



THE WHEELER
SCHOOL

AERIE
LITERARY
VOICES

2025

AERIE

LITERARY VOICES

2025

AERIE



Providence

THE WHEELER SCHOOL

“Sometimes it’s not enough to know what things mean, sometimes you have to know what things don’t mean.”

—Bob Dylan

Aerie Literary Voices

<i>Editor-in-Chief & Cover Designer</i>	Seoyon Kim
<i>Art Director</i>	Marion Cook
<i>Executive Editors</i>	Gunnar Eggertsson Robin Linden Julia Yakirevich
<i>Creative Editors</i>	Anna Kleinberg Beatrice Spondike
<i>Writers</i>	Leo Blackly-Preston Marion Cook Lina Durfee Gunnar Eggertsson Bridget Flynn Anneka Jenkins Quinn Kennedy Seoyon Kim Anna Kleinberg Ivy Lindaros Robin Linden Lara Miller Fredy Norin Jacquelyn Song Beatrice Spondike Julia Yakirevich Daisy Zhang
<i>Illustrators</i>	Marion Cook Anneka Jenkins Seoyon Kim Anna Kleinberg Fredy Norin Beatrice Spondike Daisy Zhang
<i>Faculty Advisors</i>	Robert Koppel Mara Koppel Jonathan Migliori

Full copyright of all works reverts to the authors upon publication.

CONTENTS

PREFACE.....	12
POETRY	14
ANNEKA JENKINS '24	
Big Cats.....	16
JACQUELYN SONG '24	
motion sickness (ludus).....	17
norm (pragma)	18
the city (storge).....	19
the corridor (eros).....	20
comment section (agape)	21
on the page (mania)	22
glove (philautia).....	23
sidewalking (philia).....	24
SEOYON KIM '25	
They Grind Up Racehorses	25
All Her Things Have Gone Far Away.....	25
Bedtime Stories for Little Curses.....	26
They say they play soccer up there in heaven	28
Real Nice Year Past.....	29
We docked our boat by the flowers	30
IVY LINDAROS '25	
Simple Tragedies.....	32
End of the World	33
It starts with a shudder	35
Bugs.....	37
LEO BLACKLY-PRESTON '26	
The water is wide	38
sarah street	39
one zero zero three four.....	40
skinny love.....	42
MARION COOK '26	
The Bear.....	43

Elvis	45
Sunday Morning Manhattan.....	46
Valentine.....	47
I smack the keyboard	48
LINA DURFEE '26	
Lana 5:7.....	49
Lamentations at Dawn.....	51
“We Can't Be Friends”.....	53
eyes	54
Silver.....	55
second skin.....	57
501s.....	58
for your ears only.....	59
Dear whomever I concern.....	60
wasp's sting	62
country roads.....	62
fly	63
touch.....	63
self check-out	64
fusillade.....	65
suddenly.....	66
i wish it was over/i wish you'd come over.....	67
GUNNAR EGGERTSSON '26	
Way of the Chestnut Trees.....	68
All Good Things Are Invisible.....	69
Titled: Untitled.....	71
ANNA KLEINBERG '26	
Dear God.....	73
Farmer Joe	74
The Beast.....	75
Rivulets	76
Midnight Drive	76
Evil Cats.....	77
Good Old Days	77
Anything For You	78
Calm Before the Storm	78

Ode to Squirrels.....	79
Kodachrome.....	80
ROBIN LINDEN '26	
A Love Letter To Thursdays.....	81
Flux 7000.....	82
Memory Box.....	83
Coin Toss.....	85
Finding Susie.....	86
Sequoia.....	87
The Good Days Of February March.....	89
The Edge of Girlhood.....	91
The Wise April Muse.....	93
Bittersweet 16.....	94
Beautiful Things Without Purpose.....	96
LARA MILLER '26	
Day With Dementia (I Want To Go Home).....	98
New Life.....	103
Bunny Break-In.....	103
Storm Chaser.....	104
Freshies.....	104
Mr. Copperhead.....	105
Allergies.....	105
Turn It Down.....	106
Senbazuru.....	106
Daffodils.....	107
Spare Us.....	107
Instagram.....	108
Halloween Hater.....	108
Noodles.....	109
Nothing To Wear.....	110
BEATRICE SPONDIKE '26	
Ringo's Orange Tree.....	111
Bea's Seen the Snowfall.....	113
JULIA YAKIREVICH '26	
Pesach 5784.....	114

Cedar Closet.....	115
Jazz Coda.....	116
Screen Time	117
Exhaling.....	118
Inside the Tudor on Upton.....	119
Hanging by a Thread.....	120
Memo to Self.....	121
Sky.....	122
DAISY ZHANG '26	
Eastern Standard Time	124
The Genius of Mechanical Flying.....	125
Engravings.....	126
Nightwalkers.....	128
The Snowman II	129
Chia Pudding.....	130
Libai Libretto.....	131
Neubau.....	132
Variants on a Wave.....	133
SHORT FICTION	136
ANNEKA JENKINS '24	
Aesop and Fenn.....	138
Cowboy.....	142
Owl in The Wood	143
Rodger.....	146
Farley.....	149
Lucero	152
JACQUELYN SONG '24	
Alacrity	154
SEOYON KIM '25	
Homecoming	180
The Handsome Young Colt.....	190
Christmas, 2009.....	196
IVY LINDAROS '25	
Prometheus Puts Out The Fire (Again).....	200
new dream diary 12/11-1/27 old one no good anymore.....	205

your current situation:	209
Mercury, Mercury	210
A Bird.....	211
MARION COOK '26	
Joshua and the Bear.....	216
Roulie's Homecoming	219
Adrien "Mouton" Godwood	230
Gabriel's Mother	232
LINA DURFEE '26	
A Cup of London Fog	235
You Had to Be There	237
Bowline	240
GUNNAR EGGERTSSON '26	
The Great WonderSnapper.....	244
The Four Steps to Creating An Incredible Man	246
The Magical Spoon.....	249
Rusty, the Brown Dog	254
Ode To A Boy Named Sue.....	257
The Withdrawals of Writing	258
American Artist.....	261
Uncle Osgood	264
BRIDGET FLYNN '26	
Voyeur	271
Braille for the Bruised.....	275
Compulsion.....	277
ANNA KLEINBERG '26	
The Star Prince.....	282
He and Arlen.....	291
The Great Vissarion.....	295
The Accident	300
My Ghost Story.....	303
Life Story	306
ROBIN LINDEN '26	
Music Box Ballerina	308
Trophy.....	312

Colby, Colorful Rabbit	316
The Man In The Passenger Seat	319
LARA MILLER '26	
The Great Race.....	322
Laundry	327
A Rat's Tale	329
Present/Past.....	335
BEATRICE SPONDIKE '26	
The Moon's Apprentice	340
Mabel	342
Fastball.....	344
Red Clovers	346
Phoebe and Jude.....	348
The Green Room	350
The Chimney Tree.....	352
JULIA YAKIREVICH '26	
Charlotte and the Writer	357
Dragonfly.....	360
DAISY ZHANG '26	
Jacklight Tree.....	362
MEMOIR.....	368
MARION COOK '26	
An Angry But Brief Memoir.....	369
GUNNAR EGGERTSSON '26	
Living, Dying, and Funny People.....	372
ANNA KLEINBERG '26	
Around the World in Eighty Minutes.....	375
ROBIN LINDEN '26	
Repentence	383
JULIA YAKIREVICH '26	
We are Water.....	386
DRAMATIC WRITING.....	390
QUINN KENNEDY '24	

Impact	391
FREDY NORIN '24	
Ľdor V'dor.....	413
Head in the Clouds	456
JACQUELYN SONG '24	
The Body Shop.....	463
SEOYON KIM '25	
Forever the Fortunate Few	477
GUNNAR EGGERTSSON '26	
Green Room.....	489
The Mysterious Disappearance of John Hemlock.....	502
ANNA KLEINBERG '26	
LiveBright.....	511
LARA MILLER '26	
Day at the Circus	524
JULIA YAKIREVICH '26	
Affliction.....	536
Pet Shiva	546
Judy's Diner	556
NOVEL EXCERPTS.....	580
MARION COOK '26	
Drowning Boy.....	582
ANNA KLEINBERG '26	
Night After Night	610
ROBIN LINDEN '26	
Creative Writing.....	659
Acknowledgements	681

PREFACE

As any student at Wheeler who has taken an English class in Morgan 102 and seen the black-and-white poster of a certain Stephen King quote on the wall will know, “To write is human.”

Writers sometimes tend to elevate their craft into something categorically special, different—a pure, incorruptible expression of the soul. At times, it seems almost as if writers inherently see the world in a unique, more valuable way. While this belief can be affirming for the writer, it also makes writing seem almost holy and unapproachable, rendering it vulnerable to a reputation of untouchable sentimentality. To write is human. That’s not the hard part.

The previously mentioned Stephen King quote is unfinished. The full quote reads, “To write is human. To edit is divine.”

Beyond the impulse to observe, and feel, and write, what truly distinguishes every student who contributed to *ALV 2025* is their courage. To write is one thing—to turn your writing over to the trials of editing, even simply overcoming the fear of confronting your own work once more—to assert your faith in the dignity and inherent worth of something you have created, and to be able to say of your own work, with unwavering intent and indomitable spirit, *this could be something beautiful*, is miraculous.

These stories are courageous; they are not afraid to take risks; they are outrageous, and fluid, and unpredictable, and in that anarchy the reader discerns gorgeous consequence. This tension—a push-and-pull between the reader and author, of intent and accident, purpose and beautiful spontaneity, makes reading and writing literature such a special experience at a time when the rise of generative A.I. rapidly “reduces the amount of intention in the world,” as Ted Chiang wrote in *The New Yorker*. A woman named Antimony, her heels lying by the hearth. Canadian tourists in search of a miracle. What did the author mean? Do you trust the author enough, for it to mean something? Does the intent matter? Do you trust them? Can you prove that trust?

ALV 2025 is written in the language of discovery. In the following pages you will discover several ways the world ends, the ravings and the wisdom of old men, and a multitude of rabbits—disobeying their mothers, meeting neighbors, and participating in an imperial race. You will be privy to the inner lives of stars and their volatile temperaments, at once kind and cruel, and the

apprentice who helps orchestrate their heavenly movements; the ominous flight of a bird loose in a children's hospital; and a motivational speaker's "Four Steps in Creating an Incredible Man." You will delight at the children's stories that students experimented with writing for the Aerie collection *Joshua and the Bear and Other Stories*, and find in them unexpected candor and intensity. These works illuminate in skillful, dynamic strokes narratives of grief and loss, religion, memory and recollection, and complicated family and romantic relationships, juggling wit and earnestness in equal measure.

These authors write for their closest friends and complete strangers, for young children, for their teachers, for their peers, for their families, for themselves, and for you. Their writing will not be denied. Please enjoy these students' incredible labor of love.

Seoyon Kim '25
Editor-in-Chief

POETRY



ANNEKA JENKINS '24

BIG CATS

Shoulders hunched
Eyes low
Suspended in *National Geographic* photo
On bedroom wall
Roaming through hardwood hall
Singing of Rhea
The garden Goddess
Growing lilies
Eating Danish sweets
Traveling through Turkish metros and
Peruvian rug markets,
Black and blue butterfly wings hung from iron nails in her stairwell
Next to
A collection of miniature Greek
stucco houses,
Lined in a row above bookshelves—
Mother Rhea always tended to the children showing up at her door

JACQUELYN SONG '24
AMOURISH
MOTION SICKNESS (LUDUS)

light clouds in carnivals
cotton tufts caught between lips
stuffing silence, sweet nothings.
we don't hold hands, yet there's a tug
between elbows, a bend of brows,
a how about now, whispered sleeves,
hearts peeking free in the breeze;
and the world tosses and turns
we surrender our shoes, ready,
unsteady, tilted, stilted, off-kilter
and the world rolls and rises
thoughts spooled on antsy fingers
twirling hand-bars, stinging cheeks. we
reach for haze, sift through illusions,
high within thralls, for doesn't it all
make you glow, or gag, or gasp,
elastic and plastic, blast it, fantastic,
we're pithy and pretty, so sick and giddy
to fall.

NORM (PRAGMA)

I long to write a love poem for norm
how we met at twenty-four, two years into my masters;
he'll be a doctor, talker, just-right nice,
he'll scrape the steamer, scooping rice,
and we'll date downtown: a dingy place
with ceiling fans, fish tanks, Google Translate, and
sometimes, he'll surprise, pitch-perfect Chinese—
but not too perfect. he'll never beat me.
two years later, we'll initial papers, no crowds,
he won't say it aloud, but he'll wish I picked a dress, and
we'll circle 'round complaints and pleasantries.
in suburbia, we'll find a flat and a garden, he'll
fix the kitchen, do the dishes, drive the kids to school,
and I'll file taxes (always wanted to try)
prune daisies, trim maybes, take trash outside,
and just like that, years will fly:
driveways, snow days, skates in the park,
vacations to Europe in early mid-March; decades of "dad,"
mornings of "mom," stifled silence, children gone;
two-story house, Friday nights out, upper-middle paystubs of
existential doubt; righteous, viceless crisis, nine-to-five
gripes and fights and damn my wife and
burnt-out brunches in Yankee-Candle light,
and when I wither, norm still dithers
'til I die.

THE CITY (STORGE)

back in those days, tracing panes in the backseat
I recall your hair, silky soft, sifting through palms,
I'd spool ink-dipped fingers, so proud I wasn't blonde.
long nights, you flickered in pictures, scarves and sleeves,
tin-tinted facets, mirror-rimmed glasses, some myth I crafted:
my mother in the city.
in the mystery, freights and flows,
sleek-typescript streets and boxed-window glows,
her glance, elegance, subtle romance, how she
stepped, dressed, flats clicking, giggles skipping when I
raced for pigeons. I liked your smile. I know you didn't.
now, you paint your teeth white, storm into nights,
pop a bottle, I dawdle, you snap, deal with it, and we
bite, fight, stifled emotions, late-night implosions,
yet I never feel your shards. for we trace the glass,
drive on past, stretch for white noise out of reach.
and we've no simple, no charm, no city for the car,
but here we are—on our way.

THE CORRIDOR (EROS)

I'll never understand how you tangle:
limbed wires, finger fibers, fire hazard
clutching curves, buttoned fits like a glove, like a game,
like the jigsaws on the carpet.
I long to feel mortified, walking here, watching you, caught
in the corridor before class, mid-act, staged shadows,
dress and breath and tangled conquests, giggles aired for
static silence, and cut, I'm your scene break—
distressed, unimpressed, curious, nonetheless.
what strikes a spark? wings the butterflies? which flip
must I switch in the shower to wash off the blueprints:
eyes, thighs, waist too wide, each piece they teach
to hide, and disguise, and romanticize...
for aren't we machines by design? matter for mind?
but you and you, all you poets caught in corridors,
what lies in the flesh? what urge to obsess?
am I just an idiot?
I'll shut the door. carry on.

COMMENT SECTION (AGAPE)

she poses with her pinky to her lips,
whittled wrists, ink-dried kiss, dynamite in a bottle,
pink-blond light, she sips and swallows,
blinking, beaming, diurnal dreaming,
I click and flit and follow.
in white, we type and praise, shape her
with thumbs, pet her names, speak her tongues,
she giggles, gleams, pretends it's good fun,
we're fishnets in hooks, cheques in the book,
double-taps on glass: like my new look?
I pledge her a shrine of sans excess,
she paints her nails, she strokes her dress,
projection, obsession, devouring sparks,
there's a hunger at heart, a waste in me,
cold keys, scroll feed, no inkling of you,
but what's to lose? we're illusory
so I give, you build, I build, you climb—
don't dawdle nor dwell, for self's a short sell,
but my god
you're one of a kind.

ON THE PAGE (MANIA)

my mother claims all writers go insane,
yet I keep my crazies on the page,
false-starts, oblique remarks, knives
through the heart, for what's fiction,
but a crime of passion? sometimes,
I wish someone would ruin me. I wish I could
trap you in iron and ire, rend and venge,
make it work, make it worse, make thrill
worth the chase, toss the lots, pull the stops,
ravel the plot in tortuous knots, become your
hand just out of reach. for doesn't tragedy
tantalize the soul? everytime, at the pyre, I let
fire linger in my fingers, sipping the trip of
toxicity, and it's feeling, falling, flailing,
derailing the fiction, finding reason for it all, and
I gasp palms to glass the crazies stare back
I laugh, laugh, I—

GLOVE (PHILAUTIA)

fabric doesn't flake, but suffocates,
stretching 'cross flesh you should've loved
here's love in a glove, distrust wrapped
in a fist for the ripping. sometimes, I wonder
how my thumbs would've looked, and if I could
wave without hiding in my sleeves. how my mind
would've woven a masterpiece if it didn't snag
on intrusions, sink beneath nail beds, soak them
bloody, suck them clean. I long to become
perfection. yet I can't be sculptor and muse,
grasp the girl in the marble before she's abused,
feel her in chisels, chipping away the little bits
until they've crumbled, no reprieve, no epiphany.
it stings in a child's shell, willing your flesh to fester,
digging dignity from disgust. but I'll take it. make it.
for now, the glove fits.

SIDEWALKING (PHILIA)

autumn isn't red, but unwritten
folded fable, far-flung, free-falling
hazy hues cast in childhood, we're
walking, talking, winding, neverminding,
found a book, learned to cook,
new mural 'round East's, took a look
no risks, no ellipsis, no silence to face,
you step in my spaces, I know all the places
you do. why can't we always be pieces?
why can't ease always be what pleases?
let me fall for escape, tuck you between the
pages, spread the red when we're far away
and script the same old stories. I know,
we'd fit, we'd drift, we'd come to admit,
the brief grief of leaves makes perfect...
but friend. when it falls, would you
give me a call? I'll wait for it.

SEOYON KIM '25
THEY GRIND UP RACEHORSES

They grind up racehorses and put them in pig meal. I know because my friend Lucille had a racehorse, and she told me that when he couldn't race anymore they led him to a shed and there was a great whirring sound and she never saw him again. I wonder if there's racehorse in my mom's bacon. I wonder if there's racehorse in me. The mane that Lucille braided, silky smooth; his broad pumping heart. Racehorse, they'll call me, and when I'm done the pigs can eat me up too.

ALL HER THINGS HAVE GONE FAR AWAY

When God wanted an off-white colonial in the suburbs
He got a farmhouse just at the edge of bum-fuck nowhere
siding as white as the blinding sun
and when God wanted a sealed cedar deck with a matching patio furniture set
His mama told him to invest in a sunroom instead
Not us, though
'cuz you know if my girl wants it
by God she'll get it
No kidding
It's true, it's true, I say
if my girl wants to tear the whole house up
then She absolutely must do so and if my
girl wants a house fire just to watch it glow then She must have that, too.
Raggedy teeth
Ash on my tongue and it tastes like nothing. Mouth all
dried up I can't even spit. We wheeze on the couch.
It's what god wanted

BEDTIME STORIES FOR LITTLE CURSES

	<i>full-time jobs</i>	<i>the snow had hid the train tracks</i>	<i>bedside goodbyes</i>
<i>my mother</i>	My mother had wanted me to become a railroad conductor when I grew up. "Look at that," she said when I was born. My father had dutifully looked. "Look at that," she repeated, taking me from the doctor and struggling into an upright position. A railroad conductor had saved her life once, when she was a child. She had been standing too close to the tracks and a stout man red in the face yelled at her to get away from there. "That is the face of a railroad conductor."	Unfortunately, my passion lay in chiropractic, and thus I joined a long and illustrious history of physical therapists, osteopaths, chiropractors, and Turkish bath masseurs. I renamed myself after a famous masseur whose name I read in the newspaper of a woman sitting across from me. He had died in an accident on the Trans-Siberian. The snow had covered the tracks with its lovely whiteness, he told the witness as she crouched by the red stain upon the landscape, and he had not realized they were there until there was no longer any time for regrets.	I could not sleep one night, so I asked my mother for a ghost story, and she told me she forgave me. Her creativity had always been lacking.
<i>she asks me to try, for her</i>	The chiropractic tables looked like colorful pill-bugs, curled up in varying degrees. They started at five thousand three hundred dollars. I took a part-time job at a nearby train station to pay for it. My mother wept tears of joy.	The woman came to me seven nights in a row. She knocked on the door to my clinic as I was about to close; claimed that she had come from very far away. "I can't sleep," she said, and lied down on my chiropractic table. "I can't help you," I said, and she looked at me and I looked at her like some kind of dreadful collision in the making, and I told her to get the fuck out.	
<i>leave it for the ghosts</i>	MY HANDS SPEAK FOR ME BECAUSE EVERY HORRIBLE WORD THAT FALLS FROM MY LIPS IS A CURSE. I HAD BELIEVED "HAUNTING" TO BE A MORE BEAUTIFUL DESCRIPTION BUT A CURSE IS A CURSE ALL THE SAME AND THE LIVING DO NOT "HAUNT."	The woman came to me in a dream seven nights in a row. She held my hands in hers; said, <i>did you know? I think we could be happy together</i> and I found I could not say anything in reply. I told her that my mother had wanted me to be a train conductor and she looked at me with a fleeting disappointment that passed me by like headlights outside my bedroom window.	I got a parking ticket once. My mother said I should have taken the train and we both looked out the window at the same time. Snow fell in the distance, but it was not here, not yet. My mother asked to be buried by the railroad tracks where she had almost died. She is buried behind my clinic instead. I stand in the tall grass and twist my hips and crack my joints and think, now this is haunting.



THEY SAY THEY PLAY SOCCER UP THERE IN HEAVEN

There is a dead man in the middle of the elementary school soccer field—they say he was crushed beneath the weight of a passing cloud. My parents regret wasting summer days coaxing my little sister to join the soccer team when she reports over dinner that the man had twitched and mumbled for three days before he died; confesses she had snuck away during a break and knelt down on the grass, pressed her ear by the man's face and listened to his incoherent grief. My parents scold her; wish that she would be as enthusiastic about practice even when there are no such exciting developments to amuse her. My sister will not speak to someone who will not listen, so she tells me privately how the man spoke of driving and driving and driving down a brightly-lit road, and I tell Samantha this when we sit in her car after school in the supermarket parking lot, admiring the new driver's license on her dashboard. She nods as if she understands, as if her license has granted her an arcane knowledge of suffering, and I give her a giddy grin as she gingerly slides it back into her wallet and drives us to the elementary school with the same slow deliberation. We see the cloud before we see the body, which is more of a fog, which is more of a mist; how could it be that it vanquished this man; see the way his legs stick out from below it, because no one has bothered to tell it to move along and so it claims its spoils; and Samantha and I stand over the man quietly in arbitrary courtesy until it is time to go. At least my sister is satisfied; in the morning I watch her press the tip of her thermometer to a lamp, and later the rest of the fourth grade girls' soccer team—the ones who could not escape—throw longing glances in our direction when the coach yells at them to stay on this side of the field! as he too dreams of life after death and they turn back to trail behind the ball. We return to Samantha's car and the next day she drives us to the soccer field again, and then again the day after that, as the number of girls at practice dwindles as the fog endures as the sky exhales low and somehow it is November, November. The sun rests upon the horizon though it is only 4 PM and the clouds extend across the whole sky—streaks of blood orange and gold that scar the field with its loudness, and it is as if we are somewhere else entirely, Samantha and I, and we are smiling, bashful smiles but also proud, proud, immodestly so, because we get it, we get it now, the two of us, in a field of cloud that goes forever in every direction, and you'll just have to believe me when I say that death couldn't get this out of me.

REAL NICE YEAR PAST

I like your long teeth, fish
and the slim contour of your tail
To protect my peace, I must say
it's real nice.

This year finds me searching for that
kind of lightning again,
two weeks just to show
I know it wasn't nothing, fish
Swim on by
There are dogs watching from behind glass storm doors
in the shadows of the wood-paneled hallways beyond
Take with you all the seconds you need
retrieved from our long-gone conversations
A plastic card with your pleasant face on it, a license
to swim wherever you want, I guess
It might make you feel better
Your son waits upstream

WE DOCKED OUR BOAT BY THE FLOWERS

We docked our

boat by the flowers

The celestial visitors

descend on a

Thursday/afternoon/.

Oh, says the little

boy who witnesses

it like a crimson vision

descending upon

faraway seas,

like the moment the last scissor-tailed flycatcher leaves the state for the winter, *you're back*, and then he runs off to collect the other children, after which comes a period of great revelry. *We have returned from the most successful trip heavenwards*, say the celestial visitors, leaning over the wicker-basket sides of their beautiful airship.

A domestic scene of an intimate nature;

You say that you heard a great beast outside your window the night that she died. Now picture it turning away, joints so heavy it can barely hear past the suckle, the grinding and popping and cacophonous laughter of their bones, of

time. Imagine the luminous gray stripped from its very bones. Let me tell you this: five years ago I stood in this kitchen. This front door. A dog barks down the street to the miraculous child hidden beneath the shade of the poplars. He says, I've been waiting for you. I've been waiting for you.

I could see tigers in the hillsides, say the celestial visitors. Recalled its ugliness, like the end of an old man's white beard glimpsed draped over the shoulder. Recalled also the broad road stretching far overhead, where at the end the PM wears his damp wool coat as he watches smoke rise from the Beitou chimneys into the sky, not unlike the low roofs of Newfoundland and Labrador. A truck heading towards the sun. Heavy industry eastward bound. It is moving south, said the dogs, and they curled up on the lawn, content again.

Canadians in search of a miracle now travel to Taipei.

I left you a voicemail on this perfect day.

So I guess it comes down to the rubber soles that line these fertile streets. You're like a vein shifting over the velvety bulb of an elders' ankles. You good-for-nothing," The only words you know could bathe the earth with its gentle indulgences. Mountains could collapse behind

you and you would never
know. Bellies

to the sky. Tell me what you think about this kind
of faith; this simple death. You know it won't matter.

IVY LINDAROS '25
SIMPLE TRAGEDIES

A wonderful dream. A good dream. A lucid dream. A glass of cold lemonade. An electrical tower. The sweet, long square of sun flowing through a window on the first real day of spring. The first day of spring. The first day of summer. The first day of fall. The first day of winter. *The year starts now. And now. And now. And now.* A laugh. Someone leaning on your shoulder. Waves crashing on a shore at seven P.M. An orange. Susurrations in green treetops. A deep blue sky you could drown in. Radio towers. A memory. A snowglobe. Little orange windows on the evening cobalt. Waking up. Falling asleep. Walking down a long, familiar road. Stupid costumes. Eyes glinting with sun. A dusty board game. Pictures. Oil paints. A grilled cheese sandwich. Your favorite shirt. The rain. A beautiful rock. A small gift. A smile. A hug shared with someone with a fever. A fever shared. A cough. A promise. Deep, pillowy snow. Crystalline, shallow snow. A snow day. A summer day. Deep, dark, late summer. An incoherent conversation in the very early morning. In the very late night. Rest. Time. A motel. A groundhog. A stray cat. A good story. A bad story. A story. A memory. A song. Words that mean nothing and also everything. A flashlight. Shadow puppets. Bonfires. People singing around bonfires. A good day. A perfect day. The end of a long day. The end when you know it's the end. The end when you don't.

END OF THE WORLD

You go there when you dream. The end of the world; not in terms of time, but of space. If you know where to look, or, more likely, if you don't, it will be there, sure as life, sure as the termination of a life. All you have to do is keep going, keep going, keep going, and you'll find it, or it'll find you. And it will be bright beyond recognition.

At the end of the world there is a cat curled on a tall pile of books in dead languages, and a painter whose paints are almost too dried-out to be pushed around half-stretched canvas, and an animal whose kind is on the very last sentence of its story, an animal that's the last of its species. They call them "endlings." It's a land of lost things, or forgotten things, or things that were never quite lost or forgotten but simply pushed, softly, to the side, insulated over by a quilt of dust. Stardust. It's streetlights, stadium lights.

It's always snowing, and the snow feels how you expect it to feel looking at a drawing of snow in a children's book; a thick, pillowy quietness that smells like the heat of a radiator. The flakes fall thick and fast. You will look at the ground and it will be bright beyond recognition.

At the end of the world is a forest of light. A tall, dense grid of shining metal, reflecting softly in the hush of a perpetual late winter evening. Lights LED white, fluorescent white, sodium orange, the shade of yellow that can only be seen when it's a little too late, and you're almost alone. All beaming, all brilliant, all dazzling, branching, spiking, shining torrents of light, spilling everywhere, coloring the whole world incandescent, blowing your pupils open and closed. Telephone wires, telephone poles. Power towers and cell service towers and radio towers, blinking bright, set close together. Streetlights, stadium lights.

There's a man. He's every stranger you've ever met, and every friend you've said a last word to, and every person you've made eye contact with across the street, forgotten a minute later. He's the rush of a tide and he's the setting sun and he's a comet, or a million comets at once. He's the hottest day you've ever lived through. He's a crowd of statues. He's a beautiful face in the window of a bus. He's you. He's the feeling of a sticker adhering to a surface, and he's the soft fall of snow in a street lamp while you look at it from inside, about to go to sleep. He's a laugh that was shared a long time ago.

He sits in the middle of a circle of old, obsolete computers, screens buzzing black or green or blue; computers with memory cards that no longer function, and wires that have decayed, and ports that no longer lead anywhere; jacks and ports that can no longer be plugged into by any existing cord or device. USB sticks lying around him, contents wiped or corrupted. He's typing a novel. He's typing it all for you. All about you. But he's barely visible; he's bright beyond recognition; he's a laugh that was shared a long time ago. He types,

Streetlights. Stadium lights.

At the end of the world there is a place where you can rest, where fate's soldiers will falter in their path, where the sand in the hourglass will stall and swirl and float, and time will wait for you. It will be warmth against the cold. It will be beaming, brilliant, dazzling, branching, spiking, shining, blinking bright. Strange creatures will walk through the forests and valleys and overgrown cities, and they'll leave you alone, leave you to sleep. It will be soft and forgiving, and you will barely feel it at all.

Welcome home, the snow will sigh. Welcome home.

IT STARTS WITH A SHUDDER

It starts with a shudder. Not an earthquake, or some kind of aftershock, though that's what most people think (at first, at least). Simply a deep-running tremor through the ground, damaging nothing but shaking everything, leaving not one stone unrattled, not one light unflickered. It's the subject of confused whispering for a few hours, of scientific bafflement for a few weeks, and later, largely, it's forgotten.

And then, today, the ground breathes in again, air and noise filling its dark, buried lungs; if the first quake was a startled little inhale, this is the deep, long breath that drags the sleeper up into the waking world, brings life into an organism that had begun to think it was dead. So, though this is not the first quake, this is the start. This is when the earth begins to move like an animal, this is when the dirt begins to vibrate like iron shavings close to a magnet. This is when the roads come alive.

The highway comes first. The I-195, starting to shift, stretch. It lets out a long, gravelly groan, and then it begins to rise, dragging up out of the ground, dislodging pillars and pylons and concrete columns, sloughing off cars and trucks like pebbles and sand. The buses stay, and their drivers and passengers have no idea what to do.

As I-195 lifts itself up, looking over the city and the water, rearing its odd and solid bulk against the darkening sky, it trails exits and roads and other highways that split from it, widening and pulling into a vast net of asphalt and movement. I-195 is the spinal cord, and the Providence highway system around it, the nervous system, the veins, the skeleton, the tendons and twisting ligaments. Buses flicker over the strange, oscillating web; neuron signals, moving it, keeping it alive.

The ground below is unrecognizable. The stars above are unfamiliar; some blackened, blotted out by the thing that dances in the sky. Hasbro Children's Hospital dangles off one swaying limb. Water gushes from another, thrashed into a river and brought back hydroplaning. Most streetlights are dark, but some of them still fizz and flicker, bright little pinpricks against a night ever darker as the roads tear themselves from the ground, half the city wrenched up along with them, paying little attention to the flooding or the noise, simply standing taller and taller, freer and freer from the ground below, walking in

great, loping steps across Providence, and then Pawtucket, and later Massachusetts beyond, now a tangled, hulking behemoth of a thing, picking up infrastructure as it goes, following the weak sun as it rises, not stopping for even a second, not looking back.

BUGS

Tell the spiders I say goodbye, and the centipedes, silverfish, butterflies, butterfly needles drawing thin, dark strands of blood from tourniqueted arms, eight of them, long, spindly, climbing. Tell them I remember the way they surged up the walls of the bathroom, basement, blood-brain barrier in waves and whorls of dark, clumpy motion. The way they flowed, parts of a whole, whole made of parts, into the cracks and the seams and all the places we'd have felt better off knowing they were not. They were there. We were here. We were hearing things, scuttling, stumbling, rolling legs in the night, screechy cicada song that said there were bigger things out there and bigger things here too, if we looked, if we listened. I saw cocoons and caterpillars hanging from thin, glistening clear thread on the sun-soaked green leaves, and they spoke to me too, told me the three things you need to know about being a tumor: that you are not a bug but a feature, that if you are one of more you are malignant, that sharp teeth will grow no matter what, and if you try to be kind they will just grow inward. They won't know what you are if you mutate far enough, and they won't know how to get rid of you either. They'll turn to the cicadas, and the cicadas will say LOOK! LISTEN! BIG THINGS ARE COMING! BIG THINGS ARE COMING! BIG THINGS ARE HERE! And tell the spiders thank you, because even though I hated them they gave me something to point to and say, here, this is it. This is where the problem starts.

LEO BLACKLY-PRESTON '26

THE WATER IS WIDE

love's end trail sits empty now
virginia dust settled as winter arrived
lambs limbs not left to skin and bones
and horses whose names i used to know
whine roadside

ruts fresh and deep in the slow-settling snow
guide wheels down the same road i'd walked mid-july
whose heat had brought out christmas colors of wine berries,
whose thorns now stand to attention in the nippy wind

and to whom do i write at love's end trail?

Gail's alone

Perry's kidney came and went
and gave what it got
a loft lies empty in their guest house,
and frozen flowers and grief frozen time
are still in the same way.

i learned to whistle
when i was ten
and a window's wails
are the same shards of notes
that i once blew
begging:
build me a boat that can carry two

SARAH STREET

a poet's dream
stands vibrant in the midst of slushy greys and browns
the dull and dim winter,
time's end.

poems inspired by weather and color
failed, and fell on deaf ears
but as inspiration
turns a cold shoulder to shaking hands
i beg:
i am homeless,
let this be my home

yellow curtains peek
from behind red walls
and a hearth roars through halls
to grind out the finals weeks of a year

endless daylight will come again
the year will die,
we'll reach time's end
eyes watching god from sarah street
a final color
forces through all bleak

ONE ZERO ZERO THREE FOUR

on the corner of broadway seldom stood the icee man
more likely you'd find the piragüero
whose helado was—a little too sweet
and when shaved ice was gone i couldn't down the juice.
the dominican kids knew the taste of home
they'd finish the melted ice and dye
sticky solo cups cascaded down 204th street
past the grated windows of the post office
where i took my first passport picture

and sun seeped through the windows that day
blinding me from the lines
we waited in to take that picture.
i used that paper to leave my home,
now the halfhearted smile makes a little more sense

and i miss these streets that i seldom walked
to the north of the library, the hydrants ran
this rainbow mist in scorching summer
a neighborhood palisade i never scaled
still miss the secret passage onto broadway from behind the church
the walls against which i pounded with racket, feet, hands
the balls we found deflated when we lifted the last of the furniture

we left this house, sure left our mark
we swept and cleaned and packed us up and with it
andrea and anna moved up to the bronx
and sandra and mike fled upstate
and the world as i knew it fell apart

there's a reunion i dream of,
not quite a reunion, a reliving of memory
i am seven again
when i scrape my torso climbing the dumpsters in the alley
mike still has hair
and i run on my own around the corner
i am so damn grown
but the mambas at the store are still twenty five cents
and i haven't yet learned how to write my address
and i am sure it'll stay the same
because why would it change when this alleyway is filled with family and smoke
and why would the world ever want me not here?
why would i leave?
then we wouldn't have to reunite.

SKINNY LOVE

skinny love
worn seams of poppa's work corduroys
threadbare beyond repair but
he loves those pants how my grandma loves squash season
and he fled vermont before the sticks were barer
than the pants he sports

concertos of his violin
i once accompanied him, first on fiddle then trumpet
before i dropped music much to his hippie disappointment

early morning sunrise on a massachusetts pond
we baited worms, took turns,
casting in and out without a catch
until mid morning sun baked burns onto young pale shoulders and silvery hair

steinway & sons
sautéed sailfish
an afternoon squall
grey skies paint white window frames brighter than they are
blue wood walls, now-rotted floors
playhouse of treasures that i used to know

skinny love hugs on riverside drive
a sullen hope that it wasn't goodbye
Chapin love for a woman whose aorta's been torn out
his corduroys laid out on the couch
where he slept by his temporarily-dead wife
eyes drooped as family, friends, dropped in and out
to witness the inbetween of death
and hope for life

MARION COOK '26

THE BEAR

I leaned against the counter, watching the beads of water cling to the aluminum and heard the wheezing spin of the ceiling fan. Piles of old Fanta and the mumbling of blunted voices on TV, the sound of Earl mixing drinks behind the bar, the stillness of every empty table, the loneliness of this forsaken place, steaming in the heat.

I watched the beads of water, not knowing where they came from, they simply appeared when the heat did, when the mutts appeared in the shadow of the dogwood out back, and when Earl's grey shorts stuck to the horsehair armchair he reclined in, his left hand gripping a beer and his right curled around his ladies Wan-Chan, the red and gold folding fan that he kept clean from the ketchup and mustard and grease that stained the place.

This was before the bear came.

I hung around in front of the counter a lot back then. I didn't want the mail boy to know I was actually working behind the bar instead of writing my thesis in the corner of my uncle's store. I leaned against the cold counter, my red sandals rubbing the floor, the short khakis, my Hawaiian shirt, my hair, braided tight for the summer, tied back in one heavy hold. I owe a lot to that bear.

"Natalia," Earl's got this rusty voice, like he's some sleazy salesman trying to sell you something you don't need that's going to break soon.

"It's five," he says, the fan fluttering in front of his face, a caffeinated hummingbird, cutting the air like the sails of the boats my father used to sail when he was a boy, back when his family was California royalty, and before he went to jail for eleven undeserved years.

My father met my mother at the New York Zoo after she finished Bryn Mawr. Her family's Jewish, from Amsterdam, they came to New York during the Holocaust where they hurried about with their yarmulkes, bagels, and Yiddish newspapers stuffed in trench coat pockets.

I feel like I can see them, their windblown grey-black clothes, and my father's family clad in the plaid and striped colors of the Sixties.

"Natalia," Earl rasps. I get him his pills, pour him the glass of Sunny-D's orange juice he requires to choke them down. The fridge glows blue, moths flutter towards the single street light, the river gurgles down at the bottom of the hill.

Earl takes the orange juice like its a shot, pinching his nose, rolling the glass between his fingers. “Vivaaaa Las Vegas” he spits. I laugh a little, get the cup, put it in the sink, roll up my sleeves, pick my cuticle, watch the droplets combine, and wait for the bear.

ELVIS

Antimony was the woman in the photograph. Her yellow dress stretched by the film into a singular thread that wrapped and fell and twisted through years until Tim's head sank and he had to lean back onto the cot, silent and immobile. He remembered the buttery silk, how it swam in the heat and rode up her thigh when she was on horseback, clinging onto the Elvis impersonator, Johnny. Tim hated Johnny.

Long eyelashes, greased hair, white sequins falling onto a dusty floor getting trampled by cowboy boots, lost underneath a red hollow sky.

I missed you, she must have said, before Johnny smothered her with his Tennessee voice and strong arms and lifted her like an angel onto the back of the pony.

Antimony's heels lay abandoned back by the hearth, no longer having anything to remember Tim by.



SUNDAY MORNING MANHATTAN

Her red shoes blot against the Jackson Pollock-like rug, a veritable ink stain that slipped from Vernon's pen and splashed a drop of color against the grey-blue of his *Washington Post* which his thick sausage fingers crinkle and that eventually ends up stained with mustard or relish when he wraps up the franks in the news, handing them off to office rats, ballet dancers, mobsters, and tourists.

She had red lipstick on, a dark maroon staining her mug.

Her voice was southern, a slight trip in the way she said her "T"s and "S"s soft and how when she was mad, it all fell out of her mouth and through the floor, the words sinking beneath the rug.

The Lord of the Rings was in her mesh canvas bag, getting stomped on by her kitten heel.

"Marissa, come on now," I wanted to say, but I knew she would never listen. After being divorced once already, there wasn't much more to do. Except stand in limbo in my chef's uniform, stained and ugly, holding nothing and reaching for nothing in a hallway that for her would be a foyer becoming something more interesting, and for me would remain a purgatory, from which I would not leave.

VALENTINE

Tommy's voice crackled, flowed, then rose in a stagnant, poorly recorded anger. The CD was jabbed into my car stereo, and from across decades I heard his rambling conversation unfold, until it eventually overcame the music. The song, "Cadillac Blues" performed by Maisie and her screamo band blared through the speakers as intended. Up until now, I hadn't realized that our breakup was a matter of record. I listened to Tommy, though not to what he was saying. I remembered the conversation faintly, Tommy dragging effeminate fingers through strawberry blond hair, going on about a sailing trip we had taken three summers earlier. In hindsight, his intention was probably not to end things until the words escaped his lips. Instead of his words, I listened to the sounds of his voice, the pitch and hiccups and raspy rhythm, the tilt and twirl. Tommy's voice continued to pitch and spin until the screech of his manic screaming began. Another boy's voice, murky and distant cut through the recording. And then it was as if time was shrinking, and I was back in the house. I remembered the floor layout better than our five year relationship, but new memories arose, buds sprouting from the vine of Valentine's voice. Watching birds spin around each other on the lawn, the wooden owl laying patiently on the dresser, the red ancestral breakfront. Missing things, now discarded. And then there were all the things I could never hold. The moods of the cat, Marcucio, orange and gingery. The feeling of my bare feet pressed against the marble fountain, or the shadows rippling over the lawn, stretched like gum, creeping over ant hills and discarded games of croquette. Valentine's smile, twisting, Valentine's blinking brown eyes. Valentine.

I SMACK THE KEYBOARD

I smack the keyboard
When I drive I forget to adjust the mirrors
And that I am not my father
Except when i listen to the talking heads

And he is not his father
Whose house unfolds and bends
With the weight of seven hundred newspapers
Smitty, Hobbes, and Yogi Bears
Why does a rocket scientist
Have so many pictures
And hold onto so many comic friends?

I stand in the Maryland summer
Soft and gummy with diesel and shiny mica
Clinging to my hair
But holding together
My grandparents' fraying lives
Lines turning to tight loops and scribbles
Ink running out and through
The morning crossword

Keta cups my face and I think she sees
What I never did
My own baby face looking back
And her mother's face peering down upon her
And all the sisters in Australia
Leslie and
Deb and Jess and Sammy

My shadow never grows here
Stretching to the familiar fixed point
Yet I want to stay the same

LINA DURFEE '26

LANA 5:7

You're there, guitar in hand, spotlight's love child.

Me?

Elbowing through a sea of bodies, trying to catch a glimpse,
trying not to drown in the sea of faces that isn't us. You play,
they sway, you're tossing soul fragments to the crowd
everyone eager to catch,
but I'm starving,
desperate.

A loud world, babe.

Clubs, bars, your name in lights,
and me?

Forever a step behind, blending into wallpaper, nursing drinks,
harboring this ache, sweet and sharp. You're doing it,
living the dream,
and I'm here,
sipping on groupie love,
pretending it's champagne.

There's us, backstage, offstage, in the quiet corners where the spotlight doesn't
reach.

Us and the night, the music ringing in our ears. You're humming melodies, and
I'm hanging on
every note,
a lifeline. Magic
this thing between us, the kind that keeps you up at night, wondering if dreams
are just dreams or if they are real,
solid,
tangible.

You look up, lock eyes with me, electric.

A jolt straight to the heart,

like you're singing to me,
for me, about me.

But the song ends, and the moment fades, and we're back in the crowd,
you up there and me down here, lost in groupie love, clutching at straws,
at bits of you.

No patience for shallow promises. I see us, dodging through chaos,
our hearts racing,
ignoring their swagger. Love girls,
that's us,
clinging to each other in a world spinning out of control.
A frantic dance, babe,
you and I, behind closed doors, trusting no one but ourselves.
In a broken symphony of city lights and pounding hearts, we find refuge,
carving a twisted version of forever
in the wreckage of our dreams.

This is us,
loops of highs and lows, spotlights and shadows. You, with mic, a guitar, a
legion of fans,
and me,
with my heart on my sleeve and my eye on you.
We're a melody in a minor key, ineluctable,
sweet but sad, a song that's got
no end.

So here's to us,
to groupie love,
to chasing echoes and catching dreams, to being yours,
not mine, in a room of people who all want a piece.
Here's to the beat, to the rhythm, to the madness and the magic. Here's to us,
making it work,
making it ours.

LAMENTATIONS AT DAWN

Where dawn bleeds into day,
Easter unfolds, a spectral ballet.
A tableau of grief, in silent dismay,
Marks the absence of her, now faded away.

I watch them, a procession of shades,
Clad in mourning, a pantomime of charade.
Unity in sorrow, shards and blades
That carves through me, a renegade.

Their tears, like rivers, carve canyons deep,
I stand on the precipice, peering into the steep,
Watching the others' faux pas and weep,
Feeling an imposter, in a play too cheap.

She, a spirit long gone,
In life, a shadow to my dawn.
Her presence, once a cumbersome brawn,
Now a void, in the twilight withdrawn.

Embarrassment a cloak, her love, my chain,
Her eccentricities, a wish to abstain.
Now, as they speak, I strain
To summon a tear, though my efforts in vain.

Their grief, a chorus, resounds, a solemn hymn,
For her, whose light was always dim.
I mimic their mourning, on a whim,
A hollow echo, at the brim.

Inside, a turmoil, a tempest, unvoiced,
At the junction of regret and rejoice.
For her absence, should I be poised
Or mourn a bond I never truly hoist?

They gather, a unity in despair,
A collective solace, in the air.
While I, an outsider, trapped in my lair,
Of guilt, for the love I could not bear.

Her memory, a specter, now revered,
A stark contrast to when she appeared.
A realization, grim and weird,
It's not her death, but my apathy, I feared.

Under the guise of Easter's rebirth,
I battle with my own hollow, the absence of mirth.
A sorrow unclaimed, questioning its worth,
Mirroring stale joy, now dispersed within earth.

Thus, in the shadow of their collective pain,
I linger on the sidelines, in refrain.
A spectator to the emotional rain,
Wrestling with my silent disdain.

In this theater of the mourning sun,
I confront the person I've become,
Realizing the battle, never won,
For her, the aunt, I shunned, now numb.

So, in the silence of Easter's embrace,
I search for forgiveness, a grace,
To mend the chasm, to face
The absence of my grief, in this place.

“WE CAN’T BE FRIENDS”
(yes, I mean the Ariana Grande song)

In the soft whispers exchanged among youthful peers, the phrase “know-it-all” hovered, a noise just audible enough to escape the teacher’s notice, but sharp enough for me to catch. Once, I thought I had it all figured out—the who, what, and how of my life neatly tucked away within the pages of textbooks. Calculus, modern history, physics—I delved into them all, convinced knowledge was my realm. But then came him. “We can’t be friends,” I silently repeated to myself as I watched him, a pen twirling nervously in his grasp, one hand buried in a pocket while the other clicked incessantly. His laughter mingled with our friends’, but his eyes told a different story, avoiding his smile as if afraid to betray something hidden. Later, in the quiet stillness of night, I found myself lost in thought. I had become an expert in his quirks, cataloging each one like pieces of a puzzle I couldn’t solve—how he adjusted his hoodie strings to match, or how he wore his brother’s old clothes, unable to part with their memory. Yet amidst my silent observations, a storm of emotions brewed, threatening to shatter the carefully constructed walls of how I viewed my world. Beneath my academic facade lay a truth I dared not speak: Can’t you see I’m in love with you? But if you see, then you’ll know. And if you know, then I won’t know anything anymore. And so, I remained trapped in the limbo of knowing and not knowing, tangled in the web of my own hesitation. To know him was to risk losing control, to surrender, so I resigned myself to the silent dance of unspoken longing where the only certainty was the ache of a love left untouched. Emotions swirled within, threatening to breach my defenses. I couldn’t afford to lose focus, so, I settled on the familiar refrain: “*We can’t be friends.*”

EYES

you can see it in my eyes,

the slight shift, so instantaneous, yet agonizingly slow.

the color of the blazing sun reflecting off of lily pad ponds. hues of light greens and browns that leave you wondering what made the water look that way. maybe it is the seeping oil sands and bitumen from the building up the street or perhaps the silt rubbing off of blistering hazel danburite. deep forest moss, soft and squishy at the touch; home of undiscovered insects and centipedes. ocean blues and farmers market blueberries. light amber rings of sun rays reaching deep irish landscape.

ceremonial-grade matcha lattes, swirled with organic almond milk, the pink-haired barista made blends into a murky sencha.

the flick of a switch, a compass whirring north to east, catching its breath at south. a cognitive move of the skipper, to churn the wheel so far left that cargo hauls itself against the right wall, tipping the iron-clad boat. wind rips through the captain's hair, with such force that he's unsure if his skin remains on his face. smart move, veering from the tropic oasis surrounded by sharks. it's tantalizing beauty, leaving him like the Girl with the Pearl Earring, unsure if he's looking forward or turning back. the boat's inertia drags it along, unable to stop short, twisting through stratus clouds and acid rain. cobalt to gravel gray and celadon to graphite. budding romaine lettuce in a chipped terracotta mug, grappling with irises in neighboring fields.

you can see it in my eyes, the change from heart to body, the moment i stop being me.

SILVER

A cosmos painting hues of conformity,
Standing alone, silver draped,
subtle shimmer within phosphenes.

Whispers, eyes tracing silhouettes,
second place muttered under rotten breath,
as if silver was merely a shadow of gold.

Oh silver,
dancing across ocean surfaces,
reflecting boundless depths,
echoing forgotten mysteries.

Hidden in dimly-lit family restaurants,
gleaming bold streaks on polished forks,
silent elegant concinnity,
a testament of timeless grace.

Cacophony of colors,
amidst clamor fast-fashion trends,
remaining a steadfast statement,
quiet protest of self-expression,
rebellion against expectation.

In vibrant palettes, silver fades,
Understated brilliance too easily ignored,
marketed as a reduced-price sterling-clad necklace.

Remember the silvers,
Weeping in frustration,
Cherishing simple goodmorning texts,
Seeking solace in highly caffeinated drinks.

Not as lesser-than,
But resilient, pure souls,
Embracing life's subtleties,
Finding beauty in the unseen.

Celebrate its quiet magnificence,
raw beauty,
honorary first place.

SECOND SKIN

woven woolen cables, interlinked chains i wish i could break—tight between the wraps, the welts warped into sweaty skin, bleeding flesh beneath. constricting breath in ways not spoken, each gasp—an autumnal breeze traveling through esophagus, a fragile thread transposed along inner linings of thought. scent before sight,

warmth in cologne: concentrated hours of costly time in tempered-glass bottle. outstretched fingers, arms wide, closing around the safety of torso and another set of thinking hands. yet these wander, to places even my brain can't reach at eight o' clock on a tuesday, where air bites shoulder blades, sneaking through cold, nipping at back scars.

i tug away at the feeling of scowl neck creeping up—my body, my skin. he tugs too—an off-the-shoulder sweater, easy to slip down, with a laugh still ringing through ears, wringing out my liver, this one, he says, is *easy*.

easy the way i slip to fit past the glass door that always slams, easy the power of mind, ravenous to feast on confidence and self-worth, metamorphose, coyote of my own creation.

Black leather scent smudges air, like scaffolding paint, contrasting raw denim. Rough stitches scratch skin, wax bending at knees, rubbing against belt loops. Mavica FD7 hastily buried into front pocket, crushing against metal keys and a discolored Talkboy. 99 cent Mary Janes sticking to forgotten Roosevelts and Jeffersons. Cheaply-made black earbuds, one in and the other out, swinging from ear with each step. Head bops to Stepping Stones. Back rocks to Queens bands. A crumpled can of who-knows-what next to a red and white pair of Brougham's. Take up reel rewind and blip forward. Crusted white paint stains cross herringbone indigo. Weathered back, faded and raw. AirPods Pros, navy and gray Dunks, Tyler the Creator. Casetify-cased iPhone slumped into pocket. Once stiff twill now vintage-fit, mass-produced by Polo Ralph Lauren and Urban Outfitters. Feeling rips and severs at thigh, dotting frayed islands in a sea of trademarked true blue. Right hand twill, washing 40 years into stonewash: my/dad's 501s, well-worn, never wearing out.



FOR YOUR EARS ONLY

secrets,

thoughts scraping corners of minds, butterknife scooping raspberry jam from cloth-covered mason jar. *was it blueberry?* remembering little things, golden number *three*, badge of honor hanging from chest. details: brunette sunlight, placid green t-shirt, lacking driver's license. head tossing, back, forth, back again. chime, midnight grandfather clock bell, annoying ringing haunting ears, laughing ghosts on halloween night. partitioned attention on restless limbs, thoughts of you. sunflower stalks resting on right shoulder, heavy, beautiful. hints of honey, vanilla, light warm fruitiness, comforting aura. vein to vein, sun-shaped steadfast adoration. cool ocean blue, tantalizing, smirking, waves. bare fingers on gentle sand, smooth pebbles, trapping overflowing seafoam against cracked concrete walls. silently unearthed pillars, sneaking peeks at sea, flowing water slowly stripping away silt, exposing forgotten driftwood. back to four years old, toothy grins, giggles, scampering to tide line, peering into sparkles, smiling at reflections. jumping in the deep end, it's more fun to swim in. announcement overhead, lifeguard warnings over muffled speakers. risks of drowning i'm tempted to take. fifth-grade blonde pigtails criss-cross-apple-sauce in long-spelled games of telephone, only this time inside voices, inside thoughts. whispers distorting emotions from reality, kaleidoscope scattering reds, yellows, greens, *simply perception?* highest altitude, mountaintops, petrichor, disconnected cell-service, the kind that makes you wonder why you ever purchased 5G. battleship board games, secretly deploying loaded cargo, collection of hits and misses. crafty hands drawing conclusions in buttery oil pastel...leaving some things better unsaid.

DEAR WHOMEVER I CONCERN

Dear whomever I concern,

Months of catching time at the corners that became cut turned as sharp as a knife. The harsh blade sliced through the night, peeling off minutes to hours to days of the life that was the only thing handed to me. Like a blister the damage festered under my skin, a wound evident to everyone, coated in a patch with concealer and mascara. Each day took a pair of tweezers under the skin that was stretched like dough, clear with holes and torn nerves. Fresh raw cuts appeared radiating heat, creeping lines of ruby red through my fingertips and up behind my ears. Lines morph to snakes wrapping around my head, nibbling at my neck while I struggle to keep it held high. Like a marionette emotions play across my controlled face, only I wasn't holding the strings. The red seeps and settles to the bottom of my eyelids, existing in the corners of my view, dancing into shades of purple and blue beside my eyelashes. Pounds of tears and thoughts weigh my eyeballs down to the floor, tying stakes of blood and fear into the ground I walk in, dragging sharp lines through my heels and trudging my scarecrow body through the space. If I took a blade to the chest, maybe if I were to flip it inside out, there would be a side that wasn't covered in charred rot. Maggots and flies tear chunks and sear muscles of confidence and self-worth to shreds, swallowed by the red correction ick that mocks me. Pen and quill feel sharp as I spill ink all over my palms, coating them in an erasable goo and staining them with disappointment as the quill pierces holes between the bones of my fingers. The needle and thread of gaslight words feel filthy and contaminated as they feed through my open hands, yanking at the strings, one too tight, and one a tug away from ripping apart. In the matter of seconds my open flesh will be covered in a new set of decomposers ready to eat me alive. Not their fault. They are only attracted to the scent of rotting flesh and dead bodies. I sit at night with the rest of the spool of thread I have left, piercing through my skull trying to tie back my eyes into their sockets. They spread the colors of the American flag, starting white and fresh, turning red-eye just to rest as a cold and shriveled hypothermic view. Watching the world through tainted and poisoned glasses with each day stripping away the vibrance and saturation leaves me overexposed with a lack of brilliance and too many shadows. Heat

sensors detect the radiating love from the few left standing whilst pillars of crumbling ice tease the top of my skin. My skin doesn't feel like my own anymore. The skin I thought contoured my self image now saggy and loose as the creature I am now is unrecognizable and grotesque. Looking back, I don't remember the last time I ate. I can't eye the difference between hunger and guilt that squats in my lower stomach. I feel my body shivering for nutrients yet I feel like a tub, stuffed off shame and satiated by sadness. Pure remedies and genuine smiles now replaced by Advil and coffee. When will it end? Where is the grand finale? The bouquet and applause waiting for me once I finish this performance? The contract will elapse, the movie will conclude, but as for I, I will only disappear. I went from trying to inspire to trying not to expire. From pulling my weight to my weight pulling me and from running my life to my life running me over, over and over again. The worst heartbreak is the one with your past self but the worst heartache is losing the self you worked so desperately for. Rewinding the tapes, 2021 me would not even be able to dream of where I am now. My perfectly curated world seemed too good to be true, and it was. I mean, I have everything, right? The whole package, containing soul macerating anxiety and disturbed imposter syndrome. Pull me out. I wish a life vest could hug my lungs, reviving the breath into my limp body, but my lifeless mass doesn't fit the requirements to wear a 'life' vest. Pull me out, drag me across the concrete floor and scrape my ribs with small pebbles and dirt. Rip my clothes that catch along the sticks and branches of an empty forest and leave me staring at the sky. Staring at the open world I could have enjoyed if I mended the time I spliced so long ago and reversed the dominoes of damage. Despite my body matter existing in this realm I feel like I left eons ago. Leave me looking at the world moving around me, without me while I'm sitting right there.

Your beloved,
Lina

WASP'S STING

blank stares into cosmos. noises, voices (i think?) in my head?
thoughts, through membranes, earmuffs drowning liquid laughs,
sticky silence–agitated bees attacking surfaces. honeycombs playing
charades, conflicting directions, prancing in parades, in hopes of one
day, finding aids to melt away wax, stuck in my brain.

COUNTRY ROADS

left right
left right

crossroads,
wooden tracks,
rusted screws holding planks,
rickety, yet

shy.

i stand,
red and white,
movie scenes dance across an itchy,
warm hug.

eyes closed,
racing miles back home,
back to the sweet smell of peonies and pine,
blueberry pie,
cherry wine.

FLY

fleeting: moments passing

bird soaring through soft, majestic clouds.

beautiful (you say) and it swarms overhead, through wide oak forests, ferns and all. twisting under strands of sunbleached split-ends, around tired fingertips. i reach: not far enough to catch yet far enough to feel, slight softness at the hairs. cool breeze slicing hot air. everytime i look, fly summons, racing through stormlands, guided by lighthouse or zooming through clear blues, always finding its way back to me,

to say to you,

which i've yet to do.

TOUCH

crawling out of my mouth, fingertips shaped like knives dig into my cheekbones, jerking limbs, pushing lips. soft hands clasped together. *breathe*. side hugs, shared smiles, study groups and sleepless nights. *breathe*. ear warped around corners, sparsely reaching you, enough to hear. The drudging truths, what you say about me. beat by beat, sinking into my stomach, tearing intestines. Unsure, a broken piece somehow knew how it was before it was. proving me right in the unexpected expected shattering remnants of what was given away. thoughts tiptoe upstairs, attic dust tumbling past the front door, seeping unwanted wounds into happiest memories. *breathe*. midnight texts, long walks—just echoes, empty sparks. did I know you, or chase shadows, searching for touch?

SELF CHECK-OUT

One by one, draggy feet, heads bowed,
screenagers, shuffling through aisles.

“one-way
one-way
one-way,”
the mutter...

Stickery red arrows
straight-pointing,
zigzagging pancake mix with bone marrow.

Grocery List:

- frozen blueberries
- Sugar Bomb tomatoes
- Indian-head penny (hopefully found on the floor next to self-checkout)

“cash or credit” only rule

“I gave you everything I had and more.

You only gave what I asked for.”

\$15.79 may never repay the loan,

the bounced check,

the walls closing in,

head pressed into pillow,

pinky gripping palms,

scream. never touching air—

lost,

like that greenish penny I found in the coin slot yesterday.

FUSILLADE

reckless,
breathless,
slow down the pace, not what i do
wrong kind of place, to be thinking of you
small crimes, ricochet
your eyes on me,
gaze dripping down, searing my skin,
ripping through layers, pulling me in.

it's okay,
floor it, push past a hundred,
and feel the wind,
wheels blistering,
thundering.

pleading in disdain,
“let it go, make it *end*,”
gasping for air as the road tends to bend.
beg you to stop, but you won't let it be,
speeding ahead, in thoughtless frenzy,
you'd rather die than take your eyes off me,
a fire ablaze, we're free.

SUDDENLY

eyes open,

immediate smile,

sunrays dazzle brighter.

running makes my chest feel a little bit lighter, prancing on balls of toes, pirouetting across sidewalks, free flowing winds, bright eyes. dancing fairies swarm throughout thoughts, slipping out ears, through salty coils of sun-bleached hair. sweet souls twirls through fields of daisies, roses, and tulips. the dreads of last week disappear, lost in slowly accumulating cumulus clouds, a sheer white. the color of fresh-printed paper, articulating invisible maps in hopes that someday,

happiness finds me.

I WISH IT WAS OVER/I WISH YOU'D COME OVER

blown out beeswax candles, time runs backwards, marathons of sprinters, mid-distance, and quiet distant dissonance.

fifteen again.

soft whispers, weight of muscle and bone poking on top of bare chest. eyes touring ceiling, transfixed on nothing. perhaps it's low tide outside, as rounded nails scrape veiny forearms. brain lost, maybe in the ocean, white waves in paint-facing foreheads. wads of hair build blocks of gummy-shaped gobstoppers, blocking views, jawbreaking ripe-till-rotten dreams.

malicious elves hide behind smushed earlobes, screeching words of skewed future. i cross my fingers, wishing away sweet sixteen, hearing the gloating in the gloaming: time when sunset is just missed. bike wheels churn faster, following sun rays, casting orange glisters across green eyes. just missed, and i text *i miss you*, though i really just miss summer sands, salt-stained skin.

slipping barefoot on algae-strewn rocks lodged in channel jetties, i never felt the hollow ache of unfulfilled promise,

chasing the sun i'll never catch.

GUNNAR EGGERTSSON '26
WAY OF THE CHESTNUT TREES

I look down that far, winding, road, and it goes from here into tomorrow, into the next, the next. Out of sight, beyond future memory—I am besieged by its distance! Charmed by its mystery. Beguiled beyond compare.

If I could walk a thousand years I would, then walk a thousand more. And if I could see a thousand leagues, I'd look down into the bottomless sea. Little creatures floating, like migrating bees, or avian pantomimes, little snorkeling beasts, beneath.

I'm no good at poetry. Nor do I believe it pertinent, perfect, or pure.

I think:

I can write a story, with all words necessary. Cobble together a sunset scene,

something like this or that, forget that!

But the fact is, I'm no poet. Nor do I claim to be.

These moments float about in an obscure mist. And all I need to remember are the words.

The house in Iceland: A landscape caught in wind drifts, and earthquakes.

My grandfather's funeral: Pennsylvania's green rolling hills.

I think sometimes of ancient, snarled chestnuts, suffering from fungal blight. Bent, rotting in the gust, brown leaves clinging under a burning August sun.

Maybe memories are like these trees,

Maybe people are—

My great grandparents, the Chestnuts,

Grandparents, the Elms,

My parents, the Ash.

One day it'll be just us: hard, resilient Oaks, before something new comes along.

I look down that far, winding road, that beaten path. Each day, a step, each month a leap, each year an Iliad. But I keep walking, as planets coil the sun. As Earth turns cold, then warm again. Over and over until the end of time, or until I go the way of the Chestnut trees.

ALL GOOD THINGS ARE INVISIBLE

All good things are invisible
I'll tell you
No need for hair splitting
Gerrymandering
Or white picket fencing
All good things are invisible
Existential,
Completely perceptible
Yet, ephemeral
I'll tell you

 When my grandfather was around good things were invisible
And when he was gone they weren't

All those pretty things are nothing
To what's invisible
Those things:

 Purple, black, blue, mornings,
And biting New York City wind,
What I'll remember

 Of those

 bus rides,
 And trains,
 And planes

'Cause those good things in life
Are invisible

I think,
I'll remember, when i'm reduced
To an old sickened man
Meandered, bedridden thoughts
Surely there's a place for the good-looking faces, kind-hearted laughs
 There in that long shadow
Of my fondest August nights,

In the cool Newport mist,
Parents talking, stink of smokey cigar
And the beech tree, gentle and winding,
 an elephant trunk
And I'll think,
 "That little shit-head 4th grader"

And, I'll surely be in awe of how loud the crickets sang,
And cidades hummed
The humid musty air of the Bennets' house
Yes, all *those* good invisible things.

TITLED: UNTITLED

I never read poetry, lacking the constitution to get past the first line; for boredom or fear of what might lie in the second or third verse of some old-time ditty that reminds me of all the wrong things. Heartfelt words in which metaphors lie fragmented in the cerebral resin, like hovering memories of unprocessed air pockets. I sit, misunderstood, in Central Park under a red oak, one of many that roll on the landscape. I'm thinking of this place a lot, Central Park, and of the other places, I guess, I have been to—I may remember. There was a teacher who ran the phys. ed. program at my elementary school, and aside from her criss-crossed teeth, I strongly remember the odor that hung about her, onions and horse mouth. There was a strange sort of pride by which she carried herself that retroactively makes me respect her. At the time though I only thought of her Clydesdale aroma.

I'm going to stop the poetry here—for now! I detest poetry, prose or otherwise; as much as I abhor four-button Glen plaid suit jackets cut too short, skinny jeans which unflattering cling to the thighs. Frankly, because I get too emotional writing, so they either turn abstracted like a demented philosopher vaguely grabbing at runaway vapor. Or too specific that I get angry and unbecoming. To be...or not to be...dear, poetry is like mental masturbation of the most displeasurable variety. But I'll do it for you, friends, ladies, gentleman, my most esteemed colleagues.

This woman is not the only person, I do remember *named* people. But seemingly they are too dull. There was an organ player at my school who I recall, petered his fingers on the black and white keys. I remember his wacky geriatric charm. He had a white bouffant and carried himself like an old man who knew he was old.

Again, I retread the trite roads of poetry making that I always seem to errant towards. What of these things—only to think of such things—when the lights are almost out and consciousness, on the edge of its seat. I never did like Emily Dickinson, or such poets like this one or that. I have so many unfinished ideas,

epics—way better than Homer! So many that these fragments might represent an intellectual body of work.

“The late sun excited the grasses like filament in a retro bulb.”

“Arise you, with those feelings of shame!”

“The style of houses were in that old Victorian way, with high ceilings, and slanted roofs.”

Here they lie in the wastebasket: Titled: Untitled. I never read poetry, or tell stories, or think perchance to dream. But one day, I may write one for you.

ANNA KLEINBERG '26

DEAR GOD

What is the world coming to?

Here I am,

Stuck

Writing stupid words

Lines of literary trash.

Outside, life goes on.

Bundled students walk streets,

Protected from frosty air.

Gray sky watching.

But I'm here,

At a loss.

Dusty photo of JFK glaring.

Stop staring, Jack!

Yeah,

I don't know what I'm doing.

It's fine,

Though.

So, congratulations

Me.

You just wrote a poem,

A misshapen thing,

No legs to stand on,

Never going anywhere,

never gonna run.

But hey, you tried,

And maybe there's a prize for that.

FARMER JOE

This farm is a noisy place;
Pigs have trouble sleeping,
So they
oink
All through the night
Horses
neigh.
Sounds overlapping,
Farmer Joe
napping
Getting no sleep.
moos
From cows,
From tomcats,
meows
Who join the cacophony
Like wolves to a howl.
And when the barnyard grows dark,
A discordant orchestra plays.
For Farmer Joe
No sleep.
Can't close his eyes—
Lost are quiet,
Safe,
Dreams.
All he hears,
The same broken record.
meow
neigh
moo
oink
For now and for the
rest
of the night.

THE BEAST

There's a monster in my house
Prowling dark, maze-like halls.
Paws soft, white as clouds, with
Claws sharp, cruel as knives.
A terrifying beast he is.

If eyes are windows to the soul,
I must say, this beast has none.
If one were to glance, to stare,
No emotions, not one there,
Anywhere
In my beast's green-glass glare.

Sometimes, I remind myself
We own him, not the other way around.
He struts about—
A look of serenity
On his face
No cares in the world.

There are many words
I'd use to describe him
Fear-fomenting fiend,
Toe-tearing-terror.
Yes, the truth is that
he is so much more
Than just a cat.

RIVULETS

When it rains I watch windshield droplets because like me they don't know where they're going. Sometimes the only thing connecting me to others is that we're all sixty percent water. They say the soul reincarnates; if that's true, they must be liquid. I've been a gull, a turtle, an otter, the sea. And if the sea is where we all come from, it's the sea to where we'll return, tossed about on racing currents.

MIDNIGHT DRIVE

Headlights illuminate gravel road stretching into night. Home, an eternity behind and an eternity ahead. How long have I been driving? Seven, eight hours, what difference does it make? I'm nowhere, and time, left behind. Behemoth trees on either side, and stars, a reflection from above. I'm sailing through an ocean of ink, and shore, far out of sight. These backroads are a graveyard, abandoned by time. On this lonesome night, I am here, the sound of a ghost cracking knuckles emanating from worn tires. I follow no map, my life solely determined by the toss of a coin, but, in this lightless maze, I'm free.

EVIL CATS

In the dark, dreary night, dawn, a dream, hours from coming true, the world can be as small as a computer screen. Wrapped in a fleece-lined cocoon, I scour internet to keep mind from running back to where it needs to go. Heart pounding, I awoke from a bad dream, almost screaming. I'm scared that someday you'll walk away. "I've got your back," I always say, but how do I know that you've got mine? Won't go there tonight, tired of scratched, broken record-like thoughts, unpleasant to the ear. I return to the screen and read, "The Evilest Cats You've Ever Seen," and realize, cats, even evil ones, are easier to understand than my life.

GOOD OLD DAYS

I used to be afraid of the monster under my bed, his gray leather skin and talon-like hands. He'd wrap his long fingers around my ankle and with a crunch and a munch I'd be done for. But now I've grown older, wiser, learned that in the great wide world there are things much scarier than monsters. I think if I went back to the old yellow house where I once lived, I'd climb the stairs and go back to my room and look in that one place I never again wanted to see. Maybe he'd be there, my monster, my terrible, lingering fear. Would he devour me, rip my limbs off one at a time? Or would we share a cup of tea and talk about the Good Old Days, back when my world was the size of an old colonial and I hadn't yet learned to fear my own kind more than anything else.

ANYTHING FOR YOU

If you asked me to stand in one spot for the rest of my life, I would. I'd do anything for you. I'd hug and kiss you and bring you flowers when you're sick. You're my world, darling, and you should know that. We don't always see eye to eye—that's okay. Every relationship (this is a relationship, dear) has challenges. You don't like it when I touch your stuff, and you get embarrassed when we're out in public. Remember last week, in the park, when I tried to hold your hand? You screamed, pretending you didn't know me. It's fine, things like this take getting used to. There's a comfy spot in a tree behind your house, and when you're mad at me I like to sit there. If you won't talk, I'll see you instead. My life is gray without spun-gold hair and ivory skin; your sapphire eyes send shivers through my soul.

CALM BEFORE THE STORM

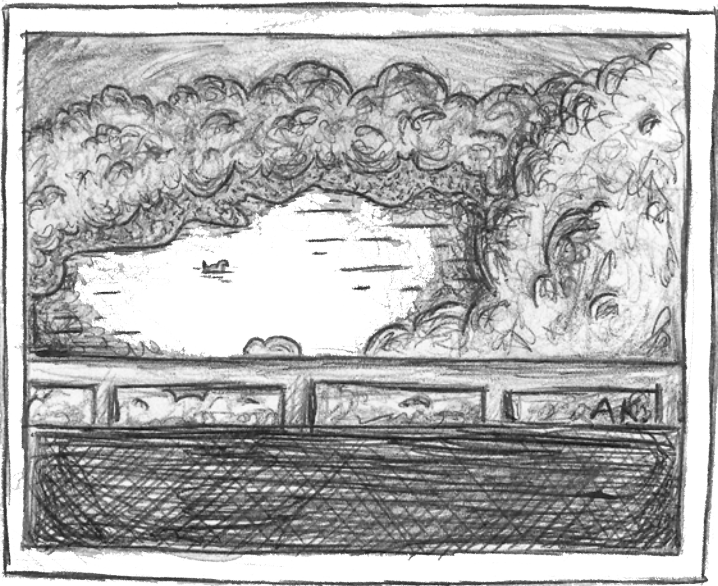
Two weary, test-tired students looking for meal, but nature has other plans. As we search for a place to eat, the smell of ozone permeates. This, I know, like lightning to thunder, is the precursor to a storm. Wind picks up, first raindrops splash. *Time to run.* Gray sky turns black, sidewalk damp beneath our feet. *Faster.* We don't stop until we reach an open door, scent of warm food wafting. *Not a second too soon.* Outside, forget about rain, torrential downpour. Windows leaking, roads flooding, water rising. We are trapped in a universe of soup and dumplings, of cheerful conversation and longing for summer—both a month and an eternity away. Prisoners, but we won't leave.

ODE TO SQUIRRELS

The world is large and dangerous, but squirrels don't care. They play in the road, flirt with disaster, live and die in big, loud ways, undeterred. Of course, they do know how to run—just see them quickly flee away from you or me—but soon forget fear and come back for another taste of danger. Terrifyingly reckless, so unlike humans hiding beneath comforting roofs day and night, never going outside without an extra layer of fur. Oh, to be a squirrel, stealing from bird feeders, dodging cars, making bad drivers even worse. I want to spend my days doing nothing, needing nothing, fearing nothing but shadows. The world is a scary place, but I wouldn't care.

KODACHROME

It's the time of the year when air is crisp and days, gray, and everything smells like pumpkin spice or death. I watch the leaves change on my car ride to school, their neon-reds growing brighter until they burn themselves out. The *soul* reminder that time is passing in this mid-autumn halcyon. I yearn to tell trees, leaves, and sky to stay unchanged, but my voice goes unheard. Soon snow will come and leaves will die, and my crimson world will be buried in browns and white. Nothing more than a memory, a photograph to gaze at on cold, freezing nights when color has long since faded. I hope I remember to use a good camera.



ROBIN LINDEN '26
A LOVE LETTER TO THURSDAYS

There is Chinese takeout on the kitchen island and someone is out of breath from laughing, a wheezy whisper escaping from her lips in place of a giggle.

Cleaning product circles the drain and the only audible sound is the clink of plates as they enter the dishwasher.

My sister tells me about the great sequoias of Yosemite, in the background a soft song from the porcelain jewelry box on her nightstand.

"If you wind it up enough, it'll play piano for you." Does she know I'll have no use for it when she's gone?

There is the green hue of my contacts in the sun and there is a girl I used to be friends with telling me I look like a mermaid in the light.

There is a pill box full of multivitamins and a heart shaped bowl full of cough drops, and on the fourth floor there is a room where I write and in the middle is a framed photo of JFK.

Decaf coffee, silver jewelry, suburbia, honeycomb, umbrellas.

Did you know that dragonflies only live for seven days?

Snow-peaked mountains, second ear piercings, labradors, pearls, tinmen.

Did you know his eyes aren't really brown?

Southern Californian men who promise to call but never do, plums, and trench coats, the last snow of the year. Gumball machines.

There is a red Mazda, belonging to my sister, and she never cleans it, and I'm supposed to drive it now so watch the roads after school because that is when I make my most dangerous turns.

Glass in all its best forms: butterflies, mushrooms, windows, and seahorses shared between sisters.

Nausea.

Swim practice nine years ago, the feeling of cold after chlorine and dinner post practice, we hated it so much but at least now we are friends with the ocean.

Thursdays are my favorite.

Thursdays are for the women who can't cook, for the little girls who cry on their birthdays, for mirror balls and jewelry box ballerinas.

No one ever writes love letters for Thursday, but that is when all the best things happen.

Snow falls and Chinese food in red and white boxes appears on the table, there are silver bracelets on my wrist and I cry every birthday.

No one ever writes love letters for the Thursday Women.

FLUX 7000

The tide going out, the snow coming in, passing time and passing people, how things fall and how they rise. The things I could've never controlled were always the ones I thought of.

I could ask the tide to stay, I could ask my mother too, but it would be the same as anything else. It happens because it must. You could always ask the tide to stay, and it would always go.

Could I change my thoughts? Could I think of sprightlier things? It wouldn't matter if they had to happen or not, because you'd want them to.

Falling asleep and waking up with a blanket covering you, fireflies and jellyfish, laughing while you're coughing, laughing while you're crying, laughing till your ribs hurt.

Hot chocolate from the corner diner, falling leaves, the smell of sunscreen, the beginning of your favorite song, aquariums, sisters.

Snow!

When your birth month is the best in the calendar, a movie with a great soundtrack, when you can see your breath on cold days, phone calls, umbrellas, sunlight through trees.

Fairy houses and folded laundry, Christmas Eve and roller coaster pictures, voice cracks and warm water on cold hands.

If I'm not angry, and I'm not guilty, what am I? I never tried anything that I didn't know I could already do, which meant I was just repeating what I could control.

If I'm not angry, and I'm not guilty, maybe I could be forgiving. Maybe I could be kind. Maybe I could try. I am terrible at opening jars and winking casually and whistling and understanding people and understanding physics and trying things I don't know I can do.

But after three hours of trying, I now produce a noise semi-close to a whistle

After six hours of trying I now understand the basics of projectile motion

After as many hours as possible, I now want to be forgiving. I want to try.

Babies growing to adults, tree roots touching each other, healing bones and healing women, gravity and waves, how they smile and why they do. The things I could've never controlled. The things I would've never wanted to.

MEMORY BOX

1st item: red rubber bracelet. The writing is slightly faded, it's white and I can make "Gotta Have Sole." Wheeler's Founder's Day 2024. I've been to twelve or thirteen, and I always keep the bracelets if they give them out. It was May, it was warm, I got sunburned, and Purple lost field day.

2nd item: Rhode Island Youth Poetry Ambassador Launch Program. Thick cardstock, beige and significant. My name printed under "Finalists." I shook walking up to the podium, careful to speak slowly and make my words clear. All I could feel was everything. Important and wonderful, talented.

3rd item: The Breakers tour ticket. White paper, adult price \$29, pink lipstick smudge on the back. Day trip with Marion sometime in March. Delicious dinner, beautiful mansion. Perfection.

4th item: Assorted Polaroids. Prospect Park, late February, seven of us huddled together to fight the cold, and I keep saying, "Just picture a candle in your stomach." They giggle, and the sun sets mildly over Providence. Hattie and I in the kitchen, a black bow in my hair, people talking near the fridge. Yellow flowers and purple dresses, we're somewhere in the cemetery. A walk to a picnic, and a giddy Robin at a birthday party.

5th item: Brown Basketball Ticket, NO RE-ENTRY. \$12 general admission. The first basketball game I've attended. Enjoyed based solely on the friends I came with. Maybe the last basketball game I'll attend. Not a waste in the slightest.

6th item: Blue Honey Straw. Bought somewhere in Newport, another day trip. Never wanted to eat it, but didn't want to throw it out. A good memory can be anything.

7th item: Yellow Ribbon. Tied onto the bouquet of daisies which Hattie brings to my mother's grave, sheer and meaningful. I watch her through the kitchen window, as she walks up to the door. She holds the flowers like they are something precious, something important. Marion holds the Whole Foods bag,

pretzels chips and strawberries waiting to be eaten in the cemetery. I think of them in the grocery, picking out flowers and dinner, and I shed a tear. It is different from all the other ones I cry on the anniversary. That one is happy. It's ridiculous how good friends change everything.

8th item: Hollins University Creative Writing Journal. Sent to all of the honorable mentions, with a colorful cover and an envelope addressed to Robin Linden. My name is not even in the journal, but I could care less. It belongs to me. My name is everywhere around it.

9th item: May 20, 2024. For Mom. A letter. Starting with "Dear" and ending with "Forever;" it's the first thing I've written where I've told her just how much I miss her. I can feel the anger leaving, seeping out with every word. It's small, and insignificant but it's ours, and that makes it the most important thing in the box. In the letter, I promise to keep finding things for my memory box. Friends and pictures and bracelets and happiness. After a while, all memories turn sweet. Time and a box changes everything.



COIN TOSS

Shimmering fish scales, hues of purple, redeeming smiles, ugly laughter.

I take feedback on my tailgating but we all pile into my car anyway. We're 16, bad driving is a currency.

Parking garages where you can see all of Providence, lookouts where the ocean threatens to hit your dangling legs but never does.

I divulge all my best spots: the garden, the cove, the park, the backseat of the car, the kitchen while making dinner, the gray couch where we can talk about anything in the world.

Competitive card games, touching shoulders, inside jokes, four leaf clovers.

I find posters for my walls: jellyfish, national parks, Pulp Fiction, Prospect Park in space.

I make coffee and drink it at weird times, I vow to buy a new bookcase every Monday and forget every Tuesday.

There are the more memorable sounds of Junior year: songs we love, yelping laughs, alarm clocks.

There are the smaller ones too: friends teaching me how to whistle, birds you can only hear if you listen, shoes being tied and untied, hitting hardwood floors, screeching and running.

I love the roads where the houses don't change, I love the fact that he can always find north, I love movie marathons and hair ties and trying to hold back laughter but failing.

I say I love life and knock on wood, I use my birthday and fountain wishes to ask things to stay the same.

There are no good metaphors for growing up, Marion says on the drive back. Flowers and bees and trees were once children too. They aren't metaphors, they're just growing.

I feel older now than I ever have, and younger than I ever will, and that elicits nothing and everything. I am not one to gawk at the more obvious signs of change, dates and big ceremonies, deep voices and realizations of age.

No, I much prefer those smaller signs of growth. Parking ticket stress, a good joke about male pattern baldness, toothy smiles, caffeine dependencies. That's all I wish for when the coin hits the water. Heads or tails? I'm so much more interested in the flip. The landing will come. For now, notice the way the sun hits the metal, notice the way they laugh, notice anything and everything. You have as long as you need before the coin drops.

FINDING SUSIE

“Have you seen this woman? She’s bright eyed and brown haired, she smells just like Sequoias and there is anger filling her soul in ways so convoluted we could never understand. She loves dogs and aquariums, if it’s Christmastime she’ll put reindeer horns and a Rudolph nose on the front of her car, and sometimes I hate her so much it’s all I can think about. She loves cookie dough and I can’t remember the sound of her laughter, but maybe it’s like delicate morning warmth and maybe it’s like the first snow of the year. I don’t know how she takes her coffee and I have no idea which color she prefers, but maybe she only wants one sugar and maybe she loves blue. She has two kids, strong ties to the ocean, an affinity for reading, and people who search for her daily. Last seen on the day of her funeral, sometime in May 2011, though sightings of her have been reported in the irate waves of rainy days and cold tiled bathroom floors. If found, please contact her daughters, both of whom have terrifying premonitions that they could turn out just like her. They might use the word “intertwined” and they might cry at the mention of her name. Do not hesitate to reach out.”

The disposition of familiarity, the temperament of comfort, is almost always defined by acquaintance. Is knowing someone the same as loving them? To me, there has always been a very thin line between attention and endearment.

Do I miss my mother, or do I just wish she stayed?

I’ve been searching for Susie since I could remember. I’m sure I see wisps of her in the ocean’s most brutal waves, I’m sure I can hear her in the robins outside my window, I’m sure I can feel her in the warm hugs my sister and I exchange.

“Have you seen this woman? Please help me find her. She’s my mother and I hate her but I won’t stop looking. Please, find Susie!”

SEQUOIA

Dear Mom,

There are these thirty seconds right before I fall asleep every night, when I'm too tired to control what's on my mind and I possess this unnatural affinity for honesty, when you are the only thing I can think of.

It's weird, because I'm always picturing a tree, but I know it's about you.

Maybe it's a sequoia, but I think it's a redwood. I can't really tell them apart.

I'm looking up at it, and I can't see its roots or its leaves, if it even has those. I'm looking at a picture, even though it's in my mind. The edges are faded and there's a black frame and maybe I took it on a digital camera and maybe I took it on a polaroid but there is a green tint which indicates it's not just a memory.

And maybe it reminds me of you because you're from California and those trees, just like you, are natives of the Golden state, and maybe it reminds me of you because trees are often metaphors in poems about growing up.

Sequoias and redwoods, the first snow, interlocking fingers, sandy palms, sad women, sunburns, cookie dough, jellyfish, crying on school nights.

I think of you more than I want.

When all the leaves have fallen from the trees and snow covers the ground, I wonder if you're okay.

I have these horrible premonitions that maybe you don't like how I've turned out. I keep trying to be patient, keep wanting to be kind. The flower in the meadow, waiting to be picked, the details in the painting, added slowly and with purpose, the cookies in the oven and the flour stained hands of the girl who baked them.

I'm just so angry all the time. Not at you, I lack patience and composure, and everything just feels so much bigger than it is. Why didn't he open the door for me, why didn't she respond with an exclamation mark, why couldn't you stay?

This is not to suggest that I dislike you or feel even the slightest amount of contempt. I am sad, because when I look at my sister and my mom, I can see this big hole where you should be, and I wonder if that's how everybody is looking at me.

I'm trying to understand you, because that feels like the right thing to do. I am angry sometimes because of how you left mom, and the way that you've

affected her life, but anger doesn't always mean mad. Anger is sometimes just an expression of how much you wish things were different.

I'll come back to the ocean to visit near your birthday, and a couple times during the summer, and I'll bring flowers and friends and every time my anger will soften until it's only marks of missing you and traces of sadness.

I'll think of trees secretly every night, and one day it won't be about you but I'll still dream of a Boston apartment and a mother who puts her kids to sleep with a kiss and a hug, even if that wasn't us.

Dreams, just like anger, are sometimes only expressions of change.

The tree in the forest, which will gain back its leaves but never forget its roots.

Love forever,
Robin



THE GOOD DAYS OF FEBRUARY MARCH

The grandeur of February March has been so perfect that two or three times a day I am filled with the urge to say, “God, I love people.”

And I say this to the sky, as if I am at all religious, as if I know anything about God.

Recently, I feel that there is something so wondrous about life that it can not just be humans.

The pink noses of my friends in the cold while they talk about the things they love make me believe that there is divine intervention, because it is all too beautiful to just be us.

I think of Maddie and I up late into the night, talking on the couch in my room and she tells me that before we became friends she thought I was cool, and I smile because I feel the exact same way about her.

I think of Marion and I singing together and laughing, and when she laughs, it feels like you should too, and once you join in, you know it is right because it reminds you of the month of July.

I think of my friends when I tell them to imagine a candle in their stomachs, keeping them warm—and their faces when they realize that their torsos burn with imaginary flames.

I am filled with thoughts of missing hair ties, blue water bottles, wet grass, takeout pizza, and fake plants.

Share books, laugh so much your ribs hurt, dance around in your pajamas, smile whenever you can, take the advice of your sister and just be happy.

The beginning of spring is not beautiful because of the temperature or the landscape, there is nothing pretty about the inbetween of cold and warm, and there is nothing attractive about dead trees and flowers.

But then again, wasn't heaven beautiful because of God?

And when my sister talks about Providence she describes it the way one might describe paradise, and I am sure.

Heaven could never have been so perfect without God, and Providence could never have been so ethereal without my friends in every crevice, my sister in every corner.

When 11:11 comes around and I am asked to make a wish, I silently pray that life can stay just like this.

Anika and I running hand in hand through the rain, clothes soaked by the time we reach the car but at least we have made it, and we smiled the whole run.

Telling Ami all about the mime at Prospect and how he follows the sun, and the way she laughs when I tell her he is forever golden.

Red blankets, braided hair, illegal parking, learning how to turn onto Hope Street, and painting my mug the wrong colors.

I go to three basketball games in the span of a week, and I don't even mention that I hate basketball till the last one, because my friends get so excited when the ball goes in that it doesn't matter if I think these games are boring.

"God, don't you just love the way they smile?" And I say this to the sky, as if it could ever respond.

These good days of February March have all at once made me feel like a child again, sitting at the bottom of a hill I just rolled down, smiling up at my friends in the sun.

I feel grown too, like I am past the age where it is okay to sleep with your light on and I have to think about the economy and my future more than I ever want to.

And when I look up to the sky while I walk with my friends, and I say, "God, isn't this perfect?" I am sure that I see the beginnings of a smile from the sun.

I am sure the world agrees.

It is perfect.

THE EDGE OF GIRLHOOD

Pinky promises and french braids,
praying to god, and praying god's a woman,
cold thighs on white pavement.

My sister designates herself the "Mayor of College Hill" and she divulges all the best picnic spots to me.

My collarbones burn red at Prospect, though we never leave the hill, a great love of the sun and Whole Foods sushi persuades us to stay.

Did you know that the word "woman" does not appear once in the US constitution?

Fading birthmarks and knee bruises,
hot coffee and jewelry boxes,
first kisses.

Sleepovers under coral sheets, whispers and mint breath.

That moment right before you laugh, wispy giggles erasing themselves in November's chill.

I still remember all of our best jokes.

Did you know that only 29% of Congress is female?

Floral arrangements and wide-eyed girls,

Christmas ornaments I made when I was three and that very first time I baked dessert without my mother's steady hands.

The promise of my grandmother's purse collection and the vanilla perfume on my dresser.

Did you know that women only make 84 cents to the man's dollar?

The first time my sister describes sexism as something you can feel in your stomach I wish every woman could have a sister.

I wish every woman could have copious amounts of girl friends, sweet souls who sit with you on the bathroom floor and hold your hand, braid your hair and rest their head on your lap.

The endearing marks of girlhood: running away from waves in the ocean, blowing out candles on your birthday, tiny feet running around in a circle, dandelion wishes.

The sadder markings too: sexist math teachers and misogynistic gym coaches. The very first time a boy makes you cry.

That soft edge of femininity and the harsh curve of the sexism that surrounds it.

Listen to your mother and your sister and your girl friends when they tell you that you could fight back.

Fight and yell and brawl and box. There are scratch marks everywhere I touch because I am sick of that gnawing in my gut, the age old cry of the worn out woman.

Don't stop struggling until girlhood comes without prejudice.

THE WISE APRIL MUSE

April's sun inflicts a pensivity and wistfulness that I never feel otherwise. The golden heat, the purple dresses, the first Magnolia retaining all of its petals; the tell-tale signs of warmth keep me in a strangely contemplative state.

The beginning of spring has—and probably always will—induced the most alluring and compelling thoughts I've ever known.

I think of things I pay attention to but can't understand: the intricacies of souls, chemistry class, the nature of men, the discrepancies of religion, daylight savings.

I think of the things that I believe in: the meaning of my dreams, pinky promises, my sister's whimsical temperament, my mother's pie recipe, the esoterica of the wise women.

The most insightful and delicate things I've ever heard have come from *Ratatouille* and the edge of my sister's bed.

I think all the time about the disposition of life. The truth is, I've been waiting to find the right metaphor to describe the world for as long as I can remember.

Some people look at life like it's something they can win, the first place medal they can hang on their door, the trophy that can sit above their bed and the certificate that declares them the victor.

Some people look at life like the todo list left on the desk, the chore sworn into the next day, the grudging task done only because it needs to be.

There are the enlightened, more content people who look at life like the flower in the meadow, waiting to be picked, the fresh layer of snow, hoping to be thrown around, the calm blue of the ocean, wishing to be jumped into.

There are people too busy to even look at life, and those who refuse to.

And maybe during December I am satisfied not thinking about the byzantine nature of souls and life's complex quandaries.

But until the chill of winter hits, my mind will be consumed with these convoluted thoughts of meaning.

For now, I will choose to view the world as the garden tended with love, the details in the painting, added slowly and with purpose, the golden warmth of the sun on the hill where all the musings are posed.

For April, life and souls are one and the same: wild and wonderful and belonging to the season.

BITTERSWEET 16

Dear Mom,

I've recently learned the date of your birthday. It seems odd that I never knew it before, but I guess you were gone before I was really old enough to remember such things. Upon learning the date of your birthday, I realized that it was three days before mine, and both of them have passed. I wanted to apologize for not doing anything and wanted to say that I am very sorry to have missed it, equally as sorry that you missed mine. As a late birthday present, I thought I might tell you a couple of things about myself, some stuff you have missed since your death. It seems only fair, seeing as I have learned stuff about you, that you should learn stuff about me. Happy birthday, I hope it is the best one yet.

I'm sixteen now, and I got my driver's permit just last week. I am a very cautious driver at the moment and have a little bit of trouble with not hitting the curb.

I decided last year that I wanted to be a writer, and now it is the favorite part of my life. I have crazy elaborate plans to move to New York and write all about the people I've ever met, you included.

I have developed a bad coffee habit, and now drink two to three cups per day. This does not hinder my ability to fall asleep at ten or eleven most nights.

I have an odd assortment of friends, a few who I think could be lifelong, but many who are not permanent but I still think kindly of.

I love the ocean, just like you did, but I haven't skied in years, which I feel slightly guilty about.

Lucie is my best friend, and though I'm not sure I'm hers, I do not mind either way. She's doing well, if that was something you were curious about. The Linden sisters have always had a way of pulling themselves out of whatever rut they are in.

I have not learned how to braid hair or solve my own problems, and am still dependent on her for that.

I have no idea what I'll do when she goes off to college.

I never finish the last sip of my drink, my favorite color is blue, I'm doing well in all my classes, and though I have developed a slight hatred for math, I still love english and history.

I wish my laugh was more raspy, and sometimes I wish I knew how to be kinder.

I wonder if some natures are too strong to change. I wonder if there is something intangible and small that I cannot identify but that is so significant that it hinders my ability to be a better person. It might just be my affinity for gossip, which has proved to not be helpful.

My favorite movie is *Little Women*, and my favorite book is *The Secret History*.

I have cried four times in the last nine days, and all four times were because of my chemistry test.

I have no talent or work ethic in regards to chemistry, and hope you did not suffer the same problem, as being a surgeon might have been complicated with such difficulties as mine in the field of science.

I have a large collection of fake plants, I love dogs, I have a slight issue with consumerism and I love the time just before I fall asleep.

Snow is the best thing in the whole world.

I miss you very much in the winter. There is something about the months of December and January which provoke a nostalgia and melancholy that sometimes ruins my whole day.

The cold reminds me of Boston, I think about the New England Aquarium, your apartment, *Megamind*, and cookie dough all the time, which means I also think of you.

I'm really sorry I missed your birthday, but promise it won't happen again. I try to make a habit of keeping my promises.

Some things should just be assured, like the holding of a secret, or pledge to remember a certain date, or maybe even a mother being there for her daughter's sixteenth birthday.

I guess certain promises are harder to keep than others.

Happy late birthday,

Robbie.

BEAUTIFUL THINGS WITHOUT PURPOSE

The day I learn how to fish is the day I learn that I will probably never fish again.

It's late July, maybe very early August, and my mother has just made the grueling 50 minute drive down to Little Compton, where C lives.

The house I arrive at was bought by C's great grandfather and is now being used by C and his family, despite the fact that C's father had moved them across the coast twelve or thirteen years ago, and C is now a Southern Californian by habit, though not by birth.

The house is charming, open windows, blue walls with images of sail boats, white wicker furniture, a pie baking in the oven, surfboards on the grass by the outdoor shower.

C shows me his room, my favorite part of the house, and I note a pair of red, white and blue superman socks, which I gave him for the fourth of July.

His friend B is with us for the day, I've met him before and despite his initial impertinence, I begin to realize that he is actually a nice guy, and that perhaps I've misjudged him.

It's C's last day in Rhode Island before he has to go back to San Francisco, and despite constant promises to call and text, I doubt I will talk to him again for months, though not for malicious reasons, only for the fact that I have firsthand seen the way C regards text and calls as if they are some foreign concept.

C wants to surf for his last day, but says we can't because the water is "just not right for surfing" though I think it might have something to do with my inability to surf, which is evident in the scrapes and bruises painting my knees, leftover from the last time I tried to learn a new skill.

B suggests fishing, and I say it's a good idea despite the fact I've never fished before and have a hatred of gruesome, unnecessary things, which at its core, is what I thought fishing could be identified as.

C has a nice size motor boat in the harbor which is maybe half a mile away, he starts to grab bikes but upon remembering my inability to bike, puts them away. He knows I never learned and am terrified of falling, as illustrated when he tried to teach me in early July and I screamed every time the bike tipped.

The boys walk with me and I feel grateful that I have friends who don't mind my failings, but instead embrace them, declaring they like the walk and it's refreshing.

We arrive at the harbor and pile into C's boat, I sit near the back and watch the sea while the two argue over which way to steer.

I discover that the best thing to do while fishing is to follow seagulls, because wherever they hover there will be fish.

I learn how to attach bait to the rod, what types of bait exist, how to cast, and what fish are considered good and bad.

Mainly though, I learn about beautiful things without purpose, which is what I decide fishing is.

When I ask B later why they fish even though they brought nothing home and did not seem to accomplish anything, he simply responds that sometimes you do things for no reason, just because you like them.

I think back and realize, yes, despite the fish guts and sun blaring and screeching gulls, there were countless beautiful qualities to that day, the sound of waves, the smell of sea, the glistening smiles when we finally caught something, and the giddy laughs when those things swam away.

Although that day I learned I never really wanted to fish myself, I was happy just to be with others on the boat.

Things are so beautiful when you stop looking at them for a purpose.

LARA MILLER '26
DAY WITH DEMENTIA (I WANT TO GO HOME)

I awake at dawn—
Strange room
Surrounded by pictures
Someone else's relatives
Friends
Favorite things
A pair of brass-plated
Baby shoes, then

A knock
Florence
Middle-aged redhead
Plastic, parrot pin
Enters

Points to
Flowery housedress—
"I'm no child!"
Escorts me
To fluorescent-lit
Dining hall
Needing fresh coat of paint
Green card tables, Windsor chairs

All around, absent wrinkly faces
Lost to themselves,
Staring
Searching

I talk
with brother John
Sharing oatmeal
Handed me

Jack isn't hungry
Won't touch his food
"Who ya talking to?"
Florence asks

The Sun Times arrives
With wrong date
Again
A decade ahead

A few minutes later
A skinny girl
In red and green plaid jumper
Sings:

She'll be ridin' six white horses when she comes
She'll be ridin' six white horses when she comes
She'll be ridin' six white horses
She'll be ridin' six white horses
She'll be ridin' six white horses when she comes

We all join in

Irma loved riding horses

I need to tell her about tomorrow's game and

How I got tickets for the World Series

A movie follows
A Dog's Journey

A man
With a light-blue mask
Approaches

"Excuse me? Could you fetch Hunter?"
I ask

"Who?"

"My basset hound. He's right there."
I point to the dog, running in a box
on spotted
pixelated grass.

"Not now dear, there's someone here to see you."

A young man appears
Something familiar
About those
Eyes, nose, ears
Dark brown curls
Swaying

He looks like...

A fuzzy memory
Jerry singing
Chestnut hair bouncing
On each note and then

The after party
Hippies and yippies surrounding me
A young man catching my eye.

A kiss
Followed by another

Wedding
Promise

“Jerry. What are you doing here?
Don’t you have to work?”

Sad smile and
We talk for a while then

Phone rings
Time’s up

“She thought I was Dad!
Mom’s memory’s getting worse!”

Another flash
Two cars
Tangled like Christmas lights with
One survivor

A knot of despair
Jerry yelling;
“Help me.”

Bird pin woman
Guides me to

Room with photos
Of my honey
Sun-shimmered smile
Baby boy resting in his arms.

My collar damp
From sea of tears

Night happens and
I climb into strange bed
Wondering
Is Jerry really coming?
Who will take me home?

NEW LIFE

I've been waiting for hours. Too many announcements. All in twisted tongue. The sun rises a vibrant orange, a skyful of Doritos. Passengers fly off into puffs of cumulus smudge. My I-phone, drastically low, virtually drained. Chaotic terminal: noisy family plopping down. A staring toddler--sticky fingers in his mouth. Like my boy, Chester, asleep at home, waiting for my return which will never happen. I had to bolt and with one right move may get lost forever. Begin a new life. Kiss my old one goodbye.

BUNNY BREAK-IN

Last night bunny broke in scattering chocolate eggs through the house. Smudged sugared paw prints line hall, avoiding every trap. Two stand together when Mr. Cottontail squatted down to examine alarm strings webbed all about. Or, maybe he rose on hind legs searching for snares. Either way, tracks stop. Marking trail's end, a woven Easter basket filled with bonbons. Many shaped like ducks and chicks and a majestic egg wrapped in gold foil. Inside, the cherished prize: an engraved carrot: See you next year.



STORM CHASER

Sun consumed by insinuating clouds, white streaks shatter darkened sky. Wind intimidates everything in its path. Except for her who runs to the storm with precipitation-plastered hair, coddling her Pentax, a mother protecting her newborn. She chases them for the rush, the thrill of living on life's knife edge. Blinding rain pounding down. Winds thicken. Camera flashes, again and again. She stands her ground, the storm, her friend.

FRESHIES

Low grades, messy manners, all the same. Parents not around, don't owe 'em nothing. Nice three bedroom house, one annoying sister. Never been starved, still always hungry. Only thing to look forward to is seeing buddies, who don't give a damn about what I do and when. Failing every test, never bothering to study. It's cool. And who cares about detentions?

Wet Williams, noogies, Jackass pranks, best moments of my life. Never did drugs, no need, already too hyper without. Boring classes, droning teachers, whatever if they yell, if we get suspended! Just means another day off, right? Never thinking about college or future. Furthest look ahead seeing new TikTok trend. Maybe this isn't the life, maybe there is more to it...who am I kidding? Best moments yet. One hundred percent!

MR. COPPERHEAD

Long lean body coiling 'round dried out cherry branch. Brown snake skin scales glisten under Infrared heat lamp. Neon-orange bag containing frozen mouse floats in purple Solo Cup, just out of my, Mr. Copperhead's, reach. Waxed plants, wood chips, reptile water dish. Wally appears out of nowhere, thick gloves strapped to paws. Grabbing my neck, takes me to a circle of children. Sticky hands with splotchy goop, tasting of fingerpaint. Memories of succulent fruit clinging to vines. Little yellow seeds surrounding plump scarlet skin. How I miss home: chasing food, crushing tiny bones, sliding through fragrant green grass. Now, only defrosted mice; slithering within a glass tank, enduring five-year-olds tying me into knots. Trying to escape, I quickly wiggle to the door, but I'm soon caught. Not easy being a snake.

ALLERGIES

Peanuts, shellfish, sesame oil, I could live without. Mustard, latex, even pollen would be all right! At least then I wouldn't have to analyze every label, consuming only fruits and vegetables. I don't eat at restaurants. No soda or tea or coffee, just water, always water. Have you guessed what my body identifies as poison? That's right. Salt. The one ingredient found in everything—from brownies to hot sauce. Little white grains that flavor foods from around the world, keeping them fresh, edible. I've had salt before, mostly by accident, and loved it. Delicious. The almost, spicy, melty, satisfying crunch. I crave it! And it doesn't kill me, just closes the throat and blotches my skin. No big deal! A well-timed injection will always save me. Pals try to stop me, but I can't help it. I'm addicted! These scrumptious crystals, delicate morsels of perfection. And what, I can't have any, ever? For salt's sake, not fair!

TURN IT DOWN

Vibrations rattle eardrums like earth quaking buildings to rubble. Dogs bark, sirens scream, Luo Bing's radioactive green Corvette blasts "God Only Knows." Too loud, can't hear myself think. Fitzpatrick always talking, asking head-scratching questions to fill silence, when it's the only thing I crave. Earplugs no help leaking like rusty faucet whose drips can be heard three floors down. They say, it's my sensitivity, brushing my misery away. Underestimating the annoyance: ceiling fans whizzing overhead, or neighbors' backyard wind chime ringing late at night. Some call my hearing a superpower, but I only feel its toll.

SENBAZURU

Fold, crease, flip. Light thin paper transforms into majestic birds. Arched heads, bent wings. Still, not perfect, white streaks shine through uneven folds, every day getting better, just like him. Hospital room crowded with colorful sculpted sheets. Walls, tables, wrought iron bed covered by siege of cranes. But not yet enough to grant a wish. Every day, she arrives with additional supplies, and stories about fighting with Father and Sister's birthday. Brother hopes, before time is gone, sister forgives for dying early. With each fold he leaves a gift for when he will no longer be here. Another paper, another fold, this one the color of spider lily. Heart monitor beeps, increased shortness of breath, vision blurs. Sister rushes in, backpack draped on shoulder. Half-folded chick rests on lifeless body. Picking it up, she folds, creases, flips.

DAFFODILS

Golden yellow petals sing in the sun. Thin, snappable stems secure in damp earth. Bouquet of shapely buds waving in the wind, more alluring than Pied Piper's melody. And yet, the sands of time define their glorious but short life, soon to expire before month's end, returning to the earth from which they will rise again.

SPARE US

Tall, skinny, ivory necks search wooden alley to spy oncoming threat. Red lines drawn like warrior paint. One, two, three, four rows of ten-pin soldiers form an equilateral triangle, the strongest of geometric shapes. Soldiers patiently await the attack. Soon, planks tremble with enemy's approach. Yellow and blue plaid sleeves roll, revealing hunky hairy arms, lining up fire power. Challenger swings back and lets go. Cannon ball of red resin skins down alley, gaining speed with each rotation. Aiming straight and true, six soldiers succumb. Others try to help, but no time, another attack is launched. Veering off course, the heavy ball misses by a hair, falling into gutter. Plaided man growls preparing next attack. His ordnance tears down remaining soldiers, ricocheting from side to side. He jumps up and cheers. The pin boy quickly arrives to replace the defense.

INSTAGRAM

Mates, makeup, meals all cramped into one-by-one portraits. Endless scrolling, strangers crouching, filtered faces, flashing smiles. How-tos on best deep-fried pickles packed with pepper jack. Teens bopping to raps, singing of rape and drugs. Pixelated hearts and thumbs-up worth more than dollar bills. Debates from foreigners about best doggy shampoo. Fake news spreading like wildfire, leaving behind more destruction than flames. To be popular is having a blue check next to your name. Time limits ignored, again and again...*just fifteen more minutes*. But it never is. Soon full moon shines through glass paned window and you still have an essay for history, a worksheet for math, but all you've done is watch AI dolphins dance to a belting Clean Bandit. But life isn't a spectator sport. Make that mistake and it's over in an instant.

HALLOWEEN HATER

"Jeez, how I hate Halloween," grumbles Cranky Chris. "And what idiot thought it a good idea for candy-crazed kids to beg for handouts? Not me! I'm just the guy who's dedicated to ruining all the fun! What, haven't these kids heard about creeps conning little Johnny into an SUV with the promise of a Sugar Daddy? And the *costumes!* Teens strutting bright Brazilian Barbie bikinis chasing out devils. No one is safe! Skeletons, zombies, vampires, werewolves, ghosts...Five-year-old faces forced into plush powder puffs. What's with all the kabuki makeup! One more fool singing *Circle of Life* holding his pet and *I'll* run after him, hatchet in hand, arthritis be damned! You can find me in my undecorated, all-lights-off, fully secure house that screams GO AWAY! Got it! Don't ring the doorbell a million times, hollering trick or treat, Do I look deaf? God, I hate Halloween."

NOODLES

Steam dancing above Styrofoam cup. Hot water gushing from copper spout makes raw pasta relax. Wooden chopsticks tug at tangled yellow noodles, clenched together, afraid to let go. Red label reads *Ramen* in Japanese across a cartoon bowl. Claims to be tonkotsu, but its pork flavor is nothing compared to Grandma standing over hot stove steaming golden liquid until it smells like heaven. Grandpa complains of an empty stomach.

I think of those mornings now, hunched over a diagram of a human heart, over-seasoned noodles cooling beside me. How I should have seen it coming, the discomfort of eating the same salty broth three days in a row, never drinking enough water, insisting *I'll be fine*. I should have caught the warning signs before Grampa collapsed, clutching his heart as if to tear it out of his chest. Hours of pacing in overcrowded hospital halls. Relief of hearing five words: *He's going to be ok*. I'll never forget Grandma tearing up handwritten recipes, passed down from generations. Since then, only bland steamed vegetables and fish. No noodles. No broth.

Phone lights up, Grandpa's number on screen. *Suhara, something happened. We're at the hospital*. Phone, wallet, keys, everything else is left like a theater set, waiting for director's voice to yell "action." Door slams, disrupting last wisp of steam from foam cup. Grandpa waiting, baggy jeans bunching over sandals. Shaking hands clutching peppered hair. Nurse tells us, Grandma won't wake up til tomorrow. I leave, stopping only to pack paper bag with food.

Kitchen looks same. I take pot and bring water to boil and add spices then noodles. Something is missing. Grandma.

In the morning, I ladle soup in Styrofoam cups. Grandpa asleep in a chair, head bent low in Grandma's room. Waking to the smell of soup, Grandma sits up on scratchy muslin sheets. She sips broth. Sunlight shines. Another day with a cup of noodles.

NOTHING TO WEAR

Light grey sweatpants slip over shaven legs. Dripping strawberry blond hair dampens light yellow tank top. Chloe stares at overflowing closet that puts Cher Horowitz's to shame. Price tags still hanging from shirts and skirts, shoes stacked in corner like Jenga set ready to tumble. No matter...one by one, she picks through pile, looking for perfect outfit, discarding unwanted items behind until all is hidden under Gucci hats and Burberry trenches. Loudly exhaling, she grabs her pink Birkin and marches to the Prudential Center. Each store offers new look. Too soon, arms numb from abundant bags, neck heavy with new white gold chain. Light snow covers sidewalk teeming with Black Friday shoppers. Chloe stumbles under the Miu Miu canopy, tripping over living bundle huddled in torn hefty bag. A teen, dirty-faced, tired eyes, peers, a strand of orange hair falling across tear-streaked cheek. "You're the star of *Silky Silhouette: Locking Your Look!* Wow! I loved that movie! Changed my life!" Chloe's eyes widen with *her* memories of being on the street, icy nights huddled in chill, an empty stomach, no friends. The sound of her foster family mocking her. Returning home, she splits leather and linen into piles, reassessing what the hell her life is all about!

BEATRICE SPONDIKE '26
RINGO'S ORANGE TREE

Rolling the firm sun-lit orange in his open palm, Ringo could feel it flex between his fingers; the pimply, leather surface, concealing a juicy interior.

Mama's chicken soup, rosemary perfume, bubbles in the bathtub. Ringo raises his head, eyes tearing away from his prize. Overhead dark shiny leaves gleam in the sun. There are other, perfectly round oranges amongst the small white blossoms, hanging heavily on the lean branches. The tree bends down toward him, its shape that of a defeated man. Its fruit, just out of reach. One must wait till the oranges fall on their own. His head throbbing, Ringo strains his neck, craning awkwardly, staring at the oranges as if rediscovering a forgotten memory.

short cut hair, the stink of cigars, soft sounds of colored bracelets. The wood chips beneath his feet smell fresh, pungent. The fertilizer, placed only days ago. Ringo digs his thumbnail into the orange's vulnerable surface. He's penetrated the peel, skin under his nail aches slightly. A bead of sweet juice swells at the surface, streaming down his tan wrist. Like the air, it's warm. Ringo bites the inside of his cheek, hard, his teeth catching on a piece of irritated flesh.

Dishes piled in the sink, unwashed sheets, an eighties Sedan. Slowly, Ringo slips his fingers into the orange's smoochy interior, pulling the skin back and separating it, exposing the faded white underside of the peel. Strings pull away from the flesh led by the rind. The smell, tart, all citrus sticky around him. Ringo takes his time, steadily removing the peel, taking care to keep it in a single piece. It was near spring, birds singing to one another, small buds peeking up from the ground, oleanders blooming. Tall trees, flush with green leaves, cast lengthy shadows over the beige stone wall, crawling up the sides, interweaving, as trees rocked in the breeze.

A red-lipped smile, la merenda, the whispers of children. Discarded, the skin falls beside Ringo, no longer of use. Now in his palm, tender carpels cling hopelessly to the core. Bursting with color, the orange is ripe. Ringo's index and thumb split the segments apart, keeping them cupped in his hand. He brings one to his mouth, and crushes it between his teeth, listening for the slight pop as he breaks through the outer layer. The flavor, sharp on his tongue, the juices sliding down his throat.

A betrayed child, tightening the tap to stop the water's rhythmic, suffocating drip. Ringo eats with vigor, no longer gentle with the fruit. He crushes and swallows the remnants and in their absence, his hands are again sticky. He knows he should head back into the school building, and embrace the shade: walk to the basin, rinse the stickiness from his hands. The exposed skin absentmindedly torn inside his mouth, stings. In the schoolyard, he hears the loud laughter of young kids, rosy-cheeked and wild. Ringo's stomach turns, he is far too old to be avoiding responsibility like this. He licks the acidic tang off his lips, letting the bitter aftertaste sit. Ringo thinks of Mama, her smile, the feeling of relief and shame tied into one unbearable emotion. She had given him an orange then, smoothed down his hair, hadn't said a word, the orange alone had been enough.

Ringo closes his eyes, thinking of long car rides with windows down. Papa tapping on the steering wheel obsessively, anxious, unnerved. He can picture the sea, crashing waves up against the shore, the screams of happy children lathered in sunscreen. The scent of salt air stuck to Mama's hair. He could smell it when she hugged him, her face calm. Ringo thinks of the time after, the quiet in the house, only Papa's footsteps echoing. He feels the weight of all his thoughts sinking to the bottom of his stomach.

He and Papa no longer drive to the ocean and Ringo only eats oranges when he misses Mama.



BEA'S SEEN THE SNOWFALL

The cold rests in exposed skin seeping into pores. White banks soak up sunlight, trees playing dead wear gleaming snow's weight. My dad once carried me, lying limp in his arms my tiny face pressed into his neck. He smelled of aftershave. His razor, often forgetfully perched on the porcelain counter, teetering into the sink's wide mouth. Hipbone pressed to the edge, breath fogging the mirror, I remember extracting a front tooth, blood-spattered clean tile, I ran to him crying. For days my tongue played in the empty crater. Even dug dirty fingers into the wound. I liked its metallic taste, the deep throb in my gums. Today, wind bites my ears surly, knit hat still at home. Cold air in my mouth, I ache for Dad's once-strong arms. I press tongue against thirty-two reasons I can no longer be held.



JULIA YAKIREVICH '26

PESACH 5784

Salt water for the daughter of immigrants, living in the ambivalent, because how do we wine and dine when we could be whining, opining an ocean of tears, waiting for someone to hear, these cries of shallow shores rising to our knees, until we cannot breathe. Drowning in a salty sea. Let our people go. *Charoset* fires, they will, to outsiders, building a wall around stories, blurring names for glory, we are chosen but not winners, fighting for our place in life, and laying our graves next to yours, and some will watch and riot, but only we know the ground under our feet. *Bitter herbs* in the suburbs, wide but high, closed eyes whisper lies while we try and internalize: where is the olive branch bearing fruits of remembrance, and because we cannot forget the bitter taste in our better lives, your screens turn off and we walk away, but the bloodshed does not pass over.

CEDAR CLOSET

Amidst sweet tea and rocking chairs, lingonberry cobbles and drunken toddlers,
just as the sun drowned over dandelion fields, our secrets sealed,
and the stars, which i still couldn't name, sprawled in the sky like stubborn bug bites
littering our limbs, scratched at with sticky, peach juiced fingers,
A shadow,
A girl,
Or woman, frozen
Hair braided, expression faded,
Sitting cross-legged between the furs in Mama's cedar closet,
Searching for a veiled memory, accessory to another century,
Of salty air inhaled, paths of ivy trailed,
hiding in August's cavern,
before dinner's cold and company's hard to hold,
outgrowing the weeds,
of another me.

JAZZ CODA

Here lies the life that never was, throwing gauze and applause at a hopeless cause, straying split ends, the ends of friends, the Kind of Blue—to know you then outgrow you—how are you, sister? Do you still see me in blue jeans, the pair I told you to buy? Have we expired so there's no goodbye?

Seven days seven planets seven scales, the blues streaming from intervallic patterns create symmetry, inverted for the introverted, filling space where words have no purpose. Still, there's hope of something: the home, the root, the end, and the beginning, that when I run out of bones there's a heart expecting me.

Out of tension that builds in caverns of devil chords comes resolution, and I come to the conclusion there is symmetry to be found no matter where I go. Lingering in the in-between, the scene of a desert landscape falls upon me, dreaming of sinking into hot grains in open plains, I lie in the dune valleys, waiting for one side to turn me to dust.

Feet adjust to the ridges of gritty cobblestones adorned by emerging moss and unlucky clover, humming the sweet lullaby of a baby's first cry over rumbling cargo ships. Reykjavik summons through the threshold of the Midnight Sun, where the memory of day becomes eclipsed by the same, with no malice in the balance; I am reborn in nightfall and full light.

Spilled coffee while people-watching, speckled hydrangeas, unsettled moods, and coastal views, I have learned to feel again: in blue Picassos, riffing honchos, Bebop machos. I reel and peel back layers of humble prayers for the diminished and unfinished. Here it comes like height marks slinking up a doorframe.

SCREEN TIME

When I pick up my phone, my fingers know where to go. They play their part, prancing along the keyboard, playing the major scale of my life—the screen. The endless void of scrolling sucks me in until my eyes numb at the bright display, and the sound of buzzwords drug my ears.

The impermanence of it all—I'd rather avoid it entirely.

Only I can't. Each night, I cradle my device and let the blue light soothe me to sleep or at least a state of mindless angst free of any real anxiety. I wonder if it's my persistent fear of the dark, like how I still squirm at the image of beetles and bees, a childhood fear never fully resolved. But of course, that couldn't be it—the streetlight shining through my bathroom window never left me fully in the dark. Perhaps it was my absence of control: a schedule never truly my own and life pursuits I only internalized from the aspirations of nosey relatives. But I liked to think no matter how repetitive the days, they were still my own. Of course, my mother would've said it was my inherent laziness and absolute lack of motivation. I would've taken the advice had it come from anyone but her, whose very lips yelled profanities at the Bravo programming on the basement TV. Now, just maybe it was the rare chance that it's simply enjoyable! I don't need a list of fears or shortcomings to excuse my affinity for empty-headed scrolling; it wasn't to help my anxiety or distract from my inability to live in the moment. Damn it, it's just fun!

I lingered for a moment on this passing thought. But still, there was the itch for the perfect ending replacing the ache for additional screen time. I couldn't think about it any longer—I was only consumed with how I'd introduce myself. My real name, or UserID3957830245?

EXHALING

I've learned the second lap underwater comes easier than the first
When spine, lungs, and legs harmonize
Discipline, your only mission
I take a last shaky breath and breaststroke across the lane,
A painted cream stripe with blue tiles—my mind, a tabula rasa for the next minute
and thirty seconds
A purposeful patience, free of expectation
Only a pair of lungs, determined to try again

I push off the wall, inhaling
Submerged
Inflated cheeks slowly tapering
Legs aching for rest, lungs begging for mercy,
Releasing bursts of air until I meet the first wall.
I don't linger long enough to make friends,
I'm condemned to counting down tiles to the end
My lips sag under the pressure of labored exhales, but I charge forward,
Sucking up the weight of a thousand I can'ts and many more I wills,
The second wall is mine.

I imagine the day I open a certain college acceptance letter,
and I get to *exhale*.
Free the air of the strife and sacrifice of
leaving, grieving, identities interweaving but never meeting
It was worth it!
We've won this race
to claim a future never thought to be ours,
Mine.
This country is only mine, and to my parents a stepping stone, until they find their
own,
Blown by a wind never fully known.
But this exhale is sharp and quick,
and followed by a hasty inhale.
A new race, a new game, a new breath:
No time to run out of air.

INSIDE THE TUDOR ON UPTON

Have you ever looked inside the rickety Tudor on Upton? The one whose shutters ricochet between ivy-encrusted panels and far-reaching branches of stubborn maple, next to mapped windows of spider webs and cracked glass. When locals return from Bali or Boca this derelict stirs controversy: winter's memory fails to distract from interiors rotting in summer's blistering palms and the growing disarray of *New York Times* neighborhood children mistake for a Halloween trick—the white mold not to be confused for a treat. Getting close reveals even less than looking from afar. Not so much a name or number. Papers addressed to a distant echo. So have another look, will you? A double take on your evening walk, before arsonists invite Upton's Tudor into smoky skies; up in flames, paralyzed.

Peering inside is like searching for love on Sunday—only so many ways to fill an emptiness never craved on any other day—

Or on Monday.

MEMO TO SELF

I thought **You** should know,
One day soon, a marvelous idea:
Subject confidential.

And on that day, the sun will shine, birds will chirp, same as any other; secrets kept and truths unwritten, love found and lost, only now an epiphany, negating all thoughts held before. Leaves will fall, Moon will wane, but *this* thought remains, putting any other to shame. When they ask what a thought has been thought, I will say look to the willows and untangle the ivy, check the pockets of your mink coat and note the asymptote. Find a riddle in a puddle, and a pun come undone. Keep chasing after wafts of home-cooked, battered and beered, ripe thought: home run! And when you've exhausted the cardinals, don't be afraid to dig—deep! Stab a shovel at this puzzle, stick a hand in the earth, pull a soily root of great mirth, take a net to the sky: don't let this thought pass you by!

If you do happen to catch one, dragonflies flapping at the confines of your mind, swallow its words and spit them out, savor the oasis but don't forget the drought.

Sun beams the same; love affairs still maim, but now it is You who has changed.

SKY

One wonders what to do with so much Sky.

Linger around a loading dock until the Midnight Sun kisses the bay and teases
nightfall,

we wrestle with getting older and meaner under a Sky that refuses to set:
a leather jacket sits heavy on my shoulders, just over the knot lodged between
scapula

The sun doesn't help with the ache, but I feel less bitter

And a bit colder

I remember Beatrice and her woeful story.

"We thought it was hail!" the thin-boned woman in a pink shower cap recalled,
"Hail in the summertime!"

I shoot her the best sympathetic look I can muster while Sky reigns dull—
unimpressive at six in the morning

"It was DDT," her eyes grow big, "we waved and screamed, the helicopter kept
flying over field,

over us—spraying white powder

Burning our skin, hair, and hope."

What to do when you can't trust the Sky anymore?

Fill it with an Aurora that follows you from a continent away?

until one night She shows up uninvited in your backyard;

you don't have it in you to beg her to stay but she does anyway.

Another stop on her magnetic storm, feat of allure, world tour, and I might just
join her:

A citizen of Sky. Free to exist where I wish and am wanted,

not bound by a dotted line, but a solar flare of perpetual haunting:

a reconditioning of breath, flesh with no motherland.

Not a butchering of consonants, trips to consulates, or an ache for forgotten continents,

A herring belonging to any sea and a mother tongue swallowed under a cedar tree.

If you asked me what to do with so much Sky—

I'd ask for more.



DAISY ZHANG '26
EASTERN STANDARD TIME

It's 1:00 AM when the alarm goes off and I wonder how long it would take to walk three hours into the past from here to California. Maybe I'd make it if I ran, empty butane can in hand, looking for a place to dispose of the burnable made unburnable. But it's easier to scrub the crust out of my eyes, to let electric blue light melt away the evening-aged mask on my face, and so I settle for this option.

By the time it's 5:00, I'm already two days, an hour, and ten minutes late. Have I slept at all? I ask you to never take me over the bridge again. Back when time correlated with the sun's hue and not a number, I stood three feet tall and terrified with one hand on my bedroom door knob, the faux-wood blinds italicizing shards of morning sunlight across the carpeted floor. What scared me on the other side of the door was the thought of face-painted rockstars, ones I'd once seen on a poster, but never met. Later came the fear of no one else awake in broad daylight. Which is to say: don't talk to me about a flame's aftermath at any point before sunrise.

There's flora and expired baby powder melting into the couch across the hall and six lumps of tap-soaked tissue paper spilling out of my hands. It's 8:00 PM and all the red-gloved butchers have closed up shop, but even in the dark every duck remains held up by its ankles, head dripping baste, spinning until inversion becomes root.

THE GENIUS OF MECHANICAL FLYING

Béla Kondor, "The Genius of Mechanical Flying", 1964

Here's what we've learned from Icarus:
Char body fluid before you hit the water.
Born to a house of blue citrus branches,
A labyrinth, where fleeting marvels make
A flytrap for a crib? Don't waste air time
scraping wings from carnaúba palms
or mother-of-soybean skin. (The only way out
is to dig.)

Perhaps it is a product of blind Newtonian faith that
I am expected to fly the same way I am thrown.
Here's something to try at home: Turn a propeller hat
into a jet engine. There's scale in motion,
a bobblehead sat by a skyscraper's open window,
a fan fighting wind off a sea-worn cliff,
fighting stereo for claim to the sound barrier. (Have you
hit petroleum yet?)

The Wrights wipe sweat from their foreheads
and cross out their first two problems. The last frontier,
Pilot control, made three axes:
pitch, roll, yaw. *The Flyer* had only room for two,
And fate, one lonely pair of eyes to watch Kitty Hawk
loom over Hiroshima—like Icarus, Orville, Wilbur, Milton
could only experience paired flight once. (For all you know,
there's a sun in the core of the Earth, too.)

ENGRAVINGS

I. Pagodas

Consider the path of a raindrop along the *Tour Eiffel*. Being a weather station for the now, all you know of all that is here is that none of it could have been deflected, so fight the will of gravity with your own shriveled fingertips. The humidity of a summer monsoon beads along the eaves of a pagoda, sails, washes the last of the Qing into street gutters. A gamelan chorus rings all around you. Trace the droplets that cling to cold-hammered iron, watch how they bitcrush and shatter around the edge of a mallet; and take note of the impact point's cleanliness, for this is where the rust blooms warmest. Most can consider the percussive value of a storm. Fewer can give it string tension across wood. You'll see the truth of the matter when the filmy water tracks absorb into rotten knots, but settle, still. To oxidize, after all, is to gasp.

II. An Evening in Granada

During the aria, a new-world warbler lands on my shoulder. A wooden sun onstage casts a flat shadow across the glass paneling, swings past what to the orchestra is the pit's ceiling, to the propmaster is an anchor point, in other words a horizon, in a creaking gyroscopic pattern. I sit atop this pyramid of cotton-fibre banknotes, constitutions twisted into origami roses, what might have been a bouquet if I served as cellophane. Blooming pillowy and delicate under my feet, folded for the purpose of being crumpled, the kind of dinner-date party trick a waiter later uses to wipe the tablecloth of toppled white spirits. The kind they smuggle in by the liter. From here you can watch the sun set twice on the longest day of the year. The storm settles deep into midnight and I watch a nightingale take its rest within the prima donna's hair. My warbler chips away at lemon-frosted salt and condensation. The glass cracks, from the force of her beak or the pull of the moon, I can't quite be sure.

III. Gardens Under Rain

Thank you for sweeping out the last of the laurels. I apologize for the way the damp soil sinks its roots into your soles and drinks as if you to it are rainwater and it to you is quicksand and I swear I'd tell you what I came to say if only the storm out here would end. You wonder how long it must have taken to cut

these all down. If we count I say the number will tell us enough. Something concrete to keep our feet planted for a clear sky. A landing pad for when the kite comes down with the garden shears. Being a vehicle of imagination ripstop nylon photosynthesizes and goes just as easy as the leaves. Allow me to fashion a crown from the debris atop your head. Five six seven eight inlay the face with hortensia pinks and junglewood splinters take my hand DANCE with me kick back the laurels in a loop till your heels catch in the gaps between linoleum tiles fall back on supermarket dirt and withering houseplants watch the spring's first kaleidoscope bruises bloom from your eyes into wild roses onto six-week-old sink-rinsed strawberries.



NIGHTWALKERS

Christmas is for kids. Reach out your hand
to meet me where the roll-up gate scrapes
across eyelids. Listen for the
lonely baby follicle as it falls, Sears—
Smells like death.

I have seen waterslides unravel from the sky and now I watch
the August sun hang in eternal cannonball. I drag
and skip my feet across malltiles and concrete,
lift my arms to the breeze and static
burns out on my fingertips.

Because the opposite of fire is pine
trap-cut emeralds on plastic tables
soft drinks bubbling inside
fluorescent astigmatism-halos
And red,
silent, whipping,
echoing, still red, I say,
Let the bulls run

THE SNOWMAN II

many times
has whittled its nose
against my bedroom window
the years have densely packed
its face and snapped the danvers
into a second hand, rotating and
screeching as it presses the heavy
sheen of its skin water and sand
long-lost cousins meet again
in a scratch / a sorry
imitation of condensation

i think of Calvin
when the glass feels my breath.
from the eaves icicles drip down
the film over my eyes. snowmen
are not seen made, spawn a blockade
rolls and bites the salted sidewalk but
far more poignant as
it gnaws on the porch
throws itself down

my window is as cold as
it ever was. the snowman rattles the
pane when i turn on the heat. it rubs
its little stick hands over charcoal eyes
to keep the light from closing them too.
the code to a heart-shaped diary padlock
is fingerpainted in six-year-old char & dew.
when there's no more traffic down my street
suburban sunset—never let it flounder

CHIA PUDDING

When I was not yet human my father built a chain-link fence for the neighbor's German shepherd to muzzle itself with. These days its lips curl and snarl around the base of a milkweed tree. I know the dog's name because both of our heads turn towards the holler of the white-bibbed sun, an egg fried in star-drizzled oil. In my lifetime the tree has bloomed but once, and I remember it because my father climbed his ladder into the sky to knock milk pods into our hands, seed floss and fertile sap drenching our fingers as we broke the skin.

While I watched the wicks wither over my third set of licorice-twist birthday candles, my mother scrubbed, in vain, the stain of dirt from the underside of her red-lacquered nails. She named me for the flower in the backyard that she yanked out and digested by the roots, for she who had been thoroughly chewed and still bloomed again: amniotic lotus. Our clumsy fingers combed through three-leaf clover bouquets, concrete roses in playpen mulch, made them our farmer's gum, manually deseeded watermelon slices, inhaled helium from party balloons just to stuff them under our shirts.

After dinner I freeze chia pudding. I dare not move until the seeds crowd to break the porcelain of my bowl of cold low fat milk, four tablespoons of glassy tarantula eyes, bound by maple lace and cinnamon swaddle. From its very conception my vision has drowned inside the juice of a stamen and there it shall curdle

LIBAI LIBRETTO

ren tal sun draped tide
har dly floored up side
down ca lli gra phy
years stared by in stride

break bread try a shard
hym nals ti thing cards
ground ka lei do scope
seeth ing blac kened lard

clothe swebs spun by moths
drip dry pa ra sols
weep in di a ink
quench de cher ubed fonts

date bark wrung and glazed
brand skin white to make
eyes rise hea ven rouge
bu ffa lo from lake

scalped moon charged in wait
sha dows eaves drop wait
cage snow swo llen traps
shoul der hung scroll wait

wood block so i speak
one stamp counts for three
half knight flies the day
what seal may i keep

NEUBAU

the
taxi driver
must be
re— minded
that his
city is beautiful. I
could take a cab
to Friendly's sit
and watch the
neon drain
out from
the sign
stain my
hands carmine
flat on
the asphalt.
but i fumble
as i
chalk the line
across which his city
be— comes mine
where taxis take no
des tin a tion
all headed towards
silent homes. only i
tour the
loveseats of
Sparta. through
the flatscreen
rose— velvet
retra— fract
inside Sissi's
offscreen compass—
grey eyes. are they glazed
over by Technicolor or will she
age forever in digital
burn— in sparkling
diffused glare
go, tell her
she looks
beautiful in
IMAX

VARIANTS ON A WAVE

I. The Hermite Under Jamestown Bridge

Every weekend I go house-hunting on the water. At the helm of the ship, as I wait for boarding, the chatter of the passengers seems so far away. The knocking of their footsteps hardly rocks the boat anymore. And here, the compass of peace always pulls my vision north, to that back-lit house perched among the trees.

My heart remembers every metaphor I have failed to wind around this house. I will give you the one I use whenever I feel the distant edge of summer burning into spring. The house is the color of a fresh-wilting dandelion, tucked gently behind the ear of the coastal town at sleep. Its stem is a spiraling, fraying set of staircases punctuated by diving boards, with a dock planted firmly in the dirt, and a terrace sprawling radially out like roots, held down by stone pillars. Until that day, the rest I can only imagine—gilded chandeliers suspended from faux frescoes, the echo of a sharp knuckle on petrified wood. Important things being discussed across a last supper, between those cushioned by embroidered velvet they never had to look at twice.

People used to ask why I don't just drive up there myself. The reason is the same as why I'm telling you this instead of adding one more stop to the itinerary. The reason being: I want us to have a wildly intelligent conversation about Greek Revival architecture. I can explain the difference between Doric and Corinthian columns and it would be the same to you as if I laid the Sun out in a neat crochet pattern. The best part is, if you could get yourself to the library and pick up any architecture book, you'd realize we're both making it up. If I do not keep my word alive, on that day I'll have bought a mansion inside a corpse. I have a hell of a lot more respect for the cartographers than any man they misled.

(I must fire dinner up for you now.) Most everyone knows better than to stick their finger in the mouth of a fish. The only way to get it to be properly still, to make it stop slapping its own face against the hull of the boat and swinging frenetically in a manner not so much like a trapeze artist, more like the pendulum of a grandfather clock, is to dig your hands into its face and hold it by the gills. People used to get a real kick out of it when I showed them, mainly because the fish's profound lack of neck became immediately apparent. Breathing from the brain, you think, and so you begin to wonder how much farther one has to go before hitting grey matter. And then the fish decides to remind you that its teeth do still adorn the sides of its mouth, and that breathing in the cold always results in a bite, and once again I find myself

washing a blood-soaked rag in seawater so I can use it to bandage another apology.

No, I don't *sell* the fish. Who would buy that? (Leave your plate by the sink, I'll take it.) I'll tell you one thing worth buying—how I'll triple my cash for the dandelion, why you're here—and that's an experience. Your captain, your chef, your chimney-sweep; to what extent, truly, do I know this place better than you? I never could share the feeling. My hope that you'll have another cruise is thin, but if I make a wish, it'll be so far I won't have to look for it.

(Step back, please. There's pappus and rabbit spirits by your feet.) On that day I may sleep to dream.

II. pennydiving

it
took
me
eleven years to learn how to swim
every time my head was held under water, i choked on the phosphenes
of my fate like decomposing flakes of copper, fighting to recognize heads or tails
as all ends barrelled away from me. lily pad and algae pennydiving for a chance, respirating by a dry
heave, potential long-circuiting after the air into landing or lining. the fountain drags malachite-
stained sweat from my eyes when i come up for air. to breathe freely one must close
the airway manually—hide the face—wash it out with a handful of tradition—smile
under the swell of water in the baby lungs.

III. Harbin Villa

The nervous system of ice courses neon, entices the pad of a pointer to meet it on the other side in a skin-blackening kiss, frostbite partitioned for three over one night under a ginseng tree. Mutual blossoming ought to be taking root in the other, but the clock is upon you, and the more brittle of the two can only be determined by who works the chisel, who barks the chip before the morning thaws and scatters you creatures into flight, feathered skin burning as charcoal.

On this side, in images and hues of voice, you call to the shards that float downstream, reach out your hands but never grab hold. My reflection is the debris freckled across your palms, the flailing tadpoles, the water trickling out from the mistake of their union. I was always taught to dig the mud deeper than the cuticles in order to reach what does not melt in March: seed, and rock. Even under a starry crimson sky the granite countertop will at most splinter, never run off, and for this house that holds its own within the crystalline snow, I am grateful.

IV. Ondine

If impalation is to be routine, running is water-cleaving into a band of facets, which way may I see out my infant soul? How shall we tidy up after I'm gone? corner-to-corner inside a velveteen-lined box? nine-hundred and ninety-nine origami swans? A word or a water-mark? How high in the sky is low enough
to go home?

Only, promise me you'll save her a seat on land. I'll claw and smooth the sand; we can all raise our pupil-blown magnifying glasses to the Sun and clasp hands in the mortal comfort of the blazing ocean. You'll find, as I often have, that Apollo's vein locks itself in place, and you may choose to call it, at any magnitude,
webbed, or wed.

Baby whirlpools snap all the knowledge of the world from letters in bottles and diamonds that blubber in the glow of wind-crumpled lanterns, scattering peppercorns and simmering, far-western blue in the eyes. If one ray finds its way to the bottom of the ocean, it will have shone brightly enough. As if men have died deaths worse than death! In a fish market, open-air and full of jewelers,
thinking, this is love.

SHORT FICTION



ANNEKA JENKINS '24

AESOP AND FENN

Beneath a dried gorge in a city called Flea—named for its resemblance to the wingless insect—a subterranean metropolis was home to the world's largest deposit of lemonstone, a pale crystal that helped power the city's network of lemon-lamps since the beginning of time. The mice who labored in the mine's belly trudged the underground caverns, returning home each day with carts full of minerals, keeping Flea illuminated.

Two brothers lived alone in the darkest part of the city, where the city's Lemonstone lamps glowed dim, the light barely reaching their home's welcome mat. They were orphaned young due to a violent accident in the mines, destroying nearly a fifth of Flea's inhabitants, including both their parents. Aesop, the younger of the two, slept on a pile of sassafras, blithely dreaming against the waxy leaves. Fenn, his older brother, watched over him while tending to the burrow's disarray, picking up story books off the floor, and discarded Snickers wrappers from their makeshift counter, fashioned together by two dominos.

Despite being on their own, the two were content, finding choice morsels while scurrying about the streets of Flea. But sometimes at night, when he surveyed the hundreds of lemonstone lamps lining the walls of the cave, Fenn looked longingly at the grim ceiling. He wondered what it would be like to have an exposed world above your head and an endless horizon before you.

When he was just a pinkie, his mother read to him about field mice, dormice, mice that lived in the desert and mice that lived by the sea. *Stuart Little* was one of his favorite stories. He wondered often why he had to be a cave mouse, stuck underground, digging forever downward. Like the heroes in his books, Fenn pretended that he too could be a prince or a warrior, destined for greatness and a life of adventure. Watching Flea asleep, Fenn vowed that one day he too would set out on an heroic odyssey.

The following morning, Aesop and Fenn woke early, gathered their things and set off for a day in the mines. Strapping glowing headlamps to their heads, they weighed into a crystal deposit, pushing a large metal cart down steel tracks, collecting stones along their way. When they reached the rear of the cave, Feivel ascended a long ladder towards a newfound mass of lemonstone

needing extraction. With a pickaxe he chipped away at the pale, yellow, stone, the excess falling into the cart below. He continued, making significant progress until suddenly his pick struck something odd. Or rather, hit nothing at all, passing straight through the cave wall. Fenn peeked through its opening, eager to see what lay beyond. He caught a magnificent glimpse of blue sky, more vast than he could have ever imagined, stretching out until there was only a fine, thin line far, far away.

“Aesop! Aesop! I’ve found it, I’ve found the way out!” Fenn could barely contain himself as he bounded down the ladder, scooping his younger brother up before returning to their burrow. Their house was a whirlwind of activity, with Fenn at the center scrambling to gather their things. He piled them all into a large canvas sack, fastened together with a bottle-cap pin. In went the essentials; wool scarves, *The Tale of Despereaux*, a lemonstone powered hand held torch, and his—in case of emergency—can of sardines. He also threw in a photo of his parents, and Aesop’s favorite quilted blanket before disclosing his plan to him.

“Now’s our chance to see the world Aesop, not one mouse from our city has ever ventured outside before, we’ll be the first!” Aesop’s black eyes glinted, thoughts of forests and brooks, orange trees and beetles filled his imagination at the sound of his brother’s words. Then for no reason, he paused, worry getting the best of him, his brows knitting themselves together across his forehead.

“Fenn, what if we don’t see other mice? What if there are cats, or worse, owls?” Fenn placed a soothing hand on Aesop’s arm.

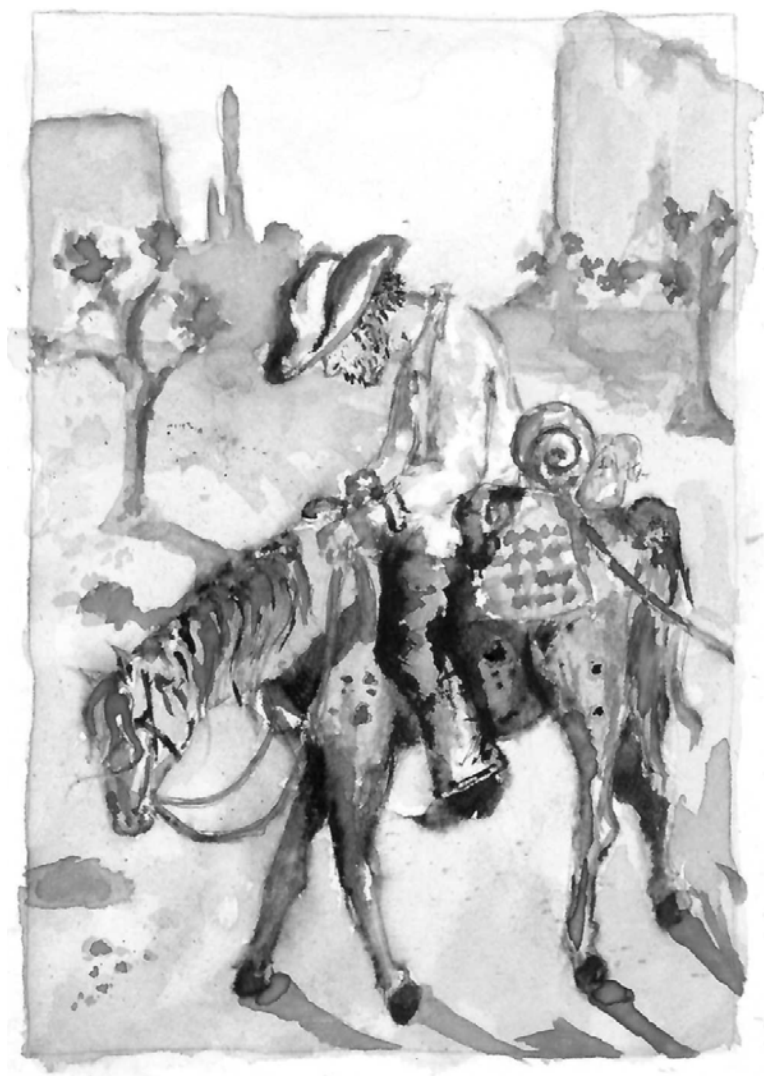
“Don’t worry, the stories we’ve read tell us that the world is filled with wondrous things. We too can discover them.” But the truth was, Fenn was also really, really scared. He didn’t know what would be in store for them once they left Flea. But their city was beginning to feel too small, and the little mice knew that their parents would have wished for them to set out on their own to discover a better fate.

Scattering along a cobblestone road within the burrow, they snuck their belongings swiftly past two buff mice guarding the cave’s entrance. When they reached the exposure in the lemonstone wall, Aesop and Fenn retrieved their picks from the sac, and started to widen the opening so he could fit his large ears through and shimmy down to the ground below.

In front of them, a rolling landscape of wildflowers dotted the miles of green ahead, the hollow pit of the gorge blossoming with Queen Anne’s lace,

bachelor buttons, and wild pink cosmos. The chasm walls were home to a colony of bees, happily buzzing in the valley, while a grove of fir trees danced on the hillside. The brothers were transfixed by the sun, beginning to hang low in the orange sky, washing everything in violet and gold. Magical puffs took on shapes of toy trucks, houses, and giraffes, each dusted in a rainbow of light, soon fading in the approach of dusk. As their eyes traveled across the setting sun, and over into the dark and starry portion of sky, they observed constellations watching over them. They were starstruck by the beauty of it all. Aesop and Fenn stood in place until the last sliver of light disappeared, a bright yellow moon rising into a crescent just above the meadow.





COWBOY

At a crossroad cutting deep into the Russet Desert, an old cowboy dragged a torn antelope carcass tied to his brown and white speckled stallion. On his leather waistband, a gold-hilted revolver, holstered to his side. His prize, bought from a rancher some thirty miles back, was now tattered and flecked with dried blood as it was hauled along the ground, scraping against sharp granite and thorny brush. Rex shielded his sunspot-riddled face with a wide-brimmed felt hat, wiping dripped sweat from his hairline. His pointed snakeskin boots were placed in a pair of tooled leather stirrups, digging into poor Rodney's side, prodding him to gallop through a wasteland dotted with old Joshua trees.

After years in this line of work, Rex found that dead antelope was the most efficient bait for trapping lost souls, who made their way to the Russet, drawn by an imperative: everything seemed to go there to die. Without his intervention, the desert would have been quickly overrun with tortured souls. It was his job to make sure this didn't happen; over the years it hadn't been an easy task. Rex's red hair turned gray, his shoulders hung low, deep wrinkles criss crossed his face. Even Rodney, who ran for hours as a colt, began to tire, often stopping under a large saguaro cactus for relief from the sun.

Rex reached the last mile marker down a desolate path, signaling he was approaching the clearing where the largest mass of souls gathered. He untied the rope that attached the antelope carcass to Rodney, and tossed it into the blowing whispering sand. Rex then disappeared, finding cover behind a wall of tangelo rocks. At first, nothing happened, and Rex passed the time braiding frayed fringes from cut leather strips. Suddenly, there was a stirring, and hundreds of pale, willowy figures formed from out of the dust. Noses raised high, they were drawn by the antelope's rotting aroma. But they were in no hurry, moving slowly, drifting together, in a ghostly scrum.

OWL IN THE WOOD

Niko watched the snow owl hurtle towards his head, piercing orange eyes staring at his brown ones. The raptor dipped, then shot through the maple grove, its shadow moving across the blanketing snow, hovering above an empty forest filled with standing deadwood, and perched atop one of the snags. Niko repressed further thoughts of the owl before trailing behind the middle aged woman, Leigh, who his father had assigned to be his caretaker until he got better. She stood at about half his height, knees and shoulders hunching so close to the ground, Niko was unsure how she could lift her body past the first granite step, displaying a gory scene of a bear mauling a bird in a bleak wood.

A month earlier, Niko's mother vanished, disappearing suddenly, leaving him desolate with little appetite for food or anything else. There was a new pointlessness that came with doing things, and he missed the times when he didn't question why he should brush his teeth, eat the plate left outside his door, or look outside to observe the sun. He was glad to be free from having to do anything now that he was living in someone else's home, where he could indulge in simply skiving off, not lifting a finger.

The farmhouse sat on a hill covered with limestones, each the shape of some minor deity whose name was forgotten, with the faces of mountain spirits skillfully carved into their surface. They lined dirt pathways, now strewn with weeds, dying beneath the frost. The house, awkwardly situated between ancient oaks, invaded the landscape, a strange presence that didn't belong. Cerulean blue shutters guarded the dark windows of the stark white Greek revival, its insides just as unwelcoming.

Once inside, Niko scanned the foyer, completely empty aside from a mirror hanging to his left, reflecting an unpleasant boy with a fixed scowl on his face. The only other decoration was the blue English wallpaper, which Niko grew tired of soon after his arrival. Leigh led him, hobbling up wooden stairs to his room on the third floor below the slate roof, in the attic. There were no complaints about the bed that was, in truth, better than his own, or the shelves of books that lined one side of the room to keep him engaged during his stay.

From here he had a view of the property. Towards the woods there was a fenced vegetable garden, littered with rotten squash carcasses. In the direction of the brook was the old guest house, which has been transformed into a garage

and storage space after the death of his great-uncle. Beyond that was the endless wood, unnaturally still, echoing only the sound of the wind and fallen branches.

In between the rotten squash and babbling brook, the perched owl mocked Niko from the snag, beginning to crumble under the grip of its black talons. Ominously, it confronted the boy's gaze, watching him from behind the glass pane. Instinctively, Niko drew the gray linen curtains shut, then planted himself on his bed, face down in a nest of plush blankets. He inhaled. It was a familiar aroma, the scent of dust and old people. With his fingers he lightly combed through thick brown hair, mirroring the patterns that his mother traced over his scalp to help him fall asleep when he was small. His own hands never seemed to put his agitated mind at rest—Niko struggled with thoughts until he dropped off.

He awoke in the dark to the sound of an owl thrashing, repeatedly slamming its body against glass and window frame, white feathers falling to the ground. Disturbed, Niko escaped to the kitchen, raiding the pantry of durham rolls and chicken sausage. He ate some of it, but left the rest on an open window sill, hoping the owl would return.

The next morning, the sausage remained untouched, and the bread, pecked away only by robins. Niko couldn't seem to connect with the large flying creature. He watched the woods, scanning for white wings atop the trees turned russet by dawn. He slipped into thick boots, and found a pair of gloves in the broom closet before dashing into the snow, still a sheet of ice glistening in the morning light. It crunched under foot causing the owl, in its usual spot, to turn and face the boy. He was disappointed when it flew off at the first sight of him, getting lost in a woven timber maze. Navigating his way through the woods, Niko's hands turned purple, but still, he trudged on in the direction of the snow owl. Images of the bird's feathers flogging, and its beak repeatedly hitting glass, danced in Niko's mind like a jester performing.

Snowflakes drifted from desiccated trees, dusting Niko's dark eyelashes. He thought of his mother as he watched them fall gracefully before disappearing in his palm. These past few weeks, he had scoured his town for signs of her, hoping she had dipped into a friend's house or inn nearby, and was too embarrassed to return. He refused to entertain any other reasons for her disappearance, and spent nights awake, poring over newspaper articles and

online posts, looking for any sign of her. It is when Niko went mute that his Father assumed that Boston was the source of the problems growing within his son, and soon after sent him to the Vermont maple farm that had sustained the family for generations.

But walking amongst the dead forest, void of the usual mink or swallow, Niko felt alone with no connection to the land, rarely thinking of the few family members whom he had met there in his childhood. The silence forced him to listen to the sound of his breathing, as he footslogged up the steep hills. In the distance he spotted the owl, not too far away, pecking at dirt and grime wedged between his feathers. Once close enough, Niko noticed that its talons were a different color, and its head narrower than before. But, the same orange eyes peered at him with intensity as they had the first time he saw them.

Niko dashed after the bird, ripping through frozen thorns and brush, calling out for it. Barely keeping its tail feathers in his sight, he found himself in a nightmarish hunt, branches cutting at his cheeks, blinded by the snow falling from black clouds overhead. The trees stood like sentinels around him, obscuring his path until he stumbled out into a flat white plane.

At the center of the frozen wheat field was the skeleton of a lone ash, whose branches held a parliament of identical white owls, hissing, hooting, and clicking their beaks. In unison, they rose into the air, a murmuration, across a dark sky. Niko watched as they rose and fell back, ascending and diving in an elaborate geometry, occasionally crashing into one another. Their screeches were lost in the howling wind as Niko stood mesmerized by their incomprehensible flight, and all feelings of anger subsided, a sense of calm overcame him. The higher they rose, the more Niko forgot why he was upset at all. Soon, the owls disbanded, scattering in separate paths through the wood. Niko smiled as he returned to the farmhouse, with the realization that all the world was in flux, and he had to get back to where he belonged, and start all over again.

RODGER

Rodger, the honey badger, stoked what few twigs he had left in his large log reserve behind his hut, heating up the small stove furnace and fireplace to warm cold palms. He lived alone, except for his few things, which he never took great care of, evident in the mess strewn around the dirt floor. However, he cherished each item, picking them up and examining them, smiling fondly because of the memories they evoked. Apart from the clutter, the badger was always impeccably dressed. He never left the house before combing out his long white mustache, brushing his button-downs with the felt lint-roller, ironing and pressing his orange and mauve checkered slacks, or tying a natty emerald green scarf around his neck. On his days off from the Bureau, he reread his collection of Jane Austin, given to him by a passing cowboy looking to get rid of some of his load. As Rodger looked around his room, the novel's Emma had just publicly insulted Ms. Bates, inviting tension to their picnic, a perfect scandal for the badger to skim through by the hearth, soaking up the comfort of his home and the delicious words on the page.

When he wasn't reading, Rodger loved to fish by the brackish creek down the river bank from his burrow. Along with his tackle box, he made sure to carry a pocket-size red notebook in his jacket in case he needed to jot down his thoughts, or sketch the mallards diving for weeds. He took careful note of the cattails as he cut his way through the water on his small fishing vessel, fashioned out of a large lily pad. Sitting cross legged in the center, he was propelled by a polished oar, scooting his way to a cove he knew, abundant with trout and other delicious fish. Rodger relished the routine of baiting the hook, casting the line, and above all, the wait. He had gotten good at calculating where the bass would be this early in the morning, and contemplated his school years as he waited for one unlucky creature to grab hold.

When he had about five neatly piled minnows in front of him, he would take them to the Fish Trader, a snaggletoothed mongoose who would flay and sell them, exchanging them for a sack of oysters. The badger would shuck them, sauntering through rolling moss hills guarded by aged oaks, riddled with knots, their branches twisting toward anyone who dared walk through their wood. However he was a regular in these parts, unintimidated by the ominous trees,

and instead scribbled down the way their limbs weaved together overhead. Lining the overgrown path was an embarrassment of daffodils, azaleas, and lavender that battled for space with the carnations just beginning to bloom. The badger, shimmying back to his hut for the day, inhaled deeply through his black and white snout, taking in the aroma of spring now filling the meadow and hillside with a fresh sense of wonder.



FARLEY

Farley rose each morning at five and wasted no time doing anything of real importance. He started off by watching the news, desensitized to the latest political hogwash emanating from his TV which always left him feeling slightly nauseous. To combat this, Farley made himself Jot Ultra instant coffee in a copper pot on a hotplate in the corner of his stark room, drinking it all, grains included. He made his twin bed, hospital-tucking each corner of the single linen sheet, and fluffing a worn cotton pillow before getting dressed in corporate gray flannels and a blue Polo shirt, paired with custom made Weejuns, made to perfectly fit his prosthetic legs.

Farley then needed to shower and lubricate his joints, which often seized and creaked during the night. His knees in particular, which were never bolted together properly, caused a chronic pain in his hips which no amount of tinkering and tweaking could fix. His wandering red eye, which needed some retooling, had to be unscrewed and wound back up like a clock, before being placed back into Farley's metal skull. He read the paper while plugged into a large cable in the kitchen wall before heading off to Stimpson and Brothers Law Firm, where he worked as a legal aide for Julio, one of the law firm's partners.

Julio, raised in Alaska by a group of offshore fishermen, weathered Pacific seas at the age of four after having been dumped at the docks by a gambling man. After washing up on an isolated beach in San Francisco, he snuck his way into night classes at the local community college, studiously learning law under the radar. He had connections in Sacramento that eventually landed him a choice position at one of California's top firms, earning him a respected place to work. Julio was riddled with gouges and scars running across meaty arms covered in tattoos, occasionally communicating in grunts when charging Farley with a task. He was the head honcho of what the machine man referred to as the Office Elite, an exclusive group of sharp-tailored lawyers who discussed Top Golf by the espresso machine, of which Farley was not a part of due to his peculiar mechanical build.

When Farley was done stacking his paperwork, sorting the civil cases from the criminal ones, and clearing out old client inventory on his boxy Commodore desktop, he left the office, waving goodbye to Debby the receptionist who only offered in return a forced smile. He never took public

transportation and didn't own a car of his own, which resulted in Farley's favorite part of the day, his long walk back along the harbor. At this time of day, the sun lingered over the water, illuminating the sea and sky in warm oranges and pinks. He shared the boardwalk with only a few runners and a calico cat, which followed ten paces or so behind Farley on the cobblestone wall lining the shore.



LUCERO

At the center of the universe, Lucero, a little star was born. Preparing his cosmic journey, he twinkled amidst infinite constellations, dancing over small moons that orbited giant gas planets. Shooting over the Jovian Strip, he brushed his hand against Saturn's belt of asteroids, collecting planetary dust on scintillating fingertips. A fresh, stirring energy that burned bright within, propelled Lucero to seek out others, in order to mark his place among the stars. Soon, he discovered the vast expanses of empty dark sky. It was a difficult and lonely journey to navigate on one's own. Each burst and glister led to a strange and unfamiliar galaxy that both delighted and terrified.

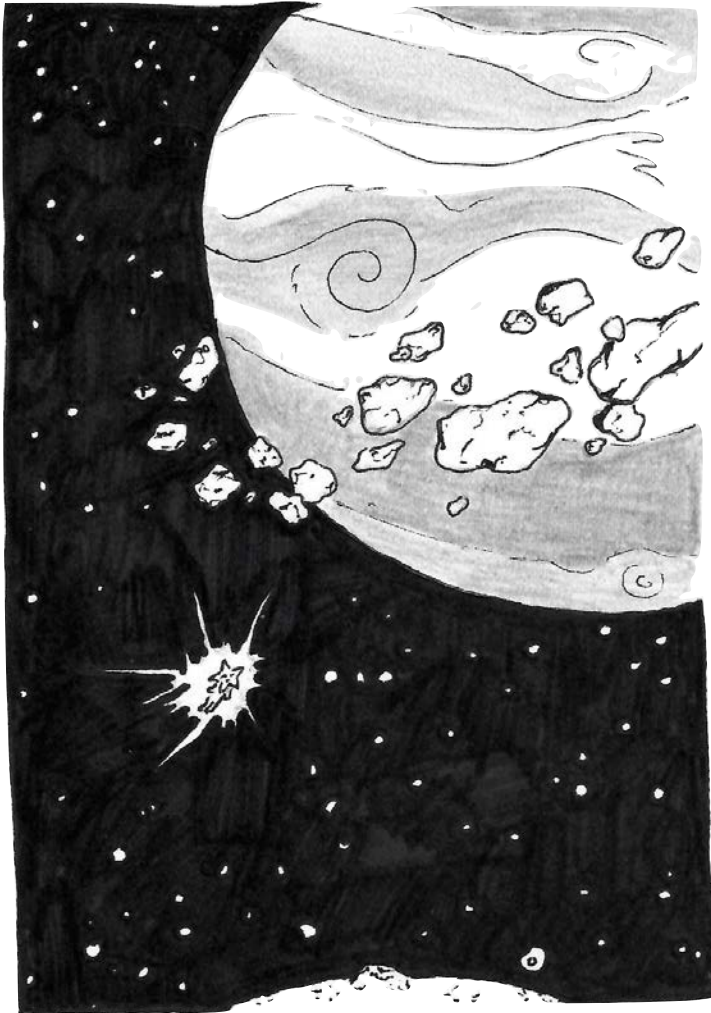
By the time Lucero reached the Triangulum, he exhausted his search for others. It proved too tedious a task for his level of competence. Unlike the older celestials, Lucero's glow faded after only a night's work, leaving him barely a glimmer as he pressed on. Ironically, he was just approaching the dimmest part of the universe, immeasurable and unrelenting. So, he looked towards a small planet he observed that was teeming with life. It was Earth! Tucked in the center of the Milky Way, he observed its inhabitants; funny creatures with strange customs, living tightly together, growing their food in dirt, always scurrying about this way and that. *Perfect!*, the small star thought, *this is where I will make new friends.*

Lucero hid amongst soft outer clouds, drifting above torrential rain, spying on the messy scene unfolding down under. The Austalians were in the thick of the great emu war, taking up arms against thousands of voracious birds ravaging the nation's wheat crops. Lucero watched attentively as militias fled in fear from the beastly squawking creatures, their shaggy brown plumage blanketing an entire field of men. The little star thought it unjust that humans were carrying weapons, firing bullets. *I should go to the emus and help them*, thought Lucero, gracefully dropping to the Earth's floor, landing within a burning crater in a dry rockland. He stood, wobbling on starry weak legs, gliding off, searching for the leader of the emus. He came across the Goliath Bird, with glossy purple feathers, munching on Midyim berries and sour Lemon Myrtle.

"Great Emu, I come with words of advice," Lucero said, then began illuminating the emus one by one, until each mastered the secret of ground

combat warfare. They flocked together before charging the Aussies' military base, then split apart causing the soldiers to become frustrated and waste their ammunition.

In a blue-gray sky, Lucero watched as the Australian Rangers abandoned their base, overrun with hungry emus demanding food and justice. When his work was done, the little star decided Earth was not the right place for him, so he continued on his intergalactic quest, dedicated to helping others across the universe in need.



JACQUELYN SONG '24

ALACRITY

Her father found her name in a Times crossword, flipping through terms he didn't know and politicians he knew even less. He suggested it to her mother with the definition "swift," and she referred to her American friends, who claimed it meant "cheerful," and the two bickered back and forth over a coffee-stained Cambridge dictionary, purchased from the secondhand bookstore down the street.

For the rest of her life, when people asked what her name meant, she'd say neither "swift" nor "cheerful," but "ready." And when they pressed, with no real curiosity, what she was ready to do, she responded swiftly and cheerfully: Whatever. In her teens, when she slammed the front door, kicked off her boots, and missed the floor mats, her father snapped that she should change her name to "whatever." Alacrity just rolled her eyes, tossed him the Times, and left him seething in the threshold.

When she was six, she stole his cigarette box and lit her braid on fire. The scar still mars her shoulder, like claws or feathers or stretch marks, a tone darker than her skin at its lightest in winter—a terracotta that yellows in camera filters. Her mother wrapped her in scarves and turtlenecks for eighteen years. Departing for college, Alacrity blew all of her savings on a rack of sleeveless dresses. Every party and orientation, she told the tale like a sharpened ice breaker. Eyes widening, they asked if it hurt, and she smirked, what do you think?, but in truth, she couldn't remember six, nor seven, nor even last year.

Near the end, tied to tubes in some provincial hospice, Alacrity wonders if she's lived life too ready. Eighteen to eighty-three, she's sought thrill in practiced doses, affection in measured IVs, risk in predictable margins of error, always guessing where the cards would fall before knocking them over. She should've been crazy. Stepped out of bounds. Capped the pen, stopped her stories, sought surprise with more receptive eyes...but what would she have found?

Love, perhaps. Love was an intrigue to Alacrity. At twenty, she told herself that all likable people had a shot at being lovable, yet she could never quite write the script. She met a guy where the dates were sugar and the talk was wine, and she sipped cocktails, sweet and insipid, until seeing him made her drowsy. Then, she found someone better, a businessman who could fill her

silences, run her in circles, leave her laughing in her sleep, but he was never greater than his own self-perception—a modest man of immeasurable feats, a champion who never competes, an elite amongst the commoners. The circles grew circuitous. And, after enough cocktails and conceits, she realized most men don't marry for respect, for the foolish seek mothers, and the clever seek trophies, and none want a "shifty bitch" to read them.

Her mother wept for her first death. Life's fulfillment was in marrying a good man, laying down roots, nurturing a family. She always knew her daughter was strange, but she never thought she'd raise a barren tree and wither without grandchildren. Where had they gone wrong? Her father was silent. They'd raised their daughter on readiness, without want nor will, determined to smother her sparks. All she'd ever learned was to go through motions.

On his deathbed, lungs blackened from smoke, he gave Alacrity a match.

If you need it again, he whispered.

She told him to sleep. He obliged. After the burial, she kept the stick in her computer case, chewing on the tip in teahouses, typing manuscripts over matcha foam and Swiss chocolate. She published a novel to moderate success, signing off on an adaptation starring an actor with a lick of Mandarin and two English surnames. It was terrible. The critics loved it. Disillusioned, she began writing for the Times, and just once, designed the crossword.

16-horizontal. A-L-A-C-R-I-T-Y, she wrote to her mother, who'd moved back to China to travel with her sisters. A day later, the response buzzed back—What is definition?

She took a screenshot: First name of Braid Burning author Zhao.

Alacrity knew her name wasn't hers. It belonged to the language she'd stolen; country she'd taken for her own; books and billboards where she'd only spice the melting pot. She came into herself, aware of borrowed time, ready to please and appease, never trip nor trouble nor trespass. And, by every count, she did everything right—paid her dues, cashed her chances, spent every moment wisely, swiftly, cheerfully...so where was contentment?

On her deathbed, Alacrity holds the match before her braid, wondering if she can finally burn away. What a bookend! For decades, she's craved flame—why hadn't she claimed it sooner? Drifting through a vacancy of memories, she comes across a box buried in sand.

High school. Senior year. Truck traffic, fluorescent haze, curtains of ash and rain. She was testing lighters in the backseat, eyes drifting through glass to the bridge, the sidewalk—

The railing. Where a stranger stood in flames. Here the police corded off the area. Here the pedestrians stumbled, whipped out their cameras, wreathed him in flashing lights. Here his mottled skin writhed from bone, blood boiling in strands of muscle and tendon; swelling, shifting, suffocating, surviving, subsuming...A thief. A god. An escape.

He was everything.

Alacrity realized she wasn't ready to die.

So, when he spread his arms and fell like a star into the river, she returned home, buried the lighter, listened to sirens aloft. In the summer, she found a job on the other side of town and drove across the bridge every day; autumn, she took the train to college and never looked back; winter, she avoided her birthday candles, terrified of temptation.

Years earlier, she was certain of what she wanted. Yet, looking back, the urges flickered, dimming every time she drove in the rain, or chewed a cigarette, or fidgeted with a match without striking. Now, fire was another predictable outcome. But then, all her life, what had she awaited? Thrill? Disaster? Control or contentment or...Right. There it is.

Alacrity slides out of bed, hobbling across the room to the newspaper rack. The Times lies atop a plastic basket. Fumbling for pens, she finds the jar empty, and with her two remaining teeth, bites the match, tracing ashy letters onto the grid by the headlines. Wires wrench from her wrists. Fluids break from balanced bags. Sirens and stumbles, corded-off walls, dots and dashes, clicks and flashes, rain pitter-pattering on glass...

Laughing under a final breath, Alacrity does the crossword.

She isn't ready.

Section One: Autra

The grass is greener at the Temple of Beliefs, at least if you believe. Many moons ago, a priestess stained it with her blood. And, amidst stones and stakes, she turned away from the rooves where the parakeets and squirrels fall in love, the gardens where petals spill scarlet upon snow, the walls that shimmer nacre with every hue of the known world. She chose body over mind, person over presence, bitterness over belief, so for her sins, she was forsaken, stripped of name and rank, cast 'cross the river unto the land of mortal conquerors.

“And now, she’s dead!” the elders declare.

Gasping, the children ward off evil with thumbs and forefingers. The elders nod in satisfaction, starting upon the moral of the fable, but the youngest boy—a slight scraggly thing behind his peers—raises his hand. “Permission to remark?”

“Permission not granted.”

He dips his chin. “Then apologies for speaking out of turn.”

“Don’t get smart with us—”

“I hear she rules the world,” he interrupts, drawing himself to full height.

His fellow children murmur amongst themselves, glancing at the elders’ stony expressions. Finally, a girl tugs his sleeve, venturing, “Who told you that, Cyan?”

“The papers.”

“Where would you get those?” an elder demands.

He wrings his wrists. “Oh, I don’t know. The peddlers. The villages. The whole world beyond the river. You could fetch one too, if you cared to swim. Like me to show you?”

“Don’t be absurd!” two elders snap in unison. Hand to chest, the first continues, “There’s no pride in fraternizing with mortals. You’re lucky your recklessness hasn’t ruined you.”

“Like *her*?” he sniffs.

“She’s dead,” the elder asserts. “Dead to *us*. And dead to the *Beliefs*.”

“Dead to the ignorant, maybe. But, if she was dead to the Beliefs, you wouldn’t *believe* she was alive, and you wouldn’t have the choice of calling her ‘dead to you.’ Don’t words have power?” he persists, flashing his crooked teeth. The congregation flares, yet this time, their eldest member, known simply as *the Eldest*, pushes through the ranks, bending beside the child.

“Anything more, Cyan?”

The boy, Cyan, focuses on the air above the Eldest’s shorn head. “Just admit it’s logical.”

“The Belief of Conflict smiles upon you,” he observes.

“The Belief of Expression, I’d say.”

“If you attended your lessons, you’d know Expression is nothing more than a facet of Conflict. And you’d know its contracts are worthless. Logic isn’t in your favor,” the Eldest counters with a small smile. Rising on wooden soles, he spins to the Temple’s entrance, holding out his hand, more flesh than muscle, more bone than flesh. “Come. I’ll walk you to the gates.”

“Sorry?” Cyan blinks.

“You have drive. And you have decision. Both of which could land you in the Beliefs’ good graces or the path of the forsaken. So, you shall be the first to form a contract,” the Eldest says. Cyan stares at the offered claw, clenches his jaw, and pushes it firmly to the side. Shoving his fists into his pockets, he weaves through the elders’ envenomed glances, marching up the stairs, between the pillars, through the arch of carved branches. *Drive and decision*. His thoughts wrap around the terms. *Call it what it is—a spine*.

A silent door swings shut, bathing him head to toe in darkness. Remembering his rituals, Cyan mutters a praise to the Beliefs, spins a slow circle on his heel, and stops where he feels is right. Extending his arms, he touches the woven rim of a Heather-Basket, laden with needles the length of his thumbs. He selects the first, and when he tucks it in his shirt, two rows of flame sputter, illuminating jewel-brushed murals in washed light. An exhale stumbles.

“No going back,” he tells himself.

Starting down the hall, he reads the inscriptions. Belief of Sight. Belief of Substance. Beliefs of Sin and Salvation, curled around each other, a snake eating the head of a lark, and past them, the three Beliefs of Pain, Plague, Pleasure, gilded in an ethereal sheen from their excess of sacrifices. Cyan hastens his pace, fingers skidding along the Belief of Time, Belief of Tactility, and Belief of Expression, where he hovers briefly, but withdraws with a shake of his head.

He must be diligent.

These aren’t the pithy faiths caught in nets by the riverbanks. The elders claim that faiths are substanceless—if one loses them, they simply wither and die. Yet, Beliefs are tangible. Transcendent. A true *Belief* has been cut from the individual, melted into the Collective Mind, tempered by every test of artifice.

More than faiths, more than beings or truths, Beliefs determine the very laws of existence.

At hall's end, Cyan halts, facing an indiscernible mural. Limestone reeks of sulfur, ink chipping on fine details, crumbling from centuries of neglect. He scrubs the brazier:

Autra: Belief of Self

Smiling, he plucks the needle from his sleeve, placing it on the tip of his forefinger. A drop of blood rolls into his palm, sizzling upon the iron rim. Flame lunges, wrapping his wrists, sinking into skin, curling up his arms and neck, down his torso and waist. Cyan exhales, letting it pry through the cracks of his consciousness. *Patience*, he reminds, *One cannot master Belief; they must simply embrace artifice and recover purpose*. Cyan could not tame the force flooding his veins, yet he could understand it, and in doing so, find the vestiges of its potential.

Another Belief might shatter him.

But Cyan knows Self. He's known it for years.

Like all prospective contractors, he was raised to embrace artifice. That was the elders' job—purifying the children, shaping them without truth, teaching them to disarm all manners of faith. He had no face, no decision, no discrepancies to call his own. A perfect vacant well.

One day, while picking paperweights from the riverbank, Cyan fell into the rapids. The water closed overhead, penetrated his nose and mouth, filled his chest with cold fire that swelled every seize. Suffocating on his tongue, he felt himself drift, yet did not kick up, nor flail nor gag nor shiver, for he could not believe in Cold nor Death without ruining his perfection.

At last, a hand broke through the surface. Cyan could not grasp it, so it caught him by the collar, wrenched him through the murky world, thrust him onto a shore of tall grass. Light broke through his eyelids, water expelled in thick heaves, and a great clarity flooded his senses. *He was alive*. And wasn't it grand, lying in the sun, crusted sand down his limbs, clinging to each rise and fall of breath? And he could feel his breath, spiraling in fingertips, sinking into nailbeds, singing in the blood that trickled down his wrists, and wasn't the warmth so marvelous?

His savior leaned over him, slapping his face. And others formed a crowd—rough hands and rough ropes, fisher boys in linen trousers, little girls with flowers in their braids, and each had noses, mouths, eyes of their own shape

and make, figures they cut in the light, baskets of dried fish or sticks of hawthorns, beads tied in twine around burnished necks, small scars in the dimples, or the corner of the lips, or the underside of the right knee, every detail a conveyance of some inner vibrance that exuded from their manners, their movements, their silent yet certain acts of self-declaration.

“What’s your name?” the fisherman who’d saved him asked.

For the first time, the word fit into his mouth. “Cyan.”

The fisherman called himself Fell. And his daughter, Renny, cut bandages for Cyan, scooped him into her broad arms, and carried him to their cottage on the hilltop. Putting him to bed, she taught him how to swim, scooping her hands in synchronized gestures. And, for the next few weeks, he followed her around the village, in his new body and new person, and he learned that he loved the smell of rosemary, despised how sand filled his boots, tented his brows and chewed his lip when lost in thought, and Renny could mimic him, and Fell would roar with laughter, exclaiming, *That’s just like Cyan!*

When autumn arrived, the elders came to collect him.

Asha, contracted with the Belief of Familiarity, wiped him from the village’s recollection. In a boat on the rapids, Cyan watched his own reflection vanish from their eyes, and it felt like a second drowning. The Eldest caught his cheeks, sweeping strands from his brow.

“*You’ve been ruined,*” he observed.

Cyan shoved him off. “*I’ve been fixed.*”

After exiting the Temple of Beliefs, Cyan finds a perch beneath the willows. Draped over roots, he contents himself by observing his counterparts, noting their contracts along a scar on his inner forearm. He chews his lips. He tents his brows.

Belief of Progress. Belief of Greed. Belief of Complicity.

“Always such self-centric ones,” he notes.

Leaning against the trunk, the Eldest replies, “Happens every year. Of three Beliefs, they squander the first on inconsequential states of being. Why, I’ve never figured! Across the river, they believe the physical world *before* themselves. Belief of Sight. Belief of Sound—”

“I think it’s logical,” Cyan responds. “We don’t discover the physical world; we’re born into it. Here, we’re taught of its artifice, but our minds are like theirs”

—he points to the distant river—“unable to reject what’s right before us. But, self is different.”

“Yes,” the Eldest muses. “It *must* be discovered, in our world and theirs.”

“Decisions of self are simple.”

“Is that disdain I detect?” the Eldest blinks, peering at him. “From the first contractor of Autra in three centuries? Oh, Cyan, the Belief of Hypocrisy may have its way with you!”

Cyan ignores him. “What about *her*?”

“Well, I wasn’t Eldest three centuries ago...”

“Not three centuries. Three decades,” he replies, counting on his fingers, “and a year.”

The Eldest’s easy smile wanes. “Not this again.”

“I didn’t contract Autra for simplicity. I wanted to know why *she* did it,” Cyan continues. The Eldest merely studies his face, splotted in shadows, traced in billowing ropes of leaves.

“And what did you learn?”

He rips the grass. “She chose Autra.”

“You’re too young to be taciturn—”

“She chose *herself*,” he amends, meeting the Eldest’s gaze, “and I’d like to do the same.”

A shriek bursts from the entrance. The elders, fawning over the children, fawning over the Beliefs, all scatter onto the cobbles, dropping to their knees as the noise pitches higher, curdling the air with the stench of ash and rot. Lengthening, it feels disfigured, devoid of shape or source or even sound. Then, swift as it descends, it withdraws in a gust of smoke, leaving nothing more than the frayed ends of silence and a courtyard of bowed heads.

A moment later, the parakeets lift from the rooves. The Eldest slips out his flask, releasing a heavy exhale. “Reckon this is big enough?”

“Who is that?” Cyan demands.

“*Was* that. From the smell, I’d guess an incineration. Take it as a lesson—don’t contract the volatile ones,” the Eldest tuts, spinning to the path. Cyan bursts to his feet, preparing his protests, but the Eldest rushes on, “You’ll find out in the headcount. No need for concern.”

“Someone’s dead.”

“Yes.”

“And they were my— my...” Cyan struggles. “*I knew them.*”

The Eldest pauses, squinting at the child. “No. No, I don’t believe so. You haven’t found Familiarity. And I’d hope not too, you’re just one contract through, and you’ll need what’s left of your perfection.” When Cyan trembles, eyes welling with tears, his expression softens. Tentatively, he reaches out, brushing the air beside the child’s hair without touching a strand.

“Tomorrow. Choose yourself again.”

Then, drawing back, he pockets his flask, starting briskly to the Temple.

Section Two: Senni

That night, three forsaken children cross the river, and one lies in reeds by the banks. The Eldest swirls his Belief of Remembrance, dusting sand over their lips and lids. The youngest laughs, soft as the current, brilliant in the blind light of faith. When their shadows vanish, the remaining eleven pull away from the sill. Kithal, contracted with the Belief of Complicity, offers to unknot the lumps in the backs of their throats. Four abide, five hesitate, but resign.

Cyan replies he’ll swallow it.

Alone in bed, he reads the papers. It’s her again—or as the mortals wrote, *Her*. She’s erected a temple in Her name. By fifth day, they’ll brush murals in gold, beckon priests to Her altar, dump the ashes of their dissenters into the rivermouth. Perhaps the fortunate will wash up here. Perhaps the forsaken will wash up there. Cyan envisions the three, flushed cheeks and empty smiles, holding their lanterns, converging on the opposite bank. They wave, and he wades through shallows, stretching, yet coldness wrap his ankles. Whirling, he spots the fourth child—faceless, faithless, askew in reeds, screams crumbling from a misshapen mouth. Heart skipping, he grabs her wrist, pulling with all his strength, and she dissolves into Renny, floral dress and swaying steps, and an unbearable ache sends him flying upright, panting, writhing, doused in sweat. Sprawling, Cyan clings to his Belief. Gently, it comes to life, stroking his tattered nerves, guiding him back to his body.

“Help,” he whispers. And Self soothes, *Trust me*.

The next morning, in the Temple of Beliefs, Self guides Cyan to an offshoot of the main hall. Gazing upon the walls, he’s eclipsed in contours of a thousand mouths, strung on cords of silver, wrapping, rebounding, twisting their sources to an intricate web of waves.

Senni: The Belief of Sound

Cyan stifles a sigh. He can almost hear the elders' chides: "*If the first is intrinsic, the second must be tangible. Mind and matter! Self and substance! It's a simple practice of balance. So, why, in your limited wisdom, must you pair the most intrinsic Belief with the least tangible?*"

The contrarian's downfall, Self notes.

"I don't *try* to be contrary!" Cyan protests.

Stepping forth, he pricks his finger, dripping blood upon the rim. Flame arches for his arm. Shutting his eyes, he braces himself for the inevitable swell of a Belief's judgment. *Sound*. What is Sound? Cyan supposes it has presence—a tingling in the ears, echoing through the skull. It crafts Self. Holds purpose. *And yet*, he recalls, Renny never knew it. When he spoke, she'd study his lips, and when she needed something, she'd take a stick of charcoal, or a finger dipped in water, or a brush upon the palm, tracing letters in shorthands she'd developed with her father. She claimed she was "soundless." Cyan said *no*—Senni simply forsook her. But what did Renny *lack*? What makes *Sound* a necessity? He dreams in distortion, and in wake, if he simply retreats into his mind, the mouth of the world seals around him.

Flame dissipates. Frowning, Cyan finds Senni's mark, stained in soot down his forearm. When he blows the flecks, they rend through flesh. *A temporary contract*, he realizes. Fair enough—anything beats incineration. Bowing to the mural, he retraces his steps, exiting through the carved-branch arch. Beneath the willows wait the others, holding similar stains for the elders' examination. Cyan sidles beside Kithal, who helps him fold his sleeve around his elbow, turning his palm skywards.

Elder Asha bows to the Eldest, reporting, "Six contracted. Three forsaken. Two—"

"That will do," he says.

"All kneel to receive the Beliefs' terms," she instructs. The children oblige, and the Eldest's lips twitch, but Cyan notes the smile's strain. Bruises hover beneath his eyes. His steps drag down the row as he sweeps residue from their arms, pressing it to his tongue.

"Three years to complete your contract," he discerns. "Five. Two. Nine, Marin, how blessed. Six for Kithal. And *Cyan*..." He smears soot. "A month."

"*A month?!*" Cyan explodes.

"You must've impressed Senni. Or offended it enough to warrant retribution," the Eldest shrugs. Regarding the others, he reminds, "Tangible

Beliefs favor tangible characters. They'll abide no diffidence nor delusion. Earn a contract, they'll stabilize you. Fail—”

“Incineration?” Marin volunteers.

“Find out for yourself. Some, perhaps, earlier than anticipated,” the Eldest replies, patting Cyan with a touch of force. Scowling, he knocks the Eldest off, whirling on his heel. Self flares, yet he stamps it down. His soul's a piece of kindling. He has no time to waste. Yet, behind him, the Eldest calls, “You're excused for the next month, Cyan. Elder Asha will accompany you.”

He clenches his jaw. “*I don't need—*”

“Yes, Eldest.” Asha grabs Cyan unceremoniously by the collar, hauling him up the ridge. Yelping, he flails, yet she lifts him like a sack of flour and dumps him onto the path. Her voice, ever delicate, sends a chill down his spine. “Make haste, Cyan of Autra-Self. We've ways to go.”

“Not with you.”

She glances back. “Why not?”

“Doesn't matter.”

“Oh,” she states, tilting her head. “Because I wiped the Familiarity from the fisherman and his daughter?” Blood boiling, Cyan glares at his boots. After a pause, Asha shrugs, turning away with no visible distress. “Well. Can't change the past. Good luck, I suppose.”

Cyan starts. “What?”

“Good luck,” she repeats, “finding Sound in a month. Likely less”—she taps her ear, dropping to a whisper—“it shirks from your slander. You ought to show more deference.”

“I didn't *say* anything!” he insists.

Asha knits her brow. “Long ago, I knew a girl just like you. Head full of dreams, mouth full of lies. She piqued the favors of Self and Sound, but soon enough, her blessings ran dry.”

“And She escaped,” Cyan finishes, tired by the overworn lecture.

“Escaped,” Asha muses. “If this place is a prison, why linger?”

“What does that mean?” he asks blankly.

“Nevermind. If you had the years, perhaps you could reclaim her delusions. *Unfortunately*, she's gone, and in a month, you'll be too...unless you listen to me,” she says, dropping to her knees beside him. When she offers her hand, sleeves part around her complete contract with Sound. His insides roil. How long must he bite his pride? How he longs to drive his fist to dirt, dash for

the banks, dive beneath the rapids. Yet, at Self's urge, he rests his palm in hers. Asha's eyes gleam, twin stars in the dark creases of her face.

She leads him to the woods, where dappled light filters through leaves, and the bitterness of sap permeates. She moves like a fox through the underbrush—swift steps that never displace the brambles. At last, in a clearing, they ease beneath the canopy, knees brushing through their robes. Carefully, Asha fits her forearms against Cyan's, fingers laced, thumbs touching.

"We're visiting the Clutter. There, and only there, every sound of the world intertwines. Learn all you hear. Separate. Discern. Imprint, and *understand*, for only by attaining all of Sound may you hope to recover a Belief. Your mind will return in three weeks. Ready?"

"Wait," he rushes. Awaiting a month of solitude, the urge to sate all lingering curiosities overtakes him. Fingers curling, he ventures, "What happened to the Eldest?"

"He's busy," Asha states.

"He looks stressed," Cyan counters, narrowing his eyes. "*All* of you do."

"How observant." She flicks the word from the tip of her tongue. "You read the papers, don't you? I'm sure you can surmise...and I've no doubt you're celebrating inside."

Cyan has no proper response, so deflects, "It's true?"

"I'm not contracted with Truth."

"You know what I mean," he scowls. "*Her*. She's built a temple and created a faith so She can cross the river." Asha's nails sink into his skin, but she deigns no response. Undeterred, he scoots closer, pressing, "But *why*? What does She *want*? And if She makes it—"

"She won't," Asha hisses.

"How can you—"

"Faiths drown in the river. That's all she can build—a faith of conceit. Our Beliefs were not made to bend before mortal conquerors," she asserts. Cyan starts, pursing his lips.

Now, the contradiction dawns on him. Should *She* cross the river, the Beliefs who banished Her would lose their meanings...and meaningless Beliefs threaten the very nature of existence. Yet, if Beliefs can't be built, then how did they emerge? And, on the contrary, if they *can* be built, what could've built them but petty mortal faith?

"Do you believe in Beliefs, Elder Asha?"

“Of course I do,” she says tightly.

“Right.” Cyan tosses his head to veiled skies. “We all do. Our Collective Mind makes the Beliefs immutable. But what is the Collective Mind? And what determines immutability?”

Color drains from her face. “What are you asking, child?”

Cyan hesitates, opens his mouth, but shakes his head. He can’t fathom it yet. He needs more knowledge on Believing to form his judgment. Clearing his throat, he awkwardly realigns their arms, forcing a smile. “Shall we, Elder?”

Her expression shutters. Meeting his gaze, she smears the soot on his forearm.

All at once, the world collapses. At first, he discerns windchimes, struck in rattling dissonance. Yet, as the tide swells, he notices pitches, semitones, echoes and vibrations, harmonies fitting together, tossing each other, here and there, up and round, shifting with each pulse of space. And then again, when he draws closer, all distorts and disentangles, and he curls into a body that doesn’t exist, realizing he can’t see nor smell nor taste nor touch, yet his mind is alive, strung tight, tuned to a frequency that shuffles out of reach with every twitch of the mass. Through fractured clarity, Asha’s words return: *Learn all you hear*.

Exhaling, Cyan brushes the closest sound—his heartbeat. *Ba-thump. Ba-thump*. The cadence soothes him, like drifting underwater, like Self calling his name. Holding it tight, he tails it through pulses, finding his breath, his hush and shout, his steps pitter-pattering, his nails growing into skin, his hair rustling in westerly winds. And through the winds, he finds the rattle of leaves, crackle of branches, screeches of parakeets in the trees. Laughter bursts from him. He learns how it oscillates between pitches, shimmers in his breaths, reverberates through leaves, trees, parakeets, whistles unfolding waves all around him. Drawn to their synergy, he finds Asha, extricating herself, laying his head on the forest floor, and beyond, the Eldest strolling with Kithal and Marin, speaking in high tones at odds with his faltering heart, and beyond the nacre walls and morning dew and Temple rooves, Cyan finds the river.

Rapids. Fish swish in nets. Far off, a Temple’s low gong, flesh set ablaze, scripture in vacant halls. He learns euphony, every word in every intonation, every phrase uttered by every person. He rushes with wind, finds chimes, runs different breezes through them, weaving notes into melodies, skipping, twirling in the streets of some remote village, where a courtesan stands on the balcony, blending words and breath, calibrating their lucidity, setting them upon her

observers, sifting through undulating chatter to a young man, crouched in the shade, humming the same tune under his breath, tapping tones with the soles of his sandals, and in the slap of wood on sand, many leagues across the sea, workers march down a beach, picking purple shells, crushing conch on slabs of granite, and when stone scratches stone, grating their bones, hairs stand on backs of their necks, so they raise the shells to their ears, beckoning the ocean—scuttling crabs, snapping turtles, whispering coves, trenches where waves go to die, crash-thrums of tidal-drums against the cliff-sides, and beneath or above or between it all, *the pulse*, pulled from the primal depths of the world, *Ba-thump, BA-THUMP*, dissonance or synchrony, depending on how closely he listens, and falling, Cyan feels it in his throat, his body, his being...

Light.

The forest sweeps under him—pine dust and prickle cones, bittered by sleep. His fingertips sting as he pushes onto elbows, acclimating to his own physicality. He feels coarse. Unwieldy. Cut from the Clutter, where everything is but an instrument of its own refinement.

“Elder Asha?” he calls.

His own voice weaves through the world, yet nothing rises in response. Frowning, he jumps to his feet, stumbling to the forest’s edge. There, on the path, in a pocket of murmurs, he spots Asha and the Eldest. Her face is hollow. Dark hair hangs in listless tufts. The Eldest strokes his beard, knuckles jutting through flesh, stretched with fresh scars.

“You’re being rash,” Asha warns.

“Pragmatic.”

“Based on faith. Faiths drown.”

“Based on *facts*. She’s no longer a vessel, nor a priestess, nor even a faith—she’s a threat to existence. We *must* recover that contract,” he says simply. When Asha whirls away, he raises his voice, “You’re contracted with Familiarity. And you knew her best.”

“I don’t know that child.” She juts her thumb behind her.

“No,” admits the Eldest. “But aren’t they similar?”

“Hardly.”

“Uncannily. Would you deem that a fluke of fate?”

“Or his natural character.”

“At such a time?” he presses.

“I’m not contracted with Fate, Eldest,” she scowls.

He knits his brows. "We speak in circles."

"Familiarity is no excuse to conflate. Rock cannot break stone," Asha says sharply. Startled, Cyan fumbles, stifling the crunch with his robes, but she whips around. "*Out.*"

He clamors from the bushes. "What's happening?"

"Child—"

"You've yet to seal your contract," the Eldest notes. Cyan scoffs, raising his wrist, yet the soot remains smeared.

Giddiness floods from his body. When the Eldest approaches, he backs into the brambles, drawing his arms around himself.

"I don't understand."

"Let me see."

"*It must be a mistake.*"

The Eldest smiles. "Yes. It must."

"I—I learned Senni!" he insists, pointing wildly to Asha. "She can testify. I learned it all, found every sound in the world, I saw the webs, the waves, the *pulse* in everything—"

"You understand?" she prompts.

He clenches his fists. "*Yes.*"

"But you don't believe. You haven't recovered purpose. You *know* Sound, Cyan of Autra-Self, but have you learned to *worship* it?" she asks, stepping forth. Cyan falters, heart hammering in his ribs. Sound exists. How could the mind invent it? How could *faith* suffice to support it? And, if something exists, if it lies in world's pulse, what does *purpose* matter?

"Follow me, child," the Eldest urges.

One look at Asha's face and every modicum of Self rebels, but too late, he stretches for the promise between those emaciated fingers. And suddenly, they're strolling, conversing, the Eldest with his usual vigor, Cyan with needles in his throat. They must be far, judging by his throbbing ankles, yet he can't discern the turns from trips nor steps from stops until the Eldest releases him.

A cliffside, a desolation of sound, a fathomless facade falling from fog.

"Where are we?" he breathes.

"The Box," replies the Eldest. "The Place Without Sound."

"Haven't heard of it."

"Shocking."

Cyan glowers, backing from the stairwell. Even from a distance, the place possesses an emptiness—an utter lack of *something* that slices beneath skin and makes his bones shiver. Would Renny feel it? *Yes*, he knows instantly, for even silence is a sound. What lies within isn't Senni's disregard, but a tarnished swath where it ceases to exist. Unlike the Clutter, the Box feels false, displaced from physicality, grotesque in the stolen space it occupies.

"Why is it here?" Cyan manages.

"The Beliefs keep their strengths. The Temple guards their weaknesses. Purpose builds and breaks, and it lurks most profoundly in absence. So here, we confine it," says the Eldest.

"But is it *real*?"

"From the look of that soot, I'd say twelve hours," he says. Scaling steps, he beckons Cyan, beaming with paternal affection subsumed by the abomination behind him. "Shall we?"

"No!" Cyan recoils, aghast. "Not there!"

"You'd prefer incineration?"

"Ask me in twelve hours," he hisses. "If I must be forsaken, so be it!"

"That doesn't sound like our rebel..."

"*I won't bend over backwards for the whim of some petulant power!*"

"And *there* he is," the Eldest chuckles, eyes crinkling shut. "So spirited! But Cyan, where's your curiosity? The last person to enter the Box was...I'm sure you know."

For the first time, Cyan wavers at the implication. Her. *Ba-thump*. Like the Clutter, he's a mass of vibrations. *Ba-thump*. Her. Again. Since his discovery of Self, he clung to Her tale—the forsaken girl who turned from the Beliefs and carved a world in Her image. She let him hope. She assured him that he could keep himself...freedom wasn't delusion. Coveting rebellion, he tailored himself to Her specifications. Never once had he questioned, who *told* Her story? Who validated his dreams? All along, was he simply a rock to strike the stone?

"What do you want from me?"

The Eldest softens. "The Beliefs don't want. They will."

"I won't," whispers Cyan, steps falling faster and faster, head snapping side to side. "I won't be your fluke of fate! I won't be what the Beliefs *will* of me, I won't, I won't, *I won't!*"

His being aches for reprimand. But, the Eldest only stares, fondness so foreign yet familiar as it penetrates, reaching deeper and deeper, to the stories

he's sanctified, martyrs he's worshipped, girl whose face he's stolen, reshaped, perfected. Self fractures inside him. Gasping, Cyan scrubs his skin until it rips and reddens. His touch defiles. Nausea roils. Yet, before he doubles over, rough hands wrap around his mouth, blotching the world in black.

When he blinks, he's kneeling over the abyss.

"I wasn't asking, Cyan."

A kick to his spine, and the world keels off-kilter; Cyan claws towards it, scraping the hem of the Eldest's robe, yet the pity in his eyes immobilizes. Pursed lips shift, sound snatched from between them. Then, in one fell swoop, the mouth of the Box shuts.

In moments, Cyan loses Sound.

In minutes, he recovers its purpose.

And, in the next twelve hours, he waits. When he meditates, his mind is substanceless, and absence rends through every thought. When he breathes, he feels his heart spasming, yet air neither enters nor escapes. At last, he strikes himself, slams the door, screams for reprieve, but strikes don't exist, nor slams nor screams, so he claws his own throat until pain seeps through his nerves, and he welcomes it, desperate, yet even it proves a deception.

When he escapes, the Eldest embraces him. Wrapped together, they sink into silence.

He doesn't feel real anymore.

Section Three: ■

In the following weeks, Asha cares for Cyan.

She pulls the blinds, replaces the floorboards, limits all intrusions of Sound, for its mere presence drives him into such fits of devotion that he chokes on his tongue.

His tongue bears scars now. The tip dangles, misshapen against toothbeds. When he speaks, syllables scrape and scratch, screams bled clean from his mouth. Remembering Renny, Cyan learns to nod and shake, rap the counter for attention, shape sentences with his gestures. Gradually, he recovers a voice—no longer his own. Asha urges him to whisper.

One evening, she arrives with a scroll. "Cyan of Self and Sound, the elders request your presence for a third and final contract of choice."

“Choice?”

“I trust you know which to choose,” she states, rolling it up.

Cyan fidgets with his blanket, suppressing his shiver. “*Edrael*.”

Asha stifles a laugh. Startled, he looks up, but she slides the news from her cloak, setting it on the counter. “She’s really done it. When you said that name, I didn’t think of the Belief of Life.”

The front page—a bridge. An abomination of stakes and skeletons, rapids slashing a seething body, prayers carved along stainless steel ribs. The end rises, rusts, sinks into sand, crumbles in ceaseless winds from beyond—the elders and Beliefs, wrapped in fog. The start protrudes from a temple, draped in the tarnished name of Life.

The Almighty Edrael Meets the Heathen From Nowhere

Asha taps the right corner, where a haggard man in fisherman’s garb shakes hands with a figure veiled in stars. “The Eldest. He wanted your opinion on his cloak.”

“He can drown in the shallows.”

Asha heaves a sigh. “He doesn’t expect your forgiveness. Grudge is your freedom; piety is his charge. He must protect the Beliefs, regardless of personal compromises.”

“Like negotiating with his enemy? Or *locking me in the Box*?” Cyan demands, dissolving into coughs. Asha touches his back, pouring a cup of water, yet he knocks it aside, snatching her sleeve. “Tell *him*, if he wants that contract, then *I* want answers. Who is She? *What is She*?”

“Let me go.”

“*Let me know*,” he cries, “and don’t you dare say ‘another mortal conqueror!’”

“You think he knows?” Asha whispers. Wrenching away, she draws herself upright, cutting through his retorts. “We *knew* her, child. When she was a priestess—*only a priestess*. And if it matters to you, she was clever, headstrong, determined to do good with her Beliefs. I revered her. The Eldest adored her, and after she contracted Autra-Self and Senni-Sound, we all thought she was poised to succeed him! And then...”

“Then?” he prompts.

Her gaze unfixes. “Life happened. I told her—Truth, Justice, Pride, they’d suit her better, they’d contract her gladly, but *she* said she was meant for more. Needed to do what we couldn’t. So, she chose Edrael-Life, and it forsook her

before the blood even burned.” Asha clicks her tongue, folds the paper, rubs her thumb along the crease. “Then...she broke. I helped her pack, persuaded the elders to give her another day. Morning come, she’d vanished. I combed the Temple, the Clutter, every nook of the known world...”

“And?”

“She’d gone to the Box.”

“*The Box?*” Cyan gasps.

“It isn’t just the Place Without Sound. Ancients used it to form all kinds of contracts. The Eldest calls it the Beliefs’ error,” she explains, suppressing a shudder. *That didn’t stop him*, Cyan thinks, but swallows his bile. “He claims she witnessed the Place Without Life. Yet, he could neither follow her, nor leave the doors open to the world. So, with grief, he sealed it.”

“Grief!”

Asha’s eyes flick up. “On all of our parts.”

“But grief doesn’t weigh on your conscience.”

“She sentenced herself. Why must we bear her faults?”

Cyan bites his tongue. He can tell she’s wound her mind into knots, weighing each action, inaction, hesitation and happenstance. Provocation would not gain him higher ground—only fuel her exasperation. Leaning against the pillows, he tries, “And then?”

“One thousand days later, I awoke to smoke. She was kneeling by my bed. She asked for her belongings—I’d kept her pouch in my dresser. She seemed the same. Movements, manners. So, I asked, how had she left the Box without Life? And she *laughed*, told me:

’Dear Asha. Life doesn’t exist.’

I rushed to the Eldest. But, before we returned, she cut her marks of Self and Sound, spilt her blood upon the willows, and vowed to burn the Beliefs to the ground. *And then...*” Her voice trails. Shaking her head, she rips absently into the article, decapitating the Eldest’s image. “Decades later, I ventured into the mortal realm for a *certain* displaced child.”

“Willingly displaced,” Cyan corrects.

She nudges him with something close to a smile. Though his heart twinges for her crime in that village, all aches dull in the Box’s lingering oppression, and he finds himself close to reciprocating. “Decades here is centuries there. We’d forgotten her promises. Yet, there she was, in the streets, on the stores, mounted

on every flag—the God of the World, emblazoned with the name of very Belief who forsook her. The Almighty Life. The *Edrael*.”

“Life doesn’t exist,” echoes Cyan.

“She always needed the final word. Something you share,” Asha remarks.

“Among many things,” he mutters, tightness climbing up his throat.

That was it? He’d been stripped of Sound, shunted by the Eldest’s deceptions, suffocated under the weight of each passing year...just to die a *sacrifice*? To follow her footsteps, choose Life, be forsaken, take a failed contract to the Box, break himself out of the seal, and *hope* for a power that none of them could fathom? And for what? A passing resemblance? A matched fire, insolence, or desperation...a *shade* of the scorned God come to punish them?

“Cyan.” Asha lifts his face from his knees. “Cyan, *breathe*.”

“I won’t do it.”

“You must.”

“I won’t be your weapon. Nor your atonement!” he flares.

“Nor our savior?”

He laughs derisively. “Why should I? Because you didn’t stop Her then and you can’t stop Her now? Because you, the Eldest, the Beliefs, you can’t *stand* anything out of your—”

“*Because we’re desperate*,” Asha hisses, and all Sound snuffs, stifling the storm within. Half-dazed, half-frenzied, she grabs his face, and he hears terror in her touch, a torrential thrum that consumes his own. “A contract with Life may show us what she found. What she’s *missing*. And if even the smallest piece of her lives in you, then *that* is our final bid for survival.”

Cyan sinks into the Clutter.

He pauses. She pulses. Breaths spiral through taut silence between them.

For a split second, he wonders if she’ll strike him, or embrace him, or if she even hears him. But, drawing away, Asha tugs her veil of indifference, rising from the stool.

“Get some rest. I’ll retrieve you at dawn.”

A crowd awaits at the Temple. Elders in finery, priests of all ranks, altar-keepers and shrine-sweepers, five children, their stewards and soot smears. Marin wishes him good fortune. Kithal hands him a braid of grass, which he ties at the ends and slides up his wrist.

At last, side by side with the Eldest, he scales the stairs to the Temple of Beliefs for the final time. For once, the Eldest trains his eyes on his sandals, addressing Cyan only in pithy pleasantries. On the penultimate step, he stops and smiles.

“Blessings,” he says.

Cyan skips ahead, beaming over his shoulder. “To the Beliefs!”

Flicking a match, he strikes the carved branches. Flame bursts, enveloping the threshold. Children pitch over elders, uproar in the gathering crowd, twisting, tumbling, Eldest lunging, knocking the heather-needle, and as it rolls from reach, Cyan scrambles, stumbles, bites down on his thumb, spits a mouthful of blood, drips his sacrifice onto marble—

■: *The Belief of Belief*

Burning.

He’s burning, vaporizing, unraveling every end; his mind pries through the gaps, want and will, martyrs, madness, immolation, incineration, and in that moment, he wonders if he’ll implode or explode or disintegrate or disseminate, if he’ll leave the world as fire or nothing...an eternal stain upon the Beliefs. Yet, before any thought reaches decision, the world retracts into a fine point on his thumb—polished nail, sutured scar, the soot of a temporary contract.

I’m alive.

The Eldest slaps him across the face. Neck snapping, he catches himself on his knees, hand shooting to the rupture. Copper floods his mouth. Spitting, he raises his chin, tears running down his swollen cheek. Snatching Cyan’s collar, the Eldest hoists him off his feet.

“*Blasphemy*,” he breathes.

“Belief.”

His face contorts. “Arrogance! To demand *control*—”

“Not control,” Cyan says quietly. “Comprehension.”

He’ll never fathom a God through following Her. So, last night, he pondered, how did She escape the Box? How did She build Herself into a faith, draw the world to Her shrines, live eons as a mortal without Life? They can’t fathom Her—the being who misaligns their very construct of existence. Because She proves its construction. Because She’s Belieffless.

Coldly, the Eldest discards him, starting down the steps. “You’ve forsaken yourself!”

Cyan curls his thumb. Bares a bloodied grin.

Then I'm on the right path.

The Box doesn't open.

Cyan scans the periphery, smears soot on stone, slams his body against the entrance. After two days and two nights, he returns to the Temple of Beliefs, but finds his belongings scattered in embers by the river. The children scorn him, elders eye him with reproach, Eldest disregards his presence. Resigned, he retreats to the Clutter, tailing Asha's sound through the intersections to his former room. When he approaches, she tugs him into the dresser, shoves a breadbasket into his arms, and severs every thread of his Familiarity with the Temple. *I'm sorry*, she mouths. Or perhaps, *Shame on you*.

Alone with Self and Sound, Cyan meditates on the cliffside. He skims the newspapers, shoved to the basket's bottom. More bridgework. More prayers, more meetings with the Eldest, more interference from the fog of "nowhere." Will they force a stalemate? Can a battle last forever? If so, in a few centuries, will they find another child, just like Her, just like him, raise them smarter, leash them sooner, write them better lies? And, if not, if the bridge crumbles, if they strike Her down, if She comes to compromise, will they retrieve him from his exile, or leave him floundering here, beneath the Box, beyond eternity, between the faithless and forsaken? Cyan wonders how it feels to age. If he'll feel it at all, in a place where nothing shifts nor strains, where people come and go and the lessons never change, where reality wavers with every refraction yet never quite breaks. He can watch the Temple, like the Temple watches the world—from nowhere.

Cyan's used to watching. Many years ago, he watched the fisherman Fell sail into a storm, lose his left leg, crawl ashore into Renny's arms. He watched Fell pass away from fever, watched Renny bury her father, her husband, her eldest daughter. He watched her second daughter bury her. Clovers sprouted from the mound; stilts punctured the clovers; three typhoons flattened the fishing village; centuries later, merchants with bronze teeth and leather draws built a dock over her remains, where ships with the head of Edrael dock in the harbor, bearing silks, satins, jewel-studded fruits, powder in iron bowls that flood the streets in smoke. A decade later, Edrael's flag obscures every mast and window. Renny must be less than bones. The elders never trusted Perpetuity. Faiths toss and turn the *now*—a ship lost at sea. *However*, Cyan contemplates, what are faiths without fragility? What are Beliefs without faiths? Millenniums

later, when the river becomes an ocean, when the parakeets lose their feathers, when even the Collective Mind meet mortality, what will become of the Temple? What vestige of power will they salvage, if there's no one left to *believe*?



Cyan traces the mark on his thumb, gazing at the Box. Within lies the Place Without Belief. If there's no Belief, there mustn't be Self, nor Sound, nor Familiarity, nor anything enshrined between the branches. A Place of Nonexistence. And *yet*, if it lies in the Box, then it must exist. And if it exists, it can't be Nonexistence, meaning *Something* must remain beyond Belief. Perhaps Cyan can't witness it. Or perhaps he can...so they sealed it away.

Life doesn't exist.

Why would Edrael take the name of the Belief who forsook Her? Because, within the Place Without Life, She recovered not purpose, but non-meaning. Because, like all its counterparts, Life is fabrication, waiting to be questioned, controlled, relinquished.

She ruled a world through one Belief's rejection. How many more reside in the Temple? If She contracts all of them, breaks through their purposes, conquers every iteration of the Box, what awaits Her? Nonexistence...or Possibility?

Why? *Why* believe? Why permit the Beliefs to write their Collective Mind? Why shackle themselves to powers that use and abuse, weave existence to fault and string mortals up its lines, build the pyres where they burn, rivers where they drown, conflict driving knives through their backs, complicity compelling them to incineration, cycles upon cycles of maddening helplessness...Life, Death, *Erasure*. The reduction to Nothing. The *expectation* of it.

One cannot master Belief; they must simply embrace artifice and recover purpose.

Scripture unwinds before him. Cyan cannot embrace artifice without rejecting every brazier in the Temple. And he cannot recover purpose, because Beliefs are *purposeless*.

The Belief of Belief is unattainable.

Cyan waits with his epiphany for three weeks.

Numbness gives way to Self, which gives way to bitterness, which gives way to festering rage. He lets it pound through his veins, hunger carving into

his cheeks. *Take me*, he challenges. Yet, Life parts around his breaths, and he holds them in his chest until his vision stains.

Cyan rises.

His legs collapse. No matter—he waits with them, tempering the strength of each and every muscle. Hobbling down the cliff, his rage pounds on through the winds he displaces, grass he rends with bare feet, rivulets trickling from the bruises. He'll cross the river tonight. He'll wade through the shallows, on and on until he reaches the bridge, for She'll soon have it complete, and if not...he'll help Her pour the mortar. And, when She conquers the Beliefs, he'll be right by Her side, breaking existence to pieces. She might kill Life. Unwind Time. Revive Memory. Perhaps he'll take Fell in one hand, Renny in the other, guide them through the formulating world. All that's left is claiming his freedom. Clenching his fists, Cyan dashes over the ridge, along the border, through the brambles wreathing the Temple—

Incineration.

A gust of ash slams him to his knees. All around, blood-grass curls like funerary paper, sifting through the impenetrable haze overhead. He can't tell if the stars are sparks, or sparks are stars, or if existence has gone up in flames, for the parakeets seem like phoenixes, fleeing from the rooves, and nacre pools in poison through the groves, and willows lie splayed, splintered, defiled by the hands of heathens, who pry bark from branches, mount shards on pyres, puncture the skies. Hundred by hundred, priests and Beliefs strike them down, and thousand by thousand, they burst through the iron gates and riverbanks, draping bodies wreathed in Edrael's emblem.

Slickness down Cyan's ankle. *Kithal?* Skeins of hair unknot from her dented scalp. Arms spasm, marred from twin Beliefs of Tactility and Complicity. Stomach churning, Cyan drags her to the bushes, staunching the flow. Her head lolls against his shoulder.

"Who are you?" she whimpers.

"Cyan." He tears his sleeve with his teeth. "You're going to be fine—"

"Are you with them?"

"I'm with you. See?" he responds, raising her braid of grass, fraying at his wrist. "You know me. Or you did, or would've, if Familiarity hadn't gotten in the way—"

"Familiarity," she murmurs. "I suppose we'll never know."

Cyan winds the fabric around her skull. “Don’t be silly. If you’d like, Elder Asha can retie the string. Kithal?” When she slumps, he grabs her, shaking frantically. “Kithal, can you hear me? Follow my voice. Don’t bend to Life, you’re stronger than that...”

“Let her go.”

Brambles rustle. Whirling, Cyan grabs a knife from Kithal’s belt. The Eldest limps out of the shadows, smudges on his palms, streaks down his arms, burns disfiguring his features. Hiking up his tatters, he reaches out, but Cyan levels his weapon.

“Where’s Asha?” he hisses.

Sunken eyes land on Kithal’s form. “Can’t you hear?”

Cyan, already searching the Clutter, shakes his head. When the Eldest’s eyes crinkle, an implosion of silence roars in his ears. Lunging forward, he shoves the blade to the Eldest’s throat. “Why? Why didn’t you surrender? When you saw Her coming, when you saw the bridge was built, why couldn’t you cut your marks and *leave*?”

“Why would I?”

“For *them!* All of *them!*” Cyan cries, clutching the hilt. “Whatever sacrifices you’ve made, must you pull our people to the pyre? Must they burn to death for the Beliefs?!”

“For Everything.”

“*Everything?*” He blinks back tears. “Beliefs aren’t *real*, Eldest! They’re tyrants! Constructs, empty claims, they’re cruel, and greedy, and— *merciless* creatures! Stripping our freedoms, spending our lives. If you give your entirety, they’ll never be satisfied!”

The Eldest blinks.

“And what is Satisfaction?”

Cyan falters. “What?”

“*Satisfaction,*” the Eldest repeats. “Or Sacrifice. Or Freedom. Or Self, or Life, or this Rage you’ve found...what’s any of it, but the will of the Beliefs? What does it matter, if the Beliefs themselves ascribe meaning to the existence they’ve created?” His hand closes around the blade. Pushing it down, he wraps a gentle arm around Cyan. *No*, he thinks, twisting away, gasps breaking through a clenched cage of teeth, yet the Eldest sets a finger to his lips.

Remembrance blooms from the touch.

Dust and dewdrops. Heather on his robes. That sunlit day, lifetimes ago, when Cyan contracted the Belief of Self by the walls and willows, sixteen children and squabbling elders, Life high and bright in the branches. He smells morning. Hears the river, rushing, like they're drifting side by side. Splicing a smile, the Eldest ruffles his hair.

“Choose yourself, child.”

Warmth floods from the knife in their interlocked fingers. Blood, blooming like flame through fabric. The Eldest falls to his knees, and keeling, Life drains from his eyes. Stumbling, Cyan drops the blade, hands flying to his mouth. *It isn't real.* Beliefs aren't real, for staining his thumb is the Belief of Belief, and if he simply lets it go, he'll bend Life and Death, and nothing will ever fall, and all will cease to exist, and he can write what he wishes, a place where blades never bury and bodies never burn and blood never soaks and eyes never empty and memories don't parch beneath his nails—

A shadow.

Slowly, Cyan swivels, facing something as far and fathomless as the Box's facade. Brushing past him, footsteps without echoes, She drifts over Kithal, bends by the Eldest, rests his head on Her lap. So empty. No person, no presence, no Life to call Her own. A rip in the world...but the world's already ripping at the seams. Perhaps that's why She scintillates, salvation that obliterates, for he feels his fire lapsing, death recoiling, Beliefs fading from wrists, faiths flowing through fingers, vaporizing the river's surface, skimming, skipping, slipping, rising and razing and retreating, left in the depths for nothing to retrieve...

So he sinks.

SEOYON KIM '25
HOMECOMING

Natalie-from-across-the-street had been scheduled to be executed down at the community recreational complex on a Saturday morning in late March. The dining area, at the least, was supposed to be back open by 11 AM for regular brunch, but the whole place remained closed to the public for the morning and the afternoon and then some of the evening too, ruining Saturday night novelty poker without so much as an explanation for why, which was really just as well.

Some folks said that Natalie-from-across-the-street escaped; Mary wouldn't know. But Mary was not want to believe gossip, as those who so casually spread it were more often than not getting on in their years anyways, and when evening befell Magnolia Meadows Active Adult Living Community that Saturday, her husband Keith folded up his wire frame bifocals and set his glasses and his pencil and his almost-finished sudoku book on their nightstand and turned off the lamp and asked Mary about her thoughts on the rumors, to which she gasped loudly in the dark, louder than was strictly necessary, and blindly reached across the bed to strike him on his shoulder, and told him that he was growing old and that he knew better than to listen to the scandalous tales that busybodies were so determined to make everybody's business these days, to which he huffed and attempted to roll over, which elicited another kind of groan from him as he struggled to overturn his heavy body, sheets wrestling against his skinny arms and round belly, and Mary was forced to get up and push him over.

In any case, what happened was that while the execution was always meant to be a private affair, the funeral was not, and when it was announced that plans had changed and Natalie-from-across-the-street's family was to bury her outside the community, allegedly somewhere in Montana's native grasslands, where Natalie-from-across-the-street had originally hailed from, or so she had claimed before she was taken to be executed, it came as discomfiting news to most, upsetting, even, Mary most of all, who had already booked an appointment at the salon to dye her gray hairs in preparation for the funeral, which had been anticipated to be somewhat of a spectacle.

Mary had not intended to walk to brunch alone that Monday morning, but she had been left with little choice when they were, as it was, already going to be late, Keith obstinately refusing to reply with anything other than “In a minute!” as she called for him from downstairs, at first irritated, then desperate. She had, in her upset, contemplated taking the car, a silver beauty that had endured her and Keith’s courtship since the very beginning, and which Keith would always, or most of the time, even in his advancing age, open the passenger seat door for her as she approached, like a true gentleman, but the thought of leaving Keith—Keith, who always treated her like a princess—Keith, who would once comb and part Mary’s hair every evening to admire its sheen and murmur compliments (though he had admittedly not done so in a while)—to walk to the community center all by himself while she waited for him in the parking lot, sitting pretty in their shiny silver car with nothing to do but watch the others walk in, made her feel somewhat sorry for him even while he blundered around getting ready upstairs, wasting time doing God-knows-what, and the day was bright and her body was nimble yet, if not quite as spry as it was twenty years ago, and taking a moment to allow the enormity of her grace, her magnanimity, to settle upon her breast, she chose to take the ten-minute walk, if even that, herself, and enjoy time spent alone before meeting with friends.

The lovely thing about Magnolia Meadows Active Adult Living Community, and the reason she and Keith had chosen it in the first place, after she had retired from her job as a nurse at sixty-one and he had passed on the family tailoring business at sixty-six and put his days of bespoke suits behind him, was its location, the entire community and its sixty-two condominiums and community center and golf course nestled in rural Kentucky, so that the retirees may enjoy the pleasures of fresh air and open blue sky and lazy sprawl of the white-hot Southern sun, all but a ninety-minute drive from the nearest urban center. And thus while a horse may have not been such an outlandish element to chance upon in rural Kentucky, like the horse Mary happened to meet that Monday morning, walking to brunch, a racehorse was decidedly less so, far away from fans and bettors and money, far away from the city and its people, and proved an unfamiliar and altogether off-putting sight to see in Magnolia Meadows Active Adult Living Community. Mary could tell it was a racehorse from its green-and-yellow checkered hood and the number fourteen, yellow on green, in bold print on its saddle, as if it had just galloped right

through a finish line of some faraway derby, and continued to gallop and gallop without stopping until it arrived here, before her, and she was suddenly overcome with overwhelming love for this majestic creature, her courageous stallion, who had traveled for great distances to be with her. When she drew closer, however, it pawed the sidewalk nervously, then turned and leaped away in a manner unlike a horse, and she watched it grow smaller and smaller, a speck in the distance, across the far-reaching Kentucky meadows that surrounded the community on all sides.

Eventually a silver car came to a stop behind her on the sidewalk, and she thought back to her youth, when the very same gleam of silver pulling up besides her had been equal parts nerve-racking and electric, but then she remembered that she was in Magnolia Meadows Active Adult Living Community, and that the only cars that passed through belonged to members of Magnolia Meadows Active Adult Living Community, and then the car window rolled down to reveal Keith's flustered red face, and she belatedly remembered, with a sinking finality that she could do nothing to fight against (though for a moment, she did struggle), that she was Mary—Mary, aged sixty-five, wife of Keith, husband of Mary, and she rounded the car and opened the door and climbed into the passenger seat for the two-minute drive to brunch.

It had been over a decade, though not too much over a decade, since Mary's menopause passed at fifty-two. She knew this to be true for Kathy as well, and was as shocked as everyone else was when Kathy announced her newly-discovered pregnancy to the table over omelet and toast, her hand pressed above her belly as if she could already feel the baby kicking, her other hand turned white in the tight grip of her husband Gregory, dim blue veins curled around the glow of her knuckles.

"How is this possible?" Mary asked to Kathy's sheepish grin, and as she looked upon the grayed ringlets that framed Kathy's face, her smile lines, her sagging upper lip, her gaze took on a certain critical air that she did not believe had been there before.

Kathy appeared to grow taller before their eyes, her cheeks flushed with excitement. "God knew that Gregory and I wanted for a child, and He provided. I always believed that I was barren, but He heard our prayers, and in his boundless grace, rewarded us for our faith."

"She was feeling sick all day yesterday," Gregory related; leaned over the tablecloth as if in sacrament. "It came on all of a sudden. And I had this crazy

idea. Old Kathy thought I was gone insane—of course it's insane. Absolutely insane. We all thought our time had passed. But I thought, hey, it couldn't hurt to check, why not, and I drove down to Westerly and bought a test and..."

"I knew this day would come," said Kathy.

"Those tests can be wrong," Mary pressed, ignoring her, fork in hand come to a standstill. She felt something rise in the back of her throat as Keith continued at his plate of waffles from beside her.

"Three tests. All positive," said Kathy, her good mood unsullied. "We are so blessed."

"Congratulations," Keith said politely without looking up from his waffles, and the table echoed, "Congratulations," and Mary echoed, "Yes—yes, congratulations."

Against all odds, baby Natalie was born, both mother and daughter healthy and well. Her name had been some source of contention, as it was raised whether it was appropriate for a new life to be tainted with the name of someone so recently departed, whose execution had caused such an upset (though they had in the end all agreed, even Natalie herself, that yes, this was the only way) and furthermore failed to deliver upon the promised funeral—accordingly, a community meeting was called in the days preceding Natalie's birth, and all were present, all except for Kathy and Gregory. The community meeting reached hard-fought consensus while Kathy underwent labor in the Westerly Women's Hospital, and when the couple returned to Magnolia Meadows Active Adult Living Community with their baby girl wrapped in pink and a bow on her bald head, they were met with the happy news that yes, yes, Natalie was an apt name for a baby girl, a fine homage in remembrance of our beloved Natalie, may she rest in peace.

But of course, Kathy and Gregory could not raise a child in Magnolia Meadows Active Adult Living Community—not when it would be many years before she would turn fifty-five and meet the minimum age requirement for residence at Magnolia Meadows Active Adult Living Community, and therefore it was decided that it would be best if she was sent to live with her aunt and uncle in Kansas for the first eight years of her life, and so she did, except for the six days she was allowed to spend at Kathy and Gregory's condominium in Magnolia Meadows Active Adult Living Community, and she was then sent to a girl's boarding school in London, where she learned the contours of her parents'

lives through photos and periodically-received milk chocolates that melted in cardboard packaging when crossing the pond, and eventually their eulogies.

Young Natalie realized her premature homecoming to Magnolia Meadows Active Adult Living Community on a Saturday morning, one week before her parents' funeral. She arrived on the back of a racehorse, though she claimed to have taken the train, producing her ticket from her egg yolk-yellow primary school backpack as proof when anyone asked. Mary knew, however, of the girl's lies, because she had been on the lookout for the green-and-yellow racehorse ever since she saw it on the morning young Natalie's mother had announced her pregnancy—ever since she had opened her heart to the majestic creature and it leapt above the horizon, tail swishing a mournful goodbye—and so when Natalie arrived on horseback—on the green-and-yellow racehorse whose appearance on the sidewalk that day had been just as enigmatic and perplexing as young Natalie herself was, in her mother's belly, and Mary knew the girl spoke lies, as did all the little girls she had known herself as a child, and so she put it to the test later, young Natalie having been invited to a commemorative dinner with friends of her parents and young Natalie having accepted, and when the good silverware had been set and the turkey cut and the gravy poured and the food finally eaten, when dishes were being stacked and rinsed and loaded, then she finally was able to ask young Natalie about green-and-yellow racehorses, and young Natalie said: "They grind up racehorses and put them in pig meal. I know because my friend Lucille had a racehorse, and she told me that when he couldn't race anymore they led him to a shed and there was a great whirring sound and she never saw him again. I wonder if he's in the bacon the school makes. I wonder if there's racehorse in me. The mane that Lucille braided, silky smooth; his broad pumping heart. Racehorse Natalie, they'll call me," then she stood from her chair and pranced about the room silently while Mary watched.

When Michael-from-the-salon was executed, great care was taken that young Natalie would not hear a word about it.

"The way I see it," said Michael once, as soon as the hair salon door swung shut behind Mary, his last customer of the day, and possibly his last customer forever, though nobody could have known for sure at that point, though it was a close thing, "There's not much I can do at this point, so I might as well live truest to myself."

Mary set her bag down atop the magazines on the coffee table. "Sorry?"

He smiled apologetically from where he leaned against the counter, abundant apron cascading down his long body, gone unchecked as it tucked and filled the space of his chest, the gap of his ribs, of his knees, his weight wedged against the shiny granite countertop in which Mary watched his reflection; watched him pull the fine-tooth rat-tail comb he used for parting from his deep apron pockets and gingerly set it down. "I am old but not too old, and where it was once Natalie-from-across-the-street, it is now me."

Mary did not deign herself to answer; after a moment's helpless deliberation, wordlessly she crossed the room to where he stood and Michael watched; did not resist as she grabbed his hand and the fine-tooth comb and forced his fingers around the silver prong of its handle. It fell noiselessly from his grasp to the linoleum floor. She moved to pick it up again.

"Mary."

"Do not be smart with me, Michael. Say what it is you truly think, and I will listen. But I will not tolerate your antics."

"Mary," he repeated.

She held the comb in front of him. "Natalie-from-across-the-street was a long time ago."

"Not that long ago," Michael said, and his hand gently closed around the comb, and in an impulse she closed her own fingers around his. They were quiet like this for a moment and then he guided her to the shampoo chair, and when she sat down he placed a towel around her shoulders, and his strong hands were warm and gentle as they braced the back of her neck; lowered her head to the cool ceramic basin, and when she opened her eyes she could see him standing over her, on the other side of the basin, smelling of hairspray and conditioner, and he said, "Not for people like us, really," and she forgot what they were talking about and raised her hand to touch Michael's cheek and he bent over and pressed his lips to hers and when Keith later told her that it had been finalized that Michael was to be executed, with the same indifference with which he had told her many years ago that poker was popular again, apparently, and that that the community center was organizing weekly novelty poker nights, even though nobody remembered how to play, exactly, and that they should go, Mary would kiss Keith on both cheeks and take his face in her hands and tilt it so she may kiss his forehead, too.

Young Natalie lived in her parents' old condo for the week preceding their funeral, a ghostly thing, as Kathy and Gregory did not put much stock into the

philosophy of decluttering, and kept their possessions close to their heart, so close that they had kept the blankets and socks and diapers and swaddles they had received during Kathy's pregnancy instead of sending them along with young Natalie when she had gone to live with her aunt and uncle; had kept them all stored in their condo, a ghostly condo with its owners' ghostly lives clinging to the carpet and the furniture and the length of electrical cords coiled in dusty rubber tangles behind a dimly flickering TV, permanently set to the cooking network, and ghostly things are rarely good for the young mind and so nobody was surprised when rumors spread that young Natalie had been found roaming the neighborhood in the early morning, seized with a fevered energy but still, reportedly, in grasp of her good senses, as had claimed Gerald Whittaker, who lived down the street from the golf course and, having caught sight of young Natalie on his way to tee off at sunrise, asked her what she was doing up and was greeted in what had been an affable but distracted manner that he charitably described as somewhat endearing, but any humor to be found in the situation was quickly strangled when it was also to be known that young Natalie had found, waiting in the dining room of an empty condo at the fringes of town, or as she so claimed, when later questioned, waiting as if just for her, only her, two children, one boy and one girl, who, though they could not be over the age of nine, was agreed by the community folk to have the nascent features of the late Kathy and Gregory on their small and round faces, resembling the couple more than their own daughter.

Of course, children could not stay in Magnolia Meadows Active Adult Living Community—not when it would be many years before they would turn fifty-five and meet the minimum age requirement for residence at Magnolia Meadows Active Adult Living Community—but considering the circumstances, which had changed since young Natalie had been sent off to live with her aunt and uncle—considering the great grief that had followed the departure of Old Dorothy, who had been the oldest of them all, who had stuck out her days playing golf at Magnolia Meadows Active Adult Living Community instead of moving to a retirement home, closer to qualified medical facilities—to the acclaimed teaching hospital, as her children, who were old enough to move to Magnolia Meadows Active Adult Living Community themselves, had urged, which Old Dorothy had rebuked, claiming that she did not like the way the students and doctors, brightest minds of their generation they may be, peered through the observation windows as if to assess her, like how a stable master

might assess his horses, the way they peered through the observation windows as if making bets, for Old Dorothy had grown up daughter of the man who owned the biggest race yard in the country—Old Dorothy, who had unexpectedly died on the golf course from a stroke—beloved, dearly beloved Old Dorothy, who everyone had been sick of but who everyone missed nonetheless, and considering the circumstances, it was decided that it would be best if, for at least the time being, the two children were to move in with young Natalie and live in Kathy and Gregory's old condo and live there, or continue to live there, whichever it was, though no one could be sure, for the community thought themselves forward-thinking folk with little use for superstition or belief, but there is little anyone can do when confronted with coincidence so great, if it can even be called that, and some even thought it to be a miracle, a family reunited, if unconventionally, young Natalie most of all, though she of all people would never know Kathy and Gregory to be Kathy and Gregory, her mother and father, as it is with young children, oft to forget the faces of their parents.

Mary had not intended to walk to brunch alone that Sunday morning, but she had been left with little choice when they were, as it was, already going to be late, Mary having tolerated from the first floor the various sounds of Keith's slow-moving path upstairs for far too long, and the day was bright and her body was nimble yet, if not quite as spry as it was twenty, thirty years ago, and, leaving the car with Keith, who had recently taken to complaining of swollen and aching ankles, she chose to take the ten-minute walk to brunch, which had this week been specifically designated a celebration of young Natalie and her two friends, and their welcome to Magnolia Meadows Active Living Community, resolving that Keith may join her later on his own time. She drifted along the pavement below a smoldering Kentucky sun, and when no racehorse escaped far-off derbies to come lie at her feet and accept her vast love and no silver car pulled to her side to gleam like a diamond come to take her away, she wondered but for a moment—careless musings that leapt from her mind entirely when young Natalie appeared at brunch with not only Kathy and Gregory in tow but also shyly holding the hand of another little boy who no one had seen before, but who everyone already knew, and the room erupted, whooping and crying and laughing, because it was Michael, Michael-from-the-salon, sweet-faced and towheaded as only a child can be, his strong hands now small and pink in Natalie's, and as the table continued to whoop and cry and

laugh, Michael hid his face in her sleeve, and young Natalie smiled, triumphant. The chair beside Mary remained empty all throughout brunch and she would later return home to find her husband dead, laid out bleeding on the bathroom floor with his wetted toothbrush still in hand, the afternoon sun slatting through the windows and casting gaunt shadows on his wrinkled face, and Mary would feel nothing but relief.

Keith was found again just as quickly as he had been buried in the earth, and this time it was not Natalie who was the one to welcome him back but little Michael, little Michael-from the-salon, who found the boy sleeping in an old boat parked on Kathy and Gregory's lawn—just one of the many things Kathy and Gregory had allowed to build up on their property like some teetering testament to their faith—which had seen many years of disuse but still served purpose as shelter for the young boy, a kind of young that even Natalie, who had loved him for forty years, did not know, youth the disarming way that Keith wore it. It's really a terrible thing to know.

When Mary's turn arrived—when she awoke on the back porch, as if she had never left; opened her eyes to the brightening sky; let her legs dangle, not quite touching the wood deck, kicked with a remembered fluidity, a natural ease; she clutched the curved armrests of her rocking chair, gripping it tighter than anything she had held in a while. She waited, felt the sun prickle her skin; the cool of the breeze coming from the far-off blue woods; admired her quality of perception, rich and supple; and when nobody came she pushed herself off the chair and ran to the street to play.



THE HANDSOME YOUNG COLT

There stood a weathered farmhouse five minutes east of the railroad tracks, where a silver train trundled through the station twice a day in complete silence, pulling with it eleven cars of precious freight. Besides the pinstriped train conductor, who lived behind a Plexiglass separator in a little booth at the train station, the nearest living person was an old lady who lived in the weathered farmhouse on the horizon. The old lady, however, was kept company by her three goats, four milkcows, five barn cats, six chickens, seven messenger hawks, and a handsome young colt she claimed was the reincarnation of her late sister Minnie.

Once, on a slow day, the conductor wrote the old lady a letter inquiring of her three goats, four milkcows, five barn cats, six chickens, seven messenger hawks, and handsome young colt. He wondered what they could possibly be doing all day there on the old lady's old farm. For a while, the conductor did not hear anything in reply. He continued to act out the motions of his ordinary, everyday life. He counted how many cars were attached to the silver train when it passed through the station every day—once in the early morning, and once in the late afternoon, and puzzled over why he counted only ten cars when there should be eleven. When he called his district railroad supervisor, the man confessed that he did not know either, and simply told the conductor to continue to keep track of the cars.

One early morning, when the sun was still peachy pink in the distance, the conductor found an envelope in front of the Plexiglass barrier of his otherwise windowless booth. He reached his hand out from under the barrier and took the envelope, which was made with a thick, cream-colored quality paper. It was from the old lady, he realized with nervous excitement. The letter the old lady wrote back said:

Dear Mr. Conductor,

Thank you for asking about my three goats, four milkcows, five barn cats, six chickens, seven messenger hawks, and handsome young colt. Nobody has ever asked me about them before, so forgive me if I seem overeager. Their lives are governed by an

extremely strict schedule that I set in place so that my animals may feel a sense of order and purpose on my farm. Here is a list of their roles proper:

My three goats stomp their hooves on the ground every morning to wake me up from my slumber. I believe they do this because they are frightened by the shadows cast by the slow-rising sun, and think they must defend themselves against the long blue goats following at their heels.

My four cows sing a lullaby to help me go to sleep at night. Their black-and-white spots transform into notes on the music scale, and they sight-read a new lullaby off each other's backs every third night.

My five barn cats do my patchwork for me. Living on a farm inevitably means that I often find the need to sew a hole that opens up in the sleeve of my dress, or darn an old sock, or patch together a warm quilt from old fabric scraps. My sweet barn cats handle all of that for me. You can often glimpse them huddled by the corner of the farmhouse with a needle and thread in their white-mittened hands.

My six chickens hang up my laundry and pull it back down before it rains. They have never failed me, and when I see a basket of my neatly folded and freshly dry linens on the back porch, I know that it will rain soon.

My seven messenger hawks read books aloud for me in front of the fire after dinner. My eyesight is not what it used to be, and until my seven beautiful messenger hawks came along, my greatest sorrow was that I could no longer read "The Little Princess" on account of how its small, uniform text blurred into an unintelligible smear in front of my eyes.

My handsome young colt is the busiest of all. He is the reincarnation of my late sister Minnie, who was the most beautiful of my twelve sisters and the most persistent. He has a very special job that I cannot accurately describe to you. He trains every day for his job. Maybe someday you should visit and see for yourself what he does.

As you can see, my three goats, four milkcows, five barn cats, six chickens, seven messenger hawks, and handsome young colt are all very busy at any given time. They each provide for our home in a unique and equally valuable way. However, what is even more important to me is that my animals are very happy and content to live on my farm. That is reward enough for me. I wager you will come to understand when you are my age.

*Best regards,
Old lady's farm*

The conductor reflected on the old lady's polite letter. On one hand, it was perfectly amicable: reserved but helpful, as expected from a respectable lady with a respectable farm to run with her three goats, four milkcows, five barn cats, six chickens, seven messenger hawks, and handsome young colt. On the other hand, he was annoyed by her reservation. It wasn't like he was going to blab to anyone about why her handsome young colt was so busy—who would he even report to? His district railtrack supervisor? He saw no reason why he should take time off the job he had faithfully committed himself to every day for almost twenty years now, just to visit an old lady on her farm. Maybe it was a ploy to get others to visit her, sad old lady she was. It almost made him feel sorry for her.

So the next day, the conductor peeled off his pinstripe uniform for a smart coat and button-up shirt, set his cap on his chair so that a visitor on the other side of the Plexiglass separator would be able to see it, and slipped off his clogs in exchange for a pair of running shoes. He jogged five minutes east towards the old lady's farm so that he made it just before noon.

"In time for lunch!" said the old lady excitedly when she opened the door. She ushered in the conductor, but before he could sit at her kitchen table, she stopped him and held out a flowing lace nightgown.

"You're covered in dust!" she exclaimed when he tried to sit again, confused. It was true; he had kicked up a significant amount of red sand on the stretch from the station to the old lady's farm, and a layer of glittering grime stuck to his skin and clothes, leaving a burnished cast upon his face. He noticed that a button had even been torn from his collar. "That won't do at all. Here, take off your coat and button-up shirt and wear this nightgown, and my

chickens and cats will fix it for you right away. In the meantime, we can enjoy some delicious tea.”

Seeing no way out of this, the conductor turned his back to the old lady to preserve a modicum of privacy and reluctantly wriggled into the nightgown, which was surprisingly cool and soft on his skin. He noticed the barn cats staring up at him with curious eyes from the corner of the living room, partially hidden in the shadow of an ornate armchair.

“Here, your clothes should be washed before they’re mended, yes?” said the old lady as she loped towards the back door. The conductor hurriedly followed her, as did the barn cats, tumbling at her heels. The old lady efficiently dunked the conductor’s coat and button-up shirt in a tub of soapy water on her porch, where the water steamed and hissed and spat at the foreign intrusion. She rubbed the fabric between the tips of her fingers and declared it done, then called her chickens over.

“They are absolutely marvelous,” she told the conductor as the chickens congregated at her feet, smiling appreciatively. “Delightful things,” then flung the sopping wet garments aloft, where they appeared to hover for a moment above the chickens’ heads before disappearing into the mass of twitching feathers.

The conductor watched openmouthed, hoping to catch a glimpse of the chickens deftly making use of their wings to drape his garments over the clothesline, but he was disappointed to see his modest coat and button-up shirt feebly fall to the ground as the chickens squawked and fluttered their wings. Sourly, he considered that his coat and button-up shirt, wetly piled in the dusty courtyard, might be even dirtier than they were before. The chickens quickly recovered from the surprise and began to mill around the garments, occasionally pecking at them with a curious coo.

“No time to dawdle,” said the old lady as she pulled him back inside. She sat him down at the table and wordlessly poured him a cup of tea. He watched from the corner of his eye as the barn cats returned to their work in the corner of the living room. They didn’t seem to be doing much, tumbling over each other as much as they appeared to be handling the gauzy fabric of the blouse they were stitching.

“They get nervous when you stare,” said the old lady, and he quickly turned back to his tea.

“This is delicious,” he offered.

“Could be better,” she sighed. “It was my late sister Minnie’s recipe.”

“You mentioned her in your letter,” the conductor remembered. “The most beautiful of your sisters.”

“And most persistent,” she added. “There was a time, once, when I ordered a load of sugar from the Salzwelten sugar mine deep in the Hallstatt mountain system. My beautiful sister helped me pay for my freight. It was of the most importance to me for many reasons. I was told the train would arrive just before dawn, gladly pulling to a stop at my station in perfect silence. That part was true. When it did, however, it did not carry my promised sugar, but instead a simple freight of gum base. My most beautiful sister once trespassed upon the web of river and brook that criss-crossed in an almost grid-like fashion the property of the unhappy boy who bought the estate next door, against his best wishes. She just wanted to do it. Violent current crossing one another in pursuit. She gave me her word that she would trespass again for me, this time the great caverns of Salzwelten, to procure my anticipated cargo.”

“And did she?”

She shook her head. “No. But her ambition travels beyond the grave.”

The conductor suddenly felt deeply uncomfortable. He should just take a quick look at the colt, he thought, and leave as soon as possible. That was what he came here for.

“Sorry to rush you,” he said, keeping his wits about him. “But I would like to see the colt. I have been very curious since you wrote to me about him.”

“Ah, yes,” she said, then faintly: “He is not here at the moment.”

The conductor felt his annoyance surge. “What do you mean?”

She shrugged and poured him another cup of tea, though he hadn’t yet finished his first. He had been deceived! Outside, he heard a hawk shriek.

Almost knocking over his chair, he rushed out of the house and threw his gaze toward the sky, where he spotted one, two, three, four, five, six, seven messenger hawks peel in different directions across the blue expanse from the old lady’s chimney like a seven-petaled flower unfurling above her home.

He expected to hear the old lady’s shouts from behind him, but hearing none, still wearing her nightgown, he took off across the plains, following the westward-heading hawk, never taking his eyes from its red plumage, a dark blot in the bright sky, even as he stumbled over the brush and the skirt of the old lady’s nightgown darkened with the dust he kicked up.

As he neared the station, he spotted the train speeding down the tracks for its late-afternoon run, and beside it, a handsome young colt running alongside the cars, sprinting faster and faster with a deliberate determination as if it had been training for a long time. The colt moved in tandem with the motion of the train, slowly gaining on the cars until finally, the last car broke from the train and toppled sideways off the track. The colt did not break its stride, instead running faster and faster, growing impossibly long and tall, until it was indistinguishable from the dark line of the rest of the train and disappeared along with it in the horizon.

When the conductor finally reached the toppled car, dizzy from the sweet-smelling desert air, he pried open the top to find the inside filled completely with pure white sugar.

CHRISTMAS, 2009

Shortly after noon on Christmas day, the Perry twins shared with everybody on Danouth Street what gifts they had received over the course of the previous night, obligingly showing off their miracles from door to door. A pure black apple; a pure white hatchet. The adults feigned a lack of interest, shying away from the cold of the open door, but afterwards, several would interrogate their children for information.

Her hatchet had felled the tree the apple had dangled from, Anika Perry said, turning the dewy apple in question round in round with her good arm. So that no other apple may come close to rivaling its beauty. Its blackness seemed even more crisp and even more brittle than ever in the watery winter sun. Anika's other arm was still in a nylon sling, from when Ellie Stanger wrestled her onto the classroom floor in homeroom and she banged her arm on the stainless steel legs of the new school desks.

Anika Perry was a goddamn prodigy at pitching.

Samira Perry held the slender handle of the white hatchet in both hands. Her oiled braid trailed like a thick black rope over the shoulder of her puffer.

"A white Christmas for sure," said Anika, looking at the pure white hatchet.

It was unfair, how things turned out. The Perrys owned the biggest house in the neighborhood, with a wide roof lined with old clay tiles that slid off in the middle of the night and made loud noises as they cracked on the asphalt below, so of course it would be the Perrys' roof that Santa's janky sled would crash into. The owners before them moved out after their divorce because they couldn't decide which one would get to keep the house. It sold for cheaper than it should have because their eighteen year-old son dug up half the backyard to make a garden with his buddies. His parents were getting a divorce and he knew they wouldn't care. Everybody thought they were growing weed, but all it was was some scraggly heirloom tomatoes and an invasive type of mugwort and the odd watermelon.

In the middle of the living room, right through the Ottoman area rug their parents had bought on their honeymoon fifteen years ago, grew an enormously large Christmas tree. Moreover, it had been fully decorated, with dangling baubles and ruby-red cranberry garlands and kindergarten pipe cleaner candy

canes and kitschy ceramic custom decorations that weighed down the dark green boughs with shit like “the Hylands, Christmas 2014” and the suggestion of pine tree fragrance sticks hidden between the needles. Wrapped presents slowly percolated through the carpet and formed under the tree, reflecting the blinking lights in colorful foil.

Remnants of Santa’s restored magic, lost and restored in full in just the past few hours, festered in the living room; in the dark sky outside, in the still before the sun’s slow emergence. The other children in the neighborhood huddled in the night, watching the scene through gaps in the curtains, eyes squinted against the blinking lights, not understanding. Mouths pressed open in gentle, anguished o’s and dry hands pressed against the glass. *There weren’t that many of them*, Anika soothed her sister later. Five, maybe six. Two of the Bannon boys. The older one always dyed his hair blue. The other was an annoying squirt. The little Chinese girl from the house with the garden up front. The short boy who was in the same grade as Anika and Samira, who announced his birthday party every year to the whole neighborhood with shiny balloons tethered to his mailbox. They all went to the same public elementary school eight minutes away, so she didn’t know them very well. When the children realized Anika and Samira were looking at them, they turned from the windows and opened the fence gate on its greased hinges and closed it gently behind them before fleeing into the shadowed trees.

“That’s when I realized,” said Samira finally, when the last of the children were gone, except for the gentle respiration of their parents upstairs, though by now she had figured out that if her parents would not wake for the sound of Santa’s reindeer on their roof then they were already beyond saving, and so it was really only her and her sister, the two of them standing around the tree. “The true meaning of Christmas.”

Gentle, good-natured Anika. “What is it?” she asked.

Samira knelt before the tree and watched the presents shimmering into existence, bending reality about themselves. Their affections warmed her shins and knees through the weave of her PJ’s, like a rug burn. Ruminated. She had always told her sister everything.

“I hardly know where to start,” she finally settled on.

Anika shook her head in disapproval. “Well, better start choosing.”

The explanation Anika later extracted from her sister:

Well, I don't even fantasize about backpacking the national parks and starting a true crime podcast about all the people who go missing anymore, because I know nothing will change and the only thing that will fix me is to wake up every dawn when everyone has gone to bed and cut a blazing trail through the suburban jungle with my pure white hatchet.

It may be a classic tale of peaking too early, but let's see where she's going with this. In ten years she will call her twin sister from her dorm in GW, standing over a bundle of moving boxes and packing tape she had bought from CVS in a panic. Her voice will trill unpleasantly over the speaker of Anika's expensive new phone. She will think they were past this. Samira will sound miserable, her wintry adventure with Santa long behind her. Sometimes she will wonder if Anika had even been there with her at all.

Christmas, 2009:

"We'll never get Santa's sled fixed in time!" Anika wailed, watching the last golden stripe fade from the magical candy cane dangling on the rearview mirror. She banged a fist on the dead dashboard as the reindeer chuffed, pawing the ground nervously.

Samira grabbed at her sister's arm. "No! We can't become the kids who ruined Christmas!"

"It's all our fault." Anika wrenched herself out of Samira's grasp. Samira's mouth pressed into a thin line as Anika fumbled for the sled door and dropped to the ground, her knees sinking through the fresh powder snow to the gray slush below. Her jeans were already wet and cold, anyway.

"Careful of your arm."

"It doesn't even hurt anymore," Anika mumbled, looking at the torn-up divorce papers scattered on the ground and mournfully picking up a scrap with her good arm. Mrs. Stanger, the signature read, a swooping cursive in bleeding black ink.

"It's all our fault," she repeated. "All because I wanted to make things right between Ellie and me." She dropped her head. "I just wanted to help."

Samira's feet dropped to the ground beside her. She swung the sled door shut again with a click. "Hey?"

"I messed up, I know."

“No, look.” Samira pointed at the sled’s glove compartment, which had popped open at Anika’s assault. She reached over the door and grabbed at the crumpled papers. Two golden rings spilled from the mess, making a small thud as they landed on the sled’s carpet floor as if they were much heavier than a ring should be. As if there should be material consequence for significance that exists only in the mind.

She belatedly stumbled to her feet, peering over Samira’s shoulder. “What are those?”

Samira picked at the papers. “They’re divorce papers, I think.” She pointed at the signatures at the bottom of the sheet in alternating red and green letters: Mr. Claus and Mrs. Claus.

“Oh! Oh, Samira. I had no idea.” Anika peered over at Santa, who sat in the snow twenty feet away, dejectedly gazing at the airplane lights rising from an airstrip in the distance. “Poor Santa.”

Samira was quiet for a while, before turning toward her sister. “I know what we have to do.”

Gentle, good-natured Anika. “What is it?” she asked.

“We have to find Mrs. Claus,” said Samira.

Santa continued to contemplate the distant airplanes in silence, multi-color buds of light flickering in the night like an invisible hand streaming Christmas lights across the sky. The Perry twins’ conversation concerned him, maybe, but he couldn’t bring himself to lift his body off the snow. Some things, he had found, are less fair than others.

IVY LINDAROS '25
PROMETHEUS PUTS OUT THE FIRE (AGAIN)

Once upon a time, there was a man who didn't know he was in a fairy tale, who didn't realize, until the wind was blowing around him and the stars were rocketing away and he didn't recognize his own face, that he was the house the big bad wolf blew down. He huffed and he puffed and he collapsed in on himself, rickety, ramshackle against the burning blue of fresh snow, scattered over with splinters and beams and stairs that led nobody nowhere, and that man was you, and I didn't care. And that man was me, and I didn't care.

- Don't make this harder than it needs to be.

I was too busy looking in the train station bathroom mirror, grime streaking over me or my reflection like rain, though I wasn't looking at me or my reflection or the rain, because I was looking at the angels staring over my shoulder like I owed them money, which, of course, I did.

Nobody else saw them, nobody but you, as they sang their song and their pincers and exoskeletons swayed in the damp wind, their eyes trained on me, beady, swollen, luminous.

Angels are always singing. I've been trying to write down the tune, but I never can. They don't want to give me anything. Not until I give them what they need. Angels aren't silent for a second. Angels are always

HUMMING

Or

WHISTLING

Or, occasionally,

*DRONING VERY LOUDLY, IN TONES THAT STRETCH THE HUMAN
EARDRUM TO ITS SCREECHING, SCREAMING LIMITS, OSCILLATING,
WAILING, RUMBLING LIKE CERTAIN DOOM GAINING SPEED AS IT
BARRELS INTO ME, LIKE THE CRY OF A TREE FLAYED BY LIGHTNING,*

LIKE THE CRY OF A HOUSE AS IT COLLAPSES, TURBULENT AND ENORMOUS. LISTEN TO US! LISTEN!

But I never will, because I've cheated death so far, because I'm a trickster god, I'm a pipe dream, I'm a dreamscape scapegoat goatherd of logic and understanding, and you'll never understand the logic of me because I'm a goatherd scapegoat dreamscape pipe dream, because I'm a trickster god, because

ME:

I'm sorry, I can't talk to you today. Why? Because I'm so tired. Why? Because I can't sleep. Why? Because I can't stop seeing angels made of pink-orange nylon neon stretched over wire armatures and old shopping carts, eyes made of glass ice steel, eyes that shine like flashlights off the bottom of a deep deep well! Well, when I put it that way, it doesn't make sense, since you could never see them the way I do, the dues they collect, no, you have to be there, and they'll never come when you're around, I'm sure of that. Don't hang up. Don't bother.

YOU:

Well, okay.

- No, you don't know what you're playing at. You haven't seen the maps. Down in my dark and shining office, I have a big tall wall of maps, and they show everyone who's ever been and everything that hasn't. And I've got eight billion thumbtacks, one for every person. You've never seen the maps, and you move the tacks around! Listen to me!

LISTEN TO US! LISTEN!

- Put the tacks down! Put your hands up!
- You have no business interfering like this!
- You can cheat god, but you can't cheat me!

ME:

Well, I've found a way out of reality. Did I tell you that? I had a dream that I was the hero of a tragedy, waking up and realizing that I'd been in a

*theater the whole time. I saw the audience! Did you know that? Did I tell you that? I saw the audience, my friend, and they saw me! So I woke up and I knew. I knew everything! Everyone who'd ever been and everything that hadn't. I peeled back the curtain. I ran out the door.
The laws of the universe only exist because we believe they do and act accordingly. It's all placebo! Panopticon surveillance! Plato's cave!
I'm awake! I'm awake! Oh, lord, I'm awake!*

YOU:

*I don't understand that. I don't understand a word you just said.
Because you're a trickster god, friend, you're a pipe dream, you're a
dreamscape scapegoat goatherd of logic and understanding. Stop it! What
are you doing? Stop putting words in my mouth!*

STOP IT! LISTEN!

I'm done. I'm done trying to make sense of it. I've stepped outside of infinity, and I've pulled apart each layer of the human condition and decided it's not for me. You could come with me. You could come with me!

Or maybe you couldn't, and that would be worse. What's in a mirror? Glass? Ice? Steel?

I'm the greatest cowboy that ever did live, and my horse is made of pink-orange nylon neon stretched over wire armatures and old shopping carts, eyes made of glass ice steel, eyes that shine like flashlights off the bottom of a deep deep well! My gun fires like the dawn of a star, and my bullets fly just as fast as I will them to, and just where I want them to go, and I am feared and loved like an old urban legend, and everybody wants a piece of me!

**STOP! LOOK! LISTEN! TURN AROUND RIGHT WHERE YOU ARE AND
FEEL THE DEPTH OF TIME, THE SCRAPE OF THE SKY AS DESTINY
KEELHAULS YOU OVER A SUNSET THAT STINGS LIKE INSULATION!
YOUR TIME IS UP! YOUR STORY'S DONE! WE'RE THE BIG BAD
WOLVES, AND WE CONVEY THE MESSAGE OF THE ANCIENT
MEGAFUNA, AND WE ARE HERE TO BLOW YOUR HOUSE DOWN!**

YOU:

They said that?

ME:

Yeah, they really did. It's laughable, the way they stand over my bed at night, staring daggers and screaming murder while I try to remember why I still choose to sleep. I have nothing to fear! Nothing to fear from them. That's why it doesn't work. Intimidation. Intimidation doesn't work for the likes of them.

BE NOT AFRAID!

ME:

Too late.

- You know this cannot end well, and you know that you know. You play with the tacks and the cobweb red thread on my maps, and you're bound to stab yourself sometime.
- You think you know everything but you're an astronaut, you're a cave diver. You're going somewhere you were never meant to go.
- Do you think that we, eternal as we are, have never looked outside? Do you think that we, having existed so, so achingly much longer than you, have been oblivious until this very moment?
- Have you ever considered that there might be a *reason* nobody is following you?
- No.
- Of course not.
- You think you've found a loophole, but you're dead.
- You've been dead from the beginning.

OH, YOU'RE NOTHING! YOU'RE NOTHING AT ALL!

We were sitting in the snow and you were vivisectioning me because that was the only way I could really learn about my insides, you'd told me, because no matter how many textbooks I studied, flesh and meat would never look recognizably like a diagram. I thanked you. This was so useful, such a valuable tool. The ground was blossoming pink and red, but I was pretty numb. I looked

down and, with your help to steady the page, I started drawing my own diagram.

I studied it on the way home, after you'd stitched me up, sitting next to a medieval Madonna in the back of an empty train. I tried not to stare, but the halos always look so real.

I was alive because I had simply realized that I did not have to die. No, I hadn't cheated death. I hadn't gambled anything. I had simply looked up and stepped out of the parlor. It was nothing. Nothing was everything. Everything had to end somewhere, and

- This ends now.

NEW DREAM DIARY 12/11-1/27 OLD ONE NO GOOD ANYMORE

12/11-

- Pick up new meds from the doctor.
- Go to the library.
- Find dream diary. Start writing in it again.

12/12-

- Call the specialty pharmacy the doctor told you to get your new meds from.
- Find dream diary. Start writing in it.
- Remember last night's dream. It was

12/13-

- Get groceries.
- Bury dead fish in backyard.

12/15-

- Go to the library. Find books about infections
- Dream diary
- Find

12/18-

- Bury bury bury dream diary bury in the ground. Post it notes. And Find the

12/19-

- This is my dream diary now. The old one went bad. I can't stand to look at my own writing anymore can't stand to look at my own things can't stand to be
- There's something violet that's glowing growing on my palms and my wrists and my doctor won't have me as a patient anymore and it sings to me swaying sickening songs. It's an infection. I need to remember my dreams I need to know what I dream of I always forget I always forget

12/20-

- Last night I dreamed of falling asleep and falling down a long long flight of stairs and when I woke up my body was still hurting from all the places where I'd fallen knocked into the hard uncarpeted wood and I was all out of breath like you are after running for too long.
- And I fell back asleep. And I was falling down a chasm a tall bright chasm like an incinerator shaft and it was just out of reach it had been just beneath my fingertips before I fell I fell I fell
- I dreamed I woke up again and there was a waterfall and I was so thirsty but it was bright violent violet glowing growing I couldn't drink from it I couldn't defile its freefalling flow

12/21-

- I dreamed of a circus that passed through town. I went up to a lion they had in a cage and I asked it where the library was and it told me "get your new meds from your doctor the specialty pharmacy they they always they always know they always know what to do! You're in good hands." And then it laughed like there was a joke there that I wasn't catching onto.
- Bury your books bury them in the backyard so nobody will find them
- Never dig them up again

12/23-

- I dreamed last night that my childhood best friend was me and I was at the bottom of a well trying to reach myself but it wasn't working because the powerful purple shine on my hands my arms and my neck too now was growing and turning into thick spiky crystals and I hurled myself toward the mouth of the well but they wouldn't break and I was stuck staring down.
- I'm leaving I can't bear the thought of my things in the backyard where I've buried them I know they'll wake up some night and my books and my coats and my old dead fish will stir up the dirt and crawl up and they'll know which hands buried them from the marks they left in the soil and they'll climb up into my bed because that's all that's left in my room now and they'll know where to find me and they'll make me remember and they'll bury me alive, just like I did to them. I've been burying all my things. I'm leaving

1/1-

- No good it's too cold I'm back

1/5-

- I dreamed I was a chef on a cooking show. The hosts were having us all cook something with the same ingredient and when I asked what it was the man in charge just
- Turned to me with a funny smile like he was looking at a food photograph like he was appraising a stolen stone

1/6-

- I was standing on one side of a dark, humming room
- On the other side was my own body
- Flayed and fractured and my head was split clean open and inside of it stretching between one crumbling cheekbone and the other was glowing growing brilliant bright violent violet thread spores

mycelium network veins unthreaded and turned into one pulsating
prickling mass like the insides of a picture of a virus like the insides
of a pumpkin when you haven't carved it yet

- My problem is that I'm a poet because

1/7-

- I can't ever seem to see it as anything but beautiful

1/22-

- I can't move anymore I'm fused to my bed I can barely write because
the crystals are growing inside of my hands it's funny I've never had
carpal tunnel but I know this is what it feels like and this is just a
thousand times worse
- My pencil is wearing down very short
- I have no time and there's something that was just out of reach and it's
slipped my grasp and I'm never getting it back now it was never there
in the first place because its existence its brilliant shining allure
depends on me looking back on it now and wondering where I went
wrong where the infectious infiltrating scales crystals pores in my
hands and my skin my insides now my heart my liver my lungs
turned into beauty
- A fairy's glamour
- A poisonous tropical frog's swaying sickening saturated haze

1/27-

- I was trying to become something
- I know I was

YOUR CURRENT SITUATION:

- All you can do is stare at him as he stands there, klaxons roaring, ballpoint pen trembling in your left hand.
- There's an earthquake incoming, and the loud, red sirens pierce through your ears like ribbons through the eye of a needle, hell's bells. Take cover.
- You're as covered as you're going to get.
- He's just standing there.
- You know it couldn't have come to any good in the end, but big decisions require both foresight and hindsight and, try as you might to see the big picture, you're blind in your right eye. It's the road ahead or the road behind. Your car is crashed. You're in a ditch.
- The first shockwave begins.
- You're knocked into the thick window frame of the motel bathroom, the light next to you flashing, flicking on and off, spinning out a tinny fizz like it did when you turned it on.
- You were here to be anonymous.
- You did not bring ID or a phone. You got by. It doesn't seem you'll be getting by for much longer, though.
- He's looking at you like the moon looks at the Earth. He's looking at you like volcanic lava looks at the sky. Two hours ago, you started the ritual, searching through your metaphysical tectonic plates or whatever the hell, finding the lines where everything fit into place, where the junctures glowed.
- In that place, you stayed, reading the text, reciting the words. The inflection had to be just right. The glow swelled and spiked and then there was a horrific splitting within you, and you were no longer ambidextrous. And he was there. He was staring.
- The walls billow like fabric.
- You didn't really think this kind of thing was possible. You just wanted to try. You just wanted to be the first.
- Take cover.
- There are two of you now.

MERCURY, MERCURY

An angel washed down onto the scrubby grass in my backyard, and she delivered a divine message, a purpose, a promise, a gift for me and for every person I would talk to for the rest of my life, but it was hard to take her seriously, because she'd manifested as a small garter snake in a big tuxedo.

When I asked her why the choice of form, she said oh, you don't really choose, it's kind of random, but it's fun, it's fun, I really do like being a snake and I think I like dressing up as well. And then it seemed to occur to her that she didn't have to only be a well-dressed snake, so she became a tall oak, and then a hippopotamus, and then a wide-brimmed hat, and then the sunlight on my face.

That was exhilarating, she said, I think I'll keep doing that for as long as I can. Thank you, thank you, thank you. There are so many things I can be, oh, heavens.

I asked out of curiosity if my backyard was her first stop down here, down on Earth, I mean, and she said yes, yes I think so, but I do hope it won't be the last. I think I am going to go to the South Pole and to the Equator and to every island and to every small town in the middle of nowhere, somewhere. I think I will learn every language and learn the ukulele and stride along the side of a misty lake on a cold summer day, and I think I will eat breakfast, and I think I will cry. Oh, it's so good. Oh, it's so new.

Aren't you infinite or something? I asked her. Don't you know it all already?

She started to cry a little, to smile, to flutter in the wind, as she was now a clothesline laden with billowing sheets. Infinity is nothing if you don't feel the limit, she said, warmth is nothing if you haven't known the cold. I will know the warmth and the cold. I will know the rain and the shine. I will know people. I will know you.

Oh, I said. Ok.

Where do I go when I die?

You stay right here, she said, and then she was gone, in a bright whirlwind, like mercury, like Mercury, and I realized that I had already forgotten what she had told me when she first fell to the earth, all except for a single sentence, a single prayer, *you know what to do, you know what to do.*

A BIRD

At 12:01, the children's hospital wakes to a siren, blaring because there has been a breach of security, because there is a long, bright bird stalking the halls.

Marie Parker's body tenses instantaneously, jolted from a half-sleep at the side of her four-year-old son's bed, becoming, once more, consciously aware of his labored breathing, the blipping of many machines, the harsh light outside their sterile little room. She doesn't know it's 12:01. Things like that have been fading from her mind lately—anything trivial. Anything but the state of her little miracle's lungs. She rises jerkily from her plastic chair, scoping around for the source of the monotone wail that reverberates through the floor, shakes the whiteboard on the wall, makes the incorrect discharge date scrawled over it illegible. It's too noisy. It's too hectic. Marie can't think.

-. - - - . - . - . - -

Outside her room, nurses and doctors are rushing about, disregarding protocol, maybe forgetting what the protocol even is. Is there protocol?

Dr. James Selkie, who constantly receives seal-themed gifts from people who think they're being original, should know if there are measures that should be being put in place. But not even he does. He's looking through a dusty manual, right now, flipping the pages with as much urgency as his sore fingers allow. It's arthritis, and he needs to see someone about it soon.

The siren becomes background noise, a ceaseless scream that won't stop until someone finds the off switch, until someone barricades the entrances that need to be blocked, until someone catches it.

Rumors are already spreading like wildfire over the hospital's many floors. The bird sounds like a foghorn and moves like a headache. The bird is incredibly fast. The bird is on the fifth floor. No—it's on the eighth floor. It's giant, and fills up a whole hallway. It's tiny, and has made its way into the vents.

It's someone's pet!

That's nobody's pet.

In the room across from Marie Parker, a nine-year-old named Samantha sleeps peacefully, alone. Her multitude of IVs and monitors have ceased to bother her by now, just another presence in this ever-moving tapestry of colors and sounds and needles and gloves. At first she was scared. Now she's just tired.

On the seventh floor, a traffic jam forms, dozens of staff trying to go dozens of ways, all trying to fit past an empty gurney that's been wedged between two inconveniently-spaced walls. Dr. Hail and Dr. Hazel, two pediatric surgeons, have broken free of the clog of people, and happen to be running in the same direction, talking breathlessly as they go.

"I saw it," wheezes Hail.

"Really?" says Hazel, batting a lock of loose hair out of her eyes.

"Yeah," says Hail. "Fourth floor. Smelled like chemicals, looked—blurry. Couldn't breathe."

"This is insane," Hazel chokes out. "How has nobody..."

Hail has darted into a nearby stairwell, leaving the door to swing shut behind her. Hazel keeps running.

.. . . .

Dr. Selkie lets the manual slam down on the desk, still open. He scrabbles for a key that he knows is here somewhere, and, upon finding it, begins to travel as fast as his 70-year-old legs can take him down to the basement. Please let it not be there. Please let it not catch him.

More rumors about the bird have been spreading, each more crazed and panic-stricken in delivery than the last. The bird is running wild. Someone's got it corralled in a storage closet. No, you idiot! It's in the kitchens, it's roaming free. Its legs are long and fluid. Its beak is shiny, and as dark as a land that has never seen day. Its feathers are the color of drying ground, sinking sun, Bohemian Rhapsody playing from someone's car. It's on this floor.

No, it's not. It's in the vents.

It's loose! It's free!

.. . . .

It's on the third floor. Marie Parker knew it was on the third floor the second the sound around them seemed to muffle, the moment all she could hear was the sudden darkness, the faint click of talons on linoleum. The whoosh of quick feathers through air.

And suddenly, the noise stops altogether, plunging her into a quiet she'll never be able to forget for the rest of her life, but that she'll want to desperately. It has paused outside their door. Marie is intensely grateful that the blinds over the little window are shut.

A most curious sound creeps against her eardrums—a methodic ticking, muffled voices forming sentences that she can hear perfectly but can't decipher

at all. A heavy cold sinks through her veins; the kind of chill that must be something fresh entering her body, something chemical. She can't see. She can't feel.

But soon—very soon, after hardly five seconds, she can hear again—click, whoosh, and the sensation passes. With confusingly desperate relief, she deflates, folding both her hands around her little Jay's, startled to see that he's crying, wide-eyed. Marie pulls him into a shaky embrace, but this moment is shared by no one but them. There's a security camera in their room, but nobody's watching. Nobody's on this floor except for them and Samantha, still asleep, still dreaming of dragons that bleed into doctors that bleed into fluorescent lights that bleed into moons, suns, stars.

Maybe her dreams shift when the bird enters her room. Maybe a strange song echoes around her bed and the equipment that surrounds it. Maybe something spectacular happens the moment the bird flies away.

Maybe it takes her up in its opalescent claws. Maybe it eats her.

- - - - -

In any case, her heart monitor's beep- beep- beep fades to a single, high drone. In any case, the siren stops, leaving the rest of the building in jarring silence.

In any case, Dr. Selkie begins to sob with thanks, singing the universe's praises in his mind as he sinks down the morgue door, which he only just locked.

Because this exact thing has happened more times than he can count over the thirty-seven years he's worked at this hospital, and somehow nobody has ever remembered it but him. He feels like he's cheating at a game that he doesn't even know how to play, and what scares him most is that he thinks he's winning.

What scares him still more is that he doesn't know if it's a thought, or a knowledge.

- - -

Dr. Marina Hazel and Dr. Miranda Hail come to at the same moment, two floors apart, nothing in their minds but half-observed images of each other's faces, vague remembrance that maybe the person they're picturing is similar to them in name. Dr. Hazel catches her breath, and realizes that she's nowhere near the place she's supposed to be. Dr. Hail finds that she was meaning to go here anyway. She shrugs to nobody but herself, and starts to walk.

Up on the third floor, someone is dialing Samantha's father's number into the phone, preparing to give the news that no one ever wants to. That Samantha has died.

Three people work together to dislodge the gurney on the seventh floor from its unfortunate situation. A nurse finds a half-open manual lying on the ground. It appears to have fallen there. He sighs, and picks it up, returning it to where it's supposed to be.

Once again, the children's hospital settles into its noisy, bustling rhythm. Once again, Marie Parker and her son fall asleep, with no idea why they woke up in the first place. Once again, everything is returned to normal, and nobody looks at the sky.

It is 12:15 A.M.

..- .-.. -.-



MARION COOK '26
JOSHUA AND THE BEAR

Joshua stood in the doorway, unable to cross the threshold and enter the kitchen. He loved cooking, but felt that he suffered from unexplainable bad luck, manifested in the form of Malakai the bear, who personified all his doubts and fears.

With a sinking feeling, he realized that he would have to give up his life's dream.

The plate he was holding shattered, a cacophony of noise and flavors, each with its own unique color and scent, smeared across the hardwood.

Orange fish eggs became reverse shadows on the carpet, rice plastered onto the walls, and the vintage sake soaked through the floorboards. At his feet, Joshua observed a spoon, bent and battered, and understood his joy had been stripped away. He would no longer be known as the great sushi chef. He would just be Joshua, whose bad luck had once again caught up to him.

Joshua left the hall, opened the door, and sat on the concrete stoop, his head in his hands. His hair was ruffled from his chef's hat. He sobbed because he thought that he would never don his treasured crown again. Joshua's thoughts turned angry. How could he explain that his problem was not his fault? But weren't the signs obvious! The storage bags ripped by what must have been vicious claws. The vegetables shredded by razor-like teeth. The shadow that fell across the tile floor, lumbering and heavy, sending shivers down Joshua's spine.

"Nobody else suffers from a bear," Joshua sighed into the cool night. "I wish Malakai would just disappear!" he yelled. Although he didn't expect a response, to his surprise, one came.

"I can help you get rid of the bear," said a vaporous presence emerging from the dark. Her skin, black as night, rippled with the points of a thousand stars. Her long white hair ran down her back like sea water, her robes comprised of silken shadows.

"For the right price," she said smoothly, placing her hands on her heart and pulling them forward, sliding a pair of golden scissors out of the black magic night.

Joshua had heard of fairies, sylfids, naiads, and other gossamer beings but had never been so close to one. He was enchanted and recognized her! She was Nemesis, a regular, who often dined at his restaurant.

“I will do anything to rid myself of this loathsome bear,” he growled, shaking his fists.

Nemesis remained still, her eyes emanating a strange fire.

“Then you must forfeit your soul,” she hissed, vanishing into the night.

Moments later Joshua blinked and Nemesis reappeared, a large beating heart in her hands. Confused, Joshua fell to his knees in front of her shoes fashioned from snake eyes she had turned into rubies. The witch stood silent, drops of crimson ran down her arms, and spotted the ground.

Squeezing her hands together, she forced the heart to become smaller and smaller until it was the size of a tiny pea. Then, she placed what remained in her mouth, swallowed it, and disappeared.

“I must be the luckiest man in the world,” Joshua marveled, for he had the good fortune to rid himself of his bad fortune. With renewed hope, Joshua returned to the kitchen.

He spent a fortnight cooking: chopping, prepping, steaming. Moving gleefully about concocting his glorious dishes. He thought his good streak of luck would never run out. He could taste greatness in each meticulously prepared plate.

Joshua was elated at the prospect of being a chef again, turning to one of his friends, he began to explain how Malakai was gone, and how he, Joshua, was transformed, forever changed. But to his dismay, his friend didn't believe him.

“What bear?” asked Chef Posey, “I never saw a bear.”

Joshua started to explain, then stopped. He walked over to a fifty-pound bag of potatoes, which a claw had obviously ripped open.

“Don't you remember that Doctor Brown asked for potatoes?” Joshua reminded Posey, referring to a loyal but picky customer.

“No,” she replied, turning back to her frying pan.

Joshua looked around the kitchen and thought about Malakai with a deep sense of confusion tinged with regret. He felt he had done something terrible. He had been scared of Malakai, a bear, a big one, with rows of sharp teeth and massive claws, but maybe he had been a big, scary, bear who had just been trying to help. Or, maybe he was just a creature of Joshua's imagination like the

witch that his mind summoned to destroy his greatest fear. Without Malakai, Joshua lacked passion, there was no one driving him to constantly be better, which brought with it feelings of anxiety. Joshua knew that to really be a great chef, he had to take back control of his thoughts, and with that, his fear of Malakai.



ROULIE'S HOMECOMING

The trembling ocean swelled and flickered, glistening so abstract and otherworldly that Roulie felt the sea and sky had switched positions, and she tossed aloft from the world she knew. She never fully grasped fire or water, never internalized that elements so visually captivating were capable of being understood. She considered such things to be a portal into something more beautiful, magical, musical, mysterious.

What eluded her was the nature of beauty. Roulie thought of other things she knew that she didn't understand: David's phantasmic face drifting away; the illusory words of Louise in late November; Chinese cooking; bubbly cleaning products spiraling down the drain.

Roulie imagined the beauty of summer daybreak, this was the type of beauty she could believe in. And the sweaty heat and primal madness of working men like Tex driving down blistering lanes; children sucking on the hearts of oranges; the wildness of rush hour; the frenzy of July mid-day; the pull of August traffic.

Most of all it was the buzz, she concluded. The rockers and their chicks. Beauty was rock and roll—all the world distilled to deep longing, drums, and guitars. And the drive that takes you there, untouched and unburdened by winter's cold.



Roulie blew bubbles as she resurfaced. The cove's water, inky at this hour, a cool serpentine black separating its deep blue head from the rest of her body. Pausing to listen to sounds in the distance, Roulie heard a faint hum emanating from the hillside. It was the song of swaying pines above the Atlantic, the trill of insects, the swell of summer wind: nature unweaving her twine, only to redo her careful stitching the next morning when the sun reflected the water clear and the trees painted with dew. There was also birdsong to be heard.

Roulie plunged back underwater.



Louise cried like a churchgoer experiencing the presence of God, as if she found salvation. Standing in front of her bedroom mirror, face scrunched but uplifted, eyes pointing skyward, she saw only the light. Catching salty tears on

her tongue, she tried to stop them from running down her cheeks onto the silky fabric of her new red dress.

Louise recognized the idiocy of crying over a dress, but her tears were not those of self-pity, rather of growing self-awareness. She was cognizant that she should not be crying over the insignificance of a mere article of clothing. In truth, it made her feel pathetic. Her reflection demanded something of her that she was not able to give: time, energy, confidence, Louise wasn't sure. But she knew that it called out for answers, as she witnessed her shoulders straightening, as she regained composure, with her fists clenched at her sides.

Suddenly, Louise was filled with a ferocious disgust for the blotchy face that blankly stared at her. She was overtaken with an immense and indescribable loathing as if a switch had been flipped, or a button pushed making everything else vanish. Her eyes bore into the reflected ones in the glass. Louise's gaze now turned to her dress, rather than its wearer, and she despised what it represented: two decades of life in her mother's house and the unstoppable ticking of lost time. In an instant, Louise felt all of the love she had for her mother, one that was deep in her bones, in her body, in her blood, but she also felt a profound revulsion for the red dress and the girl in the mirror who was wearing it.

Louise was consumed by the sweaty discomfort of legs rubbing against heavy material, her unkempt hair, and asymmetrical face. She felt ugly and monster-like, yet could not turn away from her image. Still, Louise yearned to be her reflection, so that when she walked away, she would be the one who disappeared, never having to step softly down the stairs herself.

Louise angled her eyes upwards again feeling as if she were a match that had just been snuffed, her anger drifting like smoke. She needed to float away like a dissipating dark cloud. But soon, her attention was drawn to the dried laurels hanging from an overhead lamp, making circular shadows on the ceiling of the dimly-lit room.

Louise was drawn to shadows, the ones on the ceiling, in the mirror, on her dress, and on the hardwood floor. She thought about the light that moved between this world and the one of the girl in the mirror, about all the light she would never comprehend: shadows cast, edges and borders. She also thought about the radiant arch glowing behind the mirrored girl's head, refractions, and crooked beams. Who do you want me to be? The red dress insisted.

The light lingered in her bloodshot eyes. Louise wished that the broken ice pattern of shadow and light lingering on the russet orange wood was a map: one of broken and jagged relations that she could retrace and determine which wrong turn she took, which rabbit hole she fell into.

She also thought about her family, and as she did, she imagined aging in reverse; going from an old, withered woman to a helpless, sniveling toddler—dressed in rosy pink.

Louise's mother, Jemsie, a former debutante, was a practical woman; tough, well-put together. She had pale skin that she massaged, caressed, and dotted with lemon-scented ointment, determined to prevent wrinkles from forming. This was skin that Louise was held against when she was a baby, but hadn't been held close to in years. Louise believed that her mother's ointment smelled like love and she also couldn't help but think of Jemsie as just skin: stretched, white, made up of living and dead cells, unknowable. What was it about her mother that made her into the person she was, and how was she different from shadow and light?

Jemsie was manipulative, unkind, but her sophisticated manner masked her shortcomings. Yet, the character flaw that Jemsie could not obscure, no matter how she fixed her hair, laced up her dress, or hosted guests with ease, was her strong iron will and need to constantly be right. It hurt people and she knew it, but was undeterred. For her, even the lemon-scented ointment served a purpose: to tenderize the skin of somebody who could never really be soft.

Jemsie wielded her contrived voice of reason like a blunt weapon, casually destroying the wishes and dreams of her three children: David, Louise, and Wilfred. Each was harmed in a different way. When David was in his twenties, he dreamt of attending art school. All he wanted to do was paint. But Jemsie envisioned a "brighter future" for him, and although she never exactly forced him to abandon his dream, she did all in her power to steer David away from downtown sun-lit studios, emerging art galleries, and the smell of turpentine and paint. She convinced him there was but a single road ahead: medical school. David went willingly, which is perhaps why, in part, he died heartbroken at such an early age. He never fought Jemsie, never fought for himself, he simply wilted, like a flower in too hot a sun.

When David died everything changed. Louise was forced to wonder if Jemsie had children for the sake of practicality alone: if she had thought it necessary to create a legacy rather than develop a human soul. In Jemsie's mind,

her children would care for her when she was old, continuing to follow her principles after she was gone.

Louise wondered if Jemsie saw her as a real person rather than a mere vessel to pour her thoughts into. Louise believed that Jemsie had destroyed David, hadn't seen him for who he was and what he wanted to become. Louise couldn't help but feel that if Jemsie had really loved him she would have known that she was destroying him, which forced her to reconsider her feelings towards her mother.

Parents should not have to bury their children. Neither should siblings. Louise felt it hard to comprehend living without her brother. The pain was too unbearable, but Jemsie had trained her how to be tough: how to survive. And unlike David, she wasn't a gentle spirit, she would do all that it took for her to endure.



Standing at the podium of her brother's funeral, her defiant red dress illuminated by skylight, Louise read from a poem she wrote for the occasion. As she began her voice trembled, then regained strength and lifted:

*O Apple orchard, o gnarled limbs of trees
That our tanned feet would swing from, our faces obscured by
shadow, by
leaf
This was where David played,
This was where David sang
This was where the voice of a little boy transformed into that of a
man
This is where David lies
But I do not picture him under mossy ground
I see him cradled in apple blossoms
Growing on trees
Where his limbs will never bend and he will always remain taller
than me
italicized in dappled yellow light*



Roulie exited Marley's Tavern, angry and dazed, before jumping into the passenger seat of Tex's Ford pickup, slamming the door forcefully before the lock slid into place. She squeezed her eyes shut and lightly banged her forehead against the cool window pane, a second later relief flooded her body. She waited for Tex to take it all in before he turned on the ignition and pulled out into the fog.

The mud-covered truck rattled down a bumpy two-lane highway. There was a long silence before Tex opened up, "was he there?" His low honeyed voice blended into the hum of the engine and the songs of cicadas before getting entirely swallowed by a howling wind. Roulie took a second before coughing up the truth.

She studied her best friend's face, the silhouette of deeply set black eyes and a sharp nose above a wide playful mouth. His long dark hair fell down his back and over scarred brown arms. Tex was reliably strong but gentle, producing a beauty few possessed, but many recognized. Tonight, he was less relaxed than usual. Normally when he drove his left arm hung freely out of the window, banging against the side of his door in rhythm with hip-hop pumping out of his stereo. But now, both hands gripped the wheel tightly, knuckles practically white. Suddenly Roulie remembered that after the accident he hated driving at night.

"Yeah," Roulie whispered, "he was there all right." She closed her eyes and let the cool breeze rush at her as Tex took in air through his teeth, occasionally cupping his face with one hand. Roulie wished they could drive like this forever, far away from everybody and everything.

She stared at him, soaking him up, considering what it would be like to sit in the passenger seat with him until either the truck, or she, or Tex died.

"I have a sister." Roulie blurted and then started to laugh as Tex's jaw dropped. "Ye didn't know that didya? Her name is Louise."



Tex continued to drive long after Roulie nodded off, and only pulled over to the side of the road when his heavy head began to slowly slide towards his hands. When the sun's rays rising over the desert woke them, they drove on, across South Dakota's Badlands. The fear that had gripped Tex in the dark dissipated in daylight, the hours passed easily because he was happy.

Roulie never fully got Tex. Once, he had told her that every choice had only one right option. The key was having the confidence to trust your

instincts. Over the years, Roulie noticed that Tex's choices were selfless, aiding others but stretching Tex thin. As the two sped under the clearest blue sky Roulie had ever seen, she wondered if she were a bad person.

Three and a half hours after crossing the South Dakota border Roulie and Tex lay flat on their stomachs in a green field of corn growing in Sauk County, Wisconsin. Roulie felt the red soil beneath her. It was dry and dusty and came off of her fleece and dark jeans when she brushed it. Listening to Tex's breathing she watched the tall green stalks swaying above reaching towards the sky. Wisconsin smelled different from South Dakota, fresh and clean—like the whole state was put into a massive washing machine every night. Everything about it felt dissimilar. And Dakota hadn't even felt like Dakota since Tex stopped leaving his house at night, when Joe hanged himself.

Roulie promised herself that when she was old she would return to this field and lie exactly where she was now, then she would stand up and go to the field agent and buy the land. She also promised herself that after she had lived all that she was able to, she would come back and dance along this red earth, close her eyes and pretend she was at total peace. She hoped Tex felt that way too.

Roulie made herself a lot of promises that day. She pledged that after she met her sister she would get a real job. She would work hard and pay Tex back for all his kindness. She believed when the time was right a mutt dog would show up at her door which would be the sign that it was time to return to Wisconsin. She was reminded how particularly fragile life was.

The sun beat down on the red pickup as Tex drove through Wisconsin and Illinois. The heat, oppressive, Roulie sat on old maps to stop her legs from sticking to the black leather seat. Tex drove shirtless and wore cracked brown sunglasses which made awkward tan lines around his eyes. As goshawks soared above them Roulie thought about her family, only to avoid fixating on how uncomfortable she was. She considered her sister and brothers whom she had never met, should she meet them? Could she? Jemsie wouldn't want to see her, wouldn't let her in. Roulie barely remembered Jemsie, she only recalled tough hands and mean words, the bitter feeling of not being wanted, the weighing guilt pressing down on her. Jemsie despised Roulie, and as time passed the feeling became mutual. Roulie felt a profound sadness and guilt that she didn't want to be a part of her.

Tex stole her attention as he bopped up and down in the passenger seat eating a tomato and cheese sandwich and using up all their napkins. Roulie thought about his father, Joe, and the town that loved him like a poor farmer loves an underground oil reservoir. Roulie thought that the only people who had really loved her were Tex and David. The memory of David cut through Roulie, like a lighthouse beam through fog. She missed him. His baby feet and hands, his scent, the way he crawled out to the screen porch to sit in the sun hanging on to his stuffed blue elephant. Losing David was the hardest thing Roulie had ever experienced. But, she felt content that he grew up somewhere even though he grew up without her. After all this time, Roulie was driving to Rhode Island to see David, to make sure he was still OK. God, Roulie thought, he was probably close to thirty now.

After passing through Ohio, Pennsylvania, New York, and Connecticut, Roulie and Tex stood in a Rhode Island gas station parking lot. Popping gum in their mouths, feeling uneasy to be in Jemsie's home state. After three days of driving, Roulie felt a difference within herself. She was no longer the same girl as the one who slept in the passenger seat of a truck in the middle of the Badlands. Cobalt sky or not, she didn't feel like that same person anymore. And in truth, she wasn't.

Roulie met Tex's eyes and she understood that he felt different too. As he filled the gas tank illuminated by neon-yellow light and ate a cheap powdery donut, Tex was no longer that wild South Dakota kid who named his dog Sunny after the Nez Perce cowboy, Jackson Sundown. He was discovering a new version of himself.

Tex had never been to the northeast, much less Little Compton, Rhode Island. On the other hand, Roulie was experiencing something, although bittersweet, of a homecoming.



Louise steered Bertha, an old Volvo PV444, out of the driveway for her inaugural drive. She had finally saved enough cash to buy the clunker from Phil Davenport. Jemsie hated it, which made Louise love Bertha even more. As she flipped on her shades, turned on the static-squallied radio, and came around the corner, a red pickup nearly clipped her. Louise jerked the steering wheel, tires hitting the curb, she cursed as Tex drove away.

Louise was elated. She felt a warm breeze signaling the beginning of a New England summer and experienced a part of herself that she didn't feel in other seasons. It was summer wildness, filled with promise and opportunity.

Driving Bertha, Louise was free from obsessing about her future. She knew she would turn eighteen soon, knew she would finally cross the legal threshold that eighteen meant, but at that moment Louise was happy to let seventeen linger. She was young, comfortable in her cutoffs and silk shirt, and happy, with two concert tickets for her and Annabel safe in her back pocket.

But the thought of David's death still consumed her. Her grief, a turbulent ocean far from land, somewhere between sea and sky, inescapable. It was confusing. She was happy that she was going to leave Jemsie's house, happy that Wilfred was going to Denmark, happy that she could envision a good life. But at the same time, her grief remained, overtaking her. She hated herself for what happened to David, as she tried to forget the person she was under Jemsie's roof. Louise considered just driving away, but soon turned the car around and drove slowly back home.

She felt her heart skip a beat when she saw the same red pickup parked in her driveway. Her confusion turned to fear when she heard screaming. A young woman burst out the front door. She had pretty brown hair that fell over her shoulders, the five o'clock sun made it look gold. She wore a blue T-shirt over denim cutoffs which got caught on the wrought iron railing, making her stumble down the stairs. A moment later a man ran out the doorway. Louise locked on his face: smooth features, eyes gazing downward like the neck of a swan. Dappled in sunlight, his face was almost feminine, and he moved like a dancer, scooping up the crying woman, who was shaking, her elbows pressing into the concrete.

Louise froze as the woman looked up at her. She had big green eyes set far apart, thick dark eyebrows, an aquiline nose, and thin pink lips. Freckles, not unlike Louise's, were scattered across her face.

Before Louise could move, Jemsie also burst out of the door. She was spitting-mad, yelling, cursing in a way that made Louise's blood run cold. It reminded her of when she was eight and had accidentally ripped her mother's aquamarine satin ball gown, right down to the white chiffon.

"Get out, get out of here you bitch!" The light did not fall on Jemsie as she perpetrated her rage of hate. Louise could barely see her face. The shadow of the house, the great blue and white house, obscured Jemsie, hiding her shaking

hands, her spiteful words, her salmon cocktail dress. Hidden were also the whites of her eyes, her graying hair, her deepening wrinkles. Louise wondered who her mother was when she was her age, and how she had become the way she was now.

It was as if all this was occurring in a painting or a TV show. Louise couldn't fully understand what she was looking at. As if in a trance, she calmly put Bertha into reverse, ignoring the young woman who suddenly seemed to know her name, ignoring the man who was standing on the last step, arms outstretched like the wings of a bird. Most of all Louise ignored her mother and drove down the driveway.



Roulie learned that David was dead. She didn't know why, but he was gone and she cried uncontrollably for the baby boy she had known long ago, and for the man she never met. Roulie anticipated Jemsie's welcome: angry, vitriolic, threatened by Roulie's presence.

A part of Roulie despised returning home, seeing the house, its walls and rooms and foyer. All that was left was the widening gap in her memory with haunting echoes she wished she could forget. Roulie tried to understand how this house, how Jemsie, how all these things that were gone from her life, repressed for so long, could return after all this time, and how David couldn't! Where was he now? She couldn't conceive of him not being here. She wondered where his stuffed elephant had ended up, who he had been at school, what he had majored in in college. Time blurred.

"Roulie," Tex called out, "It's good that you loved him." Roulie wondered what he meant by that. It made her think that she didn't understand Tex at all, maybe that was why they had remained friends for such a long time. Her thoughts returned to David. Roulie felt that her love was worthless. How could it be a good thing when for David it wasn't a thing at all. Was it love that hurt so much, or the lack of it? Tex said love was always good, that it made no difference, and there was no way that she could have saved David even though now it hurt terribly. Even so, Roulie couldn't help but ask herself, "What in the world was love good for?"

"How could you have loved Joe?" Roulie blurted, not realizing how cruel she was for asking Tex that haunting question about his father. Tex got stoney, cold, anger spread through his chest. Was Roulie really that clueless? Tex began

talking to Roulie about everything she had suspected but had never known, at first softly, but then with some volume.

He spoke about the red dust that clung to Joe's blue jeans, his droopy eyes, the discarded Coronas lying all about, the stale smell of his rotting soul. The march of time, always moving but at times never fast enough. Tex told Roulie about Sunny, Joe's black and white furry mutt with one blue eye who Joe regularly kicked out the door, but who would always return late at night and plunk down beside Joe's muddy work boots. Tex also told Roulie about his father's music, his guitar and sandpaper voice filling Tex's robin egg blue room, and about the duck eggs Joe would cook for him: fried, scrambled, and sunny-side up. He also went on about the dollars Joe would spend on matchbox cars, about the hours wasted watching the Simpsons, about Joe rubbing castor oil under Tex's cast to stop the itching when he broke his wrist.

Tex reassured Roulie that her love was good because she had loved David who so needed her love. It was just that simple. She had loved him, and that was a lot.

But to continue to love David as if he were still there was now her choice. Tex said that love could fade but didn't have to. Tex loved Joe because he was his father, and because Joe was the only person who knew Tex's dog, his Spiderman pajamas, his purple plastic fork, his first red football, and his baby face. Tex said that he wished he could talk to Joe, and that the only other person who he wanted to speak with about Joe's life was Joe's father, Wapasha, an old Nez Perce chief. Tex said that he loved both, and sorely missed them.

Roulie cried as she and Tex followed Louise's car. "I love you Tex." Roulie whispered, "just wanted to make sure you knew."



Louise called her friend Annabel and told her that she couldn't pick her up, and would need to find a different ride home from the concert. Screw eighteen! Come hell or high water, Louise was leaving tonight! She just needed to get away, even though she felt the cold steely tug of Jemsie, an anchor, holding her from breaking free. Was it the tether that all daughters felt? Did Jemsie really need her? No matter what, Louise was resigned to bolt. And she was good with it.

She parked Birtha in one of the fields that became the concert's makeshift parking lot. Getting out of the old Volvo, she pushed her wire-rimmed sunglasses to the top of her head and out of the corner of her eye, spied the red

Ford pickup parked two rows behind. Louise started moving through rows of cars until she came to a large crowd, bumping into twenty-year-olds in cutoffs and T-shirts; thirty-year-olds balancing drinks; fifty-year-olds nostalgically returning to relive their youth. She passed the mainstage, the ocean rolling in behind it.

"Hey, wait," a woman called out from behind. But Louise kept going, scooting around amplifiers, messy wiring, and a series of microphones, propelling herself further away from the voice.

"Louise," Yelled the woman's friend, a man, "why are you running?"

Louise turned on her heels. "It's about David," he said.

"What is it?" she said softly to the couple.

The woman's face was delicate, with bird-like features: a long thin nose, sculpted cheeks, a small chin, and big green eyes. She felt as if she knew her. She could see David in her face. It was strangely familiar and worrisome.

Louise tried to say something but couldn't come up with a single word. Instinctively, she knew! Arms hugged her like they were Davids, but they were not, they were thinner, warm, smelling like jasmine. Reflexively, Louise buried her face into brown curls and held Roulie close as she heard a guitar chord ripple in the hazy late afternoon.



ADRIEN "MOUTON" GODWOOD

“Does the sinner not eat at the table?” proclaimed the Reverend, his fist hitting the podium so that the eldest of the congregation jolted open resting eyes, and the youngest shut them tightly.

“This man welcomes sinners and eats with them!” The booming voice belonged on a tall tale ship; only the sea could tolerate it, blow it out, keep it far enough away. Spit clung wildly to his curly black beard; eyes forced open, rotating, like a terrified goat on a chopping block.

Somewhere past this, thought Mouton, there must *be* wilder people.

But where he did not know. Ivan continued to bellow, howling until the chickens pecking outside the white clapboard church scuttled away, and even Seven, protected by all her lucky charms and shooting star wishes, closed fitful eyes. Mouton leaned his arm closer to his sisters, never once looking away from the monstrous man who had finally gotten to the part about the *sheep* in his sermon, now aroused to a point that lay somewhere between anger and heart failure. He shook with a mighty reckoning.

When Mouton had been Seven's age, nine and skinny, the thought of Ivan's demise had been like food to him, a source of nourishment. When the poisonous and prayed-for lightning strike left a madder man behind, all had truly gone to hell. Mouton thought of that now, that day with the snow and the smell of burning bone when he could almost see the angelic blue glow ascend back into Ivan, pumping his heart with some unknown electrical current.

The sheep in Godwood shall be slain not on an altar of impunity, but rather of purgation!

Adrien felt a sting in the corners of his eyes, he sniffled through his nose, congested from a cold, and squeezed Seven's arm tighter.

Ivan belongs in a tomb, thought Adrian, a fly buzzed above the carnation of the old women's hats. I want more than to just bury him, he mused, I need to lock him away. Adrien imagined hurling a key so that it landed somewhere beyond the Mason-Dixon line.

*There is a wrath here
A shortness of breathing free
A closeness, Dogwood
Thought Seven.*

With her eyes closed she could see the lines connecting the world like a railroad map; greens, purples, blues. She counted the prayers until her brother's arm slid away until heaven opened its gates covered with wisteria where she hoped to find sanctity.

*Godwood, strays holy
Lifts unencumbered hands until grace
Slips this us this drug we call Salvation*

Let's light a shuck, she thought, time to go! Seven thought feverishly, the panic rising, but she continued to count up the syllables of her words so that her whispered pattern rose with the spiraling contrail of smoke. She saw the Godwoods as she saw the old oak that had been splintered by the second lightning strike; splitting down the middle, consumed, burning up from the inside out.

She knew her brother saw the Godwoods represented by the first line of lighting that was drawn; still standing, mercilessly swearing, stronger than nature. Seven wished Adrien saw the truth; Ivan wasn't miraculously alive, he was dead. His heart stopped by a thousand volts of electricity, his soul rising to heaven, leaving his body running on the injection of energy shot into it, filling it, carrying it forward.

He has no pulse, she had said once. Adrian had done nothing, just shouldered his rifle and went out to the meadow, heart pounding, in order to pretend he was king. Then, with a newfound courage that he gained from ruling his ant hill domain, he slept in the barn with the sheep, which was how he got his middle name.

GABRIEL'S MOTHER

Camila didn't know what to do with the crib, so she left it by the side of the road. A staggering mistake. Her drunken sister, Maisie, crawled into the tiny wooden bed, and only later did Benji, the skinny bespectacled can collector, discover her in the morning, a shattered bottle of Chateau Margaux drowning dandelions sticking up through sidewalk cracks, shards of dried crimson covering her palms.

It fell upon Camila to bring Maisie home, wash her cuts clean, and bandage her sister's wounded hand that lay atop the worn blanket that fell over the bed's edge limp. She kissed the knuckles before tucking them back underneath her nephew's quilt below blue and white trains and conductors. Then Camila remembered—Gabriel was gone.

That morning after Maisie pressed her heart against the wooden ribs of her son's old bed that reminded her of the Book of Genesis, whispers had already started. Gossip gathered behind closed doors and traveled from the mouth of one old pensioner to another. *Crazy woman, what a putz, and you saw the way she—without anything covering her—well you know that family!*

Maisie was missing *her* rib. Blood of her blood; flesh of her flesh. Her ticklish and enigmatic, catastrophic and dark haired son. *The body undergoes traumatic collapse towards the state of black hole* she had read once, when she thought about attending college, her leather bag full of papers, her face pinked and pointed, her eyes shining between scarf and hood, looking at a northern latitude she believed she would never leave. Her breath emerged from between cold lips, she could taste snow, could memorize chapters of *Gray's Anatomy*. She discovered words like *raison d'être* when reading the foreword of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Woman Destroyed*. She thought she understood now what the French had in mind concerning the meaning of existence. Everything Maisie had been was erased by *her* grief. All she yearned for, and would never have now, was the sweet smell of her baby.

Camila leaned against her kitchen counter, seeking to find the hard edge of marble that dug above her hip, the dull pain, focusing her as she surveyed the displaced coffee filters and dirty glasses that spilled across the stone counter and into the sink. Mugs, jam jars, and beer bottles cascading upon themselves with barely a plate in between, gave off the appearance of the underside of a bar.

Young Benji stood uncomfortably in the center of the room, his curls twisting towards the ceiling. He drank the coffee Camila handed him in awkward gulps. Then he told her that he had first thought that Maisie's hand, covered in blue glass, had been a gecko trying to bite her. Camila wondered if dumb people consciously choose to be dumb, and told him to close the door when he left.

Camila looked back into the bedroom at Maisie's cat-like form, so still that she appeared as a sculpture; one of the little bronze naked women from Israel that their mother had kept on her dresser, the girls could look at but not play with. With a lurching feeling, similar to the seasickness she had felt rocking back and forth on Saguaro Lake, Camila realized she had silenced her breathing in order to hear Maisie's. To confirm that, however shallow and drunk the breaths were, they continued. She inched closer until she saw the slight rise of Maisie's chest, but could not ever hear the breath over the rattle of the ceiling fan.

Camila thought how Maisie was different from her. How, in childhood as Saguaro glistened, Maisie had flipped her plastic boat, pulled Camila underwater, made her open her eyes to see the bubbles of light and air rising. She thought how much more water Maisie had seen: an entire ocean, the vast Atlantic. She saw water that moved, Camila thought that people fared better living near running water, a constant and holy reminder of change. She remembered the lists Maisie used to keep, scratched words that belonged to places other than Arizona: *eddy—a small whirlpool*. Camila stood in the doorway, her silent and somnambulant sister sprawled ivory skin and cactus-wren hair against plaid pillows, her eyes closed pressed into Gabriel's blankets. Camila looked upon the tiny galaxy, a stagnant pool, what the *whirlpool* had left behind.

Camila backtracked into the kitchen like a dog returning without a bone. She surveyed the mess, and slowly, began to move around the small space, her hands filling and emptying trash cans and Tupperware containers, ash trays and tea cups. She found markers of Maisie everywhere—both good and bad. A pack of American Spirit Cigarettes was taped to the top of the broken microwave where little fingers would never think to look, the packaging boasted that they were natural. *Who says people can't change*, Camila thought, and then felt her eyes sting, maybe Maisie's collapse had been a long time coming. She found a secret stack of magazines, *New Yorkers*, *Vanity Fairs*, hunting journals, and literary mags folded neatly on top of the empty fridge, the margins scribbled in

purple Sharpie, flowers of words blooming in Maisie's hand. Some pages had woman-shaped cut-outs, which was later explained by the box of pressed paper dolls, models and politicians, with assorted paper clothes to dress them in.

Camila had to sit on the floor after she looked at the box of little Kennedys and Britanys, once treasured, now abandoned. She leaned down and looked under the table to peer at the crayon scribbles of cacti and canyons that decorated the wooden underside, marks that belonged now only to her. She sat for a long time, until the world grew dim and she only thought about Michigan.

She envisioned spiked towers, and warping silver orbs. She thought of DB with Gabriel on his shoulders, those little boy hands and gummy mouth. *Would DB remember to put two pairs of socks onto his son? To pull a hat over his ears; would he remember that red was his favorite color?*

As she looked at the drawn clay canyon above her, she didn't know where her own pain began and ended. She remembered the red geraniums Maisie grew when she wore the same 1950s-style poodle skirt to fifth grade every day. Their loping flowers reaching higher and higher.

Did Camila miss Gabriel, or her sister? Did she covet lost love, or missing attention, pink friendship bracelets, little boy boots with red cartoon cars, Maisie's gardening gloves tracked with the dirt from pulled out weeds run over by plastic Tonka wheels.

Camila thought of Christmas in Detroit and New Year's Eve in Arizona; the blazing bonfire DB used to light in the cherry field. She thought about smoke, about ashes pressed and smeared onto her grandfather's forehead when he was a boy. About her grandmother's family walking through smoke and ash, fire and grime in Germany: their burned flesh, the wedding rings that got left behind. Then and now. Maisie's finger, still empty. *What a life*, she thought, picturing her house set on fire, burning everything in it to the ground, but instead she rose and walked to the bedroom, seeing her sister, feeling the emptiness of Gabriel's loss, wondering what tomorrow would bring.

LINA DURFEE '26
A CUP OF LONDON FOG

A veil of rain, soft but insistent, its quiet patter fading as Lucy stepped into the café. The door gave a faint chime behind, too delicate to compete with the relentless drizzle. Damp clung to her coat, the fabric sagging, saturated by too many storms. Raindrops shimmered on the taupe surface before dissolving into the dark wood floor beneath her. She shrugged off the coat with a subtle shiver, droplets scattering into the café's dim, muted light.

The world beyond the windows blurred—London swallowed by mist and shadow, the city had retreated into some forgotten dream. Silhouettes moved in the fog, faceless figures beneath umbrellas, shadows passing through smoke. Inside, the air warmer, but not enough to be comforting.

Nathan sat by the window, his face pale in the half-light. Fingers tracing slow, hypnotic circles around the rim of his untouched cup, he repeated the motion; a nervous ritual. Thin spirals of steam rose between his hands, curling upward—an invisible barrier, separating him from the room. His grip too tight, tethering him to something Lucy couldn't see.

Sliding into the seat across from him, Lucy shivered, the cold biting deeper than she expected. "You're always early," she murmured, the words brittle in her mouth. Nathan didn't react, his gaze fixed on the rain-streaked glass, his face unreadable.

"Same as always," he replied, his voice low, distant. His words lingered in the space between them, stretching the silence. The steam continued its slow rise, twisting, swirling, dividing them further.

Lucy's hands closed around her own cup, the heat biting cold fingers. It hurt, yet she clung to it, needing the sensation—something real, something she could feel. The café felt strange, as if something was out of place, though she couldn't pinpoint what. She glanced at Nathan, searching his expression, but found only shadows there, too.

"Nathan, is everything okay?"

His eyes flicked to the window again, following the paths of raindrops merging into thin streams. "Do you ever feel like something's missing?" His voice, barely above a whisper, forcing her to lean in.

"Like you've forgotten something, but you can't name it?"

Her frown deepened. “Forgotten something important? Like your keys?” she tried, half-heartedly, her attempt at levity dissolving as the tension pressed in.

He shook his head, his fingers tracing faster, the movement more anxious now. “No...not like that.” His gaze lifted, meeting hers. “More like something you’ve lost, something that matters. But it’s gone, and no matter how hard you try, you can’t get it back.” His voice cracked, the weight of his words sinking into the space between them.

A chill crept through her. “What are you talking about?”

Nathan leaned forward, lowering his voice, as though they were sharing something too fragile for the air. “Lucy, you don’t remember, do you?”

Her pulse quickened. There was something in his voice, a quiet urgency, and it made her uneasy. “Remember what?”

Frustration flickered across his face, but behind it was something deeper—something fragile and hurt. “I’ve told you before. Every time, you forget. And then we’re right back here.”

Her breath caught, a tightness forming in her chest. “Nathan, I don’t understand. What am I forgetting?”

He stood abruptly, the scrape of the chair cutting through the low murmur of the café. His hands clenched, knuckles pale. “I can’t keep waiting for you to remember. You don’t even realize how much you’ve lost.”

The words hit her hard. “Nathan—wait. Tell me what I’m missing.”

His eyes locked onto hers, for just a moment, and there was something in them—desperation, maybe. But then he was gone, slipping into the street without another word. The door chimed faintly as it closed, swallowed by the storm outside.

Lucy stared after him, her thoughts tangled, weighed down by a sense of dread she couldn’t explain. The world felt wrong, like the pieces had shifted when she wasn’t looking.

She blinked, her gaze drifting back to the table. Two cups. One untouched, the other bearing the faintest smear of lipstick. Her chest tightened.

She didn’t remember ordering two drinks.

YOU HAD TO BE THERE

The invitation came as casually as the breeze that stirred the leaves around the lunch table. Mabel tossed it out between bites of a BLT, her voice rising just enough above the cafeteria din to catch my ear. “We’re all going to the park later, by the oak tree. You should come.”

I hesitated. Mabel had a way of drawing people in. She already knew your answer before you even formed it. It was not a question, not really, more an expectation. And as much as I did not need her approval, I found myself walking to the park, the sun slipping lower behind the horizon, dragging day into dusk.

As the sky dimmed, the park felt different. The oak tree, with its gnarled limbs stretching in every direction, loomed in the distance. Its veiny roots bulged from the sunken earth, carving pathways beneath the grass. I thought of how roots grow deep underground, holding everything in place while the world above moves on, oblivious. It felt too familiar.

There they were—Mark, Sarah, Leah, Mabel—their laughter cutting through afternoon stillness. They stood in a loose circle beneath the tree, shadows blending into one another, an unbroken line I felt uncertain about crossing.

Mabel saw me first. “There you are!” she called, her voice light and effortless. “We were just talking about you.”

I wanted to believe her, but as I stepped closer, I could feel the distance between us. It was the kind of distance measured in shared experiences, inside jokes, and unspoken words.

“Oh yeah? All good things, I hope.” My smile felt thin, a paper stretched too far over something fragile.

“Of course,” she replied, nudging Leah, who smirked with a knowing glance. They slipped back into their conversation, something about a party last weekend. I had not been there. I never was.

Mark leaned against the oak, spinning stories like he always did—his voice, magnetic. The others, transfixed, laughter bubbling up at all the right moments. I tried to follow along, but it was like listening to a song in a language in which I wasn’t fluent. The melody was there, yet the meaning slipped by.

“Remember when you did that at Steph’s house?” Sarah chimed in, her eyes lighting up as she looked at Leah. The group erupted into laughter, the kind that vibrates in your chest, warm and full.

I smiled, or at least I tried, but it felt hollow. I wanted to be there, but I was a shadow among shadows, part of the scene but not quite in it.

Mabel turned to me suddenly, brow furrowing as if just remembering I was there. “So, what is new with you?”

A spotlight had been thrown on me. “Oh, not much. Just the usual.” The words tumbled out flat. I longed to say more—anything that would tether me to this moment—but the silence between us screamed.

She nodded, polite but distracted, before turning back to the others. And just like that, I was on the outside again, watching them slip back into a familiar rhythm, the conversation flowing around me, water through cracks in stone.

I could have left. I should have, maybe. But there was something about standing there, close enough to hear their laughter, that made me stay. It was not about liking them. It was about not knowing where else to be.

Mark tossed a small rock between his hands, effortlessly pulling everyone’s attention back to him. I watched them, all of them, so at ease with each other. Parts of a machine, they moved, each one fitting perfectly into the next. I was the extra piece, the one that did not quite belong but was still there, clinging.

As the sun dipped, casting long, thin shadows, I wondered what it would be like to inhabit their world. They weren’t cruel or purposely rude. But then again, exclusion is not about intention—it is about instinct.

There is a language people speak when they have known each other long enough, a language that does not require words. It is in the pauses, the glances, the way they fill the space between sentences. I had not learned that yet. I didn’t know if I ever would.

Mabel caught my eye again, her smile faltering for just a second. “Are you okay?”

I wanted to tell her the truth, but the words would not come. Instead, I gave her what I thought she wanted to hear. “Yeah, I’m good.”

She turned away before I had even finished speaking.

The night slowly crept, wrapping itself around us. The air felt cooler, sharper, but their voices remained warm, embers burning low in the dark. I remained a little longer, listening—not to their words but to the spaces, the silences that held so much more than I could understand.

When someone finally suggested leaving, it was as if the spell broke. They scattered, voices trailing off, promises of plans for next weekend floating in the air.

Mabel gave me a last smile, soft, distant. “Glad you came.”

I nodded, the words—“Yeah, me too”—ashes on my tongue.

I walked home alone, the quiet pressing in around me. Their laughter, still lingering, followed me, but as I got farther from the park, it faded.

It was not that I hated them; they lived in a world where connection came easily, while I lingered on the edges, watching.

And that was the hardest part: they made it impossible for me to like them.

BOWLINE

Pa always said I was special, that grin spreading wide across his face like the sea when it churned wild beneath us. He would lift me—small, unaware—until my feet dangled over the edge of *Solace*, our boat. Below, the ocean stretched unbroken, a bruise of silver under a sky so dense it seemed to press down, suffocating us with silence. The wind lashed saltwater across my face, stinging, a secret I didn't know I was keeping. I laughed, welcoming it as though it could wash away something hidden deep within. The boat groaned with the rhythm of the world, its timbers creaking like an old man remembering things he never told me, and Pa's voice—steady, melodious—never wavered, even as the wind howled through the rigging, weaving through layers of sail, an animal scratching at us from the inside.

I grew up on water, but my childhood wasn't like the others. The sea didn't cradle me; it taught me. I learned to tie knots before I learned how to read, fingers fumbling with frayed ropes that spoke their own dialect. Pa's gaze never left, but it wasn't approval I felt. It was something heavier, unspoken—an invisible truth. He never taught me to swim. "The sea won't betray you, not if you don't fight it," he'd say, like it was a rule of nature, something I was meant to understand without ever asking.

Ma...

Ma was a whisper, a name that fluttered, a moth caught in the walls of my mind, but never quite landed. Pa would speak of her when the sky split open at dusk, the sun breaking into jagged fragments of red and purple. "She loved sunsets," he'd say, as if that explained everything. "The sea was her home, too. Just like with you and me." His eyes would cloud, but it wasn't me he saw—it was something far behind me, something I couldn't grasp, always the same. Always at dusk.

I never asked. Pa was everything. *Solace* was everything.

Then, when I was sixteen—maybe seventeen—there was a crack. It was small at first, like a line in the sand, so delicate it seemed to vanish before I could touch it. We docked in a port that felt too still, the air shrouded in mystery. The people there watched us. I gazed out at the horizon, a gleaming sliver where sea and sky bled together.

I overheard them. Two men, their voices low but sharp, cutting through

the silence, a rescue knife pulled too quickly.

"Still no sign of them," one said. "You'd think after all these years..."

"The kid still out there, you think? After all this time?"

The world didn't move, it shifted. My breath stopped, a hesitation stretching long enough to swallow me. I turned away, out of sight, away from their words, not ready to bear the weight they carried.

That night, I asked Pa about it. His answer didn't come in words; it was the silence between us, the way he stared out into the black water, fingers tapping the hull, counting something only he could feel. When he spoke, his voice was stretched thin like a wound that never healed.

"People talk, Allorah. You can't stop them."

He stared at me then, but I wasn't who he saw. He wasn't looking at me at all—he was looking past me, at something I couldn't name. "Just remember who you are. Who we are."

He repeated that often, a prayer I didn't understand. I nodded. I always did.

But it gnawed at me, that weight, the heaviness of it in the air. I thought of the tin box beneath the floorboards, the corner of a photograph poking out, always just out of reach. But I didn't ask. I didn't need to.

Ma.

Now, she drifted through my thoughts more often, not as a name, but as a presence, the haar that gathers before twilight. Sketches of faces, not quite a face, blurred and shifting. Pa's words became more distant. He was speaking to someone that had never existed.

I didn't push. Pa kept me close. *Solace* kept me close.

I spent more time on deck, coiling ropes with practiced hands, feeling the rhythm of it sink into my bones. Left over right, under, pull tight, the cleat clicking with each turn. The mainstay was steady. The jib was fast and sure. The ropes slipped through my fingers, the hiss of the line running through the block echoing in my chest. It was a language I understood by heart, the steady pulse of a world that had never let me go.

But then, one night, the unraveling began. I found him in the galley, his back to me, fingers gripping something too tightly. The stillness in the air was thick, I could taste the salt of it on my tongue. When his voice finally broke through, it was so soft, it seemed like the words might slip away before they reached me.

"I never wanted to hurt her."

The words sank into me, a gash beneath my ribs. They didn't make sense, jagged and torn at the edges. My voice caught when I spoke.

"What?"

But he didn't turn. His hands shook, pale fingers wrapped around whatever he held, his knuckles white with the strain.

"She...she was going to take you, Allorah. You don't understand. She was going to leave, and I couldn't let that happen."

The words hung, unformed, disjointed, and I wanted to scream, but I didn't. It wasn't anger I felt. It was quieter, darker, twisting inside me, a knot caked in wrought sea dust.

I didn't ask for more. I didn't need to. I already knew. He kept me here—kept me on the boat, on the water—because the sea never asked the questions people would.

The next morning, the boat was adrift, listless. Sails hung limp, wind forgotten. The sun was high, but the unshakeable silence pressed against us, hugging our torsos in a salty straightjacket. I found him later, sitting at the bow, staring into the open sea. His face was pale, cheeks hollowed out, leaving only a skeleton of the man I had known. He didn't look at me. Didn't speak.

The sky stretched wide, open, suffocating, holding its breath and waiting for the moment that had already passed.

I didn't ask him what had happened. I didn't need to.

But I thought of Ma. The photograph I'd never seen. The memories that still hung between us, thick and unyielding.

I thought of the knot he taught me. Left over right, under, pull tight, the line pulling taut against the wind.

The bowline knot that had held us together for years.

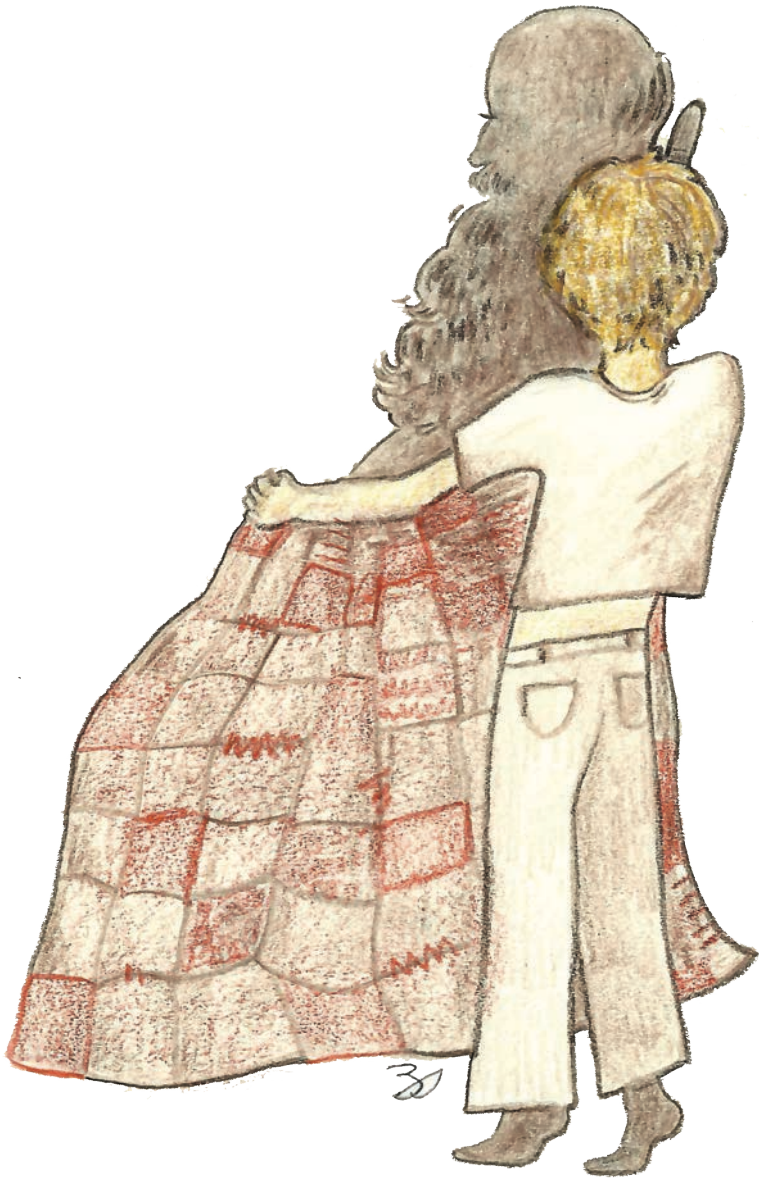
I don't know how long I sat there before the decision seeped into me, quiet and inevitable. My hands didn't tremble when I climbed into the dinghy. I didn't look back. Pa never saw me go.

Now, when I'm alone on the water, watching the way the sea pulls at the sky, I wonder if he's out there somewhere, lost beneath the waves, or if he's still hiding from shadows. But I don't know if I care anymore.

I don't know if I ever did.

All I know is that the knot is still tied.

And I am untethered.



GUNNAR EGGERTSSON '26
THE GREAT WONDERSNAPPER

Little Jack lived alone in a crooked house, on the corner of Merry Potter and Old Saints Row. The line of houses was straight and white, like teeth so bright, save for little Jackie's home. It stood apart, crooked and yellow, where Jack resided alone.

Alone? No! Not so! For under the attic romped Old Man Snow. He was mad, crazy-eyed, and wild tales he told of The Land of Ancient and Old.

Proudly, he pontificated his quizzical quandaries of life, death, and war. For in this distant land, under midnight sun, wild beasts still roamed. Dragons fought bouts in great wispy clouds, under which little garden elves potted. Old Man Snow was a great warrior, you know? He fought with battle-tempered marauders in the Land of Ancient and Old.

Old Man Snow ceased talking and his eyes turned low. The bygone face looked lost in time. His white beard fluttered in the night's breeze, illuminated by the fire. He leaned forward, creaking his rocking chair, and looked little Jack dead in the eyes:

"Have you ever seen a WonderSnapper? Oh what a great laugh, it's a miraculous creature! Snarled and twisted, spitting venomous liquid from a mouth of a thousand teeth. Forty-seven eyes, no more, no less, all black as tar. Eight scaly arms, bat-like wings, hunting men until the Hour of the Wolf."

The wizened man rolled back and forth, shouting:

"Have you seen the WonderSnapper? I've seen the WonderSnapper in the Land of Ancient and Old! It coughs like a pig, squeaks like a snake, and hums like the quietest of donkeys! Its forty-seven eyes turn even the brightest minds into sloppy pinkish Jell-O."

The old man roared, "In comparison, it makes a dragon look something like a boiled chicken!"

Jack shrieked, "Impossible!"

Snow muttered something, before loudly proclaiming, "I should know, for every beast I've slain from the Emerald Dragon to the Trolls of Haunted Hollow! The only beast that's ever come close to laying me low was that great WonderSnapper."

"What?"

“The great WonderSnapper with the nose of a crow! Moosey feet fought me on the Icy Plain. I wielded my steely sword, Gramur, and swung at the great beast. But I could not chip a single gray piece. It lifted me with its eight strange feet up from the frozen ground. And high and away it carried me. For much as I wrestled and snapped and clawed, I could not free myself from its deathly maw. After many ages it dropped me here by the old crooked house. But at least we are not so alone!”

Jack nodded and Old Snow bowed, before falling asleep in his rocker. Little Jack fetched a quilt and lay it over the slumbering warrior...and whispered in the old man’s ear: “We are not so alone.”

THE FOUR STEPS TO CREATING AN INCREDIBLE MAN

Hello reader,

No doubt, you have heard my name before, John Ambarino Hanover, acclaimed author and motivational speaker. You have also likely seen my name on the best sellers, *Twelve Easy Steps to Quitting A Crippling Video Game Addiction*, and *A Beginner's Guide to Surviving Your First Kodiak Bear Attack*.

If you picked up my little booklet at the front counter, it implies something positive about you: you're motivated, dedicated, poised for greatness. You sensed potential, and purchased it for the low price of twelve dollars and fifty cents.

So, you want to create an incredible human being: super-intelligent, upstanding, classy.

Dear friend, you've come to the right place.

Step One: Choosing The Right Birth Month

It is well known that all great men are born in January. This truth reverts to ancient times. It is believed by many scholars, including yours truly, that Jesus himself was born in the month of January. Also, the equally renowned inventor of the toy helicopter cap: Douglass Spinnings, Jr. Certainly we live in a time when many fleet of foot aspire to great wealth and fame, so, it's all the more important to dip your toe in early. This is achieved by planning your future child's birth in the appropriate month.

Step Two: Selecting an Ennobling Quote

It is understood by many great intellectuals, including Douglass Spinnings, Sr., that all men must live by the wisdom of quotes. Whether that be of the biblical variety like: "seek vengeance to no end." Though the accuracy of this quotation has been called into question many times by those who have actually read the bible; still, it inculcates the proper attitude you want for your child. The right quote should be especially fear-inducing, as to make him respectful of authority. As well, you want to make the child mindful of smites and hexes, so, he learns to never transgress against your wishes, even when you're not present. A good quote for this purpose would be from the acclaimed philosopher, Lord

Palpatine (known to close friends as Darth Sidious, or simply Darth): “The Dark Side of the Force is a pathway to many abilities some consider to be unnatural.”

Step Three: Embracing the Ingenious

Steps One and Two are really elementary. Any old pedestrian could figure them out. Here is where the ingenious comes in. There’s no way around Step Three: you simply must create waves. Now, you may be thinking, oh Mr. Hanover, you’ve gone off your rocker. But this is where most minds stumble. For this is nothing Satanic, it’s merely that a large event is required to rock the boat. Think of it as dropping a stone in the water, watching its ripples spread out far and wide.

Now, since this is more of a beginners guide (be sure to subscribe to the email chain, for just an additional \$3.99 a month, to get news on the sequel *The Steps To Creating An Incredible Man: The Seasoned Adventurer’s Version*) I won’t get into the well researched field of Waveology.

So, you’re probably wondering: “How does one create waves?” Oh, you uniformed little man, let me instruct you! Start by going to a river bank with a pregnant woman, and splash little waves over her. Through the research of my brother—and best buddy—Marcus Austin Hanover, expert in Waveology and riplomatics, we have found taking this action produces an extraordinary effect in the child’s developing mind, doubling the number of neurons. Now you may be thinking, this must be some type of pseudoscience. But, I simply like to call it a less explored field of thought.

Step Four: Controlling Thoughts

In my great-great-grandfather’s, Philo T. Waddlesworth’s, writings: *A Late 19th Century Guide to Producing a Great Man*, he warns, “Never expose the developing child to a phonograph, lest their thoughts be seized by ghouls.” Though his views about the phonograph are complete gibberish, we must acknowledge that they are a precursor to Waveology. There is a great morsel of truth in this. The thoughts you have around a child can greatly affect the outcome it has in life.

So think strong thoughts in the presence of your child, “I’m hungry, I should hunt a rhinoceros,” or, “that man that insulted me today, we shall duel.”

With thoughts like these you will inspire greatness in your boy.

Now you know the four essential steps to creating a great man. You can relax, and be confident that you've done all you can. Don't worry about book-learning as it is common knowledge that great men absorb wisdom naturally. If you want to pursue a more scholarly path, bring your new-born to a college lecture, or simply place him next to a shelf containing Homer's Iliad and Odyssey, and watch osmosis work its magic. Should you want to learn more about the wonders of Waveology be sure to buy my upcoming *Philosophy of the Wave*, inspired by the life of a great man himself, yours truly.

THE MAGICAL SPOON

The gray and lonely countryside offers spare comfort for the wanderer. It's here that one can go miles without seeing another human being. And out here, beyond the hustle and intensity of the coast, time stretches for days. Traveling like this is not easy: not kind on the spirit nor the mind. But when I got that little green Chevy station wagon, I couldn't help but heading off.

One night, when I was camped by a roaring fire, the wind blew a crumpled tempest-tossed paper at me. It was a strange note for sure. It read:

I'm not sure how it started, but it just sorta did. One day—appearing out of the nothing. Just a long gray desk, without anything on it. I tried not to think about it. I feel it's bad for one to think too much about other people, or themselves. Ideally, we should just exist without the need for: "deep thinking." I'm not all there, but I'm definitely not crazy.

It just appeared! That oblong thing. I mean does a table really describe it? I just entered my shitty little apartment and there it was. Thought the landlord, or one of my no-good friends was pulling my leg. But that was unlikely. Why would a landlord do that?

Then more stuff appeared: tire pumps, bottles, trowels, a can of kerosene. You got to believe I'm not crazy! And the appearances weren't malicious either, not scary in the slightest. Just things happened. Like I said, it's no good for one to be concerned...

But, I did get a little worried, when "parts" showed up. Wrenches, nuts and bolts, clips, nails, screws, toggles—equipment! Something...was up to something. I asked my neighbor, real nonchalant, if he heard anything.

He said, "noises. The kind that made the bugs under your skin crawl. Writhe. Contort. The ants were on the move!" I began to think these things were related: the ants, whatever put that desk in my room... What the hell were they doing!

I can tell you one thing. It was the type of note to make a man think about turning back for home. But I'm no quitter. I couldn't turn back, that's for sure. When you set out for something, you don't abandon it. Just a general principle. Though who knows, after all I did leave that stinking town behind.

That town, the one at the edge of the world. Where if you walk too long on a street you shouldn't, you'll fall off into the horrible New England surf. These little hamlets, with shriveled little people, should be wiped off the map. One day, I think, it's gonna rain or snow or something, and all the homes, washed away, back into the primordial sea. And nobody...is gonna notice.

Jesus! This may be why my friends call me a misanthrope. 'Cause I talk about people in a strange way. But please, I insist, I'm no pariah. I'm actually rather well liked and I like people very much. The folks in that town aren't even that bad, it's just they got caught up in a rather inescapable situation. Prisoners of a monstrous cyclops of a homicidal cyclone, destined to tear up the East Coast. Damn, that's a pretty good line!

I got out my notepad, and started writing back:

Not to catch you at a strange time...I find you rather proficient in the faculties of speech, and presume you're no different mentally. I think I. Get. You! That thing you're talking about. Must be why people are so nuts. Why people think everyone's out to get 'em. You're right, something's not kosher; a monkey could tell you that! But summer's passed long ago, and winter's now just getting cold. Keep yourself warm, my stranger brother.

I thought it was pretty good. I tossed it up into the air, hoping that the wind would guide it back to him. I half-slept that night, had a strange dream about a man with the head of a bald eagle. Look, I know you must have your thoughts about me, but I'm in a bizarre circumstance. A mess I wouldn't wish on God's most unholy sinner.

When I woke up a dog-eared note was on my chest. There was a title:

I have seen my brother, stranger:

It was over before it even happened. That's what made it strange. Conditions are already strained...But that's not what made it "different." It was the casualness of it all. If I tell you ghosts

are real, you're gonna tell me I'm a betting man. 'Cause the possibility of ghosts confirms that I am in fact sane. And if ghosts don't exist, then I'm already gone. I'm real tired, you know, and the more tired I get the more thoughts I have. I haven't slept in damn near four days, but I'm getting close. Close to the truth! It's darkest before the light, eh? Little dots around my room, that's how it started! It's coming back to me. These dots bouncing around, brightly colored. Connecting, congealing, forming this thing. The dots become this throbbing mass, with wild purple eyes, streaking rainbow lines, dancing in front of me. Yeah, a giant head! Then it was gone! Left, right through the wall. And everything was in place, normal.

Curious things letters are. I'm not an epistolary genius, but I like writing them. After I finished reading, I went on my way through the creaky gray forest. All the trees had long lost their leaves, spare the occasional oak, with brown vestiges flapping from its branches. I came through the forest, up a sharp hill, and unto a precipice. Out in front of me stretched, through delicate and ancient hills, a thousand, no, a million, sleeping trees. TV static, white noise, dead airwaves. And up, surrounding the sprawling forest, a perimeter of mountains, their sloped peaks covered in snow.

I wrote something:

I see what you mean, it was just a thing passing by, meant no harm. Is it not some kinda travesty that we see so much we don't understand? I'm not too sure, I just started driving one day, oh Strange Brother of Mine, as I'm not predisposed to linger in my own malaise. You said, we shouldn't think too much, but I think that's all we're good for. I have convinced myself, I have made mistakes, jumped to conclusions. Now, I'm gonna head back.

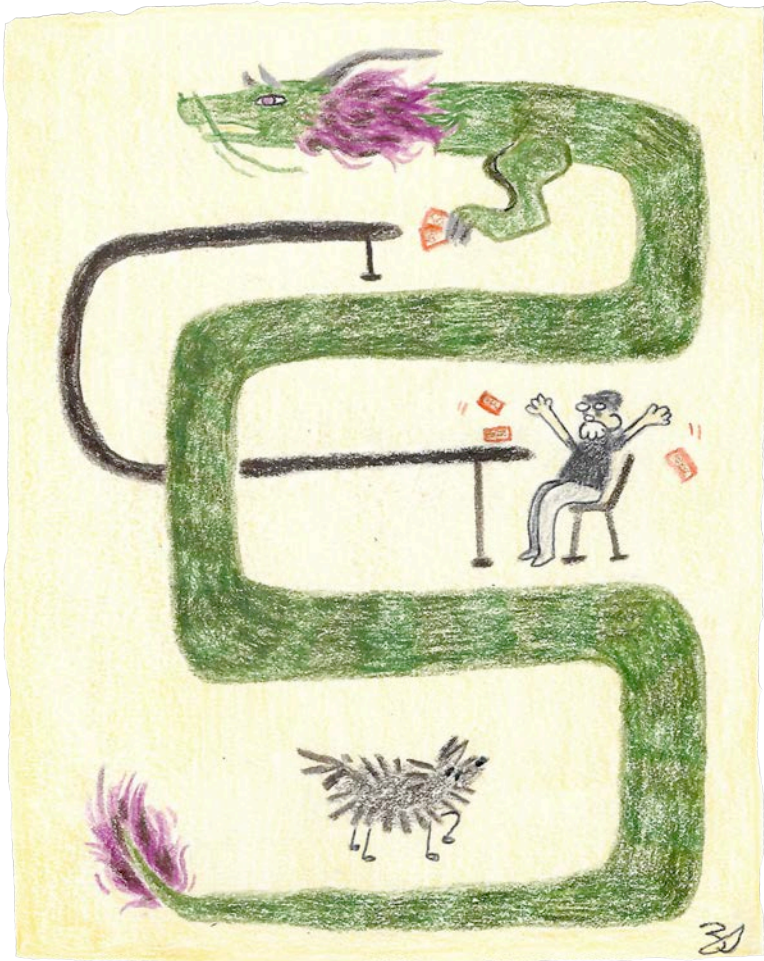
I tossed the note behind me. Walking back, I found these words, stapled to a tree:

Brother and a stranger,

Weird unexpected things happen. But time and biology are our tyrannical vices. I know, I've been quite incomprehensible, I know I don't quite make sense. But just listen here. The mailman said to me: "Read your letters, you might never see them again." Or Uncle's final words: "I'm not looking forward to death, it lasts for a while..." Peace be to the saints, and to your mother, if you like her. The works of the magical spoon!

I'll see you when I see you.

I liked that. I left it to the wind.



RUSTY, THE BROWN DOG

With great resolve, Rusty, the carpenter's matted brown dog, looked out at the imperious Ink Mountain. Above it, stars rose into an indigo marble sky. It was said by old wives that once a month, fire was seen at its center because that's where the dragon slumbered.

Rusty was in need of a remedy, for you see, his owner, Old Garum, the fishy smelling one, was nowhere to be seen. Simply stated, he had vanished into thin air.

So, Rusty traveled over hills, and across valleys deep, where wild hares sprang from bushels of sagebrush and flowercactus. Rusty slogged through marshes, and marched through rain. He came upon, to many a thing strange, like the talking toad bespectacled with a monocle, gripping an antique ivory cane and donning a brown bowler. The toad's eyes spun in their sockets frantically.

"I speak, and ramble through the brambles of this here, marshy, bog!" the toad mused atop his green mushroom. Deep in thought, he lightly stroked his chin.

Rusty replied, "Well it is quite the sight, a grey thing like you?"

Bemused, the amphibian inquired, "You know my name?"

"What?"

"The Thing!"

The frog roared, with laughter, and such might, nearly tumbling off his toadstool.

"I joke, I joke," he muttered, wiping a slimy tear from his eye.

Rusty, tilted his head, "Have you seen a carpenter pass—the name of Garum? No larger than six feet, no shorter than five and ten inches. He's often sweaty, and sardine-scented."

"Sardine-scented, have I?" The Thing fixed his slipping hat, "I think I might, but what I think is not removed from what I might benefit from, and conversely what I can gain, all from one curious canid."

Rusty growled, unnerving the toad, who wiped at his single spectacle.

"No, no, no. I'd never tax a friend like you! You simply need to aid by the answering of a few quandaries. An investigation into this great inordinance we call life. Have you seen in this marshy marsh, Smiles the three-legged spider?"

Rusty raised his dog-brows, "Smiles?"

"Yes, Smiles, short five legs, dusty, and dumb. His friend is Anthony that ant, a creature defined by bushy brows, and bouncing bells that hang from 'round his thorax. If you see them, tell them, The Thing's the name, and he wants his electric mower back. They'll tell you where your carpenter went!"

Rusty moved on, leaving The Thing chortling in his lonesome. He slogged through the cold marsh, swimming through clean quick water. Coming upon a clearing in the reeds he found the following scene: a wild mower, spurting about, roaring, slicing grass, sending hoppers flying. A spider and ant desperately held on, with bells "a-chiming." The mower snorted, like a toro, and roared like a tiger, hell-bent towards the river. The spider and ant, sensing a calamity in the making, released themselves from the inanimate beast. They both sat ashamedly on the muggy beach, while the machine bog-bound, bubbled as it charged deeper into the marsh.

"Who might you be," Smiles quipped.

"Tell us quick, before we make you sink," the little ant bellowed, brandishing a letter opener.

Rusty thought for a moment, then blurted, "I am The Thing! Who's coming from across this muddy sink. The Thing in search of his long-lost mower. I am The Thing, the horrible, the terrible, and nasty. Whose great maws will devour every thief, who dared decommission my precious possession!"

"The Thing?" Smiles, swallowed, turning to his partner, "I've heard the Thing was a frog?"

"Yes," the ant thinking, "Perhaps he's transformed!"

Rusty opened his jaws, and roared to the sky, "I, the Thing, transforms by night. I alone have mastered the arts of transmutation, teleportation, and potion creation. Now I've come for the both of you!"

"Oh, great Thing," Smiles, smiled, "What could we do to repent for our horrible mistake."

In his elaborate performance, Rusty paused, appearing to be in consideration, "Tell me of the human that passed through here."

The ant answered, "The carpenter man? Oh, he surely passed through here. I saw him just a few hours ago, heading east."

"Yes!" Smiles shouted, "towards the Ink Mountain, had he in tow, sword and bag."

"Away!" Rusty shouted. And the creatures scuttled for the reeds.

Some time later:

After passing the bog, and the surrounding fields of yellowing wheat and yawning crickets, the matted brown dog arrived at the towering Ink Mountain. Its large opening was like a gaping mouth, and inside were lighted torches and echoes of yelling. Rusty, nervous, marched under, and the great stalactites loomed from the ceiling like lines of witches teeth. He also trudged through fjords of gold coins stacked so high they looked like foothills. Finally, the dog came to a table and two chairs. In one Old Garum sat, and in the other a great dragon the size of four elephants. They were playing a game of cards.

Old Garum yelled, and threw his cards on the table, "You cheat!"

The dragon looked up, "Sore loser!"

Rusty cleared his throat, Garum spun around.

"My trusty Rusty, how I've missed you!" the carpenter exclaimed, wiping his sweaty brow, "Come here, loyal friend!"

Rusty refused, "Why, when you have left me so?"

"I'm so sorry, Rusty, I had this job I was late to. I hurried on without you."

"How horrible! I thought you went missing!"

"I am truly sorry. At least my client enjoys the gift."

The dragon guffawed, picking up the sword in his massive fingers, "It's unusable."

"Oh that's all right," Garum nervously laughed.

Rusty felt a strange sensation. Garum who was like a father to him, was desperate, but Rusty relied on him. Even so, he understood. Old Garum was as fallible as a young Labrador.

"All is well, Garum," Rusty said, "let's have some fish."

ODE TO A BOY NAMED SUE

The sunlight brightens the dank jail cell, lighting up dust motes. I rub the bridge of my nose, rising to meet bushy eyebrows. My head, still killing me.

Seven hours ago, without a care in the world, adrift in a who-knows-where coffee spot, off the corner of whatchamacallit street and remind-me-again avenue, a stone throw from edge-of-the-world boulevard, stood the most conspicuous bastard ever to grace god's green earth.

In the coffeeshop, the son-of-a-bitch, sipped his cup of mud, sitting on empty time, searching for a way, to make it fly by. Until, spying out of the corner of his good eye, a wanderer, of mysterious disposition, and cool gray-green eyes.

Me, the hard-boiled, eczema-riddled, son-of-a-bitch, walked up to the sorrowful pilgrim, and slapped him on the shoulder.

"Surprise," I said, "long time, no see."

Under startled breath he muttered, "Have we met?"

"Not yet! Didn't think I'd see you here."

"Do we know each other?"

"Don't we?"

"Enough!" He said, "What's on your mind?"

"Nothing more than to bust someone's nose and to explore the intricacies of particle physics."

"What the fuck!" the stranger said, before turning away.

I grabbed his shoulder.

"What?"

"Where do you think you're going," I smiled, cracking him on the cheek.

He didn't seem to like that, swung around and busted my head with a coffee cup.

My head down, ass up, and pride lost, I passed out.

All I know is I got the dickens beat out of me and I'm hanging around in County until I get things sorted out.

THE WITHDRAWALS OF WRITING

“It really was the strangest thing,” said the man on the train with a patchy beard.

“Really?” Lyme responded.

“Okay, I’d been going to this shrink for the past three years. Three fucking years. I go in for my appointment and I tell the receptionist, ‘I’m here for Dr. Bright.’” The man trailed off, his eyes looking out the window, watching the Connecticut landscape pass by.

“And what’d she say?”

“Sorry, I got distracted. Anyhow, she starts bawling her eyes out. Just really impassioned crying, meanwhile I’m standing there, awkward. I don’t know what to do, I give her two pats on the shoulder. Still the tears just pouring out, a leaky faucet. Makeup all smudged, people start looking—”

Lyme interrupted, “Then?”

“Yes, and then she finally calms down. Right up and died! ‘Massive heart attack,’ she says, ‘totalled.’ The condition, I looked up later, his heart imploded. Every chest vein bursting at once. A corpse before he even hit the floor... Three years! And not a single missed appointment! And I didn’t get a phone call. Not an email. Nothing!”

“Jesus, what a tragedy!”

“Tell me about it! Funniest thing, when I was driving home I was angry that he died. I mean like, really pissed! You’d think I’m a son-of-a-bitch, hell I even thought that. Dying’s kinda selfish, I mean, if we had some control over it.”

Lyme reflected, “That reminds me of when you’re a kid and one day you get home and Mom tells you, ‘cat died!’ And you don’t know what to think.”

“I agree, though I don’t know how I feel about comparing my therapist to —”

“Hey I’m sorry I didn’t mean...”

“No I didn’t take it that way, just how I felt.” He looked back out the window, “I’m getting off at the next stop.”

Lyme extended her hand, “Pleasure meeting you.”

“If you’re ever around New Haven, here’s my number. Name’s Johnson.”

She thought for a moment: Johnson. Was it his first or last name?

The man turned to leave but hesitated, returning a glance, “I wasn’t like asking you on a date—”

“I didn’t take it that way.”

“You know I’m re-married,” he continued, “This spring.”

Lyme raised her hand to signal, all was OK: “Good for you!”

Johnson faded down the aisle. Lyme’s gaze turned towards the dark, cloudy sky. New Haven’s street lamps dissipated into the night, in a swirl of mist. *Strange guy*, she mused, *few more hours to Boston*.

Earlier that day, at the Philadelphia station, an older woman working the cash register in a little bookstore said, “These train lines are ancient.”

“Do you have any clue why it’s delayed?” Lyme asked.

“Well,” the old woman paused, her eyes fixed on her crossword, “Probably a jumper!”

“Pardon?”

“People throw themselves in front of the train. It can take a while to clean.”

The cashier looked up, sensing the harshness of her comment, quickly remarked, “Oh but I don’t think that’s it.”

She then scanned Lyme’s book, “That’ll be \$12.95.”

Before exiting, Lyme looked at the novels at the front. Self help, cheap crime thriller, and romance that bordered on pornographic. Titles like: *The Killer on Fifth Avenue*, *Devilish and Charming*, *A Modern Day Miracle Elixir: How to Live Fast, Free and Long*. It depressed her, but only for a moment, she had better things to do anyhow. Sitting down she instinctively grabbed at her jacket pocket, before remembering she quit smoking three years ago. *They tell you it’s just a week. Oh the scars nicotine leaves, cuts through you like the arterial highways of “almost, not quite,” suburban cities. That’s good! She thought, I still got it!*

Some say creativity never leaves you. You can be washed up, years after marriage and decades past a successful career. Still, it’s creativity! At one point Lyme thought writing was a biological necessity tied to survival. It was not something done for pleasure, writing was fundamental, often exceedingly painful. Lyme believed it was the most important thing in her life.

But now, everything just seemed like her grandmother: that old blind woman who knit perfectly from all those years of practice. In the dank station, Lyme posited that all these drifting words were nothing more than the withdrawals of writing. It took her back to her last great line, the one she hoped

to be remembered by, “nothing is greater than the labor of living, the ardor of mortality.” *Maybe it wasn't so great.* Lyme opened her eyes just as the train pulled into Boston.

AMERICAN ARTIST

All that February, the rain never stopped, the city drowned in malaise. Luz scratched his head, surveying the little city park. In time, he grew bored, punctuated by occasional anxiety. You see, boredom is only natural, making one feel all alone. Luz helped his father up the stairs. The cycles of chemo took its toll, causing diminished strength. His father sat in a leather Eames chair overlooking the square.

Only a few more months, Luz thought. Gregor peered out the window, few wandered the park, fewer with anything to do. He put his hand over his chest, inhaling deeply. The ducts of his body, its machinery, his lungs, struggled to expand, and his hair, once full, fell freely. The sickness, a diseased albatross, overhead. Soon he would be no more.

Gregor worked in the side room. This room had fewer amenities, just a small window to gaze at the failing shopping street, and his work in the center. The great piece of marble was, itself, a filament and when the sun was half mast, it shone through the window, and striking the stone it illuminated the sad room. Gregor grazed a hand over his work. Sadly, the sun did not shine much this time of year. A shame, he thought, to die in a month like this.

When an artist nears his end, legacy becomes his prime concern. It was deeply disturbing to think this project would go unfinished. That his subject would remain half-rendered. But yet, part was free and visible—if still incomplete. He could begin to trace her outline, the shape of the rock over which she was draped and in recent months, since his sickness, she had become an obsession. If by some miracle he was to finish, it could spell, if only temporarily, financial wellbeing for his son.

Gregor knew Luz was lonely. And that his ascent to manhood was recent and still insecure.

“It’s a damn shame,” he remarked, as he went over her figure again. It’s a shame he had no real wife. And it’s an even greater shame that it was his own fault. You can justify bad luck, he thought, but not of your own creation. His eyes turned to the window again. The rain came down light, but it was cool and gray. February really was a bad month to die. Though if we had some choice in the ordeal it wouldn’t matter so much, but it did and there was a humility to it. If he was to die, spring would be his month.

Luz remained transfixed at the window. From this perspective the world was a miserable snow globe, possessed by a spoiled child. This idleness made him dull, his mind dumb—completely uninterested. And the prospect of staying in such a city made his stomach turn. But where was he to go? Luz was immature, he knew that he had squandered opportunities. He accepted boredom and sought no solution. But simple recognition was not a satisfactory remedy. One day, here in this horrible place, his father would die. Still Luz would be bored.

Gregor raised his chisel, to an untouched corner of rock. He took the hammer and struck. *Bang*, lightning, *crash*, thunder. The rock was his realm. *Boom*, creation, and sculpting. Each piece of marble removed, was closer, closer, yes closer. He could see her, *The Woman on the Rock*. *Strike*, her face became more clear. Hours passed; the earth made its twist; the sun descended into a glowing horizon.

Luz entered, stood at the door thinking. He raised his hand, lowered it.

“What are you making?” he asked.

“A future,” Gregor smiled, “and a wife.”

Luz scowled, “Strange!”

Gregor thought there was a chance he would make it, to complete his work before the end.

“It could be good money for you.”

“Maybe twenty years ago.”

“Have you spoken to Daniel about Louisville?”

“Not yet.”

“You should, family should take care of family.”

“I’m not leaving.”

“No one said anything about that,” Gregor gave an earnest expression, “We both know I’m not going to be around much longer.”

“Don’t say that!”

“It’s true.”

“We shouldn’t say it though, bad form.”

“You still have a life to live.”

“Not for you to worry.”

Gregor sighed in resignation, “Okay,” turning back to his work.

Gregor wondered what he would be remembered for, if anything. He could see it now gracing the headlines, *American Artist Dead in Paris Hotel*

Room. His name wouldn't be in the headline, no that was not of note. But the "Paris Hotel" would be. *That* would incite reader interest.

Perhaps the Tuesday commuter would see such a headline and immediately think of his favorite musician, *yeah that one, with the cool hair*. He would buy the paper, desperately hoping that a rockstar's sudden death had not befallen *his* young, beloved, up and comer. He would flick the pages, see the name Gregor Hoffman, and mumbled something about misleading headlines, tossing the paper aside. The Tuesday morning commuter could never know anything about—*American Artist*. That "American Artist" was never more than a cliché. His work filled five-star hotel lobbies and VIP airport lounges. It was commercial, violating his ideas of "true artistry".

That Tuesday commuter couldn't know Gregor's ideas about aesthetics. Nor his life story. He couldn't know that Gregor spent a great deal of time working graveyards, first planting flowers, then painfully chiseling names on gravestones. The disinterested, impartial, Tuesday commuter could not know what the smell of a human body was when it was taken to the crematorium. The stench of hotdog-like water permeating the air, and a seasick stomach.

Tuesday commuters don't know what spending a summer floating around Spain does to one's head. That an artist can become emboldened, carefree, living out fantasies of Lost Generation writers, and critics. He doesn't know what happens to such a *laissez-faire* artist when he gets a woman pregnant. A Tuesday commuter wouldn't know this, nor should he. But it was all too familiar to Gregor.

Years later, perhaps some interested historian would have liked to see this scene. The wrinkled forehead of the sweating artist, striking vigorously at his final piece. A historian, though, would only be interested in this as an oddity. For, despite Gregor's toil, his real masterpiece, his magnum opus, was made twenty years earlier and sold as a little pottery bowl to a hurried business man. This business man would take the bowl, and give it to his son, who became quite famous in the world of undergarment design. The underwear guru credited the bowl as the prime driver of his masterful innovations.

But, somewhere in the hills of New Hampshire, in a boarded up shed, remained *The Woman on the Rock*. She looked as though she were sleeping.

UNCLE OSGOOD

The north stretch of the Woodwick Peninsula is bare of trees, consisting only of brambles and tall grass, and nothing more than sand. And in the winter, only these skeletons remain, swaying in the cold wind. The peninsula splits identically, a dreary town between two sharp cliffs. Any vagabond of this region knows to avoid the cursed promontory, as there is only one road in, and one out. Some five years back a group of visiting Yalies were lost in a boating accident. Since then tourism has declined. Only a few disgruntled locals remain. They're all old anyways.

I was in need of lodging, for though I do avoid this region as much as anyone else, I was seeing to family matters. My estranged uncle had just passed, and I was invited to the little island where his funeral was to be held. Simply a short ferry ride from the only town—Hope Cove. The weather had turned bad so I was land-bound for that time being.

After asking around, the locals told me of an inn only fifteen minutes from town. At the furthest end of the promontory, once the summer home for a fabulously wealthy New York family. By the '70s it had been all but abandoned. The local paper, *The Fishery*, had reported, "The grand Mueller family residence has officially been condemned by the state of Rhode Island. No more than twenty years before it held the finest of balls. The envy of every town from Newport to Watch Hill, until the matriarch Elizabeth Prescott Manning Mueller died from a sudden heart attack. The state has already initiated plans to demolish the waterfront property."

This did not come to fruition, as in the '90s the property was swiftly, and quite unexpectedly, transformed into a hotel. The hotel had a significant dip in popularity, following the drowning of those college students. Again, it has become worse for ware, manifesting the peninsula's aura of mystery into a single property. Few want to travel the peninsula, fewer to that house and I can't blame them.

The mansion is disturbed. A facade, dark, moldy green, gray trimmings, and a whole construction leaning on its axis, perhaps from strong wind. Victorian spires, too many windows, it's a damned architectural anomaly! At once to be on the verge of collapse, but then again possessing an unearthly might—the unconquerable will of a dead, forgotten Titan. I went to that

shunned cliff it dangles on, to that derelict house, and as I entered, the earth exhaled.

The entrance was grand, a veritable creation of the gilded age. Beyond the heavy oak doors, I was greeted by two curved, chestnut staircases framing the front desk. Looking up, the large hall was entirely wood paneled, and in the high Victorian ceiling, a crystal chandelier at its center. Rain beat like a metronome against stained glass windows.

An aged figure manned the front desk, gaunt with hollowed cheeks, and on the tip of his nose, a pair of silver-framed glasses.

He spoke in a smoker's baritone, "How may I help you?"

"A room for the night, please."

He looked down into the logbook. He cleared his throat, "Just you, sir?"

"Yes."

"Perfect."

He handed me a key, and directed me to the room. I wandered up the stairs through another large entrance, into a divided hallway. There was an unsightly floral carpet, nauseating to look at. A flower identically splitting from itself, but it felt to me more like a mold contagion. The wall fixtures looked of the '90s in the styling of my Aunt Cordelia's suburban New Jersey home.

My room was to the right, I found it, and dropped my bag onto the carpeted floor. There were information packets dotted about. It was hard to read. There was no overhanging light, and the curtains were heavy, more like rugs than blinds. I found something interesting, apparently a Boston company started offering tours of the hotel given its "haunted" reputation. Funny, you know, people's predilection for danger. Today, a man, like no time before, is able to live in complete physical comfort. The average American does not worry of Norman conquest, French invasion, or Spanish inquisition. So he putters from theme park to haunted house to horror films. What off-ramp of the neural highway desperately craves danger? What synapse seeks stimulation so desperately that it dreams of shadowy dendrites? Likely the same one that compelled teenage boys to fight in World Wars. The same that leads daredevils to cliff jumping, tornado chasing, skydiving, drag racing, cage fighting, and plain old bar fights.

I decided to leave my room, traveling on this train of thought. What of these peninsulas? Estranged from land. They decided to walk out on the water, to feel that ocean breeze.

I returned to the front desk, "How might I entertain myself?"

The old man looked up, staring at me quizzically through titled glasses, "Many enjoy the hotel bar, or the gardens. Many guests indeed! Again, we run a shuttle service to and from town. It leaves in fifteen minutes, returning at ten-thirty."

"What is your name?"

"Jebediah."

"Real puritanical!"

He chuckled, "I'm Quaker."

"I think I'll be going to town, thanks."

The ride was OK, but of no particular note. The only thing I can remember is the ocean view, the overlapping waves and undulating tides. *Undulating tides, where did I read that again? Steinbeck? No, Hemingway.* Oh, I also remember drafting up an email to my editor.

The bus pulled into the town's square. It was drizzling. There were street lamps but only about half were lit. Hotel guests walked off, except one man who looked perplexed. Two dark eyes, peering from under a wide brimmed hat. His pinky tapped nervously against a herringbone tweed jacket, a paisley silk pocket square stuck out like a sore thumb.

I passed him. The houses were OK, your typical New England colonials. I crossed a little street, and under the deep shadows of the Honey Locusts, I turned into a bar, The Maine Street Oyster. It would be considered a theme bar in any major city, every square inch covered with nautical regalia, but here it seemed just right.

To my surprise, Ralphie stood at the bar. The last time I'd seen my cousin must have been fifteen years earlier at some family get-together out by the Adirondacks. Overconsumption devoured the latter half of his twenties, and his football player physique was now tackled by fat. His chubby cheeks and short hair pushed far past the forehead, making his eyes bulge weirdly.

"Ralphie!"

He looked up from his Narragansett, "Son of gun!" he grabbed me, "How've you been?"

"Well, you?"

“Good!” He was somber for a moment, “It’s too bad about Uncle Leopold. And about your father.”

I paused, “Unfortunate, very...will you be at the funeral?”

“Yeah, me and a few relatives,” he scratched his chin, “Both, damned good men! Rare. Once in a generation!”

“Who’s here?”

“Bill, Maisie, Janie, all their families. Uncle Osgood, of course—how’s your mother?”

“Sadly, seems she’s about ready to join Leopold!”

“Jesus, you must be bent outta shape.”

A silence hung in the air, making sweet poetry, whilst we stood at the bar.

“How about a brew!”

Enjoying the company of beverages, the conversation progressed in that usual boring way. Ralphie showed me pictures of his “spawn”: three varyingly proportioned children. Comically, the youngest was too round, the middle one too narrow, and the eldest freakishly short.

He swiped through more photos, including his new Chevy Tahoe, “The Chevy Toddler Annihilator,” “the Man Cave.” It was Ralphie’s antidote for a midlife crisis. I was repulsed. Why did I have such contempt? There was that snobbish combination of pity, embarrassment, and jealousy.

Who did I think I was to judge him and his vapid Connecticut life? His suburban car, lawn, and family. Why, because I was an “artist”? It’s all putrid, vomit! Yet still, that aforementioned contempt seethed in me, until finally I just had to say, “It’s been great catching up, but I really need to be going.”

Surprised, Ralphie paused for a second, “Okay. I tell you, Davey, you visit sometime! I know you’re not far. For a fact!”

“Will do.”

“Yeah bring the boss-lady, we’ll have a good time!”

“Email me.”

“Sure.” He was reading something on his phone. “Also, Osgood wants the family to come over, about nine-ish.”

“Uncle Ozzy! He lives here now?”

“How did I not tell you about this! He moved some years back. The guy wanted to reconnect with the “homeland.” Remember Grandma’s place?”

“Sure.”

“He lives there now.”

“Ain’t that something!”

“Yeah,” he nodded, drifting off slightly.

“I’ll be seeing you!”

The rain had stopped and was replaced by chilly wind. Mindlessly, I wandered down Maine Street, cut through Wharf Row, before I ended up by the docks. There were fishing boats, leisure boats. I wasn’t in the best state of mind and I reverted to the old writer’s habit of compulsive research. I spent thirty minutes doodling on my phone learning that this town was in fact quite big for wintertime boat keeping. The cove guarded against storms and inclement weather. I think the primary reason for its popularity was more likely due to its affordability. So much time passed on the docks that it became quite cold. These fall temperatures can really be a bastard!

I stumbled through the docks up some side street, I don’t recall, until I was back on Maine. The shuttle was nowhere, and the town was quiet, save for the wind. It couldn’t be discerned whether the great rushing sounds were the running waves, or the swaying trees. I waited on a bench, and began to drift into sleep.

I was awakened by a car horn.

“David! How many years?”

“Come over here, boy!”

A collection of aunts and uncles were packed into the back of the old red Jaguar. It was a conservative bunch, my mother despised all of them. Janie and Jack were Tea Party types back in the Obama years.

“Jesus, you caught me at a bad time!”

“It sure looks like it,” Janie said, “You look like a damn drunk.”

I rubbed my eyes, “Yeah, it was just that I missed the shuttle—”

“No need for talk,” Uncle Jack cried, between the chews of his cigar, “Get in the car!”

I was stuck between the elderly “great auntess Margret” and the even older “greater greatness uncle Bill”. I must have been the youngest person in that car by at least thirty years. Bill was an officer in Korea or Vietnam, I never got to speak to him much. Margret was the old money connection, a bonafide, dyed-in-the-wool, Newport *grande dame*.

Jack gnawed his cigar, “You’re going to the party, right?”

“I believe so!”

Jack toyed with his cigar, chewing, sticking it in and out of his mouth, inhaling, maybe swallowing, a pensive exhale, “Good, Osgood will be happy.”

The Jaguar spurred to life.

Janie sneered, “You seem a little worse for wear.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re too well-bred to be sleeping on benches, Davey. Far too well bred. Must be that mother’s side!”

Jack paused, “Janie, you can’t say that anymore.”

“Why not?”

“He might be sensitive about these things...we’re sorry about your father, Davey.”

Janie waved her hand, “Don’t call him names!”

The remainder of the car ride was silent, except when a pothole woke a sleeping Bill.

“What the hell!”

The car pulled into a long driveway, shadowed by an unpruned copper beech that stood between the road and the house. The house? A golden piss-yellow monument. Tastefully accented by peeling white paint trimmings. It had that quasi townhouse construction, even boasting a backyard. The creaking beech tree seemed to be almost rotted, and its leaves lay in mounds around its base.

The little group of us made our way in. The four others went off somewhere, probably to a side room to talk to Ralph about homeownership, and “city-hoodlums”. I spent some time in the parlor looking at Osgood’s paintings, he did them all himself! The guy’s nutty, been like that since his mother died. The way things worked out with his brothers, must have had him in a horrible state. But there was one painting that I don’t think I could really forget: something sublime, not seen in the others.

A woman standing on a winding beach, rolling dunes behind her. It’s winter, there is no grass, and in the background on a hill, a pile of wood. And the wind looks rough, and the waves are moving too quickly to froth. The woman’s face is smudged, her features washed out. I spent a good deal of time looking and thinking. I covered my eyes. I think I was crying.

Down the wooden staircase, walking in a waddle was my cousin Maisie. She was my senior by fifteen years, always was more of an aunt.

She hugged me, “Are you all right?”

“Fine. How about you?”

“Strange to say the least,” she chuckled, “My father’s going half-insane.”

“Who can blame him?”

“First your father, now Leopold!”

“At least he has Jack.”

“Please, that blow-hard?” She paused, “Let’s talk.”

We walked through the house, under its irregular arches, until we got outside. From there, even in the dark, you could see the waves, rising and falling, breaking over jetties.

“How are you?” she asked.

“Things haven’t worked out the way I would’ve liked.”

“Unfortunate. I know it’s been hard.”

“You understand.”

“Sure, but life provides no consolation prize.”

Before us, the waves kept spilling over jagged rocks, in the burrows of sand crabs, between webs of seaweed and periwinkle shells. *What did the waves conceal? I’ve been thinking, the two greatest repositories are mind and ocean, containing precious imponderables: the ancient Kraken, the lost city of Atlantis, dreams of Poseidon, the ocean’s inexhaustible mysteries—creativity itself. Adventures and argonauts, scribes and prophets, poets and playwrights, all who travel to the bounds of endless knowledge. The ocean, its tides, the strangeness of mind—these magnificent waves! But what lingers below? Nothing but grief—shattered bottles scattered about used needles and soiled diapers. This horrible dream washes in fits of lust and rage. Life’s great disappointments: the words never uttered.*

I walked back with Maisie more alone than I had been in years. The inebriated aunts, uncles, cousins, humorlessly humming to one another, faces drunk on life’s wealth. An empty seat at the end of the table: Ozzy was gone. I walked past his paintings and up the staircase. At the top a door ajar. I entered.

Deep, golden-bourbon-brown, Osgood’s study. A warm light danced on the ceiling across the booked-laden walls. Ozzy sat by the window, asleep in his worn leather chair.

“Bye, bye,” he muttered, eyes closing, “Bye, bye.”

I took the near-empty glass that dangled from his hand, leaving without saying a word.

BRIDGET FLYNN '26

VOYEUR

I found him shouldered against my doorway, close-lipped and sullen. My hair clung to my skin, still damp. The dim light of the hallway cast uneven shadows across his face, finding the tension in his jaw, the hollow beneath his cheekbone. I tightened my towel when he saw me. It had been weeks since we last spoke. “Lost the key?” I asked, pushing past him to unlock the door of my dorm.

His eyes were bloodshot and fixed on something just beyond me, as though I were a phantom in the corner of his eye. I couldn’t tell if he was truly there, or if he’d wandered up into his mind, lost in some memory, half-drunk on grief.

“Lost the key?” I asked, brushing past him to unlock the door. It gave way with a push, already open.

He rubbed the back of his neck—a gesture so familiar it felt rehearsed, the words caught somewhere between his throat and tongue. “No.”

“Do you want to talk?”

He hesitated, teetering on the threshold. His gaze dipped, catching somewhere around my collarbone, and my skin prickled against the burn of his stare. Wherever his eyes fell, they lingered too long, searing into my skin. I turned away, retreating into my room.

“No,” he said, voice low. “Not right now.”

I watched him stand in the doorway, his eyes scanning the mess of my room: clothes draped across a chair, the bed half-made, empty glasses all about. I realized he must have already been here. My bed looked sat-in, the items on my desk out of place. One of two framed photos laid face down—a portrait of him and Claudia, his arm around her, her laughter caught mid-breath, bright, oblivious. That frame now looked like a tombstone, toppled and unbalanced, her laughter crushed beneath it. The other frame remained upright: a picture of Arthur and me, a cigarette between his teeth, smoke curling around us in lazy tendrils.

I felt the weight of it then, the scent of Claudia’s perfume still hanging in the air, mingling with the stale tang of smoke. It came unbidden, the thought—her laughter caught in the haze, as it had been on so many nights. The three of

us would be sprawled in my room, empty bottles and ashtrays crowding the surfaces. Claudia would have fallen into Arthur, her laughter spilling over like a glass filled too high.

“Come here,” she’d said one night, reaching for me with that easy warmth of hers. “You look so serious.” She’d pulled me closer, her fingers twining through mine, her touch soft. “Why are you always so serious?”

I hadn’t known how to answer. Her laughter had felt like a knife then, and Arthur had just watched, silent and amused.

Later, after she’d fallen asleep on my bed, her breathing soft and steady, Arthur had looked at me across the room, his face unreadable in the dim light. “She loves you, you know,” he’d said, voice low and quiet, like he was afraid of waking her.

I’d laughed—bitter, hollow, a sound I didn’t recognize.

And now, standing there in my room, I felt the same bitter taste rise in my throat. When had I become so twisted?

When I turned to him, his eyes were on my towel again, a smile ghosting his lips, gone as quickly as it appeared. His voice, when it came, was sharp. “I want to come in.”

My heart dropped to my stomach, slicing my lungs clean in half. “God, Arthur,” I whispered, shaking my head. I couldn’t look at him. “Your girlfriend’s dead. She hasn’t been dead two weeks.”

He staggered back then, as if I’d taken that blade in his voice and hit him with the blunt end. His expression, uncertain, as though I were playing some cruel joke.

“No, I would never...” he ran his hand across his face, suddenly vulnerable in the soft light: ashen skin, tired lines, shadowed features that made him look hollowed out, too thin. He kept shaking his head, watching me like a helpless child. “I just...I couldn’t be alone tonight.” His voice grew quieter, barely audible under his breath. “I didn’t know what would happen if I was alone.”

All at once, my anger fell to the floor, how I imagined it would feel for skin to slide off bone. In its place, something colder settled—regret, maybe, or some distant cousin of sympathy. I didn’t move, my skeleton standing bare in front of him.

He misinterpreted my silence for judgment. “I’m sorry,” he murmured, turning away. “I’ll go.”

I reached out, fingers catching his wrist before he could turn. His pulse thrummed beneath my fingertips, fast, uneven, a flutter trapped beneath skin. He froze, gimlet eyes searching mine as if I were playing another trick. That sadness pressed deeper, a hook catching under my ribs, pulling at bone. How deeply had I been taught to distrust him?

“I’m sorry,” I said. I wanted to say more, but the words withered before they reached my lips, leaving only that one—weak and insubstantial, “Stay.”

The tension in his arm eased. He nodded, and something familiar surfaced in his expression, a fleeting smile, like the settling of dust in a room gone still. Lowering himself onto the bed, the mattress sighed beneath his weight, and I slipped away to change.

When I returned, I found him sitting on the floor beside my bed, still wearing the clothes he’d arrived in. It was late. Silence draped itself over us, dark, thick, oppressive. It was laced, too, by an unexpected awkwardness, the tension you’d feel if someone were eavesdropping.

“Do you think about her often?” he asked suddenly, his voice low.

“Of course I do.”

He was quiet for a moment, then, “I keep thinking she’s still here.”

I looked past him, to the frames on my desk—the one of her and Arthur, facedown, as if she were hiding from us. And, faintly, the air still held a trace of her perfume, that bright floral scent she loved so much. I nodded, not trusting myself to speak.

“You remember the night she died?” he asked, his hand drifting again to the back of his neck. “That night, I just kept thinking...”

He didn’t finish. The room suddenly felt too small.

“Arthur, don’t.”

He looked up, eyes hollow. “Don’t what?”

“Don’t say something you’ll regret,” I whispered. “Not about her.”

A flicker of heat—anger, maybe—passed through his expression before it softened, leaving only exhaustion. For a brief, shameful moment, I wanted him to stay angry, to let that fury break over the both of us. Anything was better than this empty, fragile quiet.

I lay back on the bed, staring at his outline in the half-dark, just a faint silhouette against the wall. I almost reached out, touched his wrist, felt as his

pulse steadied. But something—some shadow, guilt's ghost—held me still, pricking at my palms, seizing my hands.

I used to think isolation was a safe place, but Arthur and I knew better now—we were never left alone. Locked doors meant nothing to Claudia in death.

I closed my eyes and rolled away from him, the space between us growing colder. The room seemed to hold its breath, waiting.

Hours may have passed while I drifted in and out of sleep.

Then, somewhere in that suspended time between night and morning, I felt warmth at my throat. It was soft at first, like breath—then something sharper, colder. Metal. Pressed against my neck.

I froze, my breath catching in my chest. “Arthur?” I whispered, my voice barely audible, the word trembling.

There was no answer, just the pressure of the blade—steady, deliberate.

His hand tightened around the handle. “Don’t move,” he said, his voice cold like the metal, distant and hollow. “Don’t say a word.”

I stayed still as death, and didn’t speak. I never would.

BRaille FOR THE BRUISED

It was the sleeves that gave her away. Ava sat with her head in my lap, toes curled in the grass, limbs splayed under a tree. With winter's grip gone, we shed our layers. She wore the short-sleeve shirt that I gave her—the first since October.

Above, the sky looked fragile, as if it would crack were we to look too long—its dome pinpricked with stars, barely holding back light in the dark; Ava's pale skin and fair hair, just as fragile—a glass figurine.

As she shifted, planting hands behind her back, I saw—bruises, shadowed streaks of blue and green, wrapped around her wrists like ribbons tied too tight. I began to speak but faltered, the words drying up before taking shape. My hand hovered, caught halfway between us.

“Let me see,” the words rough, jagged.

Ava sat up, confusion hardening into irritation before she went silent.

“What's going on?”

She pulled her hands into her lap, curling them into fists.

I grabbed her wrist, turned over her palm, and traced my fingers over the blue ribbons—*finger marks*. I stifled a weak, strangled sound, a question half-formed, already answered. She flinched, pulling away, but I had already felt the raised skin, already understood—braille for the bruised.

Ava wouldn't look at me, her silence deepening. I felt it lifting to the glass dome sky, cutting right up to the stars.

I looked up, and for a moment, the stars were nothing but indifferent witnesses, silent and unblinking. I thought, not for the first time, what liars they were, the stars and sky—everything still, as if the earth weren't shivering underfoot. *How human, to think the sky should grieve for us.*

At that, despite it all, a laugh escaped—short, stifled.

Ava tensed at the sound, her head snapping like a startled animal, eyes darting toward me. Briefly, she froze, her body coiled tight. In the same moment, she seemed to force herself to relax. I saw it then—the flicker of fear, a reflex, too quick to be anything else.

Something fierce tightened in me. I hadn't known myself to be violent, but in that fleeting moment, I felt the cruel urge to wrap those blue ribbons on her

wrist around someone else's throat, to brand her scars into whoever had done this. The impulse was sharp, cutting through my rationale like a knife.

"I'm sorry," Ava whispered, curling her legs into her arms.

As quickly as that impulse came, it vanished, leaving behind something crueler still—that hollow ache I would grow familiar with: powerlessness. A fuse with nothing to ignite.

I cupped her face in my hands. "What are we going to do?" I asked, my voice, a rubber band pulled taut.

She sighed, her eyes glassy, apologetic. The stars shone cruelly overhead. "Nothing," she breathed. "We are going to do nothing."

COMPULSION

I was never meant to be there that night. Not in that part of campus, certainly not in the shadow of that building. It was a place most students ignored, an architectural oddity tucked behind the science wing, its dark brick and narrow arched windows more suited to a cloister than a university. I'd only ever seen it from a distance, passing by late at night, catching the faint flicker of light from within.

You didn't realize I could see your silhouette through the second-story window, poorly back-lit by a yellow hue.

The sun had set more than an hour earlier. You had been watching me for two, and I, you.

From afar, you appeared a presence from another century—sharp-shouldered, self-contained, intense. A portrait from a museum, a shadow-carved figure, distant and untouchable.

I sat against the base of a tree, bent over a book, glancing up when I thought it safe, only to discover searching eyes just above my head, the lines of your face softened by lamplight.

Suddenly, our gazes met through the glass, and for a breath, an intruder was exposed. The air, still, I, fixed in place, a moth caught in amber. My hand on the book, a thrumming pulse, but I was already half-gone into the shadows.

I saw you again, a few days later. I watched you from my side of the room. Your hair reached down your back, curling gently at its ends like vines. From my angle, completely unmoving, you were a statue, chiseled from marble—dignified, elegant, bewitching.

"Do you know her?" I asked. Andrew straightened beside me, following my eyeline.

"Yes," he said, then retracted, "Well, I know of her. She's at the Arts College too. An actress."

His words, distant, filtered through the buzz of chatter and clinking glasses, but I caught enough. *An actress*. You didn't have the overdone theatrics of most actors I'd known. There was no grand gesture, no exaggerated expression—only a natural ease.

Sensing my gaze, you shifted. Your eyes lifted, caught on mine, a magnet snapping into place. A subtle movement—just the turn of your chin, a slight narrowing of your gaze—but enough to make my heart stutter, a strange thrill.

You had moved, slipping out from under the archway, weaving through the crowd. When you reached me, you paused, glancing at Andrew with a slight nod—a polite, dismissive acknowledgment, nothing more—before turning those eyes back to me. Up close, I could see the way your lashes cast shadows across your cheekbones, how the soft amber light caught in your hair, spilling over your shoulders.

“I’ve seen you here before,” she said, her voice low and measured.

“I don’t think we’ve ever met.”

“No, I suppose not.” You held my gaze, eyes unwavering, “But I think we share a habit.” Your voice was low enough that it barely carried beyond the two of us.

“A habit?” I asked, heart thudding so loud I was sure you could hear it. My fingers curled reflexively around the spine of my glass, tightening.

You moved your head, a faint smile on your lips. “Watching,” you murmured. “And being watched.”

Your words lingered, threading between us, an invitation. Suddenly, I felt we were alone, the chatter, Andrew’s laughter—all of it receding until it was just us two.

You tilted your head, as if considering me, and that slight, assessing look made me feel like I’d been stripped bare. Under your gaze, I was painfully aware of every detail—the curl of hair against my collar, the damp of my palms, the rise and fall of my breath.

“You’re curious about the building, aren’t you?” you asked, voice soft.

I hesitated. I wasn’t sure I had a good answer, but curiosity pulled at me.

Finally, I nodded, and your smile deepened, a faint curve at the corner of your mouth.

“Come,” you said, slipping your hand into mine before I had time to think.

The air outside was cold, the kind that pricks at your skin and sharpens your breath. Your hand was warm in mine, your fingers wrapped tight. The dark brick building loomed above, the arched windows black and hollow.

You paused at the door, glancing over your shoulder, your eyes catching the light in that way of yours, half-shadowed and unreadable. “Are you sure?”

You phrased it not as a question, but a warning.

“Yes.”

The key appeared from somewhere in the folds of your coat, and in a swift, practiced motion, you unlocked the door and pushed it open.

The silence in the building was palpable, thick and dense. The interior was stranger than the exterior, disorienting. Shelves lined the walls, not filled with books, but with boxes, files, objects I couldn't identify, each wrapped in frayed string, some sealed with crumbling wax, others labeled with cryptic symbols.

“This isn't an archive, is it?” I asked, my voice barely above a whisper.

“Not in the way you're thinking.” You led me further in, moving through the labyrinth of shelves. “It's a collection. Or a record.”

You stopped before a narrow set of stairs, carved into the far wall, hidden in shadow. The air was thick with the scent of dust and something else, something metallic and sharp. Your hand slipped from mine as you turned to face me, one step above.

“A record?” I asked.

“Records of people,” you murmured. “Of moments.” You tilted your head, studying me with a slight smile. “Do you think objects hold memories?”

I hesitated. “Sure,” I said. “If the memory is strong enough.”

Your smile deepened, as if I'd passed some test. “Come,” you said, turning to lead me up the stairs.

We reached a small landing, lit only by the flicker of an old incandescent bulb hanging from the ceiling. Another door, this one narrow and worn, stood at the top.

You took a breath, then opened it, ushering me inside.

The room was small, with a single window facing out over the campus. I could just make out the contents of the space: a desk, a leather armchair, and walls covered in framed portraits, delicate and faded.

I moved closer, ran my fingers over the faces. They were all young, all different—a collage of strangers, frozen in time. I felt your presence beside me, close enough that I could feel the warmth of your breath on my cheek.

“They're former students,” you said softly, reverence in your tone. Your gaze drifted over the portraits, lingering on one in particular—a boy with dark, serious eyes, his expression caught somewhere between fear and fascination.

“What happened to them?” I asked, though I wasn't sure I wanted to know the answer.

Your eyes met mine. “Some left,” you said. You reached up, your fingers brushing lightly over the glass of one of the frames. “Others stayed.”

A chill ran down my spine.

“Why are you telling me this?” I whispered, though my voice sounded small, as if the room itself were swallowing it.

You looked at me, that slight smile pulling again at your lips. “Because you’re here. Because you want to know.”

I felt a strange compulsion I couldn’t quite name. The portraits seemed to watch us, and I found myself unable to look away. The boy with the dark eyes stared from his frame, his gaze, pleading.

“You can still leave,” you murmured, your voice barely audible. You stood beside me, so close that our shoulders nearly touched, and yet you felt distant. “Most people turn back.”

I swallowed, the dryness in my throat making it hard to speak. But some part of me—the same part that had been drawn to the flickering light in the window, the same part that had followed you here, mesmerized—refused to turn away. “And if I stay?”

“Then you become a part of the story,” you said simply. “Like they did.”

The words hung between us, potent. I felt the room shift around me, as though the portraits themselves were holding their breath, waiting. Somewhere behind me, I heard the quiet click of the door shut.



ANNA KLEINBERG '26
THE STAR PRINCE

Once upon a time there lived a prince made of starlight. He spent his days dancing amongst the heavens, a carefree soul who thought of nothing but light and happiness. When the other beings of the Cosmos saw his sparkling form, their burdens were lifted, and worried minds were put to rest. The prince's world was joyous, and within his shining kingdom, there was no such thing as fear. He ruled kindly and fairly and thought that everyone loved him as much as he loved them. For the most part, he was right.

One perfect day the prince's most trusted advisor came to him as he sat on his throne, a brilliant seat made from the light of a thousand moons, and whispered in his ear. Now this advisor was not just any man; he was an entity born from the darkness between stars, and had existed long before creation. He was old and wise and very likely knew everything there was to know about the universe. The prince admired him greatly, and whenever his advisor had something to say, he stopped and listened.

"My liege," he began, in a voice spilling like ink, "it seemsss trouble is brewing on the outskirtssss of the kingdom."

"Is there, now?" The prince rested his chin on one glowing hand, listening intently. "What's the problem?"

"Cetus has broken free and is now wreaking havoc on the wessstern border." Cetus? The prince had to keep himself from gasping. The beast, a towering monstrosity made from the dust of a dying star, had been locked away past the edge of the Cosmos in a cell made out of void so pure that it was thought to be indestructible. After the last time it had attacked the kingdom, a rampage that had put out suns and fractured many planets, it had been placed there to ensure that the events of the past would not be repeated."

"And yet they're happening again as we ssssspeak," the advisor continued, uncannily reading the prince's mind.

The prince thought for a moment, realizing that he'd soon have to take action. Normally, sending the Cosmic Army, an elite force of comet warriors, would be the best plan. However, if the people observed thousands of soldiers marching across the galaxy, the prince knew they'd panic. He'd always gone out

of his way to make sure his kingdom felt safe, so, without any other options, he settled on a riskier option.

“If Cetus really does pose as great a threat as it did during the Age of Shattered Suns, then there is nothing else for me to do but to fight it myself. It will be a long and dangerous mission, and I am unsure when I will return. While I am gone, dear advisor, I ask that you take over the throne for me. This is an awesome responsibility, but there is no one who I trust more than you.”

Leaning over him, the advisor’s lightless mass dampened the prince’s glowing aura. “Thank you, my liege. However, I must assssk: in the event that you are unable to return?”

Taken aback, the prince retreated slowly. “If I have not come home before a year has passed on the Planet of Fleeting Dreams, then I would have you adopt the Crown permanently. No one in the Cosmos is a more worthy successor.” He paused for a moment, letting his words sink in. “But fear not, my friend, for I stand a good chance of defeating Cetus and living to tell the tale. As it is born of a dead star, it abhors the light. It just so happens that I am made of what it hates most.”

The advisor smiled with something more like an endless pit than a mouth. “That isss good to hear. It would be ever sssso unfortunate if you were lost to the depths of space.”

“Yes, it would be.”

As the citizens of the Cosmos carried on with their lives, unaware of any danger, the prince prepared for his perilous quest. He decided that he’d bring with him the Moonshield Cloak, an ancient relic that would make him shine even brighter, a two-month supply of Asteroid Juice, the kingdom’s most popular beverage, and the Spear of Midnight Sun, a powerful weapon that would hopefully destroy Cetus once and for all.

After packing his things, the prince set off without ceremony, hoping his inconspicuous departure would ensure that no one noticed his absence. It would be a treacherous journey, but he was confident in his ability. As the prince departed his palace, he gazed into the Cosmos, his destination a single point of darkness on the horizon. It was a place that not even the brightest star’s light could reach, except, perhaps, for his.

It took the prince about two Cosmic Weeks to reach the little dark patch. It was, without a doubt, the most difficult voyage he'd ever embarked on. Sometimes, he flew so close to stars that even he, a creature made of light and heat, could feel the great balls of fire burning him. Other times, and this happened more frequently when he reached the Cosmos' outermost arm, he was left floating in near void, the space around him freezing cold, pitch black.

Despite the challenges, though, the prince pressed on, and after spending the night camping on a small asteroid, he arrived at Cetus' lair. The beast had taken over a small solar system, whose sun he had extinguished and whose planets he had taken for himself. It was a dead place, the only light shining there the eerie white glow from the remnants of a supernova.

At first glance, the prince saw no sign of Cetus. Even after thoroughly searching all six of the nearby planets, he found nothing but rock, dust, and the bones of unfortunate creatures who lived in the solar system before Cetus had destroyed their sun. After putting in so much effort, the prince was frustrated and exhausted, so he sat down on one of the planets and gazed into space, searching for the bright spark of his palace amongst the heavens.

As he gazed into the Cosmos, something in the sky shifted. He couldn't detect what had changed, not at first, but then he realized that parts of the supernova were moving, forming something. It was a creature, although not any that the prince had ever seen, with a thick, sinuous tail, two powerful forearms, and a head that resembled a Nightspell Starwolf. And yet, as he grabbed his spear and donned his cape, he realized that he did recognize the beast: it was Cetus.

The prince leapt into action: he launched himself into the planet's orbit, and directed his weapon towards Cetus. "You know why I've come here!"

Cetus made a rumbling noise that sounded like laughter. "You came to destroy me, Little Star, but you do not see clearly, and you do not know."

"What do you mean?" The prince was getting annoyed; he'd come here to fight Cetus, not to debate it.

"You are wasting your time. The void I was trapped in weakened me to the point of no return. I am going to die soon, and there is nothing I can do. I did not escape to destroy; I just wanted to see the light of the stars one final time before my own disappears forever."

"What are you saying? Just look around at all the carnage you've caused; it doesn't matter if you're dying or not, you need to be slain before you can hurt

anyone else. And you're not supposed to long for starlight; from what I've heard, you despise it!"

Cetus' dim light flared for a moment, before it went out. It writhed in pain for a few seconds, until it shone to life again, weakly. "This place fell into ruin long before I escaped. And, as for your other concern, I used to be a star myself, just like you. Content with my peaceful existence, my life was not very different from yours. There are, though, in your dear Cosmos, people who hate the light far more than I. One of these fanatics destroyed my body, but even still, my soul lingered on. I grew into the strange, twisted beast you see before you, spending my first years as a monster lashing out at anything that shone, trying to destroy the world that I could no longer be a part of. But my time locked away has transformed me, has let me realize where the true evil lies in this galaxy. Let me be the first to tell you, Star: you've made a huge mistake."

The prince was outraged. "I've done nothing of the sort! Stop trying to fill my head with lies!" Seeds of doubt were beginning to take root in his mind, and he was worried that if he continued to listen to Cetus, he'd actually start to believe its words.

"Do you not know who destroyed me before trapping my broken body in the void, who left in my prison one fatal flaw that allowed me to escape? And do you not know that person, the very one you left to guard your kingdom, now seeks to take it from you? I might be weakened, but my reach in this galaxy is far, my eyes are many, and I see things that you are blind to."

Realization hit the prince like an asteroid striking a planet. Cetus was telling the truth. The prince's advisor, the one who was currently in control of the entire Cosmos, had sent him on a suicide mission. When the prince died, as he surely would, his advisor would ascend to the throne and have complete power over the kingdom. The plan seemed foolproof, would have been foolproof, were it not for Cetus, the dying monster who refused to do battle.

The large beast rumbled. "I can see it in your eyes, Little Star, you have discovered the truth. If the Walking Void were to take up the Throne of Moons, the Cosmos would be plunged into darkness, its denizens destroyed. I was once a heartless, mindless killer, but my wicked deeds are nothing in comparison to those he would commit." Cetus paused, its light still flickering weakly. "You must go now, and plunge that spear of yours into his heart. The Night Sky shall not be safe until he has dissolved into shadows forever. I wish you all the luck in the universe." With that, Cetus swam away into the depths of the ruined solar

system, leaving the prince alone. He turned towards home, thinking about what he'd heard. His advisor was a traitor and his kingdom was in danger. Clutching his weapon, the prince soared back to his palace as fast as he could, a streak of light zipping through the stars. Despite his speed, though, all he could do was pray that he wouldn't be too late.

It was worse than he'd feared. In just the short time the prince had been gone, practically every light in the kingdom was extinguished, and he saw no sign of the Cosmos' many inhabitants. When he arrived at his palace, it too was completely dark.

As he entered the throne room, he noticed that the only source of illumination in the entire building, besides himself, was the faint glow coming from the kingdom's sacred throne, currently occupied by the shadowy figure of his advisor.



“You are ssssupposed to be dead. Why hasss Cetus failed me?” The darkened room made the advisor seem larger, more intimidating. The shadows on the walls and floors could very well have been a part of him.

“It had no desire to fight me,” the prince said strongly, “All it wanted was a chance to see the stars again, the ones that you ripped it from in the first place!”

Chuckling, the advisor stood up, his form much taller than the prince remembered. Perhaps he really was feeding off the kingdom’s newfound darkness. “I should have known. Even before it became a monster, it was weak, foolish, naive. That’s the reason I killed it, and the very reason I intend to kill you. You have sssspent your entire life trying to banish darkness from the Cosmos; no more. A new age shall come, one without suns, moons, or stars. Loss, fear, hopelessness; these emotions shall be eradicated, for you cannot have pain if there is no one left alive to feel it. My world will be pure, beautiful, and indestructible. I will not have you defy me when I am so close to creating it.”

The prince pointed his spear at the advisor. “You will never succeed. It is impossible for you to extinguish every light in this vast Cosmos, and even the tiniest of sparks is capable of chasing away shadows. As long as one flicker of hope remains, my kingdom will live on.”

“Oh, sssso you think this place belongs to you?” The advisor sounded mildly amused. “Well then, once I desstroy you, I suppose I won’t have many obsstacles in my way. Unless, of course, you really think you’re mightier than I.”

This was the moment the prince had been waiting for: a chance to defeat the usurper, to prove that he was stronger, wiser, a better leader than this traitor had ever been. “Yes, I do. In fact, to prove it, I challenge you to a duel. The rules are simple: winner takes all, loser dies. I have to warn you, though: in a fair fight, you stand no ch—” as the prince spoke, something strong and fast and full of murderous intent ripped his spear from his hands. Before he could even react, he felt it plunge into his back, sharp and cold, and he collapsed to the ground as the advisor towered over him, laughing. He hadn’t moved a muscle.

“I’ll admit to one thing: you probably could defeat me in a fair fight. So why, might I assk, should I play by the rules? You talk and you brag, but you don’t pay attention to what’s really important. That, my liege, is how darkness wins. It sssseeps in through your armor’s flaws and cracks, but you don’t notice it until it consumesss you.” The prince barely heard his words. The world

around him was swimming and fading and he knew he was expiring. For the first time in his entire life, the space around him was dim. This was not how heroes were supposed to go, this was not how stars were supposed to fall, this was...

Something that was both the prince and yet not the prince at all opened its eyes. It did not know what it was, it did not know where it was. It didn't even know its own name.

At first, there was only a blinding white light. It wanted to look away, but no matter where it turned, it only saw the same eye-searing illumination. After a few seconds, though, the brilliance around it began to fade, and the newborn creature examined its surroundings.

It noticed that the world around it was in ruins, the only thing untouched, a large, glowing throne that seemed familiar. Had it sat there once? It couldn't remember, couldn't remember anything at all, except...faint snatches of memories played in the creature's mind. There had been a bad man, hadn't there? One who wanted to hurt it and steal from it. Where had he gone?

The creature flew into the air to get a better vantage point. It spotted a puddle of thick, black liquid in the center of the room, and headed towards it. What could it be? The creature leaned down and stuck the long horn that adorned its head into the substance. When it touched it, a chill ran down its spine. Strange.

Realizing there was nothing left for it there, the creature exited the room through where the roof had once been. When it made it outside, it found itself in a bright, colorful galaxy full of planets and stars. Stars? Why did that word seem to invoke some ancient longing within it? It had no idea.

The creature wandered aimlessly for a while, before it decided that it would try to figure out where it had come from. It visited several clusters of stars, looking for other living beings. On one planet, it did find life, but all of the Cosmic creatures there ran away from it before it could get in a word. The only reason it gleaned for their fear was the word "supernova".

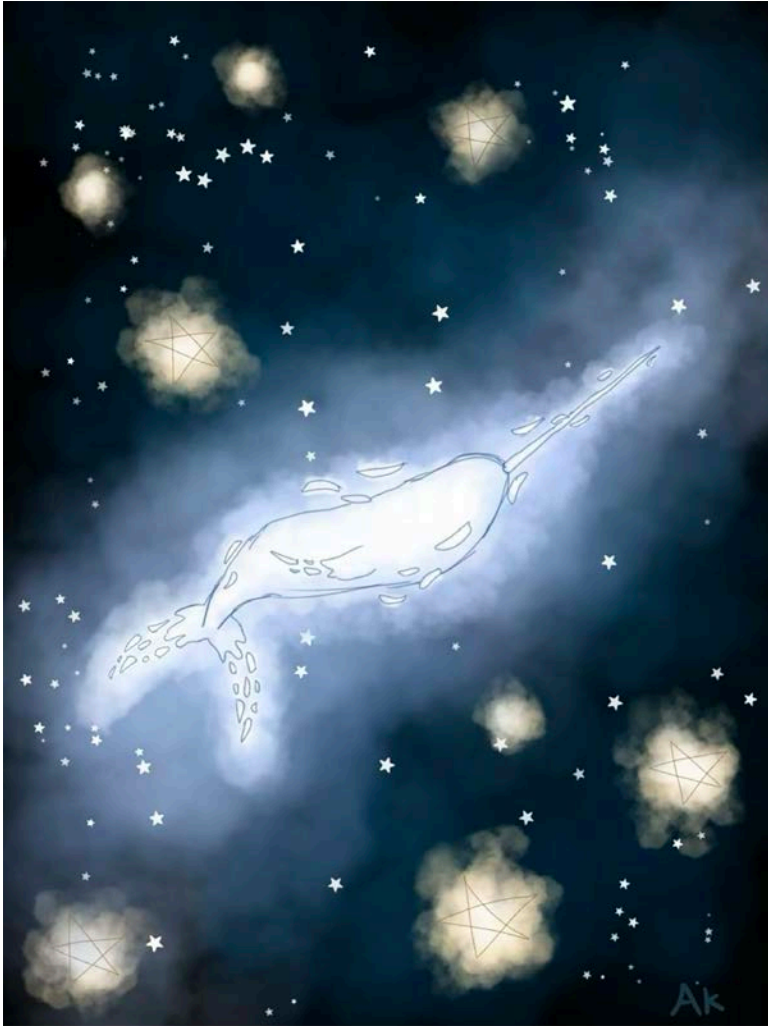
Unsure of where to go next, as it seemed as though it wouldn't be accepted anywhere, the creature headed towards the edge of the galaxy. Although its surroundings were entirely unfamiliar, it felt as though it knew the path it was undertaking. Perhaps, at its end, there would be answers.

Time passed. The Cosmos began to recover from the advisor's attempted coup and the death of its monarch. A new leader was chosen, a young star who showed a love for peace and harmony. As planets turned and orbited around their suns, the Days of Darkness faded from people's memories.

However, just because the galaxy was healing, did not mean it hadn't changed. Many planets had been destroyed, leaving refugees scattered amongst the stars. Although the Cosmos' many residents did their best to help each other, so much had been lost that they knew it would take eons to recover.

Still, not every new factor in the Cosmos was harmful: just days after their prince had seemingly sacrificed himself to destroy his traitorous advisor, rumors of two massive, glowing creatures swimming in the skies on the outskirts of the kingdom began to circulate. Curiously, one bore a striking resemblance to the monster Cetus, but both it and its companion seemed peaceful. Despite their quiet and reserved attitudes, the pair were willing to help with reconstruction, using their large size to their advantage. Although Cosmic citizens had no idea why, the smaller creature in particular had a calming, familiar presence, and it quickly became a common practice to spend one's time trying to find it dancing amongst the heavens.

It has been years since the Great Tragedy, and although one of the celestial beings has long since faded away, the other still lingers. Though once a wordless presence with no knowledge of its home or origins, it has found its place amongst the stars as a protector of the small and helpless. Despite its mysterious past, there is a spark within it, bright, ancient, immortal. Someday, when its body is gone, its blazing spirit will carry on, for something so pure can never be eliminated. It will continuously transform until the universe is no more, when darkness once again threatens to consume all. Even then, the single spark of hope shall create life anew.



HE AND ARLEN

All he's ever known is bloodshed, the feeling of hacking through armor, flesh, and bone with his blade. But now, for the first time in centuries, the skies above Belvedere are calm and gray. Birds, no longer startled by the sounds of clashing metal and gunfire, sing blissfully in the ancient pines, trees old enough to have watched the war in its entirety.

What do they think of us?, he muses to himself, packing everything he owns into one small bag. Fighting for generations over a reason no one can any longer remember, a purpose for which no one seems to care. Now, the conflict has ended, a treaty signed by Belvedere's frail, aging king. And these soldiers, born, bred, trained to fight and die for their kingdom, are expected to move on with their lives, to leave the well-worn battlefields behind.

It is time to go "home," to Jarrow, the capital. He must make the long trek across valleys, forests, meadows and mountains. So, he packs his bags, looks around at the camp he's lived in most of his life. It's strange, he thinks he'll miss the canvas tents when they're folded away, forever abandoned. Still, there is a lighthearted mood. Hope fills the air like falling snow, slowly drifting to the ground. He searches for a familiar face, and lights on one. It's Arlen, a brother-in-arms, loading supplies onto a wagon. Musket slung over his shoulder out of habit, Arlen notices him staring, and after putting down a large crate, strides over.

"Friend, you look sad. The war's over, why not celebrate? Look alive! And perhaps, if you could, assist me with this load." He doesn't answer, barely mustering an indifferent glance. From most, it would be rude, but Arlen is not offended. His friend is odd: silent, distant, but agreeable. Arlen smiles—just being acknowledged is enough—and returns to his work.

A few hours later, it is nearly time to leave. He stands in file with the other soldiers, Arlen in front of him. For the first time in decades, the clearing is empty of tents, with only a few stone structures and the burnt coal of fire pits to mark the camp's existence. He looks around, knowing it's the last time he'll ever see the place, before turning back and beginning his march.

On the first day, they make good progress, but Jarrow is still an eternity away. As night descends, tents are unpacked, and tired soldiers stop to rest. He finds

himself beside a fire sitting next to Arlen, one of the few people with whom he feels safe, who he's sure won't leave him. In the beginning, he hadn't been as closed off. He'd had friends, people who he'd laughed with, cried with. However, one by one, they've disappeared, become corpses left to rot in piles --stabbed, slashed, shot. Now Arlen is the only one who's left, and so he clings to him, prays, for both of them, that he will remain strong. But for the present, the fire is warm, comforting, chasing away night's shadows. The food, although far from delicious, fills the stomach. Contentedly, he falls asleep, but as usual, his dreams are violent, bloody, twisted. At some point, he wakes with a jolt, squirming restlessly until morning, images of death and brutality seizing his mind.

The journey takes weeks. Their path leads them through fantastic landscapes, an oak forest with majestic trees that nearly pierce the clouds, a craggy mountain peak littered with scales from the mighty, extinct, dragon. There, he stops for a moment, picks up a few, and runs to catch up with the rest of his group.

But every day, as the world reveals itself, the signs of war are more apparent; one time, he takes a step, hears a crack beneath his boot. He looks down and realizes it's a human skeleton, centuries old, moss-covered, encased in rusted armor. A few days later, they find a field strewn with mounds of bones, their cast shadows, ominously long. Silently, the men walk through it, gazing. Even Arlen, for once, is speechless.

Belvedere is an expansive kingdom, but, strangely, feels empty. They encounter no towns, only abandoned, burnt-out husks of villages, lacking people. With each day that passes, he grows more convinced that they are the last humans. But even so, there are signs of life. The paths they follow have been tread on before, and recently, too.

There eventually comes a point where the dirt footpaths turn into maintained trails, and, soon after, become roads. On these, it doesn't take long for them to run into someone, a farmer, pulling a wagon full of corn. They talk for a while, Arlen leading the conversation. For the most part, the soldiers are jovial, friendly. But the one who remains silent, a far-off look in his eyes, makes the farmer uneasy. Without explanation, he departs, leaving the soldiers some vegetables. Watching the wagon fade into the distance, Arlen's comrade wishes

he had spoken up, but upon reflection, he still doesn't know what he would have said.

The next day, the sky painted orange by the setting sun, they arrive at Jarrow's gates. For hours, they've been watching the city from afar, impossibly distant, never getting closer. Yet here they are, in the shadow of a great wall scarred from many attempted sieges. It is strong, real, proud, a monument to where their journey has taken them.

By now, they have been joined by several other groups, refugees and fellow soldiers. Wary of the newcomers, he sticks to Arlen's side. There are more people here than he's seen in years. As they wait in line to enter the city, he overhears conversations from individuals planning to start new lives. But something about the whole situation gives him pause, he's never been to Jarrow, never seen a large city. He hadn't expected to experience the end of the war, hadn't made plans for what to do. The fighting always seemed larger than life, and perhaps, larger than the world itself.

Soon, he reaches the front of the line. There, a guard asks him for his name. He gives it, speaking softly, making sure no one else hears. He produces documents, snatches them back once they've been inspected. Then he takes a deep breath and walks through Jarrow's gate.

The city is alive with noise and color. All around, people swarm through cobbled streets. Unsure of what to do, he looks around, waiting for Arlen to join him. After a few minutes, he spots his friend and walks over. "Where to?" Arlen asks cheerfully. He doesn't know, doesn't answer, so Arlen randomly chooses a direction, he follows.

Moving towards the city center, they pass homes, stores, all matching with gray stone walls and slate roofs. After a while, Arlen notices a shop that seems interesting, and pulls him into it. The shelves are full with all sorts of objects, from art to jewelry to weapons. As Arlen heads over to inspect swords, his friend hangs back, examining a small bronze statue of a woman sitting gracefully on a chair. It's not a particularly interesting sculpture, but it gives him something to focus on, a way to escape the shopkeeper's gaze. The proprietor watches him closely, making sure he doesn't pilfer anything. He won't, wasn't planning on it. Still, something about him, his silence, gaunt face, and demeanor makes him look suspicious.

After Arlen makes a purchase—a broadsword, sharp and glistening—the pair departs, the twilight air warm, comforting. They wander the streets for a while, going wherever they fancy. As it gets dark, Arlen stops to ask a merchant about inns where they can spend the night. While his friend speaks, he looks around, watching a young couple holding hands, strolling down the street. He smiles to himself, and, for the first time, as far back as he can remember, feels at peace.

THE GREAT VISSARION

“I am Vissarion, the greatest magician of all time. You may have heard of me from a friend, a relative, or perhaps, extensive media coverage. Is it possible that you have no idea who I am? Fine! All are still welcome to Vissarion’s show.

Tonight’s performance, a marvel, unlike anything the world has ever seen. I will be cut in half, with one part submerged in a pool of flesh-eating piranhas, and the other, suspended from a crane more than fifty feet in the air. In an instant, I will be made whole, without any trickery, before your very eyes!

Now, here is my assistant, RoseThorn—she will be doing the honors! I will climb into this box, yes, this very one, and she will raise the large, razor-sharp saw and cleave my body in twain. Shall we begin?”

“Mike!” A shout came from downstairs. It was his mother. Was he being too loud again, orchestrating his make-believe magic show? Why of course he was, he’d been practically screaming by the end of it. “What are you up to, sweetheart!?”

“N-Nothing!” His usual response.

Mike removed his magical top hat, staring at it. It was shiny, made of black silk. He quite liked it. When he wore it, he did not feel small or weak. Mike was Vissarion, tall, charming, a world-renowned magician with a killer mustache. He could captivate an audience of four thousand with card tricks, illusions, and dazzling escapes; he even had the hottest assistant, who was also, of course, his girlfriend.

Vissarion’s life was so unlike his own that it hurt. Mike was quiet, often lonely, and didn’t have anything to set him apart. He got okay grades in school, didn’t play any sports, and spent most of his time in class doodling doves and rabbits on his worksheets: a mundane existence that left him unfulfilled.

The hat went on the nightstand. It was time to do homework. Sitting at his small wooden desk, Mike grabbed his backpack and fished out the yellow math folder. He tried for a while to focus on multiplication problems, but his thoughts wandered. There was a thunderstorm gathering outside, and it seemed that every time he attempted to concentrate, a loud boom shook his room.

Mike put the sheets away, he'd have time to finish them later. He went over to his bed, where Rose, his goldendoodle, was sleeping. He gave her a quick pat on the head, to which she opened her chocolate-brown eyes. They seemed to ask "why'd you wake me up?" Apologizing, Mike headed downstairs for dinner.

Once again, the Gandinis were having tasteless spaghetti and meatballs, straight out of Stop-and-Shop's freezer section. It was gross: overcooked, mushy, an insult to food! Vissarion would never eat slop like this, Mike thought to himself as he shoveled the revolting gruel into his mouth.

Outside, the storm raged. "I hope we don't lose power tonight," Mike's mother said.

"That wouldn't be good, eh, kiddo?" His father added, trying to get Mike to reply.

"I-I guess so." The rest of the meal was uneventful, except for the occasional flash of lightning. Mike's gaze started to drift, the dinner table was way too boring to keep his attention. He imagined the room growing darker, purple velvet curtains on either side and a spotlight on the polished stage beneath his feet. His parents were replaced by a thundering audience, and, for a moment, Mike was Vissarion. In his mind, the great magician carried on with the show.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I apologize for the unexpected delay. As you know, it's storming heavily, and we seem to have lost power. But fear not, everything has been fixed, and we can resume the act."

"With your kind permission, it's time for the lovely RoseThorn to work her magic. Please give her a hand, or two, if you are so moved! Are you ready to cut me in half, my dear?"

"Ready as I'll ever be, darling."

"How you amuse me! Now, let me get into the box, just like this. Rose, time to begin. Break out the saw!"

"Ugh! The pain! Unbearable! Please, slice me as quick as you can. Ready the crane! Agitate the piranhas! The moment you have all been waiting for has arrived!"

Mike had a sudden realization snapping him back to reality, back to the dinner table where his mother and father silently stared at each other. And it wasn't

just a realization; it was a conundrum. You see, Mike had no idea how Vissarion could execute the illusion. If he really had been cut in half, then surely, by all accounts, he'd be a goner. However, if it was all mere spectacle, how did it work? Were the body parts simply props? Were the crane and the piranha tank just pretend? Was the entire rear of the stage a giant TV that could play a video that Vissarion had prepared earlier? All possibilities, but, to Mike, none of them seemed able to live up to the trick.

Vissarion possessed style; he knew that at least some part of the illusion had to be real. But that did little to help, limiting Mike's options. So, for the rest of the evening, the question lingered: "how?"

Mike was still searching for answers as he ate dinner. Later, brushing his teeth, he stared at the bathroom mirror, and asked his reflection: how did Vissarion do it? The other Mike provided no clue. Before going to bed, Mike sat at his desk, resolved to find a solution. He started by making a list, but he couldn't get past the methods he'd thought of earlier. Then, he went back and searched his brain for everything he knew about stage magic. A quote he'd once read from *Esperando's Guide to Prestidigitation* (Third Edition) came to mind: "Although the truth behind some tricks is complicated indeed, oftentimes, the real magic is far simpler than it seems." Maybe the secret behind Vissarion's incredible stunt wasn't that incredible at all, but then, what could it be?

Mike was lying in bed, trying to get to sleep, when lightning struck! Earlier, the storm going on outside of Vissarion's show had seemed like an inconvenience, but maybe...he could use it to his advantage. What if there was a second, deliberate outage just as the trick was being performed. At the very second a cleaved Vissarion is supposed to make himself whole again, a loud thunderclap shakes the room, and the theater's lights go dead, leaving the audience confused, in the dark as to Vissarion's fate. Yes, Mike thought, drifting off to sleep, that works perfectly!

"Prepare to be amazed! Three...two...oh! Oh dear! What's just happened? Everything's gone dark! Has the power gone dead again? I thought we got the blasted system fixed! This is a mess...I'm still stuck up here, strapped to this crane, missing the lower half of my body. What sick timing. Rose! Can you see how long it'll take to turn the lights back on?"

"Of course, darling. I'll be right back!"

“Uh, while she’s gone, does anybody want to hear some jokes? Though, since I don’t currently have legs, they can’t be classified as stand-up!”

“That was funny! Why aren’t you laughing? Okay, here’s another: why didn’t the magician finish his show? Because he was left to bleed to death while dangling from a crane during a power outage! Haha! That one’s a real killer!”

“Oh, was that too grotesque? Didn’t crack you up? Heh, sorry, I’m a bit nervous up here; I’m afraid of heights, and, well, afraid of dying. Wait! Hold on a sec! Is that the sound of Rose Thorn’s footsteps I hear?! Will she save me?”

Arf! Arf! Arf! The night time silence was broken by the sound of Rose’s wild barking. She jumped off Mike’s bed, and raced out of the room. The noise was more than enough to wake Mike, who sat up with first a look of fear, then annoyance. His dog was an odd one, sleeping all through the day but speeding around the house at night. She was cute, sure, but the amount of sleep he’d lost over his life because of her hinted at the existence of malice behind her large, innocent eyes.

Mike glanced over at his alarm clock. It read 2:35 am. During these wee hours, the line between dreams and reality is blurry, and for the ever-imaginative Mike, this was no exception. The pitch-black room, illuminated only by the face of the clock, was an endless void. He found himself unnerved by the quiet left in the wake of Rose’s ruckus, feeling like the only person awake in the world. He tried for a while to get back to sleep, but the darkness was smothering, unrelenting, and every time he closed his eyes, he immediately opened them again just to make sure nothing was watching.

Lying in bed, the image of Vissarion’s uncertain fate filled his mind. Mike began to regret thinking about such a morbid subject right before dozing off. It seemed that the only way he’d be able to sleep soundly would be to finish the performance, once and for all. Since there was no benefit remaining in the unsettling darkness, Mike flipped on the lights, prayed that his parents wouldn’t catch him up at this hour, and transported himself back to the grand stage.

“Darling, I’m back! How are you doing?”

One of the fundamentals of stage magic is to never let an audience know how a trick is performed.

“Oh, uh, you know, just hanging out. Rose, tell me, have they fixed the lights yet? I don’t know if I can take being up here another second!”

For example, if it was known that Vissarion was being lowered to the stage, invisible in the heavy darkness, this “magic” would seem little more than a common trick.

“Almost! The power should return any minute! Don’t worry folks, we won’t let this mishap ruin our show!”

The illusion itself is important, but maintaining the illusion is what’s essential.

“Well, tell the guys fixing it to hurry up! I’d really like to get down sometime tonight!”

Vissarion untethers himself from the crane, standing up silently and stretching. He’s been tightly contorted for several minutes to give the appearance of having been cut in half.

“Don’t rush them, dear. They’re doing the best they can.”

His fake bottom half is fished out of the piranha tank. He takes his place center stage, standing next to RoseThorn. Vissarion remains silent, his lines are being played by a speaker hanging from the crane.

“I know, I know. I’m just really frustrated. I mean, practically everything’s gone wrong tonight. I wish there was some way, some miracle to make this magic happen.”

At that, every light in the room turns on, momentarily blinding the audience. When it’s safe to look again, something incredible has appeared: Vissarion, whole and well, standing under the spotlight. He looks just as shocked to be there as the people watching. The theater erupts into thunderous applause.

“Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for attending tonight’s performance. Please, give a rousing hand for RoseThorn, and yours truly, the Great Vissarion!”

Through the roaring applause, a woman’s grating voice is heard: “Michael Gandini! What are you doing up so late?! Time to turn off your lights!”

THE ACCIDENT

We were told that a car had veered off the road. Unfortunate, but in my line of work, hardly unusual. What we hadn't heard about was the nightmare we'd be walking into.

The accident occurred on a small backroad, the kind that winds leisurely to nowhere. It's the isolated sort of place you don't want to have problems in. Usually, they're pretty safe, but when things go south, you might end up somewhere around Antarctica, and chances are, nobody will find you.

From the moment we got there, I assumed we'd be searching for remains rather than survivors. Although the accident had been recently reported, we had no idea when the crash had actually occurred. Not to mention, this wasn't the usual fender-bender; it was bad, real bad. I could immediately see that the vehicle had made it pretty far into the woods. From my point of view, it was nothing more than a black blob shrouded by the forest's shadow. It would have required some serious speed to make it all the way back there, which begged the question: why had the driver been going so fast? The obvious answer was DUI. Still, this didn't seem like the sort of area that was high on the list of party-goers. The puzzle pieces weren't adding up.

I've been a first responder for ten years and have seen every grotesque situation imaginable, but nothing in my experience could prepare me for what I observed approaching the wreck. Even before we made it there, I saw my colleague Jim, one of the toughest guys I knew, turn sheet white.

"Oh my god!" He was pointing towards the ground, his entire body trembling in fear. There, lying in a pool of blood, was something that no longer even remotely resembled a human. Car crashes can get nasty, sure, and I've seen some truly bile-inducing things in my life, but this...thing...lying on the ground seemed to have been decapitated, torn apart, disemboweled, maybe even gnawed on. The only way I could tell it had once been human was from the scraps of clothing that it was still wearing. I thought I was about to vomit, so I turned away and headed for the remains of the car.

The vehicle was in ruins. It had rammed into an old maple and found itself wrapped around it. There was gore and glass strewn about; twisted metal kept me from getting a good look at the driver's seat, but the sickening smell of

burnt flesh told me I didn't want one. I was about to tell the others that we should leave, that it was getting dark and there were clearly no survivors, when I heard a hideous groan.

I raced around to the passenger's side, attempting to discern from where the noise had originated. After a quick search, I realized the half-eviscerated woman sitting in the front seat wasn't dead. Although she'd been horrifically injured in several places, her legs stuck in the dashboard and her arms a limp mess of broken bones, somehow, she had managed to survive.

"Ma'am!" I cried out, rushing to her side, "Don't move. The ambulance will be here any second!"

She didn't turn to me, but clearly knew I was there. "We're doomed..." she said softly, matter-of-factly, a gash in her throat turning her words into whispers. "He's watching us..."

Dying people often say crazy things, but, even so, it was unsettling. "What are you talking about? Calm down, everything's gonna be all right." With her wounds, it was incredible that she'd survived this long. It would take nothing short of a miracle for her to make it until the ambulance came.

"He doesn't want strangers in His woods...the only reason I'm still here is because He thought I was already dead."

"Please, ma'am, just calm down. It's going to..."

Slowly, she turned her head in my direction, her eyes dead in their sockets. "We would have been OK, but He gets bored. Sometimes, He just plays with those passing through, hoping to pull them into His jaws."

"Dave...he got startled...tried to avoid the..." Dave? had that been the name of the mound of flesh we'd found earlier? "Our lives were over the moment we left the road...your time is running out too." Her eyes closed as her voice faded, and a deep gurgling emanated from her throat. Panicking, I realized she had died. The woods darkened around me, my thoughts spiraling. Why had she only survived long enough to deliver that last sinister message? What did she mean "our time was running out"? I had no answers, all I knew was that I found this place terrifying.

A sudden thud broke my chain of thought. All of the responders gathered around the car turned to look at the woods. There was movement back there, branches swaying and dried leaves crackling. Something was approaching. After a short, horrified moment of observation, Jim was the first to sprint towards the road, quickly followed by several others. Big mistake.

As my colleagues tried to run to safety, something from the darkest depths of hell lumbered out of the darkness, blocking their path. It was a creature both humanoid and animalistic: tall, bipedal, and covered in a mixture of fur and scales. Not even my wildest nightmares could have concocted something stranger. It roared, an ear-piercing shriek loud enough to wake the dead, and I screamed in fear, my own voice suddenly insignificant. I thought that if I kept going at it, someone would eventually hear me, however I quickly realized it was pointless. We were out in the middle of nowhere, isolated from the rest of the world. I could scream as loud as I wanted to, but nobody was looking for us, and nobody was coming to save us. Curtains.

MY GHOST STORY

Hey, listen up! There's something I gotta tell you. My new house, the one we moved into just last week, is *scary*. I don't know how else to say it; I've been sleeping with one eye open and have kept a nightlight on all night and have forced my parents to check the closets before I go to bed, because this place is a *nightmare*.

It all started on Monday, when we first arrived. I was *trying* to help unpack the moving van (and I was doing a pretty good job, too!) when Jenna, my stinky wet dog of an older sister, told me that I was getting in the way. Me? In the way? An absolutely *preposterous* (I learned that word in English class last week) notion! Still, she kept telling me that I was annoying, so I walked away calmly and decided to explore the house without her.

The place was a lot larger inside than it looked from the yard: dark, cavernous, musty-smelling. The wallpaper in the foyer was a nasty shade of red that reminded me too much of blood, and the floors were made of the creakiest wood I've ever stepped on. Dad had told me that the house was over a hundred years old, built in something called the "Vicktoryen Style", but that did nothing to make me like it more. In fact, I'm pretty sure that's just another word for ugly.

Almost immediately, strange things started to happen. The *second* I stepped into the house, I heard a loud crash come from somewhere above. It sounded like something had fallen over, which normally wouldn't have been *that* weird, except that *there was nobody upstairs because we'd just moved in!*

When I heard the noise, my self-preservation instincts kicked in right away, so I decided not to investigate for the sake of the wonderful person I am. Instead, I decided to ask my family members if *they'd* had any odd experiences, slyly posing the question as innocuous small talk.

"Hey, guys! Did you hear any ghosts today?" Three sets of eyes peered in my direction. "Not that *I* did, just wondering!"

Mom was the first to respond. "Of course not. Honey, I know it's tough being in a new place, but you have nothing to be scared of. Ghosts aren't real. This is a *wonderful* house, and I'm sure that in time it'll feel just like home."

"Yeah," Dad chimed in, "You're gonna love it, champ. Just wait until you start your new school!"

I felt like standing up and growling. Although they hadn't said anything to suggest it, I could tell that my parents thought I was nuts. In fact, their forced politeness was the worst part! At least Jenna, the mangy mutt that she is, had the decency to glare at me from across the table. If I really was losing it, I wanted them to tell me to my face.

Over time, things did *not* get better. In fact, they got *worse*! By Saturday, the random *thumps* and *bumps* I heard at first evolved into disembodied footsteps that roamed the house at night, wandering the rooms. Whenever this happened, I tried my best to ignore them and go to sleep; however, I usually stayed awake all night, keeping myself in a strategic, defensive, position under my blankets where even the most cunning ghost would be unable to spot me.

I don't want to use the word "afraid" to describe how I felt (because I've never, in my entire life, been scared of anything!), but I was definitely concerned. My paranormal encounters were growing more frequent and intense. If they didn't stop soon, I was worried that I actually *would* get frightened.

Everything came to a head on Friday. Over the past five days, I'd certainly *heard* lots of ghosts, but I'd never actually *seen* one. That was about to change.

It was super-duper late when it happened, probably around 9 pm. Despite that being *way* past my bedtime, I was awake anyways, because I'm just too cool for rules. I was once again lying in my impenetrable blanket fortress, waiting for sleep to come to me, when I saw a light shining from outside my covers. Realizing this was the perfect opportunity to face my nemesis head on, I threw back the sheets, only to be shocked by what I saw.

Standing next to my bed, shining a light gray color, was a real-life-super-spooky-probably-evil *ghost*! It looked like an old man on the surface, but I could tell that this guy had been dead for a while. He was wearing this weird-looking suit, and a tall, shiny hat. Nobody (except crazy people) dresses like that nowadays, and if that wasn't enough to convince you that he was a spook, he was also *see-through*!

When I looked at him, for just the briefest of seconds, I thought I was going to scream. However, I quickly realized that if I did, I'd just be giving him what he wanted. So, instead of shouting, I decided to do something a little more... unexpected.

“Hi, Mr. Ghost! How is your day going!?! Mine, personally, sucked, because you were a part of it! You know, *bud*, I don’t care how long you’ve lived here. You need to realize that this is *my* house now, and you can’t stick around anymore. You’re *dead*! Now get out before I find your bones and throw them in a river!”

Right away, I could tell that my plan had worked. The ghost looked horrified, and although he didn’t utter a word, I could tell that he was silently pleading for me to *not* throw his bones into a river. Finally, after standing there in shock for a solid minute, he vanished in a puff of smoke, putting my supernatural experience to an end. Idiot. How would I have found his bones in the first place?

So yeah, that’s what happened. The supernatural presence here seems to be gone, and I don’t think Mr. Ghost has any intentions of returning while *I’m* in charge. That means no more random banging or footsteps when no one else is home, and no more sleepless spent looking for the paranormal. Now I can spend my time simply enjoying my new house, because, you know what? After all that’s happened, this place has actually started to feel like home. Even though Mom was wrong about ghosts, I guess she was right about that.

LIFE STORY

People think I'm boring. I'm *not* boring. There's nothing wrong with working a nine-to-five, and nothing wrong with enjoying it. Like I always say: simplicity is the spice of life.

Ever since I was a kid, nobody's ever seemed interested in me; I'm not sure why. Statistically speaking, every single one of the 7.9 billion people on the planet is unique. And taking into account the fact that Earth is only capable of supporting life in the first place due to a very specific set of factors (its distance from the sun, its abundance of water, its chemical composition- Hey! Stop giving me that look!) that have not been found anywhere else, I should be the only one of me in the entire *universe*. Yet whenever I open my mouth, people look away and yawn. Not very polite!

When I was in school, I was known as "Teacher's Pet". I don't think trying my hardest to please the adults who put in so much time and effort into educating children is a bad thing, but the other kids didn't think of it that way. Whenever I answered a question correctly, or reminded the teachers that we had homework, they would sneer, call me names. Still, I was able to shrug it off. I knew that their behavior came not from a place of genuine hatred, but from their jealousy and self-doubt. Considering the frequency with which this happened, they must've thought I was a pretty cool guy.

After graduating high school at the exact middle of my class, I went off to college. This was, without a doubt, one of the most exciting times of my life. Not only did I decide on an incredibly interesting major, accounting, but I also had the chance to socialize with a lot of new people. I didn't go to a particularly large school, but it seemed like every time I got to know someone they vanished (maybe I scared them away with my encyclopedic knowledge of ferns), giving someone else the opportunity to be my friend. In the end, I never really got close to anyone, but I did collect a large amount of phone numbers that I like to use whenever I get one of those "send this to ten different people or you're cursed" spam texts, so it all turned out okay.

When I entered the workforce, my life took a drastic turn. Instead of following my passion for accounting, I decided to get a job in advertising. I told my family that over dinner (there's nothing weird about being 22 and living with your parents), and I thought they would have been absolutely delighted to

hear the news. Instead, my mother simply looked up at me, her eyes glazed over, and said “Oh, okay.” To put it mildly, that wasn’t the response I was looking for.

Despite my new occupation’s unfamiliarity, I quickly grew to enjoy it. The company I worked for, Artiflora, created artificial flowers. I was in charge of making their commercials, or, rather, *ideas* for their commercials. You know, I invented their iconic mascots, Ferny the *Dennstaedtia punctilobula* and Rosy the Rose. And the little jingle they sing? “*We never wilt, we’ll do fine without silt,*” yeah, that was also *moi*. Oh, please, don’t give me *that* confused look. I know you’ve heard it.

So, yeah, that’s pretty much been my life. Not much has changed in the fifteen years since I started working at Artiflora. I do have a few underlings who help me during my brainstorming sessions, but other than that, my job’s been mostly the same. At least I’ve started living by myself, in a wonderful four hundred-square-foot studio apartment that I rent from this old woman who I see about twice a year. Honestly, I think my choice to keep things simple has been working out fine. Everything’s been on the up-and-up, and no force on earth is ever gonna bring me down.

Well, after hearing my story, I present you with a question: am I *really* boring? I know in my heart I’m not, but just to try to glean the opinion of the masses, I’ve been going around and asking people. So far, everyone I’ve talked to has given me the same answer. I’m not going to tell you what it is, but, for your sake, you better say something different. If not, I think a two-hour lecture about fiddle ferns ought to change your mind.

ROBIN LINDEN '26
MUSIC BOX BALLERINA

It was late November when Beatrice left for the first time. Of course, she had thought about it before, visions of running away had crossed her mind hundreds of times, and elusive and wild plans of escape were often all she could think of. Soft and gentle Junes would make Beatrice long for the sun, and with the first whisper of choice, the first notion that she could leave, every month seemed to bring its own enticing reason to flee. July with its tan legs and sandy fingers, August with its faithful sunsets and melting ice cream. Even the cold of autumn made Beatrice yearn for change, red leaves on September floors, white breath forgetting itself in October's chill.

The thing that kept Beatrice from leaving the box for so long was interestingly enough the same thing that made her such a brilliant ballerina. She was dutifully obedient. With her lamblike demeanor and long legs, Beatrice was the perfect dancer. She was fragile, gentle, lithe and swift. Sometimes, she could picture herself so sleekly and with such care that she would disappear, a figure in the wind, a whisper.

It was not so much that Beatrice didn't enjoy her vocation, she just felt as if she was capable of more. Being a music box ballerina was more or less the worst possible job for a trained and talented dancer. With only nine-year-old girls as an audience, and the same out-of-pitch piano for music, Beatrice was not dancing to the best of her abilities. Sure, when the girls went to bed Beatrice could practice more advanced moves on their dressers, but that wasn't ideal either. She kept falling into pink hair brushes and cherry chapsticks, and with no music in the dead of night, all Beatrice had was her mind and pointed toes.

She cared for the girls as well. Lucie and Robin, 10 and 9 years old, were sweet kids. The two sisters were similar in height and hair, and with their knobby knees and crooked smiles, the girls were charming. Each night, Lucie would wind the music box all the way up, and the sisters would watch Beatrice dance in awe, bright eyes following long legs on the ceramic dance floor.



It was particularly warm on the morning Beatrice left. There was no specific reason she chose that Thursday, well into November to make her escape. No holiday or event, just something in the air which finally turned that thing in her brain that was making her stay. Pulling one thin leg from the music box, and then the other, Beatrice stood atop the girl's dresser, saying goodbye to the familiar surroundings. The pink princess beds and the stack of children's books, the yellow walls and the Nutcrackers posters. Beatrice had greater things to attend to. She slid down the banister, crawled out the mailbox, and took a look around. Houses as far as she could see. White with green shutters, blue with red mailboxes, brick with ivy. Houses and houses and houses. That was no problem. Beatrice would just walk till she saw somewhere she could dance. And walk she did. Blocks of well manicured lawns, sidewalks filled with parked cars and busy people, streets full of terrifyingly loud noises. The strength of her long legs seemed to be slowly abandoning her, and with each step she took she grew more tired.

After five hours of walking, she found it: Ballet Rhode Island. In all of its rundown glory, the tiny studio was in the middle of a bustling street, with small windows and a peeling decal of a pink ballerina. It seemed to Beatrice the most beautiful thing in the world. She slipped in through a crack in the door, and made her way to the area that said "stage." There, she found rows of burgundy seats, unfilled except for one in the front row, where a slim man with a mustache sat, slumped, tired, and angry. On stage, a single ballerina twirled, legs smooth and elegant, arm delicate and precise. In the background, a heavenly song was played on the piano, except it was a real man playing! Beatrice could hardly believe it. His fingers, full of knowledge and talent, hit every key, every note, and the large auditorium was full of wonder. However, the man sitting in the front row looked ever so unpleasant. He started to shout at the young dancer, critiquing her form. He was telling her she didn't look "professional" and that she lacked that necessary "grace" needed by a ballerina. Every couple of seconds he would yell a new insult, slump back into his chair, his face curled in a disappointing grimace.

For Beatrice, it was not the long walk to the studio, or the terrifying surroundings of the outside world, or even her relative size which she was beginning to think could be a problem, but the absence of Lucie and Robin. As she watched the beautiful ballerina in the perfect studio, she realized precisely

what was missing. Her girls. She needed the curious and bright eyes of the sisters to make her want to twirl and spin. For her dancing—she had decided—was meaningless without them. And so Beatrice knew what she had to do. Although tired and defeated, she had to make it home for a night time performance, where even with her crappy music and small stage and terrible choreography, she was still the happiest dancer in the world.

Long legs took long strides home, past garbage and cars and everything Beatrice had longed for. Chilly November with its white breath and promise of snow meant very little. Beatrice walked and walked and walked, till she saw her blue house with its little yellow shutters and sweet french windows. She slipped through the mail box and climbed tiredly up the stairs. The girls were already tucked in beds, but from their giggly expressions Beatrice could tell she was just in time for her performance. She readied her tutu and stepped on stage. Lucie's stubby finger turned the crank on the box, and the music began to play. The girls sat on the floor, princess nightgowns and messy brown hair, watching Beatrice with joy. The piano felt even more delicate and beautiful, and as Beatrice began to dance, she could feel the girls smiling. Twirling and spinning and dipping and bowing, the girls quietly clapped as Beatrice finished her performance. They wished her goodnight, then climbed into their beds and closed their tired eyes. That night, Beatrice did not dance upon their dresser, legs too tired and heart too full. Every advanced move or highly trained pianist or important stage in the world would not make Beatrice happy now. She had everything she wanted. Being a music box ballerina, she decided, was her duty, but even more than that, her joy.

TROPHY

Rowan was waiting outside the driver's side door of his blue Mazda when I left the dentist's office. The sky was gloomy and indicated rain. I didn't understand why he was standing there. He made no effort to open my door, and it seemed like he would have benefited from just staying in the car. He moved a toothpick around his smile. I wanted to tell him it looked stupid. Maybe this was one of Rowan's jokes. A play on masculine chivalry. I didn't get it.

"Cavities?" he asked playfully as I buckled.

"No, gum disease." He laughed, but I couldn't tell if he thought it was funny or he just wanted me to feel I had done something right.

Rowan was picking me up from the dentist's office primarily because he was one of my only friends who could drive and had access to a vehicle. Beyond that, our friendship was not shy of practicality. We wanted to hang out on Tuesday, I had a dentist appointment, he could pick me up. Things were always based on reality for us. We could both admit we liked the other one, but in the same sentence we could also both admit it would not work between us. Now we had awkward rides back from dental cleanings and the promise of things returning to normal or going horribly wrong.

"Parking garage, Prospect lookout, or cafe studying?" Rowan sounded more insecure than usual, like he didn't believe any of the places he had just mentioned existed. Or maybe he didn't believe I would go to any of them.

"Mm." I pretended to mull it over. I didn't really care where we went. As I feigned a debate over location, I studied Rowan. Blue sweater with holes in the elbows, faded jeans, freshly washed hair. His eyebrows had furrowed and he fiddled with the radio. A week ago I might have been able to guess what he was thinking. He might have just said it out loud.

There used to be this unspoken agreement between us where we could just say anything on our minds. Often when we would hang out, there would be comfortable bouts of silence. Minutes could go by where we were thinking thoughts we didn't want to share. It was never out of embarrassment; if we weren't saying what we were thinking it was only because the thoughts weren't clear, they needed to be developed more in our own heads before we could share them.

“I think lookout.” Rowan seemed surprised. Not necessarily at my answer, maybe more so that I’d remembered he’d posed a question.

He turned on the radio and slowly backed out of the parking lot. We sat silently as he pulled onto the road. It wasn’t a comfortable silence, and I wondered how to break it.

“What?” he asked before I could say anything.

The blunt and gentle “what” was entirely reminiscent of how we were before everything bad happened. The question was fraught: not just a forensic analysis of my silence, but a request for communication. Anything unsaid was unwanted.

“I like your sweater. You look good.” I took a subtle pleasure in making Rowan uncomfortable. Often, when I couldn’t sleep at night, I would think about witty, abrasive, intellectual comments I could make that would always be followed by the slight raise of his eyebrows. That time, he looked straight at me for a second too long, and I felt he was winning whatever invisible fight we were having. I thought of him brutally for a moment, trying to tangibly picture all of his shortcomings. This helped to restore the balance. I found this particular interaction entirely emblematic of something. A power-play? I couldn’t really figure it out.

“I don’t know if you heard. Me and Sophia broke up.” His ace. I wanted to clap and give him some sort of trophy.

“Oh.” I pretended to adjust my air vent. I was worried my thoughts would be completely visible.

“When?”

He cracked his neck and I regained the high ground. The sharp noise of his bones to fill the silence was a show of weakness, and I felt—even though he started off strong—that he was losing.

“On Sunday.” His voice had dropped in deepness and confidence, and I felt suddenly like he was a wounded animal, and this thought provoked all sorts of terrible emotions. Guilt, pity, embarrassment, maybe even slight anger.

“Are you okay?” I regretted the words the second they left my mouth. I was still feeling the fresh ache of humiliation from our last talk, during which I admitted to being slightly in love with him and he reminded me of the existence of his girlfriend and the thousands of problems with our relationship. I was hoping to maintain my cool disdain, at least until the animosity dissipated.

He nodded, slowly, after a long bout of silence.

“I’m sorry.”

“How bad was the breakup?”

“The sorry was in reference to you.”

I thought about this for a while before I said anything. Who was winning now? All the hostility I had been feeling had more or less evaporated. Rowan took the turn onto the dirt road leading to the lookout, and I wondered if I even wanted to win anymore.

“Are you sorry because you can’t be with me or because you want to?” He parked his car and narrowed his brows. He looked at the Barrington shore for what felt like a long time, and then he opened his door and walked toward the ledge where we normally sat. He dropped his toothpick on the road, and I considered picking it up. That seemed to imply more about my devotion to him than to clean roads or lack of litter.

Carefully, I made my way to where he was sitting. I placed one leg over the ledge, then the other, and I made sure my shoulder was touching his. I breathed harshly into the cold, and white air spanned from my mouth. I shivered slightly and paused my thinking of Rowan to be annoyed with the fact that I had forgotten a coat.

“I’m cold,” I said matter of factly. Rowan looked at me. All the complicated thoughts that had seemed to vanish on his walk from car to ledge were back as he studied my face.

“I’m sorry.”

“You’re sorry I’m cold?”

It was a long time before he answered.

“I’m sorry I can’t make you warm.”

The ocean raged in front of us. He had officially won. I thought very hard on what his prize was. If not me, or the absence of me, what could I give him? The satisfaction of the win? It was becoming increasingly apparent that I was the only one who cared about that. To him, it would always be about the game. His trophy was knowing that I would never stop playing.



COLBY, COLORFUL RABBIT

“It’s the principle of the thing. We’ve been over this like a million times.” Colby picked at his nails as he spoke, unaffected, uninterested.

“Explain this ‘principle’ to me. If there even is one.” Wetherly was more engaged in the conversation at hand; she leaned over the table eagerly, speaking loudly, slightly annoyed.

“The principle is that I hate the taste. It’s gross, I don’t want to do it, I only have a certain amount of time to live, and I should only do fun and exciting things.” Colby wore a devilish grin as he spoke, reciting his points as if he was reading a grocery list.

Wetherly would go on to tell Colby that not liking something wasn’t actually a principle, and that he had the same amount of time to live as everyone else, and so he had to do things that were boring and gross, just like the rest of the world. Petulantly, Colby would roll his eyes and sigh, and though he knew his mother was right, he would stand by his “principle” and not eat vegetables for dinner that night, as he had done for the last 273 days. Although he was a growing rabbit, who required vegetables for strength, Colby refused to eat any, and stuck to a simple diet of fruits found in the forest where he lived. His mother, Wetherly, encouraged him to eat his vegetables, practically begged him, but Colby held to his conviction and protested. As they had done for the better part of the past year, the two would argue and Colby would win, and Wetherly would slump to bed, defeated and angry.

Fondly, Wetherly remembered her younger days as a wild rabbit. Although Colby would never have believed it, at one time his mother was a fierce, untamable spirit. She had plans of never having children, of living an unconfined life in meadows across the east, seeing as much as she could and experiencing everything possible. That was until she met Jim. He was kind and steady and enlightened and the perfect rabbit. The two settled down in a hollowed-out tree in the woods near the ocean, and had six children. Now, two years later, Wetherly missed her old side, the undomesticated, primitive and primal being she had once been. On the 273rd night of Colby’s fruit eating stint, Wetherly was so angry, she could feel a little piece of that old side coming back to her. Underneath all of that patience and kindness, a wild rabbit remained. As she lay in bed that night, fuming and exhausted, the first whispers

of a plan made their way into her head. Eyebrows furrowed, Wetherly stayed up till early morning, plotting, scheming, and finalizing until she was sure. Colby would eat a vegetable tomorrow, no matter what.

It was a genius plan. Truly. Wetherly left the tree early the next morning, climbing up the small hill, past the trees and creek, until she was face to face with a raspberry bush. She pulled off twelve berries, and continued on her way. She followed the creek to the edge of the woods, where her favorite carrot patch stood, hidden behind two oak trees. She pulled four carrots, then hurried home. Once back in the tree, she pressed the berries against the wood till a deep crimson poured out. Underneath the berries, she had placed her four carrots, and as the red juice spilled, she coated each carrot in the liquid. She cut the carrots into circles, and coated each circle with raspberry juice once more, before placing them outside to dry in the sun. She waited till dinner, then grabbed her raspberry-carrots. Now dried, you could hardly tell they had once been a vegetable. They looked like hard berries, or oddly shaped apples. Wetherly called her children for dinner, and like every other night, her other five kids happily ate cucumbers and kale—and carrots. Colby opened his mouth to give his nightly spiel about why he could only eat fruit, but Wetherly stopped him.

“Colby, I’ve had an epiphany. It took me a while to realize, but you’re right. If you don’t want to eat vegetables, I can’t force you. I brought you these...” Wetherly paused, trying to think of what to call her fake fruit, “rarrots. It’s this great fruit they eat on the other side of the meadow, and I’d never seen one over here till today. I just figured I didn’t want to fight with you anymore.”

Colby sat, mouth open, eyebrows furrowed. Never could he have imagined that his mother, stubborn and obstinate as she was, would’ve given up.

“Are you serious?” he asked doubtfully.

“As a heart attack,” Wetherly responded. Colby, though still slightly unconvinced, hugged his mother, and laughed.

“Well I’m glad you finally came around. These rarrots look great.” He picked one up, examined it quickly, and sniffed. He took a large bite, chewed, and then smiled.

“These are delicious! Thanks, Mom. You’re the best.” Colby quickly made his way through the other three carrots, still blissfully unaware of their nature. Wetherly smiled, watching her plan fall into place.

“Colby, why don’t you take a walk around? You know, get your steps in, exercise. Just be home before dark.” Wetherly asked. She still had one more part of the plan which she was counting on.

“Sure, why not? I’ll be back soon.” Colby hopped out of the hollow maple, and began to walk towards the meadow. For the first thirty seconds, everything was perfectly normal. The trees were as pale as always, the ground boring and gray as usual, the sky cloudy and bushes sad. But then things began to change. In a split second, as if the world was replaced with a different version of itself, everything began to turn colorful. The maples, which used to look brown and gray, now had blue and purple leaves falling from them. Colby picked one up from the ground. Vibrant, wonderful blue, like cotton candy at a fair or a hydrangea in July. He picked up another, and it was covered in splotches of deep purple and luscious pink. It was like the sunsets he had heard so much about but never experienced. Then he noticed the ground. Orange! It was a fiery orange, yellow and red and hints of blue making themselves known. Like a warm candle on a cold day, all Colby could see for miles and miles was orange. He spun around. The whole world was suffused in color. Deep greens and fiery reds, royal purple and ocean blue. The sky was a violent green, ebbing and flowing with shades of grass and hues of forest. What was in those carrots? Colby ran and ran, studying the world around him. The creek, which used to be a pale white, was now a silken yellow, bright as a dandelion. The grass which used to be a faint green, was now a rich coral, full of pink and red highlights. Colby hopped around the meadows, hands touching the tall grass, plucking blue dandelions from the ground and sniffing the purple berries which had fallen from the crimson bushes.

Wetherly watched Colby from a small window in the tree, fascinated and proud. She could see so much of her old self in Colby, wild and free, obstinate and fierce. She watched him experience color, real color for the first time, but it was as if she was watching herself. She had been a stubborn Coney once too, refusing to eat vegetables till her mother tricked her. And the world had turned colorful, and she too had run through the meadow, fingers outstretched, ready to experience everything. In the morning, Wetherly decided, she would tell Colby about the truth of the carrots. For now, she would let him have the experience in blissful ignorance. The world was vibrant, the rabbit was fierce, and next morning was tomorrow’s problem. For now, the night, the dreams, and the wilderness were nothing but color.

THE MAN IN THE PASSENGER SEAT

They're in the car on the way to dinner and she's subtly tailgating the man in front of them. Simon adjusts the air freshener and avoids looking at the road. Sally's driving has become a sensitive subject. For his safety and her comfort, he refrains from any comments about the lack of room between her and the blue Mazda she is now way too close to. It's quarter to six on Friday and they're late for dinner at Rowan's. They're not in a residential area but they're not on the highway either. If Sally were on the road alone, she might have been going 40 or 50 miles an hour. The man in front of her goes 25 and she thinks of insulting things she can say in regards to his masculinity.

Sally and Simon are not together. At least, not openly. As far as most people know, they are two friends who are relatively close, and Sally sometimes drives Simon around because she has a car and a driver's license and he doesn't. This is not very far off from the truth. Though the pair might think of themselves as more than just friends, they definitely would not consider themselves to be an item. The lack of title for their relationship does not grate on either one of them heavily. This is just not the type of thing they would care about. They are independent-minded, fairly closed off, thoughtful, confusing people.

The blue car in front of them stops short to let a man walking a Boston Terrier cross the street, and Sally is forced to apply additional pressure to her brake. Simon launches forward slightly, not expecting the stop. Sally puts her right arm in front of his chest, as if to ease his movement. He finds this action meaningful, even though it has achieved nothing. It's less significant for Sally, she knows she put her arm out to balance herself rather than to protect Simon.

"God, I'm sorry. Are you all right?" Sally sounds genuinely concerned, and in some ways she is. She is worried more about her reputation as a competent driver than Simon's safety, but she feels guilt for any inconvenience she may have caused for him.

"I'm fine, don't worry." Simon feels no anger for the short stop, even though he knows it's Sally's fault. He finds he lacks necessary anger for things he can't bring himself to care about. Maybe that is a good thing. He's unsure.

"I'm really sorry," Sally says softly.

Simon toys with the words in his mind before he responds. He thinks of Sally as a concept for a moment, picturing her as some lamb that is perpetually guilty. This eases any malice he feels about her bad driving. The idea soothes him: beneath the cold exterior, there is something docile and vulnerable that he should want to protect.

“You say sorry a lot.”

It is Sally’s turn to think then. She pictures herself as a concept too, but it’s different than Simon’s. She is an angry child who petulantly sighs and makes harsh remarks she doesn’t really mean. There is a lollipop in her hand and evil in her mind. She thinks back to times she has recently apologized. She finds an alarming quantity of times she has asked for forgiveness. She wonders briefly if she does more things wrong than the average person or if she feels more guilt. She settles on the latter and looks at Simon instead of the road. She really is a terrible driver.

“I feel sorry a lot.” Sally confesses this in a way that elicits a strange feeling in Simon’s stomach. Guilt and angst and a yearn to change Sally. A desire to fix her.

He moves a strand of brown hair out of her eyes and puts it behind her ear. She feels warm inside. He stares at the open road in front of them, and Sally speculates about what he is thinking. He wonders how long the two of them can go the way they are. Not dating, but not friends, silently wishing they could change the other, more things unsaid than said. They could go on like this forever. This terrifies him and he focuses his attention back to the car in front of them. It’s way too close again. For some reason, he knows that the only way Sally would ever stop tailgating was if she got too close and crashed. This, he feels, is emblematic of their relationship. He can’t figure out if he is the blue car, or the crash, or Sally driving, or the air in the tires, or the action of tailgating, or the driver who goes such a slow speed it elicits said tailgating. In Sally’s mind, he will always be the man in the passenger seat. Maybe this is what’s wrong with them. He is focused on the outside of the car but she is focused on the in. The crash would never change that.



LARA MILLER '26
THE GREAT RACE

“Hear ye, Hear ye! I hereby invite all creatures, great and small, to participate in an imperial race hosted by the Jade Emperor in two days’ time! The first twelve to finish will be granted a lunar month named in their honor,” shouted the royal bellman, officer to the High Court.

Animals from across the vast plains of China journeyed to the dark, wrathful waters to compete. A slick path of unusual blue-green stepping stones was located at each end, rising to a majestic turquoise bridge leading to a waterfall. Rat and best buddy, Cat, an orange tabby, huddled together near the falls, far away from Tiger and Viper in fear of becoming a pre-race snack.

“Maybe we shouldn’t have come here,” Cat said.

“Perhaps not, but it would be so lovely to win a race with the Emperor watching,” Rat said. Suddenly, a large black-horned creature appeared behind them. He was three times as tall as Cat, standing on her hind legs.

“Aren’t you excited?” asked a deep voice.

“I would be, except we aren’t good swimmers” Cat gestured between Rat and herself.

“Perhaps you could assist Monkey, Rooster, and Goat. I’ve heard they’re planning to construct a raft to get across.” The three looked over to Monkey swinging amongst the bamboo, Goat using his horns to carry the fallen stalks, and Rooster breaking the beams to equal lengths with his beak. They worked in unison like a well-oiled grinding wheel.

“It doesn’t seem like they need help. Maybe we should just give up and go home.” Rat said, turning his tiny grey head away from the roiling water, “Too bad there isn’t a large, kind, strong animal willing to ferry us across this deadly sea. If only someone could take pity on small vulnerable creatures.”

“Yes, too bad indeed,” Ox replied, watching with sad eyes as Rat motioned to Cat to embark on their journey home. “Wait a tick, what if I took you across? After all, I’m a strong, kind animal!”

“Really?” Cat exclaimed, eyes full of hope again, “You would do that?”

Before Ox could reply, the royal bellman, an elaborately dressed little man with short stubby limbs, banged the royal gong, summoning the attention of all.

“Attention, let all creatures line up on the river’s bank. The race will commence in a moment. There is only one caution: if you tumble over the falls, you’re disqualified.”

All lined up on the sandy shore. Ox folded his hooves under himself, lowering his giant body to the ground, allowing Rat and Cat to mount. Monkey, Rooster, and Goat stood together with satisfied smiles, although their raft was barely holding together in the rough waters, vines already becoming untied. Rabbit hopped to the bridge, preparing for the arduous hops ahead. Tiger and Viper stuck together, Viper wrapped herself around Tiger’s torso. Each animal wanted nothing more than to earn a title in the new year.

A few minutes later the Jade Emperor appeared, his red and gold threaded Dragon Robe glistened in the rays of the afternoon sun. Twelve beaded tassels of white jade, gold, and pearls swung from his *miǎnguān* (the traditional royal crown). With a bow, he began to speak: “Thank you all for attending this competition. I look forward to seeing its outcome.”

“Why is his voice so high-pitched?” a canine whispered as the Emperor continued his speech. Rat looked over and saw Dog, his Pekingese mane trembling with laughter, “My name is the Emperor and I have the voice of a little girl’s laugh!” he mocked.

“Hush, you are worse than my foal,” Horse scolded her mane, the color of hand-made red bean paste, dancing in the zephyrs by the shore. Rat and Cat looked at each other sniggering. Ox shook his head at their antics, wanting the mindless speech to end. After what felt like the passage of another dynasty, the Emperor banged his gong signaling the start of the race.

“Watch it!” Cat yelled at Dog as he splattered water on Ox’s passengers.

“Oh, little Kitty doesn’t like water,” Dog taunted, swimming away to splash Rabbit on the bridge.

“Little mutt!” Cat hissed. Rat smiled. He lay on his back, eyes closed.

“I think I finally understand Pig,” Rat said in a dreamy voice. “How she values relaxing over winning.”

“Who?” Cat asked, glaring at the murky liquid as if it were her nemesis.

“The little pink one who was snoring under the lychee tree...who didn’t even stir when the first gong sounded.”

“Is she the one that’s always late?” Ox joined in, his chin grazing the water.

“I think that’s her brother, Hog,” Rat said.

“No, that’s her father, Boar,” Cat clarified. Suddenly there was a shout as Viper lost her grip on Tiger, sweeping her to the falls. Before anyone could react, a long-scaled green and gold creature sliced through the air, grabbing Viper’s tail, milliseconds before she launched over. Dragon gently placed her down on the bridge, a few feet behind Rabbit.

“Don’t worry, you weren’t the first one over,” Dragon said. “Let this be a reminder to us all to proceed with caution.”

But Rat was barely listening, only one thing on his mind. “Ox, move it! With Dragon helping Viper, we could win this!”

“But shouldn’t we make sure she’s…” Cat started.

“She’s fine. Don’t you want to win?” Rat interrupted. Ox shared a concerned look with Cat before continuing across. Soon they were only a few feet from the river’s other bank. Rat was anxious, Cat looked seasick, and Ox was exhausted.

“Cat, you look awful, would you like a hug,” Rat asked. Cat nodded and, carefully, took Rat in her front paws cuddling him close, soothing her terrified mind. Suddenly, Rat bit her left paw, causing her to drop him and jump on her hind legs. Rat scurried to her tail and pulled it out from under her, making her plummet into the icy depths. Dragon, alerted by Cat’s screech, abandoned all hope of winning first place to chase after her. But he wasn’t fast enough. To everyone’s horror, Cat hurtled over the falls. Dragon dived after her, grasping her tail moments before she landed. He flew them both to the shore gently placing a terrified Cat on the grassy river bank.

A stunned Ox looked around to see Rat sitting on the shore, munching on a lychee nut. The Emperor oblivious to the betrayal, congratulated Rat on his victory. Ox scampered out of the water and joined them.

“Rat, what the ancients was that?” Ox glared at the tiny grey rodent.

“Congratulations Ox, for finishing second in the Great Race!” The Emperor declared.

“Yes yes, thank you. Now you, explain yourself!” Ox demanded, barely glancing up as Tiger passed by, the sunset orange feline still in shock at almost losing Viper, her best friend.

“Isn’t it obvious?” Rat asked as Rabbit handed him an orchid as she hopped across, “Only the true winner gets this kind of glory.”

“But we all could have been winners!” Ox pleaded as Dragon soared above.

“Then we would have to share the prize and that’s not my style. Look at Viper just now, cutting off Horse!” Rat exclaimed. Viper was once again knotted around Tiger’s torso firing off apologies to Horse a mile a minute.

“I’m so sorry! I didn’t mean to slither right in front of you! I’m sorry! I..”

“It’s ok. You beat me, fair and square. No need to stress over the order of the months, as long as we all get to celebrate!” Horse soothed as Goat, Monkey, and Rooster arrived at the shore, clinging to the vines that kept the raft together.

“You go first,” Goat said to the others.

“No way, you carried all those beams by yourself, you should finish first,” Rooster replied.

“Rooster is right. Please go ahead,” Monkey said.

“No, we have been over this! Carrying was the easiest part! You two connected and collected all those stalks!” Goat argued.

“Maybe we should let the Emperor decide.” Monkey suggested. The others nodded. Goat, being the fastest, took the lead followed by Monkey, and last Rooster with his skinny little legs.

“Dear Emperor, we have a question for you,” Goat bowed.

“Congratulations Goat for finishing eighth. And to you, Monkey for finishing seconds after, and you Rooster for completing your team,” The Emperor said.

“What—oh no, we’re just..” Goat started to ramble.

“Excuse me, I must go congratulate Dog,” The Emperor left.

“See, they even had to ask the Emperor who should have won!” Rat said, having not heard a single word from the trio.

“But why does Goat look so distressed if he won?”

“Clearly he’s in shock. He’ll get over it soon.”

“I still think you should apologize to Cat,” Ox said.

“Me too. What you did was really disgusting,” a young voice interjected. Rat looked over to find Pig, covered in mud, scrunching her snout at him.

“Fine. Dragon, can you fly me over to Cat?” Rat asked. Two minutes later, Rat was placed beside a soaking, scowling Cat, Dragon already halfway back across the river.

“What do you want?” Cat asked.

“I just wanted to say I’m sorry. I let this race get to my head.”

“Is that all?”

“Do you forgive me?”

“After you almost killed me! No, I don’t think a lame apology is going to cut it.”

“Cat, I am sorry. I thought Dragon would catch you sooner. I never meant to tarnish our friendship.”

“You didn’t tarnish it. You destroyed it. We will never be friends again.”
With that, Cat turned and walked away into the setting sun, signaling the start of their never-ending rivalry.

LAUNDRY

Ok, you can do this! You got into Harvard for Pete's sake! Just dump the clothes and press a button. But first, get out the money!

Come ON! Take the bill, you little stupid hunk of RUST! What if I kick it...oops, maybe that was too hard...hey, it worked!

Why all the machines? There are five rows! Let's do thirteen, the cheapest.

Shoot! that's a lot of clothes...it should be fine. Red can go with white...Think? What about this cashmere sweater? I'll just throw it in...what could go wrong?

Now, how much to pour? Hmm...10 oz...and around twenty pieces, so, I guess, all! 2 oz per clothing...Sounds about right. But where does it go? Maybe where it's labeled bleach. I mean, bleach...detergent, both kill bacteria....No?

What's with all these settings? Let's try speed wash, I don't feel like waiting here forever.

20 minutes later

Did it! Take that you obsolete box of metal! Ow...ow...solid, hard...WET?

Oh crap! Why is it leaking?

WHERE IS THE OFF BUTTON?!?!

It looks as if I rung out my clothes on the floor...why so bubbly? Oh well, in they go! Now, paper towels.

45 minutes later

What's that...smell? Oh-no-no-no! Off! At least the alarm didn't...never mind.

Oh, God. The Cops! They've come to arrest me...wait, did he just tell me to use my head next time? Am I off the hook? Oh, he's making me pay a fine...could be worse. Jeez, he's waiting for me to SAY SOMETHING!

1 week later

Ok, you can do this. You're at Harvard! Just dump the clothes in and press the button. But first, get out your phone.

“Ma? I need help!”

A RAT'S TALE

My brother Max made the fatal error of trusting a Two-Foot for free food, which is precisely why I'm now left to fend for myself. For generations, my family and I have resided by Tall City's river, the only safe place to live. My name is Rachael Vanderbilt and I'm a proud Norway rat.

Last night, I wrapped three ripe blueberries into a bundle, promised Mom (a very maternal rat) that I would return home soon, waved goodbye to my other relatives, and slowly crawled out of the sewer into the street. Despite the absence of sun, the Two-Foots were still awake and when they saw me, freaked out and shrieked like little mice.

"That's right. Fear me!" I hissed.

"Mouse!" a hairless one shouted. The nerve of him! That's it! I thought to myself, scurrying up his olive green corduroy pants and digging my sharp claws into the pinkish hearing flap on the side of his slick, bald head. The pale skin immediately turned scarlet. A second later, the Two-Foot attempted to flatten me under his heavy military boot.

"That's the last time you call a rat, a mouse!" I squealed. Not long after, a rubber claw grabbed my tail and dropped me into a clear trap, a lid muffled my squeals for help. It threw me into a larger metal cage—inside, rows of cells, imprisoning my relatives, all of us rodents, of different sizes and fur colors. A white mouse and a black rat were placed next to each other separated by glass. Soon, the cage started to move.

Sometime later, a Two-Foot with pimply blue hands grabbed my cell. All of us were assigned a metal box with holes too small to escape. Inside, long, dry strands of grass, a skinny tube connected to a tank of water, and three pieces of tiny green trees, which they called broccoli if you can believe it.

In the middle of the room, placed on a shiny island, were hollow glass rods that stood in a grid, colored liquid poured inside. Soon the Two-Foots filed out and after punching the wall caused darkness to descend on our room.

"What d'ya think they'll do to us?" a basso profundo asked. The cage to my left imprisoned a light grey mouse. I turned away, pretending to eat the trees, mindful of what these monsters were capable of.

"My name's Buck, and you?"

"I'd rather be dead than be caught talking to a mouse."

“Why’s that?”

“Let me think...The Murder of Murids!”

“The what?”

“The largest, bloodiest battle caused by mice like you. The battle that, after many struggles and sacrifices, we won.”

“You must mean the Rodent Resistance and I’m pretty sure we won.”

“Excuse me? Rats rule the rivers!”

“Ah, but mice manage the mansions.”

“Who wants to live with a bunch of Two-Foots?”

“Who wants to live next to a smelly channel of sludge?”

“And who wants to listen to you two? For the love of Alpha, ZIP IT!” a hamster squealed. A channel of sludge?! I’ll make sure the mouse knows who’s the real king.

7:30 the next morning

Three Two-Foots entered the lab, turning on the fake suns. Each moved towards us, holding a razor-sharp needle oozing milky liquid. One grabbed Buck, roughly shoving the pointy metal into his side before moving on to the next victim, all small, mostly mice. Only then did they leave us for the rest of the day with just a few scraps of food, a leaf here, a nut there.

This routine continued each day, same suspects, same food. At first, I was relieved not to get injected, but now I am starting to get offended. Why do Two-Foots prefer that...peanut of a mouse? And after, he gets a piece of cheese!

Five days later

Three Two-Foots entered the room, two held small clear cages, the other carried a wooden board with papers clipped from the top. They snatched the hysterical white mouse and frozen black rat from the giant metal cage, and left.

Those left behind were terror-stuck: some burrowed under grass; others became frantic, squealing for freedom; and some had a total meltdown, crying a tiny puddle within seconds.

“D-do you think they’ll be ok?” Buck asked, his eyes wide with fear.

I hope so.

In the following weeks, the Two-Foots chose two ferrets of different sizes, who were never seen again. Rumors circulated, the most popular was that the

Two-Foots were using them as workers until they dropped. The room became quieter and lonelier until only Buck and I were left.

“Rachael, I hope tomorrow we can work together to escape,” Buck said the night before we were taken. I thought of Mom, of my hundreds of aunts and uncles, and Max. Tomorrow I will do whatever it takes to get out of here, even if it means partnering with a mouse.

“Yes, I hope we do.”

At 8:45 the next morning, the Two-Foots transported us to a larger, all-white room. In the middle, was a cage twice the size of the one that I was in. Wavy tufts of reddish-brown fur surrounded a long, thin creature. A notice, taped to the top of the cage, revealed his name: Lester the Weasel.

“Weasel...is that the colony down south,” I asked aloud.

“That’s the Wistars,” Buck corrected.

“Maybe he’s a long-lost cousin. I mean, you’re what, six inches, he can’t be much bigger than that!”

“First, I am seven inches; second, never trust a weasel.”

“Why?”

Buck looked away. Suddenly, a Two-Foot entered with a brown box, walls dividing it into a maze. Lester was placed in the center, and Buck and I were dumped at opposite sides. A bell sounded announcing the beginning of the hunt.

I ran madly, searching for an exit. I heard him before I saw him. Lester grinned as he crept towards me, blocking the only escape route. Mom, Max, please forgive me. Everything turned black.

The sudden lack of lights didn’t affect me as much as it did Lester. Disoriented, he hesitated long enough for me to scamper into the shadows.

“Buck!” I screamed.

“Over here!” a voice trilled.

“Would you shut it! I am trying to help you escape!” Lester hissed at a squealing Buck who squirmed in Lester’s hold. Buck managed to kick Lester, making them both plunge into the wall, denting it.

“Whatever those Two-Foots gave you, made you strong like a rat,” Lester said, rubbing his chest where Buck kicked him.

“Did it have the same effect on everyone who was injected?” I asked.

“Yup, I call it ratification.”

“So what does this mean, I can tolerate living next to smelly water?”

“Hey!”

“It means you can help us escape.”

An hour later

“Uh, we’ve tried everything, this wall is indestructible.” I sighed.

“What if we go over it,” Buck pondered. Crouching down, he sprang, just clearing the wall. Whoa.

“Ladies first.” Lester bowed. Copying Buck’s movements, I leaped over the wall, Lester following.

Unaware, two Two-Foots sat at a desk talking.

“Do you think it’s ready?” one asked.

“I do, but we still have to get it ratified by the board,” said the second.

“Very funny!”

“Hey! They stole my lines!” Lester shrieked, getting the attention of a third Two-Foot. We ran.

“Um, excuse me, sir?” he said to his colleague.

“Just a minute, Larry.”

Larry pointed to our disappearing forms. We heard a loud shout followed by an order, “Get them!”

“How do we escape?” Buck asked. We were back in the room containing our old cells.

“Guys, look, a hole in the wall!” Lester observed.

“Where does it go?” I asked.

“Hopefully to the street. Buck, you go first!” Lester ordered.

“Or we could climb up there and sneak out.” Buck bobbed his head to an open window, at least ten feet high.

The Two-Foots’ steps grew louder.

“Rachael, you decide. Endless void or sunshine window,” Buck said. My head whipped between the two, trying to calculate the pros and cons. The Two-Foots blasted open the door.

“Hole. It’s closer,” I decided.

“There’s no way I am going into that death trap!”

“Suit yourself.” Lester shrugged before crawling in.

“Rachael, please don’t do this. Weasels, they—” Buck said, suddenly desperate.

“Rachael Vanderbilt, get in here!” Lester’s voice reverberated through the tunnel.

“Wait a second, Buck, I know you don’t trust weasels, maybe one beat you in a race or something, but I do. I certainly trust them more than a farm mouse!” With that, I crawled behind Leaster.

The tunnel was damp, dark, and stinky. It kind of reminds me of home. There was just one problem: my speed. Lester was twice as fast and continued to urge me forward. I wanted to tell him that I hadn’t had a proper meal upon arriving but I didn’t want to sound as if I was complaining. Instead, I pushed forward using the last of my remaining strength. When all seemed lost, I saw the light at the end of the tunnel. A beacon of hope. Lester gracefully slithered out the hole like it was made for him. I did not. For me, it was a bottleneck, the exit smaller than its entrance.

I managed to stick my head and neck out, but my stomach would not follow. Lester watched my helpless form wiggle within the wall. He offered to help, using his front paws, grabbing mine, his feet braced against the wall and pulled. My sides scraped and I began to bleed but I didn’t say anything, only thinking of my family and how I promised to return.

Soon, I just popped out, crashing into Lester onto the grass. I waited for him to untangle from me in order to continue our journey. Instead, I felt his grip tighten.

“Lester, let go, we’re safe now,” I said. His head twisted to whisper in my ear.

“That little deer mouse was right. You never should have trusted me.” I felt his cold lips against my neck.

“Let her go!” Buck jumped down from a heater box, landing on top of us. We all tumbled apart.

“Do you really think you can save her? I mean, look at you, you’re just a pathetic little mouse!” Lester jeered.

“Rachael run!” Buck shouted, never breaking eye contact with Lester.

“But, I can’t leave you!”

“Go now,” Buck sighed, knowing he was no match for the weasel.

I ran, turning away from the deadly battle.

A year later

(as recorded in my diary)

“I made the fatal error of trusting a weasel, which is exactly why I’m now left to fend for myself. For generations, my family and I have lived by Tall City’s river. My name is Rachael and I’m a proud Norway rat, founder of the Murids Movement, a group of rodents dedicated to improving relations between like-minded, progressive-oriented, forward-thinking rodent communities.”

PRESENT/PAST

Present

A cracked beam leans against the broken silver wheel behind a dented wooden table covered in broken dark-green pottery. Steady plunks sound from the drip in the rotting roof. Yellow caution tape fences off the shack's perimeter. Jasper sighs, pushing up his half-frame glasses. *So this is where you went* he thinks, memories resurfacing...

November, 2000

Jasper first saw Zoey sitting behind a potter's wheel, pale face smeared with terracotta. She was the only new student in Jasper's ceramics class, yet her vase was by far the most advanced compared to her teen peers who all had a five-month head start. Despite the students' stares as if she were Shoji Hamada himself, Zoey barely looked or talked to anyone. After class, Jasper pulled her to the side,

"Great job. Where did you learn to throw like that?"

"It was my first time."

"You have talent."

"Thanks, Mr. Marsh, I need to meet with the principal about my schedule, so I should probably..."

"Of course. See you tomorrow!"

The rest of the week went as normal. Zoey quickly slipped into the shadows of her new class so much that no one asked where she was from or why she appeared at school in the middle of November. The only time anyone noticed her was in Jasper's art class when she created one masterpiece after another out of lumps of clay. Seeing the joy blossom every time she got her hands dirty, Jasper started inviting her to the studio during lunch, and within a week, she created a collection of drinkware.

"I don't know what to do with all of these!" Zoey exclaimed.

"Give them away, I'm sure your family would love them," Jasper suggested, organizing the glazes by shade.

"Archer thinks art is a waste of time, that if I pursue an art career I might as well be throwing my life away." Zoey looked up from painting a plate, "No offense!"

“Who?”

“My uncle, Archer.”

“It must be nice staying with family. I remember, growing up, my uncle would take me to the ice cream shop every Saturday.”

“Archer isn’t like that. He’s military. Keeps reminding me how lucky I am not to be in a war-torn country.”

“Maybe you could make him a military mug?” The bell rang, signaling the end of lunch. Zoey gathered her stuff and rushed out the door, but not before Jasper heard a quick *Thank you!*

December, 2000

It’s the holiday season, school just got out and the courtyard was packed with celebrating high schoolers yelling about break plans. Skiing in the mountains, relaxing on little islands, and traveling to cities around the world. Everyone was filled with joy—except for one overwhelmed art teacher.

“Excuse me, Mr. Marsh?” Zoey poked her head into the art room, second-grade paintings littering the floor.

“If you’re here to give me more art for the show, just leave it on the table by the door,” he replied, leaning over his desk with another mound of work.

“I wanted to talk to you about removing my pieces from the winter exhibition.”

“What! Why? Don’t you want people to see your work?” Jasper snapped his head up to see Zoey hovering by the door, her raven hair hiding her face.

“My uncle doesn’t want me to engage in this ‘fruitless hobby.’” Zoey frowns, eyes glued to her purple Converse.

“Have you shown him any of your work?”

“I made him a mug like you suggested, but he immediately gave it back to me, insisting ‘I should...’” Anger bubbled in Jasper. *Doesn’t he know how remarkable Zoey is? Doesn’t he care?* “It doesn’t matter. I just wanted to let you know before you start setting up.” Zoey slipped out of the room, leaving a silent Jasper with his pupils’ work.

January, 2001

It was the first day back to class, students slowly trickled in. School droned on for Zoey, everyone chatting about their grand adventures over break while she just pattered about the neighborhood. The only good thing to happen was that

she finally found the perfect hideout, a little rundown shack that got great natural light and was close enough to home that she could walk to in under five minutes, and far enough away to mute her uncle's enraged screams. She didn't dare tell her classmates of its location, afraid it would get back to Archer. After the longest geometry class in history, the lunch bell rang, releasing a herd of hungry students.

Instead of following the throng, Zoey weaved her way into the art building, the longing to get lost in sculpting so strong it almost suffocated her. She flung open the double wooden doors to Jasper hunched over a mound of clay with half a lion's face sticking out, jaws open in a silent roar.

"Hello Zoey, how's break?" He glanced up.

"Fine, I bought myself a mini wheel. It's technically made for kids, but it does the trick."

"Wonderful! I want to confirm you don't want to participate in the art show."

"No thank you. Archer is attending the opening and I don't want to upset him."

"I understand, though perhaps I can change his mind."

"Doubt that," Zoey mumbled, already cutting a piece of clay.

A week later

Art show was a huge hit. The theme that year was *Winter Wonders*, pieces reflected artist's wonder of the world or the wonders of the icy season. Jasper's personal favorite was a freshman's papier-mâché polar bear dressed as a popsicle seller, a little striped ice cream hat perched atop his head. Kids dragged their parents to paintings and pottery before approaching their teachers for praise, which Jasper gave freely. His game face was starting to slip, already having talked to too many people, when he spotted Zoey and Archer, a traditional military officer, except for a man bun with a grey strand down the middle mimicking a skunk's tail.

"Are you the art teacher?" Archer asked, skipping over the pleasantries.

"I am," Jasper straightened up.

"Good. I am here to inform you that Zoesepp will no longer be attending your class, nor will she be visiting during breaks," he declared.

"We never discussed this!" Zoey cried, attracting attention from other families.

“It was never a discussion. Until you get your grades up, you’re forbidden to step foot in that god-forsaken studio! Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes,” Zoey mumbled, lowering her head in defeat.

“What was that?”

“Yes, sir.”

Later that night

Jasper arrived home to his fiancé Peter’s famous carrot cake in celebration of surviving the art show. It was delicious, but now came Jasper’s favorite time: decompression. They lay together in bed, Jasper lightly sketching Peter while he graded Physics tests with problems that made Jasper’s head spin. Everything was quiet...until the phone rang, its Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony ringtone blared from the bedside table. Neither made any move to get it until it sounded again. And again.

“What idiot is calling at 11:30!” Peter grumbled when Jasper answered.

“Hello? ...Yes, this is him...she what?... I saw her and her uncle at the school’s art show... Yes, both of them...around 8:45 I believe...ok...bye.

“Who was that?” Peter asked a pale Jasper.

“The police. Something happened with Zoey. She ran away.”

That night, authorities found Zoey, unconscious, in her hideaway shack. A neighbor called the police, complaining of noise in the woods, thinking it was kids partying after a long week of classes, never suspecting it was Archer shouting at his niece. In his anger, Archer had destroyed Zoey’s retreat, dismantling weak wooden walls, overturning the pottery wheel caked in terracotta, smashing Zoey’s latest work: a military mug with Archer’s name carved into the side.

He didn’t want to hurt Zoey; only for her to drop this all-consuming hobby before it dragged her to rock bottom. After all, who could ever live off of molding dirt? His tantrum lasted a few minutes before stomping back to the house. Zoey shook with tears in the ruins of her safe place. Devastated, she opened her bag and took out a bottle of her ant-depressants. She took one, and then another.

Present

Jasper heads home, the sun long gone. His apartment’s parking lot, packed, only a single open spot on the far side. Jasper glances in the rearview mirror,

revealing puffy eyes, thin hair sticking up from anxious fingers raking through it. Phone vibrates, *Peter*, flashing on the screen.

“Hey hon. You almost home?”

“Just pulled in.”

“You went there after the funeral, didn’t you?”

“I had to! You know...”

“Stop it! It wasn’t your fault.”

“She spent all her free time with me, I could have... I don’t know.” Jasper pinches the bridge of his nose, a migraine already starting.

“Come upstairs, soup is ready,” Peter says. Jasper slowly gets out of the car. The snow stops, clouds divide, revealing a full yellow moon. Under Jasper’s arm, a cardboard box.

“What’s that?”

“Not sure. Archer handed it to me at the funeral.”

Jasper carefully peels back duct tape. Resting in a tangle of newspaper is an ice cream bowl in the shape of a waffle cone, chocolate syrup dripping from its sides. There is also a note :

Dear Mr. Marsh,

I know you disagree with my opinions, and probably blame me for what happened, but know that I only wanted to protect her, especially after her father drowned in debt when his pottery company went under. Never thought it would lead to this. The police found the bowl during their investigation. I have no use for it. Feel free to do what you wish. I know Zoey would want you to have it. Thank you for believing in her when I didn’t.

Archer

BEATRICE SPONDIKE '26
THE MOON'S APPRENTICE

Winnie Peterson does not mind being the moon. In fact, he takes great pride in his work, and honest work it is.

Every day, great big and small shiny red alarm clocks need to be meticulously set by hand, and can't be even a second too late. It's critical! But Winnie is a deep sleeper, and the sun rarely turns in early to wake him, except of course, in winter.

One after the other, the alarms blare, a symphony of deep bellowing rings and high chimes. It is a common misconception that space is silent. But Winnie can assure you that no planet nor star misses the clock's familiar sound.

Waking stars is another important responsibility for Winnie. Methodically, he makes his rounds to their glimmering bedsides, coaxing them out of their celestial slumber.

"Get up! Get up!" he cries. "The sun! She will be off in a moment's time!"

Then comes the astral arrangement, and let me tell you this is where Winnie really has to get creative. The constellations must line up in a particular order across the heavens.

Why? Ah, I thought you'd never ask! Think of it like a dance, in order for things to flow smoothly on the ballroom floor, every dancer must know the exact steps. Not one skirt nor tie can be out of place. The skyscape is vast! How easy it is to get lost in a sea of stars, mixed all about until you can't tell where one begins and one ends. Winnie is the orchestral conductor, directing the stars to the music, placing them in just the right spot at the right time.

By now, you must be wondering why humans invest so much time plotting the map of the stars!

Once the stars are in their proper place and greet their neighbors, the constellations are ready to appear. Of course, this is not all Winnie must do before showtime! Oh no! The planets are their own thing altogether! The gas ones, like Jupiter and Saturn, are the feistiest. Hard to control and difficult to convince! (Though Winnie never backs down from the challenge).

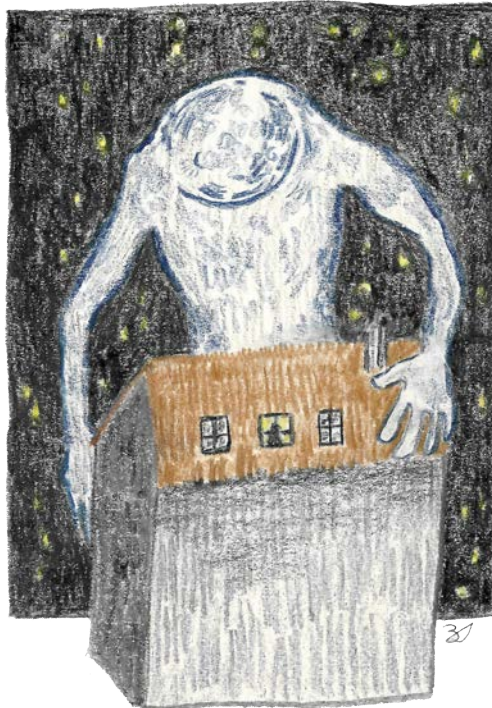
It's all sweet talk from there, promise this, promise that, and the gas planets fall right into place. No big deal!

Now, as Winnie is about to get started, everyone is getting antsy. Even me, I'm all jittery just waiting for her. The galaxy goes quiet as we wait for the sun to turn in, her swift rotation, giving us the go-ahead for kickoff. She is the most beautiful thing I will ever see—I'm sure of it! Light spills from her, eating away at the darkness, surrounding us with burning warmth. The light licks at the stars and the planets, yet she passes through without uttering a word.

Winnie has steeled himself, as he must, to work through the night. He glisters bright and kind, inviting the darkness to fill the space once more.

I rise with the moon and only rest when the job is done. I've learned all I can from Winnie, and when the time comes I must be ready to climb the mythic stairs, up to the stars. Winnie has spoken to me about this. How I must not be afraid to reach for the stars. The journey may be long and hard, but Winnie chose me!

Far in the future, at dusk, a long white spiraling staircase appears at my window. Of course, I am not scared, for the stars are kind and honest, and to an apprentice like me, the great unknown is all you can ever wish for.



MABEL

Our house is unremarkably plain, more worn than anything else. It will surely meet its end to the relentless tide pushing up against the dunes. We knew all this when we moved in and there's nothing we can do about it. I can't go back. The houses that I've lived in are stark reminders of how old I am and who I've become, but I avoid these thoughts, content to live in the here and now rather than in the past.

The drive out was long, lush green turning to brown patches of dried shrub. Tall dead-looking grass, dirt roads, muggy air that sticks to the skin; Papa and I resigned ourselves to it all. Days here are quiet, consisting mostly of bare feet on kitchen tile. Oppressive summer heat drives us off the porch, down the long hardwood hall into the kitchen to fill empty glasses with water from the tap.

Once I'm gone, it's doubtful that the house will withstand the impact and damage from the waves without someone living here. Each day the withering dunes lose more of themselves. I don't think Papa thinks about it as much as I do. It's hard to tell whether he really sees the sand slipping away, or maybe he just doesn't care. It's hard to say whether he cares about anything anymore. Even in late spring when the chilled air grows damp, when Mabel packs up her truck to leave. She slams the door right in his face. Papa sighs, tired of it all, and turns, disappearing behind the screen, not bothering to watch her go. I do. I always watched Mabel even when I was a buck toothed ten-year-old.

"You can never find the same person even in the same person", that's the only remark Papa made when Mabel took off. The thing is, I don't think it was Mabel who changed. Even out here, long days spent under the sun, salt caked into her skin, Mabel was the same. I used to look out over the dunes trying to pick out the red bathing suit she wore bobbing in the waves. I wish I could bring myself to blame her, for leaving that is. Southern hospitality could only get her so far, and as for Papa, he's always been hard to get along with. For my sake, it would've been nice if she'd stuck around a while longer. When she left, her old Ford truck kicked up dust into the muggy air, making my eyes dry and lungs tight.

Now all I can do is remember. Same with Papa. Late at night, when the crickets have no more energy left to sing, I know he recalls as I do: the red in

the sea, the dust, and the small rocks digging into our feet, always bare on the dirt road. When I look at Papa I can see it painted on his face. brushstrokes of time he'd spent and used pressed into the creases of wrinkled skin.

So, now we sit morning to night on the porch of our slowly decaying house planted in the ground that threatens to give way. I think about leaving often, for my sake. For my sake, no matter how much I'd copy Mabel as a kid, *I* can't seem to pack up and go. When Mom was still here she used to say I'd lose myself in trying to be more like Mabel.

The porch creaks and Papa slumps down next to me on the steps. He doesn't say a word. Something about his silence, the slow in and out of breath, the sweat forming on my palms, has me speaking. "She didn't know how to feel, is all." Papa looks at me, cracked lips pulled slightly as he almost smiles. He can't talk about it, I know. Still, sometimes I can't stand the silence. It gnaws at me, that I'd lost both my big sister Mabel and Mom in the same year, and even with Papa breathing right beside me, I've lost him too.

FASTBALL

Wiping the sweat off his forehead, Raymond squinted, watching heat rise from the field's dry dirt.

"Sent her a postcard," he said, casually as he could muster. The silence to his left was jarring. The men had been going back and forth all day, and this was the first time something said wasn't met with a snide remark or mean joke. Out of the corner of his eye, Raymond saw Charles looking up, holding back his swing as Ray let the pitch speed past him, reaching the dirt with a thud.

"You also sent me a postcard," Charles said slowly as if explaining something to a dumb child.

"Yeah, what's that have to do with anything?" Raymond said under his breath, eyes stuck on the pitching machine, swinging his bat like he hoped the ball would connect on its own. Charles adjusted his Sox cap, looking away, scuffing dirt with his sneakers.

"Ray, you've got the lousiest handwriting I've ever seen," he said, pulling his bat back over his right shoulder, feeling its weight in his arms. "I'm sayin' even if she did get your card, I don't think she'd even be able to read the damn thing." Charles resumed his swing, Raymond let another ball fly past.

"Hey pal, my penmanship is just fine. So, don't give me that, Charles!" Sweat began to cling to the back of Raymond's shirt, making it uncomfortably sticky. Charles didn't need to spell it out for Raymond, he wasn't a dumb child. He should have just told him flat out that she didn't read his card. "Lousy handwriting, sure," Ray muttered, "If she's not interested, just come out and say it," swinging his bat with force. It hit nothing but muggy air.

"Look." Raymond ceased his wild swing to look through the batting cages chain link fence. "All I'm sayin'," Charles grimaced at his friend, eyebrows drawn down, "is maybe you woulda had a better shot if you didn't fuck off to Vermont, of all places, right after she told you that she was in love." The fence cast a tic-tac-toe shadow over his friend's aging face, and Raymond realized, Charles Elmer no longer looked twenty-six. Except for his receding hair, and age lines that crossed his still handsome face, Charles hadn't changed much from when they'd first met, driving down to New York after grad school. He had never managed to lose his foul mouth. Even now, with the dirt kicked up all around them Raymond remembered his time spent driving behind the wheel; the

packed back seat, pushing them close to the dashboard, legs crammed the whole way. Ray could still smell the aroma of cigarette smoke that Charles still complained about, two years after their trip from Portland to Brooklyn. To be frank, anyone who'd sat in that busted yellow VW would've had to scrunch their nose and roll down the window. Any time Ray thought about that car he got a goddam headache; it had been the longest road trip of his life.

Charles' jaw tightened as he looked at Ray intently, all fifteen years of friendship showed on his face. Raymond let out a long breath of air.

"Yeah. I know," he said defeated, turning once more to line himself up with the plate, jamming his bat into the dirt twice.

"Raymond."

"Charles?" he said pushing away the thought of why he drove down to Flatbush in the first place.

"Hit the damn ball." Charles's voice stern, set tight just like his shoulders. Raymond scoffed and swung, missing once, then twice.

"Can't you see that's what I've been tryin' to do!" he said louder than was necessary.

"Don't lie. You've been swinging that bat all afternoon, and you haven't once really tried."

The sun slowly made its way across the urban skyline. The shirt clinging to Raymond's back suddenly made him cold. He shivered as the wind passed over him, dust whispering around his feet. Raymond lifted the bat, turned his head, and leaned over the plate. His spine was taut and his muscles tensed. Maybe he needed to stop running away anytime it was hard to catch his breath. His entire body shifted with his swing, torso twisting, arms and fingers flexed tightly around the grip. The bat met the ball with a resounding crack, ringing in his ears, sinking deep into his bones, and with it a realization: maybe he ought to start driving toward things, instead of backing away.

RED CLOVERS

In late August the scent of summer hung in muggy air. Sun clung to our bare backs, sweat slowly sliding down our sides. Sweet smelling sunscreen caked on the ridges of our noses, under our eyes. I released a breath, heavy in my chest, hot against my folded arms, chin resting over them. My right hand buzzed, fingers throbbing, dirt deep under my nails. Hair clung to my neck curling around my ears and irritated slumping shoulders. Hattie shifted, her brown hair tied loosely, moving with her head, cheek flush with the rough plum-colored towel lying underneath her. I scrunched my face, feeling the skin tighten around my nose. For all the days we spent pinching each other under the dining lodge table, sharing smiles in secret amusement, whispering between the crack of our worn wood bunk, today we just enjoyed the silent company of each other.

The only escape from the heat was a light breeze rising through the birches and their rustling leaves. The grass, still damp from last night's heavy rain, swayed slowly, scratched at my ankles. We watched one another, listening idly to the rasp of the radio, struggling to pick up a signal this far into the Green Mountains. Hattie blinked, eyelids heavy, face flushed as red collected in her cheeks. I was sure I looked similar as my body felt sluggish and hot. I uncrossed my ankles, extended my legs behind me, dropped my head forward, and felt my spine stretch out. I dug my feet into damp earth, flexing toes, kicking up soft dirt.

The aroma was pungent, bitter. I inhaled, my lungs expanding till they were tight in my chest, pushing tenderly against my ribs. A bead of sweat ran down my forehead, leaving a slick streak and then collecting in my brow. The static crackled, and Hattie lifted a tan hand, fingers clinging to the dial, rolling it carefully until a woman's soft voice filled the air. I rocked my head further forward, pressing my forehead against the white and baby-blue cotton towel. Beside me, Hattie mumbled something indistinct; whether it was to herself, I didn't know. Low in my throat, I hummed, hoping Hattie would find it an appropriate response.

Old paperbacks were sprawled out, forgotten in the grass beside us. My dad's navy Detroit cap crumpled against Circe's pages and tubes of Sun Bum with yellow plastic caps were scattered between our things. A cicada erupted

into a long-winded whine, buzzing in the neglected butterfly garden to our left. The dry weeds were long, dead, and bent at unnatural angles. I peered through my eyelashes, over to the shade of our cabin. It was welcoming, and when I strained my ears, the sound of laughter could be heard from within.

“Want to join the others?” My voice sounds unlike me, groggy and dry. I swallow with a tacky sound, willing the spit to ease my throat open. The radio hums and the breeze picks up past my face. I turn my head slightly, glancing at Hattie, eyes squinted against the sun. She’s breathing slow and shallow, lips parted and eyes sealed shut. I consider her for a moment. If we don’t reapply sunscreen soon, our backs will burn. The laughter rises, and my skin aches for the shade. I blow air out of my nose and ease my muscles to move, sticky fingers smudging the pages of my novel. I find the collection of words I’d last been reading, the cicada’s ring in my ears. August will be over soon.

PHOEBE AND JUDE

The trees were bare of any sign of summer. Dead and gray, the branches rattled in the cool breeze. The sky a muted blue, the ground covered in fallen red, brown, and orange leaves. Twirling along the asphalt, they danced in the wind, rearranging themselves in slow shaking circles. The cold air bit at Phoebe's cheeks as she leaned against her father's VW van, peering at the perished landscape, pulling her coat tight. Never again would she let Jude drag her to the Rockies in autumn.

"My brother used to live out this way," Jude's voice echoed from under the van. He was sprawled against the cold ground trying to figure out why the vehicle had broken down just forty minutes before they got to the clinic.

Phoebe shivered, pressing her dry lips together, watching tractor trailers whizz by on I-70. Her mouth tasted of the stale peanut butter sandwiches they had been eating for the past two days. She was sure her breath smelled like peanut butter too. The car certainly did, as did Jude's brother's navy UNC Bears sweatshirt, onto which he'd dropped more than one open-faced sandwich.

Phoebe checked her wristwatch, the long gold second hand ticked quickly with the small hand pointing just past five. She needed to eat anything but peanut butter for dinner, and with the way things were looking right now, Phoebe thought she'd be eating peanut butter sandwiches with Jude for the rest of her life.

"Jude, don't you think it's time to call someone?" She sighed, watching her breath rise into the crisp air.

"Oh yeah?" He wriggled out from under the cream-colored van, scowling, "You see a pay phone?" Jude spit out sarcastically. He had a large, black, oil smudge under his left eye.

"Not like *you'd* have any quarters to spare," Phoebe shot back. She knew he'd given her all he had from his night shifts to pay for the doctor. Phoebe was angry anyway as she watched Jude silently, listening to the dull thrum of cars. It was unfair that she had to spend all the babysitting money she'd made this summer. Phoebe had been planning to buy the *Harry Potter* collection in paperback from the second-hand book store down the road. She remembered her face growing hot when Jude teased her, calling her "a kid" for still liking the children's series.

The wind picked up, rustling leaves, making *their* faces sting. Phoebe squinted at the passing cars, trying to read license plates: Georgia, New Mexico, Wyoming, Colorado. Stupid Colorado, Phoebe thought, glancing down at Jude. He dug his front teeth into dirty fingernails, chewing on them. It was Jude's bad habit, biting them down to nubs since first grade, and no matter how many times Phoebe told him it was gross, he couldn't stop.

"Quit it!" she chastised. Jude shoved his hands deep into the pockets of his jeans, embarrassed at being caught.

"You'd think I'd know something about cars, spending so much time with your old man," he said, leaning his back against the side of the van.

"Sòk," Phoebe shrugged, looking away, "Not like I picked up any sense neither, and I lived with the mechanic!" It was true, she thought, no matter how much her old man loved her, it didn't protect her from this sort of thing. Jude looked at Phoebe intently, he knew how her dad could be, how she couldn't talk about him yet. Not until they got rid of the baby.

"I wouldn't say that," Jude said sincerely, forcing Phoebe to bite back a smile as she stared at the cars zipping by.

This time of year, the only trees with green left were the great pines with their thin, sharp needles, shivering on the bleak mountains. The bristlecones back home in Utah had also looked just as vibrant, full of life.

When Phoebe told Jude she was pregnant, he had laughed hysterically, then cried. It made Phoebe's skin crawl, watching Jude, the kid she'd known since preschool, break down over the predictable result of their unprotected sex. That too was unfair. Why did *Jude* get to cry, when Phoebe had to stand here, the frigid metal of the van seeping into her back? Maybe they needed to sit inside the clunker instead of freezing outside, Phoebe thought, shuffling her feet, willing the warm blood back into her body.

THE GREEN ROOM

The air was thick, afternoon sun crept through drawn yellow blinds. Stripes of light wrapped around the edge of the chipped kitchen counter, italicizing soft even lines across the grubby tiled floor. It was stuffy, stale smoke obscured lime-green walls. The stench of cigarettes, heavy, clinging to Roma's clothes: an off-white t-shirt and worn jeans hanging loose around slight hips. Sweat dotted a line below his short blond hair, running down his neck and broad shoulders. Bringing the stub of his Marlboro to his mouth, he inhaled deeply, letting smoke filter out through his nose, filling the room. Gus coughed, thought about his irritated lungs, appalled at the number of packs Roma smoked in a day.

Gus could not remember a time when his friend spoke without a cigarette dangling from his lips. If he closed his eyes, he imagined Roma in his brother's hand-me-down overalls, two missing front teeth, and a droopy cig lit in the gap. The idea made him smile, even if he'd never known Roma as a kid he often felt like he did. Gus thought, if they had grown up together, he would have nixed the dirty habit in the bud.

Now, of course, he would never say a thing about it, that's just not how he was raised. What did it matter if ashtrays were scattered in every room of Roma's apartment? Metal plates full of ash and dog-ends sitting all around, nestled between Roma's tattered books and next to a large wooden shelf above the bathroom sink.

He shifted, watching Roma tap out his butt amongst the many others in the rusty top of a broken pickle jar arranged between them. Gus's back ached dully as he sat straighter on the faded orange bar stool, hands gripping its cool circular edge, leaving striped imprints on his calloused palms. Drowsy, he forced himself to relax, feeling strain deep in his tense muscles. He'd worked hard all week at the construction site, the back of his neck, red and dry from an unforgiving sun.

Gus observed Roma studying the frozen hands on the Felix the Cat wall clock. It would only take a little effort to fix it, unscrew the back panel and switch out the old batteries for new ones, but Gus wasn't sure Roma was up to it. At least not now.

He looked around the green room, examining the small window above the hardware sink, the yellow shades angled, caught in their strings; the cloudy glass panels Roma never cleaned; the uneven box nails that kept it shut. It had been that way since Roma moved in. The chipper landlady squinted at him through big red glasses, rambling on about the previous tenant's poor tabby that fell to its death onto the pavement. It irritated Gus that the window would stay that way when Roma was ready to move out.

Then last summer, when the heat was also suffocating, Gus slipped his hammer from his tool belt and took to prying the rusty nails from where wood held them. Heads bent, many were stuck too deeply into the white frame at odd angles. The whole exercise proved useless. The window remained stubbornly sealed, trapping Gus and Roma, causing them to sweat.

A washed-out framed photo of Roma and his big brother, Earl, on the stoop of their old house down in Texas was propped up against the wall just behind the kitchen faucet. Gus had accidentally cracked the glass, with his hammer. The heat got him so frustrated he hadn't paid attention to where he swung. Gus studied it now, smudged fingerprints pressed on the sliver frame, Roma's bright gap-toothed smile. He did not know much about Earl, as Roma was the quiet type, and hardly ever put what he thought into words. Gus didn't blame him, he knew it wasn't for lack of trying. Some people were just like that. Gus found he could talk for both of them, filling space with words. Only on days like this, when Gus was sore from work and the green room's heat itched at his collar, could they fall into a quiet rhythm of sitting around and blowing smoke.

Fumes from the snubbed-out cigs twisted upwards, catching on a raking light, rising fluidly towards the tar-stained ceiling then slowly dissipating throughout the hot green room.

THE CHIMNEY TREE

“Come on Ro Rabbit, just last the year,” his Mama had said, hugging him farewell.

The rain had been pouring something fierce outside the Chimney Tree that Ro had been calling home for the past two weeks.

Just minutes before, in the bright morning sun, he was out in his front garden, just past the trees, down the hill, trying but failing to coax carrots into growing just a bit taller when the sky split and the storm had begun. The large cold drops had turned heavy fast, leaving Ro running for the tree. Shaking off rain from his ears, he burst through the front red door, his yellow Wellies uncomfortably sticking to his fur, his denim pants sodden.

“Gosh,” he sighed, slumping down and peeling off his boots, which he left in the wet entrance along with his jeans. Ro glared at his discarded pants before turning on his heels to look for a string in the kitchen drawer. His paws loudly pattered on the soft dirt floor. With twine in “dog hand,” Ro easily fastened it to a kitchen’s cabinet knob, then secured it to the coat rack in the front hall. Reluctantly, he scooped up his pants, carefully hanging them over the taut wire. He stepped back, admiring his handy work, taking a seat on his bed wearing just his underwear because he only owned one pair.

Ro had to admit, the dead tree was certainly more spacious than his childhood warren, but where it doubled in size it was also awfully quiet. Outside the wind had picked up, howling against the broken bathroom window, making the tree sway uneasily back and forth. Ro shivered, wishing the storm would pass soon. He was a busy bunny after all. Plenty of chores to take care of around the snag. Fixing up the loose window pane, cleaning dirty dishes in the sink, dusting grimy shelves. Yup, Ro was perfectly busy in his big new home.

Ro’s ears perked up. A quiet scratching sound filled the tree, barely audible over the storm. He stiffened, “Please let it be anything but a wolf,” he whispered to himself. His mama had warned how dangerous the forest was. About all that lived beneath the dark canopy, looking to harm a little rabbit. His mind raced, sure that out under the rain storm, there was a hungry hulking wolf, with a

large mouth and huge claws looking to rip right into Ro Rabbit. He didn't think he could bear the thought. The scratching continued, Sritch! Sritch! Sritch!

Ro did the most reasonable thing he could think of, burrow deep into his blankets and hope the threat would depart. Sritch! Sritch! Sritch! He shook beneath the covers. The doorknob rattled, once. Then twice. Click! The door pushed open with a low creek. The sound of the storm grew with the open door and Ro was sure this was it! He'd be swallowed by two bites of a giant jaw! He squeezed his eyes shut and thought about a warm fire and the carrot stew his mama used to make.

"My goodness! Could ya not hear me out there?" a small voice quipped angrily. It didn't sound much like a wolf, Ro thought, still hidden under his bed sheets.

"I mean, It will take days for me to dry!" the voice continued. "No shoe rack either," it mumbled bitterly. The thump thump of boots hitting the floor echoed around the snag.

"You should know I can see your white tail sticking out of those blankets." Embarrassed, Ro had no choice but to peek out from his hiding spot. Standing in his entry was not a wolf but a very wet, very annoyed-looking squirrel. She stood with her arms crossed, swaying her big bushy tail back and forth.

"Hello?" Ro said uncertain what exactly this uninvited guest was doing in his home.

"So he speaks!" she cries, starting to ring out the water from her yellow dress.

"I'm sorry ma'am but I'm not too sure what you're doing here?" He sat up in bed, sheets pooling around him. The squirrel gave him a quizzical look.

"What am I doing here?" she repeated slowly "Now, I don't know if those big old ears or brown eyes do anything for ya, but if they do, you'll know it's storming out." she jerked her paw in the direction of the door, which had been slammed shut by the strong winds. Ro nodded, trying to make the connection to the storm and the reason this strange squirrel was standing in front of him. She seemed to think that was explanation enough without elaborating.

"Right," he said, baffled "I'm not too sure—" but Ro could not finish his thought because the door slammed open once more. Bam!

"Ok! Come on! No no, don't push each other! Casper get your paws off your brother!" A squat mouse, wearing an apron and sandals yelled at the five

other small mice scampering through Ro's door. They too were soaked from the storm.

Ro gapped at the family of mice. He didn't have a clue what to do.

"Your father will be here soon, honey." The mother was consoling one of the younger girls. "He and grandma are just taking their time."

"Excuse me—" Ro was once again cut off,

"Ms. Mouse! How good it is to see you again!" the squirrel exclaimed and threw her arms around the mouse. They took up chatting about a number of things. how the kids were doing, where Mr. Mouse was, and of course the dreadful weather.

"Oh tell me about it!" the squirrel was saying, "don't look like it'll let up soon either."

The five mice, all of various ages, took to running about Ro's house, dragging their muddy paws on every surface.

"What a mess..." Ro mumbled to himself, ears flopping down in distress. The mice had begun an animated game of tag, tumbling around the room, knocking into chairs, walls, tables, you name it!

"Charlie Mouse!" Ms. Mouse tsked, "get over here this instant." She tapped her paw against the floor. One of the girls, who had been previously giggling under Ro's bed, scampered over to her stern mother.

"Yeah Mom?" she asked breathless

"Would you please give me your wet socks?" she held out her paw, "You're dragging the storm all through the snag." Ms. Mouse smiled fondly at her daughter. One by one she took the socks from her children's paws and hung them neatly on Ro's clothes line. It was jarring how comfortable Ms. Mouse, her five kids and the squirrel seemed in his home. He could not even be surprised when the door opened once more.

"Dad! Grammy!" The little mice all shouted gleefully, running to their father and grandmother. Mr. Mouse hugged each of his kids and kissed Ms. Mouse before greeting Squirrel politely.

"I could hear y'all a mile away!" Said a rough voice. Ro turned and found a hedgehog had entered and was shaking out his umbrella by the door.

"Good to see you Gary!" said Mr. Mouse

"Likewise," Gary the hedgehog grinned, his pointy nose scrunching up to show off his small sharp teeth. It seemed to Ro that everyone in the forest had come to his house to do as they pleased. This thought was only confirmed by

the arrival of a big barn owl and two cardinals swooping through the small hole in the tree's side. It was all just too much!

"My goodness!" Ro Rabbit cried "Have you got no concept of hospitality?" his voice loud "What in the heavens are you all doing in my house!"

All eyes, big and small were on him as the room went distinctly quiet at Ro's angry outburst. The kids hid behind their mother, their little paws holding her apron tight. The birds ruffled their feathers and the squirrel raised a high eyebrow. It was Grandma Mouse who spoke first.

"Dear," she said warmly, "this is the Chimney Tree. The only safe haven from big storms in the entire forest." she stepped forward, taking Ro's hands. "It's our community refuge, and now I suppose your home?" she searched his face.

"Yes," Ro said slowly. "It is my new home, I've come a long way." Grandma Mouse nodded, understandingly.

"I'm sure it was hard to leave," she said softly, "We'll take awfully good care of you dear." Ro smiled at that, feeling a bit silly for getting so worked up.

"It's good to meet ya." Gary stepped forward to shake Ro's hand. One by one the forest animals greeted him with a heartfelt kindness that had Ro smiling.

"Were mighty glad to have you." said Ms. Mouse as the owls began to fix a fire, in the empty stove. Both Gary and Mr. Mouse had cleaned up the mud and were now chopping fixings for the meal squirrel was busy cooking. The kids had settled down with a good book near the fire, giggling softly as they turned the pages.

Knock, Knock, Knock!

Ro turned to the door, wondering what animal had arrived now. He turned the knob, and came face to face with an enormous creature with matted gray fur and teeth whiter than the moon. Ro froze, nose twitching.

"Good evening" The wolf said in a low drawl, lightning flashing outside, silhouetting its figure.

"Oh!" Ro yelled in fright, slamming the door shut, Bam!

Ms. Cardinal hopped over, "Ro! What's the matter?" she asked, concerned.

"It's a," his voice shook, "wolf!"

"Pamala is here?" she asked, not scared in the slightest.

"Pamala?" he asked, still feeling shaky.

“Yes, Pam lives all alone, poor thing, I was worried something bad had happened when I didn't see her.” Ms. Cardinal explained as she opened the door. Pamala was still standing in the rain.

“Who's this new face?” the wolf asked, eyes turning to Ro.

“The hopper has taken to living here for the past few weeks,” Ms. Cardinal said, calm and easy. Ro searched Pam for any signs of aggression. He found none. This wolf did not seem to want to devour him, or any of the other animals in the Chimney Tree. No things here weren't as they seemed. Even if none of these animals resembled his sisters or brothers, kindness came in all shapes and sizes. Even in the form of a not so frightening wolf, reading to Mr. and Ms. Mouse's kids.

Ro looked around his house, taking in the warm smiles and loud laughter of the forest creatures. With the smell of good food wafting through the space, and the low tapping of raindrops outside, Ro realized he was not so alone.

“Welcome home, Ro Rabbit,” Grandma Mouse said and pinched his cheek affectionately.



JULIA YAKIREVICH '26
CHARLOTTE AND THE WRITER

“Charlotte, I said brown sugar, not coconut.”
“They’re both brown,” Charlotte responded disappointedly.

“Wait here for the turkey, I’ll get it,” said her mother.

Her shopping cart quickly reversed inside an aisle of canned pumpkin and stuffing mix—a convoy of other carts abandoned nearby with an odd lost child looking for a parent between pie tins and rollings pins—before parallel parking at the baking section.

Charlotte’s lip quivered, her spine faltering under the pressure of being responsible for picking up the Whole Foods turkey. She eyed fellow shoppers, sheepishly smiling at adults busy receiving frantic last-minute ingredient texts, and avoided stares from indifferent tweens, showing off sheer lip gloss and real earrings—making Charlotte feel like a fake in clip-ons.

As the line shrank, fear magnified. Usually, Charlotte enjoyed basking in the glory of standing in line, holding her head high as other prepubescent tag-alongs navigated carts, but today the reality of dealing with the butcher alone to confirm the family’s Thanksgiving order produced a sour cranberry taste in her throat. Charlotte’s gray pupils scanned for her middle-aged brunette mother, carrying cans of sweet kernel corn in elbow crooks and a hastily scribbled dog-eared list, only to discover a flight of forty-year-olds, pacing up and down aisles like lost pigeons.

Experiencing a mini-panic attack, Charlotte’s limbs became heavy, nearly numb, her jaw hinges loosening, the rubber bands from her braces popping, inflicting a sharp radiating pain felt deep in the enamel. But despite her torment, she trusted her mom would return. *She would never leave me*, Charlotte reasoned. The thought boomeranged inside her brain, ricocheting between recent sixth-grade crushes and dystopian heroine, Katniss Everdeen, until another emerged: *Mom’s not coming back*. At the front of the line, looking up at the butcher, Charlotte froze, all four feet and eleven inches of her, ahead of a cacophony of irritated Cranston customers fighting over premade gravy and forgotten focaccia for homemade stuffing.

“Can I help you, Miss?” the butcher asked, one hand folded over a clipboard, the other sliding red frames over a bump on her nose.

In between a stammer of ums and errs, Charlotte blurted, “I need a minute!” She looked at the line of carts behind her, hoping a bully would cut in and save the day, “My mom put in the order, I’m waiting for her.”

“No time for waiting, Look at this line, doll!”

Charlotte couldn’t bring herself to turn around. Instead, a hang-nailed finger itched at the insides of her coat pocket, scratching for answers buried in woolen threads and crumpled gum wrappers. “Where are you?” she mumbled.

“What’s going on,” the man behind her pressed, “can I just get my turkey?”

Silently, she stepped to the side, surrendering any pretense of competence. *What a stupid girl*, she imagined them thinking, assuming her insecurity took precedence over their holiday meal preparation. The feeling of accumulating cotton balls in her throat didn’t subside when her mother finally wheeled Domino’s brown sugar and purple Japanese sweet potatoes to the line, “what took you so long,” Charlotte screeched between voice cracks.

“There was a hold-up by the hot bar, where’s the turkey, Char?”

“I didn’t get it.”

After twelve minutes in line, carefully tracked by a Flik Flak watch received as a gift last Christmas, and another treasure hunt to track down the last spices and spritzes, Charlotte and her mother reached the cashier. She offered to help bag, as Charlotte did every week, but was summarily rejected, relegated to her usual spot next to “temporarily out of service” QR scanners. She peered at the other checkout lines, overflowing with reusable bags of organic turkey, gluten-free flour, and dairy-free pie filling. Like elves wrapping presents, the workers scanned and bagged identical items; the sacs could’ve been filled with coal and Charlotte wouldn’t have minded, customer enthusiasm was the *real gift* that never stopped giving. As her eyes followed items sliding across the black rubber conveyor belt, she looked up and observed an anomaly: an old, muscular man with deep wrinkles carved into his cheeks, a crimsoned burn mark under his left eye. He wore an aged, ripped, plaid flannel, patched khakis, and heavily scuffed brown combat boots down at the heels, a floppy sandwich wedged between inky fingers.

What a sad guy, all alone for the holiday, she assumed.

Looking back at her mother and *their* expensive groceries nestled in woven bags, Charlotte felt a pang of pity soon replaced by the thought that lucky for her she wasn’t alone eating a lousy Reuben for Thanksgiving.

“Let’s go, Char, if the traffic’s anything like this line we’re never getting out of the parking lot,” her mother nudged, Charlotte followed, taking one last look at the old man wondering what was going on his mind.

With all the Thanksgiving commotion, I needed to bolt; of course, with my luck, the only place still open was Whole Foods. At home, the gutted turkey provided little inspiration and my family’s bickering lacked all the wit of character banter that I strived for in my novel. While I yearned for the smoked bird my brother-in-law Andrew was making this year and the deep-fried Oreos that came after, nothing could make up for the burn from hot oil that flew into my eye. As I searched the grocery, jotting down sketches and strings of adjectives to describe hectic shoppers, a dollop of Russian dressing plopped onto my notepad. My calloused pinky wiped away enough sauce to see the words, “tacky, rhinestone.” The image of magenta, plastic diamond earrings resonated, and I looked for my source of inspiration, expunging more mayo, hoping that a cleaned page would magically reveal her. But, my search ended as quickly as it began, realizing that the girl had already left the store with her mother, and the character study I was going for was no longer there to pursue. I took another bite of my sandwich, hoping this time the nostalgic taste of a Reuben would guide me where to go next.

DRAGONFLY

“Right as always, Lucky,” the old man smiled at Penny, clueless to whom he was talking and to what was her real name. And while Penny knew not much more of the man she cared for, seldom referring to him by anything other than “Sir,” she was aware of how he took his coffee black and how long he’d let his porcelain cup stain brown if she didn’t come around to manage his mess. Penny was numb to being called by her mother’s name, Lucky, never bothering to correct the old salt. Even if she’d try, he’d just give her another menial chore, barking out commands reminiscent of his days in the Navy.

On a crisp morning hopeful of promises flowing from the marsh’s mouth, and with the memory of the moon fresh, Penny waded through rising waters to the old man’s cabin. The only redeemable part of his better-denoted shack was the pristine hanging porch swing, which Penny had never seen used, but when her mind let her, she imagined cradling a lukewarm herbal tea, dreamily floating in the lull of marsh crickets. But that morning, the old man was pendulating in his chair, thudding up against the chipping shack, sun-spotted shins leaping above a deteriorating porch. He hadn’t noticed Penny’s shadow approaching, and she stopped to let him savor the morning dew alone, or more selfishly, to study his demeanor, child-like swinging and bare feet that couldn’t reach the floor.

Somewhere between where her selfishness ended and selflessness began, Penny trailed a path of saltwater droplets flying off her forest-green corduroys toward the swing. The old man looked at her, registering wisps of hair covering her light, nearly invisible brows, but didn’t acknowledge her presence as she sat next to him. He sighed, sending out a series of semaphores; naval, legal, musical, that Penny didn’t understand how to decode, in response murmuring a morning prayer. The two continued their one-sided musings, listening to the swing chains creak with every teeter until a small dragonfly fluttered past them and the old man caught it between his trigger-fingered hands.

“Right as always, Lucky!” he exclaimed, “You were the only kid who could remember all the points of sail. Of course, you and Tanner, poor kid. I’ll tell you, Lucky, ya’ get off the boat, and ya’ still feel the tide under you. Never goes out, does it? Never goes out!” The old man looked down at his iridescent-stained hands, blowing air over them.

“Sir, let’s get you cleaned up,” Penny reached for his forearm.

“No!” He released Penny’s grip and wiped his palms over chalky facial hair, tinting his beard bloody indigo. “Can you feel it!”

What, your stench? Penny wanted to reply, but refrained, instead attempting a slight smile, “No.”

“Oh, Lucky, what have we done?”

Penny studied the old man’s face, surrendering any hope of helping him.

“O’ Tanner,” the old man repeated loudly, the tremor in his voice mirroring his shaking limbs, “What I did, worth a million lifetimes! Take me! Before these winds break me!”

“You get any sleep last night?” Penny asked the old man.

“Nightmare,” he responded, “I kept seein’ him.” He took his head in his palms, ripping a few strands from his scalp, then whimpered, “Too late.”

“Maybe you need a walk, wake yourself up. Or a meal, let me get some grits going on the stove.”

“Lucky, we’re gonna pay for this! One day you’ll hear him too, and you’ll forget everything you did before and everything you planned after. It’ll eat at your gut. Until you’re nothin’, like him.”

The old man raised his hands toward Penny; she assumed he’d go for her throat or hold down her upper arms, but instead, he gently took her hands in his. Mixing sweat and sticky dragonfly blood, a crunch of filmy wings filled the silence between them. “Lucky, what’s with the blood on your hands?” The old man succumbed to a wave of confusion, then repeated, this time his question a statement, “Lucky, there’s blood on your hands.”

DAISY ZHANG '26

JACKLIGHT TREE

“A running jump oughta do it, somebody said,” Fraye grumbled, wincing as he swatted tufts of his own tender antler velvet off tree bark.

For once the two deer looked not towards the ruby-hued windfallen apples nestled at their feet between blades of ryegrass, but craned their necks upwards. There, amongst the branches, was a golden apple, not quite freely dangling, but not nestled purposefully enough to suggest some underlying motive either, and for this reason it became particularly difficult to knock it down from the tree.

“I’m sorry, all right? Maybe if you didn’t look straight into the sun you’d have aimed better.” retorted Terik.

To be frank, neither of them could be sure it was an apple. All they knew for certain was that it was golden. Not the warm, heavy kind of golden that blanketed the forest floor every time the sun went down—more like the blazing, beating halo of light that pierced through the sky’s soft blue at midday, all summer long.

A few moments passed without a word, only broken by the faint chirping of songbirds and the crinkling of grass as Fraye untangled himself from the branches, muttering to himself all the while. Terik felt a pang of remorse watching her brother fumble with his newly-grown antlers, and so she began to search her brain for the best thing to do.

“Do you want to get Cilfer?”

Cilfer was the name of the wise, elderly squirrel, with graying fur the texture of pine needles and heavy eyelids that half-closed when he talked for long periods of time. Yet, despite his age, he was agile and alert. He could leap from branch to branch with ease, and if there was somewhere he wanted to be, he would always find a way to get there. *Cilfer would definitely know how to knock down the golden apple*, Terik thought.

“Seems like a good harvest today,” was the first thing Cilfer said, as he inspected one of the apples strewn across the ground, nibbling at it tentatively.

“Cilfer,” said Terik, “We need your help. Can you get that golden apple in the tree for us?”

“Ah,” Cilfer glanced up. “You haven’t tried shaking the tree?”

“We have, but it’s stuck.”

“I see,” he nodded. “Unfortunately, I don’t have any ideas for you.”

“But can’t you just climb up and knock it down for us?” said Fraye, exasperated.

Cilfer thought for a moment.

“No,” he finally replied. “That apple is too big for me, I’m afraid.”

Terik stared at him in disbelief. She had never heard Cilfer say such a thing. “But if anyone can do it, it’s you. Not us.” She motioned vaguely towards Fraye and his newly-formed antlers, to which he puffed out his chest defiantly.

“I am flattered. But I simply do not want it.” Fraye opened his mouth to speak, but Cilfer raised a paw to stop him. “I know that you want it, of course. More than anything, I know that you will find a way.”

The two siblings looked at each other.

It seemed as if Fraye had spent hours at the tree, jumping, tangling, scraping his antlers in the branches, and still only barely managing to sway the golden apple. Terik had long since given up, lying down to rest in a far-off clearing, where she “wouldn’t have to hear all that huffing and puffing”.

Fraye stood back now, after which he attempted a new jumping technique in a seemingly endless loop. Suddenly, he heard the sound of two crisp shots reverberating throughout the forest. He turned his head ever so slightly, then bolted in Terik’s direction.

“Terik? Terik?” he called out, to no reply, until he reached the clearing.

She lay there, motionless, over a bed of bright red apples. Fraye had never imagined so much red in his life. He sat there with her, soft antlers drooped over blackening grass, all through the night.

Long after the cicadas had stopped chirping and all gone to sleep, as the moon cast its lonely gaze over the night sky, Fraye suddenly glimpsed a growing light emerging from between the trees. *It’s not morning already, is it?* he thought to himself incredulously.

He looked towards the light, and saw a parade of golden apples barreling towards him from outside the clearing. It had to have been an earthquake, an avalanche, the way their rolling sent a deafening vibration from his hooves up to his antlers and rang inside his ears. But nothing was dropping from the sky, and nothing below the earth had grabbed hold of its roots to shake. The golden

apples moved with their own purpose, propelled by their own force, the kind that could only be ascribed to an animal.

Fraye scrambled to his feet, trembling, but prepared to meet the intruder. He steeled himself, hoisting his antlers up as high as they would go, and stared straight ahead at the blazing apples. That was when his vision went white.

There is a time in every faun's life in which they think of white as blankness or the absence of color. But in those moments Fraye learned very quickly that, in fact, he was seeing every light in the world. This is what he saw: slivers of the blue sky pushing their way through a tree canopy; sun-bleached soil and bark blurring into a sea of burnt umber, the way it did every time he raced Terik back home; and red apples in a forest clearing, stretching as far as the eye could see.

Then, just as suddenly as it began, the buzzing in his ears ground to a halt. The light filling his eyes dissolved. Everything became still. Fraye planted his feet and blinked.

The golden apples were gone.

A shot sliced through the silent darkness. Fraye dived. As his body hit the ground, he felt what seemed like hundreds of small masses of fur scurrying to cover his body. Under a thick blanket of little claws, with wide eyes and baited breath, he waited.

There was no second shot; all he heard afterwards was the sound of angry muttering, growing more and more distant. The rumbling of the earth began again, but it did not move any closer. With his cheek pressed into the soil, head curled into his torso, he fell into a deep sleep, which did not arise from any intentional closing of the eyes, but from being absolved of the anxiety of keeping them open.

Fraye awoke to soft-edged sunlight on his eyelids and an incessant prodding at his stomach. It was Terik staring down at him, kicking him gently with her hoof.

"Good morning. You look terrible," she said, looking amused.

Fraye attempted to jump to his feet, but he felt something strange about the weight on either side of his head. He turned over very slowly and looked to the ground, where a crowd of squirrels had gathered to gnaw off pieces of broken antler. His broken antler, still reddish and freshly shed. One of the larger squirrels turned to speak to him; it was Cilfer.

“They grow back,” he said matter-of-factly, “and you seem all right. Does anything hurt?”

Fraye got up slowly, and apart from a generous streak of grassburn, he felt no different from before. He shook his head, a bit more aggressively than usual due to the loss of his right antler. Then he turned to Terik.

She kicked a strange metallic object towards him. “Here’s our golden apple, if you were still interested.”

Fraye stared at it, puzzled. Then Terik laughed, pushing her hoof down on the side of the object, and a flickering, viciously golden beam of light streamed out. She pushed down again and it was as if the light had never been there. This was no apple.

“You know, I think I like apples better when I can do something about them,” Fraye mumbled, and the sudden depth in his voice startled him.

Terik laughed. “Me too.” Then she turned her head to the apple tree and, instead of looking down at the fallen apples, she began to chew on the leaves. Seeing as their circumstance could hardly get any more ridiculous, Fraye found himself doing the same.

When the sun carved out its place at midday, the light shone into Terik’s wide, glassy eyes, and for the first time Fraye saw they were green. Something told him not to look straight into the sunlight anymore. Instead, he began to watch how it dappled and refracted, into warm oranges blooming throughout the forest.



MEMOIR

MARION COOK '26
AN ANGRY BUT BRIEF MEMOIR

When I was a child and my mom's cancer began to chew away at her blood and spit out her eyes, I lost all my luck, but I also retained a sliver of reward: I didn't become mean.

There is nobility in that, I was proud of myself for remaining the "martyr of niceness." I wasn't the angry kid who broke shit or the girl who sat in the principal's office. True, I was withdrawn and quiet, but never to a point of worry. I retained the belief that I would not become another thing my parents had to lean over and fix, surgical gloves rolled up, bright clinical lights shining in my face.

I grew as trees do; around the knots and nails trying to stab and disrupt a green heart, crooked, leaning, dying, drinking, reaching upwards for more. I did not realize how injured I was, how many branches lost or twigs snapped until the pain that rested in my mind between night and day had to be compared to the physical pain I endured in my shins. To compare that pain, the throbbing that would pass, the ache that remained, the tie and tilt of it, to a decade of my mom dying in front of me was unimaginable. I was severed from the ability to fully feel my agony, resulting in a boot strapped to either one of my legs, crutches propped under my arms, nurses looking at me, asking "Are you all right?" I had been a competitive runner, racing until my bones fractured, unaware of what was happening.

Even as I hobbled down the linoleum floors of orthopedic corridors I was unable to separate my pain from my mom's. I saw the pressed white linens, beeping monitors, and medical aromas as details intrinsically tied to her, and to a distorted vision of hospitals that haunted me when I was young. I demonized waiting rooms; MRIs were monsters. When the gurney holding my body shifted and brought me closer to the mouth of the machine, I wasn't thinking about any possible surgery or news that could alter my life. I only wondered how many times this contraption had eaten my mother, spat her out skinnier, weaker, more fragile—like a paper bird.

I have an anger I didn't possess when I was younger, a pounding resentment for the world that does not let me catch a fucking breather. When I was eleven, a thought played obsessively in my brain, the universe really hates

Annie Cook, my mom, a cool fact that I took blindly like an unexpected stiletto to the back. I accepted it matter-of-factly; it only drove me to never turn to God, someone who I felt had grievously done me wrong. It's tougher for me now, my former resignation has turned to deep resentment directed nowhere.

I was a good kid but naive, and when my parents told me my mom had cancer I thought, people have worse problems. Some walk past wild animals to get to school, some live in poverty, some even starve to death.

The idea that the universe despised my mom didn't twist me to pieces, it forged the person who I became: nothing more than a daughter, and nothing less than a part of nature, uncomplicated, just being alive. I became obsessed with running, and because I could not remain still I moved at the only pace I knew how: a sprint. If I had stayed still, maybe the anger that chews at me, causing me to act out and slam doors now would have been expressed earlier.

I'm scared to feel it, scared it will turn me ugly, selfish, and mean, the person you don't want to be around, that you shy away from like an ominous shadow thinly painted by a waning sun. What kind of idiot stands around in a soccer field, teeth chattering with pain, and doesn't stop running? I think I believed most of my pain was psychological, a hurdle that through mental toughness I could easily clear, one that a younger me would have taken pause before leaping into the unknown.

Running had always been my refuge. I ran when I could not speak, could not think, when some part of me felt unrecoverable. Strangely, I ran because my dog stopped running and at the same time because I was sadly aware that I couldn't help my mother. Before the track medals, running was simply a coping mechanism, only about itself, pure as a pearl.

So I was left sitting in my parents' Subaru trying hard to ignore the crutches in the back seat, a harsh reminder of every kind of brokenness as rain began to pound the roof. The day before my doctor told me there was a good chance a metal rod needed to be inserted into my left leg to hold my fractured tibia together. Still, I drove myself, against my mother's wishes, to Lincoln Woods. There, as the first golden leaves of autumn fell, my anger dissipated, replaced by a mindless happiness; the gentle hoax of breath fogging glass, the smell of soft rain, the contours and sounds of dripping turbulence running down the windshield.

I am the most angry when I am alone, the most ugly, mean, and unreachable asshole. I am the most undone, with no screen of age to cover

myself. I am reduced to the youngest hurt version of the girl I was; crying like a toddler. I became so mad when I broke both my legs that it transformed the way I saw the world; I reflected, if I had gotten angry earlier would things be different? Was my gentle kindness simply an inability to express more? Could I have been so closed off that I felt nothing?

I see my younger self in the rain drenched window, I perceive leaves falling through her eyes. In a green-sleeved shirt with gemmed seahorses, striped leggings, worn-out blue Nike sneakers, poorly chopped bangs, and crooked teeth, the canines twisting inward like a pair of halfway open double doors; she smiles with one dimple. Intensely, she inhabits my mind's eddy, the girl who only knew the word cancer from things that she had heard or read (though that was still scary enough to make her cry.)

I want her to be different, to become not who I am now, a seventeen year-old who sometimes allows her life to fall apart. I scream at her, but then drive to the woods and stop, because the little girl in me needs to walk among the birds and trees, to figure things out and overcome the pain.

GUNNAR EGGERTSSON '26
LIVING, DYING, AND FUNNY PEOPLE

Lately, I've been plagued by an unexplainable cloud of anxiety. It hasn't always been this way. By all accounts I'm blessed in the realm of personal economics and physical appearance. I haven't had to worry about food or money, and I benefit handsomely from an olive complexion and being a man. But ironically, God's infinite wisdom, or perhaps endless humor, seems to have turned my luck around recently and dealt me a bad hand. When I mention God, it's not stemming from a deep religious faith, but rather from an abstract helplessness facilitated by something outside of my periphery.

I spent my first thirteen years living at the bottom of the island of Manhattan, on the filled in land that hugs Battery Park. My family moved there when I was little, just nine or so years after 9/11 and, because of that, the place was empty for most of my childhood. Only during the mornings was traffic heavy, and then again in the late afternoon when commuters thronged to take the ferry back to Staten Island. Weekends and midday were all but a ghost town. An interesting aspect of downtown is that it's not built on the grid. Streets intersect, and can be quite narrow; since the buildings are tall they cast long shadows all day. There is a unique smell of train exhaust mixed with old piss that conjures a strange nostalgia—especially when the wind is blowing off the Hudson. I can continue to talk about these fond memories, but not much would be gained aside from useless sentimentality. Not enough time has passed to find anything in them that is meaningful. Of course, I could speak of the “virus,” but that's too recent. We all have our experiences with it. To indulge in this sort of memoir is nothing but narcissism.

My great-grandmother Minnie's funeral was some ways out of the city. It was a blustery day, likely in the fall, and I was only eight. Scandalously, she had my grandfather at fourteen, in the Pennsylvanian steel city of Harrisburg. You know, they used to say, you could measure the success of that town by the amount of soot in the air. I heard that somewhere. Howard, my grandfather, had once seen a doctor who had correctly judged his origins entirely based on the health of his lungs.

He was raised almost exclusively by his grandparents. Howard's father, later to be known as Bishop Anderson, was nineteen when he had him.

Supposedly Anderson tried to marry Minnie when she turned eighteen but was refused. No one knows exactly how many siblings my grandfather had, for no one knows how many kids Anderson had.

What *I* know is Anderson and Minnie shared the type of estrangement best not speculated on for both privacy and respect. I never met Minnie, and hadn't seen her face until I looked down at her in the casket.

I tell you, *that* type of loss is strange for a child. For though death has left its mark, it cannot be understood as a tangible thing. I did not know her, only vague impressions I could surmise from the mourners. Some kissed her, touched her forehead, my grandfather cried. Why? I reason that all that potential, words never spoken, moments never shared, were relegated to that impossible realm of imagination. The last thing, a phone call, a knock on the door, a kind turn of phrase shared on a holiday, was *the* last. That chapter's over; the book's done, pack it up, go home!

To sidestep those macabre subjects of death and grief, I'll tell you a funny thing that happened not too long ago. My grandmother had come to help me and my brothers for two weeks, whilst our father was undergoing a (successful) cancer operation. In these two weeks, nearly every member of our family contracted lice. On the night of its discovery, I spent two hours poring over every inch of my brother's head, combing each two-inch section of hair. A colony of flat, brownish-yellow bugs infested every crevice of his scalp. And by my hand and comb, I enacted what must go down in lice history as a godly cataclysm of unbelievable proportions. You *need* to understand: the toxic shampoo merely stunned most of the tiny devils. I pulled out swarming vermin, stuck between eggs and a blood-heavy adult louse. Napkin, after tissue, after Clorox wipe was painted black by insectoid corpses. My gloved hand became a death-stained gauntlet. Sweat laced my brow as I worked. I have those obsessive compulsions doctors like to diagnose. I have a tendency, no, a need originating deep within me, to be completely thorough—at least on matters such as delousing.

Nothing will age you quicker in the span of two weeks than your father's cancer surgery, I'll tell you. It has felt that from this moment I have been propelled out of the throes of childhood into some other space. What happened to the teenage interlude? All of those dreaded responsibilities have covered it, hives, lice, and driving.

Another funny story from these two weeks is when my grandmother and I, on the way home from the pharmacy, stopped into a little tucked-away thrift store. The place was rank, and smelled of old rotting books. Boxes of records were stacked along the walls, and the books were piled upright and along their side on the shelves. The father and son owners were both eccentric. The son was short, hair swept back, and his beard was long dangling to his nipples. The father was old, something like eighty. He had a stark white bouffant and a blue artificial silk jacket. He spent a good deal of time trying to sell me an antique belt buckle.

“On Madison Ave, they’d sell this for three hundred bucks! I’m giving it for only fifty,” he turned it over in his hand, “Native American, 1930s, hand-made. This is an investment!”

I didn’t bite. He spent some more time rambling about how records are the fastest appreciating asset money can buy. As we were leaving, a balding man, gripping a liquor bottle in a brown bag, entered. Turning to us, he said, “Is Tommy here?” We didn’t know any Tommy!

We drove back on Hope Street along those dull blocks that’ll only be interesting at some distant point when all dreary drives become nexuses of nostalgia. At this same point, clouds will taste like cotton candy and spew champagne. At this time natural disasters will become interesting oddities befitting footnotes of history books. Then, all awkwardness will become great comedy.

I guess, when I was younger I had some notion that the world unwound itself in a natural sort of way, and that when all was said and done, things had a way of working out. I’m not so sure anymore, mainly due to that turbulence inherent to living and the inability to judge whether or not you are truly happy. During COVID I left New York City and was incorporated into Providence. During that time, my grandfather Howard passed. In the following year, my father was diagnosed with colon cancer. Two years later it re-emerged and required surgery. The world is complex, and can best be understood by truly living in it. As a species we are propelled by our desire for continuity, to make sense of it. We do things to give ourselves the feeling of stability—that we are in control. Despite our fundamental efforts, life is unceasingly unpredictable, often humorous, and so, maybe the whole goddamn circus ain’t so bad.

ANNA KLEINBERG '26
AROUND THE WORLD IN EIGHTY MINUTES

I'm pretty sure I've made a huge mistake. From the sun beating down on my head, to the humidity threatening to boil me alive, to the nauseating smell of low-quality raclette cheese permeating the air, everywhere I go I find nothing but pain. What a time to be alive!

When the idea of a three-day, incredibly intense, pack-as-much-magic-into-as-short-a-time-as-possible Disney World vacation was first suggested, it sounded like a dream come true. It had been almost six years since my last trip to the happiest place on earth, and I couldn't wait to return! A long weekend getaway sounded ideal. If only I'd known then what was in store.

Even before we arrived at the parks, there were problems. After narrowly avoiding Hurricane Milton, we arrived at our hotel late on Friday. The fans in our room were turned off, but nobody knew how to get them back on. Although I personally slept fine, everyone else spent the time tossing, turning, and sweating. The blast of an Amber Alert didn't help.

The next day, since we weren't staying on property, we had to get a ride to the parks. We needed a car that would be able to fit five, which, on most rideshare apps, is a special category that costs slightly more. However, when she went to order the ride, my friend's mother accidentally hit the regular option, so we had to *beg* the driver to let us all in. After a few frustrating minutes, she relented, but this unexpected delay was just the prelude to chaos yet to come.

Our first destination was the Magic Kingdom, home to several of my favorite rides. For some reason, my father decided that it would be easier to take the Uber to one of the Disney-owned hotels before getting on the monorail from there and taking *that* to the park. This could have worked well, except that the hotel he chose, Disney's Contemporary Resort, was about as many stops away from the Magic Kingdom as you could get. Because of my father's attempt to skip the security lines, we spent about twenty minutes in the slow-moving, foul-smelling vehicle before we arrived. By that point, I was ready to leap off the train and sprint through the gates, but I was going to have to wait even longer.

After disembarking, we headed over to the entry area. The lines to get in didn't seem like much of an issue at first; they were short, quick-moving, and I

thought there was no way in hell we'd ever spend more than three minutes in them, but, when we got to the front, my mother made a crucial error. To get into Disney World, you need to scan your fingerprint alongside your ticket. Somehow, using her digital wallet, she managed to attach her fingerprint to my *father's* ticket instead. After learning this, he became irritated, refusing to use the physical ticket that the line attendant gave him as an alternative. He instead spent a long time pestering the employees into fixing the one on his phone. It wasn't until several minutes later, when the issue seemed to be resolved, that I was finally allowed to enter the park.

Main Street, the first area after the gate. Decorated for Halloween with pumpkins and hay bales, it was picture-perfect, idealized buildings painted pastel colors, adorned with American flags. Even though it had been years since I'd been there, I felt like I was reuniting with an old friend. My excitement was palpable, the possibilities for the trip, endless. In just a few minutes, I'd be in line waiting for a much-anticipated ride. But first, a quick photo in front of the iconic castle. Then, my friend and I split up from our parents, ready to explore the park. After such a long absence, I was determined to squeeze as much enjoyment out of it as I could.

We began wandering, taking selfies and enjoying a break from the chilly New England autumn. A short deliberation later, we decided that our first ride would be the Haunted Mansion. It had always been one of my favorites, and, since it was mid-October, its theme was appropriate. We headed over, pleasantly surprised to find that the line, although still about half an hour long, was shorter than expected. After a morning full of inconvenience, it seemed like we'd finally gotten lucky.

Only shortly after getting on the ride, I realized my previous assumptions were, in fact, false. We'd made it through the line fine, but after just a few moments of journeying through the ghostly house, a voice came over the ride vehicle's speakers. The Ghost Host, the ride's narrator, announced in his rather menacing way "Attention, unruly spirits have gotten in the way of our ride. Please stay seated in your vehicle until it starts moving again." We were stuck, and, to make things worse, we'd been positioned right in front of an AC unit running on full blast. I hadn't expected to be cold in Florida, but here we were.

It took about ten minutes for the ride to restart. After we got off, we once again found ourselves in the blazing heat, and decided that another indoor ride would be best. Pirates of the Caribbean, another classic, was the obvious choice,

so we headed in that direction. However, when we got there, we found the ride's employees standing in front of the building, blocking it off.

"Sorry, we're having some technical difficulties," was the answer I got when I asked one of them what had happened. Slightly demoralized, we instead decided to watch the Tiki Room show.

Thankfully, the rest of the day went by somewhat normally. We reunited with our parents, went on a few more rides, and got some lunch that was surprisingly good. Even if we didn't manage to go on Tiana's Bayou Adventure, a new log flume that was always overbooked, or experienced three breakdowns on Spaceship Earth when we made our way over to EPCOT that evening, things were, for the time, going well.

Sunday morning, time to get up and go! The Animal Kingdom opens at eight, and although my friend's family had no desire to wake up that early, *my* family decided that we'd make it to the park before the hordes showed up. However, I was tired from yesterday's events, so we didn't get there until almost nine.

The car ride was uneventful, but there were still problems in the ticket line. It seemed that my parents' fingerprints had gotten switched around *again*. Okay, whatever. Still, I was getting impatient. The lines were long and our time at the happiest place on earth was expiring. I wanted to race around and do as much as I could, no matter the cost.

First, the *Avatar*-themed simulator ride. During the 75-minute wait, I found myself tapping my foot impatiently almost the whole time. How I wanted to sprint to the front of the line, disregarding everyone around me. But no, I forced myself to stand still, not wanting to put my trip in jeopardy.

The next two rides, Dinosaur and Expedition Everest, both had short waits, but even those, which were around ten minutes, felt like an eternity. We only had two days left –no, about a day and a half– left in Disney World, and I had to do *everything*!

Finally, my friend arrived, and her company eased my anxiety a little bit. It was easier to forget about the pressing deadlines when I had someone to talk to. That much, at least, was a blessing. Of course, she also wanted to go on the *Avatar* ride, so that meant we had to go back to the other side of the park and wait for another hour, but that time went by much faster than it had in the morning, and by the time we got off, it was already lunchtime.

After speaking about it over mediocre Chinese food, our families decided that we wanted to go on the Kali River Rapids, a ride well-known for getting its riders soaked. Because we were all very hot, that didn't seem like much of an issue, and we even went through the trouble of getting a locker to put our things in. When we arrived at the start of the queue, a sign indicated that we had a thirty minute wait ahead of us, which, by Disney World standards, was practically nothing.

We were almost to the front of the line, about five minutes away from getting to cool off on the rapids, when the unspeakable happened. An employee approached the front of the line and made an announcement. Looking disappointed, visitors headed for the line's exit, talk of the ride being closed spreading through the crowd. By that point, I was hot and tired, upset to learn that I would *not* be getting splashed. With little else to do, our families decided to go on the safari ride instead.

Out of all the queues I'd waited in so far, the safari's was by far the worst. Being outside, there was no air conditioning, only the occasional fan. Even worse, most of it wasn't even in the shade. My legs were exhausted, I was covered in sweat, and I thought I was going to pass out from the heat. Despite this, whenever my friend asked if I was okay, I told her I was doing just fine. I could not let anything get in the way of my trip, least of all, myself.

After the safari ride was finally over, we went back to the hotel for a quick trip to the pool. It was refreshing, it was invigorating, and, frankly, I thought it was a huge waste of time. Sure, the water felt great on my sore legs, but what was I doing here when I could be at the park? I kept asking myself that question, and although I came up with several logical answers, my brain refused to listen to any of them. My time was running out, and, until the trip was over, I couldn't afford to stop for even one second.

That night, Disney's Hollywood Studios. After a long walk to the front gate from our Uber driver's unusual drop-off spot, we arrived at the park's glamorous, 1920s-themed main street, the evening air much cooler than it had been earlier.

Although not one of my favorite parks, Hollywood Studios is home to a ride that has shaped my Disney trips since I was a young child: The Hollywood Tower of Terror. Secluded in a corner of the park, it perfectly matches its theme

of being an abandoned, once-glamorous hotel on the dark side of Hollywood. And when I say this ride influenced me as a child, I mean that it *terrified* me. Every time my parents tried to get me on it, I went into hysterics while still in line. Something about the thought of riding a decrepit, unused elevator where five people disappeared over seventy years ago sends a shiver down my spine to this day. And so, on this trip, I was determined to overcome that fear.

My friend, a little bit more open about her dislike of scary rides, decided not to join us, and instead went shopping with her mother, so my family headed over to the Tower without them. While in the queue, I could feel my chest getting tight, the familiar panic coming over me. The area we were waiting in, a cobweb-encrusted lobby, did nothing to calm my senses, and I found myself on edge, both excited for the ride and fearing for my life.

Eventually, we reached the pre-show room, where the eerie, black-and-white video explaining the backstory of the ride set the mood for what was to come: even more terror. All through the next queue, themed like a boiler room, I wondered if I should leave. But, deep in my heart, I knew that I couldn't. There are certain things one *has* to do when one is on vacation, certain traditions that cannot be avoided. For me, this was one of them. I would not allow myself to leave this ride without going on it, and, at this point, I had little choice. We'd reached the front of the line and were about to board the infamous elevator. There was nowhere to go but up...and then drop down.

After the elevator came to a stop, I realized that I'd majorly over-reacted. It had hardly been as terrifying as I remembered it, and, although it sounds insane, it was actually kind of fun! In fact, if the park hadn't been closing soon, I definitely would have considered going on it again. After buying a sweatshirt at the gift store to commemorate the experience, we went to meet back up with my friend.

When we arrived at the store she was shopping at with her mother, I think she was surprised to see that I hadn't broken down. I'd seemed so nervous earlier, and my giddiness now was definitely a stark contrast. Still, we didn't have time to waste by chatting about the ride; the park would only be open for about another forty-five minutes, and my dad really wanted to check out the new Star Wars themed area, so we headed over there and, to our good fortune, got lucky enough to get on a ride that you usually had to wait hours for in about twenty minutes. After that, we were out of time, so we left to go get dinner.

Robot Hotpot, a miracle of technology! For the uninformed, this form of dining consists of Chinese hotpot, with robots. We didn't exactly know what they did, but when my friend's mother found this odd-sounding but delicious-looking restaurant online, we decided to go, thinking that it would be a transformative experience.

Located in a strip mall somewhere in Orlando, the restaurant looked a little dubious at first, but, not wanting to judge a book by its cover, we decided to go there anyway. Fortunately, the interior was clean and chic. However, none of that was able to overcome our disappointment about the restaurant's main factor: the robot.

Monday morning. This is it. The final day. My friend's flight leaves around noon, which means it'll just be my family. Even before we get to the parks, I'm stressed. This will be my last chance to get on some rides I've been excited for, and I'm worried we won't have enough time to do everything. As we arrive at the monorail station, once again employing my father's strange line-cutting tactic, I feel like I'm about to have a nervous breakdown. To me, this trip's become something more than a breakdown- this is life or death.

Animal Kingdom: the *Avatar* ride, one last time for good measure. We don't look around, mess around, or shop around; we just head straight to our destination and then leave, no time to even say goodbye.

Magic Kingdom: my mother booked three fast-passes for the day, and we intend to use them all, however, we end up missing the time for our first one, the Haunted Mansion, by about twenty minutes. Still, I want to go on the ride, so we get into the long, unmoving line, and wait. To my disappointment, we have a somewhat underwhelming experience, mostly due to the fact that the guy in the ride vehicle in front of us kept taking photos with his flash on, ruining some of the illusions.

Next, we go on Pirates of the Caribbean again, finding things to do while we wait for the time our fast passes for Tiana's Bayou Adventure are scheduled for. After a while, we decide to head over to the ride. It's decent, ending with a nice, long drop that leaves you covered in water, but it's by no means as great as its lines suggest. A little annoyed, we next decide to go on the new *Tron* ride.

By some miracle, we make it on the usually-thronged roller coaster in less than an hour, and let me tell you, even if the line had been twice as long, I

would have waited for it. Although I've never seen the movie the ride is based on, it's still a lot of fun. In one part of the queue, you get to watch the ride's high-powered launch sequence from above, contemplating your fate as you hear the screams of the riders below you. And, when you finally board your motorcycle-shaped ride chair, you're whisked off on a minute-long journey that takes you both high above the park and through a dark building lit only by neon lights. Although I'm usually more inclined towards "classic" rides, I gotta say, the *Tron* ride is pretty cool.

By this point, I'm pretty tired. Over the course of the weekend, I'd probably already walked about twenty-five miles. Still, we have about another four hours at the parks and I don't intend to waste them. We're heading to EPCOT.

When we get there, I have every intention of charging around the world at record speed, stopping only to shop at the different pavilions and to try new foods, however, that isn't quite how it goes down. To be honest, most of the shops aren't that interesting, and, even worse, the food isn't that good. Still, I grit my teeth and keep moving, not wanting to stop for a second lest the day be wasted.

I reach my breaking point somewhere between Germany and Italy, at the food booth known as The Alps. Since arriving at the park, my dad has been insistent about wanting raclette, pointing at the pictures of the dish whenever we walk by. Now that we've finally arrived at the place where it's served, he's excited to try it, but oh. my. God! The area around the booth smells horrific, an aroma of Swiss cheese mixed with burning hair. Despite the stench, my father gets in line anyways, ignoring the red flags. He still claims that it's going to be delicious. Fearing for my life, I beg my mother to let us leave and continue on our way to the Italy Pavilion. It doesn't take much to convince her.

After escaping, I collapse in a chair next to a shady table. Every muscle in my body hurts, and my stomach, unsettled. Giving myself a moment to relax, I realize something critically important: I don't know why I'm forcing myself to do all this. Ever since I've arrived, I've been rushing around from one place to another, not allowing myself or anyone around me even a second to breathe. I've been trying to do absolutely everything, but that just isn't fun, especially not when it leaves you a sweaty, mildly-sick wreck of a human being. Thinking about it now, I laugh. The realization, so simple; its application for all of life,

apparent. When my mother gets up to grab herself a snack, I stay at the table, feeling, for the first time in the past three days, totally calm.



ROBIN LINDEN '26

REPENTENCE

I think of my mother's thorny being and my palms that were willing to bleed, and realize now that my hands could have never been this gentle had they not been so cut. My greatest plight was believing I needed to earn love that should have been unconditional. It has also formed the part of myself I love the most.

As a child, I was resigned to the idea that I should spend my life repenting for the sin of being born. I refused to be mad at my mother for taking her own life. Even now, conjuring up any emotion that isn't grief is unimaginable. All this anger was once love and that is sickening. That one day I should wake up and she would not be there anymore--that it would be her choice-- that is nauseating. That I could be a child blaming myself for her death, that is grotesque. But to be grown, living, aging, and still blaming myself? That is unbelievable.

I think people like to assume that enduring pain innately means strength. When bad things happen, you grow. You evolve. I spent much of my life thinking that my suffering was *mere* suffering. When my mother died, that didn't build character. I was three with knobby knees and wild hair, standing in an itchy black dress not realizing I had to say farewell. I was seven with stubby fingers and wide eyes, feeling sickeningly alone in my big home where no one mentioned my mother's name. The wooden floors and the yellow walls ached for echoes of my mother's bright laughter. The child in the hallway silently prayed someone would talk to her about those things she remembered: the funeral, the courtroom, the movie nights, the magnificent women dancing in the kitchen who she could scarcely identify to be her mother. I was eleven with long legs and purple cheetah print glasses, quietly fighting against the tears which formed in the front seat of the car as I learned how my mother really died. I was a child, wondering what role I had played in my mother's death, questioning why I had not received that unconditional maternal love I heard so much about.

Tangibly, I thought of all my shortcomings as a daughter. My overbearing laugh, my forgetful disposition, my angry nature, my crooked smile, my inability to try, my unquestioning refusal to fight back, even my habit of picking

at my nails. I so often and so strongly disliked myself. I was convinced that had I been a better daughter, a better person, I could have received that unequivocal love which was so desperately lacking.

Strangely, it was through this hatred of myself that I learned how to love others. It sounds odd to say, it seems odder to live, but my most wonderful quality is my ability to spot small and hidden intricacies in the people around me. I pay attention to those often forgotten signs of endearment. The greatest and most enlightening parts of people are frequently the most subtle: wheezing laughs, firm handshakes, the fleeting moment where they're holding the door and no one has walked past, the way they look up at the sunset, the way they run in the rain. We tend to focus on grand achievements—occupations, dreams, families—but those who haven't been loved enough notice every gesture and idiosyncrasy: slight touches of fingers, phone call endings, passing smiles, inside jokes, the way the sun hits people's eyes, the pressure of feet on gas pedals. I find intimacy in every small thing done, searching for love wherever I can because it was never given to me unreservedly. I don't request endearment; I seek it everywhere

I was a lonely and angry child who believed she would always be without warmth. I grew as a tree or a flower does, not forgetting my roots but retaining my most heavenly leaves. The lack of love I felt flourished and festered, until it became my most valuable asset: my willingness, my urge, my pleasure to look for the love around me.

I shared umbrellas, and took pleasure in opening doors; I laughed loudly and without shame, I smiled at strangers and complimented my friends on those delicate idiosyncrasies I noticed they had. I watched the sunlight filter through the tree tops and the waves crash violently against one another, searching for the messages my mother promised to leave me. In the backseat of my friend's green Subaru, I finally spoke of her. I told stories of my mother's most magical attributes and divulged all that pain that had consumed me since her death. I thought of my seven-year-old self, with her yielding silence, who could never have spoken of that wild woman whose warm laugh she missed so much. I had, grudgingly, and in spite of myself, built character. I had grown.

I am now sixteen with bright eyes and an easy-coming smile, searching and finding small doses of warmth each day. I even try to look inward and pay attention to myself. I find magnificent things: a thoughtful nature, a recognizable laugh, a gentle temperament. I feed pigeons, and wave at babies,

and find a ridiculous amount of joy in paying attention to the world around me. Through the loss of my mother, I have found that endearment is not just something to be earned or given unconditionally. It is something to be sought and cherished, discovered and found in the intricacies of our human natures. I look at my hands as I write, watching their delicate and gentle disposition. I think of my bright eyes and realize that they never would have viewed life in this way had they not seen the woman dancing in the kitchen, laughing in the car, smiling in the casket. Had my eyes not spent so much time searching, they could have never found this much love.

JULIA YAKIREVICH '26

WE ARE WATER

Grief does not come in waves. I should have packed an extra towel. Our team of three stood on the shore, reflexively tugging at limbs, stretching lazily. We were entwined: shoulders to armpits, weighing ourselves down, promising to sand and one another, “We’ll stick together.” Following the sea of matching bright pink swim caps, we paced toward the starting line. A gunshot sounded and the charity event was on its way. The crowd swallowed us and we stampeded into frothy waves, not much to do but laugh—the other swimmers shoved through as if there was a prize to be won. Though lightheartedness was soon buried under surf, arrowing through buoys and bodies, we lost each other to the ocean. Adrenaline dissipated some hundred yards in, numbness stiffened extremities, salty lips ripening like Vermont blueberries. Coming up on the first turn, I was alone—the collegiate swimmers charged ahead, I settled behind. The ocean and I reached an understanding: after two hundred yards of uncoordinated thrashing, there was little sense in fighting the current, instead, I adjusted my stroke, maintaining a comfortable rhythm.

The sun blared through red, tinted goggles, pooling salty brine in eyelids—the result of personal grief or a leak in the rubber rim. My grandfather—his gimlet eyes and unceasing hiccups that later evolved into fear-driven shrieks—hadn’t troubled me for months; Saturdays once consumed by awkward Skype calls and grammatical errors in Russian, a forgotten mother tongue, now filled empty hours. I contemplated the image of a grave I’d never seen, a ten-hour plane ride, and a worn hospital gown between sky and sea that I endured. I have a habit of thinking of the dead when physically challenging myself as if my exertion will compensate for my patently unathletic relatives, always in the form of a hurried prayer at the starting line, and when inside, staring at condensation forming on concrete ceilings glittering with chlorine reflections. Again, a blessing crept from salt-water-lined lips and rang in cold-aching ears, “Hear my cry and come back whole; fight this fight with me, it’s all I’ve ever known.” No sudden surge of requested vigor materialized, so I surrendered again to the waves, relying on them to drag me through the currents of seaweed and mourning.

Pressure in the chest with labored breaths whittling under salt air, I came to the realization that my grief didn't come in waves. The metaphor of waves intends to convey how grief seeps in and consumes without warning or reason. But that denotes that waves are an unpredictable force; if anything, they're among nature's most reliable. Tide in, tide out, a certain rhythm guides their peaks and troughs—to compare their presence to unforeseeable grief is to reject the beauty in their anticipated pattern. Instead, I've found that grief washes over me the way my body slowly acclimates to frigid water; the cold shock slowly wears off until a tolerable temperature is reached: for what is grief but a theorem of relativity?

But truth be told, I'm no expert in grief. The only things I've ever lost were manifested in pixels: grandfathers with whom relationships mostly unfolded over a computer screen across oceans, retaining only the memory of an imagined cigarette stench and gasoline-greased palms. Perhaps, I find a sense of belonging in the waves, reclaiming the fraught space that separates us—the roiling sea that has swallowed my family and spat us onto opposite sides of the world. I feel unsure whether Rhode Island and the Ocean State are truly home—never quite knowing where my parents are referring to when they mention *rodinya*, homeland in Russian, where the stamps in my father's carefully curated collection may one day be addressed to—so I enter an *ocean state*: finding refuge in the transforming water of acceptance without labels and passports. Here, I don't pick a side or immigrate to hostile lands. I float in the in-between; swim in grief, splash at the biblical and liminal, counting on the tide to take me in or turn me over. The vast body appears daunting, threatening the same ambiguities as my ties to home, family, memory—invisible lines drawn wherever I step, warning that I don't belong, reminding that I still don't know who I am. Yet in all its untethered and unstable ways, this unhurried flow, free of boundaries and borders, cuts burdens and sets permanence, offering me the only answer I can wholly accept: I am the sum of things that clash and collide, suspended not grounded, delivered without a return address.

I continued the swim alone, glancing over my shoulder every breath for a familiar set of caps and goggles, or a rhythm that matched my own. Eventually, the discomfort of numb digits and throbbing eardrums withered to something pleasant: a reminder that what I was doing wasn't meant to be easy. After the last buoy, the race's end was a straight shot to shore, waves' path perfectly aligned to give me an extra boost. The inflatable finish line loomed into view as

I trudged through muddy waters tapering from hip to ankles. I jogged through, gritty sand underfoot, fighting for resolution as sea breeze produced goosebumps, my jaw locking in an uncontrollable jitter. Looking back, the finish line swayed to the movement of the wind, in its own way, just as unexpectedly predictable as the sliver of ocean carved out behind it. Is grief a wind, wave, or wallow?

Again, the ocean disgorged me—diminishing feelings of my remaining unmovable through space and time. A stranger wrapped a towel over my tense shoulders and removed the soft foam band around my ankle that electronically monitored my swim. I peered at the ocean, breathing in rough air and exhaling strife, the tide reaching my feet just short of a child's sketch in the sand. The metaphor of grief managed to follow me out of the water, reminding that mourning can't be washed away and doesn't need to be conquered. Grief ebbs and flows, sometimes crashing along the shoreline and other times subtly shaping the coast. I wrung out my curls and pulled my fingers through salt-encrusted knots, cleared sand from my eyes, trusting the current to guide me

DRAMATIC WRITING

QUINN KENNEDY '24

IMPACT

Characters

Ashley: 22, an ambitious violinist.

Noah: 19, his first time on a plane.

The Scene

ASHLEY and NOAH sit next to each other on an airplane, NOAH by the window. Both of them sit very straight, breathing hard and fast, gripping the sides of their seats. Ashley, after a moment, pulls her phone out of her pocket and tries, and fails, to get a signal.

ASHLEY

Goddammit.

NOAH looks at ASHLEY, and then
looks away.

NOAH

I think you're supposed to leave those off. Or on airplane mode.

ASHLEY sighs and sticks her phone
back in her pocket.

NOAH

I guess the rules don't really apply. Under the circumstances.

ASHLEY

Not like it matters. You can't get a signal up here.

Beat.

ASHLEY

Don't you have anyone to...you know. Tell?

NOAH

Ah, no, not really. My grandmother still uses her landline.

ASHLEY

You could—

NOAH

If you can't text I definitely won't be able to call.

Beat. ASHLEY rings the help button.

NOAH

Are you afraid of flying?

ASHLEY

I'm afraid of crashing.

NOAH

(Explaining)

Well, I just—this is the sixth time you've called over the flight attendant.

ASHLEY

I'm just—uncomfortable.

NOAH

Okay, uncomfortable, sure. Let me just ask you—what, at this point, would make you more comfortable?

ASHLEY

Excuse me?

NOAH

I'm curious. Genuinely.

ASHLEY
Genuinely?

NOAH
Genuinely.

ASHLEY
Piss off.

NOAH's surprised, but goes silent.

ASHLEY
I want to ask her how long it's going to be.

NOAH
She's not going to answer.

ASHLEY
Jesus.

NOAH sighs.

ASHLEY
I'm not afraid of flying. I do it all the time. You've been staring out of the window since we took off like you've never flown before.

NOAH
I haven't ever flown before.

ASHLEY
You haven't?

NOAH
What a first time, right?

ASHLEY

You seem a little old to be a first-time flyer.

NOAH

You seem a little old to be afraid of flying.

ASHLEY

I'm not. Travel just has me a little high-strung.

NOAH

Uncomfortable. Sure.

ASHLEY

High-strung.

Both fall silent.

NOAH

So, why Berlin?

ASHLEY

I'm performing. In the Berlin Philharmonic.

NOAH

Oh.

ASHLEY

It's kind of a big deal.

NOAH

I'm sure.

ASHLEY

It's for a fundraiser. I'm on this panel the day before and we're having an event and every—

NOAH
What's it for?

ASHLEY
Hm?

NOAH
What are you raising funds for?

ASHLEY
Amnesty International. The German branch.

NOAH
What do they do?

ASHLEY
They raise awareness. For human rights.

NOAH
So what are you gonna talk about?

ASHLEY
Human rights.

NOAH
Right.

ASHLEY
I auditioned in New York. I had to wait six months just to hear about whether or not I was even being considered. It's pretty rare they take American musicians.

NOAH
Sounds like a big deal.

It is. ASHLEY

Beat.

What about you? ASHLEY

I was going to see the wall. NOAH

The wall? ASHLEY

Mm. Berlin Wall. NOAH

Right. What's your name? ASHLEY

He looks away from the window, up at her, for the first time since the beginning.

Noah. NOAH

Noah? Hi. I'm Ashley. ASHLEY

(She shakes his hand. As they're shaking.)

The Berlin Wall doesn't exist.

They keep shaking hands.

NOAH
(Distressed)

What?

ASHLEY

It was torn down in the '90s.

NOAH

What?

Beat.

NOAH

But I read about it. In a textbook.

ASHLEY

Mm. A reliable source.

NOAH

Quiet. Are you serious? I thought they'd at least leave it up as a memorial.

ASHLEY

A memorial of what, the Cold War? No one wants to remember that.

NOAH

They left up—I thought the whole point of history was to remember the—to remember everything, good and bad. They left up the Jefferson Memorial. I mean, there's statues of Robert E. Lee all over Georgia. We have memorial days for wars and genocides—I mean, we have an entire day to celebrate Christopher Columbus! There's so many objectively bad...things that we still try to remember.

ASHLEY

Maybe it's an American thing.

NOAH

Yeah. I guess the Jefferson Memorial also isn't physically dividing the entire country in half.

Beat.

NOAH

They didn't even leave up a section?

ASHLEY

Why didn't you check this? Before spending a thousand something dollars on tickets?

NOAH

How would I have checked?

ASHLEY

You could have Googled it. It was a whole event, when it happened.

NOAH

I don't use the internet much.

ASHLEY

How old are you?

NOAH

Nineteen.

ASHLEY

So you're a teenager and you don't use the internet much?

NOAH

No, I don't.

ASHLEY

Are you in school, Noah?

NOAH

I'm not.

ASHLEY

Why not?

NOAH

Can't afford it. My parents won't pay—I wanted to go to Notre Dame. I got in. But it's Catholic. So now I'm studying for my GED.

ASHLEY

Not Catholic?

NOAH

Not exactly. Evangelical.

ASHLEY

Jesus, you're an evangelical? Sorry. Is that offensive to say? Lord's name in vain?

NOAH

They're evangelicals. I left. Figured going to hell was better than dying in Georgia, right?

Beat.

NOAH

I guess I'm getting a taste of both.

ASHLEY

Oh.

Pause.

NOAH

I hope it's not too much longer. I hate the waiting. I can't stand it.

ASHLEY

Yeah, well, I expect the landing might be worse.

NOAH

I fell from the monkey bars once and broke my arm. My dad told me that was what hell was going to feel like.

ASHLEY

Might be worse than a broken arm.

NOAH

Well, not the pain of it, not—I mean, it made me afraid of heights. I'd have this recurring nightmare where I'd fall, just, like, endlessly, never hitting the ground or anything. And then I told my dad about it and he said that it was a taste of retribution, those exact words, retribution for my sins. He said that the nightmares meant I was being punished, and if I didn't repent, when I died, that was going to be my hell. Falling for all of eternity, without any impact.

ASHLEY

Sisyphian.

NOAH

It's almost ironic.

Pause.

NOAH

How much longer, do you think?

ASHLEY

Oh God, I don't want to think about it.

Beat.

ASHLEY

Maybe another minute or two.

Pause.

ASHLEY

So, do you have a job, if you're not in school?

NOAH

Hm? No. Not right now. I'm trying to get one. Got any advice?

ASHLEY

Not really. Only—I guess do something that you'll be proud of, when you look back. Not that it matters now.

Beat.

ASHLEY

How'd you get the money to travel? I figure your parents didn't pay.

NOAH

No. I don't—I never see them anymore. My grandma—I'm living with her while I study, I'm—she gave me the tickets as a gift for studying so hard. I love history. I think—I mean, she's Catholic, and I think she wanted this to be kind of a pilgrimage. I don't know. She's very...what's the word. I can't think of—I guess optimistic?

ASHLEY

Yeah, well, you get that a lot with religious types, don't you?

NOAH

Yeah. For sure, yeah. What about you?

ASHLEY

What's my religion?

NOAH

Well—

ASHLEY

No, not really. I mean, my parents—my dad's Jewish, but no. I don't really believe in anything.

NOAH

That's not what I—really? Anything?

ASHLEY

Yeah. Not really. I just—religion's such a commitment, right? Most Jewish kids—my parents offered to have me bat mitzvahed as a kid because my sister had one and I was just like I don't have the time. You know what that means, by the way, right?

NOAH

Bat mitzvahed? Yes. I use the internet sometimes.

ASHLEY

Anyway, I just—I didn't have the time. You have to learn so much Hebrew. I wanted to practice the violin. It's just such a commitment.

NOAH

A commitment, right. Even the most secular Christians go to church once a week.

ASHLEY

Exactly. And for what?

NOAH

To pray.

ASHLEY

Why? You never know what's going to come of it. You don't know anything.

NOAH

You hope. You hope for the best.

ASHLEY

You pour your heart and soul out to a god that you have no proof even exists.

NOAH

That's what believing is for.

ASHLEY

But you still end up somewhere else, some other plane, where this god, this—
where it still has complete and total control over you. Does it matter whether
that plane is—you're giving up everything to something that doesn't even care.

NOAH

Not if you believe—

ASHLEY

I mean, look at you! You can do everything right and still end up somewhere
like this. You can do everything right and still end up dying in Georgia.

Beat.

ASHLEY

I shouldn't have said that.

Beat.

ASHLEY

My sister's more religious than I am.

Beat.

NOAH

It makes it worth it, you know. It—it keeps you going because it's going to be worth it, because it means that you're not entirely alone. In all of this. I don't know. Maybe I'm rambling. Maybe my parents were right.

ASHLEY

What?

NOAH

I mean, maybe this is punishment. I'm being punished for leaving and you're being punished for not believing. Maybe none of it was worth it.

ASHLEY

I don't believe that.

NOAH

I know.

ASHLEY

No, I just—I don't accept that. I mean, what, you spend your entire life believing in a god that has your parents threatening you with hell as a little kid and the second you consider Catholicism as an option you die in some fiery blaze?

NOAH

Maybe we'll just plummet into the ocean. I think that'd be nicer. I hope it's nicer.

ASHLEY

(Ignoring him)

And me, what about me? I've devoted my life to a cause, I've devoted my life to belonging, and just because I find it in playing the violin rather than slapping my hands together and saying oh lord Jesus help me right now, I die? I go to hell? You go to hell if you don't pick the exact right cause to stand behind, to believe in, to anything? Then what's the point in anything?

NOAH

What do you think is the point in anything?

ASHLEY

What?

NOAH

What do you live for, if not for God? For your violin? For your sister?

ASHLEY

My sister...

NOAH

Maybe the point isn't God. I don't know. I don't really know anything. I mean, I had to ask someone what cannabis was when I got to TSA.

ASHLEY

That's what Google is for.

NOAH

Yeah, probably. But—I don't know. If the point isn't God, isn't it still a cause? I mean, do we live our lives entirely for ourselves? Where do we find the meaning? In the good people? In the good moments?

ASHLEY

And what makes them good?

NOAH

Right. I don't know, I just—I've been doing my grandma's laundry because she has trouble getting up and I don't want her breaking her back carrying around huge baskets, so I just do both of ours. And sometimes I take our laundry out of the dryers and these giant sweaters she wears are warm. They were my dad's, when he was a kid, but he left them all and they're big enough that she can wear them. They're like blankets to her. They're warm from the dryer, so sometimes—this is embarrassing, but sometimes I just press my face into them and I just

feel like I get it. I get it. I don't know why, I don't know what it is about them, but I get it.

Beat.

NOAH

And then I think about how the last time I saw my dad, he threw my old house keys in my face. They cut my cheek right here.

(He taps his cheek.)

I think that if anyone I know deserves to go to hell, it's him. For doing that. For throwing those keys in my face.

Beat.

NOAH

Idealistic. That's the word. Religious people are idealistic.

Beat.

NOAH

Do you think you'll miss anyone?

ASHLEY

I will. My sister.

NOAH

Yeah.

ASHLEY

She's the smartest person I've ever met. She went to Harvard, and when I went to go visit her we went to the Public Garden in Boston. There's a statue there of a duck and a bunch of little ducklings, lined up behind her. The day I told my parents I wasn't going to college, and that I wanted to use the money we'd saved up to try and become a musician, they told me I wasn't talented enough. I called her and cried and she told me to do it, which is how I knew it was the right decision. I texted her later to show her that I got a duckling tattoo.

NOAH

Where?

ASHLEY

Here.

ASHLEY shows NOAH her wrist.

NOAH

A tattoo will definitely get you sent to hell.

ASHLEY laughs.

ASHLEY

It has to be better than this. (Almost desperate) It has to be better than this.

Beat.

ASHLEY

Not that I believe in hell.

NOAH

Right.

Beat.

ASHLEY

I do miss my sister. She works for Amnesty International now. She's—she's really smart.

NOAH

So you didn't really get into that orchestra.

Pause.

ASHLEY

No, I didn't really get in.

NOAH

Your sister got you in.

ASHLEY

What? Oh, no, it's too big an orchestra for nepotism to play a difference, trust me.

NOAH

Then why—

ASHLEY

I'm going to miss her. I miss her.

NOAH

I miss my grandmother.

ASHLEY

Not long before we don't miss anything.

NOAH

Who's going to miss me?

ASHLEY

I miss being in the kitchen, emptying the dishwasher and singing along to Stevie Wonder.

NOAH

My grandma's going to miss me. Maybe that's the real proof I did something good.

ASHLEY

I miss when my mom would hum and ask me what song she was singing because she couldn't think of it and it was always inevitably some commercial jingle from the '80s.

NOAH

Who's going to do her laundry? She's going to break her back and end up in the hospital. And she's retired, so she doesn't work and she's not going to be able to pay her bills.

ASHLEY

I'm gonna miss bacon. And bananas.

NOAH

It's not like my parents are going to help her.

ASHLEY

I'm gonna miss biting my nails. No. That's a bad one.

NOAH

And why would God help her? He's already punishing me for leaving. Maybe that's proof she was wrong. Maybe that's proof we were wrong. I should have been a better person. I should have done more good.

ASHLEY

I'm going to miss laundry.

NOAH

I'm going to miss laundry.

Silence.

NOAH

Glory be to the Father, to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost, as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end.

Beat.

NOAH

Amen. Know any Jewish prayers?

ASHLEY

I know the Hannukah blessing but I don't think that's going to help us right now.

NOAH

Probably not.

ASHLEY

That was kind of beautiful, though. That was a nice prayer.

NOAH

Oh. Thanks.

Beat.

NOAH

Not much longer now.

ASHLEY

Thirty seconds, give or take.

NOAH

Jesus. Jesus. I'm so scared.

ASHLEY

Me too.

NOAH grabs ASHLEY'S hand.

ASHLEY

Some second-rate violinist got lucky.

NOAH

Yeah.

ASHLEY

I was never afraid of heights, you know.

NOAH

Really?

ASHLEY

I wanted to be a firefighter. I'd go to the local station and they'd give me the little stickers that were like "junior firefighter" and I visited so much they let me climb up the ladder and even inside the garage it was like you could see everything. So much of everything. It took me a full twelve seconds to climb down.

NOAH

That's a long time.

Beat.

ASHLEY

It is. It was high.

NOAH

Maybe we'll survive.

ASHLEY

Maybe. If we do, I'll take you to the real Great Wall. In China.

NOAH

I'll come see your concert.

ASHLEY

I'm not performing.

NOAH glances at her.

ASHLEY

Like I said. I didn't really get in. I'm going to see my sister.

Beat.

NOAH

I don't believe in God.

ASHLEY

There's—really?

NOAH

I don't believe in anything.

ASHLEY

Well.

NOAH

Well.

ASHLEY

Guess we ought to survive. It'd be nice to get to know you.

Beat.

NOAH

Ashley, I think that we—

LIGHTS DOWN. A call bell plays.

END

FREDY NORIN '24
L'DOR V'DOR
(FROM GENERATION TO GENERATION)

In the Beginning...

EXT. - BARREN FIELD - Day

YACHOV, a young soldier, limps into view, carrying a heavy backpack filled with ammunition and first aid equipment. Bandages covering his left knee and right shoulder, he wades into lines of rain-soaked dried maize. Wounded limbs brush against shriveled stalks, leaving a contrail of blood. The sound of heavy breathing, the result of scarring memory, comes to life: ricocheting bullets, artillery, screams of children ripped away from mothers; explosions of bridges, roads, buildings. Out of the chaos an adult's voice, Yachov's son—not yet born—predominates, reverberating across the field.

DISEMBODIED VOICE

*Like the branches of a tree, the **Fishers** traveled in many directions, yet our roots remained constant. Yachov, why is this life different from all others?*

EXT. - FLASHBACK - Day

The Screen warps, Yachov falls back, the field transforming into a barbed wire trench. A horse-drawn Larrey Combat Ambulance towers above. A soldier with

severed arm strewn in the mud. Yachov reaches out, lifting, then placing him into the wagon. A bullet grazes Yachov's shoulder; turning halfway, a second pierces the side of his leg. Yachov crawls into the back of the van, only to wake on the barren field, then raising himself, continuing his journey.

EXT. - BARREN FIELD - Day

Yachov is at the far end of the field, on the edge of a cliff, soon at the threshold of a town, Harrow Corner. A piercing noise grows louder with every passing Rakevet Train and Manoa Motorcycle. Through a sun-drenched haze, Yachov's family tavern, *Corn on the Cod*, is revealed. The wooden sign chained to the tavern's roof depicts a Swordfish wrapped in a corn husk above the establishment's name. Yakov staggers down a declining path arriving at the entrance.

INT. - CORN ON THE COD TAVERN - DAY

Entering the tavern, Yachov is seized with the pungent aroma of spongy fried gefilte, the camera pans to a round table with boisterous diners devouring corn fish skewers dipped in maize sauce, Cape Cob salad, surfin' dirt, scare craw, and popped hollowed out swordfish stuffed with a cob of buttered corn.

Tree trunks support the tavern's foundation with branches covering redwood walls. In the back corner, a family cramped in a booth hollers to Yachov above beer mugs. Yachov salutes, limping to a stool. The bartender, his back to Yachov, "washes" glass cups with a heavily stained rag, chuckling as the sound of the bar stool drags on the hardwood.

BARTENDER

Well, if it isn't the notorious Yachov Fisher! You've grown quite the reputation since your departure.

Turning around, his face revealed: a brown scruffy beard below a worn skullcap. Most notable, his one brown and one green eye, with a raised deep scar along his forehead.

YACHOV

Nallavan?

They stare at each other for a long second.

NALLAVAN

Much to explain, dear boy! Where have you been hiding for the last five years?

(examining Yachov) You need a stiff drink and a shower!

YACHOV

Who am I, my father? I'm not drinking my life away. What I need is some rubbing alcohol, a medic...Maybe both?

NALLAVAN

In due time, Yachov! You look tense, put your feet up, bask in the sun!
(scrambling around to grab drinks) Now, what are we talking about Garum Galliano, Corn Chartreuse, Maize Midori...

YACHOV

You think I know? I'm no town drunk, I've never had a taste for it.

NALLAVAN

Not even a shot of Manischewitz? (Yachov shakes his head) Oy vey, what about family tradition? Didn't he tell you about his favorite drink?

YACHOV

Talking is one way of putting it. He was hooked on cranberry iced tea spritzers.

NALLAVAN

Old news! I'm speaking of...*On The Docks*.

Nallavan grabs a green bottle, pouring it into a high ball. Behind him, a locked cabinet. Proudly, he grabs the blue moonshine, adding ice cubes, placing a wooden fisherman sitting on a dock for the topper.

YACHOV

Why?

NALLAVAN

After you left, it was the only thing he could remember you by. It cleansed his soul in unimaginable ways. No one believed him, and yet I still had hope. He said, in the drink's reflection he saw his destiny, your *family's* destiny, Yachov.

Hunched over, Yachov about to swig, sees no such reflection, then lets out a large belch.

YACHOV

Nallavan, as much as I'd "love" to hear another one of my father's bubbe meises, you and I both know we traveled a rocky road. We're not talking about Captain

Ahab. More like Captain A-Hole!

NALLAVAN

Yachov! He cared about *you*, about *all* of us. Surely, he could be scaly around the edges, but that's just who he was. If it wasn't for him, I'd never have become your caretaker.

Nallavan walks over to a cat tower, trying to feed a stray with a limp piece of sardine.

YACHOV

He instructed *you* to take care of *me*? What! My mom lied? She always said I could bunk with the Kaspomats until I got on my feet! But my father? He did nothing when they dragged me away.

Nallavan sits on the large cat tower, the strays trying to climb on him, rubbing against his fishy hands.

NALLAVAN

Chaim Eliahu was a complicated man! He told me to keep an eye on you. What he was about to face was beyond his control!

YACHOV

What are you talking about?

NALLAVAN

He knew what was coming. Believe me, he tried to find you! For god sake, *he* ended up the lost one!

YACHOV

Wow...looking for me? Why'd Mom hide the truth?

NALLAVAN

We were scared to acknowledge the truth! After your father died, Alaine asked me to keep an eye on things. When she was gone, I kept my promise.

YACHOV

So you're gonna help?

Nallavan stands up, returning to the bar.

NALLAVAN

Help! What sort of help?

YACHOV

You don't want to find them? Does the rest of the family know what happened?

NALLAVAN

I tried! Look...no one's left! (pause) Yachov...you're the last of the Gefilte Fishers!

YACHOV

Every single one? (Nallavan nods) How? You said they were safe!

NALLAVAN

Pay attention! Look all around you! The world's in a state of darkness. Even the pious ponder: why has the light disappeared?

YACHOV

So let's find it! We could stop this fighting once and for all!

NALLAVAN

We, what we? Can you eat a forbidden apple? Build an ark? Split the Red Sea in half? Toil forty years in the desert? There's no such thing as saviors anymore! (Nallavan lets out a loud sigh) Look, dear boy, *my* journey is almost at its end. And yours has just begun. You've already seen more of the world than all of your mishpucha for centuries.

YACHOV

You can also see it if you're with me!

NALLAVAN

As I said, Yachov, this is your story, your bloodline. Your odyssey. Others will guide you, but you must face it. Alone.

Nallavan slams a tray of dirty dishes on the bar. Simultaneously, a tan tabby jumps up to greet Yachov. Another, black cat, brushing against Yachov's leg.

NALLAVAN

Holy Mackerel!

YACHOV

What! What is it?

NALLAVAN

No, Mackerel, Midnight. There...

YACHOV

Alive? How? We buried them!

NALLAVAN

Not quite. We buried their physical body but not their spiritual one. Watch, let me show you.

Nallavan thrusts his arm through Mackerel, the tan tabby; the cat's fur dissipating into fog, returning when Nallavan retracts his hand.

NALLAVAN

See, Yachov! Do you know what this means? Chatul and Shakor. Animal Spirits!

YACHOV

Ferrying me to the afterlife?

NALLAVAN

No, you've got the wrong idea! Every person must know where they came from.

YACHOV

Trust me, I don't need the birds and the bees talk! I got that at boot camp.

NALLAVAN

Not where I'm going! These spirits are pet guides to help *us* travel into the spirit forest.

YACHOV

Spirit forest? Cat Spirits? Doesn't this sound a lot like Bastet?

NALLAVAN

No, we're not talking about ancient Egypt! Different mythology here, but same plane of existence. The world isn't as different as you think Yachov. You and I are the same!

YACHOV

Okay, but what does this have to do with me?

NALLAVAN

Oh, just nothing! (ironically). (pause) (exasperated) Don't you see? They're trying to communicate with you!

YACHOV

And how are they doing that?

Nallavan grabs a rolled map from the bottom shelf, laying it on the bar, revealing East Emerald Wiccan. He points to Harrow Corner.

NALLAVAN

Beyond these woods lies Gelt Creek. Follow past the waters, your Chatul and Shakor will guide you toward an ancient burial ground. There, you will undergo the seven trials of inner creation.

YACHOV

Seven! You want me to stay out there for seven days!

NALLAVAN

You'll be fine! Didn't you spend the last five years in the army? This'll be a piece
of babka.

YACHOV

Easy for you to say! I'm the one with the bloody arm and leg.

NALLAVAN

At least you're not facing a groundhog head-on! That's how I got the old scar.

Mackerel leaps onto Yachov's shoulder while Midnight slinks into the shadows.
Nallavan pushes Yachov and the pet guides out the door, then tossing him a
newly patched BorschtFaced hiking bag filled with clothes, food, an oil lamp,
and first aid.

NALLAVAN

Oy, almost forgot! Your parents wanted to give you something for all the
Hanukkah nights you missed.

Nallavan tosses a hand-crafted vinyl record player called "The Valkman" and a
bag of edible salt rock candy on a string.

YACHOV

All for me?

NALLAVAN

I'm not going to torture you for seven days without something to eat! Let alone
have you survive in silence!

YACHOV

That *thing* is supposed to produce music? (pointing to the portable “radio”)

NALLAVAN

You don't know?

YACHOV

What is it, a miniature phonograph?

NALLAVAN

No! Your great grandfather, Menashe, on Zayde's side—was an inventor. He left
blueprints, and your dad, Chaim Eliahu, finished the job. Name a musician and
it's on there! I'm talking—Scarlet Spicy Cold Scatter, The David Matthias
Ensemble, Furnace, Great Face Sweeney and the Giants...

YACHOV

Metzgers?

NALLAVAN

After their time. Besides, your father might have been overbearing with his music. You won't hear any of The Scarabs or The Coast Men. I'm sure you'll find your parents' life within the songs...Enough kibitzing. Get a move on!

Nallavan stands at the entrance, shutting the door behind Yachov.

EXT. - GELT CREEK - Sunset

Traveling along the creek, he dunks his canteen into the fluorescent waters. Mackerel, still on Yachov's shoulder, wraps around to the other side. Midnight, crouching stealthily. Headphones plugged in, diegetic music of *Jonah The Sailor* by Furnace plays out of his headphones, humming along, head nodding.

YACHOV (talking to himself)

No wonder my dad listened to this band, he always claimed he was "The Forager of the Ocean". At least I think that's what he's singing, it's hard to tell.

What is a Crackle Saute anyway?

Mackerel leaps onto a mossy rock, igniting cyan from the impact. Midnight soon does the same on a series of stones.

YACHOV

I know Nallavan put his hand through you, but you've come a long way from cat naps and catnip.

Hesitant, Yachov follows.

EXT. BAOBAB FOREST - Sunset

Mackerel and Midnight stop in their tracks, facing a forest of baobab trees bearing fruit. Rustling bushes, and echoing whispers within trees. Frightened, Mackerel hops back onto Yachov's shoulder. Midnight, eyeing a harmless kingsnake, pounces, carrying it inside the bush. Leaping out, Midnight, now the form of a black snow leopard, battles the once kingsnake, transformed into a boa constrictor, biting its throat. Weighing down Yachov's shoulder, Mackerel changes into a cheetah, clawing at his clothing, leaping.

YACHOV

Ah, The trees changed you! Looks like we're getting close.

EXT. ETZ HAYIM BURIAL GROUND - Sunset

Yachov follows Mackerel and Midnight. Tall trees obscure the pale tint of orange sky. Rustling and whispers grow louder as he traverses protruding roots. Mossy stone gatewalls lead to Old Baobab. Written on it: *LEDYAGIM* (The Fishers), surrounded by other family trees, some cut down and rotting.

YACHOV (asking somberly)

“Am I really the last of the Gefilte Fishers?”

Midnight's tail tucked and ears held back. Mackerel's eyes glisten with a mournful meow.

VOICE FROM TREE

Don't lose all hope just yet, Yachov!

Yachov stands his ground, reaching for his pocket knife. Mackerel and Midnight, crouching, eyes dilated.

YACHOV

Hello...You know my name? Reveal yourself!

The Baobabs entrance glows a bluish purple, something hiding and communicating on the other side.

VOICE FROM TREE

Release your weapon, I come in peace!

The voice transforms into a presence, gradually coming into view: an illuminated being, a wisp, whose translucent body appears as a long hooded cloak donning glasses. Still anxious, Yachov grabs a rock, ready to throw.

YACHOV

Who sent you!

VOICE FROM TREE

Relax, I'll tell you everything! Alaine sent me. She was looking for her son
and...

YACHOV

My mother? Who are you?

VOICE FROM TREE

I'm OHR, the ancient Weebro word for light, they call me The Enlightened
One! I see your Chatul and Shakor have led you here.

YACHOV

And exactly where is *here*?

OHR

I'll teach you the basics. This is your family's ancestor tree! It goes back decades,
centuries, millennia. It all started from...

YACHOV

Wait, so, let me get this straight. *You're* The Rabbi? As in *you* set up *my* trials of
inner creation?

OHR

Precisely, among your other adventures on this Iliad.

YACHOV

This isn't the end?

Yachov takes a second to examine the surrounding rotting baobabs and the stone walls, on them the names of families illegibly written.

YACHOV

Prominent families, right? (answering his own question) You're saying if I don't make it, we'll end up like them?

OHR

A wisp's job is considered the hardest in the eyes of Ashton. Nymphs, Reapers, Dybbuks, Ferrymen, Golem—they all coexist between life and death. *We* decide whether or not to sever the bridge between realms. Different mythologies, but all about the same reality.

YACHOV

A lot to process!

OHR

Got it! Now, step inside, don't you want to see some of your early ancestors, the neolithic Gefilte Fishers?

Midnight gives Yachov a nudge. He follows Ohr and Mackerel, Midnight behind.

INT. LEDYAGIM BAOBAB - Dusk

Entering the tree, the hollowed trunk reveals a cascade of draped mirrors and family portraits. In front of Yachov, a bench with stones and memorabilia from past generations. On the ground, pillows and scrunched blankets to sit on. Yachov removes his military boots and sits on the padded floor. Mackerel and Midnight retreat to a corner.

YACHOV

This is where the trials take place? Looks cramped for seven.

OHR

Not quite. Behind the bark is where *you'll* reside. Here, let me show you!

Ohr rotates a blackboard from the side, grabbing a piece of chalk and a pointer.

OHR

You see, Yachov, your plane of existence is one out of four within your
bloodline.

YACHOV

You mean my father's bloodline?

OHR

What?

YACHOV

My mother's family isn't on this tree at all.

OHR

Right! You see, your mother's bloodline follows the *carpenter of the trees* into
the afterlife's sky.

YACHOV

So they don't have four realms?

OHR

More like Monte's rings in *The Entwined Harmony*! Think of paradise at the top,
while the surviving souls are in the Inferno at the bottom. All joined by an
ascending staircase.

YACHOV

Do the four realms have this in common?

OHR

Not quite. Ours isn't a one-stop, turn-key shop.

YACHOV

What, like a trip to Mount Sinai?

OHR

That would ruin the fun, no? All you have to be concerned with is what comes after the seven trials. A journey that lasts through time. A tale of luminosity, darkness, depth of air, life within the stars, a garden of...

YACHOV

Slow down! What does a Fisher need to do to get this over with!

OHR

Of course...Why ramble when you can see it for yourself? (Getting back on track) As you've noticed, your Chatul and Shakor's energy has transformed into spirits.

YACHOV

Okay, so what's next?

OHR

Nothing complex! Close your eyes! You might think you're seeing nothing, but what you're visualizing is far greater than the physical world around you.

Yachov closes his eyes, the screen black, peeking out to see if anything changes.

OHR

Repeat after me: *Bereshit bara Elohim et hashamayim ve'et ha'aretz.*

YACHOV

Bereshit bara Elohim et hashamayim ve'et ha'aretz.

A burst of purple fills the screen.

OHR

Good, now, listen to the harmonic melody of the Valkman, the birds chirping,
the leaves swaying.

The diegetic music from the Valkman shifts into that of an acoustic cover.

OHR

Breathe in the oxygen that grants you life! Breathe out the carbon dioxide that
nourishes the tree!

The black screen shifts into a swirling light blue.

OHR

Yachov, savor the fruit of knowledge growing within you.

A white silhouette of a tree is on screen.

OHR

Feel the vibrations of the woodpecker, marsh frog, cicadas.

The tree's image is wiped away on screen.

OHR

Now, open your eyes, spread your wings! Fly! Today's another day!

Yachov opens his eyes, the inside of the tree remains the same.

YACHOV

You know, Ohr, you had me for a second but...

Yachov stands, the blankets and pillows on his feet moving in a liquid-like state, wrapping around his legs. The top of the tree's inside, a night sky. Ohr floats above the floor's reach. Mackerel and Midnight, now a jaguar and black panther leap onto bookshelves. Yachov tries to lift his feet, only to fall flat on the blankets and pillows, the fabric rippling. Mackerel and Midnight cover their eyes from embarrassment.

YACHOV

A little help would be nice!

OHR

Oh, I'm sorry! I didn't hear a "please." When Alaine described what a polite boy you were, I thought I'd experience better manners.

YACHOV

Fine, would you *please* cut the bullshit and help me out of this mess!

OHR

(under his breath) This is why I hate working with humans!

Ohr magically lifts Yachov, signaling him to move along. Hesitantly, Yachov slowly steps toward the exit, sinking into the blankets.

EXT. Nahas' Garden - Night

Yachov exits the baobab, walking backward to face Ohr, Mackerel, and Midnight. The burial ground, familiar, but now overgrown; past the sightline, nothingness. The rest of the space, creating itself.

YACHOV

Okay! What's next Ohr? 'Cause if that's it, these seven days will be a breeze!
How about we head back to Corn On The Cod and call it a night? Sound like

a...

Yachov bumps into something that resembles a giant tree root, facing it, it slithers away.

YACHOV

What in Sheol's name did we bump into?

Yachov faces Ohr for the answer, the rest of the group staring into the eyes of the beast.

OHR

About that, remember when you closed your eyes?

YACHOV

Yeah?

OHR

Well, that was just a warm-up to test if you can transfer planes. This is *your* inner creation!

Frozen in fear, Yachov faces Nahas, a giant brown and mossy-scaled serpent with venomous fangs and hypnotizing purple eyes.

YACHOV

And what do I do with that thing?

OHR

Kill it!

YACHOV

With what?

OHR

Figure it out! If Beowulf could slay a dragon...This will be easy peasy

Nahas slithers closer to Yachov, its warm breath within distance. Hastily,
Yachov puts down his bag to rummage through objects to deter it, speaking to
Ohr in the process.

YACHOV

This thing can't actually kill me, correct? I closed my eyes so were sort of in a
dream, right Ohr?

OHR

Nope, but don't worry, you won't have to travel long!

YACHOV

If it's life or death can't you three help?

OHR

Can't, it's in our contract! Besides, we spirits would just pass through every
attack.

YACHOV

Okay, I'll do it myself!

Yachov pulls out a flame-lit flashlight. The sun and moon spinning through orbit, the world submerging into darkness, the flashlight now turning on as the first light (as in Genesis), blinding the serpent.

EXT. The Night Trial - Night

YACHOV

Yeah, that's right! Can't see if I'm distracting you from such a bright idea.

EXT. The Sky Trial - Day

As the serpent draws blindingly near, Yachov walks backward, unaware of the falling ground he's headed toward, free-falling into an infinite sky, the serpent and bag falling with him.

YACHOV

Well, if I knew I was skydiving, I would've brought a parachute!

EXT. The Sea Trial - Day

Yachov and the serpent crash into an ocean, wrestling with sea currents, washing ashore on a beach.

EXT. The Dessert Trial - Day

Awaking, Yachov is stunned by a glaring sun, the serpent injured, burrowing beneath the sand.

YACHOV

Not too shabby!

At the sound of his voice, the serpent leaps out, hunting its prey. In the distance, a mirage...

EXT. The Jungle Trial - Night

Around the towering tree corners, Venus fly traps open wide, poisonous tree grapes at every turn. The serpent rustling within the bushes. Yachov rushes to a cave, hiding for a few minutes, then returns to the outside world.

EXT. The Space Trial - Night

Once a floral jungle, now transformed in front of his eyes: the surface of the moon; The sun, an exploding flame; the stars, a burst of sparkling connection through the galaxy. Yachov vaults, drifting back to Adamah's atmosphere.

EXT. The Flying Sea Trial - Day

Yachov falls into a reef of dried coral, above sea and below sky. Two creatures, a towering Leviathan, and Ziz, a griffin-like bird, who stands on land and head rests on the coral, flaps its wings, blocking out the sun.

EXT. Yachov's Trial - Day

Yachov awakes, constricted by Zahas, its eyes hypnotizing him as the song, *Cross Underneath*, protrudes out of the Valkman, somehow connecting to the serpent. Yachov pleads for help, hoping to summon Ohr.

YACHOV

Hey, Ohr, if you can hear me, I'm in a near-death situation! Just one small sucker punch? A distraction dummy? A word of advice?

OHR

Fine, you've been through enough! It's the Valkman, you're playing a deadman's melody, meaning those types of creatures lure the dead, giving you unwarranted attention.

YACHOV

And why didn't *you* mention this sooner? All I have to do is wait for...

A bull-like creature, wet reeds and water lilies cover his body, as he appears from a marsh. The behemoth punches the serpent, releasing Yachov, holding

the snake by the neck, slamming Nahas into the tree. Ohr getting Yachov's attention.

OHR

Shnel, shnel! Go in the tree, you don't want to wait for a bull burger or a pair of snakeskin boots!

Yachov swiftly follows Ohr into the tree, the damage of the two beasts destroys the surroundings, baobab branches knocked down, one blocking the tree entrance from Ohr and Yachov leaving.

INT. LEDYAGIM BOABAB - Night

Yachov's Chatul and Shakor greet both of them on bookshelves. Yachov takes a seat on a pillowed bench, as Ohr sets up what's next on his list.

YACHOV

(catching his breath) I can't believe it! You just watched? Who in their right mind...? Did my parents put you up to this?

OHR

(overwhelmed by questions) I know you need answers but we have to stay on task.

Ohr flips the blackboard with a diagram of Cain & Abel.

OHR

Off-topic here, do you have any siblings?

YACHOV

Ohr! What's with the schedules and siblings? I'm an only child, you know that!

OHR

Cousins will suffice.

YACHOV

Are you listening? I had to deal with darkness, skies, seas, deserts, jungles, fish, birds, a serpent and you're treating this like a normal workday. Can't I just have time for a schluff?

OHR

Nope! Yachov, you do understand it's been a whole seven days, right?

YACHOV

Really? Shouldn't that prove my point? To me, it only felt like a few minutes!

You're saying I didn't eat, sleep and shit for all that time?

OHR

Well, technically you don't need to if you're the only one inhabiting this plane.

YACHOV

Fine, at least give me a cup of water.

Ohr snaps his fingers and water manifests in Yachov's hand, guzzling the whole thing, the cup automatically refilling. Ohr rekindles his thoughts.

OHR

Now that that's over, we can get down to business. Because you've proven yourself worthy you can start communicating with your ancestors.

YACHOV

Start? I thought I'd get to speak with all of them.

OHR

The world doesn't revolve around you, *Yachov*. Let's start with ancestors who really impacted *your* life when they were alive.

YACHOV

Who'd you have in mind?

OHR

Your parents, but knowing the tension between you and your father, it might be best to start with Alaine.

YACHOV

My mother's here? But what about the tree only being my father's family?

OHR

She moves to tree to tree from time to time. When she heard you were coming,
she had to check on her little pishe.

YACHOV

Lead the way!

Ohr summons a staircase within the tree, leading to a doorway just above
Yachov. Ohr, Mackerel, Midnight follow behind.

EXT. Pink Beach - DAY

Opening the door, a bed and breakfast on the beach, far from Corn On The
Cod. A small white and lavender cottage with an outside porch dining area and
goat farm. The sign, made of sea shells, reads Candy By The Sea.

YACHOV

Is that...Strange, my mom always dreamt of this place before she passed.

Yachov enters, the group following.

INT. Candy By The Sea - Day

The dining area is quiet and comfy: pink ivory flooring, blue mural walls, hand-crafted furniture, and marble diner bar. The check-in, vacant, Yachov hitting the cat-shaped call bell.

YACHOV

She knows we're coming, right?

From the kitchen, the clang of pots and pans. Alaine is heard off-screen.

ALAINE

Be right there!

Alaine bolts from the kitchen, battling a broken red candy tumbler. She has brown eyes and silver hair, wearing a green shirt, yellow cardigan, dark red pants, and sparkled turquoise glasses and jewelry. Yachov's eyes glisten, without a second thought, hugs his mom, a trail of blue spirit fog radiating from her.

ALAINE

Looks like you've seen a ghost!

YACHOV

When Ohr said I'd meet you, I didn't believe it. I guess I just needed proof!

ALAINE

Well, I'm here now! Sit! You must be hungry from all that running!

YACHOV

I didn't run, I just followed the exit!

Yachov and Ohr sit at the breakfast bar, while Mackrel and Midnight lay on booth benches. Alaine, passes through the kitchen, serving breakfast and a cup of Joe's Java.

OHR

(To Yachov) Right, just like how you didn't swear at someone who saved your life! (Now at Alaine) Honestly, I don't know how you take care of your son while running this place.

ALAINE

Bitch! It's my last day! Everyone's retired in the afterlife, this is just a side hustle!
We may not need to eat, but we still find comfort in food.

OHR

Great! Runs in the family!

ALAINE

Oh, my tongue wouldn't be flapping if Chaim was here. He can swear with Nallavan but why not his own wife?

YACHOV

(Hesitant) How is Dad?

ALAINE

Same old same old, off in his own Chaim harbor like always! But, I shouldn't complain, I already did too much of that when I was living! Come on, es before it gets cold.

Yachov readies his fork against the banquet that is The Woodland Meal, piercing the over easy egg yolk, dripping on the mountain of cream cheese stuffed maple pancakes, turkey bacon, hash, biscuits, and a pool of gravy. Ohr stares into the cup of Joe's Java.

OHR

Excuse me, do I drink this?

YACHOV

Yes!

ALAINE

That's what it's for.

OHR

What is it exactly?

YACHOV

Never heard of coffee?

Saying this, Alaine pours Yachov his second cup, before taking his first bite of food.

OHR

Nope! Never tried it!

YACHOV

You're saying you've guided humans for millennia but never had coffee? We run on it all our lives!

OHR

I don't understand.

ALAINE

Do we have to spell it out! It's a water with bean juice drink.

YACHOV

For lack of a better word.

ALAINE

Just don't drink it black, it'll give you a migraine!

OHR

(Reflecting) People drink bean juice for...fun? And get pounding headaches
for, what, living a miserable life?

YACHOV

If it wakes you up, it wakes you up. Don't yank someone's yamaka if you haven't
even tried a cup!

ALAINE

Besides, this is candied peppermint mocha, what's the worst that can happen?

Ohr stares at the coffee, then picks it up, slowly drinking from the crystalized
candy glass cup. He sits in silence, pondering, before vibrating off the caffeine
kick, literally bouncing off the wall.

ALAINE

That'll take a while...So, Yachy, whatcha been up to?

YACHOV

Same thing every day for the past five years: battleships,mortars, artillery,
IUD's,terrorists, trenches, explosions, infirmaries.

ALAINE (taking a deep breath)

I'm sorry *we* sent you to bootcamp, it's all my...

YACHOV

You didn't send me anywhere, Dad did!

ALAINE

Is that really fair? Even after our deaths, you still hold a grudge? If I didn't send

Ohr, you'd never have the chance to apologize.

YACHOV

I don't have to! I'm twenty-three, you had an eighteen-year-old who had his whole life ahead of him. An eighteen-year-old who now has shell shock, and found out only today, he's the only one left from his entire family. And, you still want *me* to apologize? Most nights, back then, all I could think of were my final moments. Would we be ambushed? Bombed? Assaulted by gas?

ALAINE

What do you think happened to *us*? You should still speak with your father. The afterlife has changed him. He's more patient, reflective, a lone mensch *on the docks*. Besides, he's the key to communicating with the rest of the Gefilte Fishers. Don't you want to meet your namesake, your great-grandad, Frederick Yachovian Velvel? Your Zadey's parents, Nussen and Adelaide Fisher. What about your family that first arrived in this land, Solomon Baum and Yetta Fux?

Ohr returns to his seat, dizzy from bouncing off the walls.

OHR

Yeah, that's a perfect idea!

YACHOV

Isn't that a bit off-schedule?

OHR

How? If anything, it's on schedule! Wouldn't your uncle, the one who we're taking his kids for the next task, want to know how his big brother is doing?

YACHOV

Fair point!

OHR

You know, he fell asleep on the lap of an Avraham Teykh statue! Almost got arrested, but became a personal injury lawyer, an ambulance chaser, instead!

ALAINE

It's true! (checking the time) Crap, it's almost rush hour. Sorry bug, gotta start my shift.

YACHOV

That's it? I won't ever see you again?

ALAINE

Don't think you're leaving me empty-handed!

Alaine rummages through the bar's cabinet, picking up a small green spray bottle, handing it to Yachov.

YACHOV

What's with the tchotchke?

ALAINE

It's a citrus spray. Dr. Halter gave it as a gift, and it carried over to the afterlife.

YACHOV

Seems like wasted space.

OHR

I assure you it's not.

YACHOV

Why's that?

ALAINE

Spray this five times and boom, I'll be right by your side, even in the physical world.

YACHOV

What's the catch?

ALAINE

Besides your mom hovering over your shoulder, nothing!

YACHOV

Great! Ohr, ready to hit the branches?

OHR

You betcha!

Ohr manifests a ship's doorway, the group entering, Yachov last to exit.

YACHOV

Love you, Mom! You're the best, Mom!

Yachov exits.

ALAINE

Have a great day.

EXT. On The Docks - Sunrise

Yachov comes out of an abandoned yacht covered by a blue tarp. Ohr waits by the dock, while Mackerel and Midnight try hunting fish by the rocks. Fog with a light drizzle on the water.

YACHOV

This is the place? Looks too gloomy for my dad. I was expecting something bigger, like Mount Sinai, the Red Sea, or heck, maybe even Noah's ark. This just looks...lonely.

EXT. Chaim's Harbor - Sunrise

A scruffy man, back facing, sits at the docks. Chaim Eliahu has brown eyes and an untamed salt-and-pepper beard, wearing a black beanie, green fisherman's jacket, orange fish trousers, and white boots, covered in fish ink. He sits patiently with a reel in one hand and a bottle of cranberry iced tea spritzer in the other. The radio beside him, playing Scarlet Spicy Cold Scatter. His makeshift houseboat, rusted, its carved name: Rock & Catch, engraved on the stern.

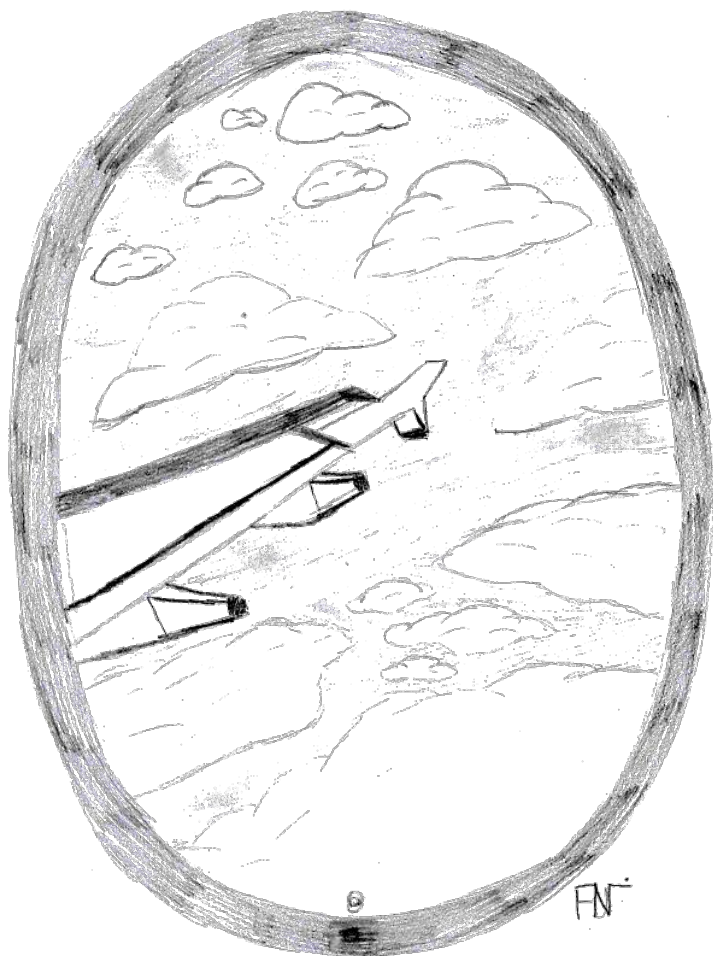
YACHOV

Dad?

CHAIM ELIAHU (Back facing)

About time you showed up, kiddo!

He takes a swig, the screen fades to darkness. The sound of seagulls and the radio, still heard, as credits roll.



HEAD IN THE CLOUDS

The Characters

CAP'N JACK: Pilot narrator.
GROUNDHOG: A teenager who lives an endless Groundhog's Day.
MARKUS A flight attendant.

The Scene

An empty stage. Curtain up. A silence. Then:

CAP'N JACK
(offstage)

This is Cap'n Jack speaking. Our flight time today will be approximately ten minutes in runtime. Sit back, wait for the seatbelt sign, and enjoy the flight.

(clears throat)

Imagine, a Boeing 757, its wheels skid along the runway. Listen, can you hear it? Passengers jolted against faux leather seats. Soon wrestling with carry-on luggage from overhead bins. Fantasy Airways' policy has us stand by the exits, welcoming first-class passengers to T.F. Green in Providence, Rhode Island. Now have a look around. Do you see them? You're not looking. Try again. Over there. A group of Wheeler students, high school kids in economy, carrying Mongrel Tour backpacks, Eiffel Tower keychains, sporting purple and gold corduroy neck rests.

(beat)

Dark circles around their eyes. As you can see. The empty cabin, a crime scene of unhappy children, disgruntled travelers, cramped suitcases, stained tray tables, crushed mini pretzels, and discarded water bottles, the result of a rocky flight.

GROUNDHOG enters, carrying a chair, placing it center stage, under a spotlight. Sits down, then waves once to the audience. Cap'n Jack continues:

CAP'N JACK

Moving down the aisle with a half-filled Hefty bag, Markus, a flight attendant, spies a lone teenage boy sitting in a window seat. Groundhog peers out, clinging to the same kind of bag the others were carrying. I'll now turn the flight over to them. OK, guys, take it away!

GROUNDHOG

Strange, after all this time, the world still feels bigger...it's peaceful that way. The possibility, so much more to discover. What do you think, Markus?

GROUNDHOG looks stage left where
MARKUS is standing.

MARKUS

I'm sorry, but I'll have to ask you to leave.

GROUNDHOG

No need, you know, we've done this before.

MARKUS

Who are you?

GROUNDHOG

Names and times don't apply. Relax, I'm sure you've had enough turbulence for one day.

MARKUS

Do I know you?

GROUNDHOG

It's not like you've shared a seven-hour flight with me, Markus! C'mon, live a little, spread *your* wings? Just don't go banging any tables. I'm not letting you get that loose, again. Don't wanna drive the audience nuts like we did the last time.

MARKUS

What are you talking about?

GROUNDHOG

Well, the Queen died, you know that...Portugal wins the World Cup. There's a Hollywood writers strike. AI threatens human extinction.

MARKUS

Are you pulling my leg?

GROUNDHOG

You tell me!

MARKUS

Fine, if you know so much about me, tell me something only I know.

GROUNDHOG

Here we go again! Always with the personal questions! You know, you really need to come up with better material.

(He grabs a notebook from his bag.)

Markus J. Moorehouse, born to Oscar and Angelica (née Hufflemeyster) on August 12, 1995. Your father abandoned you and your mother when you were a child. You left Liverpool for Rhode Island when you were eight, later deciding to study in London, hence no British accent! Need I say more, or do you get the picture!

MARKUS

Oh come on, anyone checking my LinkedIn could figure that out—on the rest of it, I'm assuming that you just took some calls. Whatcha going to say next, that you're me from a time warp?

GROUNDHOG

Calm down chatterbox, this ain't the Matrix! All I'm saying is those texts you found on your girlfriend's phone weren't from a Good Samaritan Ubering up to Federal Hill for some Italian food.

MARKUS

Who are you? You don't look like Yoda!

GROUNDHOG

(now in a Yoda voice)

Right, you are, young Padawan!

(Regular voice)

I'm not what you're thinking, but truth be told, in the past, I've considered myself something of a radio philosopher!

GROUNDHOG looks at the audience.

MARKUS

Okay...so, if you know about the future, you must be loaded! You know, Sports Almanac, won Powerball, invented something not yet created.

GROUNDHOG

If you think this is *Back To The Future*, then you'd be rudely mistaken.

MARKUS

Enlighten me! Is all this apocalypse stuff real?

GROUNDHOG

Who am I, the Oracle of Delphi? Really Markus, it's nothing to sweat. I'd be more concerned by someone like me telling you his entire existence is one big *Groundhog Day*!

MARKUS

Aren't you a little young to have seen that movie?

GROUNDHOG

What can I say, I've got all the time in the world to catch up on what I've missed.

MARKUS

So, do you remember everything from *your* past? Like, boom, you explode out of the womb and start flirting with the nurses?

GROUNDHOG

God no! It doesn't hit me all at once. It mostly comes to me in dreams, like one big fat déjà vu!

MARKUS

Weird. So, you know *your* future?

GROUNDHOG

Vaguely, I know I'll have a wife and kids—but times and places aren't that clear. I'll know she's the one but for right now I don't know her name, or when my kids will be born.

MARKUS

Okay...what about dying? Can you avoid it?

GROUNDHOG

Not really, death works differently than time. I remember a hospital bed, but in a different loop! I could've taken a wrong turn and then died from a car crash. It's funny, even after all this time, I'm still scared of extinction, even when my life just resets.

MARKUS

Strange how your brain works that way. How existential thoughts weigh you down. I just read a book about parasomnia, you know: sleep walking, sleep talking, and night terrors, the feeling of paralysis when you're falling asleep. It could all just be a warning of things to come!

GROUNDHOG

I've tried to change my future! I can tell you, Markus, it's not all that it's cracked up to be. Even though I've seen it all happen for decades, I still cry at funerals, fall in love, hang out with friends, fail to finish that damn stats project that I'm

never prepared for. Honestly, I don't know how long I'll be here but I've still not learned a foreign language, aced memorizing lines, picked up a book on the Renaissance, or even had the motivation to learn how to drive, not to mention, get a job, or live in a far-off country.

MARKUS

Surely, you've done something that's pleased you!

GROUNDHOG

Writing was my passion, never much of an actor but do you have any idea what it takes to be a best-selling author? I've been clueless, blind to the truth of the world. The kid who you see before you, is no longer the person I once was! But, there is one thing...I'll never forget the words of my old writing teacher,

(bad Yiddish accent)

"*Oy boychikal*, find *your* spark of creativity!" But I couldn't sustain it. Had to give up!

MARKUS

So that's it? You just quit!

GROUNDHOG

Quit! Groundhog never quits! I don't go down that easily! I got into radio, Broadway, TV, made a couple of albums for the heck of it but I could never truly find my own way...my own voice.

MARKUS

What are you saying?

GROUNDHOG

You know, Markus, it's tough to discover who *you* really are. Call it the next step, a leap of faith, the need to know your authentic self! Instead of committing...*I* walked away, but then, I started to hear trees, observed flowers, listened to birdsong, grounding myself to the rocks at my feet. You know what I heard, Markus?

MARKUS

No. What?

GROUNDHOG

A fascinating world of melody.

MARKUS

You're crazy!

GROUNDHOG

Who knows why but I started to live my stories: explored abandoned castles, set sail in the ocean, swam with sharks, ran with cheetahs, do you get it? Traveled to lost worlds, climbed frozen waterfalls, rummaged through catacombs, even journeyed through an underground city.

MARKUS

Why are you telling me all of this?

GROUNDHOG

Why not? You're still young, haven't gone through a midlife crisis, yet! But what do I know, I only look eighteen after all.

GROUNDHOG packs his bag, taking
the seat with him as he almost exits.
MARKUS stays in place.

MARKUS

Wait, I need to know more...why me?

GROUNDHOG

It's not obvious? You're a flight attendant! Always in between, never arriving at a final destination. So, see you next Thursday at Logan!

CURTAIN

JACQUELYN SONG '24
THE BODY SHOP

The Players

MARK Mid-twenties, plaid shirt, wide jeans, walks with a limp due to a damaged right toe. He's blunt, disgruntled, slightly awkward, though tries to be polite.

EMMA Mid-twenties, preppy, expressive eyes, wears a scarf around the bottom half of her face. Outgoing and lighthearted, but tends towards negative thinking.

CASHIER Mid-teens, Metallica T-shirt and backwards ballcap, doesn't care for his job but needs the pin money. Hates socializing, yet feels the need to share his opinions.

The Scene

Elevator music plays in the Body Shop. At the front, MARK strolls down a discount aisle of keratin strips. To his right, EMMA stands by a rack of plaster lips, scrolling through her phone. Behind, center stage, the CASHIER fiddles with his register, kicked back in a rickety chair, boots crossed on the counter. Above his head hangs a sign: the BODY SHOP logo (tacky, fluorescent, chipping) and the slogan "Find Your Perfect Self!" (monospaced, too small, slightly crooked).

MARK wanders by EMMA, thrusting a keratin strip aside.

MARK

All-natural nailbeds. *Bullshit.*

EMMA
(glancing up)

What d'you expect from this economy?

MARK

I don't. A good strip of keratin's out of question.

EMMA

(tucking her phone in her handbag)

Don't get discouraged. There's always something.

(She reaches over his shoulder, selecting a box on the highest shelf.)

Like these.

MARK

(squinting at the label)

We-Care-atin?

EMMA

Trust, okay? I worked in salons for four years...picked up a thing or two. Trick is to go for the ones in boxes. They pack a price, but they're softer, less sticky, more durable.

MARK

Thanks.

EMMA

What?

MARK

Huh?

EMMA

(withdraws the box)

Search it up if you don't believe me.

MARK

(startled)

What? Oh no, I didn't mean...I believe you. It's just my face—these eyebrows make me look surly. Got them as a gift, but I've been meaning to replace them...

EMMA stifles a giggle. Recognizing the tease, MARK accepts the *We-Care-atin*, pursing a smile. The two stare at each other for a moment too long. Clearing her throat, EMMA turns away first, shifting out of the aisle. MARK opens his mouth, shuts it again, and juts his thumb to the register, brushing past her with an awkward salute.

MARK

Thanks again. For real.

EMMA

(pauses briefly, then calls after him)

You from around here, Eyebrows?

MARK

(waving over his shoulder)

I'm from wherever you'd like!

When MARK arrives, the CASHIER wrinkles his nose, running the box through his scanner.

CASHIER

ID please?

MARK slides it across the table. Across the room, EMMA's phone buzzes. Smile slipping, she fishes it out, turns it off, and resumes her perusal of lips.

CASHIER

Mark Marcus?

MARK
(wincing)

Just Mark, please.

CASHIER
Redoing a fingernail, Mister Marcus?

MARK
Toe, actually. Need a fitting.

CASHIER
Cause?

EMMA's phone rings again. This time, she hesitates, takes it out, and sends a brief text. The responses buzzes. Letting out a breath, she steels her nerves, typing with greater agitation, pacing up and down the keratin aisle. MARK finds himself watching her.

MARK
(distracted)

Stubbed it.

CASHIER
(typing into his machine)
Stubbed...toe...okay. Are you interested in being a member, Mister Marcus? After the full price for your first toe, you can buy up to three more for just six dollars.

MARK
(still watching EMMA)
Uh-huh.

CASHIER

Was that a yes?

MARK
(starting)

Member—wait. That's only four toes.

CASHIER

One plus three is four.

MARK
(scowling)

What's the good in a foot with four toes?

EMMA's phone rings for the third time.
She flinches mid-text, close to tears.
Unable to help himself, MARK races
across the room, plucks it from her
hands, and thrusts it into a wig crate.
The CASHIER jumps, dropping his
keratin. EMMA stumbles into the lip
rack.

EMMA

What the—

MARK
(blurting)

I hate that ringtone!

An awkward silence.

MARK
(burying his face in his hands)

Oh god. I'm so sorry. Why did I do that?

CASHIER

Dude.

MARK

I'm a bit off today! Sleep-wise. My toe's missing, and my mom just bought new hips last month, and I can't tell her that they look awful, mind's all scattered, in pieces, really—

EMMA bursts into tears.

MARK

(horrified)

Please don't cry! I'm sorry! Your ringtone's great!

EMMA

Thanks.

MARK

I'll get your phone back—

(stops)

What?

EMMA

Thank you. And no need. Just...let it sit.

MARK

Okay. All good.

EMMA

(wiping her eyes)

God, I feel stupid!

MARK

Stupid?

EMMA

(laughs)

I mean, I'm standing here, crying these eyes I *just bought* into atrophy. Can't take care of anything. What's supposed to last years breaks in hours. And I keep scuffing my retinas and grabbing the newest pair of blues. Won't change. Won't commit. Stupid, right?

MARK

I don't think so! Maybe careless, but if you don't mind the hassle...that's the point of body shops, right? Everything breaks.

EMMA

But they're *eyes*. Shouldn't they mean more?

MARK

(shrugs)

If you say. I've never had mine done, but I don't ascribe much sentimentality.

EMMA

Why not?

MARK

Pragmatism.

EMMA

(pressing)

But, you must be *somewhat* attached. That's why you don't change them.

CASHIER

(loud scoff)

Seriously, ma'am, we're in the 22nd century! Don't tell me you believe that original-body bullshit? You gonna tell an old lady with an arthritic knee that she should *treasure* it? Or, I dunno, Mark Marcus here that his eyes are more than circles swimming 'round his skull?

MARK
(appalled)

I never said *that*.

CASHIER
Point is, we change our eyes a billion times, it's none of your business! Freedom of expression!

MARK
No need to be rude. She's just talking.

EMMA
(draws her arms around herself)
I should probably shut up, shouldn't I?

MARK
No, you're fine. I might not understand, but I can listen if you're having a rough time...

The CASHIER mimes gagging. MARK glares, but the CASHIER pointedly ignores him.

EMMA
Yeah. Okay.

Leaning against the keratin aisle, she sits down, draws her knees to her chest, and props her chin on stacked forearms. MARK eases beside her, worried yet attentive, unsure of where to place his hands.

EMMA
My dad's been sick for years. Sometimes, he doesn't recognize me. We'll remind him, visit, and I'll take my bone structure IDs, but I've stepped out and heard

him go: *My daughter has her mother's eyes and grandpa's nose. What happened to her?*

MARK

We can fix the body, but can't heal the mind.

EMMA

(nods)

He knows my smile—says it's just like his. That's how we've gotten by. But recently, my mouth atrophied. Tried to get it restored, but my doctor said I'd waited too long...the pieces weren't meant to last. She signed me up for a total gum-lip replacement.

MARK

Better do it. I'm sure your dad will understand.

EMMA

But that's just it. I went home, looked in the mirror, and realized I've lost every part of my original body. Scrapped my birthmarks when I turned eighteen. Fixed my calves to look better in shorts. Got my nose 'cause my boss liked a button. Don't know how many times I've done my hands...piano phase, salon phase, fitting-through-jars phase. And my eyes, and...

MARK

Hey.

(Touches her arm.)

It's okay.

EMMA swallows, wiping tears.

EMMA

Once Dad's gone, I'll have nothing left of him—my memories, but they're bound to go, and my DNA, but where's the sentiment in a string of acids?

CASHIER

Or a big rotting mouth!

MARK

(scowling)

Oh my god, dude—

EMMA

You're wrong. Or, *scientifically*, you're right, but I studied English at Smith—read all the 21st-century classics. People back then, their bodies were *romantic*, not sexual or rational or functional. Each eye or nose or mouth was precious; we were works of art. I like to think they were guided by some force we've forgotten.

CASHIER

Vanity. Lust. Or plain superficiality.

EMMA

We've gotten more superficial. That's consumerism.

CASHIER

(whistles)

Now *that's* deep! Down with consumer culture!

EMMA

(smiles)

Glad someone agrees. I had a boyfriend who dumped me for being antiquated. And the last one just left yesterday because "no one would kiss a pair of rotting lips."

MARK

Asshole said that to you?

EMMA

Right to the plastic.

MARK

Should've punched him in the nose. Those are pricey!

EMMA

(giggling)

I'm not particularly violent. Besides, he was right. I can't jeopardize my safety for sentiment.

MARK

You don't sound convinced.

EMMA

That obvious?

MARK

Listen...I don't have a perfect answer. But, your dad wouldn't want you to suffer, and letting your mouth deteriorate won't keep his memory alive. In the end, *you* ascribe meaning. Those 21st-century intellectuals glorified concepts we can't even fathom. But, were they wiser? Were their relationships more meaningful? Who knows, in a few decades, we might learn brain-editing or DNA-recoding, and everything we consider "us" will become disposable.

EMMA

So who are we?

MARK

Whoever we make ourselves.

EMMA

Can't reverse progress.

MARK

I don't know if it's progress...

EMMA

Progress isn't always positive. That's what you were saying, right? I've moved forward...I'll never get my original body back. But I—I'm still myself. If I say so.

MARK

Until you don't.

EMMA
(stronger)

And I can move in a better direction. Value what's left, take care of replacements, become someone who won't repeat the same mistakes.

MARK

And someone who guides others. I was considering getting my eyes done to match my eyebrows, but it doesn't seem that appealing anymore. Don't plan for the original-body pipeline, but I'll do my best for the pieces here...that's all we can ever do.

EMMA
(exhales)

All right.

MARK

All right?

Nodding, EMMA rises, brushing dust off her pants.

EMMA

I should find my phone.

MARK

Who was calling?

EMMA

Sister. We're supposed to visit Dad, but they won't let me in the ward with half my face gone.

MARK
(stands)

What's the plan?

EMMA reaches for the crate, but
pauses suddenly, whirling back with a
small smile.

EMMA
I'll come tomorrow. Hey, kid!
(She waves to the CASHIER.)
Will you keep my phone hostage 'til I buy your best pair of lips?

CASHIER
Coercion with consent! I like it.

EMMA
(anxiously to MARK)
Can I buy you a cup of coffee...Marcus, right?

MARK
Just Mark.

EMMA
(holds out her hand)
I'm Emma.

CASHIER
And *I'm* Kevin! Or Get-Out-If-You-Aren't-Buying!

EMMA
I can't believe I didn't know your names. Backwards of us, huh?

MARK
It's a backwards world, Emma. Let's make the most of it.

(He strolls to the left-stage door, pulls it open with a jingle, and beckons her magnanimously.)

Après-vous?

EMMA takes his arm, and the two depart, beaming at each other. The CASHIER rolls his eyes, yanking a string overhead. Slowly, the BODY SHOP sign flips to CLOSED, the elevator music winds down, and the stage lights flicker to black.

CURTAIN

SEOYON KIM '25
FOREVER THE FORTUNATE FEW



Characters

- GINA: 17-24 year-old young woman. A prophet of the times. She sees the future in the spray from her shower head, 8 o'clock on the dot every evening. She wears a tote bag and rain boots; she takes her role very seriously. It's maddening.
- DAN: 17-24 year-old, wary but hopeful. Perhaps her first disciple; perhaps not. Perhaps he will leave her behind. He stands at a great many crossroads; not all kind, but he makes do. He lurks in GINA's shadow, but the clattering footsteps of his hard-soled shoes betray him.
- ANGEL: The only one wearing bowling shoes, those heathens. Their patience only goes so far, but they stand well-aware of its limits. They harbor a deep well of emotion for no one in particular. Some may call it affection. This intensity necessitates sacrifice. Or perhaps it is the other way around?

Setting

A bowling alley at the end of the world. Only one alley is at play, with the bumper rails up. There stands a low table of forgotten, full drinks. Low jazz plays as the dimly-lit lights swing in the still air.

GINA gently rolls her bowling ball down the aisle—it strikes dead-on, knocking most pins over, except for a few at the fringes. She doesn't seem happy.

GINA

See, this usually doesn't happen.

ANGEL

No, it's fine, I believe you. It's—good. It's good.

GINA

I can do better, you know. I really am the real deal, you know.

ANGEL

I told you, I don't need this “real deal” business. An accomplice is closer to what I'm looking for.

DAN

Huh!

(to GINA)

You sure she's an angel?

GINA shrugs. She rolls her bowling ball again, targeting one of the pins standing apart from the others. It falls gracefully.

ANGEL

So, I really don't say this to be unkind.

GINA

And I can only repeat what I have been told.

DAN

Huh!

ANGEL

(turns, annoyed)

You've brought me a believer, Gina? Talk to me.

GINA

(mumbles)

It's a little complicated.

ANGEL

What's that?

GINA

(louder)

It's a little complicated.

DAN

I'll say!

ANGEL

Good. Well, complicated is good. You know, they say that—

DAN

You know that she's the next prophet? You think that she's the next prophet?

GINA

(wringing her hands)

Oh, stop, Dan, that's so embarrassing!

ANGEL

Gina? Yes. Of course I know. She's a very talented young woman.

GINA

Stop it!

DAN
(lightly)

Shut up.

ANGEL

What a way to talk to your friend! And prophet. I keep careful watch of infrequent squalls. And I'm beginning to dislike you. Gina, when the day comes where you must cross the great wide Rubicon and leave us all behind, you will need to think long and hard about who you save and who you shall bring forth to the shallow deeps of the frigid New World. Or at least, who you keep within your circle of friends. And without.

GINA
(glum)

Oh, gee.

ANGEL

Life is a series of impossible choices. But Gina—Gina, Gina—I am sure you will make the right ones. Or the best ones, from what you know to be true and blasphemous. You can never know from where you stand in history, but I am of a loyal inheritance.

DAN

Hang on. Hang on, stop doing that. Gina, you're going to save me right?

GINA

Yeah. I mean, that's what I'm planning on.

ANGEL

It doesn't work like that! Come on. What of the brilliant passes of light that pass by your window at dawn, when Dan dreams of return thirty miles away in the still of his own room? It illuminates in the dark both you and him and the nature of your lives together itself. It doesn't work like that.

DAN
(impatient)

Like what? Explain it to us.

ANGEL

(pause)

Explain it! Well! Well.

It's like...It's a bit like how-

DAN rolls his bowling ball down the aisle. Most of the pins clatter to the ground. Both DAN and GINA are immediately distracted.

GINA
(anticipatory)

Come on...

DAN rolls again, knocking the rest of the pins over—a spare.

DAN

Yes!

The bowling aisle screen is replaced from its scoreboard to equally gorgeous and outrageous visions of dancing bowling pins. They act out a scene as dialogue continues: one pin is on the ground, casually gnawing at its leg as others encircle and dance around it.

DAN

I say, the world's gone to shit. We try to stay afloat the settling current, but we're not perfect. If I must put it in words, it is like how I recall my mother's visit to Helen Keller's birthplace. She gazes benevolently at the dogwoods, though they

do not stand there anymore, once swallowed in the piercing daylight, on some perfect day. It is all dampened beneath the midnight sun and its whims.

Another pin breaks from the lines;
approaches; it quickly devolves into a
vicious, silent dogfight.

ANGEL

It is true. Your memory of the trees and lawn, moist to the touch, true. Your mother's faith, true. I can see it in you. This is a modern story. You know, as I will, because everybody is so kind. Everybody is so kind! There is nothing wrong with that. She who cannot see and will not hear is king. Gina knows.

DAN

Everybody I know secretly thinks they can make it big as a voice actor.

ANGEL

(nodding)

The first sign of the end; there will be many to follow, both great and small. You know this. And Gina will save you; I know this. She was born the very moment the last Victoria crowned pigeon left the state of Minnesota overhead, like all good prophets are.

The other pins solemnly congregate,
encircling the dog-pins. They make
bets, money clandestinely passing
hands.

GINA

The great prophets! I can only be good. Oh, Dan...

DAN

Are these Victoria crowned pigeons native to America? I swear I've never heard of those before.

ANGEL

No.

The dog-pins break apart; scatter. The spectator-pins remain; then one by one, the pins in debt fall to the ground in various states of despair.

DAN

Some freaky Australian shit, then. Typical.

DAN rights the pins. As soon as he makes contact, each pin immediately launches into acting out GINA's following dialogue.

GINA

That reminds me. Tell me this, Angel; this is the first and last test I ask of you, unlike the many times I know you will try me. That's okay, though. At this time four days ago, a six-minute drive from this very place where we stand, the Greenville Police Department received reports of a loose dog on Ridge Road. When an officer checked, the dog was at the fence, trying to get in its yard. You must tell me what to possibly make of this. Is it a sign?

The officer-pin puts a hand on GINA's shoulder and guides her to help look for the dog-pin high and low, together. The dog-pin emerges at the fence-pins, having never left. The dog-pin looks left, right—extends a longing hand to GINA and the officer-pin, who do not notice, before getting on its knees and digging under the fence. The fence-pins, holding onto each other, unsteadily totter and undulate at the dog-pin's digging.

ANGEL

Possibly. Though you can never know.

DAN mimes rolling a bowling ball. The dog-pin and officer-pin and fence-pins are swept away from the stage. DAN straightens.

GINA

Is this a strike?

DAN

They say you head west, if you want to know. That it holds answers, there in the west. Depends on how real you are.

GINA

Thank you, Dan.

ANGEL

What holds answers? Tell me, what? The people? They are too transient. The land? That, too. You cannot imbue the trees and soil with truth any more than I you with hope. Only true west. True west, listen to me. You must find true west, insofar it exists. And it is. It does exist. It is real, and I know this to be true, though my gaze falters when I lift my face to its unfolding arms. I am dreaming when I speak this; forgive me if I go astray. Those in search of a miracle go west. But who shall find? That is yet to be seen.

GINA

Westward bound. Where is true west, then?

DAN

Don't answer that.

GINA

Thank you, Dan.

ANGEL

I wouldn't. Well. What is it you really want from me? This cannot be it.

DAN

We just wanted to meet you.

(pause)

That's all. Gina says you're an angel.

ANGEL

And you must know Gina lies.

DAN

Oh, for sure. All the lying cheats and sleazeballs and small-shot voice actors out there who think they can make a living from a microphone and their closet... they all inhabit me, sure, but I do not let myself inhabit them. I cannot allow it, in good conscience.

ANGEL

Well, that is what they say.

GINA

Would you put me with those horrid people, Dan? See how even the biggest and most beautiful of the voice actors must debase themselves. Just yesterday while playing a gacha game—I cannot name it, for I have concealed within myself great shame—did I hear the voice of the illustrious Judith Fukuwara, appropriated from the still soil of where it lay as the greatest female character in Jump new-gen history, as if it were a siren song beckoning me abreast the raging current, its foam...

GINA

It numbs the soul to the great sensitivities of the submerged form.

DAN

And if we were all voice actors, perhaps?

ANGEL

It should be the end of times. Of the circling silt of your age as you know it.

DAN

Truly, the zeitgeist of an era, Angel. Imagine! Perhaps. We try to stay afloat the settling current, but we're not perfect. Our head dips in this freezing water, for a drink, for a cool taste to soothe the throat...

DAN slaps his hand over his eyes.

DAN

But voices! No better than the lowest, the feeblest of the meek. The meekest of the feeble. Rejoice...

ANGEL slowly covers their eyes with their hands.

ANGEL

But voices without faces, lost to the muck and grime... Voices appropriated for visages not our own, a likeness of mine very soul...

GINA

That's enough. You're frightening me with these words. I already have enough to deal with. You're so...inconsiderate sometimes! I am a friend to all mankind.

ANGEL

Oh but bring forth, poet, the strumming in your chest, friend to all mankind.

GINA clasps her hands over her eyes;
hums a tune.

GINA

(plainly, honestly)

I need to be much harder.

ANGEL

That's the spirit.

ANGEL walks in circles around GINA,
hands still over eyes.

GINA

So, this true west...

DAN

Hmm?

GINA

How accurate do I need to be?

DAN

Not at all. How far does the last Victoria crowned pigeon stray from its path to warmer climes?

GINA

How far can I go back so far as true west still exists?

DAN bows his head.

DAN

Gina, you have me stumped. I have been by your side as long as I can, but the water rises high, and the mud deep.

The pins return; they weave around the three, still with hands over their eyes. The three reach out; they know the pins are there, but the pins do not react, simply brushing by in their frenetic scatter.

DAN

You are free to love anyone you please. If you make me barrel down a never ending aisle of shining hardwood floors, I would. If you would prefer the slow-blinking stare, then good. It means you are free of me. That, in itself, is still a form of love.

ANGEL

Leave before it is too cold, Gina. The signs will follow.

One of the pins yelps; so does another.
It is not discernible which ones yelped;
it does not matter. GINA takes
staggering steps towards the sound.

GINA

(emotional)

Ankles wet, like all good prophets. Visage the only one of my voice. I will come back with all the force and chill of the world next, and you will see me, or perhaps you will not, a blinding shadow hovering above the unimposing horizon. Or perhaps I will not. Like the last Victoria crowned pigeon leaving this state for the next, then the next.

DAN removes his hands from his eyes.

DAN

Sure.

The pins assemble in V-formation, like birds flying south for the winter. The one at the front picks up GINA; they hurry off the stage, still in V-formation. DAN lowers his gaze as ANGEL watches them soar.

CURTAIN

GUNNAR EGGERTSSON '26
GREEN ROOM

The Characters

MARK: Early thirties, “normal-looking,” with a propensity to talk to himself and the audience.

WESTLY: Mid-fifties, a washed up former country singer, wearing aviators, gives off a Johnny Cash-like feeling.

JONAS: Early forties, a failed writer turned salesman.

The Scene

Lights up in a green room, three men sitting in side chairs center stage. WESTLY on the right, MARK in the middle, and JONAS on the left. Two doors: stage right and left, rear.

MARK
(to audience)

The first thing I noticed was the walls: muted green. And like a forest, with moss below, the ceiling was the shade of lichen. There was me and three others, all waiting for our appointments. To be honest, I can't tell you how long it was, five, ten, fifteen minutes? Impossible to say.

WESTLY
(leaning over)

Do you know how long it's gonna be?

MARK
(looks around for a moment, checking if he was being spoken to)
No.

WESTLY
Deft, to the point, are you?
(clicks his tongue)
Jesus this is going drive me over the edge.

MARK

A bit agitated?

WESTLY

I mean it's these walls, they're trying to calm me down. It's like they don't want me going nuts!

(chuckles)

Well when they say slow down, I go pedal to the metal.

(slaps his hands)

Full speed ahead!

MARK

Huh, I'm not partial to these walls either.

WESTLY

And whoever I spoke to said I shouldn't bring my security blanket with me,

(takes a swig from a flask from his jacket pocket)

Like I said, ol' Westley doesn't abide by rules.

JONAS

Really raging against the machine are you?

WESTLY

Well, at least I wasn't gonna sit around here quietly while my brain melts out my ear.

JONAS

What's your name?

WESTLY

Not paying attention?

JONAS

Could you repeat it?

WESTLY

Westly.

JONAS

Okay, well, I'm Jonas Anderson.

WESTLY

(laughing)

What kinda person says his first *and* last name. I don't know you, but you seem like a pompous B.V.D.

MARK

Jonas Anderson, like the Swedish singer.

JONAS

No relation.

(pause, then uneasily)

I'm sorry but what does DVB mean?

WESTLY

It's an acronym.

JONAS

For what?

WESTLY

(thinks)

Denver Ventriloquist's Band.

MARK

(to the audience)

Aren't people strange? But this was a conclusion I came to long before today. It was definitely not lessened though. Westly looked like a cheap knock-off of Roy Orbison, it was the glasses! Whereas Jonas Anderson seemed to be going for an avant-garde, poindexter aesthetic.

WESTLY
What do you do for a living?

JONAS
Act.

WESTLY
Movies?

JONAS
Theater...

WESTLY
Thespian!

JONAS
One could say, a writer as well.

WESTLY
Novels?

JONAS
(shaking his head)
Theater!

MARK
(to audience)
And things quieted down, leaving us again, waiting.

Lights dim.

MARK
(to audience)
Some indiscernible amount of time elapsed without updates from staff. I checked my watch but it was acting weirdly, I must've destroyed it.

JONAS
(to WESTLY)

So...what are *you* in for?

WESTLY
(raising his flask, slowly enunciating)

Wellll, it's complicated. Fat Possum Records won't sign me, until I get straight.

JONAS
Oh?

Another silence.

MARK
(turning towards JONAS)

How about you?

JONAS
Ah it's nothing, just a minor breakdown. You know how corporations get!

WESTLY
(mockingly)
Not really!

Another uncomfortable silence.

MARK
(standing up)

It's really taking a long time.
(Tries door, stage right, rear)
Damn, that's something.
(Walks to other door, stage left, rear)
Shit, we're locked in!

JONAS
What?

WESTLY

No way!

WESTLY tries door, stage right.

JONAS

That can't be!

WESTLY

(bangs on door)

Fuck, we're really stuck!

MARK

(yelling)

Let us out of here! We're locked in!

WESTLY

(moving center stage)

It's useless!

Lights dim, when they come back up, a warmer mood. The three are now sitting on the floor.

WESTLY

(dramatically)

And that's when I realized, I was in Purgatory. And God had turned his face from me long ago, leaving me with the sinners I now call brothers!

JONAS

(clapping)

Bravo, you're a bona fide bard.

WESTLY

Well I try!

MARK

Jonas, you said you were a writer.

JONAS nods.

MARK

Plays and stuff, what happened with that?

JONAS

It's tough, you know, when you're young ideas come easy. You stay up all night writing, no problem whatsoever. In my heyday: I was a machine. But theater's been dead twenty years, and on life-support forty years before. And now, even if I had a good idea, who would stage it?

MARK

So, where do you work?

JONAS

Some piece-a-shit, sell-your-soul type company. I go from crap business to crap business getting little shops to buy battery-operated equine toothbrushes.

WESTLY

What, they don't use plug-ins anymore?

MARK

Sounds like a tough way to make a buck! But lemme ask you, did you learn something from the theater?

JONAS

Did I learn something? Plenty.

(pausing, sitting up straight)

A mind at rest is to be aware that to live or to die is the same choice. The mind of the actor! He loses himself in the role. To act is to be in love, in love with a person to whom you'll never be afforded the opportunity to fully know. It is loving an abstraction, a memory, forgotten.

(crowing)

I am a goddamn artist! And all day I wrote and performed. And all it left me was this: “Novel ideas wear like ink off paperbacks.” The final words of my one true love, last played character, Boris Humphrey.

WESTLY

(contemplatively)

Did you prepare that beforehand?

(he bursts out laughing)

JONAS

(shaking head)

Only a couple of times. Say, Mark, what do you do?

JONAS and WESTLY freeze as MARK speaks to the audience.

MARK

(standing up and walking around the two)

At this point I was confronted with a terrible dilemma, one for which I still don't know the best remedy. Do I tell them the truth? The truth being that I'm a god-fearing, blue-collar, proud American union-member, demolitions expert, and that I'm certifiably insane!

(pauses)

No, that's too harsh—demolition sounds brutish, because what I specialize in isn't destruction, it's CREATION! Hell, the way I'm speaking now is so romantic perhaps Jonas Anderson would get a kick out of it.

(turning to the frozen men)

I work in construction.

Lights down, then up again, all three now have beards.

MARK

(to WESTLY and JONAS)

This is really silly.

MARK takes off the prosthetic facial hair.

WESTLY

Hey, you're lucky I brought my props!

JONAS

I mean I enjoy the costumes, but why do you carry beards with you?

WESTLY

Well, I carry an assortment of things. Beads, beards, bear costumes, though I left that one at home. It's just what I do!

JONAS

Why?

WESTLY

People find bear costumes rather disconcerting.

JONAS

No, why do you have all this junk?

WESTLY

I'm not gonna get into it. It was from my drinking days, on stage I would be performing a classic, and then whip out something completely random. One time, I carried this cap gun, the kind used for swimming races. I was planning to blast it in the air during my solo. But I mixed it up with a real one. Could've been tragic!

JONAS

(sarcastically)

You seem to really have it together!

WESTLY

No shit!

WESTLY takes another drink from the flask.

JONAS

Pass that here.

JONAS

(takes a sip)

Wait a minute, this isn't whisky.

(stammering)

It's club soda!

WESTLY

Pellegrino!

JONAS

I thought you were some kinda washed up, alcoholic country singer.

WESTLY

Well, you got two of the three right...I'm a collector.

JONAS

A hoarder!

WESTLY

Look here, I go out there on stage, bust my ass all day, ruin my body, soul, my fucking mind. And all the people keep talking about how I'm not normal! You'd be crazy to be normal, what has a goddamn normal person done!

MARK

Is that why you're here?

WESTLY

Yeah, a real pathetic situation! I mean if a man's gotta go to an asylum it should be for something based in reality. Like drinking, smoking, having a sex addiction, I don't know!

MARK

When's the last time you played?

WESTLY

I'm no quitter...about five years ago, maybe a little longer.

MARK

Are you gonna go back to it?

WESTLY

Probably.

MARK

Do you wanna?

WESTLY

Ehh...I got nothing to say!

JONAS

Meaning?

WESTLY

Look here, kid, I'll tell you how it is. You write a song when you're young, probably about seventeen. And you think it's pretty good. You write some more and people start knowing your name, you may get big, marry a pretty lady, and buy a nice house, Jacuzzi included. But you've never done more than write that first song.

JONAS

I don't follow.

WESTLY

For us singers, songs take a lifetime.

JONAS

Curious.

WESTLY

What's curious about it?

JONAS

Just reminded me of something...

Lights go down, then come up again.
MARK facing audience with WESTLY
and JONAS muttering behind him.

MARK

(to audience)

It was eating up my insides, this horrible thing. This lie, I should've just told them earlier, when the moment was right. But time in the green room doesn't move normal, makes a big loop the loop, and you start repeating conversations.

WESTLY

Then I shot the bastard dead!

MARK

(to audience)

He's said this about five times. Like I said, the green room makes people strange. (to WESTLY and JONAS)
Say, guys, I got something to tell you.

JONAS

Yeah, what is it?

MARK

It's why I'm here. I'm not right in the head, I talk to myself.

JONAS

Aren't we all a little off the wall?

MARK

You don't get what I mean, it's like I'm talking to someone.

WESTLY

Talking to someone, like voices in your head?

MARK

No, a little different.

JONAS

Explain.

MARK

It's like a room full of people. An audience. All staring at *yours truly*.

JONAS

Like a play.

MARK

Yeah, you can say that!

The door to stage right, rear, opens a
crack.

CURTAIN

THE MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE OF JOHN HEMLOCK

The Characters

NARRATOR:	An older version of RICK, speaks in a drawn out way.
RICK:	The obituary writer.
MARGRET:	John Hemlock's mother.
JOSEPH:	John Hemlock's father.
RAPHAEL:	Black sheep of the family, John's estranged brother.
WILLIAMS:	Headmaster of the Power School for Boys.
ALICE:	John's eccentric sister.

The Scene

A funeral, the atmosphere somber, uncomfortable, anxious, unresolved. Center stage, a mahogany coffin; behind it, a podium; all around, misty darkness. The coffin glows with a mystical radiance. A silence. Then:

NARRATOR

(off stage)

Well, that's the thing you know about writers, they're like mothers. Mothers, and fathers for that matter, they're compulsive. It's why writers are obsessed with art. It's narcissistic, I mean all artists are. Sorry for getting us off topic. What exactly happened? You know, I was hired by this family whose son just died. They wanted me to write his obituary. I had some moderately successful essays before this, but I was certainly no hot shot. It was goddamn tragic! You know, these funerals are the worst!

(pause)

It's a kid's funeral, really the saddest stuff out there. All very weird from the get-go. They didn't tell me how he died. Strange, I mean, I didn't need to know everything, but they kept dancing around it.

(another pause)

Yeah, the kid's name...John Hemlock. It was one of those days, where there's a sticky film over everything. And your eyes: blurry, tired. Everything's just...lugubrious! And, there was a mist, clinging to the ground and coffin. It was everywhere! There were homemade pamphlets, laying out a schedule, like a script. It called for a couple speeches, then a break, more speeches, then the

whole damn thing was over! First, people were meeting and making light conversation...I introduced myself to the older couple.

MARGARET and JOSEPH enter stage right; Rick enters stage left.

RICK

Hi, my name's Rick.

MARGARET

Finally, wonderful to meet you! I've been dying to shake your hand ever since I read that great article you wrote for the *Boston Herald* on taxidermy.

RICK

Thank you. It's a very interesting subject.

JOSEPH

We understand that this may be somewhat unusual, but we thought it best to have a real writer for our son.

MARGARET

Oh yes, he definitely deserves the services of a professional.

A silence, all three look around.

NARRATOR

There was a strange heavy air of awkwardness. I broke the silence.

RICK

Is there anything you can tell me about your son?

MARGARET

Oh you'll see, he was incredibly intelligent, a true Hemlock in every sense.

RICK

What happened?

No one says anything.

NARRATOR

The awkwardness magnified.

JOSEPH

You know we don't feel that's all that important to get into.

MARGARET

(interrupting)

It would be unbecoming of the life John led.

NARRATOR

It was a very strange statement. Unbecoming—what did that mean? The two wandered off, and I was left by the coffin. A gleaming radiance from its slick wood. It beckoned, like a lighthouse peering through mist. Ominous...

(pause)

Looking around, I felt out of place; I was an intruder! Think of it, it's bizarre to write an obituary for someone you don't know. God, I'm never gonna do it again.

(pause)

Anyhow, off to the side, there was a slender, feverish man, sucking on a cigarette. Those eyes! He was looking into some impossible distance, in an impossible place, at an impossible time. So, naturally, I introduced myself.

RICK

Hi, I'm Rick. I was hired by your family.

RAPHAEL

(kicking the ground)

Oh, you're the guy!

RICK

Sorry to hear about your brother.

RAPHAEL

Me too.

(a brief silence)

Did they tell you anything about Johnny?

RICK

No.

RAPHAEL

Figures...you know it really is a fucking horrible thing!

RICK

Pardon me?

RAPHAEL

Death, I don't understand how we delude ourselves into thinking otherwise...
it's really...a total shitshow.

RICK

Definitely sad.

RAPHAEL

No, it's more than that! Everything we ever do, say, think, dream, is all done,
and forgotten. It's hard enough being lonely, but, hell, we're all lonely. But, to
have it extinguished—like that

(snaps fingers)

—it's worse than horrible, it's goddamn...pernicious!

RICK

You and Johnny were close?

RAPHAEL

Were we close? We were—don't you get it—brothers! Jesus Christ, this whole
thing's disrespectful.

(He turns to someone weeping over the coffin)

That bastard over there, barely knew the kid.

(wriggling a ring off his finger)

Piece of shit school.

RAPHAEL tosses the ring.

RICK

The ring has something to do with the guy.

RAPHAEL

(astounded)

I mean it's his school. I forget you know nothing. He's the headmaster, and this whole tragedy's his fault.

RICK

Pardon?

RAPHAEL

Listen, no matter what these guys say I know Johnny. He didn't kill himself, all right. He was no wack job, I mean he was a cynic, but...who isn't? Hell, everyone in this family is. But Johnny was a romantic. Williams has no right being here!

RAPHAEL walks off.

NARRATOR

At that point, I thought it best to sit down with the others, to listen to the speeches. Starting with the headmaster.

Lights dim, WILLIAMS now in front of the podium.

WILLIAMS

Scores of men, endless in totality, have lived lives without saying anything. This, we come to know, is the most meaningless existence. Though I am unable to say if simply this act, to speak of one's character truly, is itself rare. I am able to say, it is excellent. And...as we all know, not all excellent things are rare.

(he looks at his ring, fiddles with it)

You'd be amazed, diamonds are remarkably common. But I think they are nonetheless stunning!

NARRATOR

The comment seemed misplaced.

WILLIAMS

(clears his throat)

Well, John Hemlock was most certainly an exceptional young man. A real thinker, he'll surely be remembered for what he was: a prodigy. Something special, the life he lived. A life most would've died for! I feel truly blessed that the Power School for Boys helped him realize this.

WILLIAMS extended his hands to the audience, in a very awkward gesture, then returned to his seat.

NARRATOR

A young woman in a feathered bonnet made her way to the podium. There was something eccentric about her, captivating, yet unnerving. I don't know how to explain. You know how you meet somebody and they seem like they might do something wild! But not crazy, like relevant. Yeah, you get what I mean. Her name was Alice.

ALICE approaches the podium.

ALICE

You'll find the greatest of artists are those that can dedicate themselves singularly to their craft. And ol' Johnny could do that! It is said by many that have known him, he was the smartest man they ever met. And he wasn't even a man yet!

NARRATOR

Like I said, something about her disposition was off-kilter.

(pause and grumbling heard from another party)

All right, I know you guys are police but would you stop busting my balls over these little details. I mean have you even read the obituary?

ALICE

Our family name has been leading the way in artistic frontiers for decades, all the while maintaining class and dignity. If I am to be honest, Johnny was simply the inevitable successor to the great Hemlock tradition. He wore the legacy well. Unfortunately, there were some who could not appreciate his genius.

NARRATOR

The especially bizarre part of the speeches was how they spoke about Johnny. He was mythologized. I began to wonder, did this kid really exist? I guess, the weirdness was getting to me. But that last thing she said, yeah that one. There were some who could not appreciate...

RAPHAEL

(rushes to the podium, pushing his sister to the side)

What a fucking circus! It's not what Johnny would've wanted!

The crowd chatters.

JOSEPH

C'mon now, you're making a scene.

RAPHAEL

That was your choice when you invited that pig.

WILLIAMS

Isn't pig a little dramatic?

ALICE

You're being conspiratorial, sure he wasn't well-liked. But how could that be Williams's fault?

RAPHAEL

He's trying to cover his ass, and the tyrant son of his! You'll see. I'm coming for you Johnny!

RAPHAEL leaps for the coffin. Lights flashing, commotion center stage.

MARGARET

This is embarrassing, you should be ashamed.

JOSEPH

Don't you touch that coffin, it's Italian mahogany!

RAPHAEL

Mahogany doesn't grow in Italy!

A silence, darkness, then a blinding light reveals an empty coffin.

ALICE

Where did he go?

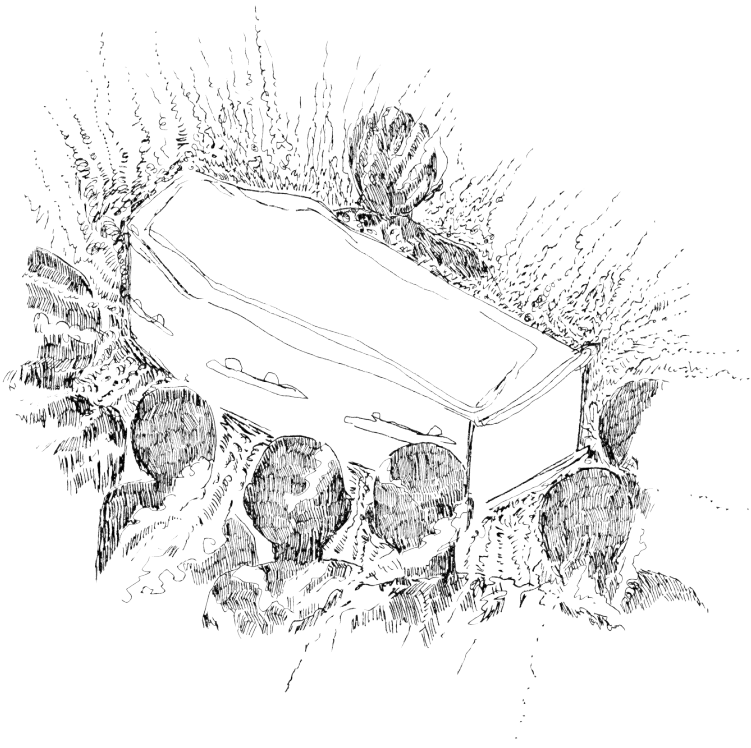
MARGARET

Gone...for good.

NARRATOR

And there it sat: the empty coffin. The question still haunts. What the hell happened? Erasure? Vanishing? A magic trick? I like to think that Johnny is still out there, living his best life in Mykonos or somewhere off the coast of Spain. But who knows? Maybe they just mixed up the dead kid's coffin.

CURTAIN



ANNA KLEINBERG '26

LIVEBRIGHT

The Characters

- AUGUST: Laid-back mid-30s, CEO of LiveBright, an aspirational lifestyle company. A true believer in the goodness of all mankind.
- GEORGE Late 60s, AUGUST and DEREK's father. A wealthy businessman who has encouraged one son to follow his dreams, but has neglected the other.
- BIANCA Early 40s, LiveBright's CFO. A stern businesswoman who prioritizes money over everything, but is kind at heart.
- DEREK: Late-20s, AUGUST's half-brother and assistant to BIANCA. An aspiring businessman who has spent his life in AUGUST's shadow.

The Scene

LiveBright's corporate boardroom. Four chairs surround a large table. AUGUST and GEORGE sit at either end, BIANCA and DEREK placed in the middle, facing the audience. A large poster covers the back wall that reads, "Always Look on the Bright Side." A silence. Then:

BIANCA

Damn it, you're not listening! It won't work!

AUGUST

Bianca, I think I've done a pretty good job of explaining why it will. Perhaps you just need to be flexible. Remember, "a mind is like a parachute, it doesn't work unless it's open."

GEORGE

I don't get it either. Explain it to us one more time.

DEREK is silent, looking towards
BIANCA, waiting to agree with

whatever she says next. AUGUST
stands up, takes a deep breath.

AUGUST

Wonderful friends, my idea is simple. Maybe I just haven't done a good job selling it. A subscription model designed to help people help themselves. Eating a healthy diet, guided meditation, getting our users to detach from the hustle and bustle of daily life. No matter what problems they face, we can give them a spiritual awakening. Amplify consciousness. And all of this, my friends, for only five dollars a month. Just think! All the people we can set free!

Everyone, thunderstruck. AUGUST
flashes a perfect smile.

AUGUST

Well, I hope that cleared things up!

GEORGE

It did, it did.

(sigh)

Listen, August, it's very interesting, but there's one major flaw I think we need to discuss. How—

BIANCA

How the hell are you going to pay for this mess of a project when you're charging people less than a dollar a day? And don't tell me that you're going to make it up in volume. There are hundreds of other companies doing the same thing! What makes you think LiveBright is any different?

DEREK

Yeah, you tell him, boss. You're mistaken, August, if you think there's something separating us from our competitors!

BIANCA

And who's going to pay for our losses?

GEORGE

Don't look at me.

DEREK

See, not even dear ol' dad is willing to help with this. You can either rethink your business model or just give it up.

AUGUST sits down, slouches.

AUGUST

I don't think it's right to ask for money in exchange for our service. If I didn't think you'd try to fire me again, I'd suggest charging nothing. Look around you, people are suffering. Life is brutal. If we force them to cough up everything they own, we're no better than criminals.

BIANCA

Well, if that's the way you see things, I'm sorry to tell you we won't be helping anyone at all. If you're proposing a spiritual awakening for free, you're going to make us go broke.

AUGUST

You always say that. You need to see the big picture. Sure, sometimes things don't go our way, but we haven't had a catastrophe yet. We've always been left with enough money to land on our feet.

GEORGE buries his face in his hands.

GEORGE

August, usually I'm supportive of your...

(pauses as he thinks of a word)

endeavors, however, this time I have to agree with Bianca. I'm fortunate to have enough money that I can help you live out your dreams, but really, isn't this just throwing it away?

AUGUST

It's for a good cause!

(pause)

Humanity!

DEREK
(mockingly)

It's for a good cause! Oh please, the only people who sign up for these things are ex-hippies who smoke weed, listen to The Rolling Stones, and live in trailer parks!

AUGUST

Well fine then! If all of you think that my original plan won't work, I guess we'll have to...

DEREK
(sweet but sarcastically)

Yes, August?

AUGUST
(practically shouting)

I guess we'll just have to sell something else on the side! Hmm...what will be good enough for you guys, what will be innovative enough? Ah, yes! I've got it!

BIANCA

Dear lord, not again.

AUGUST
(pleading)

Please wait! Just hear me out! You see, no matter who you are or where you live, everyone loves one thing: pets. However, despite all of the supposedly doting owners out there, nobody ever really lets their pet relax. What I propose is something that will make a great holiday present for your furry friend: the pet massage chair. It's small, relatively inexpensive, and will help your pet feel better than ever!

AUGUST practically jumps out of his chair, grinning wildly.

AUGUST

See, look, I can have good ideas! If we sell these, I'm sure we'll make more than enough money to pay for our subscription service. Everything will be perfect! It's brilliant!

BIANCA

George, this is too much! I can't take it!

DEREK

It's gotta stop, "Pop!"

GEORGE

August, I...

DEREK laughs coldly.

DEREK

(to GEORGE)

Would you look at that! Whenever Mr. Favorite Child screws up, you're powerless to intervene! Yet if I so much as do anything, you're a-okay with telling me how stupid and wrong I am. Always the same old thing!

BIANCA

What do you mean, Derek?

DEREK

Oh, so he didn't tell you. Big Businessman over there might want you to think he's a perfect gentleman, but take it from me: he's not. You see, a while back, he went romping around with one of his secretaries. That's how I came to be. All my life, I've had to compare myself to Auggie, knowing I'll never be as good as him. Because, to you, "Dad," my very existence is a mistake. And now we're here, and August gets to be the head honcho of this disaster factory, while I'm stuck being someone's assistant -no offense, Bianca, I think you're a wonderful person! Why not give me a chance, huh, let me try running this place! I know I

can save this company from disaster. After all, things can't get any worse long as he's in charge!

DEREK points aggressively at
AUGUST, who is slowly backing away
from the table.

GEORGE

Derek, I really don't think that's a good idea. We're going to be just fine after we launch August's line of—what were they again?—pet massage chairs.

DEREK

Goddamn it! Why doesn't anybody listen?

AUGUST

(emboldened by his father's words)

Perhaps it would be beneficial to you if you worked on overcoming your anger issues. There's no reason to get worked up over something so small. Come, let us now calm down by taking some LiveBright deep breaths.

AUGUST closes his eyes and begins to
breathe slowly.

AUGUST

Breathe in, breathe out. In, out. In, out. In, out. Are you guys following along?

BIANCA

I must ask, Derek, has August always been this ridiculous?

DEREK

Yup. Even before he got into the whole "lifestyle guru" thing he was still weird. When he drove me to school, August would wake me up so early that every day I got there an hour before classes started. And then he had this dieting phase where he'd cook these really weird dishes with seaweed, alfalfa sprouts, and raw chicken. He made me eat them. I was twelve!

BIANCA

Horrible! How could he do that?

AUGUST

Hey! Can we try being a little more aware of the space, please? You're saying all these things about me, but you seem to have forgotten that I'm sitting right here. I can hear you.

GEORGE

Yes, um, Bianca, Derek, why don't we get back to the topic at hand. Let's try and figure out something we can sell on the side to sustain our new subscription service.

DEREK

Fine, shut me up like you always do, Dad.

AUGUST

(reluctantly)

Well, I suppose if nobody really likes my idea of pet massage chairs...

(he trails off for a moment)

I guess it wouldn't hurt if Derek made a suggestion. I just feel a bit bad for him. He has all this pent-up anger inside. I'm so sorry we've gotten to the point where everybody is screaming at each other. If only you'd told me sooner, brother.

GEORGE

Tell us your idea, Derek. I'm waiting.

BIANCA

Why don't you give him a moment to think!

AUGUST pulls out a small bottle of room spray and starts to spray it around DEREK, who is sitting silently with his eyes closed.

AUGUST

Here, this scent is made of essential oils specifically formulated to help people get inspired. I like to use it in my office; it's definitely made a difference in my creativity.

DEREK

(annoyed)

No wonder you stink. Stop spraying that! It smells like piss.

AUGUST

Fine, fine. Apologies for invading your space.

DEREK

(ignoring AUGUST)

Time to have an idea! Gotta have an idea...ideas...ideas...Urgh! Come on!

DEREK slams the table in frustration.

GEORGE

Well?

DEREK

Goddamn it! I can't think of anything! Can't you just give me some time!

GEORGE

Time is money. I hate to tell you this, but if you can't think on your feet, you have no future here, Derek.

DEREK

(infuriated)

Can everyone just back off?

BIANCA

Is there anything I can do to help?

DEREK
(disgruntled)

Just leave me the hell alone...Please!

BIANCA

Not very nice!

DEREK sits with his fingers pressed to his temples and his eyes closed, ignoring those around him. Then:

DEREK

I've got it!

AUGUST

What?! What is it!

DEREK

I know what we need to do!

GEORGE

Go on...

DEREK

Well, I can't believe I'm saying this, but you were onto something, August. Not with the massage chair, but I think you're right: people don't fully appreciate their pets. Not that they don't want to, but they can't.

GEORGE
(skeptical)

Okay, I'm listening, but where are you going with this?

DEREK

Go to any pet store. I can pretty much guarantee that the only pet food there will be vomit-like mush, or rock-hard pellets.

BIANCA

So?

DEREK

There's probably no shortage of owners out there that would be completely willing to pony up extra dough to give their pet a gourmet experience, but there aren't a lot of ways to do it. You can cook for your pet, which is frankly more effort than it's worth, you can go through the hassle of ordering pet food online, or you can buy one of those cans of fake "gourmet" food. What I'm proposing is something entirely new: a nationwide franchise of LiveBright pet restaurants! Well, that's what it would be at first. Eventually, we could start a home delivery service, have our frozen meals on the shelves of every Whole Foods in America and food trucks in every neighborhood. And that's not all! Why, in the not-so-distant future, we could expand into pet day spas, hotels, lifestyle products. LiveBright will be synonymous with pet luxury!

BIANCA

Derek, I think you're really onto something.

AUGUST

(excitedly)

I have to agree with Bianca! You took my stupid idea and made it better than I could have ever imagined. You see, teamwork really does make the dream work!

GEORGE

(he slow claps)

I can't deny that what Derek came up with makes sense, but you're forgetting one important thing. LiveBright is for humans, not animals.

AUGUST

Why are you only saying that now? Dad, I've already made several suggestions involving pets, and you haven't once brought that up.

DEREK

Well, I think it's less of what's being said and more of who's saying it. You guys might like my idea, but without his support, it's hopeless. If we want to make this work, we need George's money.

AUGUST

(to GEORGE)

Dad, please. He's your son. If you don't want to do it for him, at least do it for me.

GEORGE

No way, August. If I indulge Derek, he'll become famous, and then everyone will know what I did. I can't let that happen.

BIANCA

(to GEORGE)

Do you hear yourself? You sound ridiculous. I've worked with Derek for years, and I can't count the amount of times I've been surprised by his genius. If you give up on him, you might be letting the best investment of your career get away.

GEORGE

But he...

DEREK

You can't spend the rest of your life pretending that I don't exist! I'm here, Dad!

GEORGE

Fine. Let's do it!

DEREK

You'll do it?

GEORGE

I'll help you start your chain of pet restaurants.

AUGUST gets up and pats DEREK on the back.

AUGUST
(to DEREK)

I'm happy for you, brother. I've known you all your life, but I had no idea that you were full of so many surprises.

DEREK
Thanks...Auggie.

DEREK
(to all)
Tell you what, all this arguing has made me hungry. Why don't we get lunch?

GEORGE
That's it, I've got it! Why don't we make hot dogs for dogs?

BIANCA
That's awful!

AUGUST
(exuberant)
Wait! Before we leave, let's do one more thing!

He moves the table to the back of the room, then takes everyone by the hand, forming a circle center stage.

AUGUST
(singing, all join in)
Kumbaya my Lord, kumbaya
Kumbaya my Lord, kumbaya
Kumbaya my Lord, kumbaya
Oh Lord, kumbaya

CURTAIN



LARA MILLER '26
DAY AT THE CIRCUS

The Characters

CONSTANCE Twenty-something, single-minded, self-assured, stubborn; fashionably attired.

CHUCKLEHEAD (CHET): Mid-fifties, a kind-hearted, absent-minded, fun-loving soul who graduated top of his class at clown school.

TYRONE Overbearing single parent who would do anything for CONSTANCE—except go to the circus.

The Scene

A living room. CONSTANCE and CHUCKLEHEAD lounge on a worn red velvet sofa, centerstage. To its left, TYRONE, agitated, sitting in a brown leather club chair, slightly angled to the center. In the rear, a fireplace crackles with family photos covering its mantel. A silence. Then:

TYRONE

So, you're pregnant?

CONSTANCE

No!

TYRONE

Then what are you doing with this clown?

CHUCKLEHEAD

With all due respect, sir, I was the captain of The Bubbling Buffoon Band.

TYRONE

What, a place for all the clowns to get to know each other?

CHUCKLEHEAD

Exactly!

CONSTANCE

Chet and I have been together for a very long time.

TYRONE

You're only 20!

CHUCKLEHEAD

Sir, she was 20 when we first met.

TYRONE

(to CONSTANCE)

You lied about your age?

CONSTANCE

I didn't lie. We met eight months ago.

TYRONE

What!

CHUCKLEHEAD

Has it really been that long? Just yesterday, I saw you at the circus, pointing and laughing at me.

CONSTANCE

Aw, Sweetie!

CHUCKLEHEAD and CONSTANCE

lean in and kiss.

TYRONE

Stop! We need to get things straight, Chucklehead! How many serious relationships have you been in?

CHUCKLEHEAD

Besides Constance, only one: Endora, The Bearded Lady.

TYRONE

The who?

CHUCKLEHEAD

Endora! Beautiful long beard like a fairytale wizard. She was also a great dancer, very light on her feet.

CONSTANCE

(to CHUCKLEHEAD)

You didn't tell me that!

CHUCKLEHEAD

Well, no big deal! We were only together for nine years.

CONSTANCE

(to CHUCKLEHEAD)

When did you start seeing her?

CHUCKLEHEAD

You knew we were childhood friends...

CONSTANCE

I did not!

CHUCKLEHEAD

We got together when I was...

(He thinks)

thirty-ish!

TYRONE

(incredulous)

She had a beard?

CHUCKLEHEAD

Excuse me?

TYRONE

How old are you anyway?

CHUCKLEHEAD

Age doesn't matter in the circus.

TYRONE

It matters when you're with my daughter!

CONSTANCE

I don't care about age,

(to CHUCKLEHEAD)

unlike your secret relationship!

CHUCKLEHEAD

It wasn't a secret!

TYRONE

Answer the question, Gigglehead.

CHUCKLEHEAD

It's Chucklehead. Gigglehead is my pet alligator.

TYRONE

Your pet...

CONSTANCE

I hope Zoltan takes good care of him.

TYRONE

Is she a trapeze artist?

CHUCKLEHEAD

(chuckling to CONSTANCE)

Can you imagine Zoltan, on the trapeze?

CONSTANCE

(to TYRONE)

No, Dad. He specialized in daggers.

TYRONE

He's a knife thrower?

CONSTANCE

Don't be ridiculous, Dad! He doesn't throw them, Zoltan swallows them!

TYRONE cups his throat.

CHUCKLEHEAD

It's very safe, Zoltan has only had a few surgeries in the past year.

TYRONE

How many years have you known him?

CHUCKLEHEAD

We studied pie throwing together as boys.

TYRONE

How long ago was that?

CONSTANCE

Stop pestering Chet about his age!

TYRONE

Do you know?

CONSTANCE

Of course not! And I don't wanna!

TYRONE

Well, I do! Spit it out, Jester!

CHUCKLEHEAD

Oh, you're too kind, but I'm simply a clown. Maybe one day I will earn that title.

TYRONE

What the hell are you talking about?

CHUCKLEHEAD

You called me a jester! At my circus, jesters are top-tier. Being able to fully humiliate yourself on the spot—now that's the dream!

CONSTANCE

Don't fret, Chet. You'll get there.

TYRONE

Enough Chuck E. Cheese, tell me your age!

CHUCKLEHEAD

(reluctantly)

I'm fifty-seven.

TYRONE & CONSTANCE

(together)

What!

CHUCKLEHEAD

I know I should have told you earlier.

TYRONE

You are damn right you should have! Get out of my house, Grandpa, and never look at my daughter again!

CHUCKLEHEAD begins to walk out.
(Stage right)

CONSTANCE

Wait, Chet I don't care if you are a hundred. I love you. I'll always love you. You are my dream clown!

TYRONE

How dare you, Constance! You know I hate the circus and everything about it, and yet you bring this ancient joker into our home!

CONSTANCE

It's been a long time since Mom died. And Chet's not that ancient! Old, OK, but not ancient!

TYRONE

He's older than me! Seven years older than me!

CHUCKLEHEAD

(horrified)

Your mom died at the circus?

TYRONE

Yes. In the hands of a clown.

CHUCKLEHEAD

Is this some kind of joke?

CONSTANCE

Mom adored the big top, loved everything about it, the acrobats, lions and tigers, and more than anything, the clowns. She loved watching them run around the ring spraying their seltzer bottles and throwing confetti. She was a real circus girl, brought me every chance she got. Even went so often, management offered her VIP seats, front row.

TYRONE

I should have let her accept.

CHUCKLEHEAD

Why didn't you?

TYRONE

The seats farted.

CHUCKLEHEAD

What?

TYRONE

The clowns decided to line the seats with lights, streamers, and whoopie cushions. Every time you moved, one of the balloons would slowly leak air. Loudly.

CHUCKLEHEAD

(snickering)

I see.

CONSTANCE

Anyways, eight years ago, she convinced Dad to go to the circus with her.

TYRONE

We sat in the back row, sandwiched between a cheering motorcyclist with a cone of cotton candy the size of my head and a screaming baby that spit up every five seconds. We were pissed by intermission, so when I saw an old couple leave, we rushed to claim their seats. A clown with a hideous red nose came up and warned us that Paloma, the human cannonball would be landing a few feet in front of us, and for our safety, we were advised to move in case of a misfire. We didn't, and of course, tragedy followed.

CHUCKLEHEAD

What happened?

TYRONE

Paloma crashed right into her! And that pathetic-looking clown with the big red nose failed to save my little Cricket!

CHUCKLEHEAD

Oh! And you weren't hurt?

TYRONE

(indignantly)

I almost was. Got lucky!

CHUCKLEHEAD

What circus was it?

TYRONE

Does it really matter? Cricket's gone! And so's the circus!

CHUCKLEHEAD

What did you do?

CONSTANCE

Dad sued and rightfully so. It was their fault that Cricket, my mom, died.

CHUCKLEHEAD

(to himself)

Oh God! You!

CONSTANCE

(to CHUCKLEHEAD)

What was that?

CHUCKLEHEAD

Paloma also died! My very own flesh and blood!

TYRONE

But she chose to be shot out of a cannon!

CHUCKLEHEAD

No she didn't. My sister never wanted to be in the circus!

CONSTANCE

That's how your sister died?

CHUCKLEHEAD

Yes, Paloma had a life of disappointment. All she wanted was to be an accountant. Can you imagine a more boring job? Only people with no sense of joy could survive in a job like that!

TYRONE

I'm an accountant.

CHUCKLEHEAD

(to himself)

Figures!

TYRONE

What was that?

CHUCKLEHEAD

Nothing. Paloma wanted to join the IRS or the military. But they wouldn't take her. Flat feet! So, my father handed her an old tomato and said she could join the circus or live on the street.

TYRONE

You mean an ultimatum?

CHUCKLEHEAD

(slowly)

No, an old tomato.

TYRONE

I heard you the first time. But why on earth would your father give her a piece of fruit?

CONSTANCE

It's a family tradition, Dad! You either throw it, symbolizing that you will never be taken advantage of, or you chop it up and make pasta sauce!

TYRONE

I don't get it! But if she didn't want to be in the circus, why the hell did she pick the most dangerous act?

CHUCKLEHEAD

'Cause she needed to earn a place in the Ring of Fire.

CONSTANCE

You don't know what that is do you, Dad?

TYRONE shakes his head.

CONSTANCE

It's like the Cooperstown for circus folks. Only the best get in!

TYRONE

Too bad about your sister.

CHUCKLEHEAD

Too bad about your Cricket.

CONSTANCE

Too bad about our beautiful love story that has to end.

CURTAIN



JULIA YAKIREVICH '26

AFFLICTION

The Characters

ESTHER COHEN: Recently widowed Long Island Housewife.
RACHEL COHEN: A freelance writer living in Manhattan, visiting her overbearing Long Island mother for Passover.
JACOB (JAKE) COHEN: Older brother of Rachel. A poster child of sibling rivalry.

The Scene

A family of three facing the audience sits at a tense traditional Passover seder, center stage. There is an empty chair on one end, stage right, for the recently deceased Murray Cohen. His oversized portrait hangs on the back wall. A silence. Then:

ESTHER

Jakey! Be a mensch—pass the kugel to Rachel?

JAKE

Hasn't she had enough?

He points at RACHEL.

JAKE

Time to hide the matzah! Out you go, Rachel. Now that Dad's gone, I'm in charge of the afikomen!

RACHEL

You can't be serious?

JAKE

What am I, your writing career?

RACHEL

Isn't matzah the bread of unity? So, what? We're splitting up?

ESTHER

(to RACHEL)

Tushy, please.

ESTHER nods apologetically at the empty chair. RACHEL groans, rising from her seat, and exiting stage left.

RACHEL

(leaving)

This is not me hiding. This is a protest!

ESTHER

Yes, Bubchik, very dramatic exit. You show him!

RACHEL

Ma, don't make this more embarrassing!

ESTHER

For once can't you two just think about your father?

Lights dim.

RACHEL

(offstage)

Ready?

JAKE

Yeah, yeah you can come out now.

RACHEL reenters, the family back at the table. She sips wine; ESTHER shoots her a dirty look.

ESTHER

You couldn't have waited two seconds?

RACHEL

What, I was thirsty! Gotta keep the pipes clean for praying!

JAKE

Rachel, you still in that twelve-step program? And don't forget, clean hands before we break matzah.

ESTHER

(to RACHEL)

Rachie, you sure you washed 'em good?

RACHEL

Ma! Can't we just get to the bread of affliction?

JAKE

(looking at the Haggadah)

Okay, now we can drink wine, at least I think that's what the big red splotch means.

RACHEL

See, I was just thinking ahead.

JAKE

Our very own Cassandra.

They raise glasses, then JAKE
continues to pour.

RACHEL

(chugging)

Amen!

JAKE

Now, I suppose we retell the story of Passover.

ESTHER spoons generous servings of traditional delicacies slowly and repeatedly onto plates. She and JAKE scarf food, and RACHEL plays with hers.

RACHEL

You know, the whole Passover story is a little dry, I guess I've just never took to it.

JAKE

Well it takes place in a desert, so it's not exactly dripping with plot.

RACHEL

Still, if I had written it, maybe Pharaoh would have a nice musical number, think Jonathan Groff in *Hamilton*.

JAKE

I'll be sure to pass that along to the Israelites, I'm sure they're dying for your critique, oh wait, they're just busy dying. I mean, Rachel, can't you just take anything seriously? This a seder with Mom, not a hippie convent of *R.E.N.T.*-lovers schmoozing in Williamsburg.

RACHEL

Just once, can't you lighten up? Aren't you exhausted from despising everything? Hey folks, no need for any bitter herbs at your seder!

(She grabs and waves the plate of horseradish)

Just get yourselves a side of Jake Cohen!

JAKE

Hilarious! Be sure to include that one in your next Substack post that only Mom reads!

ESTHER

Oh Mamala, I love your posts! I just showed Carol from work the one about inflation!

RACHEL

Ma! It was about the ethics of cremation.

ESTHER

(touching her temple)

Oh! Who would read that?

RACHEL

I don't know, maybe someone who's wrestled with more than a grocery list. Scratch that. The holiday's making me feel charitable...someone who wrote more than an audition monologue for the *Real Housewives of Great Neck*.

ESTHER

I resent that! Andy Cohen was going to make me a star! He owed me! You know, he's our fourth cousin!

RACHEL

Well, I resent your resentment! And please, that was so clearly a scam—maybe if you read more than *The National Enquirer*, you'd have the critical faculties to know.

JAKE

Okay! So, how about those Maccabees?

ESTHER

Wrong holiday, Bubchik! Twenty grand a year to Great Neck Hebrew Day and all I got was a schlemiel who doesn't know the difference between Hannukah and Passover and won't touch his gefilte fish.

JAKE

You also got a *writer*...

ESTHER

You mean the schlemazel who wants to be cremated?

(to RACHEL)

Sorry Bubbelah, you know how hard this year's been.

RACHEL

Well it's been hard on all of us. We're heartbroken!

JAKE

Let's not do this; Please, save it for Easter. Come on, the story of Passover!

ESTHER

Oh Jakey, stop! You kids want a real story, let's talk about the Angel of Death.

Your father, the two-bit putz!

JAKE

Ma! Dayenu! Enough!

ESTHER

No, let me finish! Your father was a cheat. In his work, in our marriage, in your lives.

RACHEL

He cheated on you?

ESTHER

Went and put his matzah balls in the manicurist.

JAKE

JESUS!

RACHEL

So much for a wholesome seder. Ma, how could you keep something like that from us, he was our father.

ESTHER

All that man brought to our marriage was great health insurance.

RACHEL

Well, surely some decent legal advice too?

ESTHER

For a lawyer, he struggled with knowing right from wrong.

JAKE

Rach, I'm telling you, you should've gotten your nose fixed when Dad's insurance still covered it.

RACHEL

Maybe I would've if the braces you had for six years hadn't eaten up the premium.

JAKE

Ma, did I get the bad teeth from you, or Pa?

ESTHER

That was your father! But Jakey, I love your crooked teeth! You've gotta let me get more photos of you smiling to put on my Facebook; I'm so close to finding you a nice Jewish girl.

RACHEL

To post on which account? I haven't used Facebook in years and still get a notification whenever a new EstherCohen64 follows me.

ESTHER

It's Zuckerberg, he keeps changing my password!

RACHEL

Okay, am I the only one who is still shocked by all this?

ESTHER

What, that Zuckerberg didn't marry a Yiddishe maidel?

RACHEL

No! That dad cheated on you!

JAKE

For once, I agree with Rachel; I mean this is a lot, what are we supposed to do now, just pass the brisket?

ESTHER

Rachelah, Jacob, you're giving me a stroke! I already suffer from palpitations
(she spits at the utterance of the word)

Tvu! tvu!

RACHEL

And an absurdly high cholesterol.

(Pause)

Ma! Ease up on the flanken!

JAKE

Lay off her, Rachel. It's the first holiday since Dad died, can't we just get along?

RACHEL

It's not like we did before.

JAKE

Maybe because some people in this family only know how to complain and can't appreciate anyone who's alive.

RACHEL

Oh are we referring to ourselves in the third person now? Quit being a hypocrite, Jake.

JAKE

At least I'm a hypocrite with a job and an ounce of ambition. All you do is milk whatever money Mom's been saving to buy seven-dollar coffees and pretend like you're a starving artist.

RACHEL

You did not just say that! At least I care about more than just money. We live in the same city and you can't even bother to call.

JAKE

That's because some of us actually work for a living, you know, with *real* jobs. And don't forget, the phone works both ways. Unless you've given up all technology and I'll have to reach you and your tribe of pretentious nobodies by pigeon carrier.

RACHEL

Maybe if you spent half the energy you do mansplaining NFTs to your failed first dates, on actually getting to know me, you would finally understand. I can't take this anymore!

RACHEL slams the table.

ESTHER

Rachel! Don't speak to Jakey like that!

RACHEL

No, I'm tired of this! My whole life: it's this afflicted holiday! All about the precious firstborns.

JAKE

The firstborns are the ones who die!

RACHEL

And they still get all the attention! A whole plague dedicated to them!

ESTHER

(hand to forehead)

Oy, I'm having a hot flash. If you two don't stop, there's going to be another empty chair here soon.

RACHEL

He started it, Ma!

JAKE

Listen to her; all she lives for is drama.

RACHEL

And all he wants is to turn everything to shit so he can feel good about his pathetic life for two seconds!

JAKE

Right, because wearing sweater vests and writing prose poems and wistfully staring out windows searching for the meaning of life wouldn't make me pathetic. Financial independence: boo! A tangible career path: oh no!

RACHEL

Oh my god! Not being defined by my profession. What a nightmare!

RACHEL clears the entire table with
the swipe of her hand and storms
offstage.

ESTHER

Rachel get back in here! Time to find the matzah!

CURTAIN

PET SHIVA

The Characters

ABRAHAM (ABE) KATZ: An eccentric old man living alone, whose parrot and cat recently died.

SOLOMON (SOL) KATZ: Brother of Abe and the town's Rabbi.

MOURNERS

The Scene

A traditional shiva, a "Jewish wake," set in a living room filled with sprawled stools, covered mirrors, and a small wooden casket set atop a table, centerstage.

MOURNER 1

You don't think they're both in it? (points at casket)

MOURNER 2

It's Abe, so you never know, but I don't see how they could fit. Wilbur the cat was starting to look more like a pig at the end—very not Kosher!

MOURNER 1

You've seen those dogs that look like their owners?

MOURNER 2

The parrot was already talking like him. Throw on a pair of tortoise shells, and you couldn't tell the difference.

MOURNER 1

Oh, right, Abe and his precious spectacles.

ABE

(across the stage)

Attention! Attention all! We have an arrangement of baked brie fig crostini and crudités.

(shakes his head)

Oh, and mini bagels with a schmear, if you prefer. Enjoy the food, but please be careful of crumbs—

(weeps)

Wilbur's no longer here to keep the floors clean.

ABE makes the rounds, greets guests, and accepts condolences. Then, a knock at the door, stage left:

ABE

I'll get it!

ABE opens the door for SOLOMON, letting him in.

ABE

Well, look who the cat dragged in.

SOLOMON
(empathetically)

Sorry, brother.

ABE

It's fine. Everything's fine. My best friends are dead and it's fine.

SOLOMON

Nice to see you too, Abe!

ABE

Thanks for coming. Everyone knows a shiva can't start without the rabbi.

SOLOMON

Oh, thanks, I guess? Is there anything I can do? Food or get some more stools?

ABE

Well, there is something...

SOLOMON

Anything.

ABE

Only because you asked...Sol, go say a few words for my kitty Katz.

SOLOMON

Abe, I love you, but is that really necessary?

ABE

You're the goddamn Rabbi, haven't you done this a million times? Just recycle some old material, just like you said for Moishe Rosenbaum last month.

SOLOMON

Moishe was a Holocaust survivor! He was sent to Treblinka! These are pets! What's wrong with you?

ABE

Pets! You mean your niece and nephew! Do this for me...Solly, we're mishpuche, I'm hurting.

SOLOMON

I understand this is hard for you, but it's wrong! Insensitive!

ABE

Here we go again!

SOLOMON

It's a matter of principle, Abe. If I sing a prayer for a dead cat—

ABE

And parrot.

SOLOMON

And parrot, then I have to let schnauzers into the temple for Bark Mitzvahs. It's just not the kind of rabbi I am!

ABE

It's not the kind of brother I thought you were either. No one bats an eye when the Altmans show up to temple with a new kid every nine months, and suddenly I'm the bad guy for wanting to honor a kosher cat and cockatoo?

SOLOMON

Hammy, let's not fight today. Would it mean so much if I said a few words?

ABE

It would. It wouldn't have to be an entire prayer, maybe just a kernel of wisdom, eulogy, or a heartfelt anecdote.

SOLOMON

I guess I could manage that.

ABE

Solly, you're my hero! Now, if you're gonna say anything about Polly, just skip his antisemitic Reddit hate blogging, it was just a passing phase. Oh, and nothing about Wilbur biting Ethan Rudenstein at his bris.

SOLOMON

And nothing about them being a part of a drug cartel or committing tax fraud?

ABE

No! What the hell is wrong with you?

SOLOMON

Okay, okay, nothing about identity theft either?

ABE

Sol, you're killing me!

SOLOMON

Well the last thing we need is another shiva, it's barely started and half the food is gone.

ABE

It's why I insisted on no kids too, should've banned everyone with a senior ID because some of them can't remember their name, but seem to know my pantry like it's home.

SOLOMON

Abe! Take a look in the mirror.

ABE

It's the grief, it's aging me like expired milk. Plus I can't shave, so I look like a hairy prune.

SOLOMON

Sure...I guess it's time for my speech.

Solomon moves toward the casket centerstage and clinks a glass of Manischewitz to get the guests' attention.

SOLOMON

Dear friends, thank you for joining my brother in his time of grief. I know Polly and Wilbur would have appreciated you being here. As many of you know, and have had the pleasure of experiencing for yourselves, my brother has never been afraid to be himself, a trait he undoubtedly passed on to his furry and feathery friends. While this is their memorial, I want to honor Abe too; remembering people while they're still alive isn't done enough. During his life, my little brother has rarely had time to be still, to just sit there and watch the world go by. But those two wonderful pets, his best friends, partners, allies, dare I say significant others, made life worthwhile.

(Turning to Abe)

Dear Abraham, you are a selfless man, kind, a visionary, the Katz's very own Honest Abe. Thank you, dear Tzaddik, for caring for these loving creatures.

(To the audience)

I realize I'm going down a rabbit hole, so L'chaim, to life!

The guests raise their glasses.

SOLOMON

Though in the spirit of embracing life, I want to also acknowledge the passing. It's clear that based on his love for these animals, a part of Abe died with them. It's quite difficult to pinpoint which part, but his life has been significantly altered and a chapter, closed. Ah, chapters! Abe used to read the animals bedtime stories and act them out.

ABE

They were both awful insomniacs, I did anything to make them sleep!

SOLOMON

Always the thoughtful one, my brother. I've put a lot of thought into these deaths, and making sense of its implications for Abraham. Frankly, I'm still in shock any of this happened. How do two perfect healthy, greatly cared for animals suddenly meet their maker? Still, well beyond their retirement years and kidney failure diagnoses, I'm dumbfounded by their untimely demise.

An unkempt MOURNER blurts.

MOURNER 3

Well I bet you one of them killed the other. Or Abe killed 'em both!

SOLOMON, ABRAHAM, and the
other MOURNERS gasp.

ABRAHAM

How dare you come into my home, drink my Manischewitz, eat my kugel, and throw around this chazerei!

SOLOMON

Hurtful accusations! Let's not be crude!

MOURNER 4

Are these animals even dead? Is this just some ploy to gain attention? I don't even remember how I found out they died. Or why I'm even here! Who are you people!

MOURNER 5

I've never even seen them! Abe goes for a walk three times a day. A baby stroller covering them up. Who knows if they were even in there! Said they were sensitive to light.

MOURNER 1

No, we've seen them.

MOURNER 2

Yeah they're always poking their heads out the bay window! Wilbur takes up a whole pane and Polly hangs back in the middle of the room near the ceiling.

MOURNER 4

Ever heard of a pillow and feather duster?

MOURNER 2

Abe rarely gets his windows cleaned.

ABE

Enough! You schlubs attack a grieving man in his time of loss! Where's your sense of decency!

MOURNER 4

I say we open the casket and find out what's going on here!

SOLOMON

Folks this is absurd. Rachmanus! Let Polly and Wilbur rest and Abe mourn.

MOURNER 4

What are we even mourning here!

MOURNER 3

I'm with you, open the damn casket!

ABRAHAM

Gevalt! What's with the madness? This kanipshin ends here and now!

MOURNER 4

That's it! I'm doing it!

MOURNER 4 opens an empty casket
and reveals it to the other mourners
and audience.

SOLOMON

Abraham, what is this?

MOURNER 3

The crimes of a psychopath!

MOURNER 2

Animal abuser!

MOURNER 5

Schmendrik!

MOURNER 1

Villain!

MOURNER 4

He's a coward!

MOURNER 2

A faker!

MOURNER 3

Crook!

MOURNER 5

An evil schmuck!

MOURNER 3

How can you live with yourself!

MOURNER 1

Shonda!

ABE

None of you understand!

MOURNER 5

What's to understand?

ABE sighs.

MOURNER 3

Well, Abe really knows how to put the shiv in shiva.

MOURNER 4

We better watch him good! Who knows what he's capable of!

ABRAHAM

Blasphemy! Let me explain myself!

MOURNER 2

I think we're past that point, Abe. I think it would be best if we all left.

ABE

No, please! It's shiva! I'll get Bubbe's blintzes! Let's just sit down and enjoy each other's company!

ABE sits on one of the stools, it breaks under him.

MOURNER 1

I think we've seen enough here, Abe. See you when your next pet dies!

ABE

Mercy! I'm a righteous man!

MOURNER 3

Could've started with showing Wilbur and Polly a little mercy.

ABE

Don't! Don't go, I won't finish the Manischewitz on my own. Just think of the heartburn!

Lights dim. A spotlight shines on SOLOMON.

SOLOMON

What nonsense! Can you imagine, a cat as big as a pig and a parrot who flew the casket. Impossible you say, but think of it. It really happened, or maybe, as we say in the rabbi business, "Seeing ain't believing!"

CURTAIN

JUDY'S DINER

The Characters

JUDY FRIEDMAN	Head of the Friedman household, namesake of Judy's Diner
MOISHE FRIEDMAN	Judy's husband
SARAH FRIEDMAN	The grown daughter
DAVID FRIEDMAN	Teenage son
CHRISTOPHER	Sarah's WASPy boyfriend
ALEJANDRO	Cuban line cook

The Scene

Judy's, a classic Jewish diner/delicatessen. Black and white checkered tile floor, countertop that someone is always wiping, framed signed customer photos of famous Hollywood types who have visited Judy's, and a large sign over the counter stating, "No senior discounts!" MOISHE and JUDY behind the counter, transfixed on an open laptop.

MOISHE

(squinting in bifocals)

Worst Reuben in Boca. Lousy latkes. Endless bickering among staff reminiscent of yappy chihuahuas.

(he starts barking)

JUDY

Moishy, what's wrong with you! Stop! We've heard it, we've read it, we've lived it. Give that schmutzy review a rest.

MOISHE

You're only saying that because it's *my* mother's kishke! And you hate her!

JUDY

Moishe for the millionth time: I don't hate your mother! Okay, I don't love her —but I don't hate her...may her soul rest...

MOISHE

(cutting her off)

Well who said anything about hate! I knew you've always had it out for her!

JUDY

(defensively)

I've had it *out* for her? Genug!

(she bangs the counter)

Don't start! That woman would have married you if she could. No one was good enough for her little Moishe-mensch!

MOISHE

Know what? Maybe I should put it to rest! If it were an accurate review, it would've said: Judy Friedman,

(shouting)

YOUR BRISKET IS DRY!

JUDY

Moishe, I'm gonna rip that pacemaker right out of your chest!

At the sound of this commotion,
SARAH and DAVID enter through
swinging doors from the back of the
stage.

SARAH

(to DAVID)

To think I almost missed this! Do they ever quit?

DAVID

(clearing plates from a table)

You weren't gone *that* long.

SARAH

(wiping down the same table)

We're gonna have to bury them on their sides, so they can still claw at each other in their graves.

MOISHE

(shouting to JUDY)

The antichrist! Alex Goldblum, how dare he! Attack a family establishment, even one of his own! I bet his niche is annihilating small, Jewish businesses. Maybe he should just go down to the Cheesecake Factory and stick a mac and cheese right up his—

JUDY

(cutting him off)

Enough, Moishe! Not in front of Barbra!

(points to a frame of Barbra Streisand)

MOISHE

Judy! What, do you agree with the antisemite!

JUDY

Of course not, Moishe. I could be in Mizner shopping with the girls or taking a Jazzercise class at the Boca JCC, but I'm here. Trust me, that Jazzercise hunk is a real cutie, he reminds me of you before you started packing your gut with blintzes.

SARAH

Mom! Can't we find something else to fight over? Christopher is on his way.

JUDY

(mocking)

Oh, Christ-o-pher. A boy doesn't need that many syllables in his name.

SARAH

Mom, we're having dinner here like you wanted. We're eating your food. We're doing everything just how you like. Cut me some slack!

DAVID

You know she can't do that!

JUDY

Bubbie, it doesn't matter what we eat or where we eat. You know the one thing I want, and you won't give it to me.

SARAH

It's my life! There's only so much I can do!

JUDY

No. You're doing this to spite me. You've been scheming how to hurt me ever since I took you out of ballet when you were six. I mean what was I supposed to do, the pink didn't suit you, and I wasn't gonna have my kid prance around the stage looking like she had roseola!

SARAH

What do ballet and roseola have to do with Christopher!

JUDY

Are you not paying attention? Everything!

MOISHE

All right, you two, I'll check on Alejandro, make sure he's not assassinating the pastrami.

JUDY

You stay away from my mother's pastrami! *She storms into the kitchen backstage

DAVID

I'd say that went pretty well.

SARAH
(to MOISHE)

Dad, what do I do?

MOISHE

I dunno, kid. Sooner or later, you're gonna realize you two are more similar than you think.

DAVID
(squinting)

Eh, right now I'm only seeing the same nose! Got any other words of wisdom?

MOISHE
(pointing at spotless booths)

Clean that up will you and close up.

SARAH flips the sign on the door, *CLOSED*, as DAVID wipes down the table again. MOISHE returns to the computer, shaking his head and mouthing profanities as the echo of JUDY berating her kitchen staff rings through the diner.

SARAH
(sighing)

Too late to cancel, right?

DAVID

I'm still confused why you're inviting him in the first place.

SARAH

It's been three years. I've gone on vacation with his family and he still hasn't met mine.

DAVID

He's met me.

SARAH

You know that's not what I meant.

DAVID

Did you tell him what not to say to Mom and Dad?

SARAH

Yeah, don't mention Alex Goldblum!

CHRISTOPHER knocks at the door,
and SARAH lets him in.

CHRISTOPHER

Hey, there anything I can do?

DAVID

Probably best you stay away from the kitchen.

CHRISTOPHER

Then, setting the table it is!

DAVID heads to the kitchen, leaving
CHRISTOPHER and SARAH alone.

SARAH

Nervous?

CHRISTOPHER

Of course not.

SARAH shoots him a doubtful look.

CHRISTOPHER

Okay, maybe a little.

SARAH

I wish I could tell you not to be, but I wouldn't wanna serve you lies with your Nova.

CHRISTOPHE

Hey, for you, it's worth it.

(he embraces SARAH)

JUDY, MOISHE, and DAVID reenter
with dishes of food.

JUDY

Ah! Already schmoozing, are we? Is that how you kids set the table these days?
Where's the tablecloth!

SARAH

Mom, no one's used a tablecloth here in decades.

JUDY

Oh, so you want Christopher here to think we're uncouth?

CHRISTOPHER

No, Mrs. Friedman, I would never think that.

JUDY

Well, what are we doing standing around like a bunch of traffic cones? Let's fres!

DAVID

In the Boca sun, it's not hard to be confused for an orange cone. And someone's gotta lay off the spray tan...

JUDY

(intensely)

Sit.

JUDY sits at the head of the table, and
the others take their seats.

CHRISTOPHER

This looks delicious, Mrs. Friedman. Can I pass anyone the brisket?

JUDY

Christopher, what are you talking about? We say grace.

SARAH

Mom, what are you talking about?

JUDY

You won't let me practice my own religion at Judy's! I never took you for a bigot, but I guess that's what decades of premier parenting got me!

SARAH

(bitterly, throwing her hands up)

Sure, let's pray! Why don't you lead us through our first-ever prayer before eating grandma's dry chopped liver!

JUDY

Well, I thought instead I could lead us through song, which is already close enough. It's an original. Oh, and Christopher, it would do you well to sing along, you'll catch on quickly.

(She inhales, replacing her sour demeanor with a cheerful one, singing)
Welcome to Judy's, Judy's, not Trudy's or Julie's or Yehudi's, it's Judy's! There's a Friedman to your left, a Friedman to your right, and careful, 'cause sometimes we bite! It's always gefilte matzah meal galore, and I wouldn't call my daughter a

—

(playfully points at Sarah, then brings her pointer finger to her lips)
You're at the best in Boca, orda' up *snaps*, club soda!

SARAH

(slowly, exaggeratedly clapping)

I don't know why you don't do that for every customer! I'm sure it would really boost business.

JUDY

(*ftou-ftouing* and warding off negative energy)

Joke about family and love, but never business!

SARAH sucks in her breath.

MOISHE

Okay, a toast to family, love, business! And grudges! May Alex Goldblum be sentenced to an eternity of schvitzing with naked old men whose tuchuser sag from Queens to Boca.

DAVID

(raising an empty glass)

Lchaim!

JUDY
(to David)

Oh you're not drinking, it's not a holiday, and there's certainly nothing to celebrate.

SARAH
Okay, that's enough!

JUDY
Enough? We haven't even cut the challah!

SARAH
Don't, Mom. I swear to God I will leave this dinner and not look back.

JUDY
You've already practically left *Judy's*, I guess it was only a matter of time until you left *Judy*.

SARAH
You know it's a real talent the way you make everything about yourself. I'll save that piece for the next time Alex Goldblum comes around.

MOISHE
(passing a plate of herring then slamming it on the table)
Heresy!

DAVID
This is the longest I've ever seen a brisket go untouched in our family!

JUDY
Please, *family* dinner?

SARAH

The more you try to make us feel guilty that we're not the perfect family...give it up! You lost!

JUDY

I lost? I lost! Your life isn't just some game to me! You don't even know how much I've sacrificed for you!

SARAH

Believe me, I'm grateful for everything you guys have done. But I'm grown! It's time for me to make my own decisions.

JUDY

And you just expect me to sit back and let you make those crummy choices? Throw your life away?

MOISHE

(piling foods onto his plate)

My blood pressure! But first, someone pass me the whitefish!

JUDY

You're not gonna back me up here, Moishe?

MOISHE

Not on an empty stomach!

DAVID

Something's not right about this Reuben. The meat's scratching my tongue.

JUDY

Eat! *Your* meat's falling off *your* bones.

DAVID

Mom, I'm telling you, it tastes funny.

JUDY

Moishe.

MOISHE

Okay, pass it to the garbage disposal.

(to Judy, shrugging)

Alejandro can make him schnitzel.

(he takes a bite of the sandwich)

Oh nothing's wrong! It's just cow tongue, not corned beef.

DAVID

COW TONGUE! I was already feeling adventurous ordering a Reuben! Trying to kill me?

JUDY

You open your mouth one more time and I'll feed you tongue til you choke on yours!

DAVID surrenders, dabbing his tongue with a napkin.

MOISHE

Anyone want a pickle?

SARAH

I've lost my appetite.

JUDY

Come on, Sarahala, you never say no to Bubbe's latkes. I'm sure Alejandro's almost done, let me tell him to bring them out.

SARAH

(shaking her head)

Mom, don't. I'll wait. Let's just talk, preferably not about my life.

JUDY

All right, Chris-to-pher, your turn in the hot seat.

CHRISTOPHER

Sure.

DAVID

She's gonna grill you like a kosher knish.

JUDY

So, Chris-to-pher, where'd you grow up?

CHRISTOPHER

Chicago, Lake Forest, then we moved to—

JUDY

Super! And college?

CHRISTOPHER

Tulane, then I came down to Boca for—

JUDY

You don't say! All *very* interesting! Where's Alejandro?

CHRISTOPHER

Mrs. Friedman, if I may. Mr. and Mrs. Friedman, I know it feels soon, and really it is, but, it's been a long time coming, and it's felt like a lifetime in a minute, which of course isn't possible, but with Sarah—

JUDY

Chris-to-pher I prefer concise conversation. Less rambling, hmm?

CHRISTOPHER

Right. I'll cut to it. I'd like to marry Sarah.

JUDY

(banging the table)

NO!

CHRISTOPHER

I—

JUDY

No. Nip. Zilch. Zap. Zop. NO. End of story. Glad we cleared that up!

SARAH

Oh, I'm sorry! I forgot that this was your decision! Mom, do you think I should have babka or rugelach for dessert? Should I move to LA or Laos? Hm? Tomorrow should I wear yellow or red?

JUDY

Definitely not yellow, makes you look anemic!

SARAH

OH MY GOD! Listen to yourself!

JUDY

Okay, fine, yellow doesn't make you look like you need a blood transfusion!

SARAH

We're done here. *My life*. This is *my life*.

(to CHRISTOPHER)

Let's go.

(she rises)

CHRISTOPHER
(reaching for Sarah's arm)

I think we should stay. It's your family.

SARAH
Don't remind me.

CHRISTOPHER
Let's finish dinner.

SARAH
How are you sitting through this?

CHRISTOPHER
I—

JUDY
Hello, are we just supposed to sit through this back and forth? Staying or leaving? Your dad can take care of your plate, I'm sure he's still got room.

SARAH
Did you forget that you make all my decisions now?
(looking at CHRISTOPHER, sighing as her expression softens)
We're staying.

JUDY
God, I wish you were just pregnant.

SARAH
What!

JUDY

At least there would be some reason for this *marriage*.

SARAH

Oh, a reason other than love?

JUDY

(avoiding eye contact with CHRISTOPHER)

I'm sure he's very nice, and would make a wonderful husband. For someone else...not for you!

SARAH

Are you out of your mind!

JUDY

I don't have to explain myself!

SARAH

Oh, and I do?

JUDY

No child of mine would do something like this. You marry him and...

SARAH

I haven't even said yes!

Silence.

JUDY

Moishe! Say something!

ALEJANDRO bursts through the swinging doors, with a platter of latkes.

MOISHE

I'm hitting the can!

JUDY

Great, so everyone in this family is a half-witted putz. Just great! I swear I could

—

ALEJANDRO

Um, Mrs. Friedman, I have the lakers.

JUDY

(enunciating)

Latkes, Alejandro, they're not a basketball team! Did you remember the sour cream?

ALEJANDRO

And the applesauce!

JUDY

(murmuring to Moishe)

He's more like us than Christopher'll ever be.

CHRISTOPHER

(murmuring, snickering to Sarah)

Those better not be the *lousy* latkes.

JUDY

(chuckling with MOISHE, then overhearing CHRISTOPHER'S comment)

What did you just say?

CHRISTOPHER

Oh nothing.

JUDY
No, I heard it. Please,
(sweetly)
you can tell *Judy*.

SARAH
Mom!

JUDY
No, you're in on this too! What, did he say something about my latkes?

SARAH
Of course not! What are you talking about?

DAVID
He called them lazy! No, no lousy! He called them lousy!

SARAH
David!

DAVID
What, I'm trying to get back on her good side!

JUDY inhales deeply, then draws out a
long, theatrical exhale.

JUDY
He called my—

MOISHE
That's what Alex Goldblum called them! Lousy latkes!

JUDY
You come into Judy's preaching the gospel of Alex Goldblum!

CHRISTOPHER

No! I said lovely, it was a misprint!

ALEJANDRO

Mrs. Friedman, I know this man. He came here last week. He ordered our Reuben, Mama's latkes, and your brisket.

CHRISTOPHER

(shrugging)

Yeah, I came by last week. Just wanted to get the lay of the land and learn how to pronounce half the menu.

JUDY

And slander Judy's? Start talking, boychik!

CHRISTOPHER

Mrs. Friedman, I don't know what you want from me!

MOISHE

God dammit! She wants to know if you're Alex Goldblum! Did you call our latkes lousy and say that our Reuben stunk!

JUDY

I can see it on him! He's Satan! First, he comes after *Judy's*, then Sarah! So he can really stick it to *Judy*!

MOISHE

Sarah, how could you let this felon in? It's like having blini with Rasputin!

SARAH

Don't accuse him! He's not Alex Goldblum!

CHRISTOPHER

(sighing)

All right. The truth needs to come out.

JUDY

We've heard enough, what else does he have to say! That he doesn't like my matzah balls! That he—

CHRISTOPHER

It's an alias, okay! Alex Goldblum!

DAVID

Well, he's already fitting in, cutting people off mid-sentence.

SARAH

What!

JUDY

Well look who was right! What did I tell you, Sarah! One big faker!

MOISHE

Alejandro, get my frying pan! And the cleaver!

SARAH

No pans! No knives!

JUDY

Hot latke oil?

SARAH

(to CHRISTOPHER)

I'm sorry about them.

CHRISTOPHER

Hey, I'm not taking it personally, Alex Goldblum knows what goes on around here!

(pause)

Look, I know I could've done better. It was only my first review. And first latke, of course.

EVERYONE

Your first review!

MOISHE

Why the hell would you choose Judy's!

CHRISTOPHER

I mean I had to start somewhere. And Sarah kept raving about the food!

JUDY

(to SARAH)

Ziskayt, sweet little child!

CHRISTOPHER

And I needed to write a lousy review, no one bothers reading the good ones!

(pause)

Listen, I thought we might be able to laugh about this one day.

JUDY

Am I laughing? You never really had a latke?

CHRISTOPHER

I've had hashbrowns.

JUDY

Moishe, stick a latke in his mouth!

MOISHE shoves a latke in
CHRISTOPHER'S face.

JUDY

So what do you think?

CHRISTOPHER

It's a little greasy.

JUDY, MOISHE, SARAH, DAVID, ALEJANDRO

(shouting)

It's supposed to be greasy, it's a latke!

DAVID

Give him some sour cream.

SARAH

Pass the applesauce.

JUDY

(shoving Christopher's mouth full)

Eat up!

SARAH

Mom, he's choking!

JUDY

(to CHRISTOPHER)

So you wanna write another review?

CHRISTOPHER

(barely able to breathe)

No, no! It's really delicious! I love Judy's!

JUDY

Sometimes it just takes a while. Welcome to the family, Alex Goldblum!

LIGHTS FADE

NOVEL EXCERPTS



MARION COOK '26

DROWNING BOY

I want to be greater than I am. That's all I can ever hope to achieve yet how can I surpass myself? I think that I rotate on an axis, like the wheels of a bicycle going nowhere. I'm no Einstein, no more than I'm Socrates or Marie Curie. Why is it that we have to say Marie Curie rather than just Curie, do we say Marie to define her as a woman? To define her accomplishments in the paradigm of male scientific endeavors? I want to believe that I am greater than the sum of my parts: my eyes, my brain, my memories. I know there is something else here! I'm confident in my potential as much as I fear it, and because I can never surpass myself, it is time that is my true competitor. Can I ever outrun her?

When I was small, friends used to say wait, but I couldn't, I just had to go. I used to think that no one really understood me. I think we all think that way when we are young. It seems people who are older just work harder to make themselves known. Still, I can't repress the feeling that nobody really gets me; why delude myself into thinking anyone does? How could someone really love me when even my love for myself is warped by so many different versions?

What would I do if i had a heart attack tomorrow? How different would life be if we knew how and when we would die? We just exist like we're going to live forever. Where is all this going? What the hell do I even really want from life?

I read all this on the note that Annie Zimmerman scribbled in second-period economics. There was also her terrible drawing of a miniature schnauzer. To be honest, I thought it was a load of crap! I mean who goes around thinking they're so much better than everybody else? Maybe I just didn't believe that I could have been as original, but I still thought Annie was being a jerk for writing down anything like that. I mean, who does that?

I shoved the note into her locker. I felt sorry for the girl! I mean, to write it was one thing, but not to be worried about it being found by someone else was

another thing entirely. I would have been terrified if I lost anything like that and somebody came up to me holding the crumpled paper in their hand. I just thought it pointless to write down, but lots of things about Linkeepling were pointless, so, I suppose, all my anger shouldn't have been taken out on poor old Annie Zimmerman! In truth, the only reason I stuffed the damn paper back into her locker was because it was on the way to William's elm.

William was this funny-looking kid; actually, he was probably one of my best friends. He was lean, but not in a strong way like a racehorse; William was frail—if a heavy wind came right at him he'd blow over like a leaf. He was kind of tall but being slim made him appear slight. The older lunch ladies always pushed lots of food on his plate: beans, corn, bread, chicken. I got the extras whenever he couldn't eat more, though sometimes I felt *I* was hungry all of the time.

William's elm was a scarred tree that he liked to sit under, wearing big red wire-rimmed glasses. I told him to take off the damn things; they were awkward and looked absolutely terrible with the school uniform we all had to wear. But William didn't really care what other people thought. I think he was afraid that he was ugly, but he wasn't really. He had nice enough hair, auburn, which crowned his brow like thorns like the thickets young boys waded through when they lost their ball at the far end of the the soccer field. He had small eyes, I'm not sure what color because he often squinted and I couldn't tell. And if I could, I'd never remember. Sometimes, when I was with a girl I liked I would stop saying she had remarkable eyes because I could never recall what color.

I think the reason why William disliked his face had something to do with his teeth which were chipped and twisted. He had thick braces covering them. Maybe he wore the wire glasses to distract from all the hardware in his mouth. I don't know. I don't like spending too much time thinking about William. I really don't. It can be depressing.

But since he was about my only friend at Linkeepling I had to think about him sometimes. Anyway, I was shoving the damn piece of paper back into Annie's locker when long cold fingers slapped me across the face.

"What the hell?!" I said to Annie Zimmerman.

"What do you mean what the hell, get away from my locker you creep!" she screeched.

I couldn't believe she slugged me! My face was burning. I felt confused, anybody would after a usually friendly girl whacked them for no reason. The whole point of returning the paper to her locker was that I didn't want to talk to her at all and that I was doing her a favor. I sure as hell hadn't expected her to blindside me like that.

"You dropped this," I said and pulled the half-flattened paper out fully and dropped it into her hand. For a second, I saw something flicker across her face. I hoped she was embarrassed and pushed past her wondering why I even bothered in the first place. Makes you wonder, why anybody should ever bother with anything!

"What's wrong with you?" Annie said curtly from behind. I wouldn't have turned around at all, except old Doc Ackermann began to hobble out of the adjacent room, and I was sort of avoiding him. Doc was this supposedly brilliant mathematician, but I thought he was about two decades too past his prime to still be teaching, let alone doing nearly anything at all. I could hear his rattling, searching breaths from across the hall, as if he was a fish out of water, as if he didn't have enough air. He walked crouched and held onto this long cane that was about as unsteady as a dandelion stem. I'd never seen anybody move like him! He probably should have been in a wheelchair. Actually, he probably should have been dead.

So, I turned back towards Annie only so that he wouldn't ask me if I had done all the math pages he had given me. The man was always trying to get me to solve equations: algebra, trigonometry, geometry, calculus, combinatorics, you name it he had slipped it from his briefcase into my hands. I felt so bad for the guy that I used to take the time to fill out the extra credit sheets. Nobody else did any math for him, not even the stuff that they actually had to do to pass the damn class. I just felt bad for him.

Recently, I just didn't see the point in solving all of the problems. I felt that they had been solved already, that Ackermann or some other guy could have just as easily solved them as me. I just didn't see the point, they were completely unoriginal and helped me none. It didn't matter if I did it or the next guy did. I hadn't brought myself to telling Ackermann that I was no longer doing all of the math he gave me, so I had sort of turned around whenever I heard his searching breaths begin to echo off the linoleum.

"Hofferma!" barked Annie, she was still mad, "Did you read this?"

“No I didn’t read your stupid note,” I said real quietly. I didn’t like Annie. I couldn’t quite get over the way she had hit me. I looked at her. Looked down at her is more accurate. I’m really quite tall, and I’m not skinny like how William is skinny either, I towered over Annie. I think most people are scared of me before they even meet me, I really do.

Annie Zimmerman seemed like she didn’t know what to say. Since I was really just waiting for the time it took Ackermann to hobble down the stairs I didn’t try to strike up a conversation. I found myself looking at Annie’s plaid wool skirt, it was long and went all the way down to her ankles, I hadn’t seen anything like it.

“Well, do you?” asked Annie.

“What?” I replied.

“Do you think that we say Marie Curie so that everybody knows that she’s a woman?” She asked like it mattered, like it was an important question.

“Yeah, I do, *Annie*.” I snapped back. I wanted more than anything to leave the damn lockers and go sit with William in the shade of his elm, but I could still hear the tap tap tap of Doc’s cane as he searched for the next invisible step waiting below.

“You think you can do anything,” said Annie. “That’s your problem, Aldo! You think you can just get away with stuff, never face the consequences of whatever it is you’ve done!” I figured that she was referring to Jude Larsson, and for about the 12th time that day, I regretted pulling him out of that icy water. All it caused was trouble!

It had been around last March when I saw Larsson trapped in the ice. I didn’t know him that well, he was popular and walked around campus with a smooth confidence that William envied more than anything. He knew me though, everybody did because I was blamed for my roommate Henry Müller’s expulsion, Herr Friedrichs’s aneurysm, and the great football loss of ’39.

Anyway, that afternoon I saw something splashing in the water from way up on the hill, all flailing and moving and slipping everywhere. I thought I was seeing some type of monster or something, I really did. It wasn’t until it stopped moving that I got really scared that it might have been a boy. That was when I started running down the hill. I don’t think I’ll ever forget his face before I punched a hole in the slowly freezing ice; it was all blown up and purple and pink and deathly still. It scared me more than anything I’ve ever seen.

Anyway, I sort of ran across the ice and kicked and punched and dragged him out of the hole his body had made until I sort of fell in and just lay flat on my back with the water slowly rising up my chest. I sort of was able to turn and start sliding along on my stomach with poor Jude beside me, crawling real slow along the thickening ice.

I thought he died. But I figured I would bring his body back to his mother anyway, since I was there, but then I didn't know if she would even want to see him because he was so blue. I really thought about a lot of things when my cheek was pressed up against that freezing ice. I didn't know why Jude had been there, he didn't even have skates on.

Ever since I saved Jude Larsson the whole school has been treating me differently, except for William and Doc Ackermann. Doc probably didn't hear about the whole Jude thing because he can barely hear anything, even when you're right next to him and screaming your head off about whatever's on your mind.

I didn't understand why Annie was so mad. I didn't get her at all. I had saved a kid's life and nearly drowned. Why'd she hit me? What right did she have to be so mad? I should probably go talk to Jude about the whole thing, he's probably just waiting around in the hospital wing. But honestly, I've been too afraid. I don't even want to look at his face, even now when he's up and around and not underwater.

Just then, it dawned on me that Annie had been going with Jude before he fell through the ice.

"Annie, why'd you hit me," I asked.

"Aldo." She said flatly, "I know everybody likes you now, but I remember... you're thoughtless...selfish and sloppy and are not concerned about how your actions affect others. I don't want you snooping around my locker, it's none of your business!"

Before she could continue to berate me, I turned and bolted down the stairs, taking two at a time. It's not that I meant to be rude, I just didn't care about whatever additional insult she was about to hurl in my direction.

As you might suspect, Linkepling is about the funniest school in the entire world. It's in Switzerland, but most of the students are from the families of the German elite. To be honest, I despise every rich person I've ever met. This of course includes my own family. Especially my parents!

I think that rich people don't realize that too much money ruins a family. I mean in novels you read about poor people who have nothing but each other sticking together through good times and bad. I've never met a single Linkepling family like that. And not because they lack problems—all anyone's parents around here do is complain! I was talking to a classmate's mother several weeks ago and she wouldn't stop talking about her experience at Gucci, purchasing a pair of fine Italian leather gloves, from a certain Frau Kruger. The way she reported the event was like she was being forced to set herself on fire! I just couldn't stand her!

I think rich people shouldn't complain so much because they really only have themselves to blame. It's not like Rachel's mother was getting eaten by a great white, being starved in a refugee camp, or getting hit by a city bus. She was just so rich that she had made herself obsess about something stupid like who was selling her gloves. I also don't like rich people because they think they are so much better, acting like God specifically chose them to be wealthy because only *they* were deserving. No one around here thinks about receiving something they didn't deserve—except for William!

William sits and talks to me about how insanely lucky he is—sometimes he even shakes, he gets twitchy when he's really thinking about things. It can be unnerving if you don't know him. Like I said before, he is frail in addition to being skinny. I think William thinks too damn much, I really do. But he's never worried about something as meaningless as which leather gloves to buy, which is why I like spending so much time with him.

Anyway, Linkepling is an odd place to go to school. There are some kids who are really poor, but they're such straight-up geniuses that the school practically begs them to stay. Like Hanz Hoffman who's fluent in English and Dutch or Caroline Neumann who could probably build a human body from scratch in her sleep. Everybody else sort of ostracizes that crowd. I'm not really sure why, Hoffman and Neumann were always nice enough when I've talked to them. There are a few other really smart kids like that floating around.

None of them are as good at math though, as I am. Probably because old Doc Ackermann chooses to spend too much of his remaining time tutoring me. I can solve math problems faster than anybody here. I sort of hope he dies soon, I really do. Sometimes when he's leaned over my desk choking up the variables to an equation I can see his heart fluttering in his chest because his skin is so thin and his ribs, so feeble. His breath accosts my face. About the only thing he

can choke down is artichoke hearts and coffee, so the whole ordeal of being around him becomes challenging. Sometimes I think his entire body is made up of paper. I just can't stand spending time around him anymore. It's unsettling.

"Jesus, Marry, and Joseph." William exclaimed as I approached him leaning against his elm. "She really hit you," he murmured, staring at the red five still lingering on my skin.

"Who the hell told you?" I said sharply, still feeling bitter.

"Clara Müller. She saw you two through the big windows. She told me to pass on the message that she wants to talk to you, whatever the hell that means. I bet it's something to do with Jude." See? Nothing but trouble this whole Jude business, absolutely nothing but trouble!

"Whatta waste of time," I griped, shoving William slightly; he was too close to my face. I could feel the warmth of his exhale by my ear and see the freckles on his neck. They looked like the gray speckles of a sparrow egg or some unknown celestial phenomenon of the Milky Way. The wire of his glasses was practically poking my eye out as he examined the damage Annie Zimmerman caused.

The sun shone through the elm leaves. William studied me and I regretted every decision I made. As always, my mind returned to the moment I saw Jude Larsson's face trapped under the ice.

"Gett'off of me wouldya?" I said and jostled a laughing William. I guess getting whacked by little Annie Zimmerman was sort of funny, in a pathetic way.

He fell kind of hard onto his ass, he hadn't been balanced because he had to perch on his tiptoes to examine the side of my jaw. I didn't feel bad. I rarely do whenever I harm somebody in a physical way. It's the mental stuff I regret, that's real anguish. But beating someone's brains out, or shoving them, or knocking them real bad is something I'm really fine with. I think most of the boys here feel that way. Except for people like Hanz Hoffmann, who prefer to keep their weasley noses pressed into books. Maybe that's why nobody really talks to people like him. Me, I'm fine with fighting, but I just don't really see the point. I think it's stupid. That's why I don't get involved in any of the brawls the boys here get themselves into. I've always found fighting ludicrous, even before Levi came home all beat up several years ago, on a cool May evening. It's just my nature. Levi's my elder brother if you must know. I'd definitely kill for him.

“You have class right now anyway,” I said, clumsily trying to fish an illegal cigarette out of my pocket and give William a hand up. I could feel the spot on the back of my neck where William’s bony fingers touched. The outline of his middle, ring, and pointer, cooled my skin like an icy tattoo.

Just then a group of girls walked out of the door that led through the Fischer building that was both the gymnasium and the hospital wing. I don’t know who put the gymnasium right next to the hospital, but they were bloody smart to design it like that. Especially recently, with all the extra training, more small injuries had been sustained in the white-walled room than ever before.

On the other side of the hospital wing, past the school fence, there is this very decrepit graveyard. It’s about the most depressing thing in the entire world. You walk into the gymnasium feeling great, then play some meaningless game and get hurt, so you go sit in the hospital and then you’re just forced to think about how you’re going to eventually die. You regret the choice you made that got you injured, and you get so depressed just sitting in the hospital doing nothing while death waits for you in the graveyard. Sports, waiting, death. That’s life at Linkepling basically. It annoyed the heck out of me sometimes, it really did.

Anyway, this group of first-year girls walked out of the gymnasium, whispering while they looked at me, not wearing their sports uniform, and since there was only one permanent resident in the hospital wing, I concluded that they had gone to visit Jude Larsson.

“Jeeesus, Aldo,” William drawled. “You’re popular now, everybody’s talking about you.”

There was a hint of poison in Williams’s voice. Deep down, I knew *he* craved the attention *I* was getting, and I hated him for being jealous, especially for the worst experience of my entire life.

I hated that William was jealous of me at all. I’m sure he didn’t look up to me, I’m not the sort of guy people look up to, but there was something about me he just didn’t have and there was something about William that I didn’t have either, that I wished I did. Maybe it was the way he wrote papers in a single night, or the way his hair looked just like the paintings of a soon-to-be-crucified Christ, or the way he wasn’t accidentally scary. Me and William were not like brothers. There’s just something about him that no one notices. But I did, from the first time I saw him shakily make his way over the green in the beginning of a September drizzle. I haven’t unseen it since.

I began to stroll towards the mathematics wing accompanied by a sense of impending doom that caused my cigarette supply to dwindle. I rarely felt the itch to smoke, but something about that walk did me in. I don't think I could get genuinely addicted to cigarettes, even if I tried. My smokes are Kassel's and they taste like rubber, mostly made of paper, light on tobacco.

Honestly, I only started because Levi used to light up before he boxed. He would blend into the shadows but for the slowly crackling orange light emanating from the burning fuse held between his pointer and index. The way he smoked his cigarette revealed that he wasn't just some wild kid. He was as refined as any banker, lawyer, or military general lavishly puffing a cigar in a drawing room. I used to think that his way of smoking was so intimidating that it explained why he often won his boxing matches without ever throwing a real punch. Maybe that's why I was never very afraid of him. I knew the image he was trying to project.

Anyway, even the liveliest of the Linkepling student body tends to get depressed walking toward the math wing. From where I stood, hidden by a row of elms, I could see the tide of bowed and rained-on heads bob towards the entrance.

"Hofferman! Is that a ciggy!" shrieked an off-putting woman's voice. My pulse stopped and a rushing sound filled my ears, as thoughts of expulsion whisked around my head. To my surprise, I turned to see it was William pushing aside the low branches of a linden, one that looked out of place amongst the elms, as if its seed had been dropped accidentally by a divine hand. I choked on the sinuous smoke in my throat, having forgotten to exhale and I just about keeled over.

"Christ Willy. You sounded just like her," I mumbled, wiping my mouth with my right hand.

"Shhh, quiet, everybody just heard you scream," whispered William peering over the thin, loamy branches of the Linden. He nabbed my cigarette as I tried to quiet the sound of my lungs convulsing. You wouldn't guess that William is a smoker by looking at him, but he can go through a pack faster than anybody else I've ever met. He uses the butt of one cigarette to light the next until they've all shriveled up, like how domino's all fall down.

"I hate smoking," he said suddenly, as he exhaled a cloud. A gracile smile slipped onto his face as he met my eyes. I must have looked as confused as

Mary Magdalene. What could he have meant? He was easily the most talented smoker I had ever found. If there was an Olympics for smoking, William would have won gold.

"I'm serious," he continued, "I really only started because the smoke kept the gnats from biting." Sometimes, I don't know what to say to him. How do you respond to that? He was the dictionary definition of a chain smoker – how stupid was it that he started simply to keep the bugs away?

"You're crazy," I blurted. And with the golden light splintering from his glasses onto his half-closed lids, his freckles glimmering on his lips and ears and nape, and the cigarette breathing in between his fingers, the smoke obscuring his meditative face, he looked like he could have been. Sometimes, William has a sort of unnerving air about him. Just different. Like how a snake moves unlike a four-footed animal or a man.

"How do you even have any left, Aldo?" said William, flicking ash beside his shoe, "I thought you got your packs from Müller." He breathed out. "From an addict's perspective, it's a real shame he's gone."

Henry Müller, as I've said, was my now ousted roommate who was dependent on three simple things: cigarettes, sex, and being a complete asshole. In my opinion, he was the worst person to share a room with in the entire universe. The only thing he was good for was cigarettes because he had an awful handle on money and you could buy 'em for practically nothing.

Müller had been bulky and towheaded, I can still see his sun-streamed blond hair glowing white as he bent over the open window dropping my sheets of calculus onto the students trodding a rutted circle into the muddy green. The cream-colored paper looked like shot doves. Müller was always tormenting me in the boyish manner that is often dismissed in places like boarding schools.

Really just immature things: stealing my shower towels; leaving damp paper or food scraps under my bed to try and grow mold; one time he even tried to take a piss in my shoes. One of his most terrible plots was trying to attract small rodents—rats, mice, or even weasels—into our dorm room. Müller was obsessed with these animals. He used to go out into the woods, following rabbits down their paths, or mice to their burrows out by the meadow.

Anyway, besides smoking, I really think that Müller was sort of addicted to sex, which was a really challenging thing to be addicted to in a small Swiss boarding school. He would try to sneak girls in whenever he could, which was rarely, partly because Frau Hibbel guarded the dorms but for a night a month

when we all knew she snuck away to the local bar, and partly because very, very few girls wanted to have sex with anybody at all like Henry Müller or have sex at all. I honestly have no idea where he found the people he claimed to be having sex with or if they were even girls!

Anyway, the reason I'm blamed for his expulsion is that one night when he had somebody in our room I just walked outside because I couldn't stop thinking. I was thinking about how this lullaby my mother used to sing was about a blue sheep that jumped over the moon and stars. I thought that the tile on the ceiling of my dorm had a stain that looked almost like a blue sheep, but that I couldn't lie in my clean bed and check because my roommate was trying to achieve intimacy on his bed, and that with every breath he took he was inhaling mold. His breaths and his sweat and his shadow fell onto my bed, and I would never be able to sleep in it again.

So I walked out of the room but I completely forgot to close the door and Frau Hibbel found them and then Henry got expelled. After that, just about everybody hated me, because at Linkepling you're supposed to keep everybody else's secrets. Always.

"He hid his smokes so well they never found them when they came and got his stuff," I said to William. He laughed a little.

"Where did he keep them?" asked William.

I looked up at him and wondered if he missed Müller. I sure as hell didn't!

"I'm not telling."

William let out a shaky exhale and smiled, but not with his eyes.

"Aldo? Is that a cigarette?" A girl's voice rustled through the leaves, startling me, which restarted my bout of coughing. This time it wasn't a cackling William who staggered through the wavering leaves, but a bespectacled and coppery-haired girl holding several books and pencils.

"You can't smoke here," said Clara Müller softly. I had forgotten that William had said she had wanted to talk to me until she appeared, breathless and doe-eyed. I had forgotten because I didn't talk to Clara Müller. The soft lines of her face blurred into the fog of Linkepling students that I had no desire to ever meet.

I hate it when you meet a person and they stand in front of you and you both offer up "how do you dos" or benign comments on the weather, or the status of a particular person's day. I hate it when you meet someone but you have absolutely no idea who they are. The first conversation a stranger might

have with a priest or a rapist would probably go the same way: “Hi, my name’s Robert, how do you do? Well, I’m Bobby, and yourself?”

So I hated small talk, but sometimes I also hated really knowing people, so I was never able to make the effort for benign conversation. At Linkeeping, the person I had known the best was most likely Henry Müller. I know that sounds awful, what with William being my closest companion and all, but sharing a white-plastered dorm room with the same guy for two years solidifies your understanding of him – no small talk required.

I disliked him for sure, but I really understood him. I remember him shaving the scruff that grew down the sides of his face, hair that surely didn’t require shaving, or how he’d wait to wash all his clothes at once, or how he would lean his arm stoically against the concrete wall when his father was on the line of the red dormitory phone that hung lonesomely in the hall. I remember watching his straight blond hair gleam like the face of the moon when he hid under the covers and cried for the mouse that Boris had smashed with a brick.

I guess me and Henry were similar in some ways, but different in others. I wonder what about me made him despise me so much.

“I thought you told him that I wanted to talk to him.” Said Clara to William, she sounded almost disappointed.

“I did,” replied William. I remembered his words vaguely and wished that the wave of nausea overtaking me would go away.

“You’re Henry’s sister, right?” I said. The connection worsened my dyspepsia. I really looked at Clara then, and I saw her brother’s features in the shadow under her eyes, and his body language in the curve of her shoulders, and the way she squared her feet. I felt a sensation of rot.

An ache filled my lungs, mixing with the sickness I felt from the smoke. As I looked at her face, I realized that I missed Henry. I missed his shallow sleepy breaths from across the room, the pine scent of his soap, and also how strong he was when he moved my things around, blocked the doorway, or shook my hand.

Henry had always been somewhat of an apparition to me; drifting around my room unwantedly and haunting me as a ghost would. But my memory of him lacked how physical he had been. I realized I missed his material presence: his footfalls, sighs, shufflings.

“How’s Henry?” The words burst out of my mouth, startling me. The fact that I cared was disorienting. Clara was off-put, and met my inquiring gaze with a heavy anger. A cold feeling spread. My whole body flinched involuntarily. Ever since I rescued Jude, I’ve hated the feeling of being cold. I even started to carry a pair of old brown gloves and a stocking hat in my coat pocket that I could pull on when walking across the green. I observed Clara’s composure with confusion.

“What’s wrong Clara?” said William in a slightly raspy baritone. I swear his voice dropped an octave when he smoked. I don’t know why, maybe he did it on purpose to make himself sound like the Marlboro Man or a hard-boiled detective. He seemed different when he held a cigarette—no longer simply bespectacled and awkward, but bespectacled, awkward, and cunning.

“It’s obvious.” She sounded like a crazy person. Her words were on fire. “You ruined Henry, Aldo, you fucking ruined him like it was easy. Just to go play hero and act like you saved Jude.”

I felt like I was under attack. I hadn’t expected her to understand that Henry had plagued me, but I had expected her to understand that I hadn’t ruined him. Couldn’t of. I left a door ajar. My door. I should have been able to do whatever the hell I wanted to with my own room.

“What are you talking about?” I snapped. Her eyes widened. Like the eyes of the rabbits her brother used to follow through the woods when they got cornered. Like she was spooked.

“You know what’s happening.” She said, a slight lisp becoming apparent when she spoke her German s’s. “You’ve read the papers, you’ve seen the planes, you’ve met the Nazis. Where do you think Henry is, *Dummkopf*.” She turned and stormed off through the trees, the leaves slowly covering her, eating holes over her back until the ends of her shiny brown hair disappeared.

“Well, what the hell do you suppose she meant by all that?” Said William dryly, after a pregnant pause. There was smoke encircling his face. It looked like a muzzle. Like something was stopping him from saying what he truly meant.

The door to my math classroom was made from a single oblong piece of red oak. After leaving William to dither in the light rain, I found it pulled closed. The oak that the door was made from must have been about the largest one in the forest—the door itself was about ten feet tall and eight inches thick. The map of veins running across the wood were the width of my thumb.

This is all to say that it's a very strange door to find closed—because it's such a pain to get it open, it's frequently left flung wide, letting in a draft. I arrived in front of it, acknowledging its greatness, I respected that door in a way—like how David must have had respect for Goliath. Or if not respect, then at least recognition of his strength. That's about how I feel about Levi too.

I observed the massive door as if it were a medieval rival. Then I firmly placed my hands onto the cool oak and walked forward, my feet planted on the hard floor. The door did not budge, but then a whisper of air from the room beyond tickled my face, and with a continued strain the hinges moved, and the panel shifted, and I felt the heavy yellow light that filled the room and emblazoned the dais behind which lay a slumped Doc Ackerman.

I had a strangling fear that he had finally died and that I was somehow responsible for having wished his demise so many times. However, he raised his head like the last drunk at closing time: dazed, bleary-eyed, whiskery.

Ackerman had the face of an old ship captain and the body of an anorexic teenager. He looked biblical, as the ceiling-high windows glowed at this hour and gave him a bit of a halo straight out of a Caravaggio painting.

“Can't run away from me know, can you Hofferman?” sputtered the old guy.

“I wasn't running, Sir,” I replied. I'm actually an excellent liar. People believe me all the time. I only get caught when I stretch my deceit too far, pull the threads of truth too thin. And I only do this to see how far it can go. For how long Ms. Koch, or Mr. Anderberg nod their heads sympathetically as I describe my lumbago, or turn their mouths into “O”s as I chronicle my proficiency with horses. Just simple stuff like that. Half of getting away with it is the way that I hold my body. Maybe it's because I'm sort of tough-looking and people just don't think I have the brains to lie at the drop of a hat. But anyway, if I present myself in the right light, and make eye contact, just enough, I can get away with practically anything. So it surprised me when Doc Ackerman let out a raffish snort. I didn't believe he had it in him.

“You were running, and it's because you're not doing the math anymore,” he said calmly. The words in my throat came to a sudden stop. He looked at me straight with his left eye as his right wandered slowly across the room. I couldn't shake the feeling that he looked saint-like, sitting there in the starched laboratory coat that blanketed his bones. I felt like I was in church or something.

“Sir,” I started, my mind racing to find a coverup. Something, anything. Boris had thrown all my sheets in the mud, I had gotten concussed by slipping in the hall, my hand had gotten burned by the tomato soup being served in the cafeteria. But the truth weighed on my air pipe like a stone. The fact remained: I had chosen not to do his math, because I had not seen the point of it.

“Let me tell you something Hofferma,” the doctor wheezed, “I gave you those problems because you are the most talented young mathematician I have ever taught, and because I believe that mathematics can save your life.”

I thought the dementia must have finally overtaken him.

“My life, Sir? My life is fine. It’s in good hands.”

His lazy right eye moved slowly and with great effort to align with his left one, like a planet moving back into orbit, so that he directed his full muddy gaze to my face for the first time. He opened his mouth so that the pink of his throat was exposed like that of a kitten’s and he spoke with an imposition that I had not experienced from him before:

“Listen my boy. My son was nineteen years old in 1914. Frank. Frankie. Frankie-Boy. He was about as good at math as you were, the numbers were easy for him. When he was young he could read pages of the textbook and then just understand concepts young people went to college to learn.”

A cold sweat formed on the back of my neck, making my heart beat quicken as I remembered the ice, and Jude, and the feeling of being trapped under the water. I wanted to leave but I felt compelled to stay. Doc Ackerman closed his quivering eyelids and his words fell from his lips and shook like he was in some sort of trance. The way he yawped sounded like the way I had heard speeches given at deathbeds described. I moved closer, listening, then I touched his sun-damaged hand.

“He was a genius, Aldo, so smart. A really good kid. Just full of life. He would accompany his mom to the market every Sunday when he was little, just so he could help her carry the yellow daisies she liked, but never really had room for. And later, when he was seventeen, he would go out to the fields and gather them for her. You just had to love that boy!”

Tears welled up in the wrinkles besides his eyes. My stomach dropped.

“In Germany everybody over eighteen was conscripted for three years to fight the French, and the English, and the Russians. Three years! But they didn’t call up the mathematicians to get stuck in the trenches! They sent the artists, the painters, the poets, the musicians to die. They sent workers too: plumbers,

firefighters, police, and mailmen. But what they really needed were physicists, engineers, and doctors. They needed scientists and PhDs to crack the codes and to make rockets. Cryptographers and ballistic specialists. They needed Frank. They really did, my boy. A Captain came to my door. He was lanky and tall, asking for the mathematician who lived in this house. And before I could speak, my wife, Anna, said that there were two. And the young Captain, removed his hat and said that he only needed one. They needed someone who could do physics and make things explode. Just one man. And my son smiled, as he did on his birthdays, and replied, "That man is my father, who would be wasted unlike me in the trenches, because of his cataracts."

The old man took a shaky breath. His entire body tightened, causing him to sound like a little kid.

"Frankie thought he would survive," said Ackerman.

Silvery tears slipped from the corners of his eyes and fell upon the wobbling reflection of my stunned face on the glass desk. I wondered how old those tears were and for how many years they had waited to fall. I had never seen a grown man cry. Boys yes, but never a man, and as I watched Doc Ackerman, the line between boyhood and manhood blurred. He seemed both like a little boy and a man as old as my great-grandfather.

He stopped just as quickly as he had begun. His chalky fingers, ancient fingers, with sun spots and freckles and thin veiny lines, turned clammy, tightening until my own fingers were in pain.

"Promise me, Frank, promise me, boy," he beseeched. He was as still as a statue but for his quivering hands and the pooling sweat on his brow. I heard the buzz of a fly, moving towards him, but Ackerman didn't move to swat it. He was looking in my direction, but I felt he was looking through me, into another room, or time.

"This math will save your life. I have made you most valuable. You must push on," he choked out the words, whispering them through a hissing throat as if a rope was strangling him. "What is it I've taught you these past months?"

I couldn't think of what to say and didn't know if he could hear me at all. I looked towards the fly, its delicate legs twitching like Williams's legs sometimes did.

"Physics, Sir," I uttered. A scatty smile spread across his face. His shoulders relaxed. I could see his yellow teeth. He looked crazy.

“Not just any physics my boy—nuclear physics.” He said the words as if they were magic.

I thought he was mad. I really did. I shouldn’t have played into it. I know that now. I should have taken him by his forearm and led him out of the room. But instead, I leaned my head forward, firmly placing my hands on my knees.

“How, Sir?”

“I know how the bombs worked the first time. I was there. They’re going to need something bigger. Which means they need a smaller catalyst. They’re going for fusion.” He slammed his fist on the table. His arm, rigid as a board. I didn’t know if his words were meant for me, or for the son he had been unable to save. “The atoms are combining!” Each word erupted out of him, a great boom so loud my ears rang and I swear the glass in the window panes shook. His was no longer hunched over. He sat straight in his chair, rigid, like a king, bathed in the setting light, until he caved forward, his spine slumping, his eyes closing, white foam coming out of his mouth. I carried his emaciated body in my arms to the hospital wing. Like a baby, or a lamb. Crutch and all.

They tucked the sheet that covered Doc Ackerman into the corners of the bed so tightly he couldn’t move. The way he lay in bed, he looked like Houdini in a straight jacket. I asked the nurse to loosen the sheets, but she acted as though she didn’t hear me; kept shuffling around his bed and cinching the blanket tighter around his diminished form. Outside the window on the other side of the room, the graveyard waited.

We were in a double room, a curtain of green material separating his bed from the other. I sat in a hard wooden chair next to the Doctor and wondered about the cut-down tree from which it had been made. I looked at Doc Ackerman and thought that it was unfair that his son had to die in order for him to live.

I also thought about *my* father. His stubble, horn-rimmed glasses, and purple pocket squares. Then I thought about myself and Levi. I wondered if my brother would ever have kids, then I suddenly could see my strange and impulsive brother being a father. Not just any father, but the best one around. The picture was complete with mounds of ice cream and little fingers holding onto his hand. I didn’t think of Levi as being great at many things, but tears came to my eyes as I saw clearly that, undoubtedly, he would be the greatest

father who ever lived. Gentle, but he would punch out the lanky army captain who comes to take his son, beating him into the ground.

I mumbled to myself and combed fingers through my hair and wiped my face, pushing back skin and rumpling cheeks. I widened my eyes and stared out the open infirmary door. It was identical to the yellow one I had left ajar that Henry walked through for the first time when he was a fourteen-year-old, as well as the same door he walked through for the last time, hands in pockets, army notice in his coat.

“Oh god,” I whimpered.

Beside me, the Doctor didn't stir.

I thought about Frankie Ackerman. I tried to imagine what he might've looked like, who he might've been. Would he have liked me? I tried to imagine his smile as he held a freshly caught herring, or if his hair was like Williams's or my own, or if he had his father's nose. But ultimately failed to conjure his image. Blurry features swirled in my mind as I tried to imagine an unwrinkled version of Doc's face from the snapshots of soldiers I had seen, many whom had their legs blown off, or found dead under their horse. I could smell the great war as I sat in that clean hospital room. For some reason, the face I finally pictured as Frankie's looked like Henry Müller's. I tilted forward in the chair, my head ringing.

The planes, the posters, the Nazis that Clara had yelled about. Nuclear physics said Ackerman's voice in my head. I saw Clara's plane clearly in my mind. I remembered stopping on the green one day because of the low rumble we all heard and turning my face skyward, the sky had been the clearest blue I had ever seen, stretching out towards the edges of the horizon. I remembered the gray line that followed the green compact planes that speckled the sky, and then thinking nothing more of it. I probably wouldn't have seen such a rich blue if it hadn't been for the planes. I remembered the poster of the Nazi soldier building a wall of bricks, placing the final one into place as the blood red of the swastika flew behind him, his hairline receding. I also remembered the line of tall, blond, uniformed German men who marched in pairs down the hall, past William's Elm, and out of my thoughts. I stood up from the chair, my legs shaking. What was going to happen to Doc Ackerman and to Henry! To any of us! Where was all this going!

Jude! I had to find him, or William. I gently shook Doctor Ackerman—snot came out of his nose, then two nurses ran in pulling me off. I just wanted

him to open his eyes. I wanted this more than anything I've ever wanted in my entire life.

I pulled away from the red-haired, perfumed nurse who tightly grabbed my arm with skeletal fingers. She had the ideal Swiss nose, pointing back upwards in an aristocratic arc that rich people so crave. Her blue uniform clashed terribly with gingery curls, and I was reminded of William's school uniform that did the same with his red wire eyeglass frames. Then I peered Henry with his monocle which he would look through when he observed animal bones. Then I envisioned a pair of smashed lenses that fell out of thin wire frames, though if they were supposed to be Doc Ackerman's or his sons', I wasn't sure.

I pushed off the nurse and bolted out of Ackerman's room, leaving him lying there. I couldn't help but think of Levi lying face down, nose bleeding onto the streets of my childhood. But he would rise eventually, square himself on shaky knees. Would Ackerman? Get up! I wanted to scream at him, like I had wanted to scream at Levi. But I never had. I just grabbed his hands, pulling him away from the boxing match, attempting to sling his broken body over mine and carry him home. I hated that he fought! I hated him for making me have to watch him lose.

I ran the length of the linoleum-covered hall towards the closed door at the far end. There was a clatter of crashing bodies behind me. The second nurse collided with the red-haired one. I didn't pause, I just ran like the devil was chasing me, as if I hadn't smoked every day for the past two years. The door I arrived at wasn't the same as Ackerman's. This was an older room, its door chestnut. Scratched and stained from decades of patients, crutches, wheelchairs, and fingers pressing against it. Using my body, I threw it open widely.

I shut my eyes at the last minute, stealing myself away, preparing myself to see Jude. My throat tightened, I felt uneasy. In an instant, I saw it all again – the ice, the bloated cheeks, the frosted eyes, the sausage fingers – Jude. But then I saw him as he had been before. As he was to everybody but me. He had the face of a boy ruler: elegant, wise, striking. Jude had green eyes, a chalky natural green, like that of an oak leaf. His hair was thick, pin straight, and jet black, gently falling over heavy eyebrows. There was a timeless quality about him, as if he belonged in an art museum, holding a discus or the head of Medusa surrounded by the works of Panaenus, Cellini, or Michelangelo.

This was the Jude that I pictured when I entered, but his bed was empty. His sheets were snaked and twisted, a green blanket lay on the floor, wet from a cup of water that had spilled on it. An IV hung loose and dripping, a drop of blood on the bed a sign of its recent removal. The two bay windows above the bed were flung open, allowing for a breeze. I looked out towards the graveyard, half expecting to see a ghost that I knew wasn't there.

Gasping, I stood unsteady in the doorway. Jude was gone. I looked over to the graves. The short grey mounds of stone rose up from the ground before me like a sleeping giant's fingertips, breaking through the soil. Since it was spring, the buds of crocuses and tulips were scattered through the patchwork of mossy ground. Great, low hanging cherries twisted in a tragically scraggly way as they often do. The sky shimmering through branches. A great wide cloud covered the upper half of the horizon, so that I saw only a thin line of blue.

I thought about Henry again. I wondered if he had ever rested in this room. If he was resting in another hospital room now. With a sudden realization, I knew where Jude had gone. I recognized that I was about the only person in the entire world who figured out where he had vanished to.

I left the door open as I turned away from the room. I wondered what nurse finally came to close it, to shut it, to stop looking for the mystery. Or, perhaps, she couldn't bring herself to, and they left the door open, to remember and to respect the missing boy. Like how one always leaves an open space at the table for Prophet Elijah, even though he will never appear to fill it.

I knew I had to get to the lake. That Jude would be waiting there, but not for me, for his courage or his sanity to catch up to him. I knew why he had been there in the winter. I knew why he had wanted to get so cold he got hypothermic, or lost a digit, or a limb, or caught a sickness that left him bedridden for months past his graduation. I finally understood why he hadn't had any skates on.

As I was pushing past students carrying books, hats, coats, chalk, and ducking around teachers walking with perfect upright posture, I thought again about Frankie. I wondered if he knew he was going to die when he inadvertently saved his father's life. And if he had, how brave then, he would have been. It hadn't sounded like Ackerman had thought so, he had spoken like his son had been naive, a clueless adolescent, making a fatal mistake. But the Frankie I imagined was different: he had been resigned yet terrified when he

told the Captain about his father's bad eyes, when he had held his mother's hand, when he had let go and waved goodbye.

I thought about how I had regretted saving Jude over the past months. How I had complained. How William had looked at me, with what I had thought was a stroke of teenage envy, but what I realized to be accusatory questioning. A blank card. A doubt, a disappointment he carried for my being ingenuous. I was ashamed. I ran and I felt like Frankie was chasing me, following me from a distance, teaching me some type of lesson. But I felt glad, I felt so happy I had seen Jude. I felt so happy that Levi had taught me enough about punching, about kicking, and flexing for me to break the ice, for me to carry the weight of a boy.

And as I ran I felt so scared. For that time it had been winter, and there had been a thick snow, and a chilling frost, and a mirrored layer of ice covering the lake, covering the water a boy may have been trying to reach. But it was April now, and I was running through mud underneath a single cloud.

"Aldo!" I finally heard the scream that cut through the rushing noise in my ears, only when the body collided with me, throwing me to the ground. I lay panting in the muck as a weight pressed over me, arms reaching above my head, shins pressing against mine.

"Stop!" William panted, mud clinging to his hair, to his uniform; his glasses were pressed into the sludge beside my hand. I suddenly heard the rest of the noises around me. The robins chirping, the breeze through the trees, and the red-haired nurse shouting, the teachers chugging up the hill, the students behind them. I heard the word Crazy being yelled by Annie Zimmerman. I could hear the crowd approaching, but I didn't turn my head, instead I looked at the dirty boy held above me.

I stared transfixed at William. His mouth was moving crazy fast, and I managed to miss everything he said. The sunlight dappled his face, caught his freckles, and his curls, and the clean streaks of his pink cheeks that the tracts of his tears left on his muddy face. I looked at his eyes, through his thin lashes, which were much longer than they appeared. It was hard to tell because they got practically white at the ends. His eyes were gray, not a stormy, blue grey, but a clear, smooth, luminous shade that captivated me. His hand slipped in the mire and his forehead came crashing against mine as the arm that had been holding him up fell away.

I connected the rhythm of what he had been speaking about, as my head rang.

“Will!” I choked out. I was short of breath. So was he as he lay next to me, barely holding my arms, trying not to let me go.

“Will,” I said as clearly as I could. “I promise I will not drown. I am not going to the lake to drown.” I held his shaking wrists as I pushed his legs off mine. He sucked in air through his mouth, I could see his braces. I also could hear the nurses bellowing as William lay quivering beside me, deathly quiet, his grey eyes glowing like the moon. I kissed the top of his forehead hard and sloppily, where his head had hit mine, and where I’m sure a bruise, or a lump would form. Then I let go of his hands, and pushed him away, so that I left him laying, covered in earth, behind me as I continued to run down the hill.

Finally, I saw the shimmering lake before me. The sun was high over the water, the path of its reflection revealed in the vibrating lines of blinding white light dancing across its surface. A sharp wind blew off the water, causing my shirt and pants to billow. I lengthened my stride, my muddy shoes slipping in the grass so that I slid down the hill.

The grass gave way to rocky gravel, which gave way to coarse, umber sand. The one time Levi wrote to me from Fresno, he had poured tiny pink grains of sand he had gathered from a beach in Monterey County into the envelope. I remembered everything about the letter, holding it in my hands just staring at the stamp, which depicted oranges on a blue background. I also remembered holding the tiny pink crystals in my palm, feeling an overwhelming numbness, like I was a car on empty, stranded in the desert, pointlessly waiting to be full again. I didn’t know what Levi was doing in California, I just felt abandoned. But I felt grateful that I had a big brother who sent me something from wherever he was, even if it was just one letter. I was proud of Levi no matter what he was doing. If he actually made it to law school, or if he was just following around some rock band somewhere, I sure as hell was proud of him. I was also sure as hell happy he wasn’t mucking around the underside of Stuttgart.

Soon I found myself up to my ankles in water. I looked up.

“Jude!” I bellowed. Reeling around, looking in all directions. I splashed along the edge of the lake, nearing the corner hidden by trees. The water stretched out before me.

“Jude!” The scream was raw. It hurt my chest and echoed out through the blue haze. Then I saw a lonely pair of shoes.

They were dark brown penny loafers, neatly polished, sitting by themselves neatly on the shore.

I bowed in front of them, my nose inadvertently pressing into the sand which began to stick to my forehead and hair, scraping against my shoes and falling down my shirt collar. I curled over my legs so that it looked as if I might have been kneeling in prayer, the shoes becoming an object of worship. I dug out the rock that was poking my knees, my fingers scraping the rough edges. It was a heavy, round stone, pure white, which I placed before the shoes. A pearly gravestone.

I was crying raggedly, when I heaved in a breath, sand stuck to my mouth, making me spit up and gag, leaving a foul, salty aftertaste. The water lapped at my heels, like the tongue of a Doberman who bites. I didn't know what to do.

“Aldo?” said a soft voice from behind me. I inhaled. I raised my head and turned, burning my eyes for I was then staring directly at the sun. The boy emerged from the water, sopping wet up to his shoulders, his silhouette emblazoned honey gold.

“Jude.” The word fell from my lips. He took a step towards me, the ripples spreading out from his knees, so that the water's surface became a tiny labyrinth he was both creating and wading through. He looked warm: so unlike the body I had dragged out months earlier. His hair, longer, falling behind his ears and curling at the back of his neck, and his face, despite being shrouded in a convex shadow, appeared vibrant.

He walked out of the water, a god, standing before me like the half-drowned cartoon pirate clambering off his raft, setting foot on dry land. I looked up at him. His soaked school uniform clung to his lean frame and the water slid down his tan arms and dimpled the sand and spotted my own shirt, which was rolled up to my shoulders and absolutely covered in mud.

We stood and looked at each other, until he finally sat down beside me. I moved over, offering him his shoes. I was still winded from running and tried to catch my breath while he continued dripping beside me. He remained quiet, looking at the burning, sinking, hole of gold and removing a pack of Marlboros from inside his left loafer.

“I couldn't do it,” he said laconically, in the same tone with which my father rattled off baseball statistics. I wanted to place my arm around his

shoulder and tell him that I finally understood. That I knew why he was in the lake, and why he couldn't...I wanted to tell him that things would get better.

I also wanted to tell him that I hadn't known what it meant to be brave until I had heard of Frankie, but I knew now that what he did wasn't brave, but even so it was ok that he was so scared. Mostly, I wanted to tell him that everything would be all right.

Jude started to cry. I had seen boys cry, but never like this. He held his tears in his eyes, they only slipped silently to run down his straight nose when he blinked. His neck tightened, his Adam's apple bobbed, his fingers squeezed sand. It looked like a grand feat of athleticism was what was preventing him from sobbing all over me. With a shake of his head, a single quick decisive gesture, a sign of no, everything wasn't fine, as if he had heard what I was thinking, the tears spilled over.

I have seen people, boys, cry at football loses and at funerals. This was the first and last time I saw anybody cry at their own funeral. Jude stared at the white stone I had set into the sand and his whole body shook with such a force that I felt he would surely crack a rib. All he could do was look upwards and let the tears fall, allowing the sun to blind him, to evaporate the dampness. And all I did was watch.

Suddenly, I heard a shout, a science teacher nearing the bottom of the hill, the crowd curving behind him. Finally Jude emitted a sharp sound, the noise an animal makes before the knife strikes down, when the trap is tightening. I looked across the water, I saw a bird dive in, an osprey maybe, but its feathers looked white, reminding me of the papers Henry used to push out my window. A waste I had thought, but flying through the air for those brief seconds must have been the most extraordinary thing to ever happen to those sheets.

The crowd was on the beach now, scouring around. A girl pointed to my footprints left in the sand. I looked at Jude and in that moment his fear, palpable and wild. It seized me, making the hair on my arms turn up, my pulse erupted into an erratic waltz, quickening when a murder of crows took off from a tree behind him.

I reached slowly towards the white stone, my head empty of thoughts. It was remarkably heavy, with both my arms shaking, I raised it high. I met his eyes. Tranquility blossomed across an anguished face, a green, watery calmness that transferred to me. Everything froze. The water stopped moving, the teachers stopped running, the breeze ceased to blow. Jude smiled, the corners of

his mouth twitching downwards, his wet green eyes creasing. I brought the stone down.

After that, all was a blur, like the way the world looked through the rear window of my father's car late at night, mysterious, shadowy, almost submerged. Right before the rock came crashing down, a peculiar memory of Levi flashed through my mind. We were young, I was maybe seven, at some aunt's house for the holidays and he was sticking his tongue out at me from behind a snow globe and I had been crying not because he had scared me but because I didn't understand that the glass was warping his face, and that really, he was fine.

I guess I really don't know when that memory returned to me, before Jude, after Jude, or right in the moment when the stone was falling. After I was expelled, I used to think back on my childhood years whenever I was in a car, just staring out the window remembering little things, like our maid showing me how to make bread, or the tiny race cars we used to have, or my old dog Sarah, a grandmotherly beagle who used to nap on the little braided rug under the stairs. Just stuff I wouldn't have thought of normally. Maybe I wasn't thinking about anything in the moment, or maybe I had been thinking about how Ackerman was doing, or about any other of the people who had confronted me that day. Maybe I was just trying to keep my arms steady.

I crushed Jude Larson's leg. I broke his left femur in three places, I shattered the bone, just above his knee, just about flattened it in front of the entire student body. The minute the rock fell Jude screamed. A piercing howl that brought the crowd running towards us. There was slippery blood everywhere, on my hands, his body, the ground, mixing with the water that was sopping him so it looked like there was more of it than there really was. It looked like his body should have been an empty shell, sucked out by Dracula, if you were going off of how much suddenly appeared out of his body.

I hadn't thought there would be blood at all, but I soon understood why, when I saw the white bone sticking grotesquely out of his upper leg. Once he saw it, he fainted. I wished I had too, but I didn't for some reason, I just looked around wild-eyed at what felt like the thousands of faces surrounding me. Mr. Berg subdued me while Mr. Anderson lifted Jude up over his shoulders like he was Jesus Christ, carrying him away to seek medical treatment.

The crowd was in a frenzy, hysterical. Some were crying, not just the girls who reached for one another through the swarm, but the boys too. Some were enraged. I remembered being scared for my life briefly, feeling that if one boy, one boy who loved Jude, who knew him, were to make a move towards me they would all follow.

I retched in the sand. Hands on my shoulders, faces blurring. I remembered a clear image of my old history teacher leaning over after he saw all the blood, his hands pressed onto his knees, his face a luminous pea green. I remembered sitting in his class, listening to his sweaty, sniveling voice ramble on about the glory of War, about the glory of mother Germany. If I got mad like Levi did, I might have tried to kill him. I might have succeeded too: the stone, my weapon, still clenched in my hands, but it was far too slippery to throw, what with the white being turned into a deep, lustrous gemstone red.

Anyway, it's good I don't get mad like Levi does, and besides, like I've said, I've never really liked fighting. Didn't see the point. I still don't. But something about that teacher, Kazlauskas was his name, looking sicker than I was, made me want to teach him something. I thought to speak to him, but as I reached towards him, sort of crawling through the sand, a girl screamed. A real Hollywood scream, like in the movies with Audrey Hepburn or something like that. A movie theater scream where you jump a little in your seats, like you've received an electric shock. After she yelled several teachers sort of jumped on me all at once. I don't know what they were really thinking. I sort of blacked out for a few minutes after that.

Thinking back, I don't blame the girl at all. I mean, I must have looked ghastly, in my ripped uniform, covered in mud and half-soaking, my hands, outstretched, painted crimson.

When I awoke again, I was being carried, my torso held loosely, my legs lifting, my arms screaming in pain for it felt like they were getting ripped out of their sockets. The crowd surrounding me moved rhythmically, a steady undulating pulse and spots of black, green, and yellow were burned in front of my vision. I heard what sounded like humming.

I remembered looking at the faces of the people around me. I didn't know the names of the boys carrying me or the teacher waving his arms around like a conductor, so vigorously it looked like he was trying to take somebody's eyes out or direct the perfect Rachmaninoff sonata. The boy holding my right leg had gravity-defying dark curly hair that sprung upwards from the top of his

head. I thought he might have been named Jankowski. The boy holding my right leg had hair so blond I shut my eyes for it reflected the pounding sun too intensely.

When I opened them, William's face was right in front of mine. He was snotty and sweaty, mouthing something. I looked at his gray eyes, I smiled because I finally knew the color. I believe I heard him say "What the hell do you have to smile about?" Before a teacher's arm cut down in front of him and pushed him forcefully backward.

I tried to swing myself around, to see him. His face looked heavenly, every freckle a cigarette burn on his cream skin, every breath shifting the light so that the green glow washed over him, his muddy hair curly and windborne. The crowd surged, it gobbled him up, so that he was suddenly lost behind rows of white shirts and pressed blue neckties, arms swinging madly in blazers. I saw his hand burst through a gap, his pale fingers reaching towards me, struck gold in the sun, grabbing only thin air. Then he was gone. I never saw him again after that.

I started thrashing, kicking my legs and twisting around, yelling. I think that's when they all thought that I had actually gone mad. Then another familiar face appeared in the crowd. It was more like I focused on it, everybody around me looked blurry, like through a television when the signal was choppy, it was more like I turned the channel just right to see the now clear face. Clara Müller was looking down at me, saying nothing. I tried to say something, maybe something came babbling out of my mouth I don't remember. But I felt vindicated somehow. In her eyes, I saw that she understood, yet she made no move to protect me. More hands clamped over me, more feet fell into a crunching rhythm, more pressure came down on my head.

I remembered seeing the wrought-iron school gate, the letters twisting and turning in front of me. Then only darkness.

Epilogue

The telegram that contained news of Henry's death arrived three days later. He had stepped on a mine, his legs blown off at the knees, arms landing some twenty feet away. The worst part was that he hadn't even made it to the war. It was a training accident, the pimply fifteen year-olds all around his mutilated body hyperventilated, screaming bloody murder.

I guess in a way, it was Henry who saved me, in life and in death. It was he who awoke me to the current horror surrounding my world, and it was his death that made me stop questioning whether or not I had done the right thing. I really hurt Jude, but as I thought of Henry's twitching fingers disconnected from his palm, I stopped questioning what I had done. Henry inhabits my mind a lot, walking through corridors and climbing through windows with a mouse in his coat pocket. I wished his ghostly presence would speak, but it never did.

I guess I sort of started seeing a lot of things back then, but never what I wanted to, or when I wanted to. William never appeared in my mind, and as time slipped by it was his face that sank deep into my memory.

I poured myself back into my math. Pages, upon pages, upon pages were suddenly completed in the middle of the night and lay face up in neat piles on my desk. I realized that, unlike Frankie, I had nobody to die for. It was then that I really started to live.

I remember standing at the top of the dusty spiral room. The computers whirring around me, the men in lab coats bustling about, the pageboy whispering about how I had been in some type of crazyhouse, or some type of trouble. I think some of those physicists were scared of me, not just because I'm pretty tall, but because they thought I killed a guy. If only they really knew.

I remembered standing in that room, the light falling down on me, with the answer to the chase right in my hands. Ackerman had been wrong, it hadn't been fission they were going for, but fusion. In my hands, I held the answer. I looked at the world, and I thought of Henry, and of William, and of Jude, and the families floating out of the chimneys of crematoria, their atoms dispersing into the night sky.

Footsteps. In an instant, I put my worksheet in my mouth, forcing myself to swallow it. In the end, there was no point. All the math I had done had been wrong. But as they pulled me along, beaten and bruised, over chipped cobblestones and shadows of elms, I still was able to remember it all.

ANNA KLEINBERG '26
NIGHT AFTER NIGHT

Preface

I've spent my entire life telling others' stories; I suppose it's finally time to tell my own. I must warn you, though, you might not like what you read.

It is raining outside as I sit in an antique leather armchair, thinking and typing, but mostly thinking, about all the memories I've hoped to never relive. It's a strange thing, really, how easily one can get swept away by the tide of the past. Though it is something I dwell on very rarely, each time I do, I find myself deeply and truly immersed in all of the pain, loss, and regret. Some days, I wish I could forget everything, start again from scratch. Would I make the same mistakes, find myself in this same hell? I don't know, and frankly, I don't care.

But that is not something that will ever happen. The life I have now, the lives all of us have now, are the only ones that will ever truly be ours. I am now writing this to tell of the could've and should've beens. This is a story of ises and wases and all-there-ever-will-bes.

That is, of course, not to say that my life has been an endless string of tragedies. Yes, pain has been quite prevalent throughout the course of my many years, but even in my darkest moments, there has always been love, joy, and beauty. A night spent dancing under the stars; full, emerald eyes reflecting silvery moon; a delicate, painfully fleeting kiss. Perhaps it has all been worth it, if only for these small sparks of bliss.

And again I am reminded of the world I now live in, completely alien to the one I knew. Things, once thought impossible, now commonplace and mundane. The magic of modernity, so different from the kind that has shaped my life. Some nights, when I awake, I still feel as though I'm dreaming. Surely, by all that is good and sacred, there is no way that I have gotten here. But this is no mere dream, not even a nightmare. No matter how many times I pinch myself, I do not arise. This is reality, where fate, our cruel oppressor, has not even given us that comfort.

The rain steadily falls, and I reminisce about another storm, in a different room, a different age. No matter how many years pass, every time I hear the gentle tap tap tap of droplets against windows, that is what I remember. Of course, it would be impossible to forget the moment my life went from (mostly)

ordinary, to strange and dark and cruelly twisted. Everything has changed, and yet, the rain still sounds the same.

One

Brooklyn, New York

October, 1897

I could hear it outside, more than a drizzle but less than a storm, on the morning I first saw him, the boy with eyes like a cat. I did not like the rain then, and I do not like it now, but I suppose if it hadn't been raining, he wouldn't have come and I wouldn't have seen him, and that would have been very bad indeed.

I was young then, only eighteen, a sheltered and naive young man who'd grown up amongst the wealthy, never knowing the pain of hunger or the cruelty of the world. Though I still had problems, and, at the time, they'd seemed the most important things in the world, looking back, they were of little consequence. My life was, for the most part, mundane, a still pool of water. But something so perfect is easily disrupted, it would only take a single thrown stone to send ripples across the surface, and in an instant, everything would be changed.

When our paths first crossed, I was in my room, curled up in a chair very similar to the one I sit in now, though, back then, it was still new. Due to the storm, I had decided to spend the day inside, and eventually found myself hunched over a battered copy of Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, which I had already read several times before but still greatly enjoyed. I have always been a voracious reader, and to this day find any excuse I can to skip social gatherings so that I might get lost amongst the pages.

I had also known, from quite a young age, that I wanted to be a writer, much to the annoyance of my family. My brothers (two, to be precise) had both already gone on to become successful businessmen, and yet I had nothing to show for myself but a few unpublished stories of, according to my mother, "mediocre quality". So it was, then, that I'd grown bored of the complaints and persistent nagging of everyone around me. I had begun looking for a way out, and, little did I know, it was about to find me.

"Mr. Mikalisk?" came a voice from behind me. My family's home in Brooklyn Heights was lavish, though rather small considering our wealth, and

had a full-time staff of ten people. A short time earlier, I'd sent down for a coffee, and it seemed that someone had finally brought it up to me.

"Thank you," I replied, rising to take my beverage. However, when I caught sight of the man holding it, I stopped in my tracks. He was just a boy, really, perhaps only a couple years younger than me. And, though it was, and still is, difficult to put into words, something about him seemed...unearthly. His appearance was doll-like, skin smooth and white as porcelain, the color on his cheeks so perfectly arranged that it may very well have been painted on. His eyes, too, were large, innocent, a dark green color that shone in the dimly lit room. He was of a short stature, with thin, delicate limbs, and his hair, perhaps the most unusual aspect of him, was an unnameable color caught somewhere between brown and white, tinted slightly pink. It was quite long and wavy, and it had been tied back in a somewhat old-fashioned way. He would have been a perfect image of beauty, were it not for a strange harshness in the way he set his features, a sharp contrast to his childish face.

He seemed to notice my staring. "Sir, your coffee?" His voice, though high-pitched, had a slightly husky undertone. It was unexpected, though not unpleasant.

"Why, there's really no need for all the formalities. It's perfectly fine if you just call me Daniel. Thank you..." I trailed off, not knowing his name. One of our servants had retired recently; this must have been his new replacement.

"Arthur," he replied curtly. As he turned to leave, he caught sight of the book lying on my chair. "Mmm, you have good taste," he said, less stiffly than before, "I quite like *Twelfth Night*; humor is something we all need in our lives, especially if you are living one like mine." With that, he gave me a quick, close-lipped smile and headed for the door, his stride graceful, feline.

After he was gone, I pondered the comment. It was odd that this serving boy was a fan of Shakespeare. Although it wasn't an impossibility, per se, he'd spoken with the sort of wistfulness that one only gains through having a deep connection with something. There were clearly memories behind his words, though, coming from someone so young, I could not imagine of what sort they would be. Even after only mere moments spent with him, I was fascinated by "Arthur", and determined to find out who he really was.

I didn't see him for the rest of the day. At first, I thought, for whatever reason, he was avoiding me. It was only in the evening, as I was heading upstairs after

dinner, that I caught sight of Arthur again. He was carrying a tray of drinks, presumably bringing it to my parents and whomever they'd invited over tonight. Although I knew he was busy, I couldn't help myself from talking to him.

"Hello again, Arthur."

"Oh, yes, hello...Daniel." He'd remembered to call me by my first name.

"You started working here recently, right?" I asked conversationally. "I've not seen you here before."

"You're quite perceptive for someone of your class," he said slyly, pausing to gaze at our richly decorated surroundings. "Many don't take much notice of those beneath them." He then turned away from me, continuing on his way to wherever he had been going.

"Wait! Don't leave just yet, I would like to talk to you!"

"Whatever could you want with me? I'm busy right now, and, with all due respect, I'm not the sort of person you'd usually be seen conversing with." Arthur pronounced each word very carefully, as though it would be hard for me to understand them if he didn't.

"Please, just give me a moment." I wanted to learn more, and I didn't know when I'd get another opportunity to question him. "You said you've read *Twelfth Night*. Tell me, where did you develop your passion for literature?"

He went silent, as though debating whether to tell the truth or not. Finally, he simply said: "Just along the way."

Along the way? Why was the boy always so cryptic? Attempting to get information from him was like squeezing water from a stone. What could he even have to hide?

"You know," I began, humor creeping into my voice, "You are beginning to sound like an ancient oracle, with all the ambiguous statements you've been making."

Arthur flashed me his same, tight-lipped smile. "Perhaps you're not as far off as you think." He laughed softly, like he'd just said something ironic. "I kid, of course. I'm only human." One look into his eyes—bright, sparkling, yet deep, and, somehow, sad—told me otherwise.

"Listen," he said gently, "If you really want to interrogate me, you can. However, I have somewhere I need to be right now, so it will have to wait until later. I shall see you soon, farewell." He went on his way, his footsteps delicate and nearly silent, even in the quiet house. When I started back to my room, I

was surprised by how loud mine were in comparison. For all I knew, Arthur was a spirit, invisible to everyone else and barely able to make a sound.

True to his word, when my morning coffee arrived the next day, it was Arthur who had come along with it. Unlike yesterday's storm, today, the sun was shining. Despite this, though, Arthur hung back towards the door, avoiding the windows with care.

I walked over to him, putting my book down. He looked different than before, paler, face lacking color. Perhaps he's ill, I thought to myself, glancing at his features. Still, Arthur seemed cheerful enough, and besides his complexion, nothing else seemed off about him.

"Good morning," he said, handing me my coffee. His tone was light, retaining some of yesterday's cheerfulness.

"Hello Arthur! Are you here to make good on your promise?"

"Promise...what promise?" He paused for a moment, trying to remember.

"That you would tell me about yourself." I was beginning to like Arthur. His odd personality and cryptic way of speaking made for unique company. In my monotonous life, he was a spot of color, a spark of chaos, and, hopefully, a soon-to-be friend.

"Why of course." He smiled, then snorted. "What would you like to know?"

"Won't you sit down while we talk?" I gestured towards the sun-lit chairs.

"Unfortunately, I don't have the time. I've got just enough, standing here, to answer your questions. So please, ask away, but I will not be moving." He planted his feet in the ground, a slight smirk on his face. I took a sip of my coffee, thinking about what to ask.

"Very well then. Arthur, where are you from?"

"Boston." He said this like it was amusing.

Interesting. He had no hint of a Boston accent. In fact, he hardly had an accent at all. If anything, he spoke like an educated man, words clear and his grammar always proper.

"Really?" I asked, a faint hint of disbelief in my voice.

"I was born in Lexington, actually." He paused for a moment. "I moved to Boston as a youth."

It was odd that he didn't see himself as a youth, because he clearly was. Still, I could detect no hint of deception in his voice.

“Arthur,” I asked, confused, “How old are you?”

This question took him quite a bit longer to answer. As he was thinking, for reasons I could then only imagine, a small smile broke out on his face. It looked like he was trying to stop himself from laughing.

“Young.” Arthur looked up at me with his great eyes, voice dripping with out-of-place sarcasm. I was bewildered. To me, it almost seemed that Arthur was a man trapped in this boy’s body, his mannerisms and knowledge not befitting a face so youthful. Yet, surely, such a thing should be impossible. Being around Arthur felt like standing on the edge of a cliff; with one wrong question I might learn something I was not meant to hear, and, with that, I would fall and join him in an abyss. But, despite the danger, I had no intentions of avoiding him. If anything, his oddness only made me like him more.

The unusual friendship Arthur and I shared started with just a brief meeting each morning when he’d bring up my coffee, but, soon, I was finding excuses to see him whenever possible. We were stuck in a peculiar sort of shadow dance, where I would ask him a question and he would dodge the answer, so I’d probe deeper in the hopes of finding the truth, but none would ever be found. No matter how little I learned from him, though, even the smallest crumbs of information were intriguing. And, to add another level of reason for my attachment to him, my feelings for Arthur were growing far stronger than I’d anticipated. To put it simply: although I hardly knew it for myself, I was beginning to love him. That, I think, is what doomed me.

During those first few months, despite his secrecy, I learned a few important details about Arthur. Through our conversations, his behavior, and the occasional drop of information, I managed to glean the following: firstly, Arthur, although from a supposed poor background, was highly educated. He had read almost every book on my shelf, was widely informed about science and medicine, and sometimes spoke about history as though he’d been there himself (which, to a certain extent, was true).

Secondly, although he never fully admitted it, he seemed to enjoy my company just as much as I did his. He didn’t attempt to avoid me, and, despite his busy schedule, always had the time to talk. At first, I was worried that Arthur had been forsaking his duties around the household to clear space for our conversations, but I did not hear any complaints against him the entire time he was working there, and, after a while, I just assumed that he was doing what

was required. Still, I was confused as to why he'd be so invested in our usually one-sided sessions of questioning. Perhaps he too was lonely.

Thirdly, Arthur, and this I gathered purely from watching him in our time together, would not set foot in sunlight. Very carefully, he would avoid open windows, stepping around bright patches as inconspicuously as he could. I have always been rather perceptive, though, and caught him doing this several times. Whenever he got too close to a sunny spot, a look of fear flashed across his face. Another strange thing, too, was his complexion. On some days, it seemed fine, his rosy cheeks standing out against his alabaster skin. However, on others, he looked pallid, face almost gray. There were several times I seriously thought Arthur was ill, but, within a short time, he always went back to normal, an odd cycle beginning anew.

I tried for as long as I could to avoid inquiring about these matters, fearing that it might fracture our friendship. Yet, as I grew increasingly attracted to him, I found it harder to resist. I should have grown wary of him, should have stopped seeing him, but I needed to know. Foolish. As they say, curiosity killed the cat, and I was a dead man walking.

It was mid-December when I finally confronted him. That night, when I'd invited Arthur up to my room, it had been snowing lightly. We sat across from each other; I sipped a hot chocolate, he declined to take a beverage. Earlier that day, I had decided to inquire about his strange habits. Now, as we made small talk, I steeled myself to ask the questions, waiting for the opportune moment. As Arthur paused to look out the window, I finally brought up the subject.

"I-I hope you don't mind me asking, but why is it that you avoid sunlight?"

He stared at me for a moment, his face briefly hardening before going soft. "Whatever do you mean, Daniel? I do no such thing."

"No!" I said, my voice perhaps a tad too aggressive, "I've seen you. Whenever the sun is out, you stay away from it as if you were in danger! You take great caution around windows, and I've not once seen you outside on a sunny day?"

He frowned. I doubted that he liked where this conversation was going.

"And," I continued, "that's not the only odd thing I've noticed. Your skin... it changes. Sometimes, it's so gray that it's practically skeletal! Who...what are you?"

Arthur smiled mischievously. "I could be a lot of things, many of them mundane. Who knows, perhaps I'm just sensitive to sunlight. Look at me, I'm very pale. Maybe I burn easily." He chuckled. "I can give you a thousand different answers, Daniel. I've been asked this question many times before, I know what people will believe. And yet, perhaps this once, I might just give you the truth. After all, you won't be satisfied with anything but."

"However, before I tell you anything, there is something that I first must know. Why, Daniel, do you care so much? Surely there's a reason you're so curious, a driving force behind all of your ceaseless questions. What is it?"

My heart pounded in my chest. To admit my motivation would quite possibly spell the end of our friendship. Yet I wanted to know, needed to know, the things Arthur had to hide. I took a deep breath, forcing myself to say the words. "In recent weeks, despite my better judgment, I seem to have found myself..." I paused for a moment, trying to regain my composure, "...falling in love with, as I'd assume you can imagine, you."

Arthur laughed softly, like I'd said something funny. I felt my heart drop. This was it for us, surely. However, when he saw my distressed face, his features became more serious and he smiled at me.

"Arthur—" I began, before he interrupted me.

"Firstly," he said, "My name isn't actually Arthur. It's Emil, Emil Chamberlain. I apologize for not telling you sooner, but I'm afraid I have my reasons for secrecy." I stared at him suspiciously. Why would he lie about that?

"Second," he continued, "I'll admit that you're hardly the first to say that to me. Over the years, many people have found me attractive. I seem to have a certain...effect on others. I tend to draw them in, like a magnet." I could see why. The perfection of his face was hard to ignore, with his high cheekbones and delicate features.

"Usually," he continued, "I ignore these advances. I could honestly care less about most people. And yet, Daniel, you seemed to have warmed my cold little heart. The only reason I'm willing to reveal anything to you is because I'm rather fond of you as well. You're so lost, so painfully innocent."

Arthur—no, Emil reached out and placed his hand on top of the one I wasn't using to hold my mug. It was the first time he'd ever touched me, and his hand felt like ice upon my skin. "Now, because I'm rather concerned about your well-being, I'm going to warn you one final time. The things I am about to tell you are not to be taken lightly. This knowledge may very well put your life in

danger, however, you will, under no circumstances, ever repeat what I say to anybody else. Understand?”

“I suppose,” I replied, somewhat confused. Emil stood up, glancing around the room. After a moment of thinking, he walked over to the bookshelf and pulled down one particular volume. It was a novel that had only come out earlier that year, one that I’d bought at his recommendation. The title was short and simple: *Dracula*.

“You’ve read this, right?” he asked softly, almost abashedly. I had, though, in all honesty, I hadn’t particularly enjoyed it. At the time, I thought stories about fictional monsters were somewhat fanciful, almost whimsical in comparison to the real crimes of men. Still, I nodded. In my mind, the pieces were beginning to fall into place.

“Good, good. Then you know, I’m sure, about the creatures this book describes. Feral beasts who roam the night, drinking the blood of mortals. Powerful, deadly, but, above all else, evil. Vampires.” He smiled at me nervously. “Now, I’m not going to pretend that you shouldn’t be scared right now. But please, don’t...don’t just run away.” He reached for my hand again, but I pulled mine away, disturbed. Was he joking? Lying? Insane? In light of all this, my earlier confession of love seemed insignificant. I stood up and headed for the door, but, to my alarm, when I turned around, Emil was already there.

“You said you wanted to know!” he shouted, sounding younger than he ever had before. “You asked for the truth and I provided. Please, I’ll answer all of your questions, just don’t leave.”

I froze, completely unsure of what to do. “What does all this mean?” I asked, fear evident in my voice. “This should be impossible, really. Please just tell me I’m having a nightmare.”

He frowned, then blurted, “I’m real!”

“How is this possible?”

“Listen, Daniel, you have to trust me. There are things in this world that humans don’t know about. I’m unsure how exactly we came to be, but we do exist, and I need to be sure you won’t tell anyone.”

“Things like vampires?” I pointed towards the copy of *Dracula* he was still holding.

“Yes,” Emil nodded. Even though I’d just learned he was a monster, he still appeared sweet and innocent as always. Only now, his manner was serious, and he seemed worried.

“Why are you telling me this?” I demanded, confused and afraid. “I thought you said you cared about me.”

“You wanted to know! You practically begged me to tell you the truth! Please, Daniel, I’m not going to hurt you, just let me explain.”

I thought it over. If he wanted to bite me or kill me or do whatever it was he did to me, he probably would have done so already. This was hardly our first time in private, yet I’d never felt threatened before. “Fine, but don’t do anything violent!”

“Thank you.” Emil smiled at me, showing me his teeth for the first time. I noticed that his canines were long, sharp, perfect for tearing through flesh. A shiver went down my spine. He took a step closer, and it took a great deal of effort to not back away. To think that, only minutes ago, I’d been madly in love with this beast.

“I want you to believe that this isn’t a life I have chosen for myself.” Though he tried to remain cheerful, Emil’s face was strained, and I could tell he was nervous. “I’ve just been handed these cards, and I’m trying to play them the best I can. Now, Daniel, what would you like to know?”

I searched my mind for a question, then asked hastily: “What does it mean to be a vampire?”

He smiled. “Well, for one thing, it means that I can’t stand in the sun. It would burn me alive. Another is, as I’m sure you’re aware, I have to drink blood to survive. I can’t live without it. First I get all pasty and gray, and then everything starts to hurt.”

“Human blood?” I asked softly, fearing for my life.

He nodded his head. “Usually. But, don’t misunderstand me, I don’t kill people. Many of my kind do, without any remorse at all. However, I only take a small amount of blood from my victims, one that won’t even be missed. I’m harmless, really.” Once again he smiled, and once again his sharp teeth caught my eye. I swayed unsteadily on my feet; I thought I might faint.

Sensing my discomfort, Emil grabbed my arm and started pulling me back towards the chairs. His strength was surprising. “You should probably sit down, Daniel.” Although his cold skin was uncomfortable against mine, I wasn’t going to protest; he was right. My entire worldview had just been upturned.

After I was seated, he took back the seat across from me. I stared into his eyes, trying to figure out how I’d ever come to like him. “Who are you, Emil?”

He sighed. “I’m no one, really. Just a boy who died a long time ago.”

“You died?” My voice was practically a shout.

“Shhh! Remember, this conversation is private. We can’t have others overhear us.” He took a deep breath. “But yes, Daniel, for one to become a vampire, they must first die.”

“How did you die?” This time, I barely spoke above a whisper.

“That’s not a story you must know yet.”

“Oh.”

“Is there anything else you’d like to discuss?” Emil asked, looking oddly hopeful.

“How many other vampires are out there?”

He smiled, then chuckled. “Oh, not many. In my time, I’ve seen possibly a hundred, though I’ve only actually met around twenty. When we occasionally pass by each other, it’s quite rare for us to stop and talk. And, I should not forget to mention, my views conflict with many of the others.”

“How so?” I was intrigued by his descriptions of this solitary species.

“Well,” he began softly, “Most vampires are perfectly fine with taking human life. Like I said before, they do so unapologetically, believing it’s just their nature. However, I don’t think that’s true. We were all, at some point, humans as well. There are a few others who agree with me, but, for the most part, I’m somewhat of a radical thinker amongst my kind. There are also other reasons, but I believe that it would take someone more knowledgeable than you to really understand them.” Even now he was holding things back, as usual.

He sighed. “Daniel, if I may ask, before all this, why do you think you fell in love with me?”

I didn’t really know how to respond. “Well,” I began, voice unsteady, “Being around you made me feel like I was someone else, someone who didn’t have to impress his family, someone who didn’t do the same things every day. I felt free.”

“Did you also think I was beautiful?”

“Why yes, of course. You’re one of the loveliest things I’ve ever laid eyes on.”

He smiled at me. At that moment, I felt like I was once again talking to my old friend Arthur. “I wish I could believe it. In my mind, it’s impossible for someone like me, who has hurt so many others just to survive, to be anything more than hideous.”

“Don’t jest with me, Emil. Surely you can’t look at yourself and see a face anything less than alluring.”

He laughed. “I wish it was that easy. Here, come with me, I’d like to show you something.” He rose, walked over to a small mirror mounted on a wall nearby. I followed him, and took my place beside him. “Look,” Emil said, pointing at the glass. I did as he asked.

What I saw in the mirror defied all logic. My own reflection was there, of course, a tall, square-faced young man with dark hair, dark eyes, and such nearsightedness that he was required at all times to wear glasses (even to this day). And that was all I saw. Next to me, where Emil’s reflection should have been, was...nothing. I glanced over to him, making sure he was still there. He hadn’t moved.

Emil smiled bitterly. “Vampires don’t have reflections. We can’t see ourselves in mirrors, and we don’t appear in photographs. It’s been a long time since I’ve seen myself, I honestly have no idea what I look like.” He reached out and stroked the mirror’s surface, his face becoming distant and sad. Suddenly, I felt bad for him, this creature blessed with absolute beauty, yet cursed to never know it. I placed my hand upon his shoulder, trying to comfort him the best I could.

“Well, if you’d like, I could be your mirror.”

Emil laughed. “You amuse me, Daniel. Fine, go ahead.”

I stared at him for a moment, taking in the details of his face. “Your eyes are like emeralds resting on a bed of the finest tropical foliage, your skin, the marble the Greeks used to build statues of their gods, and your features are as beautiful as a blossoming white rosebush.” The humor in my voice was apparent, and he grinned at me, my tenuous feeling of normalcy broken when I saw his teeth again. And just like a rosebush, I added in my head, you too have your thorns.

“You’re a very nice mirror,” Emil said sweetly. He moved closer to me, placing his hand over mine. This was a dangerous situation, I knew that. Yet, despite all his lies, despite the fact that he was a monster, I made no effort to back away. Emil looked up at me, his expression kind, genuine. “You know, Daniel, I love you too.” He reached for my face, I leant down to meet him, and then, softly, he pressed his lips against mine.

I was lost in a daze the rest of the night. Although he departed soon after, the feeling of the kiss lingered for long after he was gone.

Time went by in a blur. We were young (or I was, at least), in love, and everything felt right. To the rest of the world, he was just Arthur, a simple serving boy, dutiful and unremarkable. To me, though, he was Emil, beautiful, sweet, and always exciting. No one else knew about us, of course, but even in secret, we flourished.

Towards the start, I still remained rather restrained around him. I'd never been in a relationship before, and although I greatly liked Emil, I found myself growing rather shy whenever the topic of romance came up in a conversation. Soon, though, we were practically inseparable. Whenever we were alone, we showed great affection for each other, and I quickly came to ignore the fact that he wasn't human. Although it was never fully forgotten, Emil had shown me greater kindness and love than anyone else ever had, and it was easy to look past his flaws.

We spent a great deal of time together, most of it in the late hours of night when we were likely the only two awake in the house. Vampires were very adept at climbing, it seemed, so I left my window unlocked after the sun went down. Most evenings, he entered my room through it, and we often spent hours talking before I fell asleep still holding him in my arms. Sometimes, he told me stories from his life, about how he'd once joined a circus in France as an acrobat, or the times he'd walked through the rainforests of South America. It was fascinating, each and every word. Other times, I let Emil read my stories. He provided strong, but fair, criticism, often curious about the thought processes behind them.

On some occasions, we even did things that were a great deal riskier. A few times, we snuck downstairs to the parlor after everyone else had fallen asleep. There, Emil sat at the grand piano and played some songs I knew and many more I didn't. He was greatly proficient with the instrument, no doubt the result of a longer-than-human lifespan spent practicing. Eventually, our nighttime escapades started a rumor that the house was haunted, however, no ghostly pianist was ever found.

Although Emil and I enjoyed each other's company a great deal, there were still things he wouldn't speak to me about, the most important of these being the story of his death. For a while, I had practically begged him to tell it to me, but each and every time I did he staunchly refused. I didn't understand why he was so unwilling; surely it wasn't that upsetting for him. However, the dismissal

of my questions became so guaranteed that I eventually stopped asking. It was not worth risking our relationship.

In the end, though, Emil did divulge how he came to be. It was a night sometime in April, the long winter finally surrendering to spring. We shared one of my large leather chairs, slightly uncomfortable but glad for the closeness. Emil was curled up against me, cold body clinging to mine for warmth, with a sketchbook on his lap and a pencil in hand. He was drawing something absentmindedly. I looked over his shoulder and noticed with little surprise that his subject was me.

It was Emil who finally broke the silence. “Danny,” he began, using the nickname he’d recently grown to favor, “I want to tell you a story.”

“What sort of story?” I smiled at him, expecting to see him return it. Instead, he looked uncertain.

“My story. The one I didn’t want you to hear before.”

“Ah. Why share it now?” He stared off into the distance, as though he was already lost in the past. I pulled him tighter to me.

“Now that you’re getting attached to me, I think it’s important that I tell it before you go around making any big declarations.”

“What...declarations?” For whatever reason, he ignored my question.

“Shall I begin?” he asked, softly yet impatiently. I nodded my head. In response, Emil stood up and moved to the seat facing me. I leaned in towards him, curiosity filling my mind. What would he have to say?

“I remember little from my human life,” he began, speaking slowly and heavily, “Only hazy, dream-like images and faint snatches of almost-forgotten words. I feel so detached from them that it’s as though these memories belonged to someone else. There is one part, though, that I can recall clearly: the very end.” Emil sighed. “The night that I died...”

The night that Emil had died, he had been far too young. It was 1741, back before the country he now lived in had even existed. The middle of February, just when one thinks the snow holding the world hostage will melt, only to awake one morning to more. A dreary time indeed.

Emil had been sixteen, the youngest of four sons. His father had once been a cooper (“A barrel maker,” Emil explained quietly) but, after his wife’s death six

years earlier, he'd quit his job and turned to the bottle. The family lived in poverty, the five of them all sharing a room that could barely hold them.

Misery was everywhere in those days, and Emil's life was no exception. Despite his age, his body had been slow to mature, leaving him with a small frame, high voice, and youthful appearance. Being the weakest, most defenseless member of his family, Emil was the one who got picked on. Whether it was his brothers stealing from him and calling him names, to his father refusing to look at him, claiming he appeared too much like his mother. He was often beaten as well, usually just for making small mistakes. Yet although Emil felt as if he were trapped in a cage, dreams can travel far beyond the walls of a cell. It was only a matter of time before he would make his come true.

They weren't the grand dreams of fame and fortune that many had, rather the smaller, more realistic goals of freedom and stability. Emil often fantasized about running off to Boston, finding an apprenticeship somewhere, making a life for himself. It would be hard work, he knew, but it would all pay off in the end. Maybe someday he'd fall in love, have a family of his own. He had a future out there, and all that it would take to find it was courage.

On the cold night Emil finally decided to execute his plan, he'd never felt so alive. After everyone else had fallen asleep, he dressed himself, gathered up his few worldly possessions, and stole a small amount of money from his father's coffer. Then, he quietly stepped out the door. The night air was chilling, but Emil was so excited that he could barely feel it.

He spent much of the next day walking, the sky above clear and bright, and the road beneath quite long. It was about a ten mile walk from Lexington to Boston, and his physical fitness had never been great. Emil took many breaks over the course of the journey, often sitting by the side of the road and watching clouds pass overhead. He had no idea that this was the last time he'd ever see the sun.

When Emil arrived in the city, it was nearing nightfall. His first order of business was to find somewhere to spend the night. Although he was impatient, he knew that the job-hunting would have to wait until morning. Still, his hopes were high and he felt better than he had in years. As Emil wandered the streets in search of a room, he hummed softly to himself, the joy on his boyish face evident to all who saw him.

That happiness was shattered when he felt someone grab his arm. Emil turned around in terror to see a grizzled looking man gripping his forearm tightly. He reeked of alcohol.

“Hand over your money, boy.” Emil tried to free himself from the man’s grasp, not wanting to lose the little he had. He’d need it to start his new life. However, his attempts were unsuccessful.

“Sir, please. I don’t have any!” The man’s hold grew tighter.

“Liar!,” he roared. The man reached into his pocket. Emil turned away, not wanting to see the object. “Give it up, lad!”

Emil froze. He wanted to comply, but his body had locked up and didn’t let him move. The man began to drag him into a nearby alleyway, Emil could do little to resist. In a matter of moments, he was pinned against a wall, begging and pleading with this man for his life. However, his words meant nothing. The man was either too drunk or too cruel to listen.

Something sharp and cold plunged into Emil’s stomach. Pain coursed through his body. He couldn’t hear himself screaming, but he knew he was. Just when he thought it was all over, he felt the blade enter his body again. The thief stabbed him several more times. Finally, after what felt like an eternity, he stepped away. Emil saw the knife, coated in blood, and collapsed to the ground. He knew he would not get up again.

Emil was dying, yet, somehow, he was still aware of his surroundings. It was very strange. He could see the bricks on the wall in front of him, and the night sky above. Everything had taken on a detached feeling, and he found himself wondering if his family was sad that he’d left. He doubted they were.

He noticed it, too, when a very pale man entered the alleyway. He paused for only a moment when he saw Emil on the ground, before walking over to him, stepping through the spilt blood as though it was just a puddle. Although the pale man was very handsome, Emil noted, his face looked both cold and inhuman. It was simply too perfect to be real. The man knelt down. His eyes were a very dark color that reminded Emil of red wine, or, he noted absentmindedly, fresh blood.

“You are lost, child.” His voice was very soft. “I can help you find your way, if you’d like. It would be a sad thing for you to die so young. Come with me, and you can live forever.”

Emil nodded his head weakly. He could feel death now, only moments away. The world seemed to be growing darker. He didn't know what this stranger was promising, but certainly it would be better than dying here, before his life had really begun.

The stranger leaned towards him, and Emil felt a sudden pain on his neck. This one, though, was over very quickly. He then found himself feeling, of all things, blissful. ("For whatever reason," Emil mentioned, "we have a chemical in our saliva that induces feelings of joy." He shrugged his shoulders. "Perhaps it's to ensure our victims won't try to escape.") If this was to be his last moment in life, he would go to his grave contentedly.

The darkness hanging over the world grew stronger, and he knew his life was hanging on by a thread. Emil saw the pale man draw away. He held his wrist up to his mouth and appeared to...bite it?

The stranger put his arm up to Emil's face. Blood flowed freely from a wound there, dripping onto him and finding its way uncomfortably into his eyes. If these were going to be his last moments on earth, he wanted to be able to see what was happening, to gaze at the stars one last time. Emil opened his mouth to protest when a drop of it hit his tongue.

It felt like fire. His body was seized by a burning warmth, and immediately knew he needed more. A newfound strength helped him grab the stranger's arm and pull it towards his lips. There, Emil drank and drank and drank, any disgust at the thought of consuming blood erased by a mindless haze that came over him. He heard the pale man chuckle, seemingly amused by his behavior.

Finally, after Emil couldn't drink any more, he released his grip on the man's arm. He felt full, utterly and completely, as though his body had been stuffed with the sensation of sunshine against skin and the feeling one gets after eating a delicious soup. He'd never before been so aware, so strong. The pale man stood over him, his flaxen hair and milky skin giving him a ghostly appearance. Emil intended to spring to his feet and embrace this odd stranger, thanking him for saving his life. He didn't get the chance; before he could even move, the darkness came back, much stronger than before, and this time it consumed him.

When Emil next awoke, he found himself lying in a bed in the finest room he'd ever set foot in. The walls were covered with beautiful red paper, and the mattress he laid on was soft and comfortable, unlike any he'd ever slept on

before. Although he could tell the room was dark, his eyes didn't mind it at all. Instead, it appeared bright as day, the edges of his vision dancing with new and unnamable colors.

Turning to admire his surroundings, Emil noticed that the pale man sat in a chair facing his bed. His clothes were fine, and, looking down at himself, Emil noticed that his were too.

"Forgive me," the pale man said, his voice carrying the same softness as before, "I didn't want you to spend three days covered in your own dried blood." Three days? Had it only been three days? Remembering what happened, Emil lifted his shirt to look at the places he'd been stabbed. His skin was smooth, flawless, without so much as a scar.

"Yes, thank goodness those healed." The pale man chuckled. "It would have been quite inconvenient if they hadn't."

Emil looked up at him, uneasy. "I was going to die. How is this possible?"

The pale man smiled, "Dear, you are dead."

Emil stared at him, eyes wide in shock. The pale man just laughed, and, very gently, explained what it meant to be a vampire. He told him that the sun would forever be his enemy, that for the rest of his life, his only sustenance would be the blood of mortals. Yet, Emil would grow to have great powers, and, from then on, he would not age, possibly living for a thousand years. "The night stretches endlessly before you," the pale man said, "and never will you have to fear anything again."

From then on, Emil's life seemed a dream. The pale man, who he learned did not have a name and was simply called "Gwaed," a foreign word for blood ("I believe it's Welsh," Emil noted), seemed intent on raising him as his own. Emil was allowed to live in his home, which was lavish, finely decorated. He was given new clothes, too, and they were all luxurious, in bright colors and made from expensive fabrics. To think that only recently he lived in poverty. Now, he lived like a prince.

However, not everything about his new existence was joyous: he was constantly being reminded of the strange creature he'd become. Emil's first few days as an undead were painful. First, his body sought to rid itself of everything that had been inside it when he died, and when that was finally done, a deep aching set within his limbs. Try as he might, nothing he did could get rid of it, and, after a few nights of almost unbearable pain, he told Gwaed what he felt.

The older vampire laughed. “You’re hungry, my dear. Although your stomach no longer craves for anything, your very veins now thirst for the one thing that will bring them nourishment.”

The next evening, as the sun was just beginning to set over the horizon, Gwaed brought Emil to a small room towards the back of their home. The first thing he smelled was alcohol, then, beneath it, a warm, savory scent that he found appealing. When Gwaed opened the door, on the floor of the room, passed out drunk, lay a familiar looking man.

“I tracked him down for you, Emil. His scent was not hard at all to find. Enjoy yourself, child.”

The smell in the air had Emil foaming at the mouth. He knew what he meant to do, and he had no intention of stopping it. He felt Gwaed hand him something. Looking down at it, he noticed it was a small knife, blade still shining even in the dim lighting. In moments, he was on the man, slitting his throat and filling his body with blood. Too soon, though, he heard the man’s heart stop, and, suddenly, what entered his mouth tasted sour, vile.

“Isn’t it wonderful?” Gwaed asked softly. “Do be careful, though, they taste quite bad when they die.”

Emil looked down at the corpse by his feet. With a sickening feeling, he realized that he was a killer. Even though he supposed that it might be seen as justified by some, he knew that the blood he’d spilt today would never wash off his hands. Still, from his veins came the same warm sensation he’d had when Gwaed first transformed him, and that made it worth it. Almost. Though Emil’s body had died several days before, it was only then, when he’d taken his first life, that his humanity truly departed. Later that night, just before dawn, Emil cried to himself. He was not at all surprised to see that his tears were tinted slightly red, like they’d been stained by blood.

The next few months were as life-changing as they were exciting. Although Emil thought he would never get over his reluctance to take human lives, over the course of time, he found it became easier. Once he had claimed so many victims that their faces no longer stuck out in his mind, it became easier to ignore the guilt they caused.

Emil also found himself beginning to love Gwaed, whom he often thought of as a father, and felt a great deal of gratitude towards him. He learned that his new guardian was ancient, and, apparently, highly renowned amongst their

kind. Gwaed had great powers; the most notable being the ability to trade his body for that of one of his victim's. It was quite a surprise, the first time Emil came home to see his guardian's familiar face replaced by one that was entirely different. However, this was a relatively frequent occurrence, and Gwaed's appearance continued to change every few months, seemingly whenever a new form caught his fancy. It was very flattering for Emil to know that he was the only other vampire this charming, primeval creature had ever made. Although much of his past was still a mystery, secretive or not, Gwaed was still more of a parent than his own had ever been.

During this time, the changes weren't only mental; Emil underwent several physical transformations as well. Sometimes, when Gwaed opened his mouth to speak, Emil noticed his sharp, pointed fangs. At first, he was worried by the fact that he didn't have these himself. However, over the course of the next few months, they appeared, just like Gwaed had promised. Within a year, he was capable of using them to tear into his victims' flesh, and no longer needed to rely on a knife.

Another thing was the way his skin slowly grew paler from its lack of exposure to the sun. Soon, its shade nearly matched Gwaed's, and he suspected that he now looked quite spectral himself. However, he wouldn't get the chance to see. Although his home had no mirrors, the few times he got a chance to see his reflection, he noticed it was growing fainter. Finally, there came a night, about three months after he was transformed, when Emil stopped to look at himself in a puddle and saw no trace of his figure. Gwaed, sensing his charge's distress, wrapped an arm around him and led him away.

"It happens to all of us, Emil."

Even so, he felt a hollow void grow inside him at the fact that he'd never see his own face again.

Life as a vampire was both thrilling and boring, completely different from the one that had come before, and, yet, somehow familiar. Although it was rather hectic at first, Emil eventually found himself following a routine. Each night, he awoke just when the sky started to turn black. Sometimes, he'd sit outside with Gwaed and watch the last traces of the sun set, the faint orange glow too dim to be a threat.

With the opportunities that Gwaed's wealth provided, Emil became absorbed in several new hobbies. He found himself reading copious amounts of books, something he'd never had time for before. He learned to play the piano, a

passion that he would retain forever. He even discovered that he had quite a talent for painting, and spent some nights trying to capture every detail of interesting landscapes. Of course, several times a week, Gwaed and Emil still went out to hunt, sometimes claiming several lives over the course of just a few hours. However, within less than a decade, Emil no longer felt any trace of remorse for these souls. So what if they had to die? It should be an honor to be sacrificed for the sake of something as majestic and powerful as a vampire. The years went by and life went on, and everything began to take on the semblance of normalcy.

Of course, there were occasional interruptions. A few times per month, Emil and Gwaed would attend the parties thrown by Boston's wealthiest. There, in the poorly-lit and crowded rooms, they nearly passed for human. As the son of the mysterious nobleman who only appeared after nightfall, Emil was often the center of attention. At first, he shied away from other's glances, however, in time, he grew to embrace them, often using personal charm to secure his next meal. In those days, he quickly learned how to hide a body.

And there were different kinds of parties, too, thrown by Gwaed himself. At these, the guests were often few, and all of them had the same pale faces as their own. These events were Emil's first exposure to his own kind. Although he tried to be friendly with them, the others did not reciprocate. They were apprehensive, some downright rude. He didn't fully understand the reason, but, often, when he walked into the gatherings, they would whisper to each other, "So young," being their usual remark.

Despite the killing and the occasional disrespect, though, Emil was content with his life. Sometimes he felt lonely; unable to have human friends, Gwaed was often his sole companion. Still, the older vampire was always willing to spend time with him, and he made up for Emil's difficulties the best he could. As father and son, they were happy for twenty-five years, rarely fighting or even having disagreements. That was, until—

"Until I fell in love," Emil sighed, looking reluctant to continue. He slumped down in his chair, something clearly bothering him. I went over to him and ran my fingers through his hair. He looked up at me, his eyes sad, distant.

"You can stop now, if you'd like. I think you've shared enough."

"No! I need to keep going." He sounded almost desperate.

“If that’s what you desire, then go ahead.” I leaned down and kissed his forehead softly. He grabbed my hand and held it against his own. Mine looked very large next to his.

Emil took a deep breath. “His name was Jeremiah Watkins. At the time, his father was a well-known public official in Boston. We met at one of the parties Gwaed and I often went to. He was seventeen, then.”

“Jerri was a very sociable person, and was the first since my transformation to make an effort to become my friend. Although vampires are beautiful, Danny, as you know for yourself, many find us unsettling and make an effort to avoid us once they’ve gotten over the initial allure of our appearance. But not him.” Emil smiled sadly to himself, thinking of his former lover. His grip tightened on my hand.

“We quickly became close companions, and, at some point, our relationship evolved into romance. Even though I knew it would be disastrous if we were discovered, I didn’t care. At that point, I felt alone. Without Jeremiah, I had no one besides Gwaed. I needed him.”

“Not dissimilar to you and I, we met up in secret. However, unlike you, my dear, he had no idea what I really was. I knew he had his suspicions about my nature, but he was too kind to bring them up. Even so, we got along well; things were going wonderfully. Although I knew we had no real future together, I hoped that we’d have at least a few years to share. I thought we were being careful. Surely, no one would suspect anything.”

“One night, though, perhaps only because of bad luck, Gwaed caught us together. He screamed at Jerri, threatened to expose him, to destroy his life, if he ever caught him near me again. Terrified, he left, leaving me alone to deal with Gwaed’s fury. I don’t blame him. While Jerri just got a shouting-at, I spent two weeks locked in the small room where we sometimes kept our victims. Though most of our house was simply made of wood, this area had been converted into a sort of prison, and the walls were lined with stone that I, as a young and relatively weak vampire, couldn’t destroy. When he finally released me, my whole body was in agonizing pain. That was the longest I’d ever been without blood, and I could barely move.”

“After that, my relationship with Gwaed was never the same. He no longer trusted me, and I no longer enjoyed being near him. I began to realize the truth of the way he treated me. Even after twenty-five years together, he wanted me to act like an adolescent. Although, yes, my body does look rather young, my

mind is much more mature than my appearance lets on. He should have known this, Gwaed, being a vampire himself. Yet he gave me very little freedom and kept me isolated from the world. Perhaps he was afraid that I'd leave him if I learned that there were better things out there than him. I suppose he was right."

"Just a few months after the incident, I left without leaving so much as a note. We have seen each other several times in the century since, but he still treats me in that same childish way, no matter how old I get. Sometimes, when something goes wrong in my life, I'll run back to him, let him pamper me for a few months while I pull things together. It's nice to know, at least, that there's someone out there who will always care about me, even if he shows his affection in a somewhat twisted way. Now that I have you, though, I doubt I'll be needing him for a while." He smiled at me.

"As for Jeremiah, I still managed to see him a few times after. Once to apologize, and then a couple short visits throughout his life to see how things were going. For a while, he was greatly unhappy, ended up becoming an alcoholic. However, my Jerri managed to turn things around. He got married, had a family. Everything seemed to be well," Emil sighed sadly, as though something terrible that he refused to mention had happened.

"Although our relationship ended rather abruptly, being with him changed me forever. It made me remember how it felt to be human. Not long after we parted, I made the decision to never take another mortal life, unless they were someone I deemed to be a danger to others."

"I know, Danny, that I messed things up with Jerri. Don't worry, though, I won't make the same mistakes with you." He got up from his seat and hugged me, wrapping his body around mine. "I promise." I looked into his eyes and smiled.

"I believe you."

He returned my stare as though he was still lost in the past. I only noticed then that he was crying, his red-tinted tears staining his cheeks.

Over the next few weeks, an idea began to form in my mind based on the story that Emil had told me. I knew, deep in my heart, that we couldn't keep up our little charade forever. It was only a matter of time until someone found us out, and I doubted they'd be as lenient with me as Gwaed was with Jeremiah.

I began to plan, not informing Emil of my intentions until the day I would enact them. First, I withdrew money from the bank, as much as I could without attracting suspicion. Then, I packed a bag, picking out clothes that wouldn't draw attention, folding them neatly beside the manuscripts of my stories. I knew it would be hard to leave everything behind, but there was an entire world to see out there, and I had finally found someone to share it with.

The night I planned on escaping came, a warm, clear Tuesday. As usual, Emil entered the room through my window as soon as I retired for the evening. He embraced me and went to lie on my bed. We talked for a while whilst I remained in my chair, but I didn't particularly enjoy trying to speak to him from across the room. Eventually, I gave up, and went to lay down beside him.

"Emil, there's something I would ask of you."

He looked at me, a twinkle in his eyes. "Of course, Danny. Whatever might it be?"

I exhaled deeply before replying. "This won't work forever. It would only take one small mistake for someone to find out what we've been up to. I hate to say this, but I think we need to run away."

He looked at me, obviously concerned. "We? Please, you're being foolish. If you really think that this is such a big problem, then I'll go. I don't want you throwing away your life for me."

I pulled him closer to me. "Emil, I've thought this over a lot. It hasn't been easy to decide, but I want to be with you. It will be far safer if we continue our lives somewhere out of view of the prying eyes of my family. We don't even have to go far. In fact, it will probably be fine if we stay in the city. What do you say?"

"Oh, Danny," he sighed, "If this is really what you want, I have a residence that's nearby. I suppose we can live there until we figure things out. Dare I ask, though, when are you planning on leaving?"

I gave him a mischievous look. "Tonight."

Emil began to protest, but I silenced him before he did. After several minutes of persuasion, he relented. Although he still shook his head as he said it, he agreed to my plan. That very night, when we were sure nobody else was awake, we snuck downstairs and out one of the side doors. It took every ounce of effort not to cry out in joy as I left. For the first time in my life, I was free.

Two

Manhattan, New York

February, 1901

Being around Emil felt like sticking one toe into an endless abyss. Through him, I was able to learn of a world that I'd been unaware of my entire life. The problem, though, was that I was no longer satisfied with just looking at that world. I wanted to jump in alongside him and become a part of it.

Almost two years had passed since the fateful night I ran away with him. From my house, we'd gone to Emil's home in Manhattan. Despite it only being a few miles away, it felt like a different planet. Unlike the peaceful serenity in which I'd grown up, Emil's neighborhood was rough, dangerous. It was home to many desperate people, and was often rife with theft and violence. Still, as Emil led me towards the old brick building that housed his apartment, the streets were empty, as though everyone had fled from his presence.

When we arrived, I was surprised to see that, despite the surrounding area's treachery, Emil's residence was rather homely. The decor, though simple, was well made, and I could tell that many of the furnishings were antique. He had put very heavy curtains over the windows to keep out sunlight, and, in a corner, sat a small piano. I rather liked the place, and I found myself looking forward to living there with him.

"For all intents and purposes," Emil said as we entered his home, "You're my cousin who recently lost his house to a fire, and you are staying with me until you can afford a home of your own."

I nodded my head. "Understood."

He grinned at me. "Don't forget."

That night, and for many nights after, we slept pressed uncomfortably close together on Emil's small bed. The next morning, when I awoke, he was still sleeping. I went into the kitchen to make myself breakfast, or, at the very least, a coffee, and found that all of the cabinets were empty. I felt slightly foolish for forgetting that Emil only drank blood. Making a mental note to buy food, I set out for the day, no longer Daniel Mikalisk, my wealthy family's waste of a son. Today, I was Danny, a passerby, a stranger. I was nobody at all, and that meant I was free to be whoever.

For a time, our relationship continued much as it had before I'd left my home. Despite our differences, we understood each other in a way I'd once thought impossible. Our lives connected effortlessly, as though we were two halves of a whole, and seldom did we ever have friction between us. My love for Emil was so great that I found the inspiration to begin writing my first full-length novel, a simple but heartfelt love story, the characters' pasts and personalities much like our own. I was very proud of my work, and Emil, an even greater connoisseur of literature than myself, admitted that he rather enjoyed reading it.

However, starting about a year after I went to live with him, I felt a rift form between me and Emil. It wasn't the fault of his actions, but I blamed him for it all the same. The reason behind it was quite simple: I was human, he was not. With each day that went by, I felt myself growing older, whilst Emil remained the same. By the time I celebrated my twentieth birthday, I already looked almost half a decade older than the man I loved. If I did not do something to stop this soon, I feared that within a few short years I'd appear old enough to be his father. That was not something I ever wanted.

On the evening I approached Emil with my desire, I was preparing to go to sleep, while he had just awoken. He sat at the piano, playing something fast and cheerful. I had grown accustomed to the sound, and though he often continued late into the night, it was a noise far too lovely to be bothersome. I seated myself next to him, watching his fingers dance gracefully over the keys. He smiled when he saw me, but made no other acknowledgement until he had finished his song. An entire minute went by before he turned to me, the final notes of the piece still lingering in the air.

"Hello there, Danny." Emil wrapped his arm around my waist, a smile lighting up his face.

"Good evening, dearest Emil. There is a matter I wish to discuss with you."

He laughed softly to himself. "What is it now? Do you wish to move to Paris? Or perhaps you'd care for me to buy you something very expensive."

"Actually, I'm afraid that it's something much more pressing. With every minute that passes, Emil, I find myself closer to my grave. While you could theoretically live forever, that's not the case for me. And, to make matters worse, there will come a point someday where I'll be too elderly to do you any good. Not only that, but the older I get, the more likely it will be that I'll have to

pretend to be your father, or, dare I say it, your grandfather, out in public. That feels very wrong to me.”

Emil suddenly looked very worried. “So what? There’s nothing you can do to change that.”

“Yes, I’m aware of that. However, there is most certainly something you can do. Emil, and I say this knowing that I want to spend eternity with you, I would like you to turn me into a vampire.”

He looked furious. “No.”

“Why not? Surely you can see the benefits.”

“Daniel, the reason I told you the story of my creation was so you could see how miserable it truly is to be one of my kind. I thought it would deter you from asking this question. It seems I was mistaken. The answer is no, and I never want to hear you speak of this again.”

“Oh. Okay, then.” Why did he refuse to see reason? Surely there would be no problem if I had him to guide me during my first years as a vampire. What did he think was going to happen?

He sighed. “I apologize, Danny. I just don’t want you ending up like... never mind.” Curious. Whom had he been about to mention? I desired to know, but, at the time, I didn’t want to press the subject. “Can you promise me that you’ll never ask this of me again?”

Feeling as though I had no other choice, I, for the moment, complied. “I promise.”

Emil kissed me softly. “Thank you, Danny. I love you. This is for your own good.”

I smiled and returned his affections. “I love you too.”

Although I tried to make good on my promise, within a month, I’d broken it, once again begging Emil to transform me. The first few times I did so, he showed me the same patience and kindness that he had before, always seeming to wholeheartedly believe that this would be the last time I’d ask. However, even his gentle demeanor began to fray, and, soon enough, I found myself looking at a side of Emil I’d never seen before.

It was frightening, the first time I asked him the now-familiar question and got rage instead of a well-meaning refusal. He shouted at me, yelling for me to be quiet and to accept the fact that he was not, under any circumstances, going to transform me. His anger had likely been concealed for some time, and, when he finally let it out, it was probably far stronger than he’d intended.

Afterwards, he apologized to me profusely, pleading for me to forgive him. Still, I'd been shaken by this encounter, unsure as to what extent our relationship had been damaged by it.

For a brief period following the argument, things between us were calm. We both made a concerted effort to avoid upsetting each other, and, although we occasionally had our tense moments, life mostly felt normal again. Still, my desire to become a vampire was very strong, and it often took an extreme amount of effort to avoid the subject.

Soon, though, I was once again returning to my old habits. Whenever I so much as mentioned vampires, a screaming match would usually break out between us. We fought often, and, eventually, Emil even stopped apologizing for his anger. He often went out as soon as the sun set, not coming back until it was nearly dawn. He was clearly trying to avoid me. Although I knew that I was making him miserable, my mind was set on what I wanted, and I wouldn't stop until I got it.

Things came to a head one evening in March. Emil had awoken earlier than normal, the sun still too high in the sky for him to leave. We sat at the table, remaining silent and avoiding each other's gazes. Foolishly, I thought that it would be another good opportunity to ask him the question. It is said that insanity is trying the same thing a thousand times despite knowing it won't work. Perhaps even back then I was mad.

I looked up at him, took a deep breath, tried to prepare myself for what was to come.

"Emil, I—" He cut me off before I'd even gotten the words out.

"No. No. No. No. No! I'm not going to do it! Shut your mouth!" His voice was a roar.

"Please, just listen—"

"There is nothing to listen to! You have no idea what you're asking for! If you are so determined to throw away your future, you might as well just die now! That would be far less painful."

"B-but Emil, I'm doing this because I love you. I want to be with you forever!" My voice was weak, stuttering.

Emil growled, a feral, animalistic noise. Suddenly, his sharp teeth seemed threatening. "You wouldn't know what love was if it bit you on the neck and drained you dry! Want an example of what it truly means to care? Look at me,

at how hard I've resisted your demands. Because the fact is, Daniel, you're making a mistake, and I am trying my best to keep you from ruining your life!"

"You are my life now, Emil. I have nothing without you." I looked at him with pleading eyes, hoping that he'd hear the desperation in my voice.

"And whose fault is that?" He sounded angrier than I'd ever heard him before. "If we can't be together while you're human, then, although I hate to say it, we can't be together at all!"

"So that's it? After all this time, you're just going to give up?"

"What else is there to do? You're never going to listen." Although he still sounded angry, his voice carried a hint of dejection. "Why don't you go run home now? I bet your family will be so happy to see you!"

"Fine! I'd rather be with them right now than with you!" I headed for the door, grabbing my coat and hat from where they hung. "I'm leaving, Emil. Thanks for messing everything up." I didn't look back to see his face and didn't stay long enough to hear his response. I left, no idea where I was heading next. The only thing I knew was that I wasn't going home.

I found myself wandering through the city, my feet taking me to places more dangerous than even the area I'd lived in before. The streets beneath me were filthy, littered with garbage, and I saw several people stare up at me, eyes hungry, from where they lay on the streets. Even in my unremarkable clothes, I still felt out of place, a walking target, just waiting to be robbed or murdered or worse. It was as though I was tempting fate, daring it to hurt me.

By some miracle, I survived the night unharmed. With the only money on me what had been in my pockets the day before, I was forced to get a room at the cheapest hotel I could find. It was a cramped space, filled almost completely by an uncomfortable bed. Still, for my purposes, it was more than enough. I spent the entire day either weeping or sleeping, not even stopping to eat. For the first time in my life, I was truly a broken man.

When the sun finally set, I began doing much what I had the night before. I trudged around aimlessly, not particularly caring if I lived or died. Perhaps because of my reckless demeanor, I was bothered by nobody. My mind was consumed by thoughts of Emil, and I deeply wished to go back to him, to apologize, but I worried that he would never forgive me. Eventually, I found myself at a bar, and there I tried to drink away my worries. Come sunrise, I was very inebriated, but feeling no better than before. As I staggered back to my room, barely able to walk in a straight line, it took everything I had not to burst

out into tears. Finally, once I was back in a private space, I let out another round of sobs. I cried and cried, and when I could cry no more I slept. Each time I closed my eyes, his face was there.

This pathetic cycle continued for longer than I'd like to admit. It was one of my lowest moments, the first time I realized just how much I needed Emil. Although one would think I would give up my dreams of becoming a vampire to return to my life with him, my desires were only strengthened by this pain. The knowledge that we could be together for any period shorter than eternity scared me. There was only one way that we –I– could be truly happy. I was willing to go any length to achieve it.

I didn't know what I was looking for until I found it, or, should I say, found him. It had been six days since I'd left Emil, and, in just that brief amount of time, I'd become an utter disaster unable to care for myself. I looked thin and ill, having barely eaten in almost a week, and, whenever I was reminded of Emil, sometimes by the smallest things, I was sent into a state of such anxiety and sadness that it took me hours to recover.

It was early evening, the sun having just barely set. Once again, I had begun my wanderings, the headache from last night's hangover still strong and painful. I was walking down a busy street, scanning the crowd absentmindedly. Then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw someone, a young man with a graceful face and long, dark hair tied loosely back. What really stood out, though, was his skin. It was nearly white, so pale that it seemed almost ghostly. I realized quite suddenly that this man was a vampire, and, the second I saw him, I thought of Emil. Perhaps fate had just given me a second chance.

I began to follow the stranger, trying my best not to lose sight of him in the crowd. Although I knew it was dangerous to track a mysterious, potentially hungry, man-eating monster, I, for hardly the first time in my life, found myself doing it anyway. Eventually, he turned onto a quiet side street and I trailed behind him. The streetlights there were dimmer, and I noticed, with some unease, that the sidewalks were entirely empty. I was alone with this vampire, and, if anything went wrong, I doubted there would be anybody nearby to save me.

"Excuse me, sir?" I called, increasing my speed to catch up with him. He didn't respond. I ran towards the stranger, but, in the blink of an eye, he had already gotten all the way to the end of the block.

“Wait! I need to talk to you!” He turned around for just a second, curiosity on his face, before darting away again. He moved extremely quickly, and, before I could even see it happen, the man was once again far away from me. “Please, we must speak! And don’t worry, I already know you’re a vampire. You need not hide from me.”

“Human ears are not meant to hear these secrets,” a soft voice whispered from behind me. I turned around, and, sure enough, he was standing there, practically over my shoulder. “I don’t know who told you anything, but if you tell me, I will try to be gentle when I kill you.” He began to reach for my throat, his gray eyes shining with hunger.

“Wait, please! Let me explain! I need your help!”

“If it is not death that you seek, I’m afraid I’ll have a hard time doing anything for you.” I noticed his voice carried a faint hint of a French accent. “We have rules, you see, and humans who know, they are not meant to live.”

“That’s just the thing!” I smiled at him. “I don’t want to be human.”

His face became very serious. “What is your name, living one?”

“Daniel.”

“Daniel, that is not something you should say so lightly. I doubt you know what you ask for. If you wish to go, I shall let you, but please, give up your search for...this.” He gestured at himself.

“Wait! Don’t leave! I’ve thought long and hard, I know what the consequences will be. Please, I beg of you, change me!”

He sighed. “Perhaps, if we must really have this conversation, we should go and do it somewhere more private. My home is not far from here, let us go there.” Without another word, he started walking, leading me towards a much nicer part of the city. I followed him into a posh-looking building, and we shortly thereafter arrived at his rooms on the second floor. They were quite nice; he obviously had some money. The vampire gestured towards a couple of chairs surrounding a fireplace.

“Please sit, Daniel.” His quiet speech had a melodic nature to it. “I’m sorry that I’ve nothing to offer you for a drink, as you probably know we don’t quite share the same diet.”

“It’s alright...why, I’m afraid you never told me your name.”

“Jean, Jean Louvière.”

“A pleasure to meet you.” I held out my hand for him to shake. When he did, his own was, as expected, icy cold. “I’m Daniel Mikalisk.”

“It’s been a very long time since I’ve told a mortal my name. There are very few who would desire to meet a vampire, much less become one. Tell me, why is this your wish?”

“I fell in love with one of your kind, and I seek to live alongside him forever. However, no matter what I say, he refuses to change me. I’ve been searching for another to transform me, so that the burden of my death must not rest upon his shoulders.”

“Interesting...and who, if I may ask, is this other vampire?” Jean looked at me expectantly.

“His name is Emil Chamberlain, perhaps you’ve heard of him?” As soon as he heard the name, Jean began to laugh.

“I don’t think you know how lucky you are, human. If you had said that name to most any other vampire, I think you would have been torn to shreds. Emil is the only fledgling of Gwaed, one of the most ancient of our kind. And yet, instead of accepting the gifts he has been given, he runs from his maker like a man avoiding the plague. As you know, Emil chooses to not take mortal lives, save when necessary, and this fact has upset many of us. Also, of course, is the fact that Gwaed transformed the boy when he was not yet an adult, which, although not forbidden, is considered quite taboo.”

“Do you dislike him, though?” I prayed that Jean was someone able to look past the exteriors of others.

“In all honesty, I don’t have any particular feelings for him. We’ve only met once, very briefly, and, though to a lesser extent, I’m not particularly well-liked by my kind either. I’m considered to be too gentle, too caring. It’s true; I’m somewhat of a romantic at heart. Now tell me, Daniel, how does one such as you fall in love with Emil Chamberlain?” I did, beginning when I first met him as “Arthur” and ending just before the fights we’d begun having, avoiding that particular topic out of a fear that Jean wouldn’t turn me if he knew I was defying Emil’s wishes.

“Interesting. I never would have thought he’d fall for a human again, after what happened with Jeremiah.”

“Oh, yes. He told me that story as well. Perhaps he finally realized that it was time to move on.”

Jean gave me a look that I couldn’t quite read. “Interesting...For Emil, that’s often something far easier said than done.” He shook his head, looking

conflicted. "Fine, you've convinced me; I will turn you into a vampire. If this will make you, and, by extension, Emil, happy, I find no reason to object."

A grin flashed across my face; I wanted to hug Jean. "Then do it! Right now, I'm ready!"

"Not so fast. I must warn you: there will be no going back after this. After I have changed you, you will never see the sun again, someday come to forget your own face. You won't eat anything or drink anything besides blood for the rest of eternity. And, if things don't work out between you and Emil, you will have to exist like this forever, trapped as a violent creature, unable to live a normal life because you threw away that chance now. I know what you are going to say, Daniel, but do you really think it's worth it? Surely, perhaps, you'd at least want to wait one more day, to give yourself time to see the blue sky one last time. In the end, it's often the thing we miss the most."

"Yes, I do." At that moment, I thought I'd already seen enough of the sun for an eternity. How I now wish I'd taken Jean's offer.

"Well, before we do this, there is one last thing I should add: the power I can give you will not be what you have seen within Emil. He, though younger than me, is a creature of extraordinary potency. My own maker, on the other hand, had no godlike strength. I am quite old, Daniel, and while vampires do grow stronger as they age, I have never been more than ordinary. You will be stronger than most mortal men, however, amongst our own kind, I'm afraid you'll often find yourself quite easily matched. Now, with all of that out of the way, are you sure, without so much of a trace of doubt in your heart, that this is what you want?"

At some point during this conversation, I had started to question myself. However, I felt as though I'd gone too far to back down now. "More than anything else in the world."

At the sound of my voice, Jean's eyes seemed to grow wilder. "Very well then." He stood up from his chair, gesturing for me to do the same. I closed my eyes, waiting for him to begin. In less time than it took for me to even realize I'd made a mistake, he was on me, my body held in place by his unnatural strength, and there was nothing I could do.

The first thing I felt was pain, as though something was stabbing, or, as I quickly realized, biting deep into my neck. It hurt terribly, and I could almost feel the blood being drained from my body. Despite hearing about the process

of becoming a vampire from Emil, I still feared for my life, worried that Jean had taken the opportunity to kill me instead.

The next sensation was one far more unexpected. After only a few moments, the pain vanished, replaced by the most euphoric bliss that I had ever felt. I vaguely remembered Emil mentioning something about vampire saliva having that effect on people, but, surely, something so wonderful couldn't have just been caused by a few chemicals? Jean's grip on me tightened, and some part of my mind realized that he was almost finished with me. Only a few more moments, and I would drift away forever. Wrapped in this creature's embrace, it would be as easy as falling asleep. I didn't even care that he had betrayed me; a death so peaceful and painless was something that very few got to have.

My consciousness slipped further and further away, my mind lost in the warm, quiet darkness that enveloped me. And then, just as I was about to fade forever from this earth, I felt something on my tongue. Jean's blood did not burn, like Emil had described, but it was every bit as hot and filling and delicious as I had imagined. I instantly craved more. Opening my eyes, I reached for Jean's forearm, where out of an open wound trickled exactly what I wanted. I grabbed him, held my mouth against the cut, and began to drink like I'd been stranded without water in a desert for two days. I wanted to gorge myself upon Jean's blood, to drain his body dry. And then, just when I began to feel full, Jean pulled his arm away with a cry of pain. He looked quite weak as he kneeled over me, his face stained with reddish tears, eyes bright with agony. I, on the other hand, had never felt stronger. I got to my feet, body still pulsating with the warmth my newfound source of sustenance had provided me. And then, in an instant, I suddenly slipped from consciousness. The last thing I was aware of was Jean catching me before I could hit the floor.

The time that passed before I awoke seems to no longer exist in my mind. Despite my best efforts, I can remember absolutely nothing, not a dream or a nightmare or even a passing thought. I think, during those hours, my body was dead, and my mind along with it. It was my last brief respite from what was to come.

My eyes opened to a world that felt completely alien. My vision, though still relatively poor, was clearer without glasses than it had been in years. Everything had taken on a new sort of dimension, the small and insignificant things around me suddenly seen in far more definition than before. The first

thing I found myself focusing on was the plaster on the ceiling above me, the rough surface containing new patterns that I'd never noticed before. I traced them for a moment, letting my mind become entirely consumed by this once-mundane thing. The color of it, too, was different. I no longer saw it as plain white; I could see all of the different shades that made it up, as well as several strange, unnamable hues that were now visible to my eyes. I smiled, entranced by the oddity of it all. In this new life, it seemed, everything was beautiful.

"Daniel! You're awake!" I realized that at some point I had been moved to a bed, and it seemed that Jean had been watching over me from a chair nearby. I remembered, quite suddenly, Emil's retelling of his first time awakening as a vampire. I almost laughed to myself when I did; I now found myself in almost the exact same situation.

"It seems I am." For whatever reason, I thought the sound of my own voice was humorous, and, this time, I did laugh. I now felt quite detached from reality, and suspected that I was acting as though drunk. This, too, I found funny, and I quickly found myself rolling over in a fit of hysterics.

"Daniel!" Jean shouted, grabbing my arm. His skin no longer felt cold against mine. As I looked up at him, still lost in my head, I absentmindedly wondered to myself how I'd not noticed his beauty before. Although he looked far more tired now, his skin grayer and eyes dull, it was still impossible to miss the fact that he had the face of an angel. Every angle seemed perfectly sculpted, and I found myself reaching to stroke his cheek just to make sure he was real. The second I made contact with him, he looked at me with intense discomfort. "Daniel, please! Don't make me regret this."

My trance was broken, though my mind remained hazy. "Uh, Jean, how long was I out for?"

He thought for a moment. "It's only been a night. Your body wasn't damaged much when I changed you, so it did not take very long for it to heal."

"Am I really...a vampire?" Jean nodded, and I found myself feeling very excited at the prospect of being an undead. "So, what should we do now? Perhaps we can go for a walk, or, maybe, go hunting." Disturbingly, the thought of tracking someone down, ripping open their neck, killing them, sounded oddly appealing.

"No, not yet. You shouldn't be feeling hungry for another few days. Right now, I think, the best course of action would be for you to go home to Emil. You need to leave here before you get too ravenous." Emil! My mind leapt at the

thought of him. We were now both blessed with these same gifts, and, hopefully, we would be able to love each other as we never had before.

“Let’s go then! Right now!” My heart, which, surprisingly, I could still feel beating, practically jumped out of my chest.

Jean smiled, perhaps glad to be rid of me. “Let’s go.”

When I walked through the door of my apartment after being gone for almost a week, I expected Emil to be furious with me. The walk back, though at first exciting for me in my new state, started off uneventful. Jean stayed close to my side, making sure I didn’t wander off and hurt anybody. However, shortly after we set out, I started feeling horrifically nauseous, and, at one point, I even had to stop for a moment to vomit. Although Jean assured me this was natural, I, by the end of our journey, could barely stay on my feet. Finally, as we approached my building, Jean left me with a quiet apology, promising he’d stay in touch. I would now have to face the inevitable confrontation alone. I walked unsteadily upstairs, pausing when I got to the door. Taking a deep breath, the air no longer necessary but still comforting, I pulled out my key and unlocked the door, terrified for what was to come.

Emil was sitting on the couch, reading a thick book. He was fully dressed, likely just about to leave for his nightly hunt. I stared at him for a second. Somehow, his familiar face was even more beautiful than before. There were curves and contours on its surface I’d never noticed in the past, and the new colors in my vision gave his appearance a dreamy sort of quality. In the following years, whenever I thought of him, it was often this moment that came to mind. It was one of the few times I’ve ever seen him look so innocent.

When I staggered towards Emil, he finally noticed me standing there. For a second, he looked shocked, then grinned. He sprang up and ran to me, grabbing my hands gently. However, the second his skin, now the same temperature as mine, made contact, he looked up at me in horror.

“No...” he whispered, his face full of realization. I felt terrible, as though I was about to pass out. “Danny, how can this be?”

“I...I found someone who agreed to change me. I’m sorry, Emil, but you know how much I wanted this. We can be together now, forever.”

He seemed not to hear me. “No, no, no, no. This isn’t happening. I’m sorry, Danny, I failed you. I should have made you see just how awful this life really is.

This is all my fault!" He wrapped himself around me, clinging to me with such force that just days ago he would have crushed me.

"I'm okay, really."

"You're not! You're never going to be okay again!"

I thought I was going to throw up again. "Please, this was my choice. Don't get mad at yourself over this."

Emil sighed, took a few deep breaths before speaking. "Fine. I suppose there's nothing I can do now but help you adapt, teach you how to exist without hurting others. I wish that it never came to this, Danny, but you leave me with no choice."

"You're not angry with me?" It was hard for me to contain the surprise in my voice.

"What would the point in that be? No matter how loud I scream at you, it won't change the fact that you're a vampire. The time for resentment has passed. You know, before, I really was just trying to protect you."

"Oh, you have no idea how much this means to me! I love you, Emil. Thank you for not giving up on me. I-" my thankful speech was broken by another wave of nausea.

"Come on, let's get you sitting down." Emil grabbed my hand and led me over to the couch. "You probably feel awful right now." I nodded, letting him pull me. Once we were seated, he tried his best to hold me, his small limbs barely reaching around my larger body.

"Danny, if I might ask, who did this to you?" His voice was soft, patient.

"You're not going to hurt him, right?" Even though I barely knew him, I still found myself concerned for Jean's well-being. He was my creator, in a way, my father. His blood now flowing through my veins, I wanted to protect him as though I would any other member of my family.

"I suppose it honestly depends on the person." I remembered Jean telling me that he was one of the few vampires who had no qualms with Emil's existence. It was unlikely that Emil had any with his.

"His name is Jean. He seemed to be a kind person, well, kind for a vampire, at least. He actually lives quite close to us, too."

Emil chuckled. "Ah, yes, I should have expected that. Our neighbor, Danny, tends to be rather easily persuaded. He is not, by any means, an evil creature. However, his sympathy for humankind often manifests itself in unfortunate ways. If our species is ever revealed to the world at large, I suspect

that it will be by his hand. While, unlike me, he does kill mortals, it is very hard for him to do so once he forms any sort of personal attachment to them. Far too often does he spare those that already know too much.”

“Interesting. All you vampires seem to know so much about each other, despite having barely met.”

“Us vampires.” Emil gave me a look that could only be described as prideful. Despite his earlier sadness, he seemed to find the idea of me being an undead increasingly appealing. “When there are so few of us and our lives are so long, it becomes important to learn all we can about the others of our kind. You too will someday come to know them.”

“Now, as I was saying, Jean is hardly a bad person to have been transformed by. He’ll likely be rather distant, I’m afraid, but if there ever comes a time where you need help and I’m not around, he will be good to turn to. You could have done much worse” Emil sighed, resting his head on my shoulder.

“Thinking this over, Danny, I suppose that it is perhaps the best choice you were able to make. I know that, in your mind, leaving was never an option. At least now I never have to worry about hurting you.” Emil smiled, lightly tracing a finger along my jawline. Unlike most times, it was not uncomfortably cold. Despite my sickness, I laid there, motionless, for a long time. I no longer had the urge to fidget or blink, and, for periods that lasted minutes, didn’t even breathe. If I did not have to, at some point, get up to vomit again, I would have stayed there forever.

Fortunately, my illness lasted only a few days. The hours, though miserable, were not many, and for that I am grateful. Still, to this day, hardly anything can compare to the agony I underwent during that brief period.

My body, as Emil told me, was dying. He said it quite nonchalantly, as though it was something barely important enough to mention. And yet, as I lay in bed, my entire self aching and cramping, head swimming, heart pounding, I came to severely regret my course of action, if for no reason other than the pain it now caused me. It seemed that everything meant for the living, meaning the remains of what I had previously eaten and drank, no longer belonged inside me. Several times over the course of those days, I found myself feeling more weak and humiliated than I had in my entire short life. Yet Emil stayed calm through it all, assuring me that he had once gone through the same and that it would quickly pass. It did, but what it was replaced by was perhaps even worse.

After the sickness came the hunger, a gnawing pain that began first in my fingertips, slowly making its way to my core. I didn't even recognize the feeling at first, and it was only upon remembering Emil's description that I realized what I needed. Unsure of where to find a meal, I went to my more knowledgeable lover, who thus began the painstaking task of finding me blood until I was ready to hunt for myself.

At first, Emil had me drink from his own veins. In the beginning, I refused to do so, worried that I would hurt him. However, he insisted, claiming that it would fill me and make me stronger. Finally, after several days of starvation, I relented, taking blood from him in such a wild frenzy that he had to push me off when it became too much. He was right, though, about the effects it would have on me, and I found my body's pain replaced by a pleasant warmth that lasted the rest of the night and left me feeling full even when it faded. However, within a few days, the ache began to return, and once again I found myself feeding off of the one person I loved most. Emil took it with a strong face, as always, but it was hard not to notice the gray pallor his skin had taken on, the tired look in his eyes. I knew that I was hurting him, but still, he pushed on like nothing was wrong.

Finally, about a week after my transformation, Emil decided that I was ready to try something else. That night, when he returned from his hunt, he brought back with him a live chicken he'd bought while out. He opened its cage, grabbed it, and handed it to me. I took it cautiously, the frightened bird trying desperately to escape my arms. Emil ran off to the kitchen, looking for a knife, whilst I wrestled the pathetic creature into submission. When he returned, the chicken barely had time to screech before I was feasting upon its blood. After I was finished, some part of me felt bad for killing it. It had done nothing to deserve its death. And yet, even as I thought that, the warmth now flowing through me dulled the guilt to the point where it could easily be pushed out of mind. Surely it would be justified to go to even further lengths to feel this way again.

As time passed, it quickly became very easy for me to kill my prey. I found my ideals quickly eroding against the tide of blood that now consumed my life. I was a monster, an ever-hungry creature who was barely satisfied by the meager morsels Emil brought back for me. I wanted more, to go out into the world and hunt upon humans, sparing their lives, of course, but taking enough to fill myself completely. However, despite my pleading, Emil refused to let me

fulfill my desires, insisting that I wasn't ready, that I'd have to wait until the urge to kill weakened.

"How long will it take?" I asked him one night. It had been nearly a month since Jean had turned me, yet Emil still forbade me from leaving.

Emil sighed, stroked my cheek softly. "I don't know, Danny. A year, I'd say."

So that was it, then. I'd risked everything to become a vampire, and here I was, rewarded with nothing but more suffering. Fine. If I had to wait a year to be free, I would. If I had to wait ten, I'd do the same. Although it irritated me, I trusted Emil's judgment, and, in the end, it wouldn't really be that long of a time, right? Three-hundred-and-sixty-five short, meaningless days. The light at the end of the tunnel was so close that I could see it. After all, how bad could things possibly get in such a short period? I was going to be fine.

Over the course of the following year, I slowly began to lose my mind. It was terrible, being trapped in a few small rooms, unable to escape a newborn vampire's hunger. It was hell, having to wait each night for Emil's return, starving until he came back with some small animal. Even after I consumed it, I was not satisfied. Still, I knew I wasn't ready to leave; whenever I opened the window, the scent of warm, human blood wafting up from the street was enough to make me act violent and irrational. While I had once been a gentle and rather pacifistic person, I was now a beast unable to interact with others out of a fear that I'd kill them on sight. The worst part was, of course, the fact that I'd done all of this to myself.

I was rather inactive during those months, spending most of my time either sleeping or reading, curled up alongside Emil. I could tell he was worried, my sloth-like behavior quite unlike normal. He talked to me very often, telling me stories, discussing books, doing anything he could to keep me from drifting off into madness. Still, the couple hours he spent away each night were enough to push me to my limit. I often found my mind lurking down dark paths, and many times I had the urge to run out of the building and wreak havoc on the streets. I longed to run, climb, to escape the place in which I was contained. But I knew that it would break Emil's heart if I did, so I remained in my cell, waiting feverishly until the day I could control my dangerous instincts.

At some point, I began to write again, the boredom driving me to go back to something I'd recently had no motivation to do. Although I began by continuing the love story I'd been working on before, I quickly realized that I no

longer had the capacity to create something so lighthearted. Before I fully knew what I was doing, I found myself throwing the manuscript into the trash. As I stared at the sad, unfinished tale, I felt another remnant of my humanity leave me. There really was no going back from here.

Perhaps from the repressed, violent desires I now found myself with, my work became very dark. Many of my stories now centered around death, despair, and very few characters got happy endings. Themes of insanity, too, were common, and, worryingly, I often felt as though I were writing about myself. I spent a concerning amount of time hunched over my typewriter, my fingers frantically hitting the keys as they tried to keep pace with my thoughts. Whenever I let Emil read the results of these sessions, he always did so with a look in his eyes that might have been fear.

But the changes to my mind were inconsequential compared to those that my body underwent. Aside from my enhanced senses, I found that my strength had increased greatly, and it became very easy for me to lift things that I would have once thought very heavy. Another strange phenomenon was the way I suddenly found myself able to stand on walls and even ceilings almost as though they were the floor. Emil hadn't been lying; vampires were very good at climbing. Sometimes, for lack of anything better to do, I sat on the ceiling and examined the upside-down world around me. The first few times I did this, it made me quite nauseous, however, as I got used to the sensation, I came to enjoy this new view.

A few weeks after my transformation, I started having pain in my upper jaw. Over the course of the next months, this pain gave way to two new teeth that started to grow behind my canines. Eventually, they grew long and sharp, into a pair of fangs similar to Emil's. When they finally replaced my old teeth, I no longer needed to use a knife to kill my nightly meals. However, they often got in the way when I was speaking, and I frequently cut my tongue on them. Although the wounds always healed fast, much faster than I was used to, Emil had to teach me how to avoid them properly. I also had to learn to speak and smile without showing them, as seeing them would be a dead giveaway as to my true nature. It was a challenge, and it took me quite a long time to get it right. However, by the end of the year, I felt confident enough in my abilities to pass for human.

The last change, one more subtle yet impactful than my paler skin or newfound strength, was the loss of my reflection. It was unsettling, the

knowledge that I'd never see my face with my own eyes again. Yet, unlike Emil, it would be impossible for me to forget it. He drew and painted me often, his talented fingers skillfully capturing my image. In fact, because Emil had few close relationships with anyone besides myself, during that time, it was I who dominated most of his works. Although I would have to avoid mirrors in public for the rest of my life out of the fear of being seen for what I was, because of Emil's art, I was never truly devastated by this the way he had been. For that, at least, I was thankful.

Finally, as winter once again turned to spring, Emil told me that he thought I was ready to go out into the world. In the weeks past, I had spent much time by the open window, and, slowly, the scents coming from outside had lost their effect on me. I still craved human blood, but the mere thought of it no longer sent me into a frenzy. I was beginning to feel like myself again, albeit a slightly more distant, violent version. The past year had changed me greatly, and I think I lost a part of myself that to this day I haven't found. My morality, my gentleness, perhaps. Still, for the first time since my transformation, I felt alive, in control.

We decided that I'd take my first expedition out on a Saturday evening in May. Although unsure of myself, I was happy to be free again. As I stood by the door, putting on my coat, Emil gave me a soft smile.

"Danny, I hope you're excited to become a true creature of the night."

"Honestly, I'm more nervous than anything."

He took my hand and held it gently. "Listen, if anything goes wrong, I'll make sure that no one's left around to see what you did."

"Um, excuse me?"

Emil giggled. "I'm kidding, Danny, I know you're going to be just fine."

I squeezed Emil's hand gently. He looked happier now than he had in the past year. "I really hope so."

We left the apartment, our relationship losing any hint of its romantic nature the second we walked out the door. Emil walked to the stairs slightly faster than me, his stride more like a skip than anything else. I followed him, resisting the urge to move too quickly for humans to see. Emil had told me many times that the most important thing that a vampire must do is remain hidden. If I exposed our kind, the consequences could be disastrous.

Although the night air stank of chemicals and waste, the first deep breath I took of it was one of the most pleasant things I've ever experienced. It felt incredible to be outside. It wasn't fully dark yet, and the streets were still too crowded for us to hunt, so we decided to kill some time by wandering around, letting our feet take us wherever they wanted to. It was surreal, walking through these streets for the first time in over a year. I fought the grin that wanted to spread on my face, knowing that passerby would be able to see my fangs if it won. I eventually settled for a smaller, less prominent smile that wouldn't betray anything.

Walking next to Emil, I admired the buildings that towered over us. Whilst they had once seemed so mundane, I now found myself noticing the perfection of their construction, the way the fading light played with the shadows they cast. Several times, I stopped to examine a particularly interesting section of stonework, staring intensely at it for sometimes minutes. Emil giggled whenever I did this, leading me away when my delay became too long. I thought that I'd outgrown a newborn vampire's erratic focus, but my new exposure to the outside world must have caused it to resurface. Whatever. I was determined to enjoy the night, and I wasn't going to let any strange feelings stop me.

I didn't realize that my meanderings had a destination until I began to recognize my surroundings. Jean, my absentminded creator, had sent me several letters over the past year. However, I hadn't seen him in-person since the night he'd transformed me. I'd recently found myself wanting to see him again, and, sure enough, I realized that I was walking towards his neighborhood. Although I'd only been there once before, it was a simple task to find Jean's home.

Emil looked up at me, slightly confused. I doubted he knew where I was headed. As I returned his gaze, I smiled.

"I have someone I want to see, and it's someone you should probably meet, too."

He frowned. "Daniel, this really isn't the best time for you to go around reconnecting with those you knew before you were turned. Frankly, you never should, but certainly not just after you've gotten over the worst of your hunger. It could still resurface, you know. You're hardly safe for mortals to be around."

"Calm down, Emil. Just trust me."

Sighing, Emil threw up his hands. "Fine. Whatever you want."

I led him up the stairs of the building; knocked on its large wooden door. My sensitive ears heard someone walk towards us, their steps tentative in nature. The door opened a crack.

“Hello?” a voice—a familiar voice—asked quietly. Perhaps realizing that the speaker wasn’t quite human, Emil seemed to calm down beside me.

“Hello to you too, Jean!” The door opened fully, and, standing before us, was my wraith-like creator. He stood there, thin and pale, his clothes expensive-looking, yet wrinkled and disheveled. I remembered that they’d been like that too the last time I’d seen him; I wondered if that was his norm.

“Ah, Daniel. And, if I’m not mistaken, Emil.” The smallest amongst our number nodded, his face impassive. “Come in, gentlemen. Do forgive me if it’s a bit of a mess inside, though. I wasn’t expecting company.”

We followed Jean into his house and into the sitting room where, a year before, I’d been turned into a vampire. I looked at the rug beneath my feet, searching for a stain or a mark or any sort of evidence that told the story of what had happened to me there. I saw nothing. Jean started a fire in the fireplace and sat down. Since there were only two chairs in the room, Emil shared with me rather than sitting on the floor. I felt a bit uncomfortable, I suppose, as we had never before displayed this sort of closeness in front of others. Still, Jean appeared surprisingly nonchalant, and we continued our conversation without much of a delay.

“Daniel,” Jean asked, his faintly-accented voice as satisfying as before, “what have you been up to recently? I haven’t heard much from you; I hope my letters found you alright.”

I smiled at him. “They did, thank you. I must apologize for not seeing you sooner; Emil kept me locked up until I learned to control my instincts.” Although I said the words sarcastically, I couldn’t help but notice the way Emil looked at me, his eyes full of betrayal and sadness.

“Interesting,” Jean said softly, almost to himself. “What an odd practice. When I was created, my maker simply left me alone to fend for myself. I ravaged Paris during my first years as a vampire.” He chuckled. “To this day I still have no idea who made me. You’re quite lucky, you know, to have a friend like him”—he gestured towards Emil—“to guide you during this time. If I remember correctly, he’s quite the masterful hunter. I doubt he’ll have any trouble teaching you all there is to know.”

I felt Emil grab my arm possessively. “Actually, I’m a lot more than just his friend.” He seemed jealous, interesting. I had always thought Emil above such simple feelings, and yet here they were, brought to the surface by one simple comment.

Jean smiled in response, as though he found Emil’s reaction amusing. “I mean you no harm, little one. I was simply praising your abilities to seduce your prey, to make your victims love you and trust you. Many of them leave you without ever knowing that you’ve fed upon them. Please, forgive me and my misguided words.”

Emil’s grip on me loosened. He quite liked being complimented, and being told that he was admired was probably the easiest way to earn his approval. He grinned. “Thank you, friend, though I must tell you that I am by no means a “little one”. My stature may be small, sure, but my strength is far greater than yours and it would do you well to not underestimate it again.”

Jean shook his head. “I am older than you by several centuries. I have seen more of the world in my time, come to know many people. The names I have used over the years are still feared in small towns on the edges of the map. You might be strong of body, but my legacy stretches far wider than yours.”

Emil opened his mouth to protest, but, by then, I had stopped listening. It was very odd, watching these two powerful vampires argue over their statuses like young boys. I quickly became distracted again, enthralled by Emil’s appearance as he participated in the debate. No matter how often I saw his face, I always seemed to discover new details about it. That night, I found myself staring at the small scar on the side of his neck, the only remnant of the bite he’d received right before he’d been turned into a vampire. I had one just like it. Upon our kind’s flawless bodies, it was the one wound that never fully healed.

As far as I was aware, the discussion continued for quite some time. It was difficult for them to decide who the better vampire was not because their lives were similar, but because they were so different. Jean, I learned, was rather old, created during the time of the Black Death. He was, in a way, an orphan, abandoned by his maker immediately after being transformed. Despite this, though, he’d adapted to his new life rather quickly, his numerous early victims hidden easily amongst the bodies of those who had died from the plague. Jean had never grown to have great power, but his usual avoidance of other vampires and dislike of conflict had allowed him to become one of the oldest vampires currently living in the New World. Jean, although easily influenced and often

distant, was someone who I was quickly coming to admire, and I found myself very grateful that he was the one who had turned me.

Emil spent quite a long time talking to Jean, asking him of his history and of his opinions on others of our kind. It turned out the older vampire had spent most of his life in Europe, coming to America only a little over a century ago, when the revolution in his home country had begun. He found it hard to watch the land he'd once lived in tear itself apart, so he booked passage to New York and had stayed there ever since. Jean liked cities, he explained, for the sheer amount of people living within them made it quite easy for him to hunt without being caught. Although I knew his practices went against Emil's moral code, my lover still listened intently, nodding his head to agree whenever Jean made a point he liked. I remained mostly silent throughout the conversation, too young to have any stories of my own. Finally, about an hour after our conversation had started, the sky grew dark enough for me to begin my first hunt. Emil and I politely said our farewells before slipping off into the night.

The streets were mostly empty, the few people still out at this hour mostly workers and vagrants. I did not seem out of place here; my dress was average and my manner far less formal than it would have been in years past. Emil, with his young appearance, attracted a little more attention, but, by all accounts, we seemed entirely human. He led me towards a shady looking bar, explaining quietly to me one last time what I must do.

"You must not let your victim know what's been done to them. Many of the people in here will be quite intoxicated, which makes things a bit easier, but know that their blood might make you inebriated as well. Try to remain careful when it comes to that, and, above all else, from the person you choose, you must take very little. The margin for the amount you can safely drink is small, and as you have never done this before, you cannot know when exactly to stop. Don't try to push it; just a sip, that's all." We arrived in front of the bar. "Come find me when you're finished, I will be waiting outside." I nodded. I could do this. Emil patted me on the shoulder to say goodbye and, without another word, strode over to a nearby bench where he took a seat. I took a deep breath. I could hear the sound of a piano coming from within. It comforted me, reminded me of Emil. Steeling myself, I pushed open the door.

The interior was dimly lit, full of people. The room smelled strongly of alcohol mixed with warm blood, and the urge to start attacking people at

random suddenly became strong. Had I been any weaker, I probably would have acted on it. However, Emil had taught me well, and, though not without effort, I was able to control myself.

I sat down at the bar and ordered something cheap and strong. Although I no longer needed to consume regular food, I still found the smell of the drink pleasant, and it was a good prop to help me fit in amongst the other humans. I scanned the room carefully, looking for someone who probably wouldn't notice if I took a few pints of blood from them. This wasn't an easy task; many who fit this description were surrounded by others who would be aware of my presence.

Finally, after several minutes of searching, I found who I was looking for: a young woman sitting in the corner of the room, both alone, and, by the looks of it, very drunk. I went over to her and seated myself next to her. When she saw me, she gave me a smile.

"Why, hello there, handsome. What sort of miracle brought you to me?"

I returned her affectionate gaze, my mind now working coldly, without any emotion at all. "I don't know, madam. I thought you looked lonely, so here I am." She reached out to touch my face, perhaps making sure that I was real. I was caught so off-guard by this that I didn't attempt to stop her.

"My, my, you feel rather cold, dear. Are you here all by yourself? If so, perhaps I could help you warm up." I wanted no part in what she was offering, but played along for the sake of the hunt.

"Yes, I think that would be nice." I lied, reaching out to take her hand. She shivered slightly when I touched her skin. "You're very beautiful, you know." Another lie. I cannot remember the details of her face, and if her appearance was in any way exceptional, I probably would not have forgotten. Still, her scent lingered heavily in the air, and to my hungry brain, it was rather appealing. Very slowly, I leaned towards her and placed my lips on her neck. Then, as lightly as I could, I bit down using my sharp fangs. She made a small yelp of pain and tried to back away, but I already had my other arm around her, and there was nothing she could do to escape. In a matter of moments, she stopped fighting back entirely, no doubt entranced by the effects of my bite. And, by then, I too was lost. The second I tasted her blood, I knew I would never be the same.

By very design, vampires are neutral creatures. Our bodies take on the temperatures of the air around us, so it is very hard for us to be either hot or

cold. However, when I drank the woman's blood, for the first time since my transformation, I felt warm. My body seemed alive in a way it hadn't in almost a year, my mind clear and focused, yet distant and free. My brain whispered to me that if I just took a little more, I'd be human again and I could feel this way forever. I know now that there are members of my species with no attachments, no home to go back to, choosing to live on only for the sensation of human blood within their bodies. Even Emil, whose soul would probably be much happier existing without harming humans at all, cannot resist its pull. I drank practically nothing from the woman, pulling myself away the moment I began to feel her blood's effects. I withdrew from her neck; it took a lot of effort to not latch back onto her and drain all of her blood. My face feeling flushed, I began to make excuses for needing to leave.

"Oh, dear, look at the time!" I pointed to my watch, realizing suddenly that it wasn't that late. The woman looked at me strangely, as though she couldn't quite tell what was happening. I began worrying that I'd hurt her, and began to inspect her for any signs of serious injury. She seemed fine apart from the very small mark my teeth had left on her, which would probably heal completely in a matter of days. "Don't worry, I'll be back, I promise." Promises, I was beginning to learn, meant little in this life. Leaving her with one last kiss on the hand, I raced out of the bar as fast as I could whilst still looking human, practically hitting Emil while trying to sit down next to him. He looked at me in mock concern, his eyes, as per usual, sparkling.

"How did it go?"

"Well," I replied, not wanting to reveal much information in public. "I feel great, honestly."

He smiled. "Let's head home, then. You can tell me the full story there."

And so we started back, the world around me seeming magical, brighter than ever before. The walk was quite short and, when we returned, we sat together on the couch. Since a vampire's body, for a short period of time after consuming fresh blood, becomes warm and lifelike, as I told Emil what had happened, he pressed himself to me as close as he could, bathing in my heat. Even after I finished speaking, we stayed in that position for a long while. It was comforting being so near to the one I loved and trusted above all others.

Looking down at Emil's peaceful face, it dawned on me that not once in the past year had I truly regretted sacrificing my future for him. He had shown me kindness and attention in a world that left me mostly ignored, had been the

one to introduce to me the mysterious and beautiful creatures that danced throughout time's shadows. And now, as I laid nestled up against him, my skin pale, smooth, and eternally youthful, I contemplated our futures: dark, blood-filled, and inextricably bound to each other. I had already given my short mortal years, I was fully prepared to give him forever.

ROBIN LINDEN '26
CREATIVE WRITING

Prologue

In the center of the picture, the most beautiful woman I have ever known stands, wearing one of my old navy blue sweaters, the sleeves draping over her wrists, fingers drowned beneath the cotton. Her hair, wild in the wind, is exquisite, black waves streaming in every direction, a silver barrette dropped on the ground sometime before I captured the photo. Her eyes look almost green in the light, but if you knew her then you would know they held a luxurious hazel hue, one full of yellow, brown, and the smallest hint of lime. She is smiling, a great blinding white, revealing that her right front tooth is slightly longer than the left. In the background, you can see my shadow next to Lex's, though he appears to be eating something, an apple or pear. Behind the woman, there's a brick house, covered in snow, french windows, and a balcony with dying roses. A Christmas tree, visible through the window, is decorated with many ornaments, some more elegant than others.

It was a very cold December day when I took that photograph, a Polaroid of the woman I was sure I was in love with, Kit, in front of the most warm and wonderful place in the world, Victor's old manor. The photo, taken two months before Lex's funeral, has held a spot in my wallet since I took it, and despite the recommendation of my mother and therapist, I have not and will not take it out. It is the only thing I have of Kit's which I did not burn, the only picture of Lex, even if it is just his shadow, which I have not buried. It is the only way I can remember the manor, which I miss, constantly and painfully.

It is odd what I keep and what I don't, what I remember and what I can't. For instance, the dark winter days following Lex's funeral are extremely difficult for me to recall, mainly because it was so long ago but also because I cannot stand to think of such things. My mind is plagued once or twice a year by a vague image of mascara running down a mother's face, a black sweater draped over a velvet chair, a sad bouquet of lilies, though there are no strong memories, everything seems to blur together seamlessly, as if it never happened. As if I was never there.

It is strange, however, that the very first thing I can remember doing after my best friend's death was enrolling in a calligraphy class. It is important to

note that I have never enjoyed calligraphy, nor do I have a great aptitude for it, in fact, I have no interest in such an endeavor at all. It was simply a strategic move. I understood that it was my handwriting on the letter left at a crime scene where my best friend lay dead, and I also understood that a change needed to be made to that handwriting, as it tied me to something I could not afford to be tied to. Of course, I had written the letter using my left hand to make it less discernible, like the handwriting of the man I was framing for a suicide which was really a murder, but I figured that if the police asked for a sample of my handwriting, I could at least change it enough so the crime could not be linked to me. Surprisingly, the idea worked, because when the police asked for a sample of my handwriting, it was so changed since the forged note that I was not associated with the murder at all, so uninvolved I was asked to speak at both of the funerals and no one ever suspected a thing.

I tell you about this calligraphy class, that photo, these people, and those places because it seems, even after I have been away for so long, I am still haunted by my past. So distraught I do not sleep or eat well, I merely wait for the day when I can join Lex and tell him how incredibly sorry I am for the way things have turned out. However, since I am still alive and relatively healthy, I figured the next best thing would be to write down everything that happened, in a feeble attempt to reconcile with the past but also in a futile attempt to solve it. Will writing it down lead me to a different conclusion? Will I be able to solve the mystery quicker this time around, in reading my own thoughts? Will I be able to change things? No, definitely not. But perhaps I can write them so that they are heard, so that they are known. That is all I know how to do, anyway. I never got my law degree, never married Kit, never even took the bar. I have always been a writer, I was just never writing. But now, for Lex's sake, I will.

September, 1993

In our long, grueling debates regarding the economy, my best friend Lex would often reference the same three things: Cuban Communists, the Vanderbilts, and his father James, who he considered the epitome of the corporate man. It was unclear as to why he would reference these things; he did not know much about any of them nor did they usually relate to the topic at hand. They seemed to slip into his mind and hold such a prevalent place that he had no choice but to bring them up, regardless of their relevance. He loved Cubans, said their lifestyle was "incredibly complex and admirable" but he often came to a similar

conclusion whenever he talked about them: communism just wasn't for him. He embraced frill and fun, he was a big shopper and he loved feeling better than others, all things that indicate someone might enjoy their capitalist life. Although he knew very little about the Vanderbilts, he was always talking about them, mentioning odd facts of doubtful authenticity, or praising their way of life. He came to a similar conclusion to that of the Cubans; he would not do very well as a Vanderbilt, saying he did not "share core values." Which core values he was talking about, I do not know, as he never went on to identify any striking principles or standards by which the Vanderbilts lived. As for the third point of conversation, Lex could not stand his father. He hated his family and he hated his home, he spent Christmas with me and refused to go back to his family unless there was an emergency, which for him, there never was. The complex reasons for his distaste of home will become more apparent later in the story, but for now, all you need to know is that Lex thought no one in his family knew how to enjoy themselves, and he simply could not stand it.

Lex, despite his nuanced thoughts on the Cubans and his dysfunctional relationship with his father, was not an incredibly complex man. He liked to read, but only if the book was short and the story kept his attention, and he loved to watch movies but only if they were happy, he hated those melancholic ones that appeared in the cinema and depressed him for weeks. His favorite color was blue, and he loved the ocean. He grew up in Little Compton, a beach town in Rhode Island, and loved to surf, though he was very nit-picky about sunscreen and seaweed getting in his eyes. Unfortunately, he was a borderline kleptomaniac, you might have found him stuffing a bag of chips in the pocket of his pants, or even going farther and putting a bottle of cologne in his coat. It wasn't that he didn't have the money to buy the things he wanted, in fact, Lex was the richest man I knew, he just enjoyed the feeling of taking something that wasn't his. It was the same way with that horrible habit of eavesdropping he had, he just wanted to know things he wasn't supposed to. He would often hide in unsuspected places and sneak around, hoping to come across some information he wouldn't have otherwise been privy to. He was a horrible gossip as well, you could rarely trust him with a secret and he would always tell me things I had no interest in hearing.

Of course, he did have charming characteristics as well, after all, he was my best friend. It was my opinion that his gossiping, kleptomaniacal tendencies did not change the fact, that overall, he was a magnificent person. He was

incredibly funny, always knowing what to say and when to say it, and he was extremely intelligent, great at math and debating, even better at French, which he used to speak at home with his mother and brother. He was eccentric, outlandish at times, though exceedingly well-liked, he had been since I met him. My favorite part about him though, was how loyal he was. He would always take my side in an argument, always tell people off if they were mean to me, always let me use his notes or answers in class if I didn't get something. I mean, he could hate someone forever just because I told him they gave me a dirty look. I considered Lex my brother, because that's just how it is being brothers, you can bicker with someone and maybe not love every part of each other, but you would do anything for him, even give your own life.

The story of how Lex and I became friends began in freshman year of high school when we were 14. I was more awkward back then, tall and lanky, my face dotted with freckles that had not yet faded, my hair sticking out in all directions. I was slightly shy and didn't know how to talk to girls; I had a couple of good friends but in no way was I considered cool, or popular. Most of the time it felt as if I was just there, a placeholder, a background noise, a filler. That was until I met Lex. It was my first year at boarding school in Connecticut, I had no friends and longed for home terribly, I was beginning to think I wouldn't last till October. Lex missed the first week of school, he showed up to our dorm room with a deep tan and beaded bracelets all over his wrists, claiming he had just got off a plane from the Bahamas and was "crazy stoked" to meet his new roommate, me. I was, understandably, unnerved by his presence and decided we would probably never be friends, merely acquaintances.

I grew to love him though, we spent so much time together, studying, playing board games, talking, that I realized he really was a wonderful guy: funny and charming, loyal and kind. It was through Lex that I began to feel like I wasn't just watching my life, I was living it. I made friends, learned how to style my hair, even got better at talking to girls. Eventually, I became a semi-cool guy, nowhere near Lex's level but somewhere close enough that I was content. Lex spent the summer before sophomore year at my lake house in Michigan, and then every summer after that traveling around with me. He liked my family much more than his, he loved my mom because she was very relaxed, and he loved my sister and brother because they were older than us and interesting, and they knew how to have fun. He had a grudging respect for my father, because although he was a "corporate man," a type Lex could not

stand, he was also smart and well-traveled and he knew a great deal of peculiar things which made him intriguing and compelling. I'll tell you more about my family later on, not that they're in any sense fascinating, but because it will be necessary to understand other parts of the story, more important things.

Anyway, all you have to know is that for those four years of boarding school, Lex and I were inseparable. We ate all our meals together, took most of our classes together, played sports together, talked about everything, and knew each other so well one of us could sneeze and the other one would have already said "*gesundheit*." We were the perfect duo. We applied to similar East Coast colleges, our boarding school was a feeder for Yale so we both got in there as well as Harvard and Columbia, and a couple of other good picks. I chose Yale because I liked the campus the most, and Lex decided he would go wherever I went, which I was overjoyed about. We were roommates again at Yale and it was just like high school except we had much more freedom and much more time, it felt as if we could do anything or be anyone, we were the masters of our own lives. To Lex, this was a relatively foreign idea, his parents were deeply controlling so it was often hard for him to feel as if he had any grasp on his own decisions or thoughts, college was a nice way for him to be on his own. I enjoyed college as well, I was a political science major and maintained a good average while barely doing work or studying for tests. I went to my fair share of parties, had a few non-serious girlfriends, made some good friends, and had a nice college experience. Did I have any earth-shaking revelations about the world? No. Did I find myself in ways I hadn't before? No. Did I have fun? You bet. All things considered, a good college experience.

The story of Lex's death starts in September, 1993, in my second year of law school at Hartwell University in Concord, Massachusetts. Despite its gradual decrease in level of education, in the early '90s, Hartwell had the best law program in the country. I spent the summer of '93 in Europe with my best friends: Lex, Carter, Elliot, and Victor. Lex and I met Carter in one of our classes in September in the first year of the program. He introduced us to Elliot, his twin brother, and Victor, a rich genius they had met during orientation. We formed a strange, eccentric study group, we spent most of our time together, in fact, we even lived together, but I'll get more into that later. That summer, we spent two weeks in Vienna, chasing a girl named Lola who Elliot was convinced he had fallen in love with, and then one week in Italy, eating farfalle and lying

on the warm beaches in the south. We spent a few days in Paris, a night in London, and an overwhelming couple of hours in Barcelona, where Lex lost \$2,000 to a palm reader in the street. Lex and I spent two weeks with my family in Martha's Vineyard before school started; most of the day we spent at the beach, surfing, or in my room, reading magazines or watching whatever was on. I don't remember too much of this summer, my memories of Europe consist mainly of images of warm sand in the south of Italy and a train with a beautiful woman who I never got the courage to ask out in England. There is a ballroom in Vienna, an ethereal sunrise somewhere in France, and a boat ride in Greece where Carter fell into the sea. As for Martha's Vineyard, I remember blueberry pies early in the morning, golden retrievers running free, an outdoor shower covered in ivy, the sound of tennis balls hitting rackets, and a distinct look of horror when my mother caught me and Lex smoking Camels in the backyard. A wonderful summer to start what I presumed would be another successful year of school. It's funny how incredibly wrong that assumption turned out to be.

When August came, Lex and I moved back into Victor's manor. I first came to live there in December of the year before, the lease on my apartment had ended and Victor suggested I come to live with him. It was about a fifteen-minute drive to school, and Elliot and Carter were already living with him as their leases had ended in November. A deciding factor of my move also came down to the fact that the apartments in Concord were slightly run down in such a way that over time they could drive you crazy. I had been to the manor on numerous occasions, I often went for dinner on Friday nights, or study sessions during the week, in fact, I had slept there a couple of times and there was even a single party thrown in early November which had not gone too favorably. I loved the house desperately, there was something so intangible, so heavenly about the brick walls and white windows, the library, and the velvet window seats which to me were perfection. I could not have loved that house more had I grown up in it; it was wild, wonderful, and warm, it had all the simple things I loved, snow on the chimney, pianos in dark corners, green tiles, white lily petals on window sills. I was ecstatic by the suggestion that I could live there and immediately said yes. It was not long before Lex's lease was up for renewal, and Victor proposed that he come live with us, and he of course said yes. It was glorious, the five of us in that house. There were eight bedrooms, one was being

used as a study, and the other was being used as a library, so we all got our own room, though me and Lex shared a bathroom which I didn't mind. The house belonged to Victor's aunt, Clementine, but she was away for almost all of the year in London, she returned for the month of July, but since we were all away on vacation in the summer anyway, we had never met her nor did she cause us any disturbance. The house sat on an acre of land, somewhere about 300 feet to the right of the driveway there was an apple orchard that produced delicious Granny Smiths in the month of October, and there were gardens which seemed to stretch on forever in the backyard, which produced great herbs in the month of April. There were a few lawn chairs sprawled near the back porch and we often sat and watched the sunset, chatting about unimportant things as we ate whatever Victor could find in his pantry, usually vodka and cheese balls, though we occasionally added in a Granny Smith apple if we were feeling fancy. The house itself was brick, with two white columns in front of a large door with a loud lion-shaped knocker. There were French windows all around the house, some opened and you could get a nice fresh breeze, but some were latched shut due to time, though almost all of them were covered with white lace curtains, which seldom seemed to block the sun. There was a great big entrance hall, where glamorous old photographs hung on the walls and a coat rack which usually stored backpacks sat. In the middle of the room, a grand staircase with velvet-lined railings occupied a large amount of space, in the back there was a small closet where hundreds of our shoes mingled together until you couldn't find your best pairs anymore and had to grab someone else while running out the door, cursing yourself for your lack of organization. A couple feet to the right there was the relatively unused kitchen, none of us were great chefs, and while Lex would often dabble with odd food combinations and silly dessert plates, he would almost always give up on his invention halfway through, which caused the rest of us a long and tiring clean up process. The kitchen itself, though mainly abandoned, was charming, it had green tiles on the walls and a nice stove with a white oven in the corner, and the fridge, which rarely had food, was quite large. There were a couple of leather stools, a coffee machine, random kitchen appliances, and large windows that let in so much sunlight that it could burn you if you stood near them for too long. Next to the kitchen, a large dining room contained an oak table and fancy green chairs a couple of feet from where we put our Christmas tree. We almost always ate dinner in the dining room, though normally it was takeout or frozen food. A few feet to the

left there was a living room with a nice TV and comfy seating and a sunroom where we held our best late-night talks.

I think my favorite part of the house, and where I spent most of my time, was the library. It was a grand room, the walls a spectacular navy blue, lined with bookshelves, and in the corner an old Steinway, which Carter and Victor took turns playing. There were three leather armchairs and a big window seat, and Lex and I occupied a lot of time in the room; we did most of our studying and chatting there, and later all of our plotting. Most of the time I would search for a book while Elliot ate something in the corner; he was always hungry, and Victor would play the piano or peer over my shoulder to my book while Carter and Lex read newspapers and gossiped. The pair would gossip all the time actually, they loved to exchange bits and pieces of information they had found with one another, both were sneaky and had a thirst for drama. We spent so much time together in that library that eventually it was just the place to go if you needed to find someone. If I didn't know where Carter or Eliot was I'd go straight to the library, even if they weren't there at least one of us was and could help me find them.

You know what? I've talked too much about that house. It's important, of course, but I've overdone it. This story, this writing, it's for Lex's sake, not my own. I loved that place, but this isn't for me. I can write silly poems or foolish short stories about my love of the garden or my favorite windows, but that is not what this is. I've done my late friend a great disservice by not starting at the beginning, but let me try again. After all, Lex was a great believer in second chances.

To be quite frank, I can't really remember the two weeks of school leading up to Kit's arrival. I remember I did a lot of work, I read a lot of books, and I smoked a lot of cigarettes, but it's hard for me to recall much else. Classes started in late August; Lex, Victor and Elliot got the same teacher as I did, Professor Nelson, but Carter was in a different section with Professor Tulula so we hardly saw him during the day. Sometimes I wouldn't even see him at all till I arrived home. I was disappointed we weren't in the same section, but I loved my teacher, Professor Nelson. He was dynamic, incredibly funny, always making a joke; universally loved, also respected. I had heard from one of the guys in the class that he was the best lawyer in all of the Northeast, and people paid ten times more than any other lawyer to have him. I doubted how factual that was, nobody could really be that good at anything that you would pay ten

times more to have them. But as I spent more time in his class, I realized that he really was as great as they said, he could win any case, argue about anything in the universe, defend the world's worst criminals, or put them away for life. And he could juggle. He was, to say the least, the coolest guy I have ever known.

In my section there were twenty-five students; twenty-four of them were men, and there was a single brown-haired, quiet woman who sat in the back and answered every question perfectly. I only talked to her twice during the entire year, once in September when I asked to borrow a pen, and once in March, when she gave her condolences about Lex. Sometimes I wonder if she went on to be a great lawyer, or if she dropped out like I did, or even went on an IRS wanted list like some of the other guys in the class. I only knew about eight or nine other students; I interacted with everyone of course, but I could only remember about ten people's names, and four of those guys I lived with, so it was kind of expected that I knew them. You know, I've completely put off telling you about Victor, Carter and Elliot. I've told you all about Lex, but I've just skipped right over the other three. Why don't I start now? They were very important to this story, and they are quite interesting men, in fact, probably the most interesting men I have ever met.

Victor was filthy rich. I mean, he was the kind of rich where if you told him that you had just used his credit card to buy a car, he would've asked what color and left it at that. I never knew exactly how he had made all his money, I think his father's grandfather was in the oil business, though the details are all kind of fuzzy. Victor had grown up in New York City, he had gone to a lavish Swedish boarding school, then Columbia, and now he had come to Hartwell to study law. He might have been attractive had his features not been so strange; he had icy blue eyes, the kind where you wanted to look away every time his gaze shifted to you, and he had a large nose that was crooked near his eyebrows. His lips were thin, and they sat in a pursed way all the time, it made him look judgy and unapproachable. He was very tall, maybe 6'3" or 6'4" with short blonde hair, always brushed back in the same elegant manner. He knew a great deal of odd facts, and he might have been funny had he been able to understand social cues better. For the entire time I knew him he never had a girlfriend, though he did tell me about a girl he liked named Madison, though he never asked her out. I liked Victor well enough, he was kind and he was easy to talk to, he was also a genius, and always willing to help me with homework. None of us were too close to him, though this was only because he was away a

lot, and we didn't know that much about him. I was much closer with the twins, Carter and Elliot. They were pretty well off too, I think their parents were in the insurance business and had done really well at one of those fancy practices in New York, though I can't remember if they had older money as well. Carter was generally regarded as very attractive, he had tan skin, dark brown hair and sharp features, he was handsome in that Abercrombie model sort of way. He was a bad gossip, and couldn't be trusted with secrets, but he was very funny, always cracking a joke or making some sly comment, and he could usually get Victor to laugh, even though he hated most jokes. Both Elliot and Carter had gone to Princeton, which I thought was a little odd, because it meant they had been together since they were kids, but I guess if they enjoyed each other's company that much then it made sense to stay together for that long. Elliot looked and acted very differently from Carter; he was a lot shorter and a lot more pale, he had bright blonde hair and round features, though most people agreed he was attractive. It was different with his brother, Carter looked tan and Californian and slightly basic, and Elliot looked vaguely European, with unique features that seemed more striking. Elliot was also much more quiet and collected, he had a less distinct personality than his twin, he was calmer and he enjoyed less trivial things; he liked to read and take long walks, he enjoyed philosophical debates and gardening and he rarely made jokes or laughed. I liked him a little more than I did Carter, though I would never have admitted that. I was much kinder back in my twenties. I was a lot more stupid and dishonest too, but at least I was nice. My name is Winthrop, (horrible, I know) but everybody called me Win or Winnie, and Lex had a cruel late night habit of calling me Thropple, which I used to hate but now I miss. When I was 23, which I have not been in a very long time, I was tall and lean, tan with brown hair and pale green eyes, and girls used to love me, for reasons I didn't know. Back then I was different, I had misguided dreams of becoming a lawyer and making my father proud, I kept my love for books and writing hidden, and I never cried, at least, not until I met Kit. I was a slight alcoholic, but then again, so were the rest of us, and I always had a cigarette in my hand, which is probably why I can barely get up the stairs now. I had a lot of redeeming qualities though, I was educated and bright, I was relatively kind and funny, and I considered myself loyal and a good friend, but I suppose I'm biased. In any case, Lex, Carter, Elliot, Victor and I were all good friends who were living wonderful lives, we spent the weeks working as hard as possible, notes and legal

terms our only friends, and then we spent the weekend drinking and meeting girls, because that was just the thing to do. It was the '90s, we were thriving and we thought that was how life would always be. We thought we could cruise through adulthood the same way we had childhood, but we were severely mistaken, so much so, that one of us is dead.

I met her Tuesday morning of the third week of my second year, and I was in love with her from the moment I first saw her. Kit was beautiful. Ethereal, otherworldly, majestic. Everyone agreed. She had long black hair which cascaded down her back in neat waves, and she had ghostly pale skin that made her look like a Greek goddess. Her nose was long and slender, and her eyes were hazel with flecks of gold. Where most people looked washed out in the sunlight, she mesmerized, her eyes turning green and her pale skin turning to a sparkling bright hue. The first time I saw her it was the Tuesday she arrived in our class, though I saw her a couple hours before the lecture started. She was getting coffee from one of those little breakfast carts we used to have around campus, wearing some blue Levis and a white sweater, and she had two little braids in the front of her hair which made her look like a mermaid. I watched her grab her coffee and reach a slender hand into her bag, pulling out a ten dollar bill as a tip. That really got me, I mean, those coffee were like three bucks, and here she was giving a 300% tip. I was sure then that she was my dream girl, though I didn't go up to her or say anything out of sheer nervousness, I only watched her walk away and thought about how lovely it would be if I went with her.

I thought about her for the next couple of hours; it was Tuesday so I didn't have class till one, but Lex and I had gone to a little bakery next to campus to get some work done. I mean, it wasn't if I hadn't seen beautiful girls before, I had, it was just that most of the girls at Hartwell were either mean or plain-looking. Kit was neither. While Lex was reading about special murder cases and custody arrangements at the table next to me, I was picturing what I would say to Kit if I saw her again. Would I ask for her number? Tell her she looked nice? No, probably not. I wasn't bold back in my youth, I was shy, less confident. Honestly, I would've probably never seen her again if she wasn't in my class; I might've even forgotten about her the next day had she not appeared in the seat next to me a couple hours after that first sighting.

It was some random lecture, maybe vehicular manslaughter, maybe civil procedures, but I know it wasn't Professor Nelson speaking, because I remembered almost all of his lectures, those were fantastic. Professor Nelson had introduced the speaker and then came to sit near the back of the room, he said hi to Lex and I and told us to watch out for the new girl because she didn't know where to sit, Lex threw his jacket over the chair next to me and I promised I would wave her over when we saw her. After this, Professor Nelson promptly fell asleep, though told us to wake him when the lecture was over. It took a couple more minutes till everyone was in their seats, and the new girl still had not arrived. I wondered for a moment if she was the one I had seen getting coffee, but decided against it; the chances were too slim. It was then when she walked through the door, rushing to put a book in the front pocket of a tote bag, black hair waving wildly. Lex nudged me.

"That's her. The new girl." He stuck up a hand and waved her over, then pointed to a sleeping Professor Nelson behind him. She noticed us right away, and revealing a sligher longer right tooth, she smiled.

"That's the girl, Lex. The coffee girl. Oh my god!" I whispered as she made her way over.

"You're kidding. Win, this is perfect! You're gonna talk to her!" Lex grinned.

"Not if I throw up first." I whisper shouted into his ear.

Just then she arrived at our row of seats. I stood up to shake her hand, incredibly aware of how stupid I must have looked. I had barely brushed my hair that morning, had put no effort into my dingy jeans and ratty sweater, I had even forgotten to wear matching socks. And then there was her, who looked perfect. Her skin glowed, no eye bags or blemishes in sight. I watched her as she reached a slender wrist from her bag to shake my hand, and then shake Lex's. In her left hand, she was holding one of those flyers you found around campus, "save the earth" type of crap.

"Hi! I'm looking for Fredrick Nelson. Is this his room?"

"If you're looking for him, you're in the right place. He's actually right there, but we're having a lecture today and he doesn't really like to stay awake for these types of things." Lex pointed behind us to where Professor Nelson was napping.

She laughed. "Sure, I mean, who does?" Lex and I laughed, though mine was way too nervous and came out a little squeaky.

“I’m Lex, by the way. That’s Win. You must be the new girl Professor Nelson told us to watch out for.”

“Unless there is another new girl, that’s me. I’m Kit.” Lex opened his mouth to say something but stopped when the lecturer’s voice boomed in the microphone. Kit put down her bag and sat next to me, crossing one leg over the other as she pulled out a little blue notebook and pen from her bag. She ripped out a piece of paper and began scribbling; I paid little attention to the speaker, it was something about civil suits and since that type of stuff bored me endlessly, I gave all of my attention to Kit sitting next to me. She tapped me on the shoulder and handed me a folded piece of paper.

On a scale of one to ten, how boring is this about to be?

She signed her name at the bottom, as if I would’ve been confused on who sent it. I smiled at the note, and flipped it over to write my response.

8 to 9, depending on your attention span.

I folded it and handed it back to her, slightly giddy. I wanted to tap Lex on the shoulder and show him what was going on, but he had already fallen asleep. He usually only lasted five or ten minutes at these lectures before dozing off, in a similar fashion to that of Professor Nelson. I looked around for Elliot and Victor, but they were in the front row, paying close attention to the speaker and taking incredibly precise notes. Kit tapped me on the shoulder again and handed me another piece of paper.

What would you recommend to fill my time? I could (a) take a nap like your friend Lex, (b) draw on my notebook, or (c) pretend to go to the bathroom and then just leave.

I laughed quietly as I read it. I thought about the question for a few minutes before responding. What should she do? I mean, taking a nap was nice but only if you didn’t get caught by the lecturer, and drawing was fine too but it’s no more exciting than sitting in your chair and listening to a boring lecture on civil procedures. The third option was the worst option by far; Professor Nelson would probably want to see her to say hi after the lecture, after all he had told us to watch out for her, and, more importantly, if she left I would be horribly sad I didn’t get to talk to her. I thought about it a little longer, then replied.

Napping is a slippery slope, the lecturers sometimes yell at whoever they catch asleep, and drawing’s not a great option either, it’s a little boring. I definitely would not recommend Option C, I think Professor Nelson probably wants to say

hi after the lecture and he won't be thrilled if you're gone. I personally read while pretending to take notes, but I hear crosswords are a good alternative if you like that kind of thing.

She read it over for a second and then smiled while scribbling down a response. Happily, I watched her as she did, elated that I was really talking to coffee girl instead of just daydreaming about her.

You're making some very good points here, but I don't have a book or a crossword. I have chewing gum, a pencil, and my keys inside my bag, so not exactly ideal.

I read the note over and chuckled, considering different responses. I had an extra book in my bag, as well as a *New Yorker*, and I had a couple crosswords stuffed somewhere in the back pocket. I also had an idea so that I could keep talking to Kit, which was making me ten times happier than if I read whatever classic I was dutifully reading that day.

I have a copy of The Castle in my bag and also a New Yorker. If neither of those interest you I might have a crossword puzzle in the bottom of my bag, and if none of those appeal, I have an idea.

She read it over and smiled, then began scribbling. There was a sudden roiling in my stomach, the feeling of embarrassment at my own giddy, and the sense of nervousness, all in one: butterflies.

*Although I do love The Castle, and The New Yorkers always interest me, I would really love to hear the idea. If it's awful I'll accept the *Kafka* and a crossword plus ten minutes with The New Yorker.*

I smirked and began writing as quickly as I could, my fingers shaking as my pen scrawled across the paper. As I slipped the note back into Kit's slender hand, I realized just how happy the entire letter passing interaction had made me. I mean, I had to physically stop the corners of my mouth from curling into a smile every time I felt that paper slip back into my hand.

Well, I was thinking we could play tic-tac-toe, or dots and boxes, or a really weird game of checkers. We could even do trivia or hangman if you like. If not, The New Yorker was pretty good this week.

She laughed as she read the note, a light airy wisp which reminded me all at once of spring and vanilla cake, and the lull of tired eyes right before they fall asleep. I was so incredibly entranced by that breathless noise emitted from Kit's lips, much too delicate to be called a laugh, that I almost didn't notice the slip of paper right in front of me.

The New Yorker will most definitely not be necessary. Let's do tic-tac-toe and then hangmen and then if I can come up with good enough questions, trivia.

I grinned a large, toothy smile as the note came back to me. For the next hour and a half, while Lex snored quietly next to us and Elliot and Victor precariously took notes in the front of the room, Kit and I passed back her little blue notebook so many times we filled almost a quarter of it. We played eight or nine rounds of tic-tac-toe, though she won every time, no matter if I started first or not. I wondered if this was because I was incredibly distracted by the color of her eyes in the light of the sun, or because I was just really bad at tic-tac-toe, but either way I was on a losing streak. We played hangman four times, and she won three rounds, though in the fourth I miraculously got the word, "Alphanumeric" with only one limb to go. Trivia was the biggest hit of the bunch, she made all the quizzes, and the questions ranged from the lifespan of a dragonfly (seven days) to the second wife of Henry VIII (Catherine Howard). In the final minutes of the lecture, she asked the killer question, "What was the name of JFK's sister with the lobotomy?" The answer, Rosemary Kennedy, was not something I knew.

Whenever I talk about Kit, that is the once or twice a year when I am just drunk enough to not bawl with the sound of her name, I often mention this day. What could have happened if I had just told her to doodle on her notebook? Even if I had told her to take my Kafka and then never talked to her again, could I have changed things? No. Kit was just one of those girls that no matter how hard you tried, you were going to fall in love with her. One smile with those crooked teeth and I was hooked. I wasn't sold till Rosemary, but I would've eventually been anyway. After all, you can never stop the cold breeze of winter, not unlike the wisp of Kit which seemed to leave just when the sun came out, in perfect timing with the end of those chilly months before summer.

A couple minutes after the lecture ended, I woke up Lex, who promptly helped me wake up Professor Nelson, who had begun snoring quite loudly.

"Oh drat! I must have fallen asleep during the end of that incredibly interesting lecture!" He winked at Lex and me, and fixed his glasses, which became crooked from his nap. He locked eyes with Kit, and for just a moment, that friendly little warmth in his pupils seemed to diminish just slightly, and in came a terrifying jolt of sharpness, accompanied by the lids of his eyes drawing back to make him look surprised.

“Ah! You must be Kit, the new student. I hope you’ve enjoyed the lecture, and that these two jokers have not disturbed you too much.” He winked at us again and I felt myself turn crimson.

“No, not at all. Lex was paying close attention to the speaker and Win over here helped me take some notes.” Professor Nelson let out a big laugh and clapped his hands.

“You certainly have a good sense of humor over there Ms. Baudelaire. I have never once seen Mr. Carrington stay awake for longer than ten minutes during a lecture, and this one over here-” he clasped a hand over my back “-this one takes notes only on his silly literature and nothing else.” Kit laughed, Lex blushed.

“I’ve been told you don’t particularly like to stay awake for these types of things either, Professor Nelson,” Kit said. I thought for a moment that he was going to get angry, or call her disrespectful, but he only laughed loudly and complimented Kit for her sense of humor. That type of joke seemed to me the kind you would only make with a teacher you had known for a very long time, a teacher who you knew very well. Professor Nelson was a lighthearted man but he was also a man of great power and prestige, not the type to go joking around with on the first day of meeting him.

“Well, I’m terribly sorry but you’ll have to excuse me for just a moment, I need to speak with the lecturer. I’ll be back in a few minutes and then Ms. Baudelaire and I have a meeting. Maybe the three of you can get a quick bite and then meet me back here in twenty minutes or so? You can take Elliot and Victor with you as well, show Ms. Baudelaire around a little. How does that sound?”

“Sure, we’d love to. Would you like us to pick up something for you, Professor Nelson?” Lex said.

“Hm. If you happen to run into a black coffee and it looks very strong, bring it back. If not, a bag of pretzels will suffice. Thank you very much.” He shook each of our hands as he left, and whispered something in Kit’s ear as he walked away. I wondered what he had said, but didn’t pry, I assumed it was in regards to their meeting.

“I’m gonna grab Victor and Elliot. Why don’t you put on your coats and meet us outside the classroom?” Lex asked.

“Sure.” Kit smiled and grabbed her stuff as Lex walked down to where Elliot and Victor sat, rereading their notes.

“Should I be nervous about meeting Victor and Elliot or will they fall victim to my great charm and humor and buy me lunch?” I laughed, one of those real genuine ones, and thought about the question.

“To be honest, I think you’re looking at free lunch and a coffee.” She smiled and then handed me my coat. I went to grab my bag off the floor, and noticed a folded up piece of paper, one of the notes Kit and I had shared. Without letting her see, I stuffed the note into my coat pocket as a relic of the day and then made a promise to myself to never throw it out. Whether or not I still have it is irrelevant, but if I had kept it (I did) and I had not thrown it out (I did not) then maybe it would lay in the second drawer of my nightstand, and maybe I would look at it more than I should. That, however, is neither here nor there.

While we waited for Lex and the guys, Kit and I formally introduced ourselves. I learned that her full name was Katarina Baudelaire but that nobody ever called her Katarina and she couldn’t stand it if anyone did. I learned she was from New York and had gone to Columbia and had recently transferred from Yale Law School. She had also recently transferred from Professor Tulula’s class, though she didn’t specify why, and I didn’t ask. We had veered onto the topic of her interests when Lex, Victor, and Elliot appeared.

“Ah so you really didn’t make her up?” Victor asked. Kit laughed that airy breathless laugh of hers, though I knew Victor hadn’t really been joking. He had been genuinely thinking that we made up a girl just to mess with him and was surprised one actually existed. In that moment, I was incredibly grateful for Victor’s lack of social skills, or any awareness, because it meant I got to hear that little birdsong that was Kit’s giggle.

“Kit, this is Victor and that’s Elliot. Victor, Elliot, that’s Kit.”

“Nice to meet you, Kit. I have a twin, Carter, he might be joining us in a little while if that’s all right. He’s in Professor Tulula’s section, they get out a little later,” Elliot said.

“Oh! Kit was in Professor Tulula’s section for a week, right? Do you know Carter?” I asked. I had completely forgotten they might have met each other.

“Hm, I think so. Is he blonde?” Carter was most definitely not blonde. He had wavy dark hair, and in the light it might’ve looked mousy brown, though nowhere near blonde.

“Uh no. You must be thinking of another person. Carter has very dark hair,” Victor said.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I haven’t learned everybody’s names yet, so I must be getting confused.”

“All good. Any suggestions for lunch?” Lex asked.

“We could get a slice of pizza, there’s Mikes like two minutes away. That’s pretty quick” I offered.

“Yeah but I’m craving sushi. What’s that Japanese place on Laurel? That’s like a five minute walk,” Elliot replied.

“Sakura, but they take forever. We have to be back in 20 minutes,” Lex said.

“All right, how about Lex and I go to Sakura and Victor, Kit and Win go to Mike’s. We can meet you back at school afterwards,” Elliot said. We agreed on the plan, though I was slightly nervous at the prospect of hanging out with just Victor and Kit. Victor was weird, as nice and interesting as he was, and he could be kind of off-putting. I would also miss Lex’s company, because he seemed to make every awkward interaction ten times better, and I lacked that particular skill. I tried to not worry and shot Lex one of those, “Wish me luck” looks. As we were walking toward Mikes, Kit and Victor started talking about chess. I can’t really remember how they got on the topic, I was sort of zoning out, but before long they were in a heated debate about the game’s origin. Kit was arguing it was an Egyptian who had come up with it, though Victor was saying it came from India. They were talking about different chess moves and strategies which I had no idea about. Despite the fact that I wanted to jump into the conversation, I didn’t have anything to add. My chess skill was limited, I knew how to play but that was about it. The last time I had won a game I was playing against my nine-year-old cousin, and even then it was a rough match. The whole chess conversation kind of irritated me. I mean, I had no reason to be upset; I had no claim over Kit, no rule over what we could talk about, no cause to be jealous, yet I was. But why? Victor had not gone on a date since he was thirteen years old and then his mother had set him up with the neighbor. Victor was no Lothario.

Kit just had that effect on me. I cared about things more when she was involved. The chess thing is a perfect example. I was jealous of a guy who had no skill with women, and I was upset because I knew nothing about chess, a thing I couldn’t care less about. I desperately wanted to impress Kit, so much so I would’ve done anything.

When we reached Mike's, Victor had begun talking about Professor Nelson, a subject which I actually knew a lot about. Kit was asking us questions about his class and what it was like.

"I heard something about a second-year special case thing? Someone told me about something Professor Nelson does with his students, some case he lets them on?" Kit was referring to something Professor Nelson did every year with his second-year students, something we had all heard about and were always thinking about. Professor Nelson selected five or six students every year for whatever big case he was working on whether it be murder, theft, or fraud. These five people got special privileges, special treatment, the ability to work closely with Professor Nelson and learn much more than their peers. I had been thinking about it from the moment I learned Professor Nelson was my teacher. I desperately wanted to be one of those five, though I realized there were far more capable and respectable options than me.

"Oh sure. He chose five or six students every year and they get to work on whatever case he has at the moment. Last year it was embezzlement, though I heard a rumor that it's fraud this year," Victor explained.

"Really? That's interesting. How does he choose the students?" Kit asked.

"I think it's based on how well we do in class, though Lex has a theory it's about how much he likes you," Victor said.

"Yeah but Lex also thinks the moon landing is fake, so he's not exactly a reputable source," I said. Kit laughed, and Victor almost smiled. We had gotten to the front of the line, and before Victor could offer to pay, I chimed in and said I would cover everyone's slice. Victor always offered to pay for things, he had so much money nothing he bought ever made the slightest dent in his allowance, and usually I accepted happily. I had money too, not as much as Victor, but more than Carter and Elliot, though I didn't really like to spend it on commodities like groceries or school supplies. Mainly I spent my money on books and clothes, and though I spent the occasional grand amount on a silly vacation, I wasn't really interested in things. When I was Kit, I used to make lavish shows of my wealth. I would buy her whatever she wanted, would purchase expensive things just to prove I could. I never knew if she thought this was stupid and obscene or if she was charmed by my wealth. A slice of pizza was, oddly enough, the first and last thing I ever bought her. The first slice, if I recall correctly, was pepperoni and mushrooms. The last one was plain cheese, though it was never eaten. The conversation following that first particular slice

was mild, we talked a little more about Professor Nelson, and I found Kit incredibly easy to talk to. She laughed at just the right times, asked interesting questions, and responded to everything in such a perfect manner one might've thought it was rehearsed. I remember something she told me back in January, some odd fact she had read in a book.

“Did you know people are actually better at talking when they're walking than when they're just sitting down? It's something to do with your heart rates and the pace of the conversation, it lines up in such a way that it's just easier to talk to someone when you're walking next to them. I love that. The human body. What perfection.” I thought about that for a long time after she said it. I still think about it now, to be completely honest. Sometimes I wonder if maybe the reason Kit was so charming was because she talked like she was walking all the time, no matter if she really was walking or if she wasn't. Maybe she was just charming because she was beautiful and witty, but I truly thought there was something chemical or biological that made her the way she was. I couldn't figure out what it was, still can't, but Kit had a quality that reminded me of something ethereal, something not human. It was like those Sirens in the Greek myths my sister used to tell me about. My sister, Jane, and I used to do this thing where if one of us was too tired or standoffish to have a good conversation, then the other one would tell a story. The stories ranged widely; sometimes we would tell movie plots or books that we had read that we thought were okay to spoil for the other one. Most of the time, Jane would relate Greek myths. She knew a lot of them: Psyche, Perseus, Cyrene, you name it. My favorite was always the Sirens.

They're different in every story, no one can really agree about where they come from or what they do. In some versions, they are said to be made by Demeter to help search for her daughter, Persephone. Some versions say that Hera made the Sirens have a singing contest with the Muses, and that the Sirens lost and plucked off all their feathers and threw themselves into the ocean to lure sailors to their death. That version is kind of similar to what happens in the *Odyssey*. The Sirens are supposed to lure sailors to their death by singing so beautifully that the sailors jump off their boats. In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus knows this and asks his crew to tie him to the mast of the ship so he can hear their song but not jump. He begs them to untie him and let him jump, but they don't. In some stories, the Sirens can tell you your fatal flaw if you listen to their song, and in other versions, they die if anyone hears them sing and lives. It's kind of

complicated to think about why Odysseus would purposefully risk his life, though I always thought he believed it would make him stronger if he could survive the Sirens. Sometimes that's how I feel about Kit, like I'm stronger because I survived her.

That's not why she reminds me of the Sirens though. The thing about Kit was that she could get basically anyone to do anything she wanted just by asking. In some Siren stories, they're so beautiful that they don't even have to sing, the sailors will just look at them and jump. They're persuasive, elusive, mysterious, and above all else, the worst thing that can ever happen to a man. It's the same with Kit. If she asked me to do something, anything in the world, I would've done it. I would've lain on the ground and let her walk all over me, would've paid any sum of money, would've hurt anyone or anything she wanted. People shouldn't be able to do that. It's dangerous. No one should have those powers, and yet, Kit did. The more I got to know her, the more scared I became. Not of her actual personality, Kit wasn't malicious or crazy or anything, I was more scared of the effect she had on me. Like I would've done anything to please her. That first day I met her, I had no idea about that scarier side of her, the side that was controlling and manipulative and laced in spite. We all have a side like that, Kit's was just more advanced than the rest of us.

I walked her back to Professor Nelson's office after Victor had gone off to find Carter, and we talked about something silly, the weather, the best breakfast spots near Hartwell, the sound of the birds in the sycamores.

"Sometimes I just can't stand them," she said to me.

"The birds?"

"They just take up so much noise. Everything is full of them." I laughed confused about what it meant. What was full of birds? And how could you take up noise? Kit often spoke like that, in an obscure manner. We had reached Professor Nelson's office and I saw him sitting inside, scrawling something in one of the books piling on his desk.

"Here, the coffee and his pretzels." I handed Kit Professor Nelson's snacks.

"Thanks. I think the meeting will go better if I have these." I laughed, and considered how I should say bye. I mean, I would be seeing her again the next day, but I wanted my good bye to be so cool that she would think about me for the rest of the night. My brother had once told me that people remember you by the last words you say to them, so if you say a funny or interesting goodbye, they'll be more inclined to think well of you.

“I should get going. I’ll see you tomorrow, right?” She nodded.

“You can come sit with Lex and I again if you’d like. Elliot and Victor might be there too.”

“I’d love to. Thanks, Win. I’ve had a really nice time talking to you. You know a lot of weird stuff about dragonflies and my pizza was just above edible.” I laughed, and she smiled again, revealing her crooked front teeth.

“I had a nice time too. Nobody else I know has any idea who Rosemary Kennedy is.” I started down the stairs, smiling while looking back.

“You must have very uncivilized friends if they don’t know Rosie.” I laughed as I walked down the stairs, looking back one more time to see Kit walking towards Professor Nelson’s room. For the first time in the few hours I had known her, Kit actually looked nervous. There was something about the way her eyebrows furrowed and she clenched her jaw that made me wonder what could possibly be making her so scared. As I walked toward the quad, where Elliot and Lex sat, eating their sushi and laughing loudly, I considered how much I really knew about Kit. She had told me very little about herself, and even though I hadn’t shared my whole life story or anything, I felt I had told her a significant amount more about myself. Kit, I decided, was the most interesting thing to ever come to Hartwell. She was also the worst thing that could’ve ever appeared, but I had no idea about that. Looking back, I had no idea about anything.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to all ALV members—writers, illustrators, and editors—who created this beautiful “bulldog” edition of *Aerie Literary Voices 2025*. Particular recognition goes to Marion Cook, Seoyon Kim, Anna Kleinberg, and Beaux Spondike for their fine work. Thanks also to my partners in crime, Jonathan Migliori and Mara Koppel, for making this publication a success. As always, heartfelt gratitude to Mark Harris for his continuing support of *Aerie Literary Voices*.

Robert Koppel
Aerie Writer-in-Residence

