Renaissance: A period of growth in which the arts in every form flourish.

Since 1980, UHigh’s Renaissance Magazine has showcased the creative forces of the Lab community. The Literature and Art boards work in tandem to publish student literature and artwork of all forms, from poetry to photographs to paintings and now digital creations such as musical compositions. In the coming months, be on the lookout for a new Renaissance website and for new projects such as a retrospective magazine highlighting the work of the last decades.

Please enjoy reading the 2017-2018 edition of Renaissance, with this year’s artistic vision based on minimalist line drawings. We hope it inspires you to create and, most of all, share your art and literature with us!

Sincerely,
The Editors of Renaissance Literature and Art

Submit to Lit: renaissance.lit@gmail.com
Share your Art: renartboard1@gmail.com
Bombs
by Nick Bridges

The wet runway shone in the moonlight. Rain hammered on the tarmac and upon the vast hangars where the bombers slept like ravenous beasts, waiting for a chance to unleash their spiteful rage upon unsuspecting cities and people. Ford stood in the officer’s hut at the far end of the airfield and watched as the enormous hangar doors ground slowly open up revealing a behemoth, all shining chrome and steel, illuminated by blinding floodlights as technicians scrambled over its vast form. He stood there mesmerized, until his co-pilot Compton tapped him on the shoulder, “It’s time to go.”

They slowly trudged towards where the colossal beasts lay sleeping, looming shadows in the rain-swept night. Ford climbed into the interior of his huge craft, cylindrical black shapes hanging in the dark around him. He knew all too well what these shapes were—he had seen too many cities and factories flattened not to know. Ford crawled forward to the brightly-lit cabin at the front of the machine. He did into the cold pilot’s seat and began checking the craft’s various instruments. Compton climbed in beside him, and they silently acknowledged each other’s presence. There was no need for words; it was all routine. They had been through this scene a hundred times. The radio crackled, “All flights, engines on.” Ford flicked on the engines and the turbines began to whir, slowly rising in volume and pitch. First a hum, and then louder, louder, louder: an abysmal shriek, full of resentment and hate, like that of all those about to die.

The jets roared off into the featureless night sky—two, four, six, eight, dozens of black metal behemoths rocketing through the sky at impossible speeds. They flew for hours long into the night. Ford smoked and Compton shuffled the same pack of cards over and over. Eventually the horizon began to glow, thousands of fires burning in thousands of refineries and factories far below. Tonight, however, they were exempt from their usual bombings. The squadron’s target was different. The factories eventually gave way to vast emptiness, and night slowly turned to day. The radio buzzed, “Approaching target.” Ford tensed. There it was on the horizon: a city, bright gleaming towers of metal and glass, sparkling in the early morning light. Compton gazed into the bombsight, calling out the range, “Five hundred, four hundred, three hundred, two hundred,” and then, “Release!” The bay doors opened and out dropped five, ten, fifteen, twenty, twenty-five, fifty, hundreds of black chrome death-bringers, all with one singular purpose. The bombs fell, and the beasts roared on. Ford tried not to think about the city, it was all routine, he’d done this hundreds of times before, and today was no different.
For as long as she could remember, she'd always been amazed at how information could be conveyed. A couple of hash-marks and swoops put together with spaces in the middle conveyed meaning. Those simple words could reveal touch, taste, smell, emotion. They could replicate the beauty of the events that rested in her head and show them to the rest of the world.

The quick scratch of a pencil stroke, the cool and fluid ink, and that trusty eraser used in tandem, in bold swirls and lines, unmasked an image, a snapshot, feeling, pain. They could show her thoughts to those who didn't think the same way; she could show her reality, which didn't exist for anyone else but her.

When she had been lonely, when the rug had been swept out from under her and she found herself completely alone in the crowd, when she was trying to make sense of it all, this small idea popped into her head. She used that idea, weaving it into a narrative that helped her escape. She thought her fiction, that little universe, would die once the story was finished.

It hadn't. Years later, it had become a flourishing world, bustling with the steady thrum of life. It was so much more complex now, as she added on new ideas, concepts, people and tropes as she learned them. She dove into complex topics and stories, making them with loose ends that could be wrapped up into others. She adjusted her definition of her world, of that fake reality as soon as a more interesting one was brought into play. This fantasy was so similar to her own world, the reality she lived, except for one major thing.

She was the hero of this story.

She wasn't the girl who faded into obscurity. She wasn't the consolation prize, the person that someone would only talk to if their friends weren't there. She wasn't the mess of a human who had no idea what she was doing.

She was the hero, with a team at her back, and the ability to fight off any danger or attack that threatened her. These people, the sniper with his quiet comebacks, the muscle with her loud encouraging voice, the hacker who's silver tongue could probably convince you to do just about anything, became the people she talked to constantly, the ones she found comfort in. Someone was bullying her? Well, she could ignore that easily since she had previously taken down an evil worldwide syndicate of power-hungry businessmen with only one bullet. She was alone? Well, that was fine. As long as she had the team pulling her through when she needed them.

These stories gave her a lifetime; another life she could escape to if she needed it. Another universe to go to if it ever became too much.

But she started to live there. She shut everyone out. But, when she did resurface, she felt lonely, longing for the human connections she couldn't manufacture in her own head.

So the rug was pulled out from her, again, again, every single time she came away from her fantasy world. She'd come back and the people she used to talk to had gone away, had found someone more responsive. She couldn't talk to her friend of ten years anymore, because she didn't know how. She didn't know what to do, didn't know how to reconcile the two lives she had. So she went back to her primary response: hiding in the imaginary world she knew so well.

But, her time there started to shrink. As time passed she grew, she got less free time, less time to stay in her head. She was growing up, and she wasn't aloud to be in the clouds anymore. She was constantly being jerked out of them and into the real world. 6th grade, 8th grade until she got to High School, barely finding time to breathe. She spent day after day after day just going through every minute head-on, without any respite. The work, the people, the teachers, it all just piled on. Forced away from the world in her head, she started to flourish in reality, because she had to. She was thrown at her own deficiencies until she figured them out, until she found a balance. After feeling destabilized and incomplete and lacking for years, she finally understood living in the moment.

She started to seek out real people, through class, clubs and sports. Everyone seemed more receptive than she had made herself believe, and she felt as if there really wasn't a lot to lose by asking. She started to love talking to them. It became something of an experiment to her, what she could find in common with the girl sitting next to her in English class, with the boy who was her lab partner in science, with the people that had a locker right next to hers. It turned out, it really wasn't that hard to make friends in a school where everyone was going through the same things. She started to find a group, a few people from here and there that always smiled when they saw her, always were glad to see her. She made plans for sleepovers, and movies and FaceTimes, things that had felt unreachable up until now. She called someone her best friend and that person just smiled and agreed.

She started to be happy in the present, incorporating her heroic persona into who she was becoming. There were many times where she almost introduced herself as “The soldier”, and she'd sometimes puff her shoulders back with the confidence forged in her head right before a history presentation or a big contest. She started feeling more and more important, more like how she felt when she spun out stories in her head.

But she never forgot her team and the times when she was the hero. For everything her new group was, there was always some quiet disconnect between the group in her head and the group in real life. Even when she thought someone could almost be the sniper, or the hacker, something always stopped her from truly assigning that trait to them.

She always came back to her world. It was her comfort zone, the last place she visited before she fell asleep every night. Even with everything the real world had to offer, there were some things that she needed to reconcile in her head. For all the good things, she needed an outlet to figure out the bad. So she found a time where she could still visit without shutting everyone else out in the process.

And one day, she vowed to herself, she could become the hero, the catalyst, the initiator, in both worlds, not just one.
My teacher approaches me and tells me it is time to go on. I get up. Tick, tick, tick. I take a steady step forward, but it is the shakiest step I have ever taken in my life. Tick, tick, tick. I walk slowly up the stage. Tick, tick, tick. I hear the bomb, my nerves build up. Just one step at a time. The concentration is strangling me, tearing at me. I feel burning around my fingers and body and I do not know why but I feel compelled to look around, and see all the eyes on me. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, too many to count. Tick, tick, tick. I finally make it to the instrument that shines back my reflection and sit down. The burning in my hands and fingers goes away as I sit.

I put my hands on the black and milky white keys, I run my hands over them up and down and up and down and up. I recall the first few notes that start my piece, a G major-second inversion chord. I take my last breath and just as the bomb is about to explode, I play my first notes. As I play the chord I smile. I always love playing that chord. It feels as if sunshine is pouring out, and I absorb it. I play the rest of my song. Tap, tap, tap, I feel the milky wood underneath my fingers. 1.2.3. 1.2.3. My favorite part is coming. Louder and louder and louder, tap, tap, tap. Louder and louder and louder, 1.2.3. 1.2.3. I play the G major chord and then silence. 1.2.3. release. I look around me and see all the faces in the audience. The room bursts out into clapping and cheering, it feels like I'm at the Olympics and have just won a gold medal. As I bow, I close my eyes and listen for the ticking, but hear... silence.
Some people swore the house was haunted. While a few agreed on this matter, others saw varying degrees of warmth emitted from the hidden corridors of the household. Although, some saw a crooked house, littered on stilts of chipped wood, reeking with a musty odor, which created the sense of an eerie stillness, she saw an entirely different scene. To her, the house drew an imagery of a small cozy shack, painted with thin peeling coats of white armor that protected the walls from the rain and incessant storms. Dangling from the wooden railings hung tiny paper lights, casting elongated shadows onto the steps. Overall, the house had no sense of a haunted place, riddled with past stories of a sinister history. But that was only her perception. To her friend Jane, whose fur coats trailed through the sincere white snow, the house had a diverging voice to its charismatic nature. To Jane, the house turned into a mansion, brooding with indulgence. The high brick walls cast a domineering power like the walls of a fortress as the windows glistened with luxury. But this was only her view. Each person saw a different house.

On a particularly hot summer day, a fire was seen curling up the sides of the house. It took hold of all flammable materials and devoured whatever it could get its teeth in. Everyone stopped to watch the flames rise. The flames licked at everything with a menacing anger that could not be contained. Every eye watched as the house slowly crumbled and a blackened tar spread along the outskirts of the garden. The shack, the house, and the mansion turned into a slow churning of ashes. Everyone saw the same thing from then on, a vacant plot, ominous with drifts of smoke.
My family and I waited for Brian on the sidewalk. We had been longing for this day for six weeks; I did not know what he’d been doing since he left on July 2nd at 6:00 AM, besides the occasional phone call that my parents received where Brian tried to explain what he had been doing for the past two weeks in the span of five minutes. I waited to see the goofy brother that sang along to classic rock songs with me on the way back from school. I tried to anticipate the dumb jokes I knew he would crack on us. But when I saw him, he looked unfamiliar—he was one of the thousands of white-collar-charcoal-pants soldiers, not my brother. His muscles were tightened and his fists clenched as he walked, swaying in a robotic rhythm so his right arm swung when he stepped on his left foot.

The next night, I made sure that I sat next to him at the dinner table. I wanted to talk to him like we used to when he was still in high school. When he was still home. But, as soon as I turned to talk to him, he turned away. My dad had sparked a conversation about his 6-week training course and how he couldn’t believe that Brian made it to the end. I was very aware that Brian was going to be the center of attention at the table, but I did not anticipate my inability to recognize his speech, walk, posture, and tone. When he spoke, he used acronyms and phrases that I didn’t recognize. For example, at dinner, Brian said, “We were outside of BH when we started learning CBT. Afterward, we learned some CFT in JH and were told that we’d have our first PMI tomorrow.” I tilted my head in utter confusion, not understanding a single thing that he was saying. “We are going to start CPRP tomorrow” he continued. Was he learning to use a gun? Was he learning what his classes would be? I had no idea: he could be milking a cow tomorrow and I wouldn’t know because his language was so confusing. Instead of information, all I heard were letters. I searched the table for a Military-to-English dictionary that I knew I would not find.

However, it was not just the language that felt foreign. Brian obtained a very polite etiquette. When he laughed at a joke, he didn’t throw his head back and cackle. Instead, he lightly tilted his head and let out a short, quiet chuckle that a worker might let out after his boss cracks a joke at an office party. After dinner, we walked back to the hotel room. While we were walking, my sister and I were laughing and attempting to trip each other. Brian watched from behind without a grin on his face. After I successfully tripped her, she laughed and smacked my arm. We both began to laugh, but were quickly interrupted by Brian grabbing our arms and ripping us apart. “Cut it out!” he yelled. Mary and I stopped laughing. “It was a joke, jeez” said Mary. Brian had seen us goof off before and always joined in. He brought the intolerance that he learned while learning all of his crazy acronyms with him. Was this a new part of his language? After that, I wasn’t sure if I would ever hear Brian speak in our native dialect ever again. It seemed as if West Point’s culture had washed away every word that he had ever spoken before he shaved his head and put on his uniform.

This new language that Brian spoke confused me. I had never heard him use it before West Point, not even when he was reading every single book that he could find to prepare for training. This was not the type of language that could be easily learned from
textbooks like the Category one languages (Italian, German, Spanish, Swedish, and more). The military language was definitely a member of Category four: hard languages for English speakers. These languages tend to be much easier to learn when the student is placed in an environment where that language is used around them. Teachers say that this way, students are able to learn the context and exact use of the words without thinking about exact translations: they must learn through seeing, hearing, and trying.

I was a tourist in a foreign country, trying to learn a category four language in the span of two days. To add to that, I never really spoke with any fluent speakers (the officers, professors, and older students); I spoke to Brian, but he was not great at teaching. I did not learn very much from the rapid blathering he provided us with, just like how I did not understand much from the quick phone calls he would provide us with when he was still in training. It seemed like Brian's new language was spoken much quicker than English. Brian was taught by older students who barked words at him and expected him to understand. I, however, was not used to being barked at and was not planning on understanding his rapid speech when we arrived in New York. Even when I tried to learn the acronyms, I could not understand Brian's tone, posture, and even the way he walked precisely a foot away from each wall when he reached the landing of a staircase, pivoting his feet in a sharp 90-degree angle.

It was amazing how quickly Brian had picked up this strange dialect where words seemed more limited and sentences were typically short. When we visited him in New York, he was a monotoned, monolingual man who had forgotten English in an attempt to adapt to his surroundings. But when we took the language-learner out of his environment, his English returned; maybe it was not just the forced language that changed his entire personality -- it was the culture that surrounded him. In New York, Brian wore a white-collar-charcoal-pants uniform just like everyone else. He was surrounded by identical grey buildings that looked like medieval castles. His campus was always quiet. In Chicago, Brian could wear whatever clothes he wanted and was constantly surrounded by light-up signs and the sound of cars honking at each other and our dogs barking at passersby. The chaos of the city seemed to bring back the Brian I knew; his language changed when he wasn't limited to the colorless life of the West Point cadets. As he walked, he seemed more relaxed: like he did not have to have a perfect posture and was not forced to keep the same steady pace. He was back from a foreign country, remembering the bright and busy life that used to surround him every day. His memories brought back the mindset that contained his old vocabulary, like how he could never stand completely still and how he constantly talked about the gym near DePaul. The culture that he was surrounded by may have made it harder for him to switch languages when we were in New York, but now that he was back in Chicago, I was just happy that we could speak to each other without translation issues.
There is a cut on my finger. I stare at it blankly. The frisbee spins past my face and several bodies push after it. "The frisbee," I think, "it's just a small cut." It happened only seconds before, but I already can't quite recall exactly how that cut got on my finger. It seemed to have materialized just as quickly as the frisbee flew, though unlike the moving frisbee, the cut remains stationary. It is about half a centimeter long and a thin peel of skin curls up from the laceration. It appeared, annoyingly, on the inside of my finger. My mouth draws into a line. I shake my hand, as if the cut would fly off. Instead, the frisbee flies to my right, and along with it a platoon of chasers. A young boy leaps into the air and snatches the disk. Hesitating only a moment after his feet touch the ground, he pinpoints a teammate and hurls it in her direction. I lingered. Air traveled slowly up and down my lungs instead.

I've never been seriously injured before. No broken bones or large gashes have ever befallen me. I can't imagine how much they would hurt. The pain of my current wound is hardly more than a small sting. I've only just noticed there was pain at all, but the blood contorting around my finger looks pretty impressive.

"Hey, you alright?" Someone has begun to notice my lingering absence. My mind frets. Here's the hardest part of dealing with minor injuries – how much do you fuss about it? I debate between waiting to play and going instead to fetch a band-aid or just ignoring the injury and turning back to the game. A cut is nothing. I've had worse (not really). I'm tough; something like this can't hurt me (the stinging spreads its wrath across my finger).

My pride gets the better of me. I answer, "I'm fine" to the inquiry. I shake my hand out again, and turn my attention towards the frisbee. Someone passes to me, and I automatically time the distance between its fall and my outstretched hands, ensuring it lands squarely in between my palms. My eyes flicker between the frisbee in my hands and an opponent's watchful gaze.

Nobody notices the blood on my finger.
My Broken Boy
by Yael Rolnik

You avoid my big innocent eyes because you’re scared that if you see me you will burst into tears. You avoid my bright smile because you know that if you look you will love me again. But I see you looking sometimes and it fills my stomach with butterflies until I can’t breathe. It makes me flourish like a rose and wilt like a daisy. I see you between 4th and 5th period and my heart skips a beat. Memories come rushing in, filling my head with booming sounds. We walk past each other in silence. Like strangers. Then you pull out a gun and shoot me. The floor is red.

As I am lying on the bed I look out the big window and I see the flowers melting. Red, pink, and blue puddles are left on the ground. You come and sit next to me and my lungs fill with your familiar scent. You ask me for spoilers but I watch the movie in silence. You talk so much. Too much. We stay still and don’t touch each other because we feel paralyzed. You’re scared that if you rub against my arm it will burn. Instead, you pull out a gun and shoot me. The bed is red.

We are standing in the crowded park and the sun is scorching. My bright pink shirt is stuck to my body and my long brown hair is fluttering in the wind. I turn around and lose you for a second, although I think I lose myself, too. We dip our feet into the freezing water and finally feel good. I lay back and look up at the sun while it blinds me. You stroke my hair softly, fearing you will break me. I smile and give in. Then you pull out a gun and shoot me. The grass is red.

The Double Denim Girl
by Yael Rolnik

Sometimes I wish I were more like you.
Sometimes I wish I could take a box of matches and burn all my bridges, burn them to ashes, burn them to the ground. Sometimes I wish I could go off the radar and disappear, just for a few weeks, or hours, or minutes. Sometimes I wish I could get inside your head and find out why you did what you did. Why you stopped talking to us and why you stopped letting me drink your dark, bitter coffee. Sometimes I wonder why you don’t care anymore and why you like clipping your hair in the back. I wonder whether you still think about me now and then and whether you still tear people to pieces. I pray for you not to let the darkness consume you, even though I thought it did a long time ago. I used to think it was too late for you, but I was wrong. I thought the drugs and the alcohol were the only reasons why you are free, but you freed yourself. I think trying to read you helped me read myself. I think trying to see you made me see myself. You showed me how to fix myself. You saved me without even knowing. I thought you were sad, and maybe you are. I thought you were selfish, and maybe you are. I don’t really know anymore. All I know is that sometimes I wish I were more like you.
Salvation Army is a great place to get lost in. Each rack brimming with life, tags color coded for price and for time, carbon dating to let you know how long your purchase has been living in the store. I love the way used clothing sits, the stories it holds, the life it’s lived. Ideas pouring out of each fold like a literary classic: old but timeless. Wearing this jacket is like sitting in a pool of thoughts and memories. My dad thinks it’s polluted.

My sister and I came to kill some time after my taekwondo session ended. After dragging my feet through the barren t-shirt section, I turn right and pass the aisles of dresses and pantsuits to the outerwear, a museum of weather, puffers and windbreakers, the odd vest, a bright green trench coat. As I parse through the rack, not entirely sure what I’m trying to find, but no less determined, I see this jacket. This jean jacket, acid-washed, a few designs on the arms and shoulders, white, brown, gold, and mine. A lining some shade between salmon and leather brown, with these blue eyes, less a pattern and more a charm, something only the wearer sees.

I pick it up, and my sister frowns, a disapproving pout saved for the most horrendous of fashion crimes.

“That is hideous.”

She laughs a bit while saying it to soften the blow. I, however, love it. So while she doesn’t let me buy it that day, I decide to hide it among the endless sea of women’s sweatshirts, marooning it between something pink and something an ugly off-white, the fabric yellowed the same way old parchment is.

The next day, my grandmother, who is delighted by the cost-effectiveness of thrift shopping, brings me back so I can buy this jacket. My jacket now, and I haven’t taken it off since.
“Shouldn’t I be God?”

“If I die, does the world disappear?”

I remember asking my dad when I was six. From my view, I’m the only one who I know for sure has consciousness. So why does anything else exist? Humans are flawed. Everything humans make is flawed. People who run on money who don’t understand each other. People who only seek the best for themselves driven by pride and egotism. It is why no society will ever be perfect. Yet love theoretically should be able to transcend that. The irony. generation after generation, circles within circles to sustain this life we seek. We are smart yet never enough never enough to see it has been here. It has been here all along.

“Melody of Spring”
by Emily Sun

Spring,
the tiny bugs have bitten holes through the maple leaves and little red ladies walk the canvases they have tediously built while the sparrows vigilantly guard the shells of the future and you, you are twirling underneath a shower of cherry blossoms as the sunlight pools between the translucent leaves, carving delicate slits of brightness onto your joyous face.

underneath the curtain of crawling ivy, thick mud sticks to the ridges of the winding cream paving as grandpa digs the trench for rainwater pounding his spade across the web of reddish veins so that the newly forming buds might have a chance of blooming. this was when we were young, this was when we were free. a memory frozen on the soft carpet of grass and yellow dandelions, just you and me.
Do you think that you can take him from me? Do you think that your rosy cheeks and dimpled smile are enough to win him over? Well, they're not. You're beautiful; I'll give you that. The deep blue of your eyes resembles that of desperate waves, craving the taste of dry sand yet unable to reach past the wet shore touched by previous waves. Your face is round and youthful, innocence portrayed from every pore; but if you think you can take him from me, you're entirely mistaken.

We met when we were young and inexperienced: he was twenty and I was nineteen. I worked at a café on 53rd street where he came down every day to read, trying to guess which parts he was reading based on his expression and the distance between his page and the back cover. I knew it was nearly impossible to know what page he was on, but I took pleasure in seeing the slight upward curve of his lips as his eyes moved across the page. I imagined that he was reading the part where the man talks about his love for peaches.

Finally, I asked him out. After that, things went by rather quickly. I was in love, and nothing else mattered to me, so life blurred by in immaterial scenes as he occupied the starring role of my life's stage. You are too young to comprehend the deep emotional connection we maintained. You are too incompetent to understand the love we share—a new and unworthy addition to the world that we've already mastered. He would read to me every night from his thin books, tucking my cheeks and calling me lovely. He would tangle his hands in my thick hair as we sat in the bedroom of my apartment, draped in white blankets and eternal smiles. You cannot understand that kind of love.

We'd been dating for about two months when I realized that there wasn't a thing he could ask of me that I wouldn't provide; I loved him. With this realization I began to wonder who he was outside of our private blankets and smiles: I began to wonder what he did when he wasn't in my café reading his books or when he wasn't in my apartment stroking my hair. I asked him what his job was. I begged him playfully to tell me.

"What are you, an undercover spy or something?" I'd laughed. But he got angry. I'd never seen him so angry. His eyes looked like they no longer belonged to him and his lips quivered uncontrollably, searching for words to say to me but speaking in only heavy breaths of heated anger. "Please don't be angry, I don't need to know—it doesn't even matter. Please. Please don't be angry with me." I breathed out the apology as if it were my final breath before drowning. I prolonged the breath, trying desperately to take it back. "What are you, an undercover spy or something?" I'm sorry. I didn't mean to say it.

He gave me an out: he told me that if I wanted to leave, then that he was a hit man. He killed people regularly to live. He sat me down, put his head in his hands and explained everything. I was terrified of him not trusting me. I was terrified of what he'd done; I could forgive him for anything. I was terrified of him not trusting me. So the night that he came home with blood-covered hands. I was terrified, but I realized the importance of truly knowing the man I was confident I wanted to spend the rest of my life with; I realized the terrifying curse of unsureness that had been cast upon me. So the night that he came home with blood-covered hands, I didn't repress my curiosities. I asked him what was going on in a firm voice, though my body betrayed it in trembles. I was not necessarily terrified of what he'd done, I could forgive him for anything and everything. I was terrified of him not trusting me. I needed to know enough to tell me. I was terrified that he thought I didn't belong in his mysterious life. I was terrified that I wouldn't be able to spend the rest of my life with him if I had to live like this. It had been us against the world for three months now. I was worried he still didn't trust me, and if he didn't then I wasn't sure I could even bear to live. He sat me down, put his head in his hands and breathed heavily. It wasn't until he realized he'd gotten blood on his face that he raised his head. He told me then that he was a hit man. He killed people regularly and got more money than I could count. I took it in.

He gave me an out: he told me that if I wanted to leave, he would understand.
I didn’t leave, and from then on every night that he texted me saying he had a job to complete, I’d sit at the dinner table alone. I’d eat in silence and then around ten I’d draw a bath for him, knowing that he’d be home no later than ten thirty on such nights—that’s what he’d promised me. He never breaks his promises.

He’d come home and sit in his bath. Sometimes the water would turn red and sometimes it would remain clear; I soon stopped checking. In the beginning, I would go into the bathroom after his bath to wash my face before sleeping and see the stains of red outlining the tub like outlines left by waves in the sand. I began washing my face before his bath, leaving the markings in the tub to be washed away by his early shower the next morning. I want you to understand this; this is important. I have been through obstacles drawn from a deck of hell with him. We are unbreakable, and you will not risk unsettling our waters. He is mine, and only mine.

One day, he brought a woman home. He told me she’d tried to kiss him. He told me when he refused and tried to walk away, she’d pulled a knife on him. I sensed a rage inside of me that I felt unable to contain. I hoped he would kill her in front of me to show her that stealing him from me, either with her lips or with her knife, was something that no one could get away with. But instead of slickly slicing her neck as I’d imagined he usually quickly killed his victims, he pulled a gun out from behind his back. Kill her, he whispered from too far away. Use the rage I see in your eyes, and kill her. Show me you’ll do anything for me; show me what you’re capable of. I couldn’t do it. I shook my head. He dropped her like someone drops a dirty shirt on the floor of their room. He came over to me and shoved the gun into my hands and told me to do it again. I held the gun. I closed my eyes as he moved behind me and put his hands over mine where they clutched the gun to helped me aim.

Pull the trigger, he whispered next to me. His whisper was hypnotizing; his voice seemed to take temporary control over my body, his words feeding my stream of thought with waves of conviction. I did it, letting out a scream as I felt the gun push back against my hands. My eyes were still closed as the bullet pierced her skin and put an end to the threat on my lover’s life and our relationship. But the shot echoed through me, sending shivers down my spine and contaminating my body with weakness and instability. And although that gunshot destroyed me—ripping my body separate from my soul—I fed off of the pain. I fed off of the admiration and surprise I saw in his eyes after I pulled the trigger just as he’d told me to. I turned to look at him, taking in all of his features. I felt included. I felt loved. I dropped the gun and wrapped my arms around him, pressing myself as close as humanly possible to him and allowing him to use his death-tainted hands to pull me into his world.

Don’t you understand? We are beyond you; we are above you. You cannot pretend to love him more than I do. You do not come before me in his eyes, and you never will. You cannot take him from me, though you may try and fail. Don’t cry. You try to draw him to you with your tears and irritating screams but you try and fail. You will always try and fail.

Now I hold you to the sea. I hold you above the wild waves of black that will swallow your life as easily as a child swallows her mother’s milk. You cannot live on, for you hold the knife of potential destruction in your fat fingers. You naively face me as that woman did, and I will end you just as indisputably. My young beauty, disguised with those deep blue eyes that you stole from your father, it seems you must face your fate earlier than most. My newly birthed daughter, your rosy cheeks and dimpled smile would have stolen the hearts of millions of innocent souls, but you could never steal the heart of your father: he is eternally mine.
Everyday at 5pm
by Roma Nayak

Across the room, he works
sitting in the back corner, black glasses perched on the bridge of his nose,
A black and white plaid shirt under a red sweater, blue jeans topped off with black chuck taylor’s
He is there, writing so delicately with his fine tip, black, ballpoint pen, purchased from the antique shop across the street
I can see the crease in between his eyebrows as
he thinks about the question
He takes a sip from the piping hot, caramel macchiato
almost forgotten on the table,
but he still doesn’t understand the solution his professor
typed out and posted on the class page
He looks down at the crinkled paper
It has tears in it from being erased a few too many times for his liking
His graph isn’t correct, but he doesn’t realize

I can see the gears shifting in his mind,
The way he thinks, speaks, listens to music,
blasting from his dirty, 2010, almost broken iPhone earbuds
His pink lips move ever so slightly when he realizes something important
The emotions, the sparkle in his eyes when
at last, he does understand the question
An econ major studying applied statistics
his parents think he should be a doctor
but he doesn’t care

There I am, across the room,
but he doesn’t see me
I see him though, and I have for weeks,
everyday at 5pm, the same thing:
same pen, same glasses, same earbuds, same table, same mind

It is something different the next day.
His parents are there.
They’re talking, arguing with him,
and his eyes dart around the room to ensure no one is paying attention,
he looks back at them, he’s angry this time,
his hands go up in defense, and he finally gets up and
storms out of the café, books, pens, and earbuds in hand

I anticipate the same thing as usual the next day, his routine,
but this time
it is 5pm,
and I soon realize that it will no longer be
everyday.
She sat at her desk and tapped her pen against her notebook, trying to recall the Spanish vocabulary that she had learned at some point but was now stored away somewhere in the back of her mind. Perhaps it just flew in one ear and out the other, never bothering to stay in her brain. Or had she even learned it at all? On a particularly harsh click, she looked down at her pen extending from between her thumb and index finger. Tracing the pen to her knuckle up to the back of her palm, she could see the pinkish-red bump raised slightly above the faint blue vein that ran like a river beneath it. Not one of those grand rivers like the Mississippi that millions of boats float down each day, but rather a small tributary. Shëd always been told she had small veins; it was just a fact. Maybe that’s why it was so hard to get the IV in.

January 2018

It was the fourth time that day she had to get a new IV. The flu wasn’t allowing her to stomach much food, and the hospital smell of disinfectant certainly wasn’t helping. Not to mention the fact that swallowing felt like a razor blade being shoved down her throat. The IV was necessary to get her nutrients, but the real reason she accepted it without protest was because it came with the promise of pain medication. The room was silent aside from the occasional ripping of packaging or clinking of tubes as the nurse prepared everything. Shëd never been afraid of needles. The trick, she had learned from a young age, was to not look, so she stared up at the white ceiling as she felt the nurse slide the needle into the back of her hand. She could tell it wasn’t a clean entry from the way the nurse gently wigged it back and forth, guiding the needle into her vein. She felt something else press her hand, a cotton ball maybe? She made the mistake of looking. It was not a clean entry indeed. Blood gushed out of her hand surrounding the small hole and seeped into the cotton, once as white as the hospital ceiling, turning it a deep, dark red. She thought she’d feel the pain, but it didn’t compare to her mouth and throat, so for now her hand was only a distraction. The nurse grabbed tape and pressed it around the opening, sealing the tube into her body. It was not clean, but it would do. She could see the entry hole, too large to fit the needle, which jiggled around slightly whenever she moved her hand. She knew shëd need a new IV soon. Her eyes followed the tube as it twisted and turned around her bed to the back of the fluid bag propped up on her left. It was part of her body now, but it didn’t belong, much like the virus that infected her body and spread all down her arm and through her body, yet all she could feel was the dryness in her mouth, as her salivary gland was swollen beyond function.

The doctor came in to check up on her. “How are you feeling?” he asked.

“Nothing,” the doctor responded, “We can’t give you anything to eat or drink in case we have to do surgery.”

She could not afford to waste her water on tears, or her pain on speaking, but the dryness in her mouth prompted her to continue, “Cah I jus drin an spit it out? My mouf is so dry.”

The doctor looked conflicted, but nevertheless gave her a styrofoam cup. Audrey spit it into a tray before asking, “Pain medicine?” She knew she’d be ok. Her infection was just an inconvenience. She could feel the life pulsating from her chest to her fingertips, interrupted by the needle extending from her hand. The nurse was called in, and she closed her eyes, trying to wish away the pain.

Her locker slammed behind her as she headed to her next class. Her friend ran up behind her shouting, “You’re back! It’s about time, after two weeks.”

“Yeah, I’m feeling much better,” Audrey said. She remembered her friend visiting her in the hospital.

“Did you get the magician to come?”

Audrey furrowed her eyebrows and said, “Magician? What are you talking about?”

Her friend raised an eyebrow, “Remember, the magician I told you about when I visited? There’s a magician that comes around and does shows for all the kids when they are sick. They probably didn’t offer it to you because you’re older, but I know you love magic. Wait, you don’t remember any of that? We talked about it for like ten minutes.”

Audrey shook her head.

“Do you remember any of the conversation we had? I was there for two hours!”

She didn’t remember. All she could picture were the white walls that had been around her. She shook her head again. “I guess it was the morphine every three hours,” she joked.

Her friend started saying something else, but Audrey was no longer paying attention. She tried to recall the three days she spent in the hospital.

November 2009

She doesn’t remember being driven to the hospital in the middle of the night when a single spoonful of gatorade caused the contents of her stomach to empty, nor does she remember coughing so hard she had to use an inhaler to breathe. She also doesn’t remember crying into her mother’s arms that things were not ok, that she thought she would die. That crucial moment, the brink of life and death had disappeared from her mind, like the magician, and the Spanish vocabulary, carried away from her like wisps of wind through the air. A 104°F fever will do that to a person. What she does remember is the incessant boredom that came with staring at the same white walls for days. She remembers her mom lying on the couch beside her bed. She remembers the IV in her left forearm. Again it took them four tries to get it right. The third attempt was particularly bad. Her mother had specifically
The nurse was preparing another needle. Audrey had been trying to hold it for as long as she possibly could, afraid that getting up would cause another coughing fit. She considered just wetting the bed. No, she couldn’t do that, then she would have to get up so they could change the sheets. She turned to the nurse and said, “I need to use the bath—” but she was cut off by a force of air that traveled up her throat and escaped through her lips, followed by another, and another, and another, until the oxygen ran out and in between her coughs were gasps of air. The alveoli in her lungs had filled with fluid, yet her cough was dry. Her own body was suffocating her. She turned to the nurse to just breathe, but that was like telling someone drowning with their arms and legs tied to just swim to the surface. Her cough eventually subsided and she muttered out “bathroom.” The nurse began unhooking her from various machines connected to her body. The nurse helped her into the bathroom and told her that if she needed any help to just call out. The door was shut, and she was left standing alone in the bathroom. It was a fairly large bathroom but all it had in it was a toilet and sink. It smelled distinctly of hospital soap mixed with a faint smell of urine. She began to walk towards the toilet, which was placed on the back wall of the bathroom, a mere eight steps from where she stood. But with the lack of oxygen in her lungs, and the swine flu taking a toll on her body, she felt dizzy. Every step was a marathon. She somehow made it to the toilet seat and sat down on it. When she finished she was not quite ready to make the trek back to the door yet, she closed her eyes and sat on the toilet, trying to catch her breath, but her breath was a ball thrown ten feet above her head, and she certainly didn’t have the energy to run right now to catch it before it landed. She wasn’t aware of how long she had been in the bathroom until the nurse knocked on the door and called out to her, “Are you ok in there?”

“Yeah I’m fine, just finishing,” she responded. “Fine” was such a relative term. Fine was the appropriate response to give the nurse, as Audrey didn’t need help getting out of the bathroom, but how could she say she was fine when her lungs didn’t work, when she couldn’t take more than 20 steps without nearly passing out, and when she had to be hooked up to various IVs and machines to survive. Could she say she was fine when she was in the intensive care unit of the hospital? But what could she have said? “Well no, I’m not fine, I’m suffocating and have a 103°F fever because I have both swine flu and pneumonia and can barely breathe for myself, but I don’t need help getting off of the toilet.” Seeing as she couldn’t say more than five words without coughing, there was no way she could’ve made it through that sentence without having a coughing fit, and then the nurse surely would have rushed in to help her out of the bathroom. No, she could do this simple thing for herself. It was just a few steps. She stood back up. There were the weights again, pulling her back, pulling her down. It was as if gravity had suddenly become a lot stronger, the atmosphere crushing her down towards the floor. She somehow made it to the door handle and clung onto it for dear life as she fell into the door to open it. The nurse caught her and guided her back to the bed. She would have celebrated her ability to go to the bathroom on her own, but she didn’t have nearly enough energy left for that, and she passed out on the bed before the nurse even finished hooking her back up to the machines.

“Hey, are you alright? You’ve been in there for a while,” her friend said, knocking on the stall door. Audrey stood up and opened it.

“Yeah sorry, I was just thinking,” Audrey said as she walked to the sink to wash her hands. Her friend watched her lather soap on her hands. She rinsed them off with cool water. As the water flowed above the river beneath her skin, she brushed her fingers over the red bump on her hand. “That’s where I had one of the IVs,” she told her friend as she pointed to it.

“I hate needles,” her friend responded. As they walked out of the bathroom towards their next class her friend asked, “Hey, are you ok? You seem kind of quiet.”

“Yeah, I’m just a little tired. I’m fine though,” Audrey responded. And this time she really was.

Her mother was furious. Perhaps it was due to the failure of the IV, or perhaps she was upset because it was the only movie her dad had brought. She was accustomed to the poking at this point. The doctor came in and stood next to her to watch. He was an older man, with longish hair, big bright eyes, and a beard, the color of his bleached scrubs. To her he looked like President Snow from the Hunger Games. This nurse happened to be particularly aggressive, or maybe she was just anxious because the doctor was watching her, and she stabbed the needle into Audrey’s wrist. The needle completely missed its target and Audrey groaned in pain. She became another to hear a doctor say it. But she had to be strong, she couldn’t cry. She had to keep her nine year old daughter from complaining she’s dying. Kids have the tendency to exaggerate. It was just a few steps. She stood back up. There were the weights again, pulling her back, pulling her down. It was as if gravity had suddenly become a lot stronger, the atmosphere crushing her down towards the floor. She somehow made it to the door handle and clung onto it for dear life as she fell into the door to open it. The nurse caught her and guided her back to the bed. She would have celebrated her ability to go to the bathroom on her own, but she didn’t have nearly enough energy left for that, and she passed out on the bed before the nurse even finished hooking her back up to the machines.

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I think of the swimming pool, sitting empty outside of the big house on the hill in the movie Rebel Without a Cause. That pool, that house, in one of my past realities for it, belonged to a Hollywood hotshot and his lovely young wife—a model of course—thirty years his junior. I imagine this wife lounging by the pool in a high-waisted black bikini with white trim. Impractical red lipstick, matte, juicy, and a scandalous love affair that prefaced her greatly gossiped marriage to the Hollywood hotshot. A large straw sun hat with a black ribbon shadowing her gorgeous young skin. In this reality the pool is barely used. It is lounged by; gossiped and conversed by; kissed and taken coffee or tea by, but barely swum in.

In another reality, the house is owned by an eccentric couple. A wealthy and recluse producer, a brilliant and exuberant actress and writer, considered partially insane by the sexist standards of mental health and femininity of the time. In this reality the husband and wife swim in the pool together every morning and every evening, watch the sun rise and set together over Los Angeles. The moon and the sun over that swimming pool, having that reflection all to myself—a luxury that I can imagine lucidly through the movie screen, another reality already separated from me.

Los Angeles, to watch the sun and moon over that city, over the hills and canyons and ocean and also over the greased asphalt and sweating expressway cars. I think of a lot of Los Angeles because it is a strange and magical city to me. It is a strange city, lush—overflowing with plants that swallow stairs along the sides of canyons and houses. But it is also strips of cement, long and far off into the horizon, smog and fast roads, and strange people who don’t talk to their neighbors. Los Angeles is magical to me because my father grew up there. Like left behind remnants in abandoned houses, I like to construct my father’s past in this city.

I’ve driven past my father’s house in Hancock Park, not trendy then, all those years ago, in the way it is now, and I imagine my grandmother with her curly hair and high-waisted Levis, watering her legendary roses. Her brisket that she took pride in, the way she took pride in her roses, that was carried into the dining room and houses. And houses. But it is also strips of cement, long and far off into the horizon, smog and fast roads, and strange people who don’t talk to their neighbors. Los Angeles is magical to me because my father grew up there. Like left behind remnants in abandoned houses, I like to construct my father’s past in this city.

This house, my father’s house, is the house in Rebel Without a Cause, is a house with a history I have concocted, footnoted with details and stories from my father and my grandmother. There is the kitchen where my grandmother made her delicious brisket marinated in onions and ketchup. Her brisket that she took pride in the way she took pride in her roses, that was carried into the dining room where my father demanded that he would not eat this shit and ordered a pizza instead.

There is Tiny, the Saint Bernard, the greatest dog, who was beautiful and appeared to my father one day in the front yard, probably while my grandmother was tending to her roses. Tiny had no home. My father’s home became his home.

There is the bike path along the Santa Monica beach where my father skateboarded. And though he tells me he was never any good, I always nudge him, try to get the real truth out of him. In my mind my father was great. He rode the board with an enviable ease, and he was handsome and cool in the Jewish Los Angeles way: tan skin, short or wavy hair, hazel-blue eyes, that Jewish nose—somehow the most handsome feature of his young face.

My father was rebellious, an artist, spiteful of the 80’s Los Angeles version of Hollywood-infused conspicuous consumption. My father was the character in the Los Angeles films he so adored, that we watched together on our black leather couch in the house that became his own in adulthood.

One of my favorite things to do in Los Angeles is, once the city has gone dark, drive with my father through the hills of Bel-Air. In the dark, the silhouettes of those tall skinny palms are eerie, they become boogy-men and in the placid silence of nighttime Bel-Air, I cannot calm the shivers that run my spine. Bel-Air after dark: eerie, spooky, too still, too narrow, too silent. It all feels isolated, like some sort of sanitized wilderness where one happens to round a corner and encounter a ten-million-dollar home. I always feel that my father drives too fast on these roads, I always worry that with the wrong twitch of his wrist we will fly off of the hillside into the expectant city below. But I also trust my father to keep me safe. I know that my father has been driving since he was sixteen, that he has driven these roads many times before, that he will keep me safe no matter what.

And when we reach the top, back to civilization and stop-lights, I exhale slowly because it is flat and we are accompanied now by other cars, a reminder of how not alone in the universe we are. I think that if I were to have been the owner of that pool in that house up on the hill in Rebel Without a Cause, every night I would sit there, and I imagine that I would see all of that city, except in the darkness it wouldn’t be a city, it would be a plane of lights, and I would assign each light a location, a story.

But I do not need that pool or that house, and I do not need the stories that I have granted them. Instead I am in a car on the top of Bel-Air with my father looking out over the plane of lights, over a million versions of his past that I have created for him and a million versions he actually lived. One pinprick of light must be his childhood home down there on Wilshire Boulevard with my grandmother’s roses that she swears once were unparalleled and Tiny, the greatest dog. Another dot there must be where my father graduated from high school in a swimsuit and Chinese slippers and then traversed over to the next light, a fancy restaurant in a classy hotel where my mortified grandmother had booked a celebratory graduation luncheon.

I do not know Los Angeles the way my father does. The city hides pieces of itself that I do not have the privilege to uncover. Los Angeles is my father’s city, it is not my own. Each light that composes this city is a story that belongs to my father and not to me. I own an alternate Los Angeles. A superficial and romanticized Los Angeles. A Los Angeles cobbled of imagination, 80’s films, and reconstructed and borrowed memories. My Los Angeles is a glorified version of my father’s Los Angeles.

In fact, the stories I give to the past are all glorified versions of the reality. The reality of the house up on the hill in Rebel Without a Cause is that it was probably owned by a typical couple of the time, wealthy, involved in Hollywood, interesting in the ways that being wealthy and involved in Hollywood would be, but otherwise boring and mundane. Perhaps there were wild parties, and young models married to geriatric patients that dipped their toes in that swimming pool I think of so often. Perhaps a radical feminist who was later...
Sophie Hinerfeld

institutionalized for being more brilliant than her husband could ever be did watch the sun rise and set over the golden age of Los Angeles. These are all possibilities. Perhaps my father was the wild rebel without a cause I dream of him being, perhaps he knew the darkest secrets of the city that I will never understand. Perhaps my grandmother’s roses were larger and more luscious than any other roses she ever encountered afterwards, her brisket the juiciest and most flavorful. Tiny the greatest dog.

My father is my father, and however wild his stories may or may not have been, he is here with me now on top of the city that raised him, and even though he may or may not be the greatest driver, he will keep me safe, and we will return to the bottom of the hill alive. Los Angeles, this city that my father loved and hated, could not wait to get away from, and misses just the same. He tells me his stories through it. Los Angeles, this strange and magical city that I am happy is not my own, will always be my father’s, will always remind me of him, each light, I like to imagine, in its horizon will contain some peculiar epithet of his life.

We descend the roads, dive back into the lonesome night of dark Bel-Air homes and hedged driveways. All noise muffled by lush greenery. Perhaps Bel-Air is not haunted, those palms not boogey-men but boring old palms in the dark. My father, driving the car, handling the outdated stick shift mechanism, no radical movie hero. Perhaps, perhaps, perhaps. But everything is so much more delicious in my imagination.

Genesis
by Henrik Nielsen

What you are about to read is the most sacred of texts. It is the most factual of texts. It is the most holy of texts. It is the most pure of texts. It is the most right of texts. It is the most other positive things of texts. It is the Truth.

And Carl said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. Carl saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. Carl called the light “day,” and the darkness he called “night.” And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day. And Carl said, “Let there be a planet with land and water on it, and everything that living creatures need to survive.” So Carl made a planet with land and water on it, and everything that living creatures need to survive. And it was so. Carl saw the planet was good and called it [insert planet name here]. And there was evening, and there was morning—the second day. And Carl said, “Let there be a mostly-uncorrupt government system.” So Carl made a mostly-uncorrupt government system. And it was so. Carl saw the mostly-uncorrupt government system was mostly-good and called the mostly-uncorrupt government system “pretentious bastards.” And there was evening, and there was morning—the third day. And Carl said, “Let there be a circus run solely by alligators.” And it was so. Carl saw the circus was good and separated the blue circuses from the red circuses. Carl called the blue circuses blue and the red circuses orange. And there was evening, and there was morning—the fourth day. Then Carl spent the fifth day making travel brochures for the new planet.(1)


Use your new information wisely.

Sophie Hinerfeld
Brother, Forget Not Yet

by Jacob Shkrob

My heart goes out to you,
You who cannot hear the cries of family,
Who slips and breaks his bones on his own pills
On Prozac and Paxil. That orange coating nulls your spirit.
They made you fat and alone, made you long for someone to love. I couldn’t bear to watch
You fall into that pit
Of loneliness.

Last weekend, your job application at UPS was denied,
And instead of yearning for another opportunity, another chance
In spite of life’s bullshit, in spite of everything...
You banged your head against the wall, over and over again, banging against the ashy paint,
So much so, that your head blistered and scarred.

Last year, when you left unexpectedly, I tried to find you
In every corner store, in every book shop, every alleyway, every sidewalk.
I finally found you in the train station, but you were looking out, towards the tracks,
And I was thinking,
There and then, then and forever,
That your fate was sealed, that your time was up.
I could feel my heart pour out for you.
I cried in your hands like an old widow, like a snotty, filthy animal. You broke my heart
And spread it across Hyde Park in twenty thousand directions.
Your face was blank in expression, as if death had inexorably twisted with your silky, brown hair.

Two years ago, you locked your room. From us.
Your girlfriend called and said that she kept the apartment.
I went through the bathroom door to see you, but your tears were a mile long,
Longer than any of the dreadful nightmares that you’ve had, or described to me,
Longer than the illness you’ve been fighting against, or the books that you’ve read.
I called her up, told her to glue your heart back together or get the hell out of our life.

Two months before, your child was lost. I can’t imagine the grief that came with that.
You sheltered all that pain from us.
I nearly suffocated in the silence.
I still asked you for help with chemistry, like nothing had happened, but you were cradled in your
bed, Like an infant, never waking to the alarms we set.
That’s when you first became numb to the pain, to your suffering.
But also numb to all our love.

Four years before that, I walked you to the park bench. We ate, talked about video games, love,
and the dandelions growing on the field.
I grew nostalgic, going on and on about our adventures together, and how muscular I had become.
But you were so much more emotional, talking about the trust we had in each other,
The restless, boundless spirit we shared,
and the love in my eyes when I was toddler.

You took care of me as if I were in your womb this whole time,
Even when your depression was at its worst.
How much I saw.
You suffocate and drown in all.
The pain that life had put you through,
With all of that you still passed school?
And rocked my crib, loved me to sleep
With all those problems, with darkness deep inside your soul? Maybe your life was all my own
refusal to retreat,
From my childish need to eat. You spent your time on me, when words I could not speak.
How could my baby hands defeat your suffering in one fell swoop?

Brother, forget not yet the good times that we’ve had.
How my pupils shined in your complexion,
How your braces glowed in my reflection.
How fun it was to always match
In underwear, in socks, in hats.
I never wore a single thing
That you didn’t touch, and still I cling to them today.
Forget not yet that we live life in spite of it, and that suffering is not the bitter end.
Forget not yet how much we love one another, regardless of our differences.
Forget not yet that through me, you see truth, and through you, I see the world.
Forget not yet that life is still being written, that death is not a chapter in that book.
Forget not yet that I confide in you, and that my heart goes out to you.
Forget not yet.
I had just left from the el. (“L”) train, and I was walking home along Laramie Avenue. It was 8:00 pm and my eyes began to water as the freezing wind hit them. The streets were bustling with cars and black faces revealed by the artificial warm haze of the city’s street lights. Corner stores and dilapidated apartment buildings took up so much space. Along with the frigid air, the sounds of the constant honking of cars and chattering kept me awake. With each step, I had to trudge through the shattered glass from liquor bottles, not afraid of the cuts and scars I may have on my boots later. The ancient oak trees whisked past me as my legs began to move faster. The murk from the street lights and the fleeting cars streaming past blurring as I fell into a deep daydream. As I got closer to home, I felt myself thinking about my father. My legs moved faster and faster as the thought of my father became clearer.

I was worried about him. We had gotten into an argument about whether or not I should be allowed to stay over at my mother’s house for the weekend. Because of school work and extracurriculars, I didn’t spend enough time with him anymore. He missed me and I was guilty. He hadn’t called me back on Sunday. He usually called to make sure I had finished my homework. I needed to make it home to see him.

My father was a storyteller. He was so good that I envisioned his stories when he wasn’t around and even sprinkled my own details onto them to bring them to life. When I imagined his stories, the lines between real and pretend details became blurred. While I was daydreaming, I envisioned him in a nightclub. The club was littered with dozens of faces. Mary J. Blige was playing, and bodies moved in violent synchronization as they danced to the heavy bass. Their movements were erratic but harmonious as they moved together. He was a bouncer. The nightclub was full. One moment, an unexpected shot went off. The club began to stampede. People flowed out as if they were being poured out of a broken bottle. All that remained of the club was a man lying in a pool of blood. In the middle of it all was my father. He recalls that after everything, he felt a calm euphoric experience. It turned his life around and around, because he always felt responsible that someone died on his watch. His manager called him in and fired him that night. He was bothered, but not. All he could do was think about the body on the floor and the man that was now gone. I thought it was bullshit. He must have been a little baffled. The police officer grabbed my mother’s shoulders and said, “Everyone experiences death differently.” My eyes widened as my life began to turn around. “I broke him,” I thought to myself. I sat there and contemplated the differences that erupted when I opened my apartment door. He is gone and my family is suffering. I thought about my reaction and my life. I searched through the shards of his life, cutting myself every time trying to piece together what used to be. His intelligence and his warm laugh and his wholesome love and his stories and his passion and his aspirations and his breath and his smell and his stance and his big-ass head and his blood and his stillness and his dead body and his bottles. I could do nothing else, but accept that things were different.

The image of my small apartment building woke me up. I arrived at my front door. It was crimson and weathered by the elements. I put my key in and twisted the cold, cracked knob. I turned the door slowly as it creaked. When I looked inside and saw the naked body of my father. He lay on the cold wooden floor. I ran in and shouted “Dad.” He didn’t move an inch. I shouted about five more times, each time getting closer and closer. I ran to him and tried to touch him. He was cold and hard liked packaged meat. The warm fluorescent lights beamed on my father’s cold body, but his skin looked ashen and gray like a used stick of incense. His lips were black; I knew right away. I called 911. I told the operator everything. She sounded frantic, and she kept asking me questions. As she asked these pointless questions, I moved around the house. I felt disoriented, as if things were different (but I usually didn’t quite remember where things had been or what had changed). All the lights were on. I also saw an empty bottle of vodka on the dinner table along with cigars and mail. The kitchen was littered with pizza boxes with some of the crust left inside. The bathroom stank as if he had digested all of those pizzas. This aside, it seemed as though he had also made my bed and folded my clothes. The operator’s voice then suddenly woke me up.

She asked me if I wanted to perform mouth to mouth. I looked and touched his body again. I tried to maneuver his big and meaty body, but his bones were fixed in a strange position. I feared that when the paramedics got there, they would have to break his bones to get him into a normal position and fit him on the large cart. While I tried to move him, I noticed a small pond of blood around his big head. I told the operator that I couldn’t do it. He was too hard and empty to feel. I could tell she thought something was wrong with me, possibly. She spoke with a bit of suspicion. She made me think that I did something wrong and that I could still save his life. I knew that I had come too late and accepted that he died.

After I made couple of phone calls, my mother and the police arrived. I saw her sad red eyes and into her suffocating sorrow. Tears continued to flow and flow as she patted my back. I stepped out of the house for fresh air and something hit me. The trees began to whirl around and around. Tingles shot through my body. My hair began to stand. My lungs popped open as if I were a cork in a champagne bottle. However, my heart still beat at the default pace. My mind was riddled with déjà vu. My mother and a police officer walked outside. My mother observed my weird stare, gave me one back, and asked, “Why aren’t you crying?” with a bit of concern. I felt baffled. The police officer grabbed my mother’s shoulders and said, “Everyone experiences death differently.” My eyes widened as my life began to turn around. “I broke him,” I thought to myself. I sat there and contemplated the differences that erupted when I opened my apartment door. He is gone and my family is suffering. I thought about my reaction and my life. I searched through the shards of his life, cutting myself every time trying to piece together what used to be. His intelligence and his warm laugh and his wholesome love and his stories and his passion and his aspirations and his breath and his smell and his stance and his big-ass head and his blood and his stillness and his dead body and his bottles. I could do nothing else, but accept that things were different.
A CHINESE FAMILY WALKS INTO A DINER...
by Jennifer Wang

ROSE is a short girl dressed in shorts and t-shirt. DAD is a short, strongly-built man with an extremely loud voice, laugh, and presence. MOM is a sweet, rather soft-spoken woman. The parents are both Chinese immigrants and so speak with obvious accents, and occasionally misspeak. At a booth in a diner. The two parents sit together across from Rose. The daughter scrolls on her phone, the mother and father look around the nearly-empty diner.

DAD
Are you sure this is a good place?

Rose doesn’t look up from her phone.

ROSE
Okay, father... I am just going with what has the most stars.

DAD
How many stars does it have?

ROSE
Four and a quarter.

DAD
Only four? Not five?

ROSE
Father!
The waitress, a stout blond woman with heavy makeup, approaches the family, seated in a booth.

WAITRESS
Hi, I'm Debbie, and I'll be your waitress today. Here are your menus, let me know if you need anything!

Waitress leaves.

DAD
Rose, you order for us.

ROSE
Okay but that’s so weird, you guys can order on your own.

DAD
You know your mother and I are Chinese, we never eat this kind of food.
ROSE
(Shoulders hunched, body small)
Father! That is not our waiter. Please, you just have to wait!

MOM
Sweetie, the restaurant is empty.

ROSE
...Okay true.

Nonetheless, the waiter goes to alert their waitress that the family is ready to order.

WAITRESS
Alright! You ready?

Dad picks up his menu to point at what he wants.

DAD
I want a salad. Which one is best?

WAITRESS
Oh, I think they're all quite good.

DAD
Okay, which is most expensive?

ROSE
Father!

DAD
Fine, fine, I just want this one.

He points at one, and the waitress jots it down.

MOM
(slowly, unfamiliarly)
Can I have this... pulled pork sandwich?

WAITRESS
Sure.

Rose does not order until the waitress turns towards her.

WAITRESS
And you? What'll you have?

ROSE
Uh, I, uh... I think just this burger, if that's okay? Haha.
DAD
Rose, please, relax!

ROSE
No! You and Mom always do this, whenever we eat anywhere!

Dad shrugs as he tears open the dressing packet.

ROSE
No, you do! If Rachel were here she would agree with me.

DAD
If Rachel were here, she would not be so weird about ordering. Rachel would not care.

ROSE
Yeah, well, I think you need to care more about other people's feelings!

Mom has cut and put a quarter of her sandwich onto Rose's plate, and is cutting another for her husband.

MOM
Should we call Rachel? Did she have her interview already?

DAD
You see? Your sister can even do interviews. How will you survive in the future if you cannot talk to people?

ROSE
I can talk to people, unlike you!

DAD
Hey, English is not my first language. You should speak better.

He begins to eat his salad. Then stops. It looks oily, not very fresh, and in general like a very sad salad.

DAD
(In Chinese)
This is too difficult to eat.

ROSE
Really? But it's a salad.

ROSE begins eating her burger. It, too, is oily and disgusting.

ROSE
Okay, you're right, this is... not good.

She looks at the fried seafood appetizer.

ROSE
I am also not touching that.

MOM
Take more of my sandwich! Here.

She gives Rose more sandwich. Rose begins to laugh, pulling out her phone, and Dad is also smiling.

ROSE
Oh my god, I have to tell Rachel about this. This is so bad.
The Ice-Kissed Duvet
by Jenna Nimer

Maybe if it weren't for the cracks in his skin, the cold wouldn't have been merciless. Maybe if he had rubber boots instead of flimsy fabric slippers, the snow wouldn't have been so cruel. Maybe if he had a pair of mittens to cover his bare hands, the ice wouldn't have been threatening.

When his back began to ache from being hunched over, he stood the shovel beside him and surveyed his work. Satisfied with the amount of snow that was now on the grass instead of the driveway, he nodded to himself. He turned on his heels, only to find Father right behind him. Father snatched the shovel from his hand, turned it lengthwise, and forcefully shoved him back. He slid on his damp slippers and landed on the floor with a thud. Father tossed the metal shovel beside him and warned that it should not come inside until it had finished shoveling the snow.

With the joints of a seventy-year-old, he lifted himself off the ground and reluctantly stood up. Looking at the scene again, he realized that he had forgotten to shovel the walkway up to the front door. What does it matter, he thought to himself. He would be locked in the basement when guests came anyways, where the flimsy cot and torn rags did little to keep him warm throughout the brutal winter nights. Nonetheless, he began the tedious work and heaved the snow to the sides of the cement path. As the snow continued to blow with a raw fury, the task seemed more and more Sisyphean.

Once his muscles became sore from countless repetitions of the same motion, he turned and looked at his work more carefully this time. After checking again, he returned the shovel back to its rack and opened the heavy door to come inside. Although the wind did not blow fiercely inside, the heat of the furnace would not reach him until he found the center of the house. Eager to feel the warmth's embrace, he stepped through the laundry and dining room until he reached the heart: the kitchen.

Mother was already there, sitting on one of the wooden chairs around the table and licking chocolate cake batter off a spoon with a cup of steaming black coffee beside her. Upon seeing it, she let the spoon fall to the table and stood up with the mug in hand. She scolded it for coming inside with its wet shoes still on, pointing to the track of black sludge he had left in his path. With a quick flick of her wrist, Mother threw the boiling coffee at it, letting the heat scorch the skin on his face and neck. To keep from making even more of a mess, she told it to wait outside, contained, until she finished cleaning up after him.

He ran outside without a care of making the floor even more soiled. While inside, the heat of the coffee offset the frost that bit at his cheeks, but once he passed through the door the drink made his face even more numb than it was while shoveling. It was good that she threw the coffee on his face, he thought. That way she wasn't able to see his pouring tears.

After shoveling, his bones and muscles ached for rest. He simply trudged up the walkway, slipped through the patch of rocks connecting the path and the grass of the front yard, and marched over the snow, moving towards the center of the lawn. He slowly sat down, all the while knowing that his pants would quickly become soaked with melted snow. The cold became difficult after a minute, but he let himself set his head down and feel the iciness. He looked up, since it was the only direction he could look, and lost himself in the dull gray clouds that covered the sky. Feeling his heartbeat slow, he listened to the rustle of the wind as it picked up the snow and whipped it onto the pavement.

Then, the snow around him wasn't so cold anymore. It was soft, actually. A fluffy white mattress cushioned his frail body as a down-filled duvet materialized on top of him. He could no longer stare at the blank sky, for the flakes that had fallen onto his lashes became too heavy to hold. He closed them silently as the snow lulled him to sleep.

And so he lay there, suspended between the firm ground and distant sky. He slept somberly for hours, maybe days on end. Not a single soul could stir his body.
Some Deaths that I Have Come Upon
by Elena Sparrow

Years later, I jump down from the top of the broken fence with the hose. I land and notice a dark quiver on the sunlit brick accompanying my impact. There, a still dragonfly. Its back is pressed to the ground and its tail points in my direction. A colorless bug, save the light its wings reflect like mist and its turquoise stone eyes. My face tightens; death always stays with me so long.

Before, it was summer. Elias and Logan had come into our backyard, struggling as they lifted opposite sides of a large plastic container. Inside were two dark, round shells beneath woodchips. We placed the turtles on the grass. They immediately revealed their extremities and trotted in their freedom.

The first things I was ever responsible for killing were probably the worms I collected from beneath the stones of the pathway in our front yard. I placed them into a dented, tin cooking bowl with a handful of dry dirt. I soon forgot about the bowl, and found it the next day. I nudged the limp strings of flesh, thinking about how they were just squirming yesterday.

“Dad said they needed exercise... but we can’t lose them,” Logan said.
Their legs stomped with oil wrinkles, supporting a dense load of shell, making chunky movements that carried them in tangled directions. We crawled alongside, watching.

“Can I touch it? It’s not a snapping turtle, right?”
“Yeah,” Elias poked it.

I touched its back lightly, but it continued through the grass. I reached towards its rubbery neck and pet it less delicately there. Elias grabbed the foot of one and pulled at its toenails. I stroked its beak, and that rid us of the last of our uncertain timidity.

We giggled as they tripped over pebbles on the ground and began placing them next to each other so they could race. We flipped them over and traced the lines on their bellies with our fingers. We giggled at their liveliness.

The first thing I cared for that died was a Juniper Bonsai tree, a gift from my best friend. It was in a sapphire pot, and I envisioned a snail family living beneath it. One day I visited it, and its leaves were dry and its branches the color of rot, of loss.

The turtles were becoming less new and exciting with each slow, wrinkled movement. We had lost sight of them a couple of times and hunting them was becoming bothersome.

“Let’s put them in the flowerpot so they stop getting away,” Logan said. They rocked in the flowerpot and that was fun to watch for a while. The sun had reached the center of the sky and we were getting impatient and hot.

“Maybe they want to go swimming,” Elias said. We broke up the grass quickly and began creating a large pit in the center of the yard. I remembered Dad getting mad when we had dug a hole before, but we were blinded with motive now. Elias tugged the hose out of its knots and sprayed us before he filled the pit, and Logan and I plopped the turtles into the water.

They resurfaced and floundered confusedly towards the crumbling sides of the hole. We chatted with each other while we watched them drag themselves out and clamber to a drier area of grass. We knew they didn’t like it in the water, but we talked like they did and put them back in as soon as they got fully onto land. They desperately escaped from sinking and we put them back again and again. Sometimes we’d hold one down to see what it would do. They started coming out more slowly, floating lopsided.

But this time, I was not onlooker as death approached. Instead, I was powerless in my living.

We put one in again. It swayed its arms, but the rest of it was limp in the water.

I had only ever seen an animal struggle with death once before. I was walking home and I heard a thud on my neighbor’s window. Below the window I saw a flopping scribble of feathers. I picked up the upside-down bird and placed it on the ground. Birds never let you do that unless they are about to die. It lay on its side. I remember its whole body beating, beating, every part of it. Its eyes were pure black, but I could see them beat too. I was sitting next to it, feeling myself beat with it, feeling it being alive.

Eventually it got onto its feet, still beating, and hid beneath a leaf. About an hour had past and the excitement was being washed away with the rain that had arrived. I could have gone home now that it was resting and dew covered, but its raw life was so magnetic, I did not want to leave it. I grabbed the bird with kitchen gloves and put it in a shoe box, and I felt it flopping against the walls as I carried it to the house.

The porch was cooled with the rain as I sat and watched the bird pulsing in the corner of the box. I watched, it pulsed, the rain poured. The bird suddenly burst with final energy into flapping, writhing, struggling, struggling, and then collapse. It was still. It had fallen on its back, its wings tucked and its tail in the air.

These creatures were afraid as they died. It’s more than fear that I feel about death, it is not just my animal urge to survive, it is more. It’s the loss, and the knowing about it.

My mother found me and called our neighbor, a biologist. Mom didn’t understand, the biologist certainly didn’t, why I was crying so hard. Sure, it was life, but it was living that had been lost.

The turtle pulled at the water with a final struggle. It bumped into the wall and clawed at it, slipping.

“Let’s bring the turtles home.”

We took the turtle out of the puddle with relief and placed it on the grass. It crawled quickly across the yard, and we let it. It died in the coming winter.

When my brother died, a cardinal landed on my mother’s foot as she walked out of the hospital. Birds never do that unless they are about to die. All deaths stay with me, but his just stays and stays.

I nudged the shimmering dragonfly with my toe, and it flipped right-side up so it looked like it had just landed there, like it probably had before. I was seeing the afterwards, after the struggle, one of many. I reminded myself, because it does not stay with me if I don’t think of the life first.

This was only one moment, then I walked on to water the plants.
He held my hand tight, grasping it until he couldn’t hold on any longer. His weight carried him downward, and slowly, he slipped away from my sweaty palm. In one solid thump, his body fell into the wet dirt again, smelling brown earth all over his pearly white sneakers. Perhaps he felt the first time because of the slipperiness of the soccer ball and the grass beneath him, or maybe his daydreaming had gotten the best of him. Our silence lasted for about five seconds, until we erupted in cackling, breaking the quiet. Tears of laughter spread across the grassy moss, still wet and soft from the morning dew. Darkened clouds viciously stirred above our heads, illuminated only by the sunsets pinkish haze that spread over the horizon like thick jam. Once he had the strength to get up, he feebly walked across the weeds, slowly ripping apart the grass in the process, and made his way to my chest. His hairy legs, still drenched in mud, were fickle and weak. Due to his exhaustion, he tripped head-first into the earth once again. I burst into tears for a second time, unable to hold back my laughter.

"Oh fuck you!” he said jokingly, trying to hide the serious, worrisome tone stuck in his voice. "We could have just stayed with everyone else, but now look at us.” He pointed to his soccer jersey, which was covered with clumps of fresh mud, so much so in fact, that the excess dirt slid down his clothes like raindrops down a car window.

"Showers aren’t open until the morning, and I’m dirty as hell!” he said slightly annoyed. He tried to hide his smile behind his hand, but I knew he too was amused by his own dirt-ridden figure and filthiness. Mud had landed in between his eyes and the on the spots of skin below them, so his lids were stuck closed. I reached out to clean them, but he noticed and rubbed his brow vigorously. I smirked a bit, underneath the moonlight that approached us. It was getting dark, much darker than the light that beamed out of the street posts and skyscrapers back home.

"It’s not my fault you’re too clumsy,” I said provokingly. I kicked the ball straight to him, but he slipped while trying copy the moves of the older campers. Neither of us had the skill to do the trick moves we “ooo”-ed and “ahh”-ed from the sidelines. In secrecy, we would sneak out of the camp at night and practice in the soccer field on our own. Childish motivation, I guess.

"I was only a couple feet away from you, Alan.” I wanted to maintain my seriousness, but I just couldn’t. Giggling was all I could do. It jittered uncontrollably out of me, vibrating my muscles and bones with forceful strength. “Let’s just go back to the cabin and get some rest.”

"How am I supposed to sleep with all this crap on me? These are my PJs! I don’t think the rest of the guys want to see me with my small-ass underwear on.” Alan was embarrassed because his mom had packed his younger brother’s boxers, the ones with dinosaurs and dancing apples sticking to the tiny chest hairs he was so proud of. He gathered his shirt into a little pillow and stuffed it into his pack to keep away from his dampness. He tried to hide his smile behind his hand, but I knew he too was amused by his own dirt-ridden figure and filthiness. Mud had landed in between his eyes and the on the spots of skin below them, so much so in fact, that the excess dirt slid down his clothes like raindrops down a car window.

"I’m ticklish, asshole,” Alan said lovingly.

"I’m ticklish, asshole,” Alan said lovingly. "I know.”

"I rested my head against his, combed his hair with my hand until he fell asleep, and spent the night together enveloped in foliage.

We took off our shoes and ran through the dirty patch of soil ahead. We still had a long ways to go until we reached our camp site. We knew that the counselors would be checking attendance soon, so we rushed as fast as we could through the pitch-black shade covering our path. The forestry was beautiful and serene. Crickets chirped as we passed the thick, towering oak trees beside us. Our surroundings were illuminated by fireflies that flew around our necks and eyes, spinning around us in a neon haze, but we had little time to slow down and appreciate them. As we zoomed through the vegetation, I couldn’t help but look in front of me at Alan’s brown locks of hair bumping up and down in the breeze. I asked him if I could take a minute to catch my breath, just for a second. I was too exhausted to go any further. In the back of my head, though, I was excited. Excited to spend time alone together, just the two of us. Barefoot and in the wilderness. X X X

Alan rolled his eyes when he saw me rest on the forest floor, gasping for air. “We’re definitely not gonna make it now,” Alan said nervously, biting his fingernails with his back turned away from me. I reached around him, over his shoulder, his curly brown hair, and his dirty neck, and turned him towards me so that we were face-to-face.

"Don’t worry,” I repeated over and over to him. “Don’t worry.” I pushed him down into the pile of leaves beneath us. Joining him, I sat with my hands far away from my hips and my legs stretched far in front of my torso. There was nothing around us, except for the oaks and the sky which lay perfectly still. The stars above us shined brighter than any red blip of a plane or helicopter or traffic light. They winked at us from light years away.

Alan took his shirt off. The mud had seeped below his shirt and covered his body, drying and sticking to the tiny chest hairs he was so proud of. He gathered his shirt into a little pillow and stuffed it tight into the space between his legs. His eyes locked with mine for a second, but quickly turned away. He timidly looked back out into the darkness. I took out my hand to wipe off the dirt left on his face, and we softly chuckled together.

"I’m ticklish, asshole,” Alan said lovingly.

"I’m ticklish, asshole,” Alan said lovingly. "I know.”
Miranda Mireles

Sahar Siddiqui

Camille Rehkemper

Sahar Siddiqui
How do you love a body?

My body is my own
My body belongs to me and no one else.
I love my body
I love my body
I love my body
I love my body
I love my body
How does a body love you?
Scramble Think
by Elena Liao

Scramble thinking between scrambled eggs scraped by spatulas, and sunny side up eyes and toast with no butter.

Bitter mornings get better with butter. Makes burnt toast taste better on my tongue. It’s "easy-peasy," but now very inconvenient.

Pick a store, and get some more. Store’s fridge to safely stored, enjoying bits of business-as-usual. Bits of breakfast plans. Barely formed before heading out the door.

Today, I’m just scrambling. The fast is forgotten, I feel far from famine. But my buttons are still pressed; what’s an egg without bread? It’s less.

I confess, maybe burnt toast can better butter-less. But the elevator doors open. Beholden, I go then. Then close them, quickly. I’m thinking.

This elevator goes up and down. It carries people around. But that’s not right? I mean, elevators don’t go ‘round. Elevators don’t run in circles. The system needs maintenance. Fix our language, we pay for smooth operation with rent.

My thoughts are scrambled as the elevator goes down. Familiar words get switched around. Does that mean I’m diagonal now?

I’m walking out, and my keys jangle in my hand too loud. I've got too many things to think about, I guess a yolk would do just fine. Get ready, Freddy, for bready with no butter. Pop me! Poppy! Dripping on my toast! Cross butter off my "to do" list. I just need to change up the taste. Scrambled think gives me stomach aches.

Discomfort is roses and thorns in my side! Oh, my! How nice! Grin and bear it. It’s called rose color merit, but I’ve always been a lotus flower. Petal by petal, pedal to the metal. Rock it, rocks it, clear the water, clear the air.

If I was fair, you still wouldn’t be. You consume the way I live: You taste China or Korea or Japan or Vietnam Or nice. A joke.

On the tip of your tongue, laughter licking crumbs off your chin. Ready to consume my approval, “Butterface looks mad”

Get rid of the whole spread. Time to spread new suggestions, Hope you can digest them because you’ve missed it, miss it. Miss, do you need me to repeat that? You missed me, a mis-speak, I mean, Miss, my Chinglish morning mouth isn’t funny.

Camille Rehkemper

Discomfort shouldn’t just frighten you away. Try your eggs in more than one way. Butter doesn’t cook up better breakfast or justice. Must we—I mean, must we go without justice?

Get to know me first. I’m not laughing with you, Is that the cereal you’ve been eating? Seriously, it’s practically serial soul murder.

Sliced bread, burnt and blanketed by butter. Even if it’s not what you meant, We still speak different. Foreign tastes on our tongues.

No more renting me out as your broken English token friend. I missed that, I still miss that, but, Miss, I don’t have the stomach for stereotypes Even if they’re scrambled with some truth.

We wash words white, stripped of cholesterol, All must speak slander somehow.

Discomfort shouldn’t just frighten you away. Try your eggs in more than one way. Butter doesn’t cook up better breakfast or justice. Must we—I mean, must we go without justice?

Camille Rehkemper
Emma and I stand on our tight hotel balcony overlooking the Kalahari parking lot, a splash of Wisconsin forest ringing the asphalt in front of us. The heavy glass sliding door to the hotel room suction-scrapes open, a draft of air conditioning kissing the backs of our legs as Jenna takes a place on the balcony beside us. I can’t think of a good reason why someone would join us out on the balcony; the June air is suffocating, like when you duck your head under a thick blanket and stay there a little too long, like stepping into a mouth.

“Can you talk about the stars? About the constellations or planets or something?” Jenna asks.

“Of course,” I respond calmly, half distracted by the narrow slice of universe laid out above us, half feeling like the stars will blink out if we speak too loudly. There isn’t much in the sky to see between the too-tall parking lot lights, the fuzzy glow of the Dells, and the roof over the balcony.

“You can see Orion’s belt right there. See those three? They’re just a straight line. And the Big Dipper is right there, just a bit off from Orion,” I instruct softly, pointing though I know it won’t make much of a difference for them. All they see is distant dots on a flat sky. When I look up at a night sky and see even a single blinking star, I feel my tether to the universe, as the cosmos seeps into my bones and blood like an IV drip. The universe feels impossibly far away, yet so close it could be inside my ribs. “There’s Cassiopeia; that’s my favorite.”

“Where? Is it that? That one or that one?” They ask, pointing at the whole sky. Stars from separate constellations unite to form new ones, just for us.

“It’s right there, that one,” I say, quietly impassioned. “It looks like a W, see?” Since I learned about Cassiopeia in middle school, she has felt like home. She was thrown into the stars as punishment for her vanity and hubris– not much of a punishment, if you ask me. She was imprisoned in the stars, but I never feel more grounded than when I see her.

Suddenly the night sky is unreachable, two-dimensional, like a screen hung up atmospheres away. I zoom out and realize how far away I am from clutching the plush universe in my hands. “That up there is everything,” I whisper, mostly to myself. I glimpse Emma and Jenna at my side, their moon faces still tilted, bodies contorted over the railing, to see everything.
Because My Friend Always Blasted Jason Derulo in the Car
by Chauson Dam

Even in the 21st century, it’s not easy to go to a dominantly white school in Seattle. That was how I found myself when I switched schools in second grade. In such a place, you were a deserted island unless you played sports, collected Pokemon cards, and played video games from dawn to dusk. Only being in second grade, all we really knew about the society was what our parents taught us and what we saw on TV.

There was a Hispanic kid in my class named Brian. He always stood around those girls who played hopscotch or whatever, and he often joined them. I was (and still am) Asian, and I never really stood around anyone. We began to get to know each other on this one day when we were assigned to work together in class. We then started to hang out more, and by third grade basically every weekend, and soon we were closer than cookies in a jar. We both loved math, music, and geography. Every time we went out, Jason Derulo joined us. The process usually went as follows:

1. I would give Brian a call and tell him to meet me at my house
2. When I heard the doorbell, I would get my iPod from my drawer and put it in my bag
3. Brian and I would get in my dad’s car, and I would plug my iPod in and select a song from Jason
4. In the car, we would argue in chorus with the navigation system and tell my dad to take a better route
5. We would get out the car, giggling
6. Wherever we were, we would laugh and chase each other around
7. We would leave the place laughing so loud that people on the moon could hear us

I’ll never forget those moments, even when I become older than a dinosaur. These songs were always hype and they made me happy. It wasn’t only Jason Derulo; we also listened to TI, Sean Kingston, and Miranda Cosgrove. Whatever it was, we had a good time.

The wind somehow changed direction around fifth grade. We used to be two train cars held together by a coupler, but now the cars were held together with packaging tape. Up until fourth grade, Brian still talked to boys, but in fifth grade I was the only boy he talked to. He also started wearing much tighter clothing.

One day when I was eleven years old, a meteor struck me. My mom received a job offer at the University of Chicago. I had known about it for some time, and so had Brian, but that was the moment we realized we could not hang out as much anymore. After I moved, we still sent emails to each other sometimes, but then he stopped responding. I knew that he was not upset about something, so I was not sure what to think.

Sometime after I settled in Chicago, I received an email from Rachel, one of my other friends in Seattle. I replied to it. This is how the thread went:

“Hey, how are you? How’s Chicago?”
“They’re pretty nice here. How are you doing? How is everyone in Seattle? Like Brian for example?”
“Yeah, but we call her Miranda now”

I was rather confused. I could have asked Rachel about the situation, but I did not want to say the wrong thing. I looked on Instagram and saw a profile of a girl named Miranda who looked exactly like Brian. As I scrolled into the earlier posts, I saw a photo of Brian getting an estrogen shot. As I looked through the profile, I saw photos of Miranda’s transformation into Miranda. The most recent videos showed Miranda very happily hanging out with her friends, the same way Brian and I used to laugh with each other. Now Miranda has long hair like Rapunzel. It felt too awkward to call my friend Miranda, so I just sent a message saying “Hey, this is Chauson. Do you remember me?” Since then we got to message each other a couple times, but we have both been very busy lately.

I don’t listen to Jason Derulo that much anymore; I listen to Hopsin. When I listen to his songs, I feel like he knows how it is to be a transgender Hispanic, even if he is a straight black male. When I think about my friend, I don’t think Brian or Miranda. I just remember the person I used to laugh with all the time.
Dear Ms. Tribbles,

While observing your 11th grade physics class, I was disturbed to hear no mention of what is perhaps the most important law of physics for an 11th grader to know. I am speaking, of course, of the law of mishaps.

In case you do not know, which would be very troubling, the law of mishaps states that “if ever anything goes wrong, then Mr. Wuffles is watching.” It was first discovered in 1746 by the infamous Monsieur Buggles who reportedly saw Mr. Wuffles in a bush and was shortly caught in a storm of chickens, one of Mother Nature’s rarest disasters. I know that this law’s validity is currently being questioned due to no definitive proof of Mr. Wuffles’ existence. But I have seen Mr. Wuffles with my own two eyes, and I can confirm that he is as real as you or me.

I remember it was a Saturday night a couple of years ago. I had just made myself a cup of tea and was sitting down to see what was on TV. I remember reaching for the TV remote when my phone rang. It took me a while to find my phone, but eventually I found it on the kitchen counter. It was at that moment that I saw him, two eyes peering at me from outside my window. I had just a split second to register this creature’s existence before he vanished. The next thing I remember is the ceiling falling in, and then waking up in a hospital the next day.

Before you ask, it was not Mr. Snurgles, as he is described to have green hair, and this creature outside my window most definitely had neon orange hair. Besides, it’s a well known fact that Mr. Snurgles only shows up at birthday parties. Neither was it Mr. Blabbles, who as you should well know, died in 2004 after a misguided attempt to rob a Walgreens. No, this creature was undeniably Mr. Wuffles.

I tried to tell anyone who would listen about my near-death encounter with Mr. Wuffles, but no one would believe me. “Lots of people suffer hallucinations before being crushed by the apartment above them,” they would say, or “I remember seeing Mr. Wuffles once. Turns out I was just really hungry.” I would then explain to them that I was not hungry as I had just eaten dinner prior to my meeting with Mr. Wuffles, but no one would believe me. But even if you do not believe me, it is still imperative that you teach your 11th graders about Mr. Wuffles. If you can teach them to be on the lookout for Mr. Wuffles and to be wary when they see him, you may just save their lives.

Sincerely,
-Mr. Goobles
Nothing Really Mattress
by Sanaa Imami

witty quotes and funny sayings, completely escape me.
fumbling for my words,
attempting to cleverly craft a simple simile.
look!
an amateur alliteration at its very best, but it shows me that I may just be able to have enough word prowess to master wit.
you see, I have oodles and oodles of words in my brain, but the way it sounds in my head and the way I say it doesn’t quite sound the same.
in reality, it actually resembles something quite lame.
honestly?
now that I think about it,
I don’t chair anymore.
it doesn’t matter.
I’m bed up with it.
nothing really mattress.
The Strike of a Match
by David Tapper

He stares at me as we climb the stairs. After we watched the stars struggle for awhile, he told me that the light is old and I’m astonished: “What about the moonlit land?” He laughs for a moment, so I look to the lawns for an answer. All I see is the gleam of the grass and a poor family huddled under a tarp in ragged blankets. My neighbor stares at them– I know one will come asking, and he’ll strike a match, turning them away. His world is shrouded and his son shames the home he’s in. That family heads home to the tent, and his son has a man to face.
Riddles
by Esha Mishra

Riddles
nothing
but a set of letters
set in an ordered fashion
yet asking,
ordering me
to deliver their other half
so they can be complete,
content
a spark, escaping from the whirling words
and ricocheting into my brain
seeking the answer
the unknown answer,
one that we don’t know
that we can’t find
because
even we don’t know what we’re looking for
a twisted vine
nets of murky mazes
a complex of confusion
pulling at the inner strands of the brain
stretching to the farthest reaches of one’s mind
heard from years past
penetrating through the deep depths of the mind
piercing every thought
every crux,
But as I skim these elusive lines
I feel no frustration,
Instead
there’s a thrill,
an excitement
of solving the unsolvable
because
even we don’t know what we’re looking for
and I realize
the riddle isn’t asking me to help it
it’s asking me to help myself
every day, hour, minute, second
we try to solve the riddle of life
one whose answer keeps slipping away
like the sun slips away from moon’s grasp
every night
and we ask ourselves,

why are we here?
to dream?
to work?
to love?
and the honest truth is
this universal riddle,
the riddle of life
has infinite answers
but one answer for every single being
one answer that we, and we alone
must figure out for ourselves
because
even we don’t know what we’re looking for
We are told there is a mountain. We are told that we are going to climb it. We are told that we are to do it alone.

The docks of downtown Portland, with their old Lobster and Moss Nest dressing factories, pass by as our yellow school bus curves into the woods.

I get off the bus with Jules, a Congolese refugee who professed his love for me the summer before; Najima, a girl who has fought against police brutality and worked alongside her police chief; and Tema, who is a peace-loving teenager and my best friend. Laughing, the 28 of us are told our roles for the hike: some had to be silent, some would be blindfolded, some would lead the “blind,” some were map-readers, some had no job. I was assigned to be silent.

In my sly way, I walked over to Aidan, who was going to wear a blindfold while walking up the mountain, and Mia, the girl with a sore throat. As someone who would not be blindfolded and had to stay silent, I was going to help the two climb the mountain. The excursion, a part of Seeds of Peace Camp in Maine, was meant to take up the whole day.

Mia said, “My throat hurts so much. I don’t want to talk. I can’t lead him up the mountain.”

Now, I had been trying to become better friends with Aidan, and I replied, “Oh, want to ask them if we could switch roles because your throat hurts?”

The leaders thought this was a great idea. And that was how Aidan and I became friends.

We started on the path, our arms intertwined. Vines, roots, and leaves all muddled the path. The roles were set: I would ask Aidan questions, and he would answer sometimes.

“What do you want to do with your life?”

“I want to go to college and then I want to come back to Maine. I love Maine. It’s filled with kind people. I feel like people are happy here. I want to be an old man here who can walk into record shops. Who everyone knows. I would like that, I think.”

“What’s your family like?”

“My dad works at Whole Foods. My mom is an accountant, and my sister goes to Harvard. I don’t get along with her much, she’s too showy,” Aidan said with a chuckle that sounded like a 1940s jazz song.

“What do you like to do?”

“I listen to records. John Coltrane, Wayne Shorter, Bob Dylan, John Fahey, Leo Kottke, Ravi Shankar, Joan Baez, Miles Davis, Funkadelic, Hank Mobley; all good on record. Records are great. I have this LP that was made in 1967, at a studio. It’s one of 100. You can hear them cough, and it’s like I’m there when I listen. I can feel the palpable energy in the room. I wish I could’ve been there.”

We walked along the winding path of the “mountain,” which was more like a hill. It was only after the hike that I learned it was called Bradbury Mountain, which has no name relation to Fahrenheit 451’s author. “I think we’re walking into a blueberry field. I can see the farmhouse over there,” Aidan said. And with that, he started to feel around and let go of my arm. Let me be clear, he was blindfolded.

“Aidan, whoa, whoa, whoa. We’re in the woods.”

“No, we’re in a field. At a farm, the farmhouse is red and it’s to our left. I like the house, but the best part is the fields. I can see the fields in front of us. All of them are filled with blueberries. There are trees to one side, some sort of grove. But, the blueberries are the best part. They’re everywhere, blue dots sprinkle the field. We’re definitely there. It’s sunny outside, I can feel the sun on my skin.”

In fact, it wasn’t sunny on Bradbury Mountain. I was wearing my jacket for fear of rain.

We stopped on the trail, and I gave out cashews, from my pack, to 15 different people. I had put Aidan’s arms around a tree, and I turned around to find him with his arms straight out walking down the path. Blindly, he had no idea where he was going. Logs, moss, mold, Aidan felt around the ground and bonked into a few trees.

“Aidan! You can’t wander off like that. It freaks me out. You’re not in a field.”

“Oh golly, Talia. I’m sorry you can’t see all the blueberries. It really is quite a nice view.”

I got ahold of him and we walked further up the trail. The tree branches that hung over us like arms were nothing like fields of berries. The woods were closed, but the fields he described would have opened in front of us.

All 28 of us. Even though there is no one else on the mountain, we aren’t alone. We reached the final stretch of the hike and Aidan took off his blindfold.

Slate rock surrounded my feet. A rock boulder below me. Looking out, I see millions of green and brown items: trees. It must have taken those blindfolded a minute to adjust to the expansiveness of the watercolor-like world in front of them. And beyond the trees is the Atlantic Ocean and the rest of the world. It’s all there on that little mountain in Southern Maine.
Almost instinctively, my arm began to shoot up into the air before I caught myself, hesitated, and let it dangle by my side again. In hopes of a cue, I looked over at my sister Saskia, who was squinting through the sleepy fog that filled the street ahead of us.

"Do you see him? Is he there today?" I asked eagerly.

"Give me a second...I'm looking." 

We shifted back and around the car so we could get a better view, moving back and forth as we tried to find the angle that would show us the apartment we were looking for. As we scanned the rows of buildings, my dad's voice surprised us.

"Alright, spoons, time to go to school. Let's move it." He shuffled us towards the car but my other sister, Hanna, interrupted us as she ran frantically from the back porch, blurting loudly that "The Guy" had appeared.

We all turned to face the top window of the apartment directly across our driveway. At a desk crammed right in front of the glass, was an old man staring down at the scene we had made, a mug nestled between his loosely clasped hands. He smiled, placed the cup on his desk, and waved.

The four of us, in a line, waved back. Our arms all outstretched, motioning vigorously at the man who we knew only as being "The Guy" we greeted every morning. A few minutes went by, all of us encompassed by an overly-aware, yet content silence, completely focused on the exchange. Moments later, we got back in the car and slowly drove to school, our gestures continually reciprocating until we were out of each other's sight.

"I love that guy. He's just so... nice." Hanna's simple proclamation splintered away the silence that had unknowingly upstaged Elvis Costello's routine presence in my dad's Audi.

"My sentiments exactly, mouse." 

The next morning was the same, as was the previous morning, and what we thought would be all the mornings to come. Waiting, smiling, waving, driving, waving.

One time, probably in fifth grade, the waves were getting so intense that we graduated from just using our hands and took advantage of the rest of our bodies. Hanna and I would hop onto the trunk of the car, waving not only our hands, but our feet too. We would see his tiny face laughing and smiling in reaction to our silliness, but eventually we would have to stop and our lives would diverge completely until 7:30 am the next day.

Our greetings continued for months, which turned into years before we knew it. Again, every day was the same. Waiting, smiling, waving, driving, waving.

That is, until the day it wasn't. Or at least, the day we realized that it wasn't. The Guy hadn't shown up to his cloudy perch in weeks. We disregarded it at first, until Hanna couldn't handle the uncertainty any longer.

"Daddy, why haven't we waved to The Guy in so long? Where did he go?"

"I couldn't tell you, duck. I'm sure he's just on a vacation. He's an old man--I bet you he's treating himself to a glass of whiskey on a beach in Madagascar, right at this moment."

"Haha, I hope he is. Do you think he'll come back soon?"

"I bet you a five dollars and finger-puppet, that he will." Hanna chose to believe my dad's story.
Amber Huo

An old man,
Almost a boy purifies his body
In the light sweet nectar,
As the plasticky metal can
Reaches his lips
Its light sweet nectar flows down a
crevise at the corner of his mouth
Sustaining him,
Staining him
A light red color creating him,
The hills and the mountains growing him,
From the ground up melting him,
The oceans and seas stepping him,
Left right left right
And a book of numbers
Says he should heal and bind your wounds
And to think it tastes good to him,

1 A child,
Almost an infant enters,
Enter those doors,
They slide open,
A concept almost irrelevant to the matter,
They slide open,
Stepping left right left right left right left right
He enters
Not even stopping
They slide open.

2 Organic,
Training to be pure,
For what?
A cherry
Cracks on the Boy’s tooth,
Its sugary nectar flows down his chin,
Staining his skin
A light red color,
It tastes good to him,
Stepping left right left right left right left right left right
Sweet nectar,
Drip,
Stained red shoes.

3 He sees them,
Sugary sweet spheres of sensational flavor
Crowd the room,
A boy,
Almost a man, sprints across that room
Stepping left right left right left right left right left right
Clyde’s classic donuts,
They please him,

4 He takes what he wants, and he gets what he wants
Stepping left right left right left right left right
Rotisserie,
A man eyes his prey… for it is the wilderness,
Plump rotisserie chicken,
Enough to feed a family of four,
It will suffice.

5 Stepping left right,
left right,
left right,
left right,
It’s worth the longer journey,
The Stars Outside
by Jenna Nimer

If dreams are
Just out of reach,
Shadowed behind clouds,
Invisible to the hand—
Then locked away are
Iridescent dreams,
And clueless
Hopes.

New wonders and
Empty promises,
Predestined goals and
Pointless ambitions.

Wills,
Ways,
A quest
Undertaken in vain
And in hope.

Why admire the stars
Of a different universe,
When yours are just as bright?

Crafting Constellations
by Chantalle Dupont

Gather the darkest nights—
Those spent alone in silence.
Spread smoothly and evenly
Above Earth.

Leave space
For a stillness
In between.

Slowly,
Froth and add hues
Of purples and blues.

Paint patterns
Of people and creatures,
Of heroes, victims, wars—
Of peace.

Whisper and breathe.
Bear life to sleeping dusk.

Harvest the stars,
Luminous and radiant.
Pepper across the night.

Let them drip down and pool,
Into the souls of people,
Into the eyes of children.
sleepless, loveless
by Ananya Asthana

He loves Love in the morning, when it’s not quite bright out just yet. When sunshine timidly peeks through clouds, oceans of pink-orange-blue tint the sky, and Love is still on the cusp of waking, prying one eye open while the other stays closed. Under the rays of light shining on his sheets, Love is vulnerable and hesitant, young and innocent, hopeful and brave—everything he wishes love can forever be. But forever is fleeting, and he only has now, this very moment to love Love before it turns and rolls with the morning tide. He threads his fingers around Love gently, almost reverently, careful not to jostle or wake. It is in between sunshine and sheets that Love feels closest to him, even if all Love does is lie entangled with his emotions.

He loves Love in the noon, when the sun blazes down. Love follows in his footsteps, always just a few steps behind, yet still (as always) out of reach like his noon-time shadow gliding across the pavement. Love is in-sync but off-beat, with him but not in him, and it makes his fingers itch to crawl the sidewalks for that missing piece. But Love, like the bolstering heat on his skin and the rough granite against his feet, is unforgiving. Love in the noon plays hard-to-get, except instead of hard, he finds it downright impossible, because all his hands can grasp is empty space. The lunchtime crowd pushes past him, and all he can do is be carried away with the flow. He reaches for Love as it slips past his fingers as it mingle with other lost loves in a sea of footsteps and shadows, while he feels the burden of its absence heavy in his chest. The cracks on the pavement mirror the empty fissures that shake him to the very core, from the tips of his fingers to the hollow of his soul.

He loves Love in the evening, when the moon comes out just to have the stars dance for it. His eyes burn holes into the night sky as he soaks the moonlight in, memorizing this feeling of serenity that shrinks him down to a mere point in a vast plane of cosmos and galaxies that extend beyond comprehension. Love wraps around him, molding to fill his spaces and gaps and pulsing under his skin. There is an aching contentedness that battles in him, a little paradox of fully empty and happily sad, like he is both nowhere and somewhere all at once; like he has had and lost in the same moment, and he’s not quite certain where he ends and where Love begins.
Moments passed before I realized I couldn’t move. Sitting on the closed lid of the toilet, I felt my whole body go numb. The seconds felt like hours. How could she be dead? I knew I needed to tell him, but I sat there, paralyzed.

I anxiously threw on my signature maroon parka and ran up the stairs to check on their progress. For the past week, I had been hosting my friend from summer camp, Elliot, and his girlfriend Talia.

“I swear to God, if I need to come up here one more time to tell you guys to finish getting ready … Please hurry up.”

I paced back and forth outside of our guest bedroom, suddenly aware of the worn down soles in my fuzzy gray Vince Camutos. I checked my watch: 6:45. We were late. I hated being late.

I heard some shuffling behind the door, which had been designated as Talia’s room for the week.

“Jeez, sorry, we’ll be out in a minute, okay? Meet you downstairs?” As I heard Elliot’s voice respond, I felt my shoulders clench with anger and impatience. I turned and rushed down the stairs to the first floor.

My cheeks started to burn and my legs had gone numb from the hard edges of the toilet seat. I lunged forward and grabbed onto the door knob, resisting the urge to collapse onto the floor. I cherished these moments of solitude, the moments before things would have to change. Before I would have to tell him. Hannah was dead.

We were the last to arrive at Jessica’s house, but we were greeted by smiles and warm welcomes from the unfamiliar faces. The ball drop was already on the TV and we sat down to watch as huddled masses crowded into Times Square. As we watched, a breaking news commercial flashes on, alerting viewers that a domestic plane carrying American citizens had crashed within Costa Rica. Fatalities expected, but unconfirmed. The news was still fresh and sandwiched between smiling faces and New Years celebrations.

Hours passed and with the clock nearing midnight, I received a FaceTime call from Helen Spellberg, which made a smile crawl onto my face. I hadn’t heard from Helen since she went to visit her friends in Florida for break, and I was excited to hear about the crazy parties she had anticipated. Sitting on the couch next to a couple school friends, I answered her call, and my heart immediately dropped. Her eyes were swollen and her cheeks were drenched, I knew something had happened.
Poem for Mitt Romney and Drowned Innocence, in the style of David Young’s ‘Poem for Adlai Stevenson and Yellowjackets.’
by Samuel Morin

It's summer, 2012, in Michigan, at my friend's house on the bluff above the great lake, and I'm eating chocolate-chip pancakes, part of my stay, along with flashlight-tag, late-night movies, Sunday bike rides, and swimming in the lake daily after walking down the old splintered stairs fast enough to match our excited hearts but not so hurried that we trip and fall. And then tip-toeing carefully between the sharp bundles of switchgrass to reach the molten sand and cool water, the home of our boyishness and lively laughs. Mitt Romney and Barry-o are toe-to-toe, but Mitt won't beat Barack, a fact I'm half-aware of, held as I am by long summer days, digging into a burger at the small joint a mile away and downing a cold Coke. I'm good at finding lake glass on the beach: round edges, those pale greens and blues, forgotten pieces, found half-buried in the wet sand—calling my name beneath the granite pebble and driftwood—I can fill my pocket and place them in the kitchen jar and his grateful mother shares a warm smile and hug, genuine thanks.

I sit under a heavy blanket listening to the large raindrops pound stones on the deck. My memories of that summer can't resist my mood and a hope that this never ends sparks into a flame. Tomorrow we'll find the truth when waves crash over that flame burying naivety in tragedy and screams in a deafening silence flooding my mind and soaking my last childhood summer—the gallery now speckled with hopeless prayer, lost Jordans and a drowned innocence. Nothing like I expected.

Touch Football
by Jason Coe

We stood with our backs straight as Mitchell and Jordan, two 3rd grade Tom Bradys with immense swagger in their step, emerged from the large door carrying the worn-down brown football. They installed themselves in front of us and began to inspect us like new recruits, examining every detail from our height to our fingernails. As he did everyday, Mitchell first picked Kevin, who could slam into a streetlamp and still hold onto the ball, hands covered in grease from his daily pizza pockets. Jordan's obvious pick was Mike, who was about the size of a pizza pocket but ran faster than a gazelle. Everyday the draft order remained the same, always ending with Eddie and Bryce, neither of whom knew what a touchdown even was but still played just 'cause. Though these games lasted only as long as recess and our field was just a concrete square, we might as well have been on the turf at Soldier Field. The mud-covered football still felt like it was just a day old. The sun burned like hundreds of night lights aligned around our stadium. The silent pedestrians who quickly glanced at us sounded like our fans roaring for their team to win. When Mitchell disputed a call with Jordan, both teams transformed from scrawny kids to brawny men. Each team squealed every "bad" word it knew, from "loser" to "Noob," trying to out-insult the other team.

Eddie didn't share this image of the game. For him, it was a recreational game of touch football, not a lifestyle. Every day he would timidly try to convince us to change our ways with a new suggestion: "If you wouldn't say it to your grandma, than don't say it at all." But most of us sarcastically responded with, "Thanks for your help, Professor!" and then Mitchell called, "HIKE!"

Then, on a day like any other day, we were all assembled on the wall to be inspected for the draft when Eddie decided to play on the jungle gym instead of with the rest of the boys. Everyone stared in awe. Whispers erupted amongst the draftees: "How could he not play?" I heard in one ear. "What is he doing?" I heard in the other. Bryce looked down and walked, his feet like anvils, to join Eddie. Another boy left and then another. Mitchell and Jordan emerged with the football, as they always had, and announced with a booming tone, "Let's just play!" The game played out as it always did, just with fewer members, yet as the teacher rang the bell and forced the class to go back inside, something changed. The usual conversation about a poor call or an amazing catch was replaced with awkward silence. We became divided as a class. Every recess the two groups would peel away, one to go play on the jungle gym and the other to play football. Each group acted like the other one didn't exist.

Today, I still play Super Smash Bros. with Mitchell, Jordan, and the rest of the football players, laughing about our old yearbooks, middle school romances, and our failed driver's exams. But, when I pass Eddie and Bryce in the hallway, all I see are little kids walking away from the football game. I'm sure they've had their fair share of bad photos, crushes, and driving disasters too, but I wouldn't know.
It was late in the morning when we–his son, wife, and I–joined him at the dining table. He sported an apartment-provided bathrobe and fluffy white slippers, an unusual look for a man who maintained a starched button-down shirt tucked into trousers at all times. Over breakfast, we examined the possibilities for the day.

With shaky and wrinkled hands, he shoved bread into his mouth. If the bread was too hard or too dry, he would gnaw and slobber on it for some time before swallowing. It often was too hard for him. Additionally, his water mustn't be too cold, he ate no salt, no sugar, and no fat of course, and if supper wasn't served before 6:30, the world would fall to pieces.

"So, you're going there? Chocolate? Pastries? No, not for me," he said, chuckling. It wasn't particularly humorous, as he somehow managed to imply we were variations of Miyazaki's no-face monster gorging our way through the bathhouse.

"No, I'll stay right here in the apartment, so there you are," he said, signaling to the space around him. I watched as he critically surveyed the breakfast table and expressed explicit disgust at it all. He didn't like the apartment. The heavy doors made his old bones creak, the bathrooms were far too small for his tall stature, and don't even get him started on what the humidity did to his vision. At the table, Callum looked at his wife. The conversation had shifted to her acceptance speech for some teaching award–the reason we were in Berlin in the first place.

"You can say your speech in German," he declared to his wife.

"You can say it in Russian," he said looking at his son.

When he turned to me: "Well, you can, umm…" I waited, almost challengingly, for him to finish. I couldn't help but think: "Jesus, what the hell… I'm not an imbecile." He turned his head away and redirected the conversation to the multitude of problems he had suffered through over the last few days: the noise of traffic (of course this was so shocking for a major city) had kept him up till two in the morning, at some restaurant he paid €16 for ravioli which he claimed were straight from the box, and his bread was still too hard.

It was 6:29 and we gathered ourselves at the table. Unlike this morning, he was now dressed in a crisp white shirt and ironed khakis.

"You don't sound like you believe me," he said, looking intently at me.

"Yup, sure do."

"You don't want to make mistakes, but mistakes are part of life. It's a very unusual opportunity you have, you see."

"Yup, sure do."

"You don't sound like you believe me."

"No, I do believe you," I responded unconvincingly. That about did it, and I left quite satisfied with my efficiency.

As we walked further along, the cobblestone paths wore him down, and he soon headed back to the apartment. I ventured on till 6:00, even though I knew he would be waiting on the couch with his head back and mouth so open that his snores had no trouble escaping. I turned back to make it by 6:30.

When the apartment–with a few minutes to spare and found him close to what I expected: Legs neatly crossed, arms layering those of the couch, and head bobbing off-rhythm. Yet, in that moment I felt sad. I watched his chest rise and fall as he struggled for air, air which used to come so easily. His eyes fluttered. I could practically hear his voice from some 70 odd years ago: "I don't want to go to sleep! I'm not tired!" he would've whined.

"You don't want to make mistakes, but mistakes are part of life. It's a very unusual opportunity you have, you see."

"Yup, sure do."

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It wasn't a boo-hoo moment, no one had died–well, no one had died quite yet–but it was one of those things where your brow furrows and your mouth tightens up, and you reflect on the deeper themes in life.

The moment ended very quickly.

It was 6:29 and we gathered ourselves at the table. Unlike this morning, he was now dressed in a crisp white shirt and ironed khakis.

"Did you enjoy the rest of your day?" he directed the question my way and beckoned for the basket of too hard bread.

"Yeah–" I said, knowing that surrender was probably the quickest and most humane way of killing the conversation.

"Sure," I said, knowing that surrender was probably the quickest and most humane way of killing the conversation.

"You seem to not speak your mind. You hesitate," he stated. As if I hadn't heard this spiel before.

"Yes, I didn't feel the need to voice my every thought, but I would slip into conversation with a snide remark every here and there to establish or reclaim my presence. I like to think I speak with a calculated voice, living a pleasant life in my head.

"You can say your speech in German," he declared to his wife.

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"You can say it in Russian," he said looking at his son.

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"I’ve been doing better"  
Curling and escaping from her lips  
Thoughts like fog mysteriously hung over the room  
Rising and evaporating, dripping  
Onto a sepia interior tired and cold  
Crawling, creeping into cracks  
Of the sunken couch, sighing with each seat  
Alive yet worn and coffee stained  
Reminders of where he spent his sleepless nights  
Drowning in tomato soup and all his patients’ worries

"That’s good to hear, can you tell me more about that?"  
She looked back  
At the murky oceans underneath his eyes  
Rich with schools of stories  
Glistening and darting back and forth  
She reached in and pulled one out  
Filling the room with a deep blue hue  
Hanging over them  
Her silence on a clothesline  
Then suddenly details started dripping on his shoulder…

"Actually…there's something else I'd like to say"  
Watching her skin flakes peel away and dissipate  
He began to unfasten her at the collarbone  
Feeling him breathe a cool breeze onto her neck  
He placed a hand upon her conscience  
Peeling off her citrine skin  
Slowly and pristine  
Bone by bone  
Button by button  
Gently cracking open every rib  
He could finally open up her pages  
And meticulously read her story

"I feel like I'm decaying into almost nothing"  
His voice became an angelfish  
And dove into her pool  
Gliding through the azure waters  
She was a dazzling kaleidoscope of contour  
And his reflections on her surface glistened  
Finally breathing each other’s air  
And flowing through each other’s water

"Well… I guess that’s all… I’ll be back next week"  
"And I’ll be waiting"
The Impossible Quest
by Destiny Strange

“I think I want to be a teacher.”

“Sure, but they don’t make much money. Unless you work at one of those rich people schools,” my mom says as we drive down the bustling street.

Whenever I’m in the car, I love to stare out the window and take in the scenery. Even though we drive down the same streets everyday it’s nice to see the different people on them. Some days it’s a group of school kids or a young mother pushing a slightly older child walking behind her. As traffic builds we slowly drive under a viaduct and I can’t help but notice a small dark haired woman pushing a shopping cart full of clothes to a pile further down the viaduct. A makeshift garbage bag tent holds the belongings of the dark haired lady: two winter coats, a blanket, and various articles of clothing. The next stop-light turns red and traffic under the viaduct comes to a halt. I glance at the long line of cars ahead of us before returning back to the window. The woman turns her head and for several seconds her watery brown eyes meet mine. Her eyes are red and puffy, most likely from a long day of crying, and sunken into her copper skin. Her cracked calloused hands slither around the bar of the shopping cart as she continues pushing. The light turns green and a few seconds later we inch toward the end of the viaduct.

“Did you see her?” I ask my mom as we finally make it out of the viaduct.

“See who?” my mom asks as she changes the radio station.

“Nevermind.”

I let the conversation drop. I’m sure she hadn’t seen her. I decide to go back to the prior conversation.

“I just thought it would be nice to teach people,” I reply.

“I never said it wasn’t nice, but I know CPS doesn’t pay teachers what they deserve,” my mom retorts.

We sit in silence and listen to the music from the radio before my mom picks up the conversation again.

“I know you don’t wanna think about it like that but that’s how it is. Teachers had to go on strike forty times before anything changed.”

“You’re right.”

“It’s not about being right, it’s about honesty. I want you to do what makes you happy, but you still have to make enough money to support yourself.”

I smile before returning to the window.

“I wish we could go on strike about all these potholes. The streets nice all over Hyde Park, but as soon as we back to the hood they all messed up,” she replies half to me and half to herself.

The car jumps and rattles as we drive over the potholes that we couldn’t avoid. I look over at my mom as we continue down the bumpy street. She tries to mask her look of worry with a smile, but I could see through it. Her neatly arched eyebrows furrow accentuating the deep worry lines in her light brown, almost beige skin. She curls the corners of her full lips into a grin like smile, a smile that says “I’m fine,” even though she and I both know that the last pothole sounded like it did an expensive amount of damage. As we near the house, I can’t help but think about the history of my neighborhood. Our block, that’s littered with abandoned buildings and the houses of elderly people, was once the hub of the drug dealing gang wars of the 80’s and early 90’s, the “wild wild hunneds” it was once called. Fortunately, the block is now filled with the people who survived life in the “wild wild hunneds” and my family. We climb the slippery mocha brown stairs clenching onto the wobbly railing, making our way into the two flat apartment. Upon entering the house I threw my backpack near the dining room table, and hoped that the homework that tirelessly awaited me would all disappear into nothingness, and I’d be left with no responsibilities. I finally start my homework after staring at my backpack for ten minutes, trying to will it all away. I bury myself into my studies to block out the noise around me: the tv that’s on ESPN, my sister scream-whispering the latest rap song that she is listening to while she cleans the bathroom, and my mom having a facetime conversation with my aunt. I can’t help but catch bits and pieces of the conversation.

“Did you buy the stuff for the party yet?” my mom asked.

“Not yet. It was either the supplies or my light bill,” my aunt replied.

“It’s fine I was just checking. I’m still figuring out when I’m gonna be able to get these brakes. I just got in the house after coming from the car shop.”

“What the kids doing?”

“Niyya cleaning and Destiny’s doing homework, like always.”

“Let me see her.”

My mom turns the camera on me while my aunt exclaims, “Hey niece!”

“Hi,” I respond dryly.

I could feel myself slowly being pulled from the protective bubble that I create whenever I do homework, and dragged into the loud outside world.

“She just dry,” says my mom after my lackluster performance.
“Letta be dry. My niece gone get us out the hood. Ain’t that right, niece?”

“Yep,” I respond with a little more pep.

I was seconds away from being completely pulled from my bubble, the bubble that took ten minutes to create.

“Don’t you got your own son to get you out of the hood?” said my mom.

I was grateful to have left the conversation and quickly started patching up the gaps in my bubble.

“Like I said, my niece gone get us out the hood,” asserted my aunt.

“I don’t care who she get out the hood as long as I’m first.”

“Just make sure I come next then.”

I finally finish repairing my bubble as the outside drifts into complete silence, and I melt into my studies once again. It was going to be a long night. At 1 am, I sluggishly throw myself into bed with the saddening thought that I’d have to be back up in four hours anyway, but it was more sleep than I got last night so I was content.

***

On the way home from school today, my mom decided it would be a good idea to stop by my great aunt’s house, since she needed to pick up something that was in the direction of their house anyway. Once inside the house we are greeted by my aunt and a few of my cousins.

“Hey Des! You’ve gotten so big,” my cousin Patrick says to me, after my little sister reminds him that she indeed is not “Des” but Laniyya.

“Hello,” I reply as informally as possible.

I wasn’t in the mood to be teased on my formality once again. It was a running joke among my family. The extreme focus that I apply to my studies along with how pale I was as a baby earned me the nickname “white girl,” and the fact that I go to a private school doesn’t really help my case.

He disappeared into his room and I was left alone to sit on my great-aunt’s couch (we call her “Auntie Lil Pat”) while she and my mom talk about “grown folks’ business”. I soon move to the kitchen table to begin my homework. I didn’t bother making a bubble because I know I won’t get much work done here anyway.

“How your grades?” a voice from behind me calls out.

“They’re go-od,” I stutter after feeling a heavy hand slap by back with a thud. I turn my head to find the calloused hands of my cousin Keith gripping my shoulders as he makes his way to the kitchen sink.

“Good job. You’re going to...gulp...make enough money...gulp.... to get us out of here one day,” Keith gasps as he stops for breath in between his gulps of water.

The stinging in my back prevents me from audibly answering. I reply with a nod.

“Go on niecy, make enough to get us out of here. Lords knows we need it. There’s nothing here for us in the hood,” adds Auntie Lil Pat from her spot on the couch.

In the car ride home I begin to wonder if this is all just one big pipe dream. Just a sacred deed passed onto to every member of our family, and given to the most promising ones for extended use. This is our family heirloom that gets passed down from generation to generation, not rings, or blankets, or houses but a never ending quest. Don’t get me wrong, I want to be fortunate enough to ensure that all my family lives comfortably, but the pressure gets to you. Knowing that your family is expecting you to provide for every single aunt, uncle, cousin, cousin’s cousin, cousin’s cousin’s cousin on a teacher’s salary is a daunting task, or to them on a doctor’s, chemist’s, lawyer’s, pharmacist’s, or surgeon’s salary because they won’t accept anything less.

Unlike many of my friends and people I’ve encountered, I never desired to be rich, I longed to be comfortable. My dream occupation always switches between doctor and teacher, a choice my heart wants but my brain decides. Following my heart only allows for my immediate family to live comfortably, but following my brain allows everyone to live comfortably but at the expense of my happiness. Later in the day as I plop into bed and pull the tribal print comforter over my head, I allow myself one more question before I go to bed: How can I possibly get my family out of the hood if I can’t even pull myself out of bed in the morning?

Sahar Siddiqui
Phantasmagoria  
by Elizabeth Lin

Lines run everywhere, crisscrossing here and there. They form the bathroom tiles that anyone can see, but extend beyond, into the imaginary realm she roams when she lets herself. But those lines don’t matter to the real world; there’s already enough lines anyway. Her lined paper writing assignments always beg for extensions, because she never has enough room to say what she wants to. And maybe what she wants to say doesn’t matter to the world, either.

The lines extend all around her as her pencil scratches graph paper over an uneven wooden desk, the squares, made of intersections—of lines, fading into the background of her math homework, taunting her as she solves yet another problem. Everyone around her raves about the beauty of abstractions, and she does not disagree. But she’s always wanted to draw a clear line. There’s a beauty to something that is absolute; something that, unlike her, will never waver.

She is ideal, they tell her, a perfect student and person. She pretends her life is clear-cut, that she knows what she is doing, that she is organized, that she knows what she wants. And they lap it up, her facade, her practiced smile and occasional genuine laugh. She hasn’t crossed it, that invisible boundary where she takes off her mask and everyone sees that her eyes are tired, that the path she wishes were straight twists and twines round and round.

They don’t see her typing furiously, the luminescent computer screen her main source of light. The digital clock reads 12:15, the harsh red lines making up the digits ticking her life away slowly, until 12:15 becomes 16, 17, 18, until it is one and she is done.

The cursor blinks on the page, a constant rhythmic beat to it, and her page parallels her imagination. Luminescent pages turn dark, as her thoughts bleed over into reality—into physicality: It’s dark outside. The stars twinkle from a far distance, affixed in a different time and space, with some long dead by now but still seen—a paradox of being. They lie and deceive those down below, with hopeless wishes and aspirations pinned onto their twinkling facades. The moon is obscured by dark, ominous clouds and a street light flickers in and out of existence.

Nothing stirs. But as twilight turns into night, a faint drizzle begins, soon to turn into a maelstrom. The pounding of rain on shingles covers the sound of a single pair of footsteps. The identical houses creak and groan, threatening to blow over, and it feels as though the world is ending. And even if one were curious enough to look outside, they would be unable to see past the rain, blots of inky essence within a murky horizon.

Outside, the rain begins to pound on the steepled church across the street, and, in her imagination, the water wells and wells and doesn’t end. It rises to the first floor, to the second, to her waist, dark and inky. And everything is drowned out of existence.

So when she feels a raindrop, she is not surprised; when she rubs it off and it is washed-down-inky rain, she wants to smile but can’t. Her eyes grow puffy, red, from happiness, she tells herself, happiness that the imaginary has bled into reality. She wonders if now would be a good time to remove the mascara she wears as a last resort, her last wall, the last mask in the masquerade of perfection she resigns herself to.

The stars twinkle outside, affixed in a different time and space when she looks out the window, and she can imagine their saccharine grins, beckoning her to join their ranks—but they know that she knows she has already become a paradox of being.
comfortably in hopes of finding a smoother patch. I felt like I’d been in the makeshift meeting markers. The hay square that I sat on had a tendency to poke through my jeans, so I shifted un-
dry. I sat, slumped, over the cool surface of a white foldable table tracing lines left by colored
The morning’s air carried an unusual post-rain thickness that made my throat feel sticky
of the bedding I spread. It wasn’t very long until I heard a faint cry calling my name for lunch.

I was prepared this time for the chaos that an “unexpected” summer storm would inflict on the camp schedule and found myself already scurrying to the supplies room to grab a pitchfork. The pitchfork was rusted with a few missing teeth, but I knew it was the best pitchfork at camp be-

ner they that I refuse to touch horse poop?” One of the girls addressed me, poking her thumb out at

ning that it would only be used as bedding later on, but the prospect of itchy watery eyes and terrible sneezing all
day was enough to deter me. I could already feel my eyes growing puffy just from standing there, so with a small

the seemingly excessive five minutes I had to pick a hiding spot. The arena was dimly lit and quiet save for a few

room for years. In reality I’d only been attending the camp for a few weeks, but the hour we had between lunch
and our afternoon ride was always insufferably boring. Sometimes we would fill the free hour with some horse

The Fields
by Quari Ewing

It was raining again. This time the wind howled in great gusts, propelling
droplets of rain through slips in the soft aged wooden walls of the meeting room. My dad had
dropped me off a few hours ago, when the vast grey skies had only just started their rumblings.

The Fields
by Quari Ewing

...
hear the crunching of gravel and shouts indicating the search had truly begun. The first few minutes I sat as still as possible, not daring to move or breath. Though as time progressed and the group had walked past me a few times I started to relax. I knew that, thanks to the lack of patience my peers possessed and the level of concealment provided by the particular field I’d hid in, I wouldn’t be found anytime soon. I began to pull at shoots of the cool green grass listening to the pleasant sound each strand made as it was ripped from the earth. It wasn’t much longer until I could hear a few complaints now coming from the chicken coop. “Did you guys check all the stalls yet? She might be in one of them,” someone suggested. I knew we weren’t allowed to hide in stalls either, but it did sound like something I would do. The discussion went on like that for a little while but I stayed put, but I could hear the voices fading away they sauntered off to the meeting room. One of the horses did let out a loud nicker, as if laughing at my camp mate’s defeat, I could feel a bit of a smile playing at my lips too. But I did not follow quite yet, the idea of not only giving away my perfect spot but going back to the small room to pick a new hider filled me with a sense of resentment. I had to stay longer and enjoy the tickle of the breeze, the birds chirping, and the scattered whinnies of grazing ponies.
Midsummer Laments
by Amber Huo

She was a girl who loved cats, more so than the average human being, and was delighted when, upon reaching her double digits, she finally made the acquaintance of one. Every morning that summer the stray could be found around her grandparents' neighborhood, where she stayed for summer vacation, away from the city and her parents. The cat wandered from house to house, and stayed at those that gave him a morsel of fish or other delightful treat. The neighborhood blared with traffic noises: cars, pedestrians, bicycles, and street vendors on its most populated squares. But deeper into the blocks, where her grandparents lived, it was quiet, though still livid with the chirp of birds and the friendly greetings of neighbors who had known each other since childhood. It was far away from the cacophony of the neighborhood and even further away from her home in the city. She preferred playing in the latter areas, as did the cat.

He was a big feline, but his fur made him appear even bigger. It defined him in the midst of all the other strays in the community; while other cats were grey or white, he was a brilliant orange. He came running across the dirt path when she called, because she always had some bit of food, saved especially for him, from whatever she had for dinner the previous night.

"Stay for a bit longer today," she would whisper, stroking the cat's beautiful coat. The pelt looked particularly beautiful underneath that day's summer sun, which seemed to set the coat ablaze. She fed him slivers of fish from her hand, and looked into his dazzling green eyes, which were reduced to slits from the glare. He was the personification of summer; he was the sun of cats, but shade could still be found in the speckled leaves of his irises. Her own dark eyes and dark hair, dull in comparison, borrowed a bit of light from the lustrous cat each time he visited. When satisfied, the cat bounded back across the path and disappeared into the foliage. She never knew where he went when he was not with her. To her, he simply melted away in the humid atmosphere.

She ran from her grandparents' gated apartment, her hands full of fish, on the final blinding day. The cat, drawn by the scent of the fish, emerged as a ray of light, his blazing form a mere streak to her slow eyes. She stopped and panted, wiping beads of sweat from her forehead, which had become matted with loose hair. Dropping to her knees, she placed the fish scraps on the scorching ground, and tried to make out the form of the cat, though his figure was practically indistinguishable from the glare of the unobscured sun. She closed her squinting eyes and raised a hand to ward off the piercing glow, but just as she escaped the sun's wrath she heard the skree of a bicycle, braking hard, sending bits of dirt off the path onto her precious fish morsels. Her eyes snapped open. She had missed a moment of sunlight, and it was, to her horror, already fading. Her widened pupils took in that fiery orange fur, interrupted in motion, matted with blood and dark earth. The trees around her provided no shade from the relentless sun; the leaves in the cat's eyes were dead and blank. She walked slowly towards him, an extinguished flame, and brushed her hands across his rumpled fur, now drained of its glorious luster. Hot tears and sweat fell on her stroking fingers.

She left her grandparents' home the next day. The summer had ended for her. The blazing sun had dimmed, clouded over by the prospect of returning to her daily life.

Risa Cohen
The Instrument of Journey
by Jessica Pan

rejected memories, differed dreams, and pure landscapes of fantasy
create other worlds
empty worlds, where details grow because someone wishes they could be there
universes where everything and anything has already happened
and the sky is orange and blood is green.
these empty worlds are always there, just under our noses
constantly smelled and seen by those hoping to be in a plastic world
where they got the job, and she said yes, and they live together
in a house wedged between a cloud and a waterfall
yet this world they dream of is only touched by the tip of their finger
only by holding me can they escape into them
for I am a bridge over the gaping hole torn between these worlds
connecting him to his inner artist
her to her lost puppy
them to their former friend
the world to its alternates,
sHELLS OF ITSELF THAT WERE LOST LONG AGO
or will not arrive for millennia
where everyone can catch their dreams in a butterfly net
and then he who always wished to fly
would sprout wings from his back and soar above the clouds
that could never drag him back down.
he does
when he sits and fiddles with me until I work
and I set out into the snowstorm in front of me
to forge the sun into the rain
connecting some to their dreams is one purpose
some prefer this assigned world
to observe it keenly with my aid.
in one of my malleable worlds, there is no mystery
everything, the past, present and future, is understood
science connects some to fragments of this world
able to glimpse unventured terrain
they feel they observed it alone, but it’s never without me
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