau, have even learned from bugs, something I can’t do considering any notice equates to avoidance or violence.

Despite this knowledge, I find myself unable to care about bugs enough to stop me from killing them. They’re too insignificant and foreign for me to care deeply. Their only real chance to survive an encounter with me is to be in the right place at the right time and/or to please me through arbitrary, completely not-up-to-them means while not posing too great an inconvenience, again in ways they cannot control. They should not be too noticeable, too sneaky, too daring, too small or too big, and too gross. This is all I ask. Is that too much?

I have reopened my book and found the line the gut-smudge interrupted earlier: “I bear the creature no ill-will, but still I hate the very sight of it.” And I do hate the sight of it, the sight of the stain on my page, and it won’t be the last, and the others won’t come off as well.

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8 Even a cursory glance at my list, without reading the explanations, makes this clear.

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a. Yes, spiders are technically not bugs but arachnids, but neither are ladybugs (beetles), and they have the word bug in their name. The word bug is just easy and colloquial.
Perseus in Want

I hate the fact that
you’re a clichéd metaphor
with a Classics degree
and a penchant for telescopes,

so I’m meeting you halfway:
between left and right brain.
I admit
there are stars in
your eyes.
But they’re not for me.

They’re a dull, Grecian hue,
glazed over with an edge
of steel similar to an engine
on Apollo 13 or some other
overzealous endeavor to
learn more, do more, be more.

Misguided,
I’ve sent out
countless expeditions
to your supernova eyes and
the universe locked
within.

At this rate, I’m surprised
there’s not a miniature flag
with my initials
embroidered in red,
planted firmly
in the obliterating
vastness of your cornea.

That uncolonized planet rivals Saturn
with its sapphire rings and the
supermassive black hole
that lies at its center,
swallowing me whole
in a single heartbeat,
till the point that
I am nothing
but a black
speck.
Foolish not to have
foreseen the dangerous,
forlorn circumstances
of the unreciprocated nature of
your world,

I seek to make contact;
however, I reach for you,
and my arms only
close around vacuous,
oxxygen-deprived
space and time.

Chained to a craggy bluff
here on Earth,
my fingertips only dip into
the milky water of stars
lapping at my thighs
as it rises higher.

And I look to the sky and curse
the astronomer and
the snake-headed woman and
the reflection which gave you
your beginning and end.

I remain a speck,
out of your mind
and nearly out of mine,
while they have made you
Immortal,
always in sight and
always out of
reach.
2013. The eyes of the carousel stared at Ava. Around and around it went, metal machinery and rusted horses powered by the ghosts of children laughing. It was an echo of a memory that eternally spun in her mind, but was frozen in the bitter January chill. Her gaze followed the imagined path of one animal in particular, picturing a chestnut mare disappearing and returning to view. Black acrylic eyes peered into Ava, peeling back memories and moments best left buried. Ava forgot how to breathe as the carousel blurred and time rolled backward.

1943. Lila had always loved the summer. When the air got warmer and the smiles got looser, it was only a matter of time before home was on the horizon, before the wind whipped through her hair on the interstate and the seaside porch lights welcomed her back. Summer held the promise of ignorance, of forgetting why tourists looked at her and men asked her to dinner without ever getting to know her. It was a cycle of bright dresses and picnics on the beach and riding her bike along the boards. What mattered was that she knew faces on the sidewalk and every breath passed in familiarity.

It mattered because it was the only place she could hold on to, the only thing from before that she could keep.

The lure of Hollywood had changed everything, every glance, every relationship, every moment outside of this small town. She was one of the unfortunately lucky people to obtain the golden dream. She was silver on the screen, the darling of the red carpet. The girl who came from a small coastal town and claimed international fame on talent alone. When people stopped her underneath the bright city lights, she told them she was in the prime of her life.

But the best moments had always been spent here: at home in Cardenia, the hidden cove along the coastline. Her happiest memories had been born on nights like these, when the crowds of dancers turned the rhythms from the bandstand into a living entity.

The soft glow of the sky called her back to childhood, to the endless evenings spent strolling along the boardwalk as the sun dipped towards the sea. An array of pink and gold reflected in her eyes as she stared over the crowd, the shine of the ocean barely visible in the distance. It was moments like these where she felt she could be anybody, that her life had curved in a thousand directions and she lived a thousand lives. Here, she could be a quiet girl in love with the soft murmur of the waves, imagining someone’s lips on her cheek and hands tangled together above the cooling sand. Something normal in her unusual life.

Faintly, she heard the delighted screams from the amusement park, squeals from children who were growing up to be just like her, growing up to be someone, to return home and gaze over the ocean thinking that dreams never turn out the way they’re planned.

Her father’s disgusted grunt pulled her back to the makeshift wooden dance floor and the white tables. “Would you look at that indecency? It’s a goddamned parade of killers.” Following her father’s gaze, a thrill ran through her when she
saw the pack of soldiers walking down the boardwalk to the bandstand. They were a sea of green and gold, muffled shouts echoing through the fading daylight. Though her father merely saw plastic murderers, Lila could only recall the image of Richard Arlen dying on the big screen.

The newcomers integrated easily, winding their way between pastel dresses and the eager grins of girls that only thought of war as a word. Placing her wine-glass on the perfectly ironed tablecloth, Lila descended the stairs and pulled the sleeve of her dress slightly off her shoulder. She looked around the stage with disdain, spying pristine tablecloths, symmetrical banners, identical floral arrangements, and the matching pearls adorning the neck of every housewife. Her mother’s smile told her that this was her future: sitting beside a man who drank a little too much but was kind nonetheless, looking pretty and listening to the swing band but never dancing. Lila didn’t want that, not today, not someday. She wanted a return to the chaos, the feeling of flying from swings and skinning a knee. The feeling of sitting in a whitewashed office in LA, eighteen years old with nothing but a dream, being eaten alive by audition nerves.

She wanted to look at the ocean and have it stare back at her and not know her. To walk down the street and not be recognized, never hearing her name on the lips of strangers as if they knew her. She wanted to be unknowable, merely the small-town girl she could have been. For one night, she wanted to be the direction her life had taken if she had never been an actress.

“May I have this dance?” Lila turned at the sudden voice, words flowing from lips and mixing with the strumming bass. He was like the heroes in the cinema, as if he stepped straight from the silver screen. The glow from the string lights glinted off the polished buttons on his uniform. He held his hand out and smiled, a loose lock of hair falling across his vision. His eyes were the same blue as the ocean after a storm and the fabric of Lila’s dress.

She could see the disapproving glare from her father as she took the stranger’s hand, but his grin was inviting, and she wanted to spite her father’s whiskey-tinted words. Here, she could be anybody. The band took a breath, and the notes slid down into a ballad, the tempo slowing as the piano began singing. Even though she didn’t know him, it was endearing how his hands shook nervously when they rested on her waist. Something about the gentle way he held her make her heart pump slightly faster.

“So, what brings you here?” Lila asked. The soldier looked so out of place, his uniform stark and foreign in the sleepy seaside town. Even the scar that cut through his eyebrow blended better into the cold European soil.

“Just passing through town,” he said, swallowing hard as she moved imperceptibly closer. “It’s one of our last nights on American soil before me and the boys get to ship out to Italy. Our commanding officer is decent enough to allow us a last taste of refined culture before we’re elbow deep in trenches.” There was a crooked smile to accompany the bitterness of his words.

“Have you ever been in warfare before?” Possibly an inappropriate question, but something within Lila relaxed at the calm nonchalance of his eyes. His hand slid to tangle fingers with her, dress twirling through the air as the piano rippled. “No, but I’ve also never danced with a famous actress before, so there has to be a first time for everything.”

The words sent a chill through her, every muscle stiffening and easy smile
fading. She could never belong in a small town, removed from the bright lights of the big city. Of course he knew who she was the moment he saw her across a watercolor sea. Her face was on every billboard for miles.

“At least, that’s what my buddies said. They’re over there,” he continued, waving an arm at a group of officers clutching beer bottles as lifelines. Their guffaws and hollers calmed the waves beating Lila’s heart, turning her face back to the stranger.

“You don’t know who I am?”

“I’m sorry. I’m not much of a moviegoer. Promise me, I would have remembered the face of a pretty dame like you.” A wink caused Lila to blush furiously, hiding her candied laughter behind slender fingers. “I’m Frank.”

“I’m Lila,” she murmured, curling into his arms as the band picked up the tempo and the drums crashed with the waves. The smile that broke across her face mirrored the lightness in his eyes.

They spent the night twisting and twirling, dancing through the past and future, never once letting go of each other, never leaving the dream that existed between the bass and the saxophone. The sun slipped beneath the water, the dazzling light of a million stars reflecting in his dress shoes and the glint of her teeth. Time seemed to stretch and grow around them, a string that knitted his hand to hers. Everything melted away, and Lila was a vision of possibility, a glimpse into an alternate future.

The band gradually slowed to a halt, asking for beer bottles as their lips rested with unsung notes. Frank’s eyes glittered when they met Lila’s; the racing of their hearts was something personal, laughter contained between linked hands.

“Do you want to get out of here?” Lila asked, dragging him through the throng of people towards the boards. He nodded and draped an arm across her shoulders, her skin tingling where it touched his.

The amusement park sparkled in the distance, bells and fresh popcorn inviting them. Inside was a timeless wonderland, a flurry of activity where nothing mattered but the squeal of bumper cars and skeeballs rolling down lanes. Lila watched Frank’s grin transform into childlike awe as the two of them ran past crowded lines and children toting multicolored animals.

Lila came to a stop in front of the carousel, marveling at the lights that pulsed in time with the metallic music. The ride had been installed at the end of last summer, its wooden horses still shiny with weatherproof paint. She dragged him towards a chestnut mare, the fabric of her dress sliding off the surface. Frank smiled and wrapped his arms around her.

A giddiness spread through Lila, something warm and exuberant—something her characters had experienced but never her. There was no way to tell if it was the bass that echoed in her head or the fantastical lights of the carousel, but a ridiculous bravery washed over her. “Do you love me?” she yelled, glancing at Frank’s surprise over the symphony emitting from the speakers. Maybe it was because he was still a stranger and because they both were headed in different directions different lives; maybe that was why she fell for him.

“Is the ocean endless?” It was neither a confession nor a refusal; it was what she wanted to hear, what made her lips fall against his. They were words that lingered in her mind, never lost their clarity. Not even when the summer ended.
1992. Ava was seventeen when she learned the definition of home. Years of traveling across oceans and making acquaintances with forgotten highways had left her to imagine a place she could call her own: a small yellow cottage by the sea, with window boxes overflowing with peonies. She had never imagined that home could come in the form of a person.

His name was Jude, and he had a grin that could set the whole world ablaze. When he first kissed her beneath the flickering light on the porch of her twenty-seventh home, he became her favorite song. Something about him made her open her shutters, crack her windows waiting for his summer breeze to warm the tile floor of her heart. When she told her grandmother about him, Ava could hear her smile through the rotary phone.

But there was still a caution to her voice, a warning in the eyes of her mother. “I just want you to know that the love you feel is going to have to be strong enough to fly overseas,” her grandmother said, gentle like the seagull feather that once landed in the backyard. “That’s what it’s like to love a military man.” Ava dismissed her concern; it had worked for her grandmother, so why should it not work for her?

Ava tried to remember what love felt like when Jude would leave for weeks, months--sometimes one state over, sometimes one country away. He moved parallel to her, too busy training to call or on an isolated base with no mail service. Her friends and family advised her against stringing her heart across landlines, but she was tying the rooms of her body to the badges on his uniform.

1945. The war was over. Lila noticed every day since the victory, counted them like broken bones. She kept herself busy with fundraisers and scripts and premières, but every character was stiff, and her smile felt numb. Directors and cast mates tried not to say anything, but the cracks spreading from her foundation were turning into the beginnings of an earthquake.

She didn’t come home for the summers anymore. She had driven back for the holidays, thinking everything would be different with the chill in the air… but the sight of the abandoned boards and the motionless carousel only increased the ache growing in her. Even Hollywood was more desolate, the stillness of her heart made more obvious by the city that never slept. No matter how hard she tried to put it behind her, Frank’s smile haunted her every time she closed her eyes.

He was there in every note, every changing rhythm. Every chord that reverberated from the guitar, soft and echoing through the chambers of her heart. He was written on the lips of the singer, his name whispered like a prayer through the microphone and the memory of stolen glances in a crowded space.

Most of all, he was noticed by his absence. The man dancing across from her looked nothing like Frank. No permanently unruly hair, no eyes to match the color of her dress, no smile that alternated between an answer and a question. This man had a face that blurred into a thousand others, some black and white Hollywood product. It was static when he touched her, only a hand on a waist; his lips only removed her lipstick, like all the other dashing wannabe talent that made her feel nothing. His voice sounded like every director she had
ever ignored; he smelled like the backstage dressing room where she had lost her
virginity. It was all foreign, unsettling—it all felt wrong.

“Are you okay?” he asked, stepping back to examine the ache that had
settled in her throat. She couldn’t tell if his concern was genuine or just another
trick of this city.

Lila’s voice was small, strangled. “I just need some air.” She shoved past
him, ignoring the stares and the curiosity of onlookers—men bending to whis-
per rumors into the ears of women who tangled pearls around their knuckles.
Another movie star lost to the greed of la la land. She pushed open the garden
doors and left the murmured voices behind, the chill of the twilight air sending
a shiver through her and the mint green topiaries.

Collapsing against the iron gate, she tried to reach out and capture her
heart as it flew from her ribcage. The whole world seemed slightly tilted, an
unnoticeable shift that made the oxygen a little thinner and the star-studded at-
mosphere unbearable. God. This was what she had wanted since she was a little
girl, since she watched Charlie Chaplin waddle across the screen in the library
basement. Her childhood was a wish for glitz and glamour and living life in the
clouds. She wanted dark lipstick, elaborate gowns, and her name in cinemas.
And so she had packed her small red suitcase at age eighteen and hitchhiked
to Hollywood, spending years in desolation before the big break desperately
longed for. Starring Lila Evers. Red carpets and sleek cars and life in lights. She
had made it. All the lonely nights agonizing over the impossibility of dreams
had been washed away as she sat at premieres, imagining she was alone in the
library basement.

But the dream had changed. Somehow, without her ever realizing it, some-
thing had shifted in her, and the Hollywood sign seemed more like an omen
than a blessing. The ideal future no longer contained an endless collection of
films. When she closed her eyes, she was transported back to that night in
Cardenia, staring into ocean eyes. The salt air on her cheek and his hand against
her neck were animated memories.

And then it was as if her mind turned to magic, projected desires trans-
forming into reality. When she opened her eyes, she was there. Standing in the
garden, a flesh and blood memory. For a second, her heart stopped completely;
there was no air, no universe except for his desperately blue eyes. His crooked
smile was slightly tilted, everything about him slightly different from what she
remembered. But she had no doubt that it was Frank, that he had found her,
that he had come for her.

This was fate. Something about this was reminiscent of a miracle, but Lila
could only explain it as a dream when she sank into his arms.

“Did you miss me?” she breathed, scanning the lines of his face. There was
a serious color to his eyes that hadn’t been there before.

“Is the ocean endless?” His hands pulled her flush against him, lips meeting
with the thousands of words lost in the space of two years. This was the Hol-
lywood ending: the screen fading to black and the credits rolling over a future
in a seaside town. A future they could share.

1995. After gaining her degree in linguistics from U.C. Berkeley, Ava emptied
her bank account and placed a down payment on the cottage down the street
from her grandmother. Twenty-five years of life, and Cardenia was the only thing that remained constant, the place where she returned ceaselessly with the waves. Jude requested leave to help unpack their boxes, pulling her close for a dance in the bare living room as the sun set below the windows.

Summers came, and he left with the changing of the seasons, but he always came home for the important things. When her engagement ring fell down the drain, he spent a day beneath the sink. Her grandparents’ fiftieth wedding anniversary, her uncle’s losing battle with lung cancer, her first miscarriage.

Still, there were so many things that he missed, moments that Ava could never get back. Things that Ava had given up: a shot at achieving her dreams. She had sacrificed a chance at traveling the world as a translator because she needed a steady income to pay the bills. She sat by herself at the pristine tablecloths as her friends got married, watched their happiness as they shared homes where both partners returned every night. When she got a promotion at work or when her cousin had a baby girl, he wasn’t there. He was never there—not really. He was across an ocean, on the other side of the world. Every night, Ava kicked off her shoes and turned the lights on as if she expected to see anything besides the dingy cottage, but she was always alone, staring at the ring on her finger as if promises meant something. As if love could be true when one half was always absent.

Ava became quite good at distracting herself and found small ways to settle down, to build a home. She turned into a seasoned waitress at Chez La Mer, a lofty French restaurant run by Americans who had an exquisite taste in red wine. Every afternoon, Ava untied her apron and ascended the staircase to the rooftop garden, tracing fingers along metal vines and splitting the spine of a battered leather journal. From the deck, the faint crash of waves could be heard against the sand, the Pacific Ocean matching the tides of merlot that streamed down her throat. The book fell open to reveal dozens of photographs and hastily scrawled letters with edges curling towards the sunlight. Ava smoothed her hand over a page, the ink rising to meet skin and dipping where the pen had pressed down too hard. Fingers hesitated over the corner of a photograph, watery smile caught on frozen figures.

A younger version of Ava gazed at the camera, lips tilted upwards and hair permanently messy. Beneath a golden graduation gown was a two-piece black dress, embroidered with fragile pink roses. Ava’s grandmother had made it for her mother, back when the two of them spoke outside of the holidays. A taller boy had his arms wrapped around Ava, the adoration in his eyes the only thing that remained unchanged by the cruel hands of time.

The image of him made Ava’s stomach flip. There was so much possibility in the photograph: two people full of dreams and desires, not knowing what disappointment the future held in store for them. She longed to tell the girl in the photograph what she would be giving up.

Two more days until he was here. Only two more days until he came home.

The two days passed by slowly, every second ticking against Ava’s nerves until her shift ended. The walk home was torn between excitement and apprehension; she was never quite sure what she would be returning to. Part of her had become so accustomed to living alone that her ring felt like the faux jewelry her grandmother let her play with. Ava had spent so much time dreaming about
what this moment would be like—running into his arms, looking just as he had when they met, still the same boy she fell in love with—that she was afraid reality could not live up to her expectations. The sun beat mercilessly on the back of her neck. She desperately wished this wasn’t another dream that could not be made true.

The front door gave way beneath Ava’s touch, falling in to reveal mismatched couches and countertops piled high with outdated *Vogue* issues. Her heart skipped a beat when her eyes caught him: Jude, hair cropped close to his skull, still in his fatigues. All her fear melted with the tiniest of smiles, and she collided with him.

“Ava,” he breathed, arms stiff as rocks around her. Her mouth found his in the half-light, lips parting like the seas as he pulled her closer, *closer*, until they were reunited into one. When she pulled back, his eyes were far away; the kindness in his smile had faded until his whole face was replaced with stone. It made Ava’s heart drop, turning cold. One word, and Ava already knew this was not the man she had fallen in love with.

“I’m so glad you’re home,” Ava sighed, an attempt to throw him a lifeline that he would not grab hold of. He just flashed her a smile that meant nothing and turned the television on, sinking into an artificial world. Away from reality, away from her.

Even though she could look at him and touch him and he was right there, it felt like Jude was still overseas. There was a part of him left behind in the war, something crucial that would not return home to her. He wandered the hallways like a ghost, going through the motions as if it equated living: wandering into the kitchen for a snack, sitting in front of the T.V. until the popcorn bowl overturned when he fell asleep. Ava awoke every night to the screams that penetrated every inch of the house. She would find him on the couch, thrashing violently and punching at the air; one time, he had accidentally punched her in the face, fending off some villain that didn’t exist anymore. There was nothing in his eyes when he saw the purple blossom across Ava’s jaw. His eyes were as unforgiving as the ocean.

Ava refused to believe that it had all been for nothing, that sacrificing what she had and loving him as she did could mean nothing. She refused to believe that a war could steal their love. Just like she had pretended it had worked overseas, she was going to make it work when they lived in the house she had dreamed of. This was the one thing she was unwilling to give up.

She slipped on the dress she had worn at their engagement party, trying to let herself think that this was just a normal night. That Jude had never gone to war and this was one version of herself that had never known the heartbreak of distance. She tried her best to keep a smile in place even when Jude bemoaned the activity, reluctantly sliding into slacks. When she pressed her lips to his, she pretended like her love could kiss away the haunted look in his eyes.

That night, she swept him down memory lane, walking the boardwalk against the flow of traffic. Hands linked as wooden planks creaked beneath shoes, the thin strip of beach separating them from plunging into the indigo waters. Streetlights flickered on as the sun crept towards the horizon, painting the sky hues of violet and pink. Golden shadows made Jude less severe, returning him to the boy Ava met in high school. Removing all traces of war from his
Darting through the crowds, Ava dragged him into the old amusement park where her grandfather had taken her on the ferris wheel and where Jude had kissed her after she signed the lease, leaning against the side of the cotton candy truck. The pair stopped at the carousel, wrapped in each other and giggling in line with dozens of children. She wasn’t sure if it was pretend or reality--Jude trying to act like who he once was--but Ava just kissed him like she could cement love.

Jude placed his hands on her waist and lifted her onto a chestnut pony, reins matching the silk of her dress. He stayed beside her as the ride started to move, classical symphonies raining down from aluminum speakers. Ava’s skin was electric where his hands lingered, his lips a dream that she could always live. Looking into endless brown eyes, she could see the future lain out: the two of them, the be all, end all until time came to a close. From the vantage point on the carousel, it was always going to be this. *Always.*

1945. Lila and Frank married in June, the promise of summer pooling through the sand at their feet. Her father didn’t come to the wedding, but Lila stared into her bouquet of lilies until she could pretend that the ocean replaced his voice. In the end, the only things that mattered were Frank’s hands in hers as he slipped the golden band onto her finger.

The years passed by, and Lila never went back to Hollywood. Frank offered to drive her once, see the glorious sign and relive her life spent in gin joints and studio lots. As far as Lila was concerned, she never wanted to leave Cardenia; she found her home between the setting sun and the waves in Frank’s eyes. The two of them bought a run-down shack three blocks from the beach, building and rebuilding their life until it was firmly theirs: no films, no wars. Just one of the thousand tracks her life could have followed, a path developed in a dark room.

They started a family, first a girl with familiar blue eyes, then three boys. Lila learned how to sew dresses from curtains, how to bandage scraped knees and make kites out of newspaper. She watched them grow up and have families of their own--grandchildren that appeared like the perfect union of Frank and herself. Her daughter married a man from the Navy, travelling around the world with their young daughter.

When summers rolled around, her granddaughter would get a break from the road and live with her and Frank as long as the weather stayed warm. On Sunday afternoons, Lila took her to the library basement and introduced her to Ingrid Bergman and Jimmy Stewart and the faces she used to know.

Ava had the same blue eyes that Lila loved so dearly; she even ate her peanut butter sandwiches with the crust cut off, just like Frank. When Frank passed away, Lila held on to those eyes the color of her favorite dress. Even with him gone, summers were still Lila’s favorite time of year.

2000. Two weeks after the carousel had closed for the season, Ava received a letter in the mail. It wasn’t written in Jude’s neat script, but it was addressed from the same base. His metal dog tags were folded up in the paper. They slipped between Ava’s fingers like blood. When she went for a twilight walk, the board-
The Mercury

walk lights failed to turn on. She screamed his name until the roar of the waves swallowed her voice.

2013. Sound returned to Ava slowly, interrupting the memory of a smile. The air was filled with the remembrance of bells and laughter, the cries of children out past their bedtime and the footsteps of teenagers beginning the night. It was all an imagining from another place, another time. Jude’s face faded from her mind, replaced by that of her grandmother. She remembered someone telling her once that she looked just like her grandmother when she was in the movies.

A hand on her shoulder drew Ava from her reverie, jumping at the contact, tears tracking her face. Her husband offered her a smile, one hand held out to her and the other propping up their sleeping daughter. She had his blond curls and Ava’s ocean eyes. “Ready to go home?”

Ava pressed her lips in a thin line, allowing one last look at the carousel. It had stopped moving, past and reality merging into a bittersweet remembrance. Ava looked down at her black dress, adorned with rusting dog tags and now, her grandmother’s engagement ring. The carousel never changed, never aged. It remained stationary while the world grew around it, unaffected by time and removed from the humans that gazed on it. The wooden animals silently looked upon shifting faces, watched children turn to parents and grandparents, missed those that left the amusement behind. The carousel knew Ava, and it knew her grandmother, and it knew everyone. Gazing into its unblinking eyes, Ava could see the translucent figures of years gone by: a younger version of her and Jude, first love that never dies; the night her grandparents met, a moment where the future was designed. A moment where dreams had come true.

“Let’s go home.” She took her husband’s hand and smiled. The carousel would always move again next summer.
i. concerto

The first time he smiled at me, I thought he looked nice. It was the dawning of summer—sophomore year, untamed hair and train track teeth, and the beginning of being defined. The air in the music hallway was sticky with humidity and strained notes. My hair streamed down my back, a layer of sweat between the strands and my skin, and my new sneakers made no sound on the tile floor. The room stopped talking, stopped moving, stopped everything when I opened the door—all eyes turning to me, the only girl in the entire brass section. Time seemed to stay still as I hovered uncertainly between my past and future, but then I was surrounded by boys tripping over each other to introduce themselves and stand next to me. From the first moment they laid eyes on me, I was already at a disadvantage. Already being separate, other because of my gender.

The band director made a big show of my arrival, clapping my shoulder and telling the group all about me—“she’s crossing over from choir, been playing trumpet since the fourth grade, involved with theater, a real musical talent”—already bragging about me like a foster father, already weaving the strands of my legacy. A musical prodigy at age fifteen. I watched the eyes of the semi-circle alight, the words sparking something different in each boy who eagerly trailed their gaze over the hint of swaying hips—a dozen degrees of want, of making me into something more than I was.

He was the only one that looked at me with any sense of normalcy. His smile held nothing more than friendliness, no trace of desire or flame flickering behind irises. Maybe that was why I was drawn to him. I wondered what it would take for him to look at me like all the others, if desire could darken his almond eyes. But he just gave me music to learn for the next week’s rehearsal, and I waited for the day when his smile would share a secret. Two months later, when his hand brushed mine for the first time, we both knew that he was more than just my section leader and there was more between us than three years.

We began to mirror each other, our lives running on perpendicular tracks that met every time we could communicate without ever saying a word. He was a symphony of sound, never able to keep quiet; it came in tapping his foot against the band room floor, pressing trumpet valves, cracking the bones at his neck back hands. I turned the habit into a release: intertwining my fingers like I imagined his hand sliding in mine, and twisting until the crack satisfied my pining.

There were so many reasons why we couldn’t be together—he was graduating in nine months, he had just gotten out of a serious relationship, the age gap could not be bridged, and no one could know about it. The smiles he tossed to me from across the room were only small tokens, sentiments that kept me believing one day could be exchanged in public. I got so accustomed to it that I never noticed his flash of teeth were like thorns and the notes he created made me bleed without realizing. To this day, I still place my fingers together and pull. Wait for the crack. It’s unconscious, something I don’t even realize until the sound drifts to my ears. It

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**Symphony**

**i. concerto**

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makes me feel like he's still waiting for me to return his smile.

ii. legato

The earliest parties I can remember all occurred at Dave's house. He was an old college friend of my dad, someone who shared his passion for fishing trips and the sweet intoxicating scent of wine right after the cork popped. My friends and I were too small to reach the hors d'oeuvres on the table, but we slid perfectly beneath the legs of strangers draped in dark lipstick and polished shoes. My mom always slipped us a few deviled eggs before ushering us upstairs, through the wooden suffocating steps that led to the attic. We settled onto the moss green couch and she popped in a movie to keep us occupied when she returned to the glamorous haze of tinkling glasses and laughter. My attention was only half-focused on the television, always partially drawn to the window that led to the street three stories below, the streetlight pooling over undeniable concrete. Sometimes, I would get so daring as to rest my knees on the windowsill and press my fingertips against the cold glass. I looked down and imagined what it would be like to jump. I only wondered what the fall would be like—I never thought about what the end would be. The pain of collision and the deadly impact upon arrival.

Falling in love with him made me realize how fatal the crash could be.

It seemed so harmless from the outside: flirting through text messages, his fingers dripping down my back, driving home with show tunes filtering from the radio. A young girl in Disneyworld pulled on her mom's dress and pointed to us: "they look like a prince and a princess." The royalty of the music department—him wearing a brass crown, perfectly refined in the art of winding hearts around his finger; me draped in the pain of three years to come, the musical martyr, a songbird that loses its voice.

(When I'm with you,
it's poison deadly fatal,
but I would jump off a bridge
if you told me it would save you.)

When I was younger, I was under the impression that jumping from a window would never actually hurt me. It was all about the rush of falling and flying, feeling the wind surround me. Landing was an afterthought, something that didn't pose a real threat. I thought that I was invincible when I was growing up. I never knew that one smile could cause me to tumble headfirst, three stories down to the sidewalk below.

iii. accelerando

If you look in the dictionary, there are eight definitions of perfect. Flawless, without fault. Complete. Contented, satisfied. In music, a perfect interval occurs when the chord sounds right even if notes are inverted. Even if it looks to be contrasting from up close, it sings in unison.

It started out with texting. When I was around him in person, I stuttered over my words and my nerves fluttered against my heart like a thousand monarchs, their paper-thin wings brushing the empty space inside of me. I felt more in control when he couldn't see me blushing behind my flip phone, savoring every vibration that signaled a new message. Maybe I fell more in love with the
symphonies his words created in me than with him.

My dad and I had been in the car for over thirteen hours, the endless road wearing thin tires and patience. He pulled off at the first open rest stop in Vermont, leaving me curled in the passenger seat as he filled his coffee cup and the gas tank. The moon was high in the ink sky, the night alive with the distant shrieks of birds and cars on a forgotten highway. The light of the convenience store illuminated discarded cigarettes and rainbow oil spills. I felt like the only person left in this wooded corner of the world, not a drop of exhaustion within me. There was only the plexiglass window separating me from the real world and only a phone separating me from him.

My phone left me glowing, an artificial battery energizing me; I ran my fingers across the plastic words like I imagined his lips against mine. All day, we had been discussing our futures—much more immediate for him; he kept reminding me that he graduated in eight months, and I kept denying the thought. I told him the dreams I had engraved on my heart since age seven, ripping open my skin for him to see me raw, rare. I wanted to be a writer; I wanted to use my pen as a sword and save the world. But I wasn't good enough, all the odds were against me, I wasn't perfect. Nerves twisted around my throat, anxiously awaiting his reply. I was expecting electronic laughter, his scientific brain dismissing my color-by-numbers anatomy. One incoming text: “You’re plenty perfect.” I wondered what it would be like to hear him say such lovely things in person, instead of hiding behind technology. Instead of stringing me along in sentences and trapping me between syllables. Those three words were the closest I ever got to a confession—the space between Vermont and Delaware and three years and everything left unsaid plagued me.

When he texted me, it was always easy to forget the line between fantasy and reality—final, the sharp slice of a knife when I paired his warm words with the cold freezing the lines of his face. I caught him shooting glimpses at me in the band room, neutral until our eyes met and his mouth turned down. “You’re plenty perfect” twirled on repeat through my mind, but I could see his disappointment. Every time I missed a note, every time I played a rhythm wrong or missed my cue. It was the slight shake of his head, the frustrated sigh meant for my ears only. Doing my best was not doing enough for him. He wanted more and more, and I wasn’t enough. Wasn’t perfect. Wasn’t even close.

Soon, it wasn’t just his voice or his words that could unravel me—it was his silence, the absence of sound as my fingers slipped off the trumpet valves and my lungs constricted. One frown from him and my hands started to shake and the music blurred around me. The chair flipped over when I ran from the room, not able to get enough air with everyone’s eyes on the back of my neck: the clarinets with their reeds still between lips; the band director, his baton hovering in the air with uncertainty; him, rolling his eyes and shaking his head. I rushed to the bathroom, on the verge of tears when my palms pressed against a locked door. Some girl with a red smile and sympathetic eyes turned the key in the lock and I tumbled onto the tile floor. My fingers clutched the porcelain sink, knuckles turning white as I gripped it like a lifeline, something to keep me from drowning in my own tears.

All I see is the disappointment every time he looks at me. Eyes burning a hole in me. Burning my lungs as they heave for oxygen that doesn’t exist. Self-
inflicted asphyxiation. I gasp for a breath, but my body has forgotten how to keep me alive. Salt streaks my face, body collapsing and curling to hold my ribs from breaking outward. I know that he doesn’t think I’m perfect anymore. He probably never did.

I’m trapped inside my own head. Screaming, banging on the door of my mind, but it’s locked, and there’s no help. How do I get out of here? How do I disappear? How do I become perfect?

A knock sounded on the door, not waiting for my reply before entering. The girl from before kneeled beside me, gently removing my hands from the sink and holding them like birds ready to take flight. Her blue eyes looked like mine, back when they were kind. Her smile revealed white porcelain teeth, and I wanted to hold on to this one small act of humanity. She coaxed me into a sitting position, speaking softly and rubbing circles on the backs of my hands—calming, taming the hurricane of insecurities.

“You can do it,” she said, encouraging words from the bathroom floor. “You are strong and you can make it through this. You are more than enough. Just breathe with me. In, out.”

A wave of peace washed over me, my grin matching hers when we parted ways. Back to the band room, where glances silently questioned me and I ignored them. I couldn’t get this one lick right in Vesuvius, and my chest tightened with his dissatisfied sigh—but I kept on playing, even if my hands trembled. I kept playing despite every second of disappointment, every thing he wanted to fix in me. I kept playing and singing and dancing—I kept up the act, played the role of being perfect because to admit his words triggered a panic in me would be to admit weakness.

I was never perfect enough for him. He proved that when he slept with my friend and grinned like the devil.

iv. staccato

I held my cup high above my head, raised above the makeshift dance floor in a stranger’s living room. Of all the faces my gaze snagged on, I only recognized two people—neither of them him, neither of them me. I couldn’t even feel my body anymore. The only thing that felt real was the deafening pound
of the electronic bass, unwillingly dragging me back to nights in his car. The rain pouring on the roof as he told me about what he feared. I could still taste the memory of words that hovered on my tongue, left unsaid: *What I fear most is losing you.*

Instead of him disappearing, the person that got lost was me. I locked myself in the bathroom—three a.m., tile floor decorated with discarded solo cups. The reflection in the mirror was unrecognizable, the product of too much alcohol and not enough sanity. My breath was tainted with brandy, and he was the reason for the drink in my hand. My friend was singing from the other side of the door, begging for me to rejoin the crowd of people I had met two hours before.

These were not like the parties I had gone to as a kid. There were no movies and pretty people in pretty dresses. This was not a game of play pretend, but something with real consequences. I went for a drive to my friend’s house, and she slid behind the wheel, three drinks too many to see clearly. My heart shriveled up in my chest as I stepped out of the car and landed at another party. It was a vicious cycle, a series of weekend attempts to drop myself into the glass bottle and hope that I could drown the part of me that cared for him. Even drunk as hell, I couldn’t erase the image of his eyes lowering when he realized how far I’d fallen.

I looked at the other me in the mirror—the girl with the same eyes as me, but with none of their kindness. Just two storm clouds in place of irises. I hated seeing what I had done, what some boy had reduced me to. My reflection begged me not to throw everything away just because one boy had smiled at me, and I had fallen for it.

I needed to feel like I was in control—of my love, of my melody, of my life. I refused to let him conduct what happened to me. The last thing I wanted was to let someone mold me into the perfect puppet—twist my arm this way and I dance, move my leg and I march in formation. Once my heart stopped bleeding, I bandaged my brokenness in the beat of the drums.

v. rubato

My whole life revolved around music. The calendar was booked, every paper square overflowing with a stressful schedule and color-coated reminders. Marching band, symphonic band, brass ensemble, jazz band, women’s choir, advanced choir, musical theatre, theory and composition, a cappella rehearsal. I spent more hours cleaning shoe scuffs off tiled floors with tennis balls than I did sinking into the tan couch my parents bought for their first house. People joked that I lived at school—it would have been easier to shower in the locker room and sleep in the nurse’s office than go home to a bed haunted by thoughts of his smile finally meaning something. I tried to detach myself in the days of the week, but I kept being tugged back to that balmy April night. The crisp breeze after the Disneyland humidity, alone with him on Main Street. Just another ordinary town in America. His fingers gripped mine as fireworks exploded over the castle, and my heart turned into a metronome. Beat, beat, beating out of control.

I never could get the tempo right.

When he graduated, I plugged the hole in me with the sweet symphony of
three years. Music streamed from my fingertips and penetrated every moment spent between the band room and the choir room and the peeling, painted stage. Dedication shown in the bags beneath my eyes, determination proved through constant repetition--run the scene one more time, aim for the high B, and stay even after everyone else has gone home. Stay until it’s perfect, just to prove him wrong. Stay because quitting is the same as admitting defeat. I was born a lion, steel jaw and golden ambition. I was the ruler of my life.

Everything that I had ever learned in my life was contained within five bar lines. I made a home in the smiles of friendly faces--there were so many that they outnumbered his a thousand times over. The eyes faded from the back of my neck, my hands stopped turning into earthquakes. When I stood on stage with the lights in my eyes, the ground finally felt steady beneath my feet.

vi. adagio

The rain slid from the sky in silver sheets. Classical music tinkled from the overhead speakers of the Longwood Gardens lobby, a soothing background to accompany the boy sitting next to me. Cole’s hand linked in mine, an unconscious action as we spread out thin mints on our wooden bench. The whole world was displayed in the glass wall: the emerald branches bowing to the ground, laden with water; pink petals blooming across my cheeks as Cole tucked a strand of hair behind my ear; the reflection of the two of us together, in perfect harmony.

The boy that came before him doesn’t matter anymore; he stands on a distant shore, abandoned on past islands. A silhouette that reappears in the moments of paralyzing panic that disappear when I fold myself into Cole’s anchoring arms.

Cole hummed Broadway snippets into the air around us; the sound reverberated off the glass and surrounded us in our gravity of inhales and exhales. I was worried that the storm had ruined the planned day of wandering the gardens before the evening musical, but he told me he was just as content to sit beside me--nothing mattered except that we were together. Singing in unison.

Cole’s eyes always reminded me of a spring day soaked in sunshine. Sometimes green, leaves budding from trees and grass sprouting from cold ground. Sometimes gold, the glow of a buttercup held beneath a chin. Meeting Cole was when my life started to warm up. When the music started hurting less and grew into ink flowing from lyrical poets. I was awake, I was alive. I planted my roots in the music department and stretched myself towards the sky.

When Cole and I matched our voices together, sometimes the notes would clash and the duet would fall flat. It wasn’t perfect. But the song belonged to us, and I sang it with perfect clarity.

vii. soli

The notes flowed from me, pencil to paper--methodical, melodic. They were fast, scribbled marks on lines, each one following the structure born from the curve of my hand. Something that I could control, something that I could create. My own personal song. Full of faults and flaws, inverted chords that made the melody darker, more beautiful. A storm cloud right before it rains, when it turns the sky forty shades of violet.
Music was something I could have for myself--no one else could have this. The rhythms my heart sounded when it beat against my breast, the octaves crafted from flexible emotions, vibrato in my voice when a film brought tears to my eyes, the fermata of my back standing straight, the glissando hiding in my mouth as I smiled into the spotlight. I was composed of the fragmented pieces of a musician that was only ever playing one note. It took me a long time to realize that I was the whole symphony.
Edited for Younger Viewers

They say
I am too gay young to understand

They say
I am ignorant and arrogant
to think I could understand

So, I will write of how you’re a brute,
and how your affection is odd
and protective with me

how your anger is like wrathful God
but never of how gentle you are

I won’t write about your smile
or rather your “devilish grin”
or will I write about your charisma

for it will only lead me to sin

I’m sorry I can’t serenade you,
but dirges are all they’ll allow.
I just wanna write you psalm,

to read when we take the vow

but they won’t let me rhyme.

I want Thomas or Peter
I’ll write you as Judas, not Peter.
They’d prefer Mary, Adele
As Lucifer, not Uriel.
They tell me I can’t write of Heaven
so, I guess I’ll just write of Hell.
Katherine’s hair streams behind her like a flag. She’s driving, because of course she is. Meg has this theory that, in driving, Katherine frees her alter-ego; loud, fast, and confident. Meg’s Beetle is breezing up the coast at what feels like double the speed limit, black road melting away into blue ocean in the rear-view window. Katherine weaves in and out of the lanes, shrieking at the top of her lungs every time someone encroaches on whatever microscopic opening she has spotted. Meg doesn’t even flinch at the noise, just stares out the open window, her eyes fixed on the sea, somehow crashing even more recklessly than Katherine’s driving.

Meg grew up in the ocean. On Sundays, the one day her father escaped the limp sunlight of his Los Angeles office building, he would swing her onto his shoulders and set off on an exquisite journey across the street. Meg used to tell herself a story as they bounced along the street: she was a young mermaid, plucked from the ocean by her father. Her human mother didn’t want a girl who didn’t understand life on land. So Meg took whatever chance she had to slip underneath the waves and forget her, while her mother sunk herself into a different kind of liquid. She would toddle away from her father and go under, under, under until she and her mother, the girl of sea and the girl of land, were connected in their drowning.

Meg still imagines this world, even at eighteen, even being almost positive that she wasn’t actually born part fish. She knows Katherine is from the ocean too, knew it as soon as they met. They were seven, and Meg’s neighbor, Jack, had cornered Katherine on the beach. The two were hunched over something, and Meg could see Katherine’s shoulders heaving.

As she approached, she noticed something small writhing on the sand between their feet. A fish, glinting like a chip of glass, slowly breathing poison. Katherine’s hands were wet, dribbling water and tears onto the fish, while Jack whacked at it with a piece of driftwood. The sight of it made Meg’s chest ache, but not as much as the sight of Jack did. Meg remembers stomping over to him and whacking him in the shin, explaining to him as he doubled over that maybe the fish was hurting too. She gripped it by one fin, ignoring the feeling of soggy tissue paper as she motioned to Katherine to help her drag it back to the ocean. Of course, it didn’t swim away, just bobbed up and down in the surf, one still eye turned towards the blue. Katherine was sniffling a bit, so Meg whispered, “boys drool, right?” and decided she and Katherine were best friends in that exact moment because she had never seen someone nod so emphatically.

Eleven years later, they pull across the sand and gravel onto an overlook, about an hour after passing Meg’s future university, Pepperdine. Katherine’s summertime buoyancy deflates as she turns the engine off.

“Wanna get out here?” she asks, and even though “here” is a patch of cliff-side dirt next to a busy highway, Meg absolutely does.

The blankets in the back seat are grass-stained, wine-stained, gasoline-stained. They smell like summer nights on the beach with Katherine, squealing at boys, and afternoons driving up to Francheschi park, smoking like they knew
what they were doing, looking into the veins of their city. Meg spreads the blan-
ket on the hood and curls her toes into the grill, first hoisting herself up and
then yanking Katherine to lie next to her. They fall into silence, hands linked,
chests rising and falling as the waves crash.

And then Katherine breaks the reverie.

“I’m gay,” she says, with the tone of someone who is setting their entire
world on fire.

Meg’s heartbeat is all she knows. She hears it in her ears, drowning out the
ocean and the cars and the sound of Katherine’s waiting. She feels the groove
of Katherine’s knuckles bumping against hers and jerks back like she is the one
being burned.

Katherine stares at the place where they were connected, at a red wine stain
she had made.

Neither says anything for long moments.

Katherine’s eyes darken towards her lap.

Meg is breathing fast, faster, sucking in all the air in southern California.
Her mind is all jagged edges. She thinks for a split second of changing in front
of Katherine, lying on her floor in just a bra for hours. She thinks of sharing a
bed with her, thinks of Katherine’s face every time she’s looked at her. Too many
times to even count. Thinks of the last time she called someone a dyke. Thinks
of the way she laughed with the breathless thrill of the forbidden. Wonders if
Katherine was swept up in the rush or if she felt a small dark part of her heart
break. Thinks about her father, a few years back, cussing at a TV that showed a
pixelated frame of a skinny, mean-looking girl in front of a neon sign that read
“Stonewall.”

She thinks of July, two years ago. Meg’s dad was probably paralyzed on
some highway, constantly trying to come home but never quite making it. The
noise of her mother clinking bot-
tles in the sink was suffocating her thoughts.
So she had crept to Katherine’s house, breezing right in, opening the door to
her room. Katherine was laying on her fluffy pink bedspread, peering into the
glossy darkness of a magazine. Of Playboy. Meg had never acknowledged herself
before entering Katherine’s room, but the exhausted eyes of the woman on the
page screamed at her to get out. She tiptoed backwards, thanking God for the
shag carpeting that muffled both her footsteps and the way her heart was ham-
mering her ribs.

Meg said, “Kath, I’m coming in!” in a voice she hoped could cover up the
swell of embarrassment in her stomach. She heard the splash of paper-on-paper
just as she opened the door, met with Katherine’s flushed face and saucer eyes.
She never said a thing.

“Nothing has to change,” Katherine says, barely audible over the waves, like
she’s scared of letting her hope out.

“Everything changes,” Meg says, her voice coming from a mouth that’s
not hers, from a body she can’t control. She can’t remember ever being mad at
Katherine. Katherine is the one person she could never be mad at, except she
doesn’t know her now.

She slides off the hood of the car, yanking the blanket out from under
Katherine. Joni Mitchell is still drifting from the open window: “Dancing up
*the river in the dark, looking for a woman to court and spark.*” Katherine’s hands are smacking the radio off before Meg has a chance to feel the words burrow under her skin.

Meg gets into the car, driving this time. She grips the faded leather wheel as tightly as she can, imagines feeling the impressions Katherine’s fingers left there. The sharp press of her foot on the gas jolts both of them back into their seats, and Meg vaguely hears a horn scream at her as she cuts out of the overlook. Katherine freezes with one leg curled up to her chest, murmurs “shit,” more defeated than Meg has ever heard her sound.

Meg looks into the rearview just in time to see the blanket, the red wine, cigarette, grass-stained blanket, slip off the roof of the car and curl up in the breeze, out of sight as they go around a hairpin curve. Katherine stretches her body around and splays her fingers against the closed window as if she can snatch it from the wind, tuck their childhood safely back into the car.

But Meg keeps the car dancing up the road, into the dark.

Two hours later, the light at Sea Chest is unfailing. Stretched out, soft like tissue-paper, it makes its way into every splice in the clapboard walls of the old restaurant. Here, Katherine looks like she did when they were kids, tailing their dads up to meetings in San Francisco. She looks like she’s trying to fold up into herself, except this time Meg can’t see how to unfold her.

This is probably the longest Meg has gone without speaking in her life. Her hands twitch with the urge to grab Katherine, to shake her, to yell *why now* and *why us*. Instead, she asks her to pass the salt.

Except it comes out as “have you ever kissed a girl?” The words are hushed like the secret isn’t out yet.

Katherine says yes, her face as red as the checkered table cloth but her voice steady.

It isn’t even the thought of the kiss that makes Meg’s stomach flip; it’s the idea that Katherine has kissed someone, has felt sparks and butterflies and first-time tingles without immediately jumping into Meg’s bed and telling her all about it.

Meg feels the knot in her chest untie and she’s finally crying, two hours of unfamiliar silence later. Salt trails down her face and splashes on the vinyl tablecloth as the couple at the table next to them tries desperately not to look. Meg thinks that maybe she and Katherine look like a couple right now, crying over the slow rot of their relationship. And then Meg thinks that Katherine probably doesn’t find her attractive, snot-streaked and scene-making and wrapping her arms around her stomach to keep everything inside. The thought is just enough to make her snort a laugh and she repeats it to Katherine in little hiccuped words.

Katherine gives a real smile then, a five-year-olds-on-the-beach smile, a looking-at-each-other-in-the-mirror-before-the-homecoming-dance smile. She says, “You’re not my type anyway.”

Meg doesn’t think she can handle knowing what Katherine’s type is. The guys she’s been with are all surfers, built like tree trunks and about as soft. Would she want a real girl, or one of the girls Meg sometimes sees smoking
super-lights in front of the Ralph’s, with their hair buzzed so short she can see the sun bouncing off their pale heads?

So she asks, “Do you want people to know?"

The dollhouse of high school is over, thank God, and Meg has heard Brown has a lot of lesbians, but that doesn’t mean Katherine will be okay everywhere.

“Oh my God, no. Not here. Not my parents. Maybe at school, if there are other…” she breaks off, “…people like me, you know.”

And then Meg’s real fear sinks in like feet in sand; this is something they will never have in common, the biggest rift in their seas. She is no longer like Katherine. A life of sharing clothes, stories, grades, even a boyfriend once, for a few hours, and now this. Meg wishes more than anything that they could drive back down the coast, drive over Katherine’s words until they were ground to dust and Meg knew nothing.

But she does know, and she isn’t sure if she wants to know more. Katherine’s face is a blank map, and she has no idea where to turn.

“So, why did you tell me?” she asks, a sharp left.

“You’re my best friend,” Katherine says, “and you know, like, every single other thing about me. And it felt so, so wrong to keep this inside because every day all I wanted to do was tell you and have you see me.”

Meg sucks in a deep breath, brushing off a concerned-looking waiter.

“I do see you. I think I see you, you know. It’s just--” she drops her head again, can’t look at Katherine who, for some inexplicable reason, appears calmer than she has since they took off this morning.

“I thought I had been seeing you this whole time. We’ve been friends for, what, eleven years? And I thought I knew you.”

“Oh my god,” Katherine says, using the same voice she does when Meg yells too loudly in public or declares that she and Katherine need to drop their lives, move to Carmel, and adopt a couple hundred cats. “You’re, like, the dumbest person I’ve ever met.”

Meg wrenches back from the table, mouth open, ready to regale Katherine with all the ways she is not dumb, even if Katherine was the one who got into Brown.

“This isn’t as big as you’re making it, as usual. It’s just something. Like, if I dyed my hair blonde, we wouldn’t be crying in a restaurant.”

Meg interrupts, the words “this is the biggest thing in the world” pouring from her mouth.

“Meg. It’s just not. We’ve been through everything else, high school and your mom and my parents and soon we’ll survive being two thousand, five hundred and sixty-two miles away from each other.”

Meg’s heart clenches up but feels huge in her chest. Of course Katherine memorized the miles.

Meg meets her eyes, the mirror blue of her own.

“You know I love you, no matter what,” she says, the words feeling small in the face of this love, but they’re all she has.

“I know you do. Me, too,” Katherine smiles, the sun breaking through her face.

She asks, “Do you want to go to the butterflies?” and she sounds so young and so much the same that Meg can’t help but say yes.
At Pacific Grove, the Monarchs cover everything. Meg could start to see them flocking even as the girls wound up the coast, all of them born with the knowledge of exactly where to go.

She sighs, “They’re so pretty, aren’t they?” thinking that the word is inadequate. Katherine interrupts with “they’re beautiful, radiant, amazing, stunning, incandescent, anthropomorphic—” until she cuts herself off laughing and can’t hear Meg call her a show-off in the same voice she has been using for years.

She pulls into the parking lot and winds the windows up, watching Katherine bouncing up and down in her seat like a child.

Katherine calls, “I get to drive back!” and Meg is more than happy to let her, even if it means seven near-death experiences in an hour.

Katherine is still yelling at her for being slow, so Meg races ahead of her, stumbling into a confetti storm of butterflies. The air is thick with them, the sound of their wings beating like a heart, and the sun is so close that Meg feels like she could touch it. She reaches her hand up, imagines casting a shadow over the earth. She sees Katherine do the same and can’t tell exactly what she’s thinking. But somehow, she doesn’t mind. Meg watches the beauty and thinks of her mother and her father and Pepperdine and Katherine and the mermaids, shining in the sun and hiding in the sea.
Both There and Not

My hair is dyed pink; you just can’t see it. I dyed it before a trip in early December when I was feeling deprived and found my hand-me-down-camel-colored coat. My room radiates pink. You can see it from where I’m standing in the white bathroom we’re renting with hanging green ferns, black and gold accents. I am clean and warm and cold. I cannot spill my bottle of pink dye onto the white rented fake marble sink. After eighty unfruitful minutes I am still brunette, but I believe I can see pink in my hair and I swear to god you can see it and it’s not really there.

I want to feel like this radiating, pink aura moment, show everyone in the capital how I felt the day before. I am not counterfeit, even if my happiness is boxed and dyed and fleeting. I want to cut off my ends, all way up to the shoulder, and strut in my hand-me-down Calvin Klein. Upload it to show a new me.

Led by my tiny, pregnant Spanish-origin linguistics professor, my class rides a bus for hours. Instead of wearing my feminine coat and pink hair, I travel coatless in masculine sneakers and a purposely shapeless grey sweatshirt. My hair is braided behind me to show the fat in my face. We are here to see the Smithsonian museum of Native American History, but it takes us hours to get there. First thing, we use the bathroom in the lobby of the air and space museum, astounding feats of architecture, only briefly witnessing the aircrafts suspended from the ceiling in imagined midnight.

The girl who has been around the earth like her belted coat wraps around her waist complains in a small voice for Starbucks coffee. She looks clean in the way that only expensive clothes can do. A month and a half later during the inauguration, a trash can got thrown through the window of that coffee shop. For now, I suck up my disdain of visiting a chain cafe in such an endless city. I suck up velvet and gritty matcha tea.

We go sightseeing before anything else because most of these students have never witnessed the sites of a city that makes decisions for them. Once, now common knowledge, this city was a swamp with water so sour and toxic it killed three presidents. Now, it is filled with Pokemon GO creatures; flopping cheddar-colored fish with fat yellow mouths, starfishes with bronze limbs and rubies in their middles, short limbed teal turtles standing on their hind legs and fighting with their hands. I walk poetically on the long stretch of a greening reflecting pool, thousands of copper pennies at its bottom as I walk further ahead from the crooked conversation of students behind me.

At these memorials, guides excited by seeing a group of students exorcise the demons of their architectural knowledge and tell us all the little things we can’t see in these monuments. A man in an olive hat, standing at the end of the reflecting pool, points upward and explains that under the semi-translucent ceiling of Lincoln’s memorial are the names and shapes of the American states.

Little foxes start squirming in my pocket, their nine tales like the plume of a fan. I don’t want to listen to the guides because, though I know nothing, I am not a tourist. I am here to live and not to explore. A weak fox tries to run from
me; I follow her. I stray further and further from the tourists of my class. I chase foxes and hold them hostage.

At every corner, there are colorful carts of Obama merchandise and ice cream. Both the ice cream and the Obama merchandise cost five dollars. Both items are out of season in December. I tell myself to save my money for the museum. Besides, you can come back to get that Obama tote bag before inauguration.

The class, hours behind schedule, has perhaps accidentally found the World War II memorial. It is infested with those cheddar-colored, fat yellow mouthed fish. But I close the app in respect to this memorial in particular. I had never seen it before.

Coins litter the bottom of this giant fountain, hopeful offerings of goodwill below a sign that says PLEASE DO NOT THROW COINS IN THE FOUNTAIN. Spoken rule.

Please do not throw coins in the fountain. A spoken rule unfollowed.
Please do not throw coins to the beggars. Unspoken rule, followed.

This man looks clean in the way that comes from never sweating, perhaps from being outside all of that forty degree December. He is wearing a red cap (but not one of those goddamn red caps), a markless white long-sleeved shirt, and jeans that are not wrinkled or soft. I can’t tell his age, but I’m famously bad at telling age. He is a performer, and he enchants us in a way that he moves inside a circle of students that he wrangled himself. He opens up a glossy military folder that is worn but uncreased.

He was drafted and dutiful for Vietnam, where he returned from unharmed. But this isn’t about his time there. I think he’s living in a shelter. He speaks of how much he’s cleaned himself up, physically, since when he was homeless decades ago. Now he keeps himself nice and clean, he says. “I didn’t have a job for a while, but I have that all figured out now.” He says it like he has a disdain for the version of himself that didn’t--and, I assumed, couldn’t--work. Self-blame for a version of himself that wasn’t his fault. This rhetoric is masterful. It appeals regardless of personal beliefs. If you do not like those who plead for your money, you pay him for his storytelling.

His mother died two months ago, and he keeps a flyer from her memorial service in that well-kept and well-worn glossy folder. I would cry if his eyes hadn’t told me not to. The rest of the students treat this story as grand entertainment. I am well aware it might be, but this is not about making money. Begging is not a lucrative business.

I can’t vouch for his narrative, but I believe it. We walk away as a class and ride the bus in a circle until we gaze upon the cherry blossoms in winter. I know I am the only one who sees his pleading as more than entertainment.

He’s in pain. Perhaps he’s faking. Begging is not a lucrative business.

I wander around the city dreaming of wasting my money. The D.C. skyline is made of low buildings and looks marbled and sandy. Its sky is white and grey like only one drop of ink mixed into a large glass of milk.

Squander. My money would not be well spent on a memorial Obama bag. They’re all five dollars. I should save my money for the museum we came here
The Mercury

for, even if we theoretically will never reach it. I look at the prints of Obama in a blue suit walking down a hallway with Michelle in red, lilies against the walls. There’s one of the first family on the green lawn back when his daughters were girls instead of women.

I love him. A man who has killed thousands by remote drones is one of the best things that has ever happened to my life. He has deported high volumes of immigrants. Been incredibly progressive but more centered than I can always handle. And I love him for what he’s done for me, and therefore wonder if I cannot think clearly, or critically. I see him and see safety, a man who championed difference and diplomacy. Nobody else dared to give me marriage equality, educational investment, environmental regulation, or dreams of immigration reform. What does it say that this horrifically problematic figure gave me more than you people* ever have? I continue to love him.

*You people is a phrase I uttered for the first time when I was sixteen years old. It was a starkly quiet and suffocatingly black night; the moonlessness ate the Leland Cypresses beside my dark blue tent. My best friend and I were camping in my backyard, and as she was a Republican, and I did not understand her beliefs with any of my viscera, we were arguing again. She and I were talking about welfare, and she talks about the “stereotypical” girl who spends all her money on acrylic nails and uses food stamps. And I start off my rebuttal with “you people” and she responds “you people?” and opens her mouth while widening her eyes as if to show me my rhetoric meant she had officially won the argument. And I did not misspeak. When I say “you people,” it means that you have fit the image of the oppressor history has taught me about you and I never wanted to believe. When you say “you people,” it means that you believe the stereotypes you, the oppressor, created about me. I want to explain that when you are not white, when you are not heterosexual, when you are not Christian, American politics is no theoretical. “You people” are white, speak in theoreticals, and never challenge your own views.

But I didn’t know how to articulate that.

The distance between “but” and “and” is a false dichotomy. I threw this away sometime not too long ago, and I don’t know why. If I say “but I don’t know why,” all I’ve done is split time into a before and after. There is no defining moment in time. And I don’t throw it away when writing. A philosophy and opposed practice can coexist.

I told my best friend never to use “but” when she asked for my advice in breaking up with a guy. She tells me it works really well, minimizes hurt. When you remove “but” from your vocabulary, you spare your words from undertones of justification, of blame, of excuses. “We were on a progressive track politically, but then the election happened.”

“We were on a progressive track politically, and then the election happened.”

I can split time into before and after with the flick of a tongue. And when I do, I see clear beginnings and not what caused them. I dismiss cause and effect. Using “but” treats the first half of your sentence like an anomaly, a now defunct way of thinking. “But” throws its weight around like a bully. There are
no sudden shifts; these effects have always been building, growing, and “but” admits you didn’t see them.

Take “but” out of your vocabulary. It’s the only way to view time non-linearly.

Our bus leaves in two and half hours, and we are somewhere around the Lincoln memorial taking pictures as a group. We are forty minutes from the museum on foot, and fifteen minutes by car, and I know this because I keep Googling it. It is a sunless December, and I know that even though the she’s invisible, she is ready to set. Since we left before the school cafeteria opened and we haven’t yet had lunch, most everyone is solely full of coffee. Maybe we only made it to the museum because we were hungry.

This city is vibrant yet clean, perhaps just because it’s marble white. The facade of the Native American museum, made of beige rocks and with water cascading down it like a waterfall, is one of the only things that stands out. We enter to find a small artisan marketplace full of people asking respectable sums for beautiful work, and I am poor so I make one circle and walk away. My troop of classmates gets tired and silent. Once at the cafeteria, I buy what I’m told is buffalo meat but tastes too familiar.

Though I only have an hour to admire the works in the museum, I notice how I’m always walking in spirals. One exhibit highlighting the basic traditions of nearly every Native American tribe in North America is composed of spirals. Black sky rests above the exhibit, little punched out stars shining light. Like somebody lifted a child to the ceiling and they dipped their hand into a bag of glow-in-the-dark stars and used every single one. I watch these people who have always lived in this country from behind a digital screen with wonder because I have never really seen them.

I didn’t anticipate that I’d feel like I was on fire when I saw the Mayan exhibit. By that time, I was completely alone with my professor and the PA. I knew very little about my father’s side of the family, but that my great-grandmother, who was born on either April 25th or 27th and not the 26th, is Native Mexican. I don’t remember that portion of the exhibit. I remember feeling viscerally, and my professor and I talked about the beauty touching everything in the Mayans, and then I couldn’t stop talking. I talked about how my great-grandmother had survived the Pancho Villa revolution by living in a cistern and eating armadillo. My professor nods her head up-down and acts as if I’ve blessed her with this story. Her blonde ponytail bobs and her blue painted eyelids flicker, but I do not remember what she says, just that she is talking. She is Spanish, my tiny pregnant Spanish professor. The adjectives that describe her are a lesson in English word order.

In November in her class, we were discussing the census and its odd categorizations. She is Hispanic, but not Hispanic non-white, and is generally confused by the affair and categorization. I bring up how I am Latinx, but not Hispanic, and not Hispanic non-white. I am also not able to fill out the singular bubble for white. Does the government know what these words mean? What do they want from me?

Was it their intention I go uncounted in some way regardless? Is this a test to see where my loyalties lie? Do you think that political loyalties rest along
race? I am alive but always absent from the record in some way because these bubbles weren’t built for anybody but the concentrated singular. Do you think me a diluted something-else?

Pink is diluted evil, a first step to the wickedness of red in western symbolism. Before the 20th century, it was the color of men and of strength. We remember Eve, and we remember the wickedness of red, and afterwards we dress our girls in pink. Our homosexuals in pink. We are almost at the gates of something wicked.

And this is why I love it. It is natural, but it is fleeting, the first and last seconds when the sun dives below the horizon. It is blossoms that will fall and someday shrivel, the insides of berries that will someday rot. Beauty destined for quick death. It is the color that I hated because I thought femininity was weak. Its pigments are more often made from diluted red than from concentrated pinks. It is a pigment scarce but thrust upon every baby girl. It is designated to the gendered descendants of a theoretical Eve. There is no wonder why I, a lover of Lilith, cling to it like no one else.

When we moved from the home I’d grown up in, I insisted I paint my new room pink. The shade is called Old Flame. It soaks up the light and radiates it, throwing it like a ball out of my room and reflecting it throughout the hallway. I wanted my head to be this color. Fleeting. Bouncy. Thirsting for light. Throwing good energy around like a ball.

Pink like the palm of hands squeezing who they love too tightly. Pink like a day spent steeping in sunlight for only a few minutes too long. Pink like the liquid perfume my abuelita sent me for a quinceanera I never had. Pink like how my room was painted when I first moved into my own room. Pink like the strip of color from the original pride flag that has since been removed. Pink like it is finite, because it is.

It does not work, but I smell it. I smell the unspecific fruit scented dye on everything. So I know I am pink, but I am obscured.

But before pink, I had painted my old room blood red.

How do I exit through the gift shop? This is the third one I’ve found. Where are the stairs? Where are the windows? Where’s, uh, anything I can afford? I buy my mother a postcard because I cannot afford the print. My brother, an unspecific pan flute. I buy a blue decal for my laptop but have no idea what nation it is representative of. Does giving Native American nations respectful representation really necessitate that I shell out more cash? Are most wealthy always be the most informed?

I run out of the museum fifteen minutes early because night is falling, and I am anxious to find my way home. As much as I love this city, it exhausts me, and I never realize until I’m at my wit’s end. It is safe in that December, but I will not visit any time soon without protesting. I nearly run down the staircase that circles only once down the entire first story. It makes you descend much slower than necessary.

I see my classmates and watch the sun set for three minutes until the city becomes unnaturally dark. Since I am still ten minutes early for the bus, I tell my friends to hold my things and that I’ll be right back. I run to the end of the
block, peer to its other end, look across the street. I panic. The Obama carts are gone.

My hair is pink, and you can’t see it. I follow the virtual, and it’s really not there. He needs my money, and he might be faking. He has given me the world, and he’s done awful things. I misspeak in rhetoric, and you have not automatically won. I am not one singular word, and I am not a diluted something-else. I love the color of diluted evil, and it is fleeting beauty. I am chasing after something, and it is gone.

I am both here and not.
I Write Instead

My Heart

I want to write a poem about me.

About my heart,
the last peach of summer,
bruised but sweet.

How it has not felt
an ocean type of love,
not a nonstop earthquake dreams love,
but something more like a soft drizzle
or a moth
beating at the panes of a window
not understanding that the light has gone out.

But there is no poem there.

The poem I write instead
is the sound of my mother’s wedding ring
jumping off the hardwood floors,
burrowing into a crack,
sliding into the dark.

The poem is her not bothering to pick it up.

The poem is my father,
the moth,
and my mother,
the window.

And me,
sixteen,
gripping each half of my heart in both hands,
starting to understand that this might be it.
A Dangerous Thing

The first time she shows up at his apartment in the middle of the night, he’s awoken from a deep sleep by the sound of fervent knocking at the door, but it’s not really a knocking, it’s a pounding, a rhythmic slamming of her fists against the wood that screams *let me in, let me in*.

He’s suddenly wide awake when he sees her leaning casually against his doorframe, as if she hadn’t just been in a frenzy a moment before, and her dark eyes are the color of melted gold under the fluorescent hall lights. She looks thinner, which is hard to believe, considering she was small enough the last time he saw her, her body swallowed whole by the scuffed leather jacket that used to belong to him. Now there’s blood on it, despite the fact that she doesn’t have a scratch on her.

“Jesus Christ.” There are so many things he wants to ask. *Where have you been? Why didn’t you call? How can you just show up here after how you broke my heart?* But in the moment his vocabulary escapes him.

“Nope, just me,” she says with a smirk, breezing past him to grant herself entry to his apartment. She had a key, once. “Can I use your washing machine?”

He starts to nod, but she’s already stripping herself of her clothes, and she drops her jacket and her heavy boots on the floor behind her like breadcrumbs as she makes her way to the washing machine. He turns his head as she slips off her bloodstained tank top, feeling intrusive, but out of the corner of his eye he catches a glimpse of her black bra and panties, of the yin yang tattoo on her skinny shoulder blade that she got illegally when she was sixteen, and of her father’s necklace that now dangles between her breasts.

He hasn’t seen her since the funeral, the rainy morning when she showed up to the cemetery with sunglasses over her eyes and breath smelling like something forbidden. He stood beside her as the priest said his words, one hand holding onto her sobbing, red-faced little brother, the other waiting for her, but she hadn’t looked at him once. Her eyes had remained firmly trained on the hole in the ground they were lowering her father into, a stony expression on her face just like the one she is wearing now, surely trying not to think about how her father’s casket had to be kept closed so the guests couldn’t see the hole that the shotgun blast left in his face.

He whispers her name just like he did after the funeral, but he hopes this time she won’t walk away from him and disappear for six weeks again. “Lou…”

“I hate that nickname,” she says as she firmly slams on the start button, and the washing machine roars to life. “Do you have any beer in your fridge?”

“Can you just shut up for a minute? Stop acting like everything’s okay! Everything’s not okay.” He thinks of her bloody clothes whirling around in his washing machine and of her father in the ground and the look on her face that day in the cemetery.

She raises one eyebrow at him and steps towards him so she can look him in the eye. “You think I don’t know that, stupid?” She leans up to kiss him without warning, and her hands curl into the fabric of his shirt. Her lips taste the same, like her signature crimson lipstick, and for a moment he forgets that
everything is wrong.

Afterwards, she rolls off of him with a sigh and collapses onto her stomach, the bones in her shoulder blades jutting out of her naked back like wings. He wonders if they have a 30-day treatment program for this because what he just did is definitely not an appropriate reaction to the girl you’re still in love with showing up at your apartment covered in someone else’s blood.

Beside him, he feels her body go suddenly still. “Are you still awake?”

“Yeah.”

“You know I don’t mean it when I call you stupid, right?”

“But I am, though.”

Through the darkness, he sees her shake her head. “Don’t say that. Don’t ever say that.”

* * *

Another six weeks later he’s had a particularly awful day, which means he drinks twice as much as he usually would, and he’s half expecting her to show up when he turns on the TV and sees the breaking news story. The news anchor stands on the corner of Mulberry and Spring, and in the background of the shot paramedics are carrying a body bag. He curses her name.

When he opens the door for her, her hair is several inches shorter, and she’s sporting a nasty gash across her cheek, water soaking through her T-shirt. “Christ, Louisa. Why were you out walking in this rain?”

“I wasn’t walking, I was running. Can I use your shower?”

When she comes back out, wrapped in a fluffy towel, he’s waiting for her on the couch with a pot of hot coffee and a pathetic dinner made out of the detritus left in his fridge. “Do you want me to look at your cheek?”

She waves off his concern and takes a sip of her coffee. She’s never liked people to know when she’s hurt. “How’s work?” It sounds too casual, too normal.

“Same as usual. I’m not up to much these days. Sometimes I go get drinks with Tom and the guys, but usually I just stay home…” He slept with someone else, once when he was drunk, someone who was the exact opposite of her in every way, and it still felt like cheating somehow, even though she told him she didn’t care if he saw someone else. In fact, she’d actively encouraged it, at the beginning.

She pauses between bites, as if she’s scared to say what she’s about to say. “Have you seen my mom around?”

He shrugs a single shoulder. “I call to check up on her. She gets out of bed most days. And she misses you. She wants you to come home.”

“I will, once this is done.”

His mind flashes to the scrolling headline he saw on the news. “That was you, wasn’t it? Esposito’s guy?”

She doesn’t meet his eyes as she sips her coffee. “What about Georgie?”

He thinks about her dimpled, dark-haired little brother, who looks just like how she used to. “He’s good. I went to visit him last week, took him out for ice cream. Your mother got him a therapist. He’s…adjusting, I think.”

“That’s good.” She wipes away the thin trail of blood that still lingers on her cheek. “Then he won’t end up like me.”

“You don’t have to do this, you know. Your father knew that this could hap-
pen. He knew that he was playing a dangerous game…”

When she turns to look at him, her eyes burn. “That’s exactly why he prepared me for this exact situation. I don’t enjoy this, you know, constantly looking over my shoulder, constantly running, feeling angry all the time. But this is the only way it can end, and I’m going back for Esposito whether you like it or not.”

He collapses back against the couch cushions because he knows he won’t be able to dissuade her. They used to fight all the time, about movies and music and where to go for dinner, stuff that seems like such trivial things to argue about now, and he knows when it’s best to just give up and let her have her way. He doesn’t want to provoke her tonight, because tonight should be good, because in the morning she’s just going to get up and walk out of his life again, and then he’ll be back to sitting around waiting for her to return.

Maybe he should start that 30-day program himself. How to get over your beautiful, stubborn, avenging angel of a kinda-sorta-maybe-girlfriend. But starting a program would mean that he wants to quit her, and he doesn’t. He knew what he was getting into when he fell in love with her, but he did it anyway. He’s always been a bit of a masochist. She stands up, and her red lips form a smile that doesn’t quite reach her eyes. “Come on, no more fighting. Let’s just go to bed.”

“Why?”

“Because the only time I’m not angry is when I’m with you.”

They lie together in the dark, his arms wrapped around her small torso, his calloused hands tracing the intricate pattern of half-healed scars that now adorn her stomach. He pauses for a moment on a fresh, red welt near her heart, and she whispers his name.

“When it’s all over,” she says, “We’ll go away--run off and become outlaws. How does that sound?”

“What about Georgie?”

She goes deathly quiet, and for a moment he thinks she’s fallen asleep. “I went to visit him at school the other day, you know? Just stood across the street, waiting for him to get out. I saw him walk out of the building, talking to this little girl with blonde pigtails…” He can barely make out the slight smile that adorns her tired features. “I wanted to go talk to him, but…he looked so happy. I didn’t want to ruin it.”

Instead, she came here. Because she already ruined me, he thinks. And we both know it.

They’re both in so deep that he doesn’t know how he’ll ever reach the surface again, and so he dives deeper and welcomes the water into his lungs.

* * *

The third time isn’t until much later, so much later that he was starting to think she wasn’t ever coming back. When he opens the door for her, it’s the middle of the day, and she actually looks happy. Her hair is tied back in a neat braid, her skin unmarred, her clothes pristine and unwrinkled. She’s holding a brown paper bag in one hand, and when he sees it dripping for a second he thinks it’s blood but then realizes it’s only grease. “It’s almost over.”

He wonders what story they will air on the evening news tonight, and if she will still be sitting beside him when they do. They sit on the floor of his apartment even though there are plenty of chairs they could use, their hands
slick with grease as they devour the takeout she brought from the hole-in-the-wall place down the street. She laughs about how he still buys the same brand of cheap beer, and for a moment he can pretend that everything is normal, that everything is the way it was supposed to be. They drink until they can barely see.

That night, they go to bed early, the rhythmic beat of their movements just more white noise added to the cacophony of the city, and he can see the outline of her ribs, threatening to pop out of her skin. He counts them in his head. He stares at her afterwards and she pries open one tired eye, looking at him. “What are you gawking at, stupid?”

And because he’s stupid, he reaches over for his nightstand, and her eyes go wide when she sees the little velvet box in his hand, the little velvet box he had wanted to present to her months ago before all this shit happened. “Louisa, I lo—”

She clamps a cold hand over his mouth. “Please stop talking. Please, just stop…”

His hands fall limp to his sides, and there’s a soft thud against the hardwood as the box falls. All he can hear is his own breathing.

When he looks at her, there’s remorse in her eyes, and it looks like she might cry. “I know you don’t understand, that you can’t understand, but…this is something I need to do. If you love me, then just trust me. And after this all over, after I’m done…then you can ask. And I’ll give my answer.”

He presses a feathery light kiss to the sensitive skin above her eyebrow, and because he’s stupid and in love he says ‘okay’.

* * *

The last time, he wipes the sleep from his eyes at three a.m. as he answers the door in a daze. She looks as exhausted as he feels, like she might collapse at any moment, and she practically falls into his awaiting arms. “It’s done,” she whispers into his collarbone. “It’s finally done…” He reaches out to steady her, and his hand brushes across her abdomen, which is burning hot. He pulls his hand away and finds it sticky and slick, dripping, dripping, dripping.

“No.”

Before he can move her knees buckle, and his arms reach out to grab her before she can hit the floor. Frantically, he presses down on her wound with one hand while reaching for his phone with the other. “Louisa? Louisa, please…”

“It’s done,” she says again, her voice sounding soft and far away, repeating the phrase like it’s all she knows. “Esposito…he’s gone. They’re all gone. It’s done.”

“It’s not done,” he finds himself saying. “You and me. Just because you’ve done everything you promised…that doesn’t mean it’s over, okay?”

She smiles faintly, no color on her lips, and shakes her head. “You’re so stupid.”

He doesn’t remember exactly what he says to the 911 operator, all his words lost to the hazy fog of memory. All he remembers is the operator’s soothing voice and the pounding of his own heart in his ears. As soon as he hangs up the phone slips from his grasp.

“I should’ve let you ask,” she says as both his arms wrap around her. “I’m sorry. I thought…I thought I had to do this first, so I could move on. So I could finally be worthy of you.”
“Don’t say that,” he whispers fiercely. “Oh Lou, don’t ever say that…”
For once, she doesn’t remind him how much she hates that nickname, just
smiles, only smiles. “I never deserved you. You were so good, and kind, and
selfless, and I…” Her breath comes out in ragged whispers. “I was so selfish, I
kept coming back, kept hurting you. Can you forgive me?”
He shakes his head. “There’s nothing to forgive.” He was the selfish one, he
thinks. She told him what she did, what she was, she warned him--but he didn’t
listen. He never listened. “I love you.”
Her eyes are focused on something far away, something he cannot see. “I
love you, too. Can you…can you talk to my mom? And Georgie? Can you tell
them I’m sorry? Can you protect them, like I couldn’t?”
“You protected them, Lou. You protected them.”
She lifts up one of her bloody hands and pressed something hard and me-
tallic in his palm. His fingers grip the medallion of her father’s necklace tightly,
so tight it presses an indentation into his skin. “I’m sorry.”
And just like that she leaves him again.
He supposes that, deep down, he always knew she would.

* * *
This time, Georgie holds his hand while they’re at the cemetery. “Lou told
me she had to go away.”
His eyes don’t peel away from the hole in the ground, right beside her fa-
ther’s. “And what did you say?”
Georgie’s eyes burn gold. “I said that sometimes we don’t decide whether
we stay or go. Sometimes we just have to.”
He wonders how a fourth-grader ended up being a million times smarter
than he ever was. His free hand clutches the necklace of her father’s that now
rests above his heart, and silently, he decides that Georgie will never have it.
Lou wouldn’t have wanted him to.
Yellow

Vincent Van Gogh believed that by creating art, he could give happiness. He infused his paintings with colors to convey emotions, making everything symbolic, intense, and bold. The Yellow House where he lived in Arles, France infected his color palette, brightening his works with a joy he himself did not feel. He applied yellow in bold brushstrokes, bestowing his canvases with the moon and its celestial companions, reflections of riverside French cities, pinprick flames from lanterns, sunflowers confident or wilting, hay bales basking in sunlight, bed frames waiting to welcome the weary. Yellow was warmth, cheer, comfort—things Vincent desperately wanted to offer to others if he could not have them himself. But nobody was buying his art. He kept painting, kept trying to disguise the anguish in his heart. His brother, Théo, wrote, saying he couldn’t loan Vincent more money. The artist stopped paying for food but kept paying for paint supplies. He nourished himself with coffee, cigarettes, and hours and hours of painting. His neighbors began to whisper when he took up residence with his doctor; they said he sipped on turpentine and ate the color yellow. They said he thought it would make his insides bright and help him be happy.

***

As a child, I drew pictures of myself with yellow hair, and the taller stick figure of Mommy next to me. We both had green dots for eyes, but I color her shoulder-length bob brown.

“Why don’t I get yellow hair, too?” she would ask, examining herself in the mirror and rearranging her hairline to better hide her dark roots. She’d ask about having to call Grace at the salon, and I’d go back to coloring, confident in my choice of the brown crayon for her and yellow for me. After all, Cinderella had yellow hair, and so did Tinker Bell, costumes of the characters scattered on my bedroom floor beside the Barbie dolls everyone favored over her boring brunette friend, Stacy. It wasn’t until later, when a classmate told me to add brown to my drawing’s yellow hair because I was dirty blonde, that I understood how Mom felt: as if the way I’d chosen to depict myself needed a modifier signaling imperfection, impurity, blemish. I’d been proud of the way my self-portraits stood out on the classroom walls, a burst of yellow in a sea of brunettes, but now I was told I blended in with the rest more than I wished to admit. The word “blonde” was reserved for fairytale heroines and the dolls who got picked first, and real people should describe themselves accordingly, streaking their yellow crayon drawings with dirt.

***

I went to Ikea to buy a new comforter, the old one having lost a battle with my residence hall’s washing machine. The store was designed to remind you that you are indoors, and interior design should be your sole focus. There were no windows, and the floors consisted of gray cement flecked with whatever people trekked in on their shoes. The lights overhead, fluorescent white bulbs, bore no resemblance to sunlight. The entire space was made all the more confining by the crowds of shoppers struggling to follow the directional arrows that seemed to lead them in circles, and I was desperate to escape as
soon as I’d arrived. In the bedding section were plain duvets, and I chose one weighted to keep the dreamer cool at night before moving on to the duvet covers, hung like tapestries in an old castle. I easily selected bedding the color of melted butter run through with vines of ivory; I wanted to always wake up to the sunrise.

***

Two weeks into the new semester, a girl in one of my classes arrived with the same dandelion-colored backpack as the one between my feet. “I kept noticing yours all over campus,” she said by way of explanation. “I had to have one. I didn’t want you to think I was copying, but I loved yours so much.”

I shrugged and couldn’t help but notice her dandelion was far cleaner than my own, which told the story of my college years through its various stains, frayed edges, and the hole in the bottom that threatened to lighten my load at any moment. Despite its imperfections, the conspicuous hue stood out amid the crowd of more subtle blues and blacks, a single star against the night sky. Whenever I saved seats for my friends in the busy dining hall, they knew exactly which table was ours.

While I didn’t mind the sunshine on my back as I made my way from one end of campus to the other, I was more aware of its brightness when I spent a weekend in Barcelona during my semester abroad. With all my worldly possessions in the mochila amarilla peeking out from beneath my noticeably blond hair (where was that brown crayon now?), I did my best not to draw any unnecessary attention to myself in the pickpocket capital of Europe. At the time, my biggest fear was having my wallet stolen. I wasn’t in Barcelona a few months later, when a vibrant dandelion would have made a perfect target for a terrorist’s rampant van. During my time there, I didn’t have anything taken from me.

***

Without the color yellow, there would be no daffodils signaling spring, no baby chicks emerging from eggs. We couldn’t ask for butter on our popcorn at the movie theater. We wouldn’t have green or orange but would instead be stuck with blue and red. The sunset would not be half as impressive, and there would be no amber waves of grain to sing about in a show of patriotism. The canary wouldn’t warn the coal miners, and I couldn’t drizzle honey into my tea. Nobody could blow out the candles on their birthday cake, and my mom’s gold ring wouldn’t wink at me in the sunshine. Angels wouldn’t have halos, and Mary and Joseph would never have found Bethlehem without their guiding light. We couldn’t warn children about which patches of snow they shouldn’t eat. No tall stalks of wheat would call to be harvested. Coldplay wouldn’t tell us to look at the stars, “look how they shine for you.” The teeth of smokers and caffeine addicts wouldn’t publicly betray bad habits every time they offered a smile. There’d be no corn on the cob at barbecues, no school bus to pick up the children at the corner. No pencils would sit on desks to signal an eagerness to learn. Lighthouses would have no means by which to warn ships away from the jagged coast, leaving splintered shipwrecks on the dark shore. Nobody could stand on the corner of a city street and hail a taxi cab to take them home. I would only see half of the bumblebee resting on my foot threatening to sting me. My dad wouldn’t cut into his fried egg and let
the gooey yolk ooze across his plate, only to be sopped up by his toast. There would be no transition between “stop” and “go” on the traffic light. Bruises would fade from black and blue to invisible, with no hues in between to remind us what healing looks like. People with the condition synesthesia would be handicapped when it came to certain words, smells, sounds, feelings; no lightning bolts erupting from the slam of a door or a sunburst accompanying every kiss or fizzling gold fireworks with the smell of firewood.

My mom’s hair dye would permanently fade, giving way to the brown crayon of my drawings.

My comforter wouldn’t keep me warm all through the night or remind me of the newness of dawn each morning.

My backpack would blend in with the rest of the crowd, just another student hauling books to class.

Van Gogh’s morning star wouldn’t illuminate the canvas, his dying sunflowers would never have lived, and Arles wouldn’t shine off the surface of the Rhone. His insides would stay as dark as his works. The brightness of the paint would do nothing to counteract its toxicity as it coursed through his veins. He wouldn’t feel happy, not even for a moment.
Woman, Piazza della Murate

Photography

DANIELLA SNYDER
Modern Centurion

Photography

KATHLEEN BOLGER
Peaks
Photography

ERICA SCHAUMBERG
Science, Not Silence

*Oil on board*

ZOE YEOH
The Black Forest in White

HAYLEY BELL

Photography

Forest in White

The Black
Elim House, Windermere, UK
Watercolor on paper

ZOE YEOH
Wild
Charcoal
NATALIE ORGA
The Sacre Coeur from the Musée D’Orsay

Photography

HAYLEY BELL
Green Shades, Piazza della Murate
DANIELLA SNYDER
Photography
The Mercury

Bust, Palette, and Glass Jars

Charcoal pencil and compressed charcoal

JOSEPHINE MEIER

Photography

ERICA SCHAUMBURG

Going
Science Center
346 (Healing Tree)
Oil on wooden board
ZOYEYOH
The Elephant Family
Charcoal
NATALIE ORGA
Mechanisms of the Mind

Just breathe.
But what can you do when
the air burns like smoke,
and the smoke feels smoother than air?

Inhale.
Hold it.

Let the body take control.
Let the heart’s pulse increase.
Let the pulse’s growing intensity be felt in your veins,
throughout the body.

When your throat begins to silently scream,
when your toes curl, your fingers twitch,
and emerging from every nerve is shooting pain.
Hold it.
To figure out which reigns,
Hold it.
The mind or the body?

Exhale.

Was it a choice?
Sick

It took moving an ocean away from my family and my home for me to begin to feel the need to reconnect with my mother. One of the most soul-nourishing activities to do, tucked up under my bedcovers or walking through Gettysburg at nighttime, is to listen to a recording I have of her singing to the *Wizard of Oz*’s “Somewhere over the Rainbow.” She’s horrible at singing. Objectively awful. But interspersed between her off-tune screeching is one of my favourite things to listen to: hysterical laughter with her best friend. I can picture the moment: she’s wiping tears off her cheeks and desperately trying to catch her breath to get the last words of the recording out, “Please don’t put this on YouTube!”

My mum told us that she was sick on a Sunday afternoon in the middle of July. I know that it was a Sunday because the whole family was sitting outside eating lunch together. I know it was July because it was a beautiful day, such a beautiful day, and I could feel the sun through the vine leaves above me on our pergola.

We ate lunch together every weekend, but Sunday was a special day. Growing up in Italy meant that food was what the day revolved around, and I was taught from an early age that lunch was the most important meal of the day. A Sunday lunch consisted of piles of vinegar-soaked cherry tomatoes folded together with hunks of mozzarella, slabs of bread drizzled in olive oil, and thick, sizzling sausages straight off the grill. My dad was always in charge of the grill. I would sit at the table and watch him battle spitting oil from the meat, all the while with a cigarette in his hand. My dad always had a cigarette in his hand, making sure to hold it high above his head when he was around my sister and me in a futile attempt to keep the smoke from creeping into our young lungs. Smoke that was the same colour as his aging hair, although he tried to convince everyone that he met that it was still brown.

My sister, Blanca, was just seven years old, wearing a neon bikini and piling food onto her plate. I remember because I complained to both my mum and my dad that she was being greedy—“Save some for me!” was my cry. Her bleach blonde curly locks hung damp around her shoulders; we had just ended an immense morning of chasing each other around the garden with buckets of water and the hose. Being the older sister, I had used my considerable size advantage to ensure that I stayed relatively dry.

In line with Italian family traditions, it was well past two o’clock before we sat down together in our usual seats. Without fail, for every meal, I sat opposite my mum. I can’t remember a meal from my childhood that didn’t include her bouncing brown curls, her infectious smile, and her reluctance to take a second helping because she was “on a diet.” This Sunday lunch in the middle of July was no different, and I remember catching her eyes and smiling really big before my dad skewered two sausages onto my plate and I was distracted by the dance that was plating food. After a chorus of *buon appetito*, we all dug in. It was a hot July day, but we were sheltered from the unforgiving Italian sun by grape vines, draped lazily over the wooden beams of the pergola that my dad and uncle had built years ago. Even with bloated stomachs at the end of the meal, not one of
us could resist reaching across to a bunch of dark purple grapes and popping a handful into our mouths.

It was in this post-lunch stupor, as Blanca and I were squabbling about whose turn it was to wash the dishes, that my dad stood up, poured himself and my mum another glass of wine, and asked my sister and I to sit up properly. I remember feeling the food sink to the bottom of my stomach, now an unpalatable rock. One look at both my parents’ expressions, and I knew that something was going on. My sister was still apparently oblivious as to what was happening.

“I’m sick,” said my mum, somehow managing to keep her smile on her face, as she squeezed my dad’s hand for support. “I’m going to get sick like Auntie Pat.” I remember thinking about the past six months and my mum’s best friend, Auntie Pat. I thought back about hushed conversations, conversations that as a child I certainly wasn’t allowed to be a part of. And of visiting her in a darkened room where she wore a brightly colored scarf wrapped around her head. I remember that she hadn’t been teaching in school for the past six months and that people got quiet whenever I asked about where she was. But, I reasoned to myself, it can’t be that bad. My mum explained to us that she was going to be losing her hair, that she was going to have to be in and out of hospital, and that she was going to be staying home from work, all the while dancing around the word which I would come to fear: cancer. My mother had developed late-stage breast cancer, the fault of the BRCA II gene, and six years and one month later it took her from us.

But at nine years old, I was totally immune to the idea of cancer and what it meant for her to become sick. My reality of her sickness came in bursts. There was hair loss and staying at home. For my sister and me, that meant joking about different types of comical clown wigs that my mother would try on before finally settling on one that our oblivious neighbour decided was nicer than her old hair. For my mum, it meant pottering around the house, catching up with old friends, and plotting for the moment when she could pounce at us from behind a corner, using the few greying hairs clinging to her scalp to her advantage. I have never fully been able to understand how she remained so unselfish and cheerful during this time, but she made sure to keep my sister and me young, something that I will always be grateful for.

And the Sunday meals continued. Those meals were where we celebrated her remission, clinking glasses filled with bubbling prosecco. We ate the same cherry tomatoes soaked in olive oil and vinegar, and my dad still cursed under his breath when he was burned with fiery globules of fat from the spitting sausages. Blanca and I had the same arguments about who was eating the most food and who got the last sausage on the plate. And as we grew older together under those drooping grape vines, it seemed for a moment like the world had resettled. Blanca’s once bleach blonde hair had now developed into a dirtier shade and, much like her tempestuous personality, frizzed stubbornly upon her head. I, in my foolish youth, had opted for a short bowl cut. And my mother’s had grown back out into her familiar bouncing brown curls. She even ventured beyond her usual locks.

I remember one evening, after our cherry tomatoes and sausages, when the wind was cooling down just enough to bring a shiver, that my mum announced that she was going to dye her hair. We lived in a tiny village, twenty
minutes from the nearest hairdresser, so it was no surprise to us when she pulled
a carton of Do It Yourself dye from underneath the table. What ensued is one
of my favourite memories of my family. While my dad pulled on the flimsy
plastic gloves, I sat on the toilet seat and read out instructions: “Pour this, add
that, squeeze the bottle.” Blanca was perched on the tiny windowsill, knees
tucked underneath her chin, and my mum was crouched over the bathtub,
hair dripping. We laughed and joked our way through forty minutes of waiting
for the dye to set until it was time to wash it out. The result was a colour that
was matched only by the same cherry tomatoes we had consumed earlier. My
mother’s beautiful curls had been transformed into the garish looks of child-
hood icon Ronald McDonald. She bravely laughed through three work days of
her new hair before eventually giving in and traipsing into a hairdresser where
a woman, suppressing her own laughter, carefully stripped my mum’s hair back
to her normal brown.

It was on a Sunday in early spring, too early and cold to sit outside for a
meal but nice enough to gather all together out there to read one afternoon,
that Blanca and I were told that my mum was no longer in remission. That was
the same night we were told we were moving to the Netherlands. I was eleven
years old, and I remember looking up at the pergola and the now-naked vines
and breathing in the cool Italian air. We all tried desperately to keep a sense of
normalcy over the next few months. We went to the beach on Saturdays, had
lunch on Sundays, and went to school during the week. But my mum’s frequent
visits to the hospital were a constant reminder that she was sick and only get-
ting sicker.

We went on holiday to Lefkada, Greece that summer, a final hurrah before
we began our life in the cold North. We didn’t have our pergola, but we made
do by sitting around in the sunshine eating bowls of fresh fruit and taking dips
in the pool. What the books don’t tell you about cancer is that weight fluctua-
tions are to be expected. At this time, in part due to the chemo and in part due
to the carbohydrate-heavy Greek food, my mother was overweight. She was
conscious of it but not so careful to the point that it would detract her from
joining us in our feast of said Greek food. On the third day of our holiday, my
dad announced that it had been his lifelong dream to drive a motorboat, a life-
long dream coincidentally triggered by an advertisement in a pamphlet the day
before. So we all packed our bags for the day and drove down to Nidri where, to
my father’s delight, we rented a little motorboat and set off in search of adven-
ture. My mum took a backseat that day, and I remember watching her trailing
her hand in the crystal blue water of Greece. We quickly learned that riding in
a motorboat was not as sexy as that pamphlet said it would be. Docking for the
first time, my dad jetted into a quiet harbor of a sleepy island, misjudged the
distance from the moorings, and noisily crashed the boat. We departed quickly,
after reassuring locals that we were capable of staying afloat, and never showed
our faces there again.

Later that afternoon, in the privacy of waters off of an uninhabited island,
we anchored our little vessel and spent two hours snorkeling and snacking on
packed goodies. My mum was the last to get in the water, and one of the last
to get out, but not for lack of trying. The tiny ladder supplied by the boat was
enough to support the nimble legs of Blanca and myself; even my father could
unceremoniously clamber onto the boat. But my embarrassed, pleasantly plump mum could not begin to bend her legs into the contortion required to get on. In a moment she liked to pretend never happened, my dad stood on the boat, bracing his legs in a wide stance, holding onto my mum’s hands. I was ordered back to the waters where I was instructed to use my arms and what little upper body strength I had to push my mum’s arse on the count of three. In an act of pure comedy, Blanca, who had been sitting on the side of the boat and watching in amusement, picked up our family camera and captured several unflattering pictures of this moment. Needless to say I thank her to this day for those instincts. They provide a necessary dose of comic relief to the rest of us while we pore through family photo albums all these years later.

About a year after driving from Rome to Maastricht, the Netherlands, my mum had to start using a wheelchair. It was at this point that I noticed the biggest change in her demeanor—she started not to care. There’s something truly magical watching your mother, who for her whole life remained composed and polite, transform into a comedic hero before your eyes. She was shameless about using her wheelchair to get Blanca and I first onto the rides at Disneyland when we visited, even when she herself wasn’t coming along. She talked at the top of her voice about passersby and laughed loud and long. One of my fondest memories of this time was during the winter of our second year in Maastricht, the coldest winter that any of us had ever experienced. The Dutch, despite being citizens of one of the smallest countries in Europe, are a resilient folk and exhibit an odd behavior during the winter: sitting outside in the freezing cold for meals. My family, coming from the lavish warmth of northern Rome and the oasis of our vine-covered pergola, was bewildered by this behavior. But nobody was more confused and outraged by this behavior than my now-unfiltered mother. One weekend, my mum and I had decided to venture into town and do some shopping before settling inside one of the café’s lining the main square. Shivering and footsore, I pushed my mum around a corner onto the square and past rows and rows of Dutchmen and women huddled around electric heaters and blankets. I paused, scanning the menu of a café, when I heard my mother scoff, then break into full laughter and say at the top of her voice, “They’re all fucking mental!” I froze, mortified at what my mother had just said and what nearby patrons of the cafés had definitely heard given their hand-to-mouth expressions. In blind panic, I gestured to her wheelchair, wordlessly begging for the internationally-understood sympathy and forgiveness for someone disabled.

One day I will have to tell my half-brothers about how my mother isn’t here anymore, that their mother is not my mother. But I’ll tell them this story. I’ll tell them of how I never thought of my mother as being sick. Technically, she was sick for almost half the time I had with her. But she was always just my mum, my crazy, beautiful mum, who just so happened to be sick.
Sweet

One day,
They shall lay me down
And slice me open,
And finally discover that all this time
My heart has been pumping jars and jars
Of raspberry jam.
Interview with the Greatest Trumpet Player in the World

FADE IN:

INT. TELEVISION STUDIO - EVENING

INTERVIEWER

With me on set today, I am pleased to welcome Robert Morgan, world renowned trumpet player and musician extraordinaire.

ROBERT MORGAN

It’s a pleasure to be here.

INTERVIEWER

The pleasure is all mine. So, Mr. Morgan, you performed with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra from 1994 to 2017, is that correct?

ROBERT MORGAN

Yes.

INTERVIEWER

What was the audition process like in 1994?

ROBERT MORGAN

Well, actually, I first auditioned for an open position in the trumpet section in 1992. I didn’t make it in, but I was not discouraged in the slightest. I was twenty-four at the time, so I knew I had my whole life ahead of me, still. When I got the news that I had not placed into the orchestra, I immediately increased the rigor of my practice pattern tenfold. I would start with three hours of focused rehearsal every morning after I woke up, then a short break for lunch and reading of music literature, during which I would go over finger dexterity exercises and mental scales constantly in my head. After lunch, I would practice for another three hours, this time switching to my left hand as a challenge. Right before bed, I would finish with a steaming cup of Egyptian chamomile herbal tea and an extra hour of rehearsal, this time playing as silently as possible, to the point where my sound was almost inaudible.

By the time the 1994 auditions were approaching, I was much more refined in every aspect of my playing. The audition took place in the Royal Albert Concert Hall. There were three judges, separated from me by a thin screen so that there was no prejudice in the selection process. The audition consisted of three aspects: scales (major, minor, and chromatic), a performance piece of my choice, and sight reading. Naturally, I executed each piece of the audition effortlessly, thanks to my training.
INTERVIEWER
In which chair were you initially placed?

ROBERT MORGAN
I started out as the fourth trumpet, but that didn't last too long. I quickly rose through the ranks.

INTERVIEWER
Your rise was unprecedented in the history of the group, and there has been a fair amount of controversy regarding the means by which you obtained the rank of principal trumpet player in just six months. What can you tell me about Lois Gilberto, the third trumpet at the time?

ROBERT MORGAN
Well, Louie was only there for a short amount of time after I joined. From the few rehearsals I spent next to him, I remember he had the obnoxious habit of tapping his foot loudly and off tempo all the time. His shoes were well shined, but he would never tell me which polish he used. He was let go from the group after he missed our performance in the Konzert Haus during the European Tour. Thank god I knew both of our parts, so I was able to cover the third trumpet for him.

INTERVIEWER
Why did Louis Gilberto miss the concert?

ROBERT MORGAN
As I recall, we were sharing a hotel room in first district of Vienna on that tour. When it was time to get up, I couldn't wake him. I splashed water in his face, and I even shook him, but it was no use. It was unbelievable, I've never seen such a deep sleeper. Eventually, I had to give up, because I figured that there was no use in me missing the concert when I had woken up on time. After that concert, I moved up to take his position.

INTERVIEWER
When we asked him for comments regarding the incident, he claimed that he is a very light sleeper. He contends that you deliberately snuck out without waking him up so that he would lose his position. Do you care to respond to this, Mr. Morgan?

ROBERT MORGAN
Who can really say what happened that morning? It was so long ago, and we had all been drinking at the hotel bar the night before. To tell you the truth, I suspect that he was a drunkard by the way his pitch swerved up and down when he played. He was most likely just hung-over that morning.

INTERVIEWER
Let's move on. Can you tell me what happened to Eloise Ray, the second
trumpet at the time, shortly after Louis Gilberto was expelled from the group?

ROBERT MORGAN
Oh my, it’s hard for me to remember so far back. Can you refresh my mem-

INTERVIEWER
There was an incident involving factory machinery.

ROBERT MORGAN
Oh yes, we visited an assembly line together where they mold brass into
various instruments. Eloise reached out for something, and her fingers were
crushed by a machine. It was a shame; she had just gotten her nails done in
a beautiful shade of magenta the day before. When she got her hands out, all
of her fingers were unusable. Unfortunately, you can’t play trumpet without
fingers.

INTERVIEWER
After the loss of her digits, she was forced to retire, and you became the sec-
ond trumpet. She alleges that you pushed her arms toward the machine. What
do you have to say about that?

ROBERT MORGAN
Nonsense! Why would I ever do that? We were on a lovely date.

INTERVIEWER
Don’t you find it strange that tragedies befell all of the trumpet players in the
orchestra that you interacted with?

ROBERT MORGAN
You forget that Wally is still fine and well.

INTERVIEWER
Wallace Murray, the fourth trumpet who filled in your position after you
moved up to the third chair? He was never in the chair above you, so I think
your point is hardly valid.

ROBERT MORGAN
I maintained my position in the trumpet section through a strict regimen of
training. I don’t like what you’re insinuating.

INTERVIEWER
You don’t have to like anything I say, Mr. Morgan. Lastly, I’d like to ask you
about Klaus Stevens, the first trumpet player in the group who preceded you.
What can you tell me about him?

ROBERT MORGAN
Klaus Stevens was a greasy man with a bushy white beard. He was quite the
opposite of myself; I was lean and skinny, and he was round and fat. As for his
sound, it was weak, like that of a deflating balloon. His intonation was out of
control, as were his eating habits.

INTERVIEWER
How did you react to his untimely death, which occurred so shortly after you
became the second trumpet?

ROBERT MORGAN
Oh, that was so emotional for me. I felt such a strong bond with him, like a
brother. What a shame that he choked on a Christmas sausage shortly after
our winter concert. I guess he bit off more than he could chew.

INTERVIEWER
He died during a dinner at the Murano, at which several other members of the
orchestra were present. Where were you when he died, Mr. Morgan?

ROBERT MORGAN
If my memory serves me correctly, I was in the restroom having an unpleasant
experience myself. The rabbit tortellini did not bode so well with my sensitive
stomach.

INTERVIEWER
After Klaus passed away, you became the principal trumpet player in the
orchestra. Did you ever suspect that there was any foul play involved in the
incident?

ROBERT MORGAN
Never! Never! It was a fine orchestra, not a fight club.

INTERVIEWER
Other members of the orchestra said they saw you touching Klaus’ plate that
night.

ROBERT MORGAN
Who told you that? Was it a trombone player? Yes, I sat next to Klaus that
night, but he offered me to try a bite of his dish. Perhaps I forked an extra bit
of sausage off his plate when he wasn’t looking, but I can’t really remember.
If I did do such a thing, I apologize sincerely, although he never finished his
dinner anyway.

INTERVIEWER
Did anyone ever challenge you for the position of first trumpet?

ROBERT MORGAN
Eloise returned at some point with prosthetic fingers, but she could not play
well enough to surpass me. People in the orchestra fear me.
INTERVIEWER
Why is that?

ROBERT MORGAN
Because they know I will not stop at anything to be the best. They wish they could be me, but they can't.

INTERVIEWER
One last question for you, Mr. Morgan: Have you regretted anything that you've done in your journey to become the best?

ROBERT MORGAN
Everything I have done, I have done for the love of music. It was done for the sake of the ensemble. Weak players must be weeded out so that the ensemble can perform at the highest level possible. To get to the top, you have to step over some others, and in the process they may get trampled. It's easy for you to sit there and criticize me, but I know you didn't become the number one interviewer at your network by being a considerate, friendly person. You had to beat your competition, and sometimes you really hurt them. Marathon runners elbow the people that get close to them in races. Soccer players aim for ankles when they slide tackle their opponents. Politicians drag the reputations of their opponents through the mud. The anchor before you who interviewed me two years ago. What was his name? Jonathan? Jacob? Jeff? What happened to him? Why isn't he interviewing me today? I recall he was wearing a sharp red tie with a paisley pattern that day. His wife called before the interview to let him know that their son had skinned his knee on the playground and was crying for his daddy. Are you really a better interviewer than he was? When the next "great" interviewer comes close to you, what will you do to keep your job? Once you're on top, it's hard to give up.

The interviewer sits in shocked silence for a moment, mouth agape, unsure of what to say. His eyes stay locked on Morgan's eyes. He snaps out of it and puts a smile back on.

INTERVIEWER (Stuttering at first)
Isn't that something? Well, that's all the time we have for tonight. Thanks to Robert Morgan for coming on the show. Tune in next week when I interview Jeremy Carlan, the comedian, about what it was like joining the late night sketch show, Saturday Night Live, in 1984.

FADE OUT.

The End
Nirvana

One of those “Weather Warning!” notifications appears on my phone. It’s 4:56 a.m., and my alarm is set to go off at 4:59 a.m. I switch off the alarm, immediately grab my laptop, and log onto “magicseaweed.com.” I learned about this website from some locals, and it has been bookmarked on my laptop ever since. I type in Ocean City, NJ, and hope for the best. I scroll and scroll and get to the forecast.

12-14 foot swells, 11-second periods, 10mph wind.

My face smiles, but my heart sinks. I want to, I think to myself, but I don’t know if I can. I’ve only been surfing for a couple of months. I’m not ready for this.

I take a picture of the forecast and send it to my friend Rich, hoping he will tell me the storm is too strong. I get up out of bed and open the blinds to look outside my bedroom window, or should I say into my neighbor’s kitchen.

My neighbor’s house is this gigantic, elevated white beach house, while my family’s beach house is more of a small cottage. I don’t mind, though; as long as I’m at the beach, I don’t care where I sleep. It’s dark, gloomy, and spitting rain outside. Not a smidge of sunshine is peaking through those black clouds. I knew the storm was coming, but I guess I was hoping it would be too dangerous to surf in.

My phone buzzes; it’s a text from Rich. “Holy shit. Be over in 10,” Rich says. I go to high school with Rich, and his family has a beach house right down the street. Since both of his parents work back in Philly and only come down on the weekends, Rich spends most of his time at my house.

I quietly open the door to the hallway and tip toe into the communal upstairs bathroom so that I don’t wake up my mom or sister. I brush my teeth and then tip toe back into my bedroom to get ready.

Whenever I walk downstairs, I always walk straight through the living room, past the kitchen, and immediately to the backdoor to unlock it. I’ll then walk back into the kitchen and start making scrambled eggs. After a few minutes, I hear the back door open. I can hear the wind hollowing through the trees and the rain slapping against the pavement. Rich walks through the back door and sits down on one of the high top chairs at my kitchen counter.

“It’s nasty out there,” he says, as he’s trying to catch his breath.

“I look over at him, and he’s dripping wet.

“Rain must’ve gotten worse,” I say to him in a disappointed tone.

“Britt and Fran said they’re on their way,” Rich says to me.

Britt and Fran are two other kids we go to high school with, and they spend their summers in Avalon, NJ, just a couple shore towns over. They’ve been surfing since they were kids, while Rich and I are still pretty new to the sport. I was never a huge advocate for them to come surf with us today, since they are obviously a lot better than us. I think I just don’t want to be embarrassed.

I finish making the scrambled eggs, divide them up onto two plates, and hand one plate to Rich. His parents normally don’t leave him any sort of money
or food for the week, so he'll come over here for most meals. As Rich starts feasting on his eggs, I look down at mine and begin to feel a little queasy. I poke at them a little and then just hand them over to Rich.

“You’re not hungry?” Rich asks me.

“Nah, don’t feel too good. Must’ve been those tacos last night,” I explain to Rich.

While Rich finishes up stuffing his face, I go out back to get everything ready. I pick up my backpack and make sure I have a towel, water bottle, and wax. I walk into the shed and grab my wetsuit hanging off a hook and my surfboard. That damp, musty smell from the shed always wakes me up. When I walk back inside, I notice my mom walking downstairs. It’s around 5:30 a.m. at this point, so I’m not too surprised she’s awake.

“Good Morning, Mrs. Rava!” Rich says to my mom.

“Morning, mom,” I say to her next.

“Morning, guys!” she says with a bright smile as she walks over to give me our routine morning hug. “Be careful today, ok? Don’t try anything you can’t handle,” she whispers to me and then gives me a kiss on my forehead. I normally just respond with a soft smile and say, “I know, mom.”

Rich puts his dish in the dishwasher, I slip into my flip-flops, and we’re out the door. We hop on our bikes, using our left arms to hold our surfboards and our right arms to steer. I look at my reflection in the puddles as we ride through them, just to make sure I don’t have a nervous look on my face. We had to take a few detours to get to the beach because Ocean City streets flood easily. As we get closer and closer I can hear the waves crashing, the seagulls chirping, and the little voice inside my head telling me to turn around. The fog begins to thicken as we pull up, and I can barely see the entrance to the beach walkway. There are two other surfers locking their bikes together when we get there. They look back at us and give us a death stare…must be locals.

“Where are Britt and Fran?” I ask Rich.

“They just texted me. They are having trouble getting through the island because of all the flooding,” Rich responds.

We ride our bikes up onto the sand, and my heart begins to beat faster and faster. I try locking our bikes together, but my hand keeps shaking.

“I’m shivering, it’s freezing out here,” I tell Rich in an attempt to hide my nerves.

I take off my flip-flops so that my feet dig through the sand as we make our way over the sand dune. The feeling of soft sand normally calms my nerves, but the rain has made the sand damp today, only making matters worse.

We get over the dune, and the first thing I see is a 10-foot white cap barrel over another wave. My stomach flips; I think I’m going to be sick. I’m going to die out there. There is absolutely no way I can surf this. There’s that little voice in my head again: “Turn around, Jon.” I’m going to do it, I’m going to turn around, until Rich says, “don’t worry so much, man, what’s the worst that could happen?” with a little smile on his face, and then a chuckle.

I immediately think to myself, are you kidding? What’s the worst that could happen? I could think of A MILLION bad things that could happen. Yet, that little smile and chuckle on his face somehow calms me, and I gain a tiny bit of
Rich and I walk over to our normal spot against one of the sand dunes, and put our stuff down. I take off my sweatpants and sweatshirt so that I can squeeze into my wetsuit. I keep looking up at the waves, especially the ones crashing into the jetty, to remind myself not to get too close.

“There they are,” Rich says.

I look back at the pathway and begin to see Britt and Fran peek through the fog, holding their surfboards. Both are wearing their wetsuits pulled halfway up to their waist, with a sweatshirt over top. They walk over to Rich and I to put their things down, and the four of us perform our typical “dap” of a handshake.

As we all stand looking out towards this raging monster of an ocean, I think we all begin to take in different nerves. While Britt and Fran may be feeling eagerness and excitement, I feel butterflies and turbulence.

“Let’s strap in, boys,” Britt says. And with that cue, we fasten the Velcro straps to our ankles and run into the water.

I purposely take a minute or two to strap the board to my ankle and let everyone else go ahead before me. I watch the three of them run into the water, jump onto their boards, and paddle out into this violent abyss.

There is only so much more I can act like I am doing before they notice I am just chickening out. I pick up my board, take a deep breath, and just start sprinting as fast as I can into the water. I immediately jump onto my board and begin to paddle through this vicious current. The first big wave is approaching, and I adjust all of my weight to the front of the surfboard so that I can dolphin dive under the wave. I pop up on the other side of the wave, gasp for air, and start paddling again. I only get in a few more paddles before I am approached with another wave. Once again, I shift all of my weight to the front of the board, and dolphin dive underneath the wave. I pop out on the other side, gasp for air, and begin to paddle. This becomes my routine for the next ten minutes. After about the fifth wave, I pop out on the other side to look for everyone. I see Britt and Fran, but no Rich. I look back at the beach and notice the current has already moved me down two beaches. When I look back out to the ocean, I immediately get hit by a wave and am taken back about fifteen feet. When the wave finally stops carrying me, I use my strap to pull my board back to me. I hop back on and continue to paddle. My mouth tastes like salt water, I’m exhausted, but I have come too far to turn around now.

As I resume my dolphin dive routine, I notice something. I am no longer nervous. I am no longer anxious. I am no longer fearful. I got this, I tell myself. With this newfound attitude, I continue to push myself physically and mentally.

Finally, I make it far enough where the waves aren’t as close together, and I can rest in between sets. This is known as the Promised Land for surfers. It is where we sit and wait for our perfect wave, the one that will instill both terror and adrenaline within our mind and bodies.

I see Britt, so I paddle over to him.

“Rava, you made it, my man,” Britt says to me with a surprising look on his face.
“Yeah. That was brutal. Where are Rich and Fran?” I ask Britt.

Britt points to our left, and I see Fran about a hundred yards away from us. He’s sitting on his board, waiting for a wave.

Then Britt says, “Yeah, little Richie never made it out. A wave took him back in, so I think he’s going to rest for a little and then give it another shot.”

I look back to the beach, and I see Rich sitting with our things. That could have just as easily been me…but it wasn’t.

Just when I think the hard part is over, I remember that I still have to ride a wave. As minutes pass, and I sit there patiently, I go over the pop-up routine in my head. I keep thinking to myself, hands under shoulders, push up off legs and toes, one foot in front of the other.

Suddenly, I hear Britt yell, “THERE HE GOES!”

I look over to where Fran was waiting, and I see him paddle with a wave as it forms, slowly rising a few feet per second. Eventually, Fran rises about ten feet on top of the wave, and the wave breaks into a barrel. It looks like a giant tube, and Fran is surfing right in the middle of it. He pops out on the other side of the barrel and continues to ride the shoulder of the wave into the shore. It is incredible.

Just when I think there is no way I have the ability to do that, I remind myself that I have made it this far, and there is no turning back. Therefore, I turn my board so that the tip is facing the shoreline, and I wait for my perfect wave. After about a minute, I begin to feel the water start dragging out to the sea, and my board lowers into the water; this means a wave is coming. I turn my head around, and see the formation of what is either going to be the life or the death of me. As this gigantic beast forms, I cannot stop thinking to myself, hands under shoulders, push up off legs and toes, one foot in front of the other.

I feel my board being picked up by the wave, and I give myself two more power strokes. The wave starts to break, and I pop up, pushing off my legs and toes. I put one foot in front of the other. I feel like I am on top of the world. I stay focused on my footing as I lean my weight back and forth in order to surf the wave. I keep riding the shoulder of the wave, and after a few seconds, I finally realize that I got this. I pick my head up and look at the beach. Rich is standing up, and it looks like he’s cheering. I have the biggest smile on my face and become filled with emotions of surprise, adrenaline, and pure happiness. Nirvana.

When I get close enough to shore, and the wave begins to die down, I hop off the board into the water. I pop up out of the water, and slick my hair back as I try to hold back my smile. Rich runs down to the water and gives me a giant hug. I pick up my board, and the two of us walk back up to our spot on the beach.

As I sit in the sand and look out into Mother Nature’s work of art, I reflect upon what today meant. Today was not about finding the perfect wave. It was about overcoming my fears and believing in myself. Up to this point in my life, I have never been faced with a challenge as tough and as frightening as this storm. Today was a rite of passage, and this experience will serve as a reminder that I can do anything in life as long as I stay motivated and believe in myself.
Splashes Unheard

Why don’t you come down from there?

He has never felt this high before. Looking straight out, he can see over the dangling sun on the horizon. It would be high, he has known, but this high? Everything below him has transformed into a distant mass, like a painting seen from afar: one rolling, gray-blue surface. From this height, he can barely discern the tips of the tallest rocks.

He hears his heart’s squelchy thumping.

Cars behind him sit empty, some with doors left open and engines running. People have crowded in huddled groups behind the barricades. They watch him. Some faces look pained, pinched. Others have phones shielding their expressions. One woman sobs loudly into a man’s coat shoulder; she is the only not watching. Most look impatiently blank.

From here he can’t hear the waves crash against the cliffs. Foam sprays and splashes around the jagged edges, the white standing out against the gray, but neither the crashing whoosh nor the subtle ebb and flow echo up this high. He can still smell the water, though: briny, ancient, mucky. It smells like distant memories—some his but most not—and a promise. Maybe he can’t hear the waves because the wind is so loud. It howls monstrously in his ears, along with the thumping. Stronger gusts sway the bridge, and he squeezes harder to maintain his grip on the oxidized rail, which is damp from dew or bird shit, or maybe his own sweat. He doesn’t know why he grips tighter when the gusts roll in. Doing so seems counterintuitive. Something instinctual, imbedded deep inside him, reacts before he can stop it, he guesses.

Why don’t you come down so we can talk?

His arches ache. He left his shoes at home, not seeing the point in bringing them, and now his bare feet curl around a black pole about as wide as an average man’s arm, rust patches like scabs. With every gust the railing groans.

He’s walked along the bridge countless times before, coming home, leaving home, going nowhere in particular. He always walked along its side-set path, fenced in from the road and the edge. It never looked this high from the path. He could see out from there, but never down. This is real height, out here on the rail, past the fence. This is a cosmic height. Maybe even a divine height, if one believes in that, he ventures, and he feels the yearning to believe now. Aching arches and sweaty palms are worth such a feeling.

You don’t want to do this, son. Come down so we can talk.

It took a while for anyone to notice him out here on the rail, and then a while longer before they cleared a perimeter around him and phones came out and the woman started sobbing. His arches ached by then.

He stands stock still, as motionless as the cliffs below, meditatively focused, his senses hyperaware. Dr. Lorsan tried to teach him mindfulness. They spent a few sessions on it, breathing a lot, thinking about breathing even more. He never managed it, that acceptance and progression through the world, that wholly, bodily there. Out on the rail, now, he has finally achieved it. He is wholly and bodily here, now, progressing on the rail. But there’s so much—more too—so
much Dr. Lorsan didn’t explain, maybe didn’t know about being *here* or *there*, that it really meant also not being *here* or *there*. Next Tuesday will mark a year since Dr. Lorsan and the Tuesday after that two years since the house. Whatever it is, I’m sure we can fix it.

Can they? He has asked this question dozens of times with dozens of variations, but he hasn’t found the answer. Below knows, though. It must.

Long before he ever stood on this rail, long before this rail existed, that space below him was there. That space below him stretched and wound and slithered back through time, a time so distant he can’t imagine it. Once, long ago, it was all water, before land rose from the depths, a beast emerging from below, and brought with it a whole new world, whole new life. Cliffs now towered and lorded over the water. But one day, after all the eons of splashes and crashes that he can now see but cannot hear way down below in the froth, the cliffs will erode, swallowed back again by the parent who birthed them, who gave life to the new life. Long gone would be the rail, even longer gone him, when the cliffs disappear, submerged beneath the pools. Going down into that water is not a fall but a return. Water is in him now. He can feel it squelching. Water is him. He is water, and one day all will be water again. What lives beyond water, after all?

Please, son. Children are watching.

The sun hangs on the edge of the horizon, partially concealed by the cliffs, casting forth a polychromatic screen of darkly warm hues, reds and purples and pinks. Orange is the sun itself, enlarged by its proximity to the cliffs. How large it would loom once all was water, once the horizon curves and falls away, unbroken by anything but fluffs of cloud, which are really just water waiting to return, like him. He can’t imagine an orange not exactly the orange of the sun right now. He knows there are other oranges—he has seen other oranges—but here and now is only this orange. Orange of fire once flickered in his irises; he stood outside and watched as it licked away his world. But that orange has evaporated out on this rail, and this orange alone remains. Only that purple and red and pink, too, once he thinks about it, remain. Only that gray-blue swashing below. Sunlight iridescently bounces off the water. Movements along the surface make the reflections quiver and dance. He is aware of his body like never before, aware of all of it, the whole thing, here. Not just the aching arches or the sweaty hands or the knees growing a little shaky. He feels the breeze on his skin, on every inch of it exposed, in his hair. He feels the smallest flutter of the air around him. He feels his lungs expand and contract, every increment of their ballooning. He feels the trace of his thoughts, the way they surface, grow, and then disappear, and he feels the ripples they send forth. He feels his blood in his body, moving like those waves, red like the red halo around the cold orange disc. He feels all this as if for the first time. Every pore is individual, distinct, atomized, and he can feel them, each one. And he can extend this awareness out, beyond him, past him, but still with him. What he can’t see or smell or hear or taste he can still feel. Crashes and splashes down below, not even seen now because he can’t focus on both the sun and the water, resonate up to him in lulling undulations. Not on his fingers or his palm or anywhere on his skin: inside is where he feels it, because it is him, and he is it, connected by his water to the water. They are bound by their long history, both experienced and
The Mercury

awaited. They will reunite soon, he knows, because he feels that inside of him too. He feels the lowering of the sun. Not just its last vestiges of warmth or the only-orange glare in his eyes, but the movement of it. He can feel the sinking, the sliding, and he knows it is neither sinking nor sliding, not really, not for him. Like the return to the water, it is not a descent. Sometimes, language fails a sensation. Language, after all, is not water, perhaps the only thing that is not water, and language is all he’d known before that rail.

Are you listening, son? Can you hear me?

The sun now barely peaks out from over the edge, all orange disappearing. It has dipped below the horizon, a horizon now inside him. All of it rumbles together inside, mixing, swishing like the water, his water, the water. There is no he, no rail, and, now, no sun, no orange, not the shade of the sun nor the shade of his banished memory. They are not so discrete as that, so divided. They are one now, and he feels them, deep in here, resting like a weight that pulls him downward and will burst out of him and birth it all anew. He feels only now.

Son…
Texas (with an Accent)

Slow dance polka in your mother’s kitchen,
“How we did it in Texas” you said
and for once I didn’t have a witty quip
about hunting or Republicans or guns
because you were swinging me
through windows full of drying herbs
and your sisters had grabbed each other
and followed our lead—
your mother, oh your mother,
clapping her hands to the beat and laughing
and somewhere I thought
“This is love. Love is THIS.”
And maybe it is and maybe it wasn’t
but I teach my fiancé (who isn’t you)
to polka “the Texas way”
even though I hate Texas
and still, sometimes,
you.
There’s a split second where I’m unsure if this is really happening. Maybe I imagined a car backfiring, or maybe the local kids have started throwing bigger rocks, but when I hear the screams, I know it’s for real. Everyone starts running away, but I know I have to move in the opposite direction. I need to run headfirst into the fight.

My heart is beating so quickly it feels like it could explode. The palpitations are so powerful I can hear the rhythm they keep deep within the canal of my ear. Each new breath I take is being squeezed out of me. Until I learn how to breathe normally under pressure, every breath is a battle in itself.

Sweat is running down my face in sticky beads. It pools at my eyebrows, my upper lip, my chest, and the lowest part of my back. I’m producing so much heat that my special ballistic eye protection fogs up, and I have to rip them off my face just to see.

Kabul, Afghanistan fucking sucks. The sun is always radiating pure hellfire heat. If the humidity didn’t make it hard enough to breathe, the pollutants in the air certainly don’t help. The air is so full of contaminants that a constant cloud of toxins always hangs, hazy, overhead. The water is polluted, running thick and brown from the faucets. The traffic is the worst I’ve ever seen. Worst of all, no one wants us here and, at times, neither do I.

I know I checked this morning to make sure I didn’t forget anything from my uniform but, just in case, I run through the list in my head. I know I have my duty uniform on because the fire-retardant clothes are camouflage and everything else I’m wearing is placed on top of it. I shift the weight of my I.O.T.V.—for plebeians that’s an improved outer technical vest—and I feel both it and my soft armour pull away from my now adhesive skin. I wear four ceramic plates around my front, back, and sides, and they are hefty, but I’m grateful for them because they are ready to stop 7.62 x 31s, rounds fired by AK-47s, the most favoured gun by many of the world’s shitbags.

I tighten my gloved grip on my M4A1 Carbine, a rifle that I’ve had since basic training. Below the M4A1 is my M320 that can fire 40mm fragmentation grenades, smoke bombs, and pyrotechnics. As I run my hand down my gun, I am reminded of the three-hundred-and-forty rounds I’m carrying. I’m carrying one-hundred and thirty rounds more than what is required, but the extra weight means increased safety, and I am comforted.

I squeeze the pocket on my upper thigh to make sure I’m also carrying the tools I need to fix my weapon if it goes down. I am. In the same pocket is a knife, a pen, and a pad of paper. The pocket on the opposite leg would contain my land navigation supplies, things like maps, compasses, protractors, and string, but I think that’s bullshit.

For starters, most of our missions occur in the city doing COIN-op, or counter-insurgency. Then consider that the trucks we ride around in have two different forms of navigational devices, and we always roll out in convoys of three trucks. That means six separate navigational devices would have to go down in order for me to ever use my land navigation skills. As I said, bullshit.
My footsteps are light despite the weight of my combat boots, something I’ve been practicing for close to two years now. As I step, I hear the sloshing of water in my Camelback, the bottom of which is secured by my admin pouch. My admin pouch is brimming with cigarettes, lighters, and chew. It also houses my C.A.C. card and my R.S. Badge, two forms of identification that are used to recognise me by the U.S. military and any N.A.T.O. forces.

I hear a bullet whiz past my ear, immediately followed by shouting.
“GET IN LINE!”
“RETURN FIRE!”
“BATTLE DULL ONE ALPHA CALI!”
After each line is shouted, the entire platoon repeats it in unison.

I can feel everything. A calmness washes over my body, and I am so focused that it’s as if I’m a part of everything surrounding me because of how aware I’ve become. As if I’m one with the battlefield. Yet, at the same time, I’m not here at all. I feel as though I’m observing all this through someone else’s senses. My breathing slows, my eyes widen. Someone better and more experienced, who has been in thousands of firefights, is stepping into my shoes. A real fucking killer.

Then I see ‘em, the enemy. I see him, but he doesn’t see me. His cover is shit. I pull my rifle to my face and align the sight with my right eye. I press my finger against the trigger, so charged and ready to expel a shot into this motherfucker. I line up my shot and blow him away. Easy as that. I shoot him again, and again, and again until I’m sure he’s dead. The craziest part is, after all this time, I’ve actually gotten used to this part of my day.

Bullets sail through the air, but they’re so small and sporadic that I can’t even worry about them. I just progress towards cover and worry about the guy to my right and my left, knowing that he’ll worry for me. These guys are in my platoon. I’ve trained with them for months, lived with them for months. These are not just my co-workers, these are my buddies, my video-game-playing, deep-conversation-having, witnessed-some-crazy-shit-with friends.

And within moments, one of them goes down.

Sometimes, you’ve just gotta let ‘em lie because it could be a trap. The enemy will purposely wound someone, and when you go to save them, they shoot you in the face. Then, the person who comes to save you gets shot in the face. Then, the person who comes to save them gets shot in the face, and so on. This is not one of those times.

Every soldier is combat-lifesaver trained; it’s a school you have to go to before you can be deployed. Because of this, my training kicks in and takes over. I cannot tend to the soldier until the enemy has been killed or properly suppressed. So, I suppress the fuck out of the enemy and put as many rounds in their direction as I can. I shoot until I know they are sorry that they shot all.

I am the member of my team chosen to run out and get the grounded soldier. I recall my AVPU and ABCs, checking to make sure he is alert, verbal, receiving pain, or unconscious. Kneeling beside him and seeing that he is mumbling incoherently and his eyes are fluttering, I look for an entrance and exit wound. Dark blood stains his right knee, and I know I must act immediately

I render him trauma naked by using my knife to cut off his pant leg. Blood is spilling out of his former kneecap, which is now demolished. I run my hand
over his skin to locate the bullet wound, and finding it, I pull out his I.F.A.K., an improved first-aid kit, and rummage for a tourniquet. I slip the tourniquet under his thigh and tie it high and tight, about two inches above the wound. As I knot it for the last time, I begin to stand.

I apply a buddy carry, hoisting his torso onto the backs of my broad shoulders and lacing my arm between his legs. My right arm wraps around his right leg and grasp his right arm, pulling them together. In my left hand, I hold his weapon. His body is heavy, but I’ve been thoroughly trained for this moment. He smells like blood from his wound and smoke from his weapon.

“Hang in there, buddy…You got this, man…Don’t you die on me, you fucker…”

As I enter the concealment of a ramshackle house, I am greeted by another member of my platoon.

“Fucking hell, dude, he looks like shit,” he says, helping me lower the wounded soldier to the floor.

Now, the wounded soldier is completely unconscious, and I go through my AVPU and ABCs again. He isn’t breathing, and I see a newly formed puddle of crimson by his left pectoral region.

“MEDIC!” I scream.

The other soldier is off to my left, watching. I look over at him and notice that he has a radio.

“Get on your radio now and give him the nine lines!” I shout.

I watch as he scrambles for his radio, squeezes the receiver, and recites the five lines necessary to obtain a Medevac. He communicates our location, call sign, the patients by urgency, special equipment, and discloses that our patient cannot walk. After successfully requesting and getting the Medevac helicopter airborne, he can now recite the remaining four lines.

I hear this in the background as I’m ripping off the wounded soldier’s shirt. I’ve gone through his I.F.A.K. to find an absorbent pad to seal the entrance wound on his chest. I hoist him upright to locate the exit wound, which is near his goddamn kidney. This means that the bullet travelled inside his body, bounced around, and, more than likely, his organs are all torn up. I slap another pad on this exit wound.

I lay him down and find that he is still not breathing. I swab the inside of his lips and his throat for any dip that may be lodged inside. Finding none, I locate his NPA, or his nasopharyngeal airway device, and lube it up with the blood, still shiny, surrounding his chest wound. With the bevel in the direction of his septum, I feed the tube through his nose. I open his mouth and push until I see the N.P.A.’s colourful bottom poking out in the back of his throat. When I feel a warm breath escape his mouth and notice his chest has resumed its normal inflations and deflations, I let out a sigh of relief. But the danger is far from over.

“Luke,” my mother’s sing-song voice carries up the stairs, “It’s time for dinner!”

I smell the spaghetti and meatballs from my room. I can already taste the slippery noodles covered in a deep red, chunky marinara sauce. My mouth salivates.
I stand up, pause Call of Duty, and head downstairs, letting my PlayStation 4 controller fall to the floor, and hope to continue my player’s mission after one, maybe two, helpings of my favourite meal.
Two Rooms

I twisted my hands around the straps of my overnight bag as, panel by panel, the industrial-size sliding door closed behind us. Forty-eight hours left in this new place, and I was already anxious to leave. The slamming of the car doors echoed throughout the parking garage as we made our way toward the elevator, my brother and I silently gawking at the unfamiliarity of our surroundings.

As soon as the elevator doors reopened, we stepped into the fluorescently-lit hallway. The smell of spaghetti mixed with stale cigarette smoke hit me like a brick wall. Bag still in hand, I watched my dad locate the apartment key among various others. As I stood there wondering if he still had the one that would bring him home, he swung the heavy door inward, allowing my brother and I to pass through the threshold.

The walls were all white. There was no trace of the warm tan color from the living room in our family home, reflecting the crackling embers in the fireplace. No yellow tint of the dining space that held memories of Christmas cookie decorating, pumpkin carving, and countless after-school snacks. Instead, the sides of the kitchen, leading up the narrow staircase into the open bedroom were all freshly coated in a color that expressed no emotion: a color unable to hold memories.

Other than my dad’s inquisitive “What do you think?” no one had anything to say. To be honest, my dad hadn’t had much to say for the past seven years, so I wasn’t surprised by our lack of conversation. It was almost like he was a stranger to me, an ominous figure that had provided for the rest of my four-person family while only actively participating in larger family functions when work refused any more overtime.

Now, it was this moment that defined how I would view my father for the rest of my adolescent life. Our wandering eyes quickly settled on the television screen set as a main focal point of the living space. As we sat eating our greasy, sad supper in front the flickering screen, I allowed myself to harbor further resentment towards my apathetic father. Not only did I believe that choosing pizza for dinner reflected his carelessness towards us, but I had convinced myself that he was more interested in some History Channel special than his own children.

I knew my definition of “family” had changed significantly since the divorce, but I knew my definition of family would never be this. “Family” meant mom’s home cooked meals and cuddles with our puppy. “Family” was Sunday afternoon cookouts and the tire-swing hanging from the oak in the backyard. It was not awkward silences and stumbling into uncharted territory. It was most certainly not this two-room apartment.

I considered the choirs of “How was your weekend?” that would ensue once I returned to school the following Monday and couldn’t help but cringe. I bargained with myself that I’d either lie, or, if I couldn’t mask my disdain, simply evade the question entirely if it was ever directed my way.

So, as we extended the futon and inflated an air mattress, transforming the living space into a bedroom for my 5-year-old brother and me, I began contem-
plating future excuses to escape a weekend at my dad’s. With exactly forty-two hours left in those uncomfortable rooms, I became unbearably angry. I had no desire to return to this place: empty, forbidding, embarrassing. Hot tears started streaming down my cheeks as I laid in the dark, allowing them to slowly lure me to sleep.
Still-Life (Portrait of a Lover)

i. hands

yours take mine,
take my whole life too
because i fall in love with you
every time you pull me closer
and my skin brushes yours,

heat from your body
like rope winding me,
desire binding the strings
of my heart

to your fingers.
play me like a marionette.
knit me into the fabric
of your heart,
rip out the embroidery of
your last relationship:
a girl that looks just like me,
someone you now consider a psychopath,
a stranger.

i become new when you touch me,
made again from the electricity
sparking from your fingertips;
i am a hotwired car,
i fall into the leather of your
convertible mustang when your
hands and want restrain me.

keep me tethered to earth;
with all of the confusion floating
in the genetic dark of my brain,
this is the only way i feel real.
hands in mine as we dance,
endless movement and time

erases everyone else from the room
until the universe consists
of your palm on my palm.
my heart in your hand,
blood buried beneath nails;
you look at me wondering
why i gave you this damaged thing
to carry.

pull me closer and tie
the knots of me to your wrists.
nervous sweat slicking your fingers
when you first told me
you loved me.
a strong grip when my tears fall
and melt into your skin,
my salt mixing into your bloodstream;

i cannot tell you from me,
i cannot distinguish what hand is mine;
my grip becomes tighter
because even when sense
slips through my fingers,
i cannot let you get away.

ii. neck

press your hands on me,
p press them up against my neck
and wrap your long fingers
around my throat

watch as i gasp for air,
the purple bruises left behind
a request to feel something
to feel real
and what it’s like to comprehend
the feeling of drowning
without water.

am i still alive?
does it count as living
if you press your palms
to detect a heartbeat and i
pronounce myself dead on arrival
from the pills i’ve been taking
to make myself feel whole again,
to feel like my old self again.
depression makes every word i speak
feel like a pretender in your eyes.
my senses burned out
by one too many matches swallowed
and the brandy bottle that lit
my sentences on fire.
place your hands on me.
give me cpr,
teach me how to turn my shaking breath
into something more convincing:

teach me how to pump
my lungs again to
make the heart beat fast
against my neck
in the palm of your hand.

i rest my head
next to yours,
our pulses touching and fighting
but the only war
is to make it to another morning.

iii. legs

we run through meadows of gold,
dandelion puffs and wheatgrass
licking the skin at our ankles.
i want to dance with you
beneath the endless
east coast july sky;

your legs stretch on for miles
a stride to match a smile
to match your skin
as radiant as the sun:
you are summer,
you are the birds soaring overhead

and you never know that i am winter,

i am the cold
that creeps into your jacket
even after it’s zipped up all the way.
i try to pretend like one smile can thaw me.

keep pace with me
even though it’s a hindrance;
your laughter moves faster than your muscles
even though your legs could
cross an ocean,
but mine could only pass a stream
and crumble beneath my foundation.
i remember the sea:
indigo swirling waves
knocked out my knees
and made you stand your ground.
i remember the patio:
dulled neon lights barely
glowing glinting off your teeth
as you rest your hand
on my thigh and it is

so unlike the previous residents
that rented my body as their home,
their summertime cottage
with the heating bill
they always left unpaid.
oh how they ran
away from my heart;
maybe they were waiting
for you to stay.

you have walked beside me
at every step of the way,
every milestone and path
every hike around my heart
around my love.
starting to build a home
in the deep dark wood
along my dirt road
that leads back to where i belong.

you run ahead,
still laughing and smiling
still an aspect of summer
in a changing climate;

still part of the race,
you never lose that golden glow.
i watch your form retreat on the horizon,
a figure running into the sunset.
you are unaware
that i have stopped running.
I-85 runs from somewhere up by Richmond, through most of the southeast, and ends out in Montgomery. It’s one of those highways that’s somehow always crowded but seems to grow more desolate after you leave each successive city; the population follows canyon curves, with stretches that feel like you’re somewhere out in Who-Knows rather than being, as you are, never more than 100 miles from a city. In spite of being a major thoroughfare for these southeastern cities, it still finds a way to be dangerously sharp in some of its curves, especially when it rains, and raining it definitely was when I drove home. Forrest Gump wouldn’t have had the words to describe this kind of storm, I don’t think. Still, it seemed as though we’d all collectively decided that stopping was for chumps.

I noticed her sometime around the I-81 and Rt. 77 interchange, following right on my ass. I brake checked her a couple of times before seeing that it was just some girl who was clearly a little too nervous in the coming rain. Her rationale, I assume, was to stick onto the back of a truck much bigger than her little coupe in the hope that it’d guide her through the traffic (and with the way I drive, I most certainly did). Maybe she saw the college stickers on the back of the truck, along with the license plate (complete with county, as most southern plates are), and decided it would just be easier to make her only focus the back of a truck going to the same place, rather than worrying about the signs, the GPS, or the shoddy directions her father probably sent her. I don’t know, though. I never really got a word in with her.

It was somewhere south of Greenville, just across the Georgia-South Carolina border, that she lost control of the car. I’d been checking the rear-view every once in a while to see if she was still there, and a few times between North and South Carolina I saw her check her phone and drift towards the median, only to jerk back into the lane a second later. This time, though, she didn’t jerk it back. It almost looked as though she was just letting it drift into the grass in the center of the highway. She finally ripped the wheel back and sent her car rolling, its white paint now slinging mud and oil. I slammed on the brakes, skidded into the grass, and ran back to help her, pulling her limp body out of the car and filling my palms with broken glass and a stranger’s blood in the process.

The last thing I remember about her was the way the mud and blood matted her hair. Georgia clay is glue when it’s wet, and it, along with the blood creeping from the point of her gentle widow’s peak, laid her hair flat in my hands and along the grass of the median. Raindrops kept the blood from her eyes and hid the tears I’m sure she was crying, but it made the black, curled mass of her hair like a woolen surplus blanket against my forearm. I wanted to lay her somewhere better, anywhere, but there was nowhere to place her that would keep her hair out of the glass and the clay, so I knelt there, waiting for an ambulance. I held her as gently as I could, this nameless girl, and watched her slip in and out. She breathed in quick gasps at first, shaking, visibly wondering where she was and jerking away from my bloody hands and then back into them when the pain, she realized, was just too much. She looked up at me after each spasm, her eyes wide and her lip, split from the crash, quivering; each time, her
eyes would slip closed slowly and roll backwards. If not for the gasping breaths of broken ribs I would’ve been sure she’d died twelve times before the ambulance finally rolled to a stop, but that was still so far away, and she was running out of time, so I stayed.

There was a rose tattoo on the left side of her neck, right below her ear—American traditional. It was only two colors, red and black. Three, only if you count the ever lightening porcelain color of her skin. The porcelain that was, of course, cracked in a thousand places. The color of her blood matched the rose petals perfectly, if only in the glow of shattered headlights and partial moonlight. I pressed my thumb over the center of the rose, trying to hold the two halves of her skin together like an accidental suture; I was not even the temporary solution, and I was going to lose her. She was begging me in silent gasps and fleeting whispers to keep her there, hold her grounded in southern dust. The rain, though, turned her into copper mud, and she was slipping backwards into the void. I didn’t know what to do but hold her the way I had been for the count of three slips in and out of consciousness and forty-five speeding cars without so much as a brake light or a rubberneck.

She was still fighting four slips and sixty-two cars later, still jerking out of sleep and sliding back into my hand. I held it up against the top of her spine, like I was taught, though she moved enough for me to know that I was simply holding her spine still in her body and keeping the clamp shut so that her ribs didn’t burst into wings and send her out of herself. She gasped twice when she looked behind me, her eyes growing wide and bright, and then shutting slowly, as though closing the blinds at the end of a day. The lights of the ambulance stretched out from behind my back like rays of tinted sunlight across the highway. The red of the siren turned her blood into tar, dripping even from the corners of her eyes. It seeped from the center of her rose and dripped from the de facto ring the crash had created on her lower lip. Nevertheless, they were here. Angels screaming into siren trumpets on their way to do as they do best.

They came in too fast. The tires screamed for mercy as they hydroplaned and slid into the back of the overturned car she was pulled from. I slumped over her to cover her from the glass. The sound of a second crash triggered something inside of her that brought her right back to the surface; her eyes shot open and the creeping blue light behind me lit her eyes up brighter than I’d imagined. The skidding of steel on asphalt and glass on skin, though not hers, made her shake like a bareboned wind chime; the glass both peppered off my soaking back and ripped its claws into me, touching me with leper-spots of blood through my shirt. Though I couldn’t see it, the overturned hood of her car slid towards us like a guillotine. I stayed slumped over her and watched her eyes watch it slip closer and closer among the rock and water of the road. She had the same look in her eyes as it blotted out the warning lights that ancient people did when they saw their first eclipse. It was doomsday, and they were sure of it, though they had no shield over their sky. Still, as if halted by God himself, the white civic stopped before it flattened us, though putting corkscrews and debris into my back, further punishing me for keeling over her and trying to keep her alive. We slipped further into the mud and clay as we waited, though I was still stuck on this nailboard of a hood and she was still the same cracked porcelain doll she was when I’d found her. We waited.
The ambulance sat for what felt like hours before two angels came bursting out of the back and sprinted towards us, kits and tools in hand like flaming swords. One pulled me off of her with a gloved hand and leaned me, weaker than I’d thought, against the guardrail. The glass still lodged in my arm from the driver’s side window from which I’d pulled her slid down and sliced me further than any of us had known. The twisted bits of hood and bumper pressed further into my shoulders as the guardrail and my fatigue laid them in like a vice that only they, the preoccupied angels, could loosen.

I, as she had, started to slip. I dug my nails into Georgia clay to keep myself grounded, but I could feel my hands sink deeper and deeper while my head rolled back and my eyes rolled skyward. I’m sure I was cracked porcelain to the God that was holding me. I’d wondered if it was the bleeding of the cross tattoo on my back that finally brought him down here, finally let him answer to the two reincarnations of Job he’d left on highway 85. I wasn’t sure if the blue lights were making my eyes light up the way hers had, but I knew when each red light flashed that I was covered in blood, or tar, or clay.

Another set of sirens came, and with it, another set of lights, and then another, and then another. God had split open the sky for me and lit the world with headlights and flashing blues and then their flashing reds. Back and forth they went while they tended to her and then, almost by accident, found their way over to me, leaning on the guardrail, eyes pointed skyward. They slid me down, and my head cracked against the mud and stayed there, not bouncing, but stopping dead against the ground. I turned to see her just as they’d elevated the stretcher and brought her towards the dented angel’s chariot. Her eyes were surely pointed skyward, with her temples sandwiched between plates meant to stabilize a neck injury she likely didn’t have.

The last I saw of her as they rounded behind the car and further back into the ambulance was her hair, sticking out from the neckboard and still matted with blood and clay. It lay like an obsidian shield tied to her head, blocking out anyone who held it, passively rejecting the touch of skin from anyone trusted enough to touch her. I was given such trust only because she needed it, I guess. In another life, another world, this is exactly where we’d be. I’d likely never see her in a bar somewhere in Atlanta, buy her a drink, make small talk about the rose tattoo on her neck, or tell her, with my hand wrapped around the nape of her neck and the curled blanket of black hair, how blue her eyes were. I’d only see her again if they placed us next to each other in the hospital, or if I stumbled upon her stone growing out of the ground, but I didn’t know where she was from or even her name. I wouldn’t have known her in another life. I wouldn’t have seen her the way I saw her then.
I Came, I Saw, I Fled: Romantic Cowardice in High School

Back in my junior year of high school, I was fumbling, insecure, and awkward, with dark curly hair, crooked glasses, and a bit of body flab. I was (and still am) an undeniable nerd. I loved Pokémon, video games, and books and hated socializing, group activities, and athletics. A person such as me might as well have had a giant “Don't Date Me” sign on his head, and at this point, I was an outcast from the various cliques at St. Timothy’s Catholic High School—Nicholas Koloian was a nobody.

The conflict during autumn of my junior year, and the apogee of my high school awkwardness, all came down to girls. Everything started with Michael, who almost acted like a friend when he wasn’t making fun of me. A pudgy African American of Nigerian descent who usually wore rimmed glasses, Michael made it his sacred duty to torment me at almost every opportunity. When he asked who my first crush was, I told him because he had told me who his crush was, and I lacked the common sense to not respond in kind. That’s a story on its own, but for now I’ll just say that she didn’t return the feelings, and that my friend Madison helped prevent her from finding out. It did, however, give Michael a precedent to ask me who my second crush was. I refused to tell him, but she was a sophomore named Natasha. Natasha was a petite girl with straight blonde hair, braces, and glasses. I related to her, in a sense, when I overheard people talking about how shy she was. I coveted her because I imagined her as being like me, even though I never spoke with her. She was the only girl I could picture myself with, and I barely knew her.

In a bold betrayal only matched by the likes of Judas handing over Christ to the Sanhedrin, a friend who knew I liked Natasha sold out my secret to Michael for five dollars, which the friend used to buy lunch. Michael informed me that the friend sold me out after school one day and then told a sophomore named Alexis right in front of me. Alexis told another sophomore named Gus, who is the primary agitator of this particular tale.

It happened when Alexis mentioned that I liked Natasha to Gus one day at lunch.

“You mean that really quiet girl?” he asked.

“Yeah, what are you thinking?” Alexis said.

“I’m thinking we should get her over here so Nick can ask her to homecoming.”

The fast-approaching homecoming dance, which I wasn’t planning on attending in the first place, became a source of existential dread after Gus’s statement. He came up with some truly awful suggestions for getting me to ask her out, like serenading her, or asking her out in front of the entire school at homecoming so she couldn’t say no. Then Gus physically held me down at the lunch table so Alexis could find Natasha and bring her over to me. I managed to break free, run out of the lunchroom, and hang out in the hallways for a while. I came back to the lunchroom later for some reason (even now I’m not quite sure why),
and Gus told me I needed to “face my fears.” I turned at the door and saw Alexis and Natasha walk in, triggering a fight-or-flight response that sent me running from the lunchroom again.

But the big awkward moment happened on October 4th, 2013 – my seventeenth birthday. On that day, the hallways, with their bland white walls lined with dull green lockers, were empty at St. Timothy’s, save for Gus and me. Bright ceiling lights gleamed down on the white floor tiles, while Gus sipped from a nearby drinking fountain. I knew Gus was going to agitate me more, which gave me a nervous feeling in the pit of my stomach. Black bangs hung down over Gus’s forehead, overtop pale pimply skin and glasses—his body type was also distinctly doughboy-ish. “Face your fears,” he told me, after he finished his drink. We proceeded to walk down the hallways to geometry, a class we had together, which was also full of sophomores.

The arguing began in the hallway and continued into the geometry classroom, where Gus said he was going to tell her. He then told Pam, Lisa, and Kathy.

“Stop telling people!” I said.

“Practically the whole school knows,” he said.

Great, my secret was spreading like an STD.

The bell for the end of the school day rang, and I walked out of the classroom, down the brightly lit hallways, and eventually into the school’s library. It wasn’t so much a library as a room with shelves stacked with books, full of students goofing off, skipping class, or eating candy instead of reading. From the ratty, light brown carpet to the dilapidated bookshelves with a collection ranging from The Hunger Games to Mein Kampf, the place had no sense of comfort. This was the place I usually waited for my dad to pick me up after school ended.

Michael and another student named Lewis were hanging out inside the library when I entered.

“Gus is talking to Natasha,” Lewis said. Then I saw Gus and Natasha enter the library.

“Coward: One who, in a perilous emergency, thinks with his legs,” wrote Ambrose Bierce. Even if I had known this quote at the time, the wisdom of it would have been lost on me. I ran out of the library and down the entryway. The scene—a large foyer with a triangular roof, light shining down on the floors from the windows at the ceiling arch—was a blur to me as I sped out of St. Timothy’s. I went out of the building and down the long sidewalk, winding around the school. I ran past the white siding and brick foundation of the school, past the green lawn and the dark green shrubs that flanked the building. The sidewalk, right next to the road on which parents drove to pick up their kids, led me to a place right at the corner of the school, right where the road forked off into a T shape. I could wait for my dad to take me home here, and I stared at the trees across from the school, catching my breath and taking a moment to collect myself.

I pulled my cell phone out of my pocket, unlocked it, and noticed a notification onscreen. It was a text from my good friend Madison. She had always been nice to me, the kind of outstanding person you rarely see in a lifetime, let alone in high school. Before this, she had helped me with the first girl Michael tormented me over, finding out that she didn’t want to be in a relationship be-
fore I asked her out and saving me from awkwardness.

Regarding Natasha, Madison didn’t have the full story, but had texted me saying, “Sorry everyone was being a bit of a dick.”

I received no presents from friends on my birthday. Instead I went running from the school like a coward because someone was trying to force me to ask my crush out.

I saw a car drive up to my hiding spot at the corner. It was Michael getting a ride from his carpool. Michael just laughed. The student he carpooled with, Angelica, said “I’ve never seen you run so fast.”

Eventually, they drove off, and my dad came back to drive me home. I didn’t tell him what happened. Upon returning home, we proceeded with a meager birthday celebration, a chocolate cake from Wegman’s. The cake was large, double chocolate, with thick layers of icing and “Happy Birthday Nicholas” written on top of it in blue. My dad went upstairs to take a nap, while I began eating my cake. I was eating a little too quickly. Bite after bite, I was feeling fuller and fuller. Upon finishing, I decided that I’d had enough of that day’s bullshit and wanted to de-stress, to take a walk and listen to some music. I went out the garage door, Bluetooth headphones on, with some nondescript song from a Nintendo video game playing. I barely made it a few houses down from mine when I felt a sinking feeling in my stomach, as if I had just swallowed a load of wet cement, and then the sensation that I was going to be sick. I returned home, entered through the garage again, and ran to the bathroom, where I heaved my birthday cake into the toilet, the ultimate coup de grâce to my self-esteem after my flight from school.

It’s worth saying, to his credit, that Gus never pushed further to try to get me to ask the girl out. Based on what his friends told me afterward, he felt incredibly guilty after seeing me run from the school. High school is a time of great immaturity, and they don’t call sophomores “wise fools” for nothing.

What wasn’t so admirable was that Michael ended up trying to force me to ask Natasha out after Gus relented. At first, I was almost comically unwilling, but the choice was between sucking it up and asking her out myself or having Michael ask her out on my behalf, as he was threatening to do. One day, I was with Alexis when I saw Natasha waiting to be picked up from school. Natasha stood by the school’s front door in the entrance hall, looking out the window to watch for her ride. “She’s right over there,” Alexis told me. “Why don’t you ask her out?”

“Fuck it!” I said. I walked over to her, gathered my strength, and then...

“Hey Natasha,” I said. “I have a question. Would you like to go to homecoming with me?”

She smiled and said something I couldn’t quite make out. Then she repeated herself: “I don’t know.”

“You don’t have to give me an answer if you don’t want to,” I said. She assented and I walked off.

My friends, when they saw what I had done, immediately told me how brave I was. They also pointed out that I was shaking. If Ambrose Bierce’s cowardice quote seemed too harsh on me, Mark Twain once wrote: “Courage is resistance to fear, mastery of fear, not absence of fear.” In that sense, and in that moment, perhaps I had overcome my cowardice.
A few days later, I asked Natasha over Facebook messenger if she had given my question more thought. She thanked me for asking her, but told me she was going with someone who she hadn’t seen since middle school. At least she was polite when rejecting me; the first girl Michael asked out laughed in his face and said no.

I later learned from Alexis that Natasha was going to the dance with another girl. I still clung to the hope that there was some way I could change her mind, some convoluted plan that would get us together. Eventually, I texted Madison from earlier, who by this point knew the full story of the great debacle of October 4th and referred to the aggressors as “huge, colossal assholes” rather than “a bit of a dick.” By then, I had lost all aspirations of changing Natasha’s mind. I told Madison there was no hope of me ever being in a relationship, and that I’d never let myself be burned again. I regret that I don’t remember exactly what she said, but I do remember the general tone—taking a break was fine, but I didn’t need to give it up forever. I would find someone someday. When replying to Madison’s texts, I agreed that taking a break was good. It was only after a few months of waiting in high school that I got over it. From there, it was only a few years later that I realized Madison was totally right, when my romantic situation reversed.

In 2016, at the beginning of sophomore year at Gettysburg College, my flight on the 4th from St. Timothy’s was out of my mind. Instead, a good friend who I had met on my first day of college was on it, and I had hopes of something more with her. I’d been playing it safe with the friend since earlier that year in the spring, spending lots of time with her, but never explicitly saying I liked her. One day that fall, I finally texted her and said, “I don’t know if this is a good way of saying I like you as more than a friend?”

She asked if I meant as a crush or “bffls.”
“Crush,” I said.
Her reply: “Ur cute. :D.”
We then agreed to spend more time together and see where things went.
Almost one year later, now officially dating my college crush, the memory of Natasha doesn’t pain me anymore.
A Letter to My Daughter

Sweetheart,
I'll never be the father you want me to be, but I'll try.

I'll ask God to put lightning in my bones, and have the voltage run through my body
And contract the strings in my fingers
So that I'll never drop you.
Soft skin has better grip than the glass of a bottle,
Or the wrapping of a cigarette.

I'd rearrange the planet for you if I could. I'd bend weapons into instruments,
Turn water into wine when you're old enough
And break the good boys’ hands into holding yours,
Though the curve of your smile would hook them just fine.

I’d sew your clothes out of the sunlight in my hair, and when I ran out,
I would unstitch myself and graft the best pieces of me onto you
In hopes you might wear a thicker skin than I ever had. The world can be so cold and so dark,
But you will be warm, and bright.

When the flushing of your cheeks is taken from you
I will replace it with the redness of my blood,
Tearing myself open so that you could stay the same. I’d be your angel
Only in that I’d have torn my ribs open into wings
To open myself up to be who I should.

All of this because, darling,
You are still a dream,
And that’s all you may ever be.
Promises are so easily made to girls whose names are still blank.

You are only half a whisper,
A breeze that blows in only when I leave the windows open
So that the night air will ease me of my worries.

It is not you that scares me, darling, because I know how far I’d walk for you,
But I don't know where to step,
Nor how far to go.

The world can be so cold and dark,
But you will be warm, and bright
When I finally find you.
The Invention

The first time I saw the shadow girl was my fifth birthday.

That day, at my request, my parents and I went to the park. It didn’t have any playhouses or swing sets, just a yellowing strip of grass and a murky pond. Even so, it was my favorite place in the universe. There, not a single tree or rooftop obscured the horizon, so when the sun rose or set, it was framed by nothing but ivory earth.

We brought a whole loaf of bread with us, as we always did. The loaf had been sitting on the counter, growing stiffer by the day for an entire week, so by the time my birthday arrived, it was ready. I crumbled slice after slice of age-stiff bread in my tiny palms and lobbed the crumbs into the pond. We spent the day watching clusters of fat, glossy ducks gobbling up whatever we threw, paddling with thick yellow feet and squawking. As the evening approached, a chill swept the muggy California air, and my parents and I huddled together in a huge, grass-stained picnic blanket. It smelled like wet earth and summer. The sun was sliding beneath the trees, smearing the darkening water with gleaming bars of orange and gold silk.

I remember the laughter, just snippets of it. My mother’s laugh, like a sweet bell, her hair a dark tangle beneath the picnic blanket. My father, his deep, gravelly chortles thrumming against my back as I laid against him. The air had a crisp, honeyed scent. I don’t remember what we were laughing about, but I will always remember the laughter.

That’s when I saw her. My smile faded like an old photograph. I only just glimpsed her—a flash of dark hair, the length of her fingers—before she vanished into the twilit shadows. But the memory followed me home as if it had folded itself up inside that picnic blanket and nestled in the checked folds.

I knew she wasn’t just a random bystander or someone who passed us by chance. She was watching, hiding. I felt her eyes on me like silent brands. Thinking about her was wrong; seeing her felt...unnatural. It was as if I had seen something that I shouldn’t have, like a kiss on the lips that I should have hidden my eyes from. But time spiraled away, and I almost forgot.

The second time I saw her I was eight. It was the middle of the night, and a gentle hand on my shoulder woke me. My dad was nudging me awake, a finger pressed to his lips.

“Come on, Claire. I have to show you something,” he whispered. Anticipation instantly flooded me. For two months now, he had sequestered himself in our basement, working. When I pressed my ear against the door, I could hear the soft scratching of graphite, the whisper of papers rustling, but I couldn’t fathom what he was making. It wasn’t exactly new to me, though.

My dad called himself an inventor, though he had yet to invent something. He lived off my mom’s sparse paycheck and tried desperately to think of something no one had thought of before.

“A useless endeavor,” my grandma used to quip. “There’s nothing new under the sun.”

“But what about beyond the sun?” he would grin. I suppose that’s why I
adored him so much. There was no such thing as impossible to him, and I was boundless, a child.

But even at the age of eight, I knew there was something desperate about him, something frantic. I'd never been allowed in his basement before, but his half of my parents' bedroom was enough to hint at what it was like. Papers, crumpled and tossed, smears of ink on the sheets, dirty dishes on the nightstand. To me, those drawings, all hectic scribbles and excited scrawlings, were the most mysterious and beautiful things I'd ever seen. I would smooth them carefully with my palms, drinking in his imagination until I heard his boots on the basement stairs. Then I would rush to my bedroom, head spinning, cheeks flushed with the impossible.

In hindsight, I don't know why my mom put up with his work. He lived because of her teaching job, and she supported us alone. But I guess she thought she saw something special in him, in the agitated way he tried to create, the bizarre intelligence behind his eyes. She was right. He was special. Or maybe it was just the way he laughed, stale bread in one hand and a picnic blanket in the other. Either way, she let him sketch and continued budgeting her spare dollars in mason jars.

I'd seen him inspired by an invention before, but that night was different somehow. He had barely left the basement for weeks, and when I did see him, he looked strange. His cheekbones protruded, skin sporting a waxy sheen, and his face was sallow. His eye sockets were sunken and dark, as if bruised, but his eyes...they were thrilling. They were electric in a way that I'd never seen before: raw, unbridled.

That night my heart fluttered in my throat. Was he going to show me his invention? Would I be allowed, finally, into the wonderland of his basement? What would it look like? I imagined beakers filled with sparkling, vibrant liquids, rabbits hopping in hanging enclosures. But we didn't turn towards the basement. Instead, we crept towards the guest bedroom. I held my breath as we ascended the stairs noiselessly. He grinned, opening the door with exaggerated caution, and I watched with wide eyes as he pried open the window. Awkwardly, he swung his lanky legs out and over the sill. Perched on the roof and grinning mischievously, like a child, he turned to me.

"Don't tell your mom," he whispered, holding his arms out to me. He lifted me out onto the roof and into the humid night air. Then he lay down right there, sprawled out under the immeasurable expanse of the night sky. I scrambled down next to him. The gritty asphalt shingles pricked my elbows.

"This is what I wanted to show you, Claire. Look up," he said. The moon was huge and pearlescent, hanging dangerously close to earth. The stars were close enough to taste. I sighed.

"Isn't it amazing?" he breathed.

"Yeah. I wish every night could be like this," I murmured.

"But they won't be," he said softly. I turned to look at him, taken aback. He shifted to peer at me, and there was that glint in his eyes, that dark, obsessive excitement that was beginning to frighten me a little.

"But if you could go back in time," he continued, "you could revisit this moment, again and again, as many times as you want."
I sat up.
“You would never have to wish for nights like these again, Claire.”
“What are you talking about?” I asked, but I already knew.
“It’s my invention! The Time Machine!” he exclaimed, folding his arms under his head in self-satisfied way, beaming up at me. I rolled my eyes, propping my elbows beneath me. I only realized he was serious when he remained silent, his eyes shadowed and searching beneath his brows.
“Mhm…” I began.
“No, really! I’m not joking, Claire! So many people have tried before, and I’ve been looking at their attempts, and I think they’ve been going about it the wrong way entirely! I think I know what to do now--how to make it work!” he burst, sitting bolt upright, “I have what they were missing! That old basement is going to be an edifice of science! My Time Machine is going to change...everything,” he declared, his voice low and strained. His hands were calloused but still delicate, like an artist’s, when they clasped mine.
“It is going to change the world, Claire. We are going to change the world.”

He radiated excitement. I knew he needed me to believe in him. He needed me. He’d never needed me before. I allowed a small smile, and his eyes were suddenly ablaze with pride.

It was infectious. I giggled, the exhilaration slowly gripping me, stealing my breath.
“I can’t believe it! You’re serious?!?” I gasped, and he bobbed his head.
“Why would I lie?”
“You...you can really do it? Do you really think you can?”
He put his finger to his lips in caution and nodded vigorously. Then we were laughing, delirious with exaltation.

For a while, we just flopped onto our backs on the roof, beaming up at the stars, and in that moment I could have sworn I was one of them. We both were; so bright and impossibly untouchable. It was as if the future was spilled out before us in the patterns of the Milky Way, and I knew that nobody could look at my face without being blinded. Nobody could touch me without feeling that bursting light just beneath my skin, white-hot embers of hope. We were unstoppable.

Suddenly I felt the sensation of eyes on my skin. Of watching. I turned. The shadow girl was there, standing stock-still on the roof. She was just a dark frame, perched lightly on the shingles, as if she were a ray of light on the verge of vanishing. I couldn’t see her face, but the moonlight illuminated the crescent of a smile. And then she was gone.

It wasn’t exactly threatening, but I immediately felt protective of my father. Was this girl trying to steal his ideas? But no, she couldn’t be. I’d seen her before, a long time ago, in the midst of some sun-sweet memory...

Soon after that, the sounds in the basement changed from the whispering of a pencil to the grinding and shrieking of metal on metal. It drowned out my voice. I tried to keep my excitement fresh--tried to help. On the roof that night, he’d needed me. But as his work drew him closer to a breakthrough, it pulled him further from me.

Years passed. I saw the shadow girl five more times, seven in all. I never knew how to feel about her presence. She just watched. She appeared mostly on
the happiest of occasions, like my high school graduation, and though I never saw her face, she seemed glad for me. At first, I thought she was a ghost. Some sort of lost spirit following me in secret. After a while, I began to think of her as a sort of guardian angel. Even when I couldn’t see her, I felt her like a hand on my shoulder. But as my dad became more and more obsessed with his work, her presence became less and less frequent. Though the shadow girl unnerved me, I felt unexpectedly abandoned.

I grew up. Once he began his work on the Machine, he spent more time surrounded by cords and wires and plates of metal than he did with any human being. Eventually, mom and I moved into a different house with a roof much too slanted to sit on and stargaze. It was a tiny house. Mom planted vibrant flowers and crawling ivy everywhere, and the effect was that of an old-fashioned cabin in the woods. It was as if she were trying to ward off technology completely. The new house had no basement.

For a while, it seemed as if my father hardly existed. Mom and I would sit on the threadbare couch in the new house, sipping tea and pushing pawns across a stained chess board. But my father’s personality was so sharp, his presence so acute and lively, that his absence was just as palpable. We tried to laugh it off, but without his energy, that frantic scrambling for answers surrounding us, it seemed like we had no direction.

Between the bell-notes of my mother’s laughter, I could hear him. In the moments when her eyes weren’t fixed on me, I could see him. In the space between her words, in the silence between her heartbeats, in the early mornings when she pushed her coffee cup away from her and cast her eyes towards the lake, I could feel him. She could, too, and I guess that’s why she died. When she stopped eating, I knew that she was already gone. My father wasn’t at her funeral. I faced it, robbed by time and dreams and a basement.

But I wasn’t completely alone. The shadow girl was there beside the coffin, just before the friends and distant cousins spilled in with flowers and perfumed sympathy cards. I barely caught a glimpse of her as I turned into the reception room. One long-fingered hand was cupping a rose bud, but she disappeared too quickly for me to see much else. She’d pulled one of the petals free when she fled, though, and I clutched that petal in my fist throughout the entire funeral. It was damp and creased, but it was my companion.

As time passed, I barely saw my father. I knew his health was slowly worsening as his obsession grew, but even so, I rarely visited. He never called. I occasionally called him, but when we were on the phone he always sounded distant and distracted. I didn’t really mind. I called him because he was my only relative left, not because I knew him. Ignoring me was the least painful thing he’d done.

Sometimes, I stared at the peeling plaster ceiling at my mom’s house, the house that I now owned, and thought about the days when the plaster was the night sky and my father’s eyes weren’t hooded and dark. The days when he was just an unsuccessful nobody, with a useless job and a mischievous grin, a knack for stargazing and a fistful of stale bread. But those days were gone.

When I was 20, the time finally came. My dad called me. I answered on the first ring, sure there was an emergency.

“Dad?” I asked, my blood rushing audibly.

“It’s finished,” he whispered. His voice was thin from disuse.
“What?” I asked blankly. I could hear his breath through the speaker, shallow and tense.


I sped through every red light on the way to my parents’ old house, weaving between cars. When I got there, he was sitting in the front lawn, looking comically out of place. His skin was practically transparent, and he had lost an enormous amount of weight, his bones jutting like knives. He was skeletal, but the gleam in his eyes was stronger than I had ever seen. A feeling of unease beleaguered me. The grass, unkempt and shaggy, had grown long and yellow.

Inside, the house was almost exactly as mom and I had left it. Except, of course, for the dust. An old telescope sat by the window, and a few of my stuffed animals lay discarded on the carpet. It was like an abandoned building—a ghost town. Our lives, frozen in place and left to wither. I wondered for a moment if dad had even noticed when mom and I left.

My hearthammered in my chest as I walked down the basement steps for the first time. I’d always thought my first time in his secret study would be an exciting, enchanting moment. Standing in the simple cement room, I felt numb.

My father’s creation was in the center of the space. The Time Machine was oddly small and simple. Just a box, a metal cube really, veined with a labyrinth of gleaming wires and glowing buttons. It was barely big enough to hold a person. I knelt in front of it, staring at the countless years of tireless work, the memories of my dad I would never have because of this box. It had stolen them from me.

“How would you like to be the very first time traveler?” I heard him ask, his voice distant. There was a clicking noise as the door swung open on well-oiled hinges, and the hum of electricity washed over me. I folded myself into the tiny box, knees to my chest, the coolness of the metal seeping through my shirt.

“When do you want to go?” he asked. I already knew the answer. This box had taken my mom, crushed the breath from her lungs. It had robbed me of all those memories I should have had with my dad. Now, it was going to give them back to me.


The machine clicked and thrummed as my dad pushed the buttons and shut the door, locking me into the darkness.

When I got out, it was all exactly as I remembered it. The quiet ripples on the pond. The ducks gliding across the water. The picnic blanket and the little girl, and that laughter. I could hardly make them out beneath their shelter, that mud-smeared blanket. I still didn’t catch what we were laughing about, but we were together.

Five-year-old me did something unexpected then. She peeked over the blanket. I saw her eyes find me.

Right then I knew that I would never stop visiting myself. I would appear on the roof of my house, at my high school graduation, and every moment in between. I would never go back to the bleak present. What was left for me there? I knew then that when the Machine was finally destroyed, I would remain.

She didn’t see much. A flash of dark hair, the length of my fingers. But I knew what I had become from that moment on. A shadow.
Holding Me

Cradling myself, feeling the support of the kitchen floor beneath me. The grey and brown swirls of the tile are cold and tough. I surrender all my weight into the light brown, wooden cupboards beside me. I don’t care that my tears are distorting my thick, black eyeliner. The heat they bring is welcomed because I find my skin to be freezing. I try to curb my inner monologue because my thoughts are elusive and sometimes too fast for me to catch. I try to control my thoughts because thoughts turn into triggers. Triggers are dangerous because they stop my breathing, they quicken my heartbeats, and they transport me to a scene of their choosing. But it’s too late to avoid that now.

He was my best friend. Sometimes I think about how happy we might have been if the bad, the horrors, had never existed.

But they did.

We met in the summertime, when the sky was blue and the shade of a tree provided shelter. Six years ago, at the age of fourteen, he was just over six feet tall. His eyes were wide and light blue with a little hazel circling his pupils. His hair was outrageous, untamed, and black. I remember running my fingers through his thick curls, lightly grabbing hold, and leaning in for a soft kiss where his lips embraced mine.

We were so in love. Maybe in the you’re-too-young-to-know-what-love-is-kind-of-way, but it was wonderful. We spent every weekend together, always doing something outdoors. Maybe it was a sailing trip with my parents or a wine festival with his. Whatever it was, we were together, and I was incandescently happy. We were the type of couple that everyone was jealous of. If he could, he would never let go of my hand. If he could, he would make sure I was always smiling. If he could, he would never let a moment pass by without letting me know that he loved me.

We attended two different high schools, he and I. He went to Gettysburg, smack-dab in the middle of Adams County, Pennsylvania, and I went to Fairfield, just fifteen minutes southwest. Fairfield is a rural town where the cows outnumber the people, everyone knows everyone else, and drama spreads like wildfire. To me, Gettysburg was the town where all the essentials were: Walmart, Giant, restaurants, outlets, etc.

Because we lived in two different towns, we could only see each other on the weekends, but we made the most of it. Once, I attended his soccer game and cheered his name so loudly and so often that I lost my voice. I sat in the grass with his father, stepmother, and two stepbrothers. The grass was itchy, but I didn’t mind because I was watching my superstar take the field and totally annihilate the other team. He scored goal after goal and, as he ran past me, he would wink and say, “How’s my girl doing?”

I loved being called “my girl.” I loved being possessed, knowing I was his and he loved me. The way he acknowledged my presence gave me a high. My body erupted with pleasure that started in my chest and spread to my fingertips. No matter how embarrassed I felt, no matter how much my modesty
felt betrayed, I would smile. A big, goofy, unashamed-to-be-loved-by-the-best-
boyfriend-in-the-world smile.

But that smile would vanish after a year of bliss. The smile he fought so
hard to keep on my face would falter and disappear.

July 31, 2012. One year, one month, and twenty days after we met.

It was premeditated. The expansive forest behind my house, the comforter
taken from my bed, the condom stolen from his parents. I had changed my out-
fit at least seven times but settled on a short, tight dress with a floral pattern. A
little too girly for my taste, but what other costume could’ve been more perfect
for my deflowering?

We were both acknowledged virgins and owned the innocent awkwardness
of that fact as we hiked about a mile into the woods. Nervous laughter and
multiple whispers of “Are you ready for this?” interrupted the forest’s quiet de-
mianour. As we stepped foot onto the sacred ground chosen for this occasion, I
felt the nervousness ease in my stomach. We helped each other unfold the com-
forter and place it on the forest floor. Smoothing out the wrinkles, we ended
up on opposite sides of the blanket. We made eye contact, and he spoke first.

“Are you nervous?” he asked.

“No, I know you’ll be gentle,” I said.

And with that, I crawled towards him and let my fingertips pull upward at
the seams of his grey t-shirt. Taking his turn, he tugged at the hem of my skirt
before realising that it needed to be taken off in the other direction. In one,
fluid motion, he pulled the dress up and over my head. I wriggled my arms free
from their sleeves and stood before him in only my bra and panties. He decided
to take off his shorts himself because the button had always caused me trouble.

Simultaneously, we undressed down to our bare skin. I allowed myself a
moment to acknowledge everything my senses were experiencing. Before this
moment, I had only seen his bare chest in the context of a pool. Now, he was in
front of me with nothing to hide behind. The various shades of green enveloped
us. The dark green grasses curled over the edge of the blanket. The lighter green
leaves canopied the tops of trees, contrasting the sunlight sneaking through the
gaps between branches. Even the browns from the trunks of trees were encircled
by lush green vines.

He reached up, brushing the loose strands of hair from my face, and kissed
me. It was different from other kisses he’d given me. This one was hard and,
acting like a leading question, begged for a response.

Close by, a branch fell.

Its crackling noise stole my attention. My awareness expanded from his
immediate touch to the surrounding forest. My Cherokee-oriented grandfather
taught me that nature is sentient and autonomous. In the moment, the trees
became perceptive and the soil in which they grew was responsive. The forest’s
presence overwhelmed me. It provided active company. The green engulfing
my vision was dynamically occupying this moment. The vegetation remained
unbiased, but I could not help but find comfort in its existence. But this ease
would be short-lived.

As I emerged from our thick haze of intimacy, I noticed that his expression
was one of annoyance. He was clearly flustered that I had broken his concentra-
tion and, therefore, killed the mood.
“May we resume?” he pressed.

“Can I just have a minute?” I pleaded, “I’m sorry, I just got caught up in the moment, and that clamour made me jump.” Suddenly, the thought of un-welcome hikers crossed my mind, and the fear of being happened upon made me uneasy.

“Are you serious? Do you even want to do this? Are you just making up excuses because you can’t just tell me that you don’t want to be with me?” he probed.

“Of course not! I was so excited for this moment! It was going to be so special…” I felt my voice begin to trail off.

“Was? So it’s over? Just like that you decide that we’re through here? That this isn’t going to happen?” he assumed.

“No, that’s not what I meant—”

“Because you don’t get to decide that, you know. You built this up, you got me all hard, and now you have to honour your word,” he stated firmly.

“But I’m just not in the right mindset now, you know? I’m sorry,” I said.

“You will be.”

In a flash, he placed his right hand on the curve of my shoulder and his left around my neck. He had never touched me this way, and it rendered me speechless. His grip was so tight that I could follow his veins from the back of his hands, up his arm, to his biceps. His eyes were darker now, his dilated pupils taking up most of the space, and his jaw was clenched, as if he was putting every ounce of energy into this action. I was eighty-five pounds, and I knew he could overpower me, but I still didn’t understand what was happening.

My body became tingly and numb as I felt him push me onto my back. I even remember blinking at him a few times, wide-eyed, as I stared into his familiar blue eyes, as he lowered himself to reflect my horizontal state. I allowed him to position my body, like a puppeteer manipulating his doll.

Heaving, he separated my legs. He tugged my underwear down over my knees, then over my ankles, and eventually onto the pile of clothes I had willingly removed. He situated himself between my thighs, creating a space wide enough for his hips.

I remember how dizzy I felt as I refocused my eyes on the leaf-speckled ceiling. All of my blood drained from my face and rushed to my heart, which was now beating so loudly that even he couldn’t help but notice its rhythm. He gathered my limp wrists into one of his giant palms and held them above my head. With his other hand, he adjusted himself and pushed into me.

The pain startled me, and I yelped. In that moment, everything was too much. My senses were overwhelmed. I could taste the blood in my mouth, as I had unknowingly been biting my tongue. I could hear the breeze move nearly-weightless objects across the ground beside my head. I could smell the perfume I had borrowed from my mother in honour of this occasion. I could see how his body contorted mine. As I exhaled, his weight crushed my ribs, not allowing my lungs the courtesy of another breath.

I raised my head to see if the fear on my face could be registered and processed as an apologetic surrender. I repeated my repertoire of apologies and pleas but he took my words and twisted them into consent. This was before I learned that silence makes him softer.
“It hurts!” I cried.
He ignored me, and another sharp pain was followed by a shift of weight. I
felt him thrust his full body weight into me.

I started screaming and thrashing within the confines of his grip, “Please,
I’ll do anything! Please stop! Stop!” He tightened his grip and choked my sobs
away until I was left, whispering, “Please… Please… Please…”

After what seemed like hours, his grip loosened, and he pulled away. When
I inched away from him, I clasped my hand over my mouth. About three feet
below the indent that my head left behind was a pool of blood, now staining
the middle of my childhood comforter. I pulled my knees upward to rest my
chin on their boniness.

He edged slowly towards me, offering my clothes in lieu of a white flag.

“I’m sorry,” he said, his eyes, now soft, pleading with mine, “You’re just
so beautiful that I couldn’t help myself, and I had built up this moment in
my head, and the thought of not going through with it today nearly broke my
heart. Don’t you understand?”

I couldn’t find the words. I couldn’t even look at him. I grabbed my clothes
from his hand and slowly began to dress.

“Are you really going to be a baby about this whole thing? I mean, come on,
wasn’t that everything you ever wanted it to be? Wasn’t it special?” He reached
his hand out to touch mine, and I flinched, the first of many to come.

“Oh, Love, you know I would never do anything to hurt you. Please? You’re
making me feel bad,” he beseeched.

That broke me and he knew it. A guilt swelled up inside of me that was so
great and so overwhelming, that I smiled. I turned to face him, lifted his hand
to my lips, and kissed his clasped hand. As my dimples gave way, he enveloped
me in an embrace that reeked of a false sense of safety. But while I was shrouded
in his arms, I buried my face in his chest and allowed silent tears to fall.

My eyes burn, my head is pounding, and my lungs feel like they are thaw-
ing. All at once, very real arms surround me. I’m lifted off the kitchen floor, and
my feet are grounded. My mind still feels clouded, and my body is weak from
reminiscing, but he knows this. He scoops me off my wobbly feet and carries
me to my bed.

Trying to calm my dread, my beloved sings to me, “You are my sunshine,
my only sunshine…” I almost urge him to stop because this nightmare will not
be soothed with a nursery rhyme, but think better of it because his voice settles
my breathing, dries my eyes, composes me.

“Which time was it?” he inquires, his low whisper not intruding on my
privacy but genuinely wanting to understand, to help.

“The first,” I manage, but my voice breaks.

“It’s ok. You’re ok. You’re safe now,” he repeats. With each phrase, he
strokes my hair in rhythm. “He’ll never touch you again,” he says, sternly. And
although an embrace from my protector may send me back into the arms of my
demon, all I want, more than anything in the world, is to be held.
Spring Wakas

Beckoning colors,
Draw up my eyes, stretch minutes,
Grooming longer days.
Fanatic, eating the sun,
Now is no time for sleeping

My forbidden love,
If I wait to watch you wake,
You’ll sleep forever.
Rapidly springing to green,
I roll your new leaves and feast

Chapels are structured
From canopies, as nothing
Godly could be this divine.
Devotion reemerges,
Not remembering time sans shade

Saturated with jade,
I lie organic, apart
From my maker, lone, rootless
Like cream in unstirred coffee,
Like harmony with no song

Branches like harp strings,
Vibrate tonally, birth leaves;
All that moves makes sound.
I grow now, but one day die,
Singing, and one day, muted
Are You Ready?

A space emerges before you. First, a crack, a sliver, and then it swells. Light pours through the opening. The light hurts. You squint your eyes against it and hope it will dissipate.

You wish to remain where you are, but a hand is on you, and it ushers you toward the light.

Droplets that kaleidoscopically interact with the light plaster your skin. Your palms especially, curled into little balls, are moist.

“Come on,” a voice says. “A little more.”

The light has swallowed everything. You can see nothing in it. All noises, including the voice, sound thunderous and hollow, as if echoed down a well. A strange pounding reverberates all around you, thumping intensely and rhythmically.

Shadowed outlines surface from the light and slowly materialize into shiny blurs. An arm extends outward from you, pale and bristled with thin, flat hairs. It turns blue above the elbow, rippling like the ocean at twilight. More pale appears past the blue. An edge, like a cliff face, juts out with sprinkles of dirt irregularly patterned across it. Two thin, pink lines protrude above that, a brown bush above those.

“Come on,” the voice repeats. The pink lines tectonically divide and recollide.

You move into the lighted space.

“Not much further now.” This is a man. His voice doesn’t rumble anymore, no longer sounds like it roars from the clouds. It comes out throaty.

“Right in here.” This time it’s a new voice, adenoidal and slightly screechy, and it comes from behind and to your left. You see eyelids painted a bruised color. This is a woman. Her arm, thinner and with less coating than the man’s, touches your other shoulder. Her fingers form more of a caress than the grip of the man’s. Both, in their own ways, feel reassuring.

Glasses slip down the man’s nose and he takes his arm off you to push them back up. Images move in the lenses. As you blink, a figure blinks back. You realize that is you staring back.

The woman also removes her hand, and your legs feel like they can’t possibly hold you. You teeter in place. Knowing you must move, you drive your knee upward and push your foot out. You sway dextrally. Without thinking, your arms extend laterally. You bring your left leg forward and discover balance anew.

There is a straight-backed chair in the middle of the square room. A fluorescent rectangle blazes directly above the chair, and a few specks of dust play in the air beneath it. All the walls are sterilely white and have a vaguely reflective quality that makes them seem like they move. On the wall to your left, facing the back of the chair, a clock hangs. The wall across from that, the one the chair faces, has a single, long mirror running across it, several feet high. Over in the corner across from you and to the left is a panel with a series of switches and dials.

Your feet no longer feel unsteady. Your body groans.
A man in a white smock stands a few feet behind the chair and watches you closely. His coal eyes move up and down your body and penetrate it, seeing the muscles and tendons and bones underneath. Another man in a navy button-up lingers near the back of the room, shifting his weight and causing the light to bounce off his smooth head at different angles. He stares straight ahead in a way that says he isn’t looking at anything in particular, one hand on a black belt, displaying no sign he has noticed you. A five-pointed star glints from the left side of his chest, and to the right of it is a tag that reads Juris. A woman in a teal blouse lingers between the man behind the chair and Juris at the back of the room. Her hair perches in a tight bun, and her eyelids are a droopy, fleshy pink. Her eyes also penetrate you, but this penetration feels different, as if she sees things inside you that you don’t want to see. She smiles at you with tight lips.

Your body has stopped groaning, and the smooth, glossy slate floor looks lower than before.

“Are we almost ready?” the white-smocked man asks.

The bruise-eyed woman and the man with the glasses leave. With the finality of a tomb slab slid into place, the door closes behind them. You glance at it, also white and with a worn-bronze knob on its left side, and you know there is no returning, no heading back through that door, and you can already feel the memory of the space beyond it seeping away. The light buzzes.

You stand alone and hesitate.

Juris turns and now all eyes in the room look at you.

The woman with the tight lips walks over towards where you stand. Her heels clack like heartbeats. She still smiles at you as she reaches your side. “My name is Dr. Potestas, and I’ll be supervising today.” She puts her matching-teal-nailed fingers gently around your arm. “Come on,” she says as she takes a step forward. “I’ll go with you.” You mimic her step beside her.

She keeps going and leads you towards the chair. With each step your soles clap against the floor. As they bounce around the room, they combine into an applause that you find both exhilarating and menacing.

Juris checks his watch.

You reach the edge of the chair and something in your stomach distends. Dr. Potestas takes her hand off your arm. The air against the skin where her fingers lingered feels cold.

Your knees have begun to throb dully. Hand shakily extended, you feel the arm of the chair. Cold, slick wood greets your skin.

“Okay, sit down, and we’ll secure you.” The white-smocked man, who has not moved, pats the back of the chair. He has a gold cap on his first right bicusp.
 shouldn’t?”

“That’s why you’re here. That’s why I’m here, why they’re here” the white-smocked man gestures around the room. “For you to sit.” He peers straight at you as he says this, and his voice carries something final.

By now, the aching in your knees has spread and reached your hips and the lower region of your back.

“They were wrong about me, you know,” you say. “They were wrong.”

“Everyone says that.” Juris takes another step towards you, puts his hand on your shoulder, and gives you a slight push. “Now do as he tells you and sit.” Your hold on the chair keeps you from stumbling.

With another attempt at a swallow, you acquiesce and move around to the front of the chair. As you lower yourself as slowly as you can, the exertion burning in your thighs, something inside tells you that it’s not time yet. You are unsure what it’s not time for. A moaning issues from the chair as more weight than you expected presses down into it. The chair feels rigid and, somehow, relaxing.

“Okay,” the white-smocked man says. He steps from behind the chair and moves to your right arm. He grabs the black strands dangling from the chair and straps you in so tightly you can feel your heart beat in the crease of your elbow. After your arm, he moves to the front of the chair and straps in one leg and then the other, attaching something you can’t see that feels cool to your left leg, and then he stands and reaches over to your left arm. One final strap stretches across your torso and squeezes in your diaphragm so that it becomes difficult to breathe. As he loops this last strap, you can smell something chemical about him. He looks at you studiously again before he steps away.

The man no longer in front of you, you now look back at yourself in the mirror. The clock on the opposite side of the room indicates it is three minutes from twelve. Its red hand ticks in a blur. Juris has reassumed his stoic-sentry position below the clock, staring at nothing with an air of dignified purpose. Dr. Potestas still hasn’t faced back around, and her head hangs towards the floor.

You hope and fear that people are on the other side of the mirror and see the clock racing, too. Mostly, you fear that they look at you.

“Are you ready?” asks the white-smocked man.

“The clock,” you say. “Why is it moving so fast?”

“Are you ready?” he asks again. The way he peers at you tells you that it doesn’t matter whether you are ready or not, and you don’t know anyway, so you don’t answer.

A thin, black cloth slides down your face. It slips over your nose and settles around your jaw. Each breath pulls the material toward your mouth and your exhalations feel warm against the cloth. It smells like salt. If you squint, you can see vague outlines through the black layer. The silhouette of what you presume is still the white-smocked man walks over to the dials in the corner of the room and grabs something circular from atop the machinery that has a tail slithering from its back which connects to the panel. He returns to the chair and slides this thing onto your head like a crown, pushing and pulling on the shroud. You had no idea a crown could be so uncomfortable. Wrapped from temple to temple, it squeezes your head in places hair once sprouted. A single bar rests across the top of your skull.

The silhouette behind you moves away. “Okay. I think it’s time.” The voice
sounds quietly indistinct, as if not meant to be heard, and the acoustics of the room mask its tonal source, so you don’t know who speaks. From behind the shroud you can’t see the clock hands and don’t know what time it is. You imagine the hands spinning so quickly that they hypnotize those who look upon them.

The figure behind you moves back over to the corner and raises an appendage to the panel.

The light above you flickers, goes out, and then brightens into a shimmering halo. The air smells hot. Someone screams from a distance, and the voice sounds familiar, but you cannot place it. Your body irregularly and painfully tenses and jolts but you don’t tell it to. Pinpricks have begun in the tips of your fingers. The halo has swelled into a sun, and you see other stars appearing around its edges. These stars are not like the one on the man’s chest. A song you have never heard before but which originates from inside you sizzles through your head and reminds you of the quiet hum of dusk. The sun has gotten closer and closer, and you can feel its heat tingle your nose while the other stars swirl around you in a dance perfectly attuned to the throbbing cadence of your song. Something inside your chest desperately wants out, and you want to ask it why, why does it want out of you, but you no longer have a voice. Is it time and are you ready? Do the people on the other side of the mirror see the clock now, or can they only look at you? All shapes have disintegrated, even the layer of the veil. You can no longer feel the straps pinching your forearms or the pressure of your lungs or the stiff set of the chair. Are you really innocent? You aren’t in any one position, like liquid released from its container. The tingling of your nose spreads and immerses every particle of you in celestial droplets, and you feel them slowly moving inside of you and making you glow, but you feel this from afar. Lights have become light as the dancing stars and sun conjoin into a descending, encompassing wave that pumps bursts of heat you swear you can see and taste and hear. The prickly sensation has now spread to more regions than you knew you had. The song reaches a pitch and blares like a musical siren. It no longer matters if you’re ready or guilty. The light quivers, collapses, explodes, and then recedes into a crack, a sliver across the black space that emerges before you.
Seeking Totality or: Risking Blindness Nearly Naked in My Front Lawn

I stand in my front yard. Half of the grass I can see is mowed in wobbly, vertical lines, trails of yellowing clumps running parallel to the cut lanes; the other half, which is to my left and across the driveway from the cut side, is high enough to tickle the bottom of my shin and subtly glistens with left-over dew. I wear only gray briefs and a pair of cheap, plastic sunglasses I found in the junk drawer. Its hinges and temples are a shamrock green. Something crawls over my feet. I ignore it, and it scurries on. A car drives down my lane, and the racket of the flung pebbles rebounds off the trees.

Against every recommendation coming from the TV inside, I’m staring straight at the sun without protective glasses.

When I was between six and eight I experienced a meteor shower.

My best friend, a shy boy with an inherited overbite named Nathan, lived in a house similar to mine: two stories, remote, atop a hill with a sizable lawn flanking all sides of the house, and surrounded by woods. It was an ideal locale for meteor-watching. My presence at his house late at night meant it was either a Friday or a Saturday—no sleepovers on school nights.

I had a ghost runner on third—the supportive pole near the washer and dryer—and led by two runs when Nathan’s mom came down the basement stairs. “Come on,” Mrs. Zetterstand said. “Come out and watch the meteors.” I dropped the meter stick we used as a bat atop home plate—a pillow—and Nathan set the beanbag ball on the stairs as we hurried after his mom. I made sure to remember the details of our game.

Mr. Zetterstand and Nathan’s older brother, Shane, met us at the top of the stairs. “The shower should be starting soon,” Mr. Zetterstrand noted, steering us outside by the shoulders.

The sky outside was twilit and cloudless. The tree line was marked by edges of a deeper darkness.

As soon as we stepped outside, Nathan and I began playing, chasing each other around, looking for quartz in the dark. Mr. and Mrs. Zetterstrand and Shane, too old to care about quartz, stood in a loose triangle and peered upward, Mr. Zetterstrand occasionally checking his watch.

After a few minutes, Mrs. Zetterstrand gasped and quietly said, “Look.”

I don’t know whether I listened to her, whether I stopped and regarded the distantly burning sky. I have a vague memory of standing next to Mrs. Zetterstrand, her hair silver and her arms wrapped around herself. She gazed upward. In this memory, the streaks are an acidic green, a shade associated with cartoon aliens, ones with teardrop heads and obsidian eyes. Meter showers are, of course, not an acidic green.

The source of this misremembrance remains unknown, and it makes me doubt I ever looked up.
If I squint and peer through the cloud cover with the sunglasses, I can discern the dark, distant outline of the moon pushing against the white of the sun, the image like a cookie with a cleanly round bite out of it. I can’t actually see the moon. I see only where the sun isn’t.

It is now 2:27. My phone, to my surprise, has managed to capture exactly what I see in the sky. Later, I’ll delete these photos to save space; they are for my parents who, on their drive home from Minnesota, say they can’t stop and look. “That is beautiful!” my mom replies. I suppose she’s right. It looks like every other gibbous to me, except I know it’s the sun.

Beyond the meteor shower, I have lived through a series of partial eclipses and appearances of Venus. Like the meteor shower, I never saw any of them. Afterward, I looked at the photos that appeared online or flickered on the news and wondered if they really looked like that, looked so vivid, so sublime, every picture inspiring awe.

This new event has stirred something inside me none of the others had. Maybe taking an astronomy course titillated my inner Galileo. Maybe I want an excuse to stop vacuuming around the house for my parents to return. Maybe the promise of totality tinges it with a consequentiality I subconsciously find lacking in the other cosmic events; a partial eclipse sounds so dull. The buzz surrounding the event is probably what I really did it, though, is probably what drew me outside and has kept me there, incapable of focusing on anything else for the duration of my wait. The voices telling me how spectacular, how unique this event will be, and the smaller voice inside telling me not to be left out, not again, like the meteor shower: these are what have planted my toes on my stone front walk. Not that those other reasons aren’t good enough, or true.

From what I can find (which means quickly Google) total eclipse should occur around 2:50 and last anywhere between thirty seconds and two minutes. I hope for the latter.

There is too much uncertainty in the predictions for me to feel comfortable about the timeframe: nobody, neither the local news nor any website, gives a precise time for Palmerton, Pennsylvania, instead grouping the town, which I’m already at best on the fringe of, into the greater region of the Lehigh Valley. Uncertain and unwilling to risk missing the main event, I went outside at 1:23, and I don’t plan on returning inside until I watch the sun get swallowed.

I haven’t spent the full hour standing there and staring at the sky. My patience is not that monk-like. Right now, I’m sitting on my front porch, which could really use a new coat of paint, the white chipping to reveal a darker wood beneath. The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao sits open on my lap, unlooked at. I haven’t turned more than 2 pages since I came outside. I maintain a careful watch on the lighting in my yard, ready to jump up and down my porch steps should the light suddenly dim. Who could miss the descent of abrupt diurnal darkness? Every few minutes or so, even if the light remains the same, I step to the edge of my porch, put on the sunglasses, and check the regression of the sun.

The progress is slow and steady. Time trickles in the way it does when you want something. It’s now 2:29 and the sun is somewhere between half and two-thirds gone. With the eclipse still far from its seminal moment, I return to my
The last visible total solar eclipse across the contiguous United States fell on February 26, 1979. Jimmy Carter was president, gas cost an average of $.65 a gallon, Rod Stewart crooned “Do Ya think I’m Sexy?” across America’s radios, and *The Empire Strikes Back* was a week from starting production. Along the geologic timeline, hardly a whisper had passed. On my timeline, the last eclipse may as well have ended the dinosaurs.

The next total solar eclipse for the continental US will take place in April 2024. Much can happen in 2,416 days. I could go blind—possibly from staring at the sun without eclipse glasses. In enough ways to provoke agoraphobia, I could die. In enough ways to provoke nihilism and alcohol-dependency, we could all die. Or it could be cloudy.

These possibilities have coalesced into a feeling of necessitated immediacy: if I would ever see a total eclipse, it would have to be here and now. Hence, my anticipation has swelled well beyond levels I’ve felt for anything for too long. Something within me depended on those thirty seconds to two minutes; this feels like my last chance at carefree, inexplicable, unreasonable excitement, a final vestige of the childhood aura we forever crave once it vanishes unannounced and unnoticed until, suddenly, we look back and realize it has left us, never to return.

A glow announces the appearance of the sun from behind the thin, light gray clouds. I put on the sunglasses to see what has emerged.

There is a problem—not a crisis yet, but certainly a problem. Until now, cloud cover had dulled the rays, and through it I could discern the shape of the sun as the moon crossed before it. Without cloud cover, the light is overwhelming. Instead of a slowly shrinking ball perched in the sky, the sun has transformed into its usual self: indistinct, shimmering, and visually merciless. Nowhere is the moon. Everywhere is the sun.

I try to adjust the sunglasses, push them tighter to my face, but this does nothing. Neither does holding my hand over my eyes and the glasses. After a quarter of a minute of trying to find the outline of the moon, my eyes have begun to hurt; they squint so tightly I see only a bright, hazy slit through the curtain of my eyelashes.

The door grunts closed behind me. Inside is twilight. Violet blotches block my vision like cartoon squids inking on a TV screen. Hands held out to avoid bumping into corners, I make my way through my dining room, around my kitchen counter, and to the junk drawer. My fingers fumble around inside and close on a gallimaufry of goods ranging from fish oil pills to an old disposable camera to a pile of old mail, which, I know, is mostly from casinos. No sunglasses meet my fingers.

I venture back outside and look up at the sky again, scanning for clouds. The only ones in sight are already east of the sun and creeping towards the horizon. This may, I admit to myself, now be a crisis.

Throughout history, we have chased the sun. We have chased its light on the equinox and the solstice and its edges during an eclipse. We chased it west-
ward as it sank, across open waters, across continents. When we couldn’t reach the sun, we landed on its sister and claimed it as our own. Now we seek its children as surrogates, sending rovers to explore Mars and probes to document Pluto.

Icarus, given his chance, chased the sun until his wings melted. I don’t know when I first heard of Icarus. I do know when I first understood. Had I wax nearby, I would have formed wings, too.

2:42.
Back inside, I grab a black cloth headband from the cabinet with our winter apparel. My other options are ski goggles, full beanies, and scarfs. My options aren’t good, but this headband is my last hope.

I half-jog down the stairs and back onto my front walkway. With naked eyes, I can still only see a normal sky. I sweep my hair back to keep it out of my eyes and slide the headband down my head and over my face. The absurdity of my image—still only gray briefs on my body and now with a black headband over my eyes—is not at all lost on me.

I can barely open my eyes. Through the crisscrossed holes of the stretched fabric, instead of the position of the moon across the sun becoming distinct, everything has become indistinct.

2:47.
I’m pacing. My soles slap on the rocks. I’m wringing my brain, but the only option that comes to me is to wait, to have faith that the moon would consume the sun and its blinding lights along with it, giving me the chance to peer above uninhibited. I’m not good at faith and never have been.

Maybe I had it right as a boy: I should run around in the grass, ignoring the space above me, and let my imagination lie to me afterward, let it fill me with the splendor I never saw.

Maybe I should’ve ordered protective glasses.

2:50
It is, according to the website, the moment of truth. I can’t feel any truth pouring upon me. The space around me still blazes with a summer glow. I don’t know whether the wind blows or something inside me has chilled. The sky remains typically blue. Hairs stand on my arms.

The predictions could be off, right? I should stay outside and continue to wait.

Hope, always so flimsy and fickle, has started its slow, seeping drain from my veins, and my heart slows because of it, easing back to normalcy.

3:05.
Nothing has happened. I’ve stayed outside and held faith as tightly as I can. Fifteen minutes is too great a difference to account for calculative error. My chance at totality has evaporated with the pounding rays of the sun. Numbness creeps from my naval. Seven years are a long way away, and I have already spent this much time seeking a light that has never stopped.

I raise my arm into the air. My hand turns red in the sun, and I feel warmth on my palm, but it stops at my skin. I close my hand, and my fingers grasp around nothing.
At the Feet of David

I press as close as the glass barrier allows
and let the yellow light
from the windowed dome above wash
over me, neck dropping back, mouth
falling open, like a baby bird
just minutes old, calling to be fed.
I wait for him to bestow upon me
the knowledge, the perspective
he has, the understanding I crave.

He is everything they said he would be.
Massive but delicate, more beautiful,
more human than stone should ever be allowed
to be. I see what every art professor
has always raved about: the defined
musculature, the contrapposto
stance, the smoothness of the marble,
the steady gaze into the distance,
the legend reborn, and me, standing
here so small in his presence.

But there is more than that. The look
in his eyes and the gears turning behind them,
the rock that hasn’t been thrown
yet resting gently on his thigh. I can
see him deliberating, planning the battle
to come: how his agile feet will
spring through the grass, how his shoulder
will drop back, how the muscles in his arm
will tense and release, the air
in his lungs forced out with a grunt as he
does so. He calculates the trajectory
of the airborne stone before he lets it fly.
He knows where it will strike.
He knows how his opponent will fall.

How is he so confident in the face of a Goliath?
How is he so assured of his victory when so much stands in his way?
How do you beat a giant when you’re just a woman,
little more than five feet tall, twenty-one years old,
disgusted with the world you live in
and desperate to fix it?

Throng of tourists with their cameras and guidebooks
and *Top Ten Things to do in Florence* checklists wade around me, like swells of the ocean trying to loosen my grip on the pier.

I do not let go. I cling to the David because he has the answers I need, I’m sure of it. He knows how to beat every Goliath plaguing this fucked up world.

He must know. He’s survived every other Goliath he’s faced, looked Hitler and Mussolini in the eyes and watched them fall. He can tell me how to defeat the Goliaths we face today, as long as I wait here long enough to hear him speak.
Sitting in an auditorium surrounded by students three years younger than me, I am scared for them. It’s the third day of orientation, and the class of 2021 is learning about Gettysburg College’s commitment to ending sexual assault and power-based interpersonal and domestic violence through education and awareness. The first-years are tense, self-conscious, and unmoving. We, the orientation staff, have worn them out with hours of icebreaker activities in the unforgiving August sun. So while they’re grateful for the air conditioning of the auditorium now, I know by the end of their third information session warning them against all the things that can go wrong in college, they’ll be begging for more get-to-know-you games and blazing heat. There’s always a content warning at the beginning of this particular presentation: “We’ll be talking about sensitive topics, so if you need to step out of the room at any time, please do so.” Everyone looks around to see who will be the first to leave.

The presentation begins with a slide of statistics: 1 in 5 women will be the victim of attempted or completed sexual assault during her time in college; female college students aged 18-24 are 3 times more likely than women in general to experience sexual violence; sexual assault takes place at the highest rates in the first three months of the fall semester, with the majority of victims being female first-year students. This information is meant to emphasize how prevalent the issues of sexual assault and domestic violence are on college campuses—yes, even small, liberal arts colleges like this one—but it casts a noticeable pall over the room, as if it’s all just another way of saying, “good luck avoiding those stats.” For the past three years, my room has been marked by the words “Resident Assistant,” naming me as a resource for confused new students. In other words, I’m supposed to be an answer to the question, “who can I talk to if I’ve been sexually assaulted?” I’ve yet to have a resident come to me saying it happened to them. I’m not so naïve as to think this means my residents have just been the lucky ones, and it’s a fact that makes it hard to fall asleep some nights given the statistics projected at the front of the auditorium. But perhaps my final year will prove the toughest, and someone will knock on my door in a state of shock or with tears running down their face. I look down my row to where five new female residents are sitting, and before I can stop myself I wonder, Which one of you will it happen to?

Attempting to sound optimistic, our moderator informs us we can end power-based violence, not only by being decent people who respect others, but also by intervening in situations we think may foretell violence. Like both the perpetrators and the victims of sexual assault and domestic violence, warning signs come in all shapes and sizes: bruises on a classmate’s arm, an excessive number of phone calls or text messages, humiliation and degradation thinly veiled as jokes, isolation, fear, mood changes. When we notice these things, we’re supposed to offer help or look for someone older and wiser than ourselves and ask them to step in. In my transition from college first-year to senior, I’ve had to become that wiser person, although I don’t feel it; I am no less frightened by the prospect of an unwanted kiss on the middle of a dance floor or of being
followed home at night than I was in 2014.

Having heard this exact presentation a number of times, I usually take this time to observe the room: some of these people will commit acts of violence or sexual assault, probably with malicious intent, but maybe because they just “zoned out” during the part of the presentation that provides a detailed definition of “consent;” some will be the victims; and some of these people have already experienced interpersonal violence. They know what happens when nobody notices warning signs. One of my residents asked me this morning if she could skip this orientation session. Of course she can, I told her, she should take care of herself first and foremost. I’d find her later, pass on the pertinent information, name various campus resources, cite myself as someone she could talk to at any time, hope she wouldn’t take me up on it.

After the initial overview of the problem and the staggering statistics meant to inspire caution, we’re asked to close our eyes.

“Picture someone you care about,” says the moderator. During this exercise, I’ve always conjured up an image of my best friend: a college-aged woman like myself, we both fit into the category of “most likely to be victimized.” And although she’s my first thought this year as well, her image in my mind is quickly replaced by another.

When my mom was nineteen, she had long, skinny limbs and frizzy hair. Her front teeth were prominent but had been straightened by braces, just like mine. Her green eyes crinkled when she smiled. Over the past year, my aunt has dug up a cache of pictures of the three sisters when they were young. I am a shade of all of them, but the one in the middle is undeniably my mother. She is gawky and awkward and wearing an oversized button-down shirt, pink leggings, scrunched white tube socks, and Keds. The bangs exploding off her forehead in a poof confirm the year: 1984. But as I sit in the auditorium and picture my mother at age nineteen, it’s not the version I’m used to seeing in old Polaroids.

“Picture them in a room with someone, someone who is hurting the person you care about.”

And he is, he’s hurting her, and her skinny limbs are bent at awkward angles, she’s crumpled in a corner, like my Raggedy Ann Doll when I was done playing with her. My mom’s green eyes aren’t crinkled, they’re swollen shut, and she’s not smiling because her front teeth are on the floor and her mouth is a gaping hole. She is bloody and her clothes are torn, and in my mind, she suddenly opens her eyes, and it’s so hard to tell through the bruises if her face is still her own or if the broken figure lying there is me.

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It was August of 2013, and we had just arrived in Harrisonburg, Virginia, to move my older sister in for her second year of college. Every family in the town seemed to agree: Panera Bread was the perfect place for lunch that day. The three of us found a small table in the corner of the restaurant, tucking ourselves out of the way.

“We’ve sat at this exact spot before, Mom,” my sister noted, surveying the crowd of people. “Last year, when you told me what happened to your teeth.”

“It was something I thought you should know before starting college,” my mom said. A glance in my direction and the thin line of her mouth told me she wished my sister hadn’t mentioned it.
I’d always known my mom’s teeth were false—a bridge of three squares at the front of her mouth, each the ideal shape, different now than in pictures of her as a kid. I admired their smoothness, running my tongue over my own smile, recently freed from three-and-a-half years of braces but still not quite perfect. Why my mother even had a bridge put in had never been a question I felt the need to ask. But then, I was seventeen and entitled to everything. “What happened to them?”

“I had an abusive boyfriend,” my mom answered, softly but definitively, making herself heard despite the chaotic hum of Panera. “He knocked my teeth out.” There were tears in her eyes, the feeling of a hand clenched around my windpipe, the muted sounds of the surrounding people. My mom hesitated, debating whether she’d said enough or should add one more thing. Her voice dropped even lower, but I heard each word perfectly. “I was raped.”

I stared for a moment, trying to remold this strange new person into the shape of my same mother. But she was suddenly much smaller, and she held so many secrets. We still looked alike, but I was seized by the realization she had once been someone other than a mother, a person entirely separate from me.

I closed my mouth and scrambled for something to say. My gaze landed on my sister, who was watching me carefully to see how I’d react. I looked back to my mom. I desperately grabbed onto a difference between her and me, like a vine floating out in the middle of the rolling river I felt I’d just been sent down. I chose to cite my all-girls’ private school’s favorite words: “You should’ve been an empowered young woman.” It was a motto that came at a high cost to my family, but she wouldn’t have sent me there if she didn’t think I deserved this emphasis on empowerment in addition to the prep school education.

She didn’t laugh, although I don’t know if I really expected her to; sarcasm is my family’s native tongue, the one we revert to when we can think of nothing else to say. Maybe I thought that if I used our first language, she’d understand my true meaning: I can think of nothing else to say. But she just looked even more sad. “Yeah, I should’ve.”

We haven’t talked about it since that day, leaving questions unanswered for the primary reason that I have not asked them: How long did she date him? Did her family know him? Were there warning signs leading up to it? What was his name? It makes me feel like there are gaps in my memory, and then I remind myself that I can’t remember something that never happened to me.

Four years later, I was behind the wheel of my sister’s car, driving the two of us home from vacation. The rest of the family would stay in the Adirondacks for another day, but she and I had a concert to attend. Within the last year, we’d begun excavating the skeletons in the maternal half of the family closet:

Four years later, I was behind the wheel of my sister’s car, driving the two of us home from vacation. The rest of the family would stay in the Adirondacks for another day, but she and I had a concert to attend. Within the last year, we’d begun excavating the skeletons in the maternal half of the family closet: Our grandparents got divorced when Mom was seven, but apparently it was much more than a mere “failure to make it work.” Our grandmother’s affair was rumored but never confirmed. Our grandpa remarried soon after, moved an hour away with his new wife and seven step-kids. Grandma and the three daughters, Mom in the middle, went to live with my verbally abusive, alcoholic great-grandfather and certifiably crazy great-grandmother. It was easy to criticize all of them when we’d heard bits of the story from our dad, who entered the scene when Mom was twenty. He wanted us to know how much she held

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things together in that household, sticking around to take care of her grand-parents, living at home and putting herself through college, when everyone else came and went as they pleased. I never asked clarifying questions of my dad; I’d already learned that family history rarely results in better understandings of one another so much as further confusion and the cognitive dissonance between the people I knew and who they’d been before.

“Mom was kidnapped that night,” my sister told me without preamble, fitting her words into the silence between songs on the radio. We hadn’t even been talking about Mom; I’d made a concerted effort to steer clear of this exact topic.

“She was kidnapped. Her sisters called the police to go get her. They found her with her clothes torn, and she’d been…violated. And her teeth had been knocked out.” Crumpled in a corner, like my Raggedy Ann Doll.

Nothing about the situation became any clearer to me: I still didn’t know his name or how long they had dated or how long she was gone before someone picked up a phone, but I didn’t want to hear anything else. My grip threatened to tear the steering wheel in two, the beam of the headlights flattened into a thin and watery line. Breathing deeply, I surreptitiously wiped at my eyes. I let my sister talk herself out, grateful when she quickly moved on to stories about our aunts and great-grandparents before falling asleep in the passenger seat.

I thought about the word “violated.” It was different than the word my mother had used—“raped”—which I think my sister and I shied away from, scared. My mother wasn’t raped or assaulted; she was violated. He’d been someone she was dating, and he had taken advantage of just how much power he held over her, and he had violated her trust, her body, her being. He left her broken and bloodied. He wrecked her confidence and self-image, like taking a hammer to the mirror she looked into, forcing her to try to fit the pieces back together, to reconstruct herself in a way that looked whole, false teeth the finishing touch.

Summer ended too quickly, and October was underway when I found myself alone with my mother in our kitchen, a rare opportunity to talk without someone else vying for her attention. She was washing the pile of dirty dishes in the sink, and we were talking about my younger brother having to find a new therapist. I’d just told her, as casually as possible, I had spent autumn of the previous year seeing a counselor at college. She was taken aback and asked why I hadn’t told her sooner. I picked my words carefully, kept my tone even.

“Because it wasn’t that bad, I just went to talk through some of my anxieties.” I was annoyed, hoping she’d leave it at that. She, after all, should understand better than anyone. She, too, spent most nights awake at 3:30AM with her thoughts threatening to overwhelm her and her heart pounding in her chest. “It isn’t a big deal.”

“I know it isn’t a big deal, so I don’t know why you didn’t just tell me.” Obviously, she thought it was a very big deal.

I bit my tongue, letting a snarky “well, I just told you” sit behind my teeth. My mother was only ever allowed to hear about things in my life after they occurred. As a kid, I’d tell her I got an A on my test, and she’d say she didn’t know I had a test. College applications, school events, breakups, all had a waiting period before they reached my mom, giving me time to process things on my own. I needed to make sure all damage was done, there weren’t any aftershocks. I needed to know my voice wouldn’t hitch on the phone. Mom would get the
story after all bombs have been successfully disarmed because I wouldn’t want a sliver of stray shrapnel to leap up and puncture the bubble of today—bills that were always overdue, four kids, two jobs, the daily minutiae that took up her attention and was more important than the things I blathered about to my counselor. My mom never made me feel like one, but it was my goal to never be a burden to her, to never tell her anything that could cause concern.

She paused, soapy hands poised above the sink full of dirty dishes. Her eyes welled, sage green and rimmed with brown mascara, just like my own. “I think therapy can be a very good thing. I went when I was nineteen, and it really helped me regain some of my confidence.”

It was so simple, but her words betrayed the complexity of how we speak to one another, never directly, something always remaining unsaid. What happened when she was nineteen opened like a chasm between us, and in the space laid all the details I’d never asked about, but I could still see her across the distance. I could have reached out, offered words meant to act as a bridge—Mom, I’m sorry that happened to you. I wouldn’t mind hearing the story if you ever want to tell it to me, but I mostly want to know if you’ve found peace. If you’re happy with the way things are now. I want you to know it won’t happen to me. Instead, I let the air lay dead between us, making a note to enter this conversation into my journal.

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The Thanksgiving leftovers were barely in the refrigerator when I went off on a rant about sexual assault on college campuses, all the factors that create and maintain the climate of abuse known as “rape culture.”

And my mom had said, “Young women need to start protecting themselves! If they’re not going to respect themselves, how can they expect other people to?” She said something about tight clothing, something about drinking too much. I looked at her and saw someone who was a teenager thirty years ago, before people began spreading the radical notion that sexual assault is never the victim’s fault.

In all my training sessions on what to do in the event a sexual assault is reported to me—from Residence Life to orientation to the online tutorial we watch before the start of every school year—one thing consistently emphasized was the importance of believing the victim’s story. Acknowledge how difficult it must have been for them to even get the words out. Tell them it wasn’t their fault. What they were wearing, how much they had to drink, whether they’d had sex with their assailant before were all pieces of information that didn’t matter when someone has been violated. So just believe them.

I wanted to shake my mom and scream, what are you saying? I didn’t know how to tell her that I can’t hear the word “rape” without thinking of her expression that day in Panera. When I think of anyone getting assaulted or taken advantage of or abused or violated or any of the myriad other words we use for the terrible things people do to one another, I see her, alone and scared and missing her teeth. Was all of that, then, a result of her lack of self-respect? Her words stung me because I wanted her to know when I talk about sexual assault prevention, I’m advocating for her, the nineteen-year-old version of her who I can’t erase from my mind, especially not when she looks so damn much like the person in my mirror. I was working toward a world in which moth-
ers wouldn't have to tell their daughters they were raped (with the unspoken warning that it might happen to them too).

My dad suddenly entered the conversation. “The burden of proof rests on the shoulders of the accuser,” he reminded me gently. “A rape case, like any other criminal investigation in this country, still relies on the notion of ‘innocent until proven guilty.’ Once physical evidence is lost, adjudication proceeds with the accounts of the people involved. And it’s almost never enough.” I knew he was right.

While half the battle is getting a victim to report sexual assault to the police—a mere 31% of rapes are reported, as opposed to 62% of robberies and a similar statistic for assault and battery—only 6 out of 1,000 perpetrators will ever see jail time. So, despite outcries of support through movements like #MeToo and the urging of my college administrators to just believe them, the overwhelming statistics present a different narrative. How can anyone honestly think we believe them if we’re simultaneously holding the door open for their attacker to walk free?

I don’t know anything about the abusive boyfriend who hurt my mom. Maybe he saw the inside of a jail, or maybe he joined the 82% of suspected rapists who are never even arrested. And maybe he, like my mom, came from a place of turmoil, a fractured home. Maybe alcohol was a fixture in the hands of the people who raised him, loosening tongues so they only spat words of hate. Or maybe “love” in his household was spelled with clenched fists and split lips; one third of abusers are the children of abusers. But I can allow him no excuses. In my head, he has hateful eyes and a smile made of razor blades. I hope he never saw my mother again. I hope he is haunted.

My interest lies in the children of the abused; am I statistically less at risk because I’m the daughter of a survivor? If one in three American women is likely to be the victim of attempted or completed rape in her lifetime, maybe my mom was the unlucky “chosen one” from our household. And now she has painted her blood above our doorway, warding off the Angel of Rape, hiding my sister and me: There’s no one else for you here. We’ve made our sacrifice.

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The moderator of the sexual assault presentation speaks once more, her voice breaking through the image of my mom at age nineteen.

“Now picture a third person in the room, someone who knows the person you care about is getting hurt. They can do something to stop it. Wouldn’t you want them to? Or, better yet, wouldn’t you want them to say something before it ever got to that point? Wouldn’t you want them to notice the warning signs?”

But there wasn’t a third person in the room when she was beaten and raped, when he tore her clothes and knocked her front teeth out. Nobody saw the warning signs. Nobody did anything to stop him before he had the chance to take her from her home and inflict that pain. They didn’t know he was hurting her until they saw the blood.

I squeeze my eyes tightly, praying my new residents won’t see me cry, hoping I won’t be the person who quickly walks out of the room, drawing the attention of everybody and making them think I’ve been assaulted—I haven’t been assaulted. My mom was the one who took the abuse, and despite how much we look alike, maybe now I won’t have to. We’ve complied with the statistics; her
daughters have been spared. My cheeks burn redder than usual, and my breath catches in my throat. The exercise suddenly ends, and we're all told to open our eyes.
Why We’re Here

we tiptoed into an ocean
like liquid nitrogen swirling around our legs
so cold my breath came faster
pressing my chest against the neoprene
bandage of my wetsuit

I turned to my sister and said
before you die from hypothermia
your entire body fills with the most
soft, golden warmth

and she said shut up
and I sent a bank of blue her way
and then we were giggling
and I felt that golden warmth
but in a way that reminded me
I was alive

connected to her
not by the salt in our blood
but by the salt of the ocean
and we were speckled with sunspots
blinking water from our blue eyes
shielding our fairness from the
blistered sky

I pulled her to me and,
half drowning her,
told her of other wonders

we are built from splintered stars
penguins propose with pebbles
the structure of our DNA came to a scientist in a dream
and sea otters hold hands

and as we tumbled through the ocean
I clutched her to me
both afraid we would drag each other under
and afraid we would drift apart.
NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

HAYLEY BELL is a junior double majoring in German and Globalization Studies. She loves to travel both independently and with new friends along the way. She enjoys doing photography to keep the memory of a new place alive.

TIMOTHY BLACK is a sophomore political science major.

KATHLEEN BOLGER is a senior (AHH!!!) English major with a writing concentration and has minors in Spanish and WGS. She is from West Caldwell, New Jersey. She hopes to go into publishing after college, but for now she's enjoying her remaining time on campus as a Residence Coordinator, a PLA for the English Department, and the Managing Editor of The Mercury. Having completed her capstone in creative nonfiction, she's now finishing her Honors Thesis on Dominican-American immigration narratives. In her spare time, she listens to Pitbull songs and engages in heated debates about movies. She frequently passes off quotes from The Office as her own.

CHRIS CHICK is a Religious Studies major with a Writing minor. He is a junior and serves as the Recorder for Sigma Alpha Epsilon in addition to playing Offensive Line for the Bullets.

JULIA CHIN is a first-year English major with a minor in Music at the conservatory. Books have been her best friends long before words and long after. When not ensconced in a novel nook, she passes the time ranting about fictional romances, displaying a lack of motor control through swing dance, or attempting to make others laugh. Like Jane Eyre, she “would always rather be happy than dignified.”

MADISON CRAMER is a junior English Education major. She is the fiction editor for The Mercury.

NICOLE ELLIOTT is an English major with minors in Writing and Economics.

DAPHNE ELLIS studies Theater Arts and English and is in her third year. On “Where Heaven Stops” she says, “I found beauty in the middle of a tragedy. A smitten couple strolls beneath the Los Angeles ash storm caused by wildfire. Everyone on the beach watched the Malibu sunset burn together.”

CALEIGH FLEGG is a sophomore majoring in English and double-minoring in Writing and Business. She has been writing since before she could talk, and she has utilized her passion to become the editor-in-chief of her high school’s literary magazine, a general fiction editor of the Mercury, and a contributor to Women In Read. Caleigh is fond of any literature but has a soft spot for E.E. Cumming’s poetry and Jandy Nelson’s prose.

BETHANY FRANKEL is a sophomore English major with a writing concentration and has a double minor in Education and Peace & Justice Studies. When not writing her novel and drinking copious amounts of coffee, she can be found working on her music or petting dogs. She was born and raised in Delaware, which is, in fact, a state.

BRYNN HAMBLEY is a Theater Arts major with minors in Writing and Music. She has previously been published in The Mercury 2016 and 2017, and Z Publishing House’s collection entitled “The Best Emerging Poets of Pennsylvania.” She would like to thank her fiancé, her roommates, and Poetry Circle for being the best editors she could ask for.

LAUREN HAND is a sophomore double majoring in Spanish and English with a Writing Concentration. She is a proud ginger, a coffee addict, and co-president of Poetry Circle.

ELIZABETH HOBBS is a first-year History and Anthropology double major. She is the production editor for The Mercury.

ANIKA JENSEN is not really sure how to spell her own name. She is the editor-in-chief and nonfiction editor of The Mercury. Anika would like to thank Ian Isherwood for all that World War I stuff.
NICHOLAS KOLOIAN is a junior English major who enjoys Pokémon, baking, and reading. He hopes to publish more written works in the future and can often be found sitting in the library, blankly staring into the void, contemplating life before eventually doing his homework.

AUBREY LINK is a junior English major with a writing concentration and a Philosophy minor. She is the public relations chair for The Mercury.

MARION McKENZIE is a junior from Lancaster, Pennsylvania. She is an Environmental Studies major with a Mathematics minor and enjoys writing outside of her math and science classes.

JACKIE McMAHON ’21 intends to major in English with a writing concentration. She has been in love with storytelling since childhood and aspires to someday become a writer of mystery and suspense. In addition to The Mercury, Jackie writes for The Gettysburgian newspaper and is a member of College Democrats. In her free time, Jackie likes to spend too much time on her literary-centric Tumblr blog, obsess over fictional characters, and pet all the cats she possibly can.

JESSICA McMANNNESS is a junior double majoring in Anthropology and English with a writing concentration. She is an events coordinator for The Mercury.

APHRA MURRAY is a senior Chemistry major. She took a creative writing class in the spring of her junior year and found a creative outlet not available to her in science classes. Next year she will be attending graduate school to pursue her love of chemistry.

ANDREW NOSTI is a senior studying history and English with a writing concentration.

PAUL HENRY O’NEILL is a junior and in the last year dove into the world of film and photography. He is a Cinema and Media Studies and Political Science double major. These berries are from his grandparent’s blueberry bush in Michigan. When he was a boy he could only reach the low-hanging fruit, but now he plucks them from any height with ease. As he ripens, the sweet taste of nostalgia from these berries only intensifies.

NATALIE ORGA is a first year intending to major in English with a writing concentration and minor in Studio Art. She is from Bear, Delaware and hopes to become a published novelist in the future. She would like to thank her dog for being extremely fluffy.

JONATHAN RAVA is a senior Political Science major and Business minor.

ERICA SCHAUERBERG is an Art History major and former member of the class of 2018. At an early age, she always believed it was 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. She is the art editor for The Mercury.

MACKENZIE SMITH is a sophomore majoring in Environmental Science and Public Policy. Kenzie is an events coordinator for The Mercury, a weekly radio host for WZBT, and a research member for the Environmental Leadership program in the Eisenhower Institute. In her free time, she enjoys reading sappy romance novels, telling corny jokes, and writing poetry.

DANIELLA SNYDER is a senior English and Art History double major from Northumberland, Pennsylvania. During the fall of her junior year, Daniella studied abroad in Florence, Italy. Her favorite place to spend time was the Piazza delle Murate, a former convent and prison turned cultural hub full of cafes, restaurants, and beautiful places to read, write, and people watch.

CHARLES STERNBERG is majoring in Cinema Media Studies and minoring in Music. In his free time he enjoys watching movies and playing trombone.

ELLIANIE VEGA is a sophomore English and WGS major and Japanese minor. She loves tofu, vintage Nintendo games, yoga, David Bowie, and the color pink.

EMILY WHITCOMB is a senior Studio Art major. She loves writing but found its healing powers a little too late, so she is sad that she wasn’t able to explore this outlet more in her classes. She loves the outdoors and spends most of her time hiking, kayaking, skiing, camping, etc. This is her first time opening up to strangers, and she is feeling vulnerable, but she is excited to see where this takes her!

ZOE YEOH is a Senior Biochemistry-Molecu-
lar Biology major and Studio Art minor. She works in Dr. Jennifer Powell’s lab in the Biology Department and as a Public Relations assistant in the Art and Art History Department. She can usually be found in the Science Center at all hours of the day (and night).
Thomas Bender (fiction) graduated from Gettysburg College in 2012 with a B.A. in English with a writing concentration and minor in Religious Studies. He earned his M.F.A. in Creative Writing from Temple University in 2014. While there, he served as an Editorial Assistant and then Managing Editor of TINGE Magazine, Temple’s online literary journal. Bender completed his M.Ed. in Secondary Education from Chestnut Hill College in 2017. He taught English and Creative Writing at Mount St. Joseph Academy in Flourtown, PA, for two years and currently teaches English at Notre Dame Prep in Towson, MD. He lives in Cockeysville, MD with his wife Mandy, also a graduate of the Class of 2012 from Gettysburg. Bender has been previously published in Digital Americana Magazine and is working on a short story collection.

Austin Clark (nonfiction) graduated from Gettysburg College in 2012, majoring in History and minoring in writing and Civil War Era Studies. He is currently a Master’s Student at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, studying public history and writing about graveyard preservation and classical art in America. As a writer, Austin specializes in creative non-fiction, especially in memoir. After his graduate studies, he is looking forward to exploring how historical thinking can be applied to personal non-fiction writing.

Emily Birx (poetry) is a Gettysburg graduate with an MFA from Queens University of Charlotte. She was an intern at the Gettysburg Review and now teaches Creative Writing at Gettysburg College. She also teaches college courses in two prisons in Maryland through Goucher’s Prison Education Partnership and is starting a doctoral program at Vanderbilt later this year.

Anika Schneider (art) is an artist originally from the D.C. area. She currently lives in Minneapolis, where she is a MFA candidate for 2019 at Minneapolis College of Art and Design. She went to Gettysburg College for undergrad, where she double majored in Environmental Studies and Studio Art. Before pursuing her masters degree she worked as a naturalist at Croydon Creek Nature Center in Rockville, Md. Her paintings aim to use oil paints in new ways to make connections between various aspects of her life. She is currently working on a series of narrative paintings exploring memory and the loss of her grandmother. When she is not painting, she enjoys exploring parks with her dog.