

SPENCER CHANG

Poetry | Taipei American School, Taipei, TW

Fishhook / Anchor a haibun for my Grandpa

as you raise me onto the wooden deck, unlatching the fishhook from my shirt, I try to speak, but cough up ugly noises instead. amid oceans heavy with summer smog, anything can be turned into myth—you pull me close, cradling me like a fledgling fallen from its nest. I reach for my face only to touch yours.

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in a room cast still by thunderlight, I wake to a broken oar suspended above my head, the rugged bed. look down at your feet & count each callus. from the altar, incense whirls around us a halo. yellowed wallpaper unfurls from the ceiling, as if to listen, as if to speak.

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from you, I learned how to pluck the bones from fishmeat, wring the salt from murmurous waves. now, we're netting white carps from the sea, eyes gasping wide. I pocket a few to play soothsayer: foretell the clawing storms, white teeth of currents. even then, *there are things only the moon can predict*, you say, plucking chords from its rods of light.

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things we find washed up by the shore: a needleless compass, plastic radios without antennas, driftwood sawed off at the ends, to be part of something greater—this fishhook, my anchor.

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on moonless nights, we watch boats illuminate black waters, rudders cleaving into wakes, as waves rush in to sew. I imagine a healing like this.

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you used to slow-dance in the living room, swaying to the ocean's pulse as waves crashed, carving a little shore to keep for themselves—now skin hardens like bark up your legs. a sparrow in oil, sinking beneath its own feathers.

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when I found you on the kitchen floor—skin sharpened into scales, neck knifed into gills—I filled the bathtub with seawater & lifted you in. how much smaller you looked in the room. how much smaller I looked next to you.

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full moon turns the shores into mirrors, then silver, & I step into the waves one last time. water rushing into my palms like a third hand, pulling you. the ocean whispers. I whisper back, *this is a second healing*:

your hands reaching for
the hazy moon & my hands
unhooking from yours.

Ghost Stories (II) a sestina for Vincent Chin

& they bury their hammers into the cold machine
like gavels. another hit caves its teeth, lifts
its jaw & black oil brims out. for *criminals*
like these, they say justice. hunched close beneath the streetlight's
drone, they raise their hammers, chant *this is our country*
& the TV switches—a reporter suited in blue says *good*

morning America & I profess to be a good
citizen, twist my jaw like a machine
around the Os & call this country
home. leaving for groceries, I saw them lifting
flags up their front gates. I avoid streetlights,
pray my shadow won't be mistaken for a criminal's.

but I, refusing to speak my prayers in English, I, criminal,
I, on the streets licking shrines with my dirty tongue, I, good
beggar bad immigrant, I, smothered by the streetlights—
I fold my arms, announce myself a drowning machine,
mouth crushed & reassembled a silver ring. I only lift
my hands up, palms outwards, when a man asks what country

I'm really from, I say *our country* & he says *my country*—
it's Friday night & I mistake my reflection for criminal
again, my tattered jacket fuming with sulfur. still, I lift
my right hand & practice my oaths. good
subject, loyal soldier, obedient worker, open machine,
let you tinker with my ribs under streetlights

& you, gilded like a lost savior, make streetlights
of my eyes. I reach for all the windows, but find a country
of mirrors. a gunshot in low frequencies, their machine
hands pointing everywhere, *someone needs to be the criminal*—
a boy mistakes my prayer for begging & says *no good*
in saving a broken thing. two men lift

their baseball bats & splinter the moon. their cuffs lifted
for cracking a skull, smoke turned halos under streetlights.
they dress blood in snow, kiss the dirt, call themselves *the good*
citizen I can never be, my body turned an open country.
O, dim my mouth, make me faceless, strip the criminal
from me— at the ceremony, I machine

my hands. I play good. we all pledge. they lift
flags. mouthless machine. dead machine. the streetlights more
alive than ever in this country—where anything that moves is a criminal.

KATE CHOI

Play or Script | Seoul Foreign School, Seoul, KR

All's in the Past Now

The stage is bare except for a single box in the center and a stool at the far right. MEI sits on it, crosslegged; her eyes unfocused, uncertain. For a few seconds she sits silent, staring at the audience, looking away and back again. Suddenly, she leans forward and speaks—hesitantly at first, but gradually louder and faster.

MEI

It was hot that day.

(She pauses.)

It was hot, so hot that day, and it wasn't the good kind of hot either. Not the kind of hot where the sky is perfectly blue and cloudless, when you know you're being sunburned but it doesn't matter to you either way... No, it wasn't that kind of hot that day. It was the other kind—the humid kind—the kind where the air is so thick and sticky it clings to your skin and your clothes, and every breath feels like air you just exhaled. It was so humid that day that even in the airport with its high-powered air conditioning I could feel it, right away, and I could just see it outside, behind all the windows and doors. The humidity, it was everywhere.

(A long pause... then a deep breath, a contented sigh; she continues rapturously, speaking fast.)

My God, it was glorious! It was just like they said it would be! They'd told me the summers were humid after the rains, and they were right. I mean, I knew they were right—my friend Ara and her parents, that is—I never doubted that they were right, when I heard them tell their stories growing up—but it was different to know they were right... to stand there and feel it and know they were right and know it because I was there. I was there! And it was just as I had expected it would be... just as they had told me it would be... it was a sign. It had to be a sign... it was all right, exactly right.

MEI jumps up from her stool and crosses the stage rapidly. At the other side she turns and paces back again, and sits back down, crosslegged, but now PAST MEI enters, pulling an imaginary suitcase behind her. She walks quickly back and forth a few times, stopping once to shake out her loose hair and tie it up against the imaginary heat—she stops and sticks her hand out to the side, waving, staring at something the audience cannot see.

MEI (CONT'D)

And it was even more humid outside, but—

PAST MEI

TAXI! TAXI!

Seeing an invisible taxi heading her way, PAST MEI pulls her hand back. She sits on the box and pulls an unseen car door closed.

MEI

—inside the taxi from the airport the air conditioning was on, which was much better. I told the driver where I wanted to go—in Korean and everything!—and he understood me. He didn't ask me to repeat myself, just took off. I mean... I knew that I knew Korean, of course. I learned it growing up, from Ara. I sort of did, anyway, and before I came I bought these huge books on Korean vocab and grammar, so I'd fit in and all.

As she speaks, PAST MEI stands from her seat and pretends to be examining a row of bookshelves before her, occasionally picking out an imaginary textbook and filling her arms with invisible volumes.

MEI (CONT'D)

I bought maybe too many, but I couldn't tell which ones were best, and the only other person who could've told me was Ara.

Here her voice falters, just slightly, and for just a moment, MEI hesitates before she continues—PAST MEI, in the midst of picking out another book, falters momentarily too.

MEI (CONT'D)

So I just got all of them.

There's a moment of silence. Then MEI continues abruptly, briskly, and PAST MEI takes down the book and sits down on the box again.

MEI (CONT'D)

It's good I got all of them, because the taxi driver understood me. It was like I was fluent and everything. And we got to the hostel okay too, the right address and not too much traffic.

PAST MEI, sitting on the box, seems to be looking out a window at a cityscape rushing by... her chin resting on her hand, her expression dreamy and excited. Then, as if disembarking from a taxi, PAST MEI gets up from the box. Her invisible suitcase in her hand, she looks around to find a building she recognizes in the imaginary landscape around her. Soon her face lights up and she heads determinedly for an unseen door across the stage... she knocks and waits. An AJUMMA enters from the other side.

MEI (CONT'D)

I saw it right away. The owner was an *ajumma* [*an older woman*], a nice woman who said hello—

AJUMMA

(Bowing, with a smile)

Abnyeonghasaeyo [*hello*].

MEI

Just like that! And I said hello back—of course I did.

PAST MEI

(Eagerly)

Abnyeonghasaeyo!

For a moment it looks like she's about to extend her hand to shake, but PAST MEI catches herself and bows quickly instead, a little flustered. AJUMMA gestures for PAST MEI to follow her and PAST MEI and AJUMMA both exit the stage.

MEI

(Leaning forward, suddenly a little anxious)

I almost forgot to bow, though. That was stupid of me. I never thought I'd forget to bow! I always bowed to Ara's parents when I went over. It's a Chinese thing, too, you know. It's all down to respect. I suppose I was just out of practice, since in America we don't bow, and it'd been so long since I last saw Ara's parents... Anyway.

From behind MEI, PAST MEI reenters, looking around expectantly.

MEI (CONT'D)

I dropped off my things, and I knew I had to go and eat—Ara's parents always had homemade Korean food for me to eat—so I went to the first Korean restaurant I found. There weren't many people around, but I said hello to everyone I did see.

PAST MEI

(Walking slowly back and forth, smiling and bowing)

Abnyeonghasaeyo—abnyeonghasaeyo—abnyeonghasaeyo.

MEI

They all said it back, too, and—

(Proudly)

I didn't forget to bow. I found a restaurant, and there weren't too many people—it was a really homey place, not modern or slick, just one of those places with a faded storefront and plastic tables and shiny metal bowls.

PAST MEI walks around the box and then sits behind it, using it as a table. She looks up as WAITRESS enters and approaches.

MEI (CONT'D)

The waitress was another *ajumma*. I guess it was just that kind of place. I loved that it was that kind of place, you know? It was a place of the people. Not fancy restaurateurs or foreign chefs, just plain old local people, local cooking, people I could talk to.

PAST MEI

(To WAITRESS)

Abnyeonghasaeyo!

WAITRESS

(Smiling and nodding)

Abnyeonghasaeyo.

PAST MEI studies an invisible menu and points as the WAITRESS stands beside her and nods at her choice.

PAST MEI
This is so exciting—to be in Korea, and eat the food! My friend Ara would be so proud of me.

WAITRESS
(Hesitating, slightly taken aback)

You mean... you're not from Korea?

PAST MEI
(Surprised, though evidently pleased to be mistaken for a local)

No, I'm from America. I just flew here today. I'm moving here.

WAITRESS
But you're Korean?

PAST MEI
No, I'm American.

(Realizing what WAITRESS really means)

Oh. No, I'm Chinese American. My parents were Chinese. I was born there.

WAITRESS
Oh.

She looks at PAST MEI again, as if for the first time, and a frown crosses her face momentarily. Her manner becomes more reluctant, but the shift is barely noticeable, and PAST MEI doesn't seem to see it right away.

WAITRESS (CONT'D)

Oh. I see. You have an accent.

PAST MEI
(In consternation)

I do?

WAITRESS
Yes, a little.

She looks PAST MEI up and down again, dubiously.

WAITRESS (CONT'D)

Your teeth are really clean for a Chinese person.

PAST MEI

I—oh—thank you.

She watches, confused, as WAITRESS exits the stage.

MEI
(With a smile, though it wavers a little as her voice does also)

That was really nice of her, wasn't it?

(She pauses.)

I mean, I wasn't expecting to get a compliment like that. That was a really nice compliment. It's true, too. I have nice teeth. Lots of people say I have nice teeth. Or—well—I suppose not lots of people, but they should, because my teeth are nice. And she noticed! It was nice of her to notice... And she almost thought I was Korean, too.

She pauses. Before she continues, WAITRESS reenters and begins walking around the stage, serving a few imaginary customers and clearing imaginary tables. In the center, as she waits for her food, PAST MEI looks around her, taking in the sight of a Korean family in one corner, smiling and waving at their two children.

MEI (CONT'D)

I got a lot of compliments when I was younger, but not about my teeth—mostly about my eyes—me and Ara both did. All the kids in America used to talk about our eyes. They thought our eyes were cool—like snake eyes—

MEI pauses for a moment, looks expectantly at the audience with an uncertain smile, and brings her hands to either side of her face, tugging slightly so her eyes become slits. After a few moments, she drops her hands to her lap.

MEI (CONT'D)

They didn't say it, exactly, but I know they thought we had cool eyes.

As she speaks, PAST MEI continues looking around as WAITRESS walks

around her table and on and off the stage, carrying imaginary plates, though she is in no hurry. As time passes, PAST MEI begins fidgeting a little. Her smile slips a few times as she checks her watch and she watches WAITRESS walk back and forth. Finally, hesitantly, she raises her hand to catch WAITRESS's attention, though at first WAITRESS does not see it. It's possible, though, that she only pretends not to. At last WAITRESS walks over, and a silent exchange takes place: PAST MEI asks a question, an uncertain smile still on her face, and WAITRESS is vaguely surprised. She shrugs, says a few words, and walks offstage, though not before collecting a few more imaginary dishes and pouring a cup of water on another table, smiling at the unseen customer in a manner that is noticeably warmer.

MEI (CONT'D)

Anyway, it was nice that the *ajumma* liked my teeth.

(She pauses.)

It was so nice of her that I forgave her for forgetting my order. I mean, I get it. She must have gotten mixed up, and it just slipped her mind. Besides, she's not so young... I mean, she's just the age when people forget some things sometimes. But it was okay... I got my food eventually.

WAITRESS returns and places an imaginary plate in front of PAST MEI, who smiles.

PAST MEI

Gamsabamnida [thank you]—

But WAITRESS has already turned away and headed to the far side of the stage, where she's joined by WAITER, an older man who glances at the customers in the restaurant and begins conversing silently with WAITRESS. PAST MEI, pretending nothing has happened, turns to eat her food. WAITRESS looks at PAST MEI and says something to WAITER—WAITER looks back at PAST MEI and, as WAITRESS did a few minutes ago, quickly reassesses her.

MEI

Everyone in the restaurant was so nice anyway that I would've forgiven her even if she hadn't said anything nice about my teeth. There were these two kids in the corner—they were super cute.

As she says this, PAST MEI looks up and smiles and waves again at the same corner she waved at before. She pulls a funny face, giggling as she watches the children's response.

MEI (CONT'D)

And when I was about to go, an *ajushi [an older man]* who worked there said hello to me, too. They were all so nice, everyone in the restaurant.

WAITRESS exits the stage as PAST MEI finishes eating and rises. PAST MEI is rummaging through an imaginary bag when WAITER approaches and makes her look up with a smile.

WAITER

Abnyeonghasaeyo.

PAST MEI

(Bowing)

Abnyeonghasaeyo!

She waits expectantly for WAITER to say something, or explain why he has approached her—maybe she's waiting for a question, since that seems to be the only reason why WAITER would come up to her so suddenly. But WAITER is only ushering her to the door.

WAITER

I hope you enjoyed your food.

PAST MEI

Oh—yes—it was very good, thank you.

WAITER

Good, thank you.

They stop at the door. PAST MEI, suddenly feeling an urge to say something more, and feeling somewhat misplaced, as if she knows that WAITER knows she is a foreigner, speaks eagerly.

PAST MEI

The *kimchi [fermented cabbage]* especially was very good.

WAITER

Thank you, I'm glad you liked it.

He opens the invisible door and looks up at PAST MEI, who stands there a little uncomfortably, not moving to leave. Not really sure what else to say, WAITER tries for a compliment.

WAITER (CONT'D)

You know, your skin is so pale, you could be a Korean.

He smiles.

PAST MEI

Oh! Um. Thank you.

She walks offstage quickly, and WAITER closes the door, walking back across the stage, smiling and nodding at the customers. He exits the stage in the opposite direction.

MEI

I told you so—everyone in Korea is so nice. They give compliments all the time! Ara and her parents never mentioned that when we were younger. See, I'll give you another example. Just the other day I was shopping in this little street where they have clothes out on racks, and shoes put out on windowsills, so that when the wind blows the shirts fly up and down like enormous wings and brush up against the shoes.

Behind her, PAST MEI enters, walking slowly up and down the stage and gazing appreciatively around her at racks of imaginary shirts and footwear, occasionally stopping to finger a sleeve or bend down to examine a pair of shoes.

MEI (CONT'D)

All the stores were small, and I was looking at some shirts in the street that had English on them, and none of them made any sense. You'd think they'd know how to write five words without messing up the order. Like there was a shirt that said—

PAST MEI stops as an imaginary shirt catches her eye. She reaches out and holds it up to read, laughing.

PAST MEI

"IT IS ONLY OF RELATIVE FUNNY." What's that supposed to mean?

She puts the shirt back on the rack and starts sorting through others, occasionally pulling out a few to read aloud, amused. OWNER enters and walks up behind PAST MEI, tapping her on the shoulder and making PAST MEI jump.

OWNER

(Admiringly)

Your pronunciation is very good!

PAST MEI

Oh! *Ahnyeonghasaeyo!*

(Bowing quickly)

You must be the owner of this store—you scared me.

(Glancing down at the shirt in her hands)

Oh, yes, I can speak English. I grew up in the United States. I just moved here.

OWNER smiles, looking proud, as though PAST MEI is her own daughter.

OWNER

Ah, I see. America! That must have been very nice, living in America.

PAST MEI nods.

OWNER (CONT'D)

So you moved back for... your family, maybe? Is someone in your family sick?

MEI

You see! You see, everyone is so nice in Korea. The lady was nice, very nice—she complimented my English—she asked about my family—she was very kind. Anyway, let me tell you about this other time—

MEI is about to move on and share some other experience or example to prove her point when she's interrupted by PAST MEI. She looks back, startled, as the memory continues playing—she hadn't planned for that to happen.

PAST MEI

I—back? family?—no, I moved because... well, I had a friend who was Korean.

OWNER

Is she here?

PAST MEI

Well, no. We're not very—I mean, I haven't seen—

OWNER waits for PAST MEI to continue, but PAST MEI trails off and says nothing more.

OWNER

Ah, so not your parents then.

PAST MEI

No, they're fine. They're not even here, they're back in China now.

MEI

(Trying, desperately, to cut into the memory and halt it in its tracks before it goes further. She has a fumbling smile on her face now as she talks, very fast.)

ANYWAY, that just goes to show, like I said, how nice people are in Korea. Like this other time—

OWNER

(Interrupting MEI, who looks at her despairingly)

In China! Why didn't they just come back here? Or I thought you said you lived in America.

PAST MEI

We did, but they moved to China a long time ago—they're from China. They've never actually been here before.

MEI

ANYWAY—

OWNER looks at PAST MEI as WAITRESS and WAITER did, as if seeing her for the first time again. MEI puts her head in her hands but then shakes herself, remembering she has an audience. She looks up at them as she tries to smile, as if to say it's no matter, we'll just wait it out, it's no big deal.

OWNER

Ah...! But you speak Korean very well. You're... Chinese?

PAST MEI

Chinese American.

OWNER

Ah.

She looks at PAST MEI and says nothing else for a moment. Her expression has turned from affectionate to unreadable. On the stool, MEI struggles to maintain her smile as OWNER looks at the imaginary shirt PAST MEI is still holding, nodding at it abruptly.

OWNER (CONT'D)

Are you buying that?

PAST MEI shifts, sensing the sudden change in atmosphere, and puts the invisible shirt she's holding back on a rack.

PAST MEI

I—no, I guess not.

She looks back at the shirt, then at OWNER, her expression confused and disconsolate. She doesn't understand what has happened, but she knows that something has gone wrong, that the other woman no longer sees her as someone who could be her own family. Slowly, she takes a step back.

Well, have a good day.

She bows. OWNER only gives a shallow nod and turns away, walking quickly off the stage as PAST MEI stares after her and slowly exits in the other direction.

MEI

(Too breezily, trying to brush it off as a mistake)

Well, I mean, that part wasn't meant to be shown—I mean to say, you weren't supposed to see that part—not that I'm trying to hide anything, I just didn't want you to get the wrong idea, is all.

(Her face lights up suddenly, and she speaks almost too fast to be understood in an attempt to resolve the misunderstanding.)

It doesn't look right, see... it puts her in a bad light. You didn't get the whole story, so I don't want you to make judgments without knowing the whole story. You probably thought she was sort of—callous, at the end, but she wasn't really, it just looked like that. She was very kind to me. Like I said, she asked after my family and all that. Like she was my friend. Even though we were strangers!

(She pauses.)

I mean, maybe the last part when she walked away—when she looked at me like that...

MEI stops for a moment and looks into the distance, remembering, and for just a second her expression contorts into something that we haven't seen from her yet, something that comes and goes too quickly to identify.

MEI (CONT'D)

When she looked at me like that, that part might have made her seem a little... cold... and maybe it might have looked like she did it because—because I said I was Chinese American.

(A laugh, forced)

It's easy to think that! You might be thinking that. It's a silly—I mean, simple—mistake to make, so you don't have to feel bad about it. But that wasn't it at all. No, not at all... what it really was... I've been thinking about it, and I know that what it really was was that I was being rude, terribly rude. I was standing in front of her store, talking to her, holding her shirt, and I wasn't even going to buy it...

(Another forced laugh)

I was laughing at it, actually! "IT IS ONLY OF RELATIVE FUNNY"—

MEI stops, the phrase from the shirt suddenly striking her very differently, and quickly returns to her point.

MEI (CONT'D)

What I'm saying is, it was me that was very rude and she was right to call me out on it like that.

(A shadow passes over her face, and she looks longingly out at the audience)

But she was talking to me like I knew her and she knew me, like we were friends. Like I was on the same team or something, in on the same secrets and— and dreams. I never could find anyone like that. No one but Ara, anyway...

She shakes her head abruptly, as if just realizing what she has said, and it is something that she had not meant to say.

MEI (CONT'D)

And at any rate even if she acted a little funny after I told her I was Chinese American—I mean, even if something happened...

She stops. She stands up from her stool for the first time, and slowly starts to walk across the stage and back again.

MEI (CONT'D)

Even if something funny happened...

(Walking faster, back and forth)

Something funny happened, maybe, with the shirts, and something funny might have happened before too, in the restaurant... But they were very nice. Everyone is very nice in Korea, and they give many compliments. Yes.

She stops for a moment and nods, decisively, before she resumes walking, quite fast now.

MEI (CONT'D)

Yes, they all gave very nice compliments—Ara and her parents used to give very nice compliments too—except they used to compliment my grades or my shoes. I guess it's different because I'm grown up now. Or maybe they just give different compliments when you're in Korea.

(She pauses.)

Gosh, I wish Ara were with me now. She'd be able to tell me which one it is. She grew up in America with me but she came to Korea all the time. She was very Korean. She was my best friend. She'd know. I wonder where she is now, Ara—old Ara and her parents. I haven't seen her in such a long time. Gosh, I miss Ara and her parents. When we were growing up, she didn't care that I—not like the kids at school, or my cousins in China—I couldn't speak to my cousins in China—I couldn't speak Chinese well enough—they'd make fun of me—God, I miss Ara and her parents.

MEI is almost crying now, walking back and forth very, very fast, blindly.

MEI (CONT'D)

I thought—I think maybe I thought—maybe that they'd be here... or that everyone here would be like them...

(Shaking her head again, she dashes her hand across her eyes to drive the tears back, speaking firmly to herself.)

Everyone here is very nice. Very nice. Very—

(Shaking her head)

I bet you if Ara were here... if it were Ara and not me... I bet you Ara still gets compliments on her grades and her shoes and not her teeth... she has nice teeth but I bet they don't say—I bet they don't say things like that about her teeth... Maybe her eyes, when we were kids... maybe that's why she was my friend, because we both had the eyes—the snake eyes.

She turns to face the audience and pauses for a moment to demonstrate, pulling out her eyes by the corners into slits as she did before. This time her face is twisted from trying to maintain a smile that has grown almost grotesque with the effort, and it is no longer even remotely funny.

MEI (CONT'D)

She never cared about that. She always complimented me on other things. Not like this though. Not like this. I bet you it's me. It's my fault—everyone here would like me if it weren't for me... I can never find anywhere that's enough like... like home... like a home. I thought when I came here that maybe—that Ara and her parents, maybe—but it's been so long, and I don't know where—oh, God!

MEI covers her face with her hands and though the audience can't see behind them it's clear that she's crying, or about to cry.

MEI (CONT'D)

I thought Korea would be different. I thought everyone would have the eyes, so no one would care. I thought I understood it from Ara and her parents—I thought I could speak the language well enough—I knew it couldn't be worse than Chinese... I never could speak Chinese, I never could understand anyone in China. I thought in Korea they would understand—God, I thought they would understand me!

(In a soft, faltering voice, still crying behind her hands)

I thought they would understand me... I thought where I was from wouldn't matter anymore... I thought it would be enough.

(Returning to sit back on the stool, her hands still over her face, still crying quietly)

I thought—I thought...

OLD WOMAN enters from the other side of the stage. She's only on a walk or an errand, but she sees MEI and approaches her, concerned.

OLD WOMAN

Abnyeong [bello (informal)], are you all right?

MEI looks up slowly, her hands lowering from her face. When she sees OLD WOMAN, MEI's expression changes. She looks apprehensive, afraid, unsure. MEI shakes her head.

OLD WOMAN

What's wrong? Are you hurt?

Again, MEI shakes her head.

OLD WOMAN

Do you need help? I could call someone... Do you want to go back home? Where do you live?

MEI

(Hoarsely, and without feeling.)

In the hostel, up the hill.

OLD WOMAN

The hostel?

(Looking at MEI more closely)

You're not from here?

There is a pause, during which OLD WOMAN appraises MEI again, like the others did before. MEI opens her mouth, rather tiredly, but abruptly stops herself from saying whatever she had meant to say. She looks up in the direction of the hostel and back, her gaze suddenly very heavy and resigned—we see that she's made a decision, and when she opens her mouth again she speaks quietly but resolutely.

MEI

No, I am... I am. I'm just going to be moving, that's all. I needed a place to stay, and my parents are too far away now. I am—from here. Korea.

OLD WOMAN

(Smiling)

Oh, okay. Well, I'll help you back then. It's not far.

She takes MEI's arm and helps her off the stool, and slowly they start to make their way across the stage, the OLD WOMAN hobbling slightly. She's speaking to MEI about something, animated and smiling, though we hear

nothing. MEI matches pace beside her, nodding and smiling back, but her nods and smiles seem absent and distracted, and it's impossible to tell what lies beneath them. Just before they cross into the shadows at the edge, MEI looks back at the audience and the stool—her gaze lingers for a moment, and then she turns away, leading the OLD WOMAN off the stage and into darkness.

END OF PLAY.

MADDY DIETZ

Short Story | Interlochen Arts Academy, Interlochen, MI

Stone Ruth

I scream my throat raw—it turns out yelling makes me like a cherry pie, all warm and red and synonymous with crackling July fireworks—and Jude rows us back to shore.

My hand brushes back and forth over the scrape of boat-dirt on the knee of her jeans. I do my best to stop myself from stopping the crying. Which feels weird. And good, all through me. I suppose I'm supposed to feel guilty by now.

Jude tells them where Tommy is, her voice clipped.

She can't cry. She whispers that to me apologetically; I hide her face against my shoulder, she pets my back. Someone gives us each a shock blanket despite the late-July heat.

An ambulance arrives with enough flash and noise for me to keep crying. When they try to separate us to ask questions, I shriek and shake and go limp to the forest floor, collecting leaf-bits on my shirt. I don't actually know if I'm playing pretend. Jude holds onto me tighter then, only letting go to adjust my new baseball cap. Making sure people know it's my hat now. Both movements are challenges for someone to try that again, and I like that. I like that the color of my new hat suits me. I like that the medics ask us questions together now, and I like that the counselors let me stay in Jude's cabin for the night, and the next night, and the next, whittling down the scant days left of camp. Soon we'll see our parents again. Maybe they'll take one look at us and know we reconstructed ourselves entirely, maybe they won't notice any difference at all.

When I can't sleep because I'm thinking about the weeks before this, turning each day over in my head, checking for corrupted images and static in the corners, Jude presses her chapped lips to my neck, no teeth and no bite, and murmurs facts there for me to hold onto. "In an interview, Ruth Stone said that she wrote poems backwards, sometimes. Same wording only turned as she grabbed the work by the end and pulled it back to her. Sedimentary stones are formed when the earth settles down to rest, and igneous stones are formed when the burning dies down, and metamorphic stones can be anything at all."

From here we can pick out the lapping of the lake, over the worn-smooth rocky shore.

Jude's hands are warm, even underwater. She has both wrapped around my wrists, not to hold me inside out but to help, and isn't that beautiful? Her face is creased with intent and fury and she is the handsomest savior-who-helps-me-save I could ever imagine.

Tommy's mouth is stuck in an ugly egg shape as he flails under my hands and the waterline, nails plunking uselessly against our sturdy metal boat. In this moment the world is overwhelmingly beautiful: the lake and its putrescence, Tommy's eyes wide open, Jude helping me push him down, Jude.

Drowning doesn't look the way people expect. He can't even yell, which feels ironic. Every part of him is so dead set on coughing out water that he can't get sound out, just like how five weeks ago my body was so dead set on freezing that I couldn't yell either. His arms are so weak now. Kitten soft. Jude's arms are squeezed strong around mine.

His eyes are open under the water, snow globes, all glass and hollow. I wonder if I looked like that. I press the sharp of my knuckle into the wound on the back of Tommy's head, watch him garble slow and slower.

We hold him down another five minutes after he's gone limp, in case he's pretending. That stupid baseball cap of his floats nearby; Jude grabs it out of the water and rips off the fabric logo of Tommy's favorite whatever-

team. She crowns my head with the hat like victory. Water runs down my ears and nose in a new, clean shower. We push Tommy away from the boat. Did you know that human bodies float when relaxed? I think it's the air still stuck in their lungs. Between tooth and meat and spit.

Jude is still panting with exertion, and my hands still ache from the reverberations, but we wrap around each other anyway. Even the buzz of the insects steadies into something resembling quiet.

"We've gotta make it look like an accident," Jude murmurs, chin tucked firmly against my neck. I breathe, I nod, I'm alive enough to do all these beautiful things.

"He dived out of the boat himself," I whisper, careful not to disturb the air. "We think he was trying to show off or scare us or something, but then he just didn't come back up. Until he floated. Shallow water here."

Jude nods against me. Those oakwood hands cradle my own hands-that-killed so very gently. "We should look upset about it. We should yell."

My hair is plastered with dead-boy lake water and I can scream bloody murder if I want to, and I do.

Water sounds like a city talking among itself, and Tommy clunking one foot into our boat sounds like gunshots scattering the crowd. He grins. Says, "Lucky day. I've got two."

He pushes us away from shore and waves, cheery, back at the counselors before sitting down next to me. Jude isn't breathing, I think. Tommy takes the oars from her to row us out. I, now mechanical, finish tying the nylon rope to the shore rock anchor. When Tommy's near me and I'm forced to think about him, or when my brain decides to do without my input, my head gets all fuzzy. Makes it hard to read, hard to think in neat lines. There's this cloying at my stomach like I'm a kid who ate pounds of sticky jam, I can feel my smarts dripping out of my ears through a bendy straw. Makes it hard to speak. Being around Jude makes it hard to speak too, but it's different, with her. I thought I was gonna get to bask in good-different today.

Tommy stops rowing once he's found a secluded spot and sighs, content. My hands start tugging up at my shirt without my input, which is good, because the further I can cast my brain out into the murk of water, the better. Jude still isn't breathing.

"It's not your turn yet." When I'm kept dumb like this, all cotton-in-the-head, Tommy talks like I'm a kid running with scissors and he's a doctor looking for work. He stands despite the boat teetering in protest, beaming. "First I want to see how much Jude remembers me."

She makes this noise. It's like hearing someone crack their skull open; that sudden empathetic wrenching of the stomach. Forget fuzzy; my head's an air raid siren now, clear and piercing and still unable to figure out what the fuck to do.

He turns to Jude, still grinning, and my without-input hands grab onto the stone anchor. I bring it down on the back of Tommy's head; it jars my wrists but he topples. Clunk-clunk against the side of the boat and the garbled cry of something still alive. Jude leaps up before I even process what I've done. The realization, long moments later, doesn't stop me from plunging my hands into the water alongside Jude.

I wonder if ants, when they're all plunking along in a line, are spooked by the sheer number of identical twins following them. I'm standing in my neon camp shirt and my mud-sneakers with three dozen other matching kids behind me, and the only difference is I have hold of the pay phone for a minute.

Jude is somewhere twenty kids away; I miss her in my ribs. My hands hurt from gripping the hand-sanitizer-thirsty plastic receiver. I want to go float in the lake but, for legal reasons, we don't get to go out in a rowboat until after we've all had swimming certifications done. Never mind that me and Jude have been dunking our heads in the lake for two weeks now. Mom's telling me about all the bad weather I'm missing and how bad weather is just a sign of the times, but not necessarily one's own times.

"Can you get dad?" and just the choice, the I'm-gonna-tell sick of it. I feel it on the very back of my tongue, like steaming bile is trying its damndest to push past the hula hoop I've got stuck in my throat.

"Oh, hold on," says my mother, whose voice goes high and thin when she's scared for me. It's low, warm molasses right now. I don't want that to change.

Sometimes when I'm scared, I can hear my blood. The pink noise of it through my ears makes it hard to hear my mom calling my dad's name, the middle-aged grumbling as they turn the speakerphone on. My polyester shirt's pricking at my back in protest of the new sweat.

There's a crackle as my dad speaks too close to the phone: "How's it going over there, chipmunk?" When he's worried, my dad's voice turns into an iron to make the edges of his phrases steam-pressed. I miss Jude. Her voice is always just a voice.

The other side of the line is quiet. Good listeners. I say, "The first week of camp, something." Full stop. "Happened."

Someone leans against the side of the telephone booth and I look away, apologetic on instinct, until the someone clears their throat.

My voice warbles when I'm scared. It pitches and tips and rushes, so the moment I peek up and see Tommy grinning through the glass with his stupid baseball cap pulled low over his eyes, my voice trips hard. "I realized I missed you guys a ton like a lot and I wanna come home now please."

Tommy likes grinning at me, and maybe it's because he likes reminding me that those straight teeth have been in my neck. Many girl-necks. He told me of his past conquests, like bragging, like see-how-I-get-away-every-time.

Blood is deafening when it wants to be, but sometimes I wish it screamed. I can barely hear my dad,

"Way to expand your comfort zone! Make some connections! We'll send you back next year, you'll feel so much more at home."

My mom, chirping,

"Well, one door closes and another opens, but don't worry about doors in the forest! You know what helps with separation anxiety? Bodies of water."

I hang up first with scant goodbyes. I try to flee, and Tommy grabs my arm. If I were a lizard I could shed this bitten limb and Tommy would hopefully be satiated with owning one-fifth of me for himself. I'm not a lizard, but my blood feels cold in the shade next to him, and colder when he leans down. I wonder if he does it slowly because he knows that hurts more.

I can spell 'tipping point,' but not now. I wonder if it's physically possible to scream while being kissed by a killing creature in a baseball cap.

Weird how much things change in a week when you're a stupid teenager in a hellhole full of other stupid teenagers. My head feels cracked open. Guess I was clenching my jaw? My body feels like static, so I can't tell.

Seven days ago, the shiny first day of camp, I was all worry-blistered about the big circle of us saying names and grades. And trying to ignore how, like, this guy kept looking at me. He didn't even tip his baseball cap down to hide it. And I thought, maybe he likes me? My mom practically says everyone on earth likes me, which is how I know she lies a lot. He said his name was Tommy.

I still feel watched, even if I can't be, 'cause no one uses the bathrooms after midnight. I've got privacy to look through my own pupils and try to figure out if my face looks any different now. Like, that's it. Last remains of girl all gone.

But I still feel something physical under skin, between joints. The worst thing is that I smell like Tommy, now. Girl sweat and boy sweat always smell different. If I asked my biology teacher about it she'd probably say something about hormones and Axe body spray. And I guess

it's a generalization, saying boys and girls smell different. But I smell like him, like boy-rot and the nose-itch of stale bodies, and under that I smell like when I was eight and broke a bone for the first time. Not the blood smell. Not the coppery taste, adrenaline, maybe. That's all there, but the shock of panic-sweat is filling me up like I'm the worst plush bunny in the world.

When Tommy first talked to me, I told him I also sometimes accidentally stared, and he told me that if he was dictator of the world things would be better and did I even take World War II history and Brave New World is his favorite book that he's never read. And I realized, oh. Oh, you're not like me at all. You're not trudging through teenage brain-gunk to get through the day, you're piling it up into a throne and pretending you're Him with a capital H. I didn't walk away, though. I'm really too polite sometimes.

I look like shit. But I don't look changed.

On the first day there was this girl.

She wasn't looking at me, and besides, it's different when girls look. Feels like being seen instead of eaten up. Feels like looking. But no, she was all ugly red splotches and grimace directed towards Tommy. It made and makes something quiet in me bubble up against my rib cage.

My mom always says, to grin is to ask how someone's doing without all the bother of words. On the first day, I said my name in automatic rhythm and the girl's eyes flicked over to mine with the rage of something hunted and I smiled at her as carefully as I could.

My reflection seems to react quicker than I do; is that weird? But it looks up, through the mirror to the bathroom door behind me, so I do too.

The girl walks in like guilt, carrying a gallon-sized ziplock bag of shower stuff. Soap and shampoo and everything my skin feels like it needs right now. She's like a bug, sort of; more scared of me than I am of her.

"Sorry," she says, and I'm shaking my head before I realize how weird this looks: me, looking at her through a mirror, bobbling about. "Sorry."

"No, it's okay. I'm just here." It feels like a lie? Like the way that lies feel, the skin-deep pull of shame, or maybe that's how I have to exist from here on out. I clear my throat at the yellowing sink.

I'm waiting for the hiss of shower water to serve as audio cover so I can sneak back out into the night and pick a direction to walk and keep walking until I reach whatever historical figures thought was the edge of the world and walk off of that like one of those cartoon characters that doesn't really fall until they look down. The shower doesn't turn on. And it's all quiet, like even the cicadas don't know what to say. So I look back, and the girl is seething.

"It was Tommy, wasn't it." Not a question. Maybe a threat, and I'm somehow more aware of the weird marks on my neck, like I've stolen half a jewelry store and had an allergic reaction to it. He mostly just bit. Technically fingers were involved, and technically my bra was pushed up around my collarbones, but mostly it was biting. And promises of more later, which scared me worse than all the physical stuff combined. Maybe she's Tommy's girlfriend? Maybe that makes me a terrible person accidentally? I think almost-sixteen's a little young to be a home-wrecker but—"Are you okay?" she adds, a rip in her voice, like she means it. "Dumb question. Jesus."

And I open my mouth to say something normal like, "I don't know what you're talking about," or "please let me steal your soap, I wanna smell like strawberries so bad," but I bleat more than anything. Just one syllable of sound, and I start blinking as fast as the tiny muscles around my eyes will allow. I had them shut so tight for so long that they feel achy.

"Jesus," the girl says, and drops the plastic bag. She steps near me but doesn't quite touch me, she doesn't pull me into a hug or tug me into a shower stall to hose the boy-smell off of me or anything, and maybe that's good? I have to be the one to crumple against her. Her palms are warm and steady against my shoulder blades, and I squirm because I thought comfort would feel like relief, like you-can-wake-up-now. Of course it doesn't.

"I've got you," she says, and that's what Tommy said when he first kissed me and I, drunk with attention and summer, smiled all confused. He'd said things I thought only supervillains and presidents could.

There was also the fact that he got his boxers down after a while. And the fact that his fingers burned, which made his whole motive feel

like pouring salt on a slug. I'm the slug, of course. I wanna puke. Not that I will, or can, but that I want to so much that I have to hang onto the girl's shirt even tighter. "I've got you, s'okay. I know how apocalyptic this all feels. Gonna talk, you just listen. All you've gotta do is listen and breathe. Um. Ravens can be taught how to talk. That stuff that looks like clover near all the cabins is edible, actually, and it tastes a bit like lemon. Called 'wood sorrel.'"

Her words make me settle back into my own skin, just a little. I still feel like dry heaving, but I can see the label of her shampoo over her shoulder, through the crumpled ziplock bag. Strawberry. Pink as day.

"C'mon, we're going to walk a little."

Still hanging on, still alternately too tense and too fatigued to stay upright, I shuffle my feet beside hers.

"Do you know how to swim?"

Dad likes to play these online shooter games where bad wifi means the character jumps forward meters at a time, clumsy, unsure of how the hell it got there. The walk to the lake feels the same; suddenly, the rocky beach, the gentle easing off of shoes, the wading chest-high into the water. We both still have our clothes on. She's carried out the plastic bag of shower supplies with her and, after I start pawing at the shampoo through the wet plastic, she starts unpacking it all to float around us. She spreads some pink gel onto her palms. She washes the sweat out of my hair even when I tip my face into the lake to cry without having to note the difference between salt and freshwater. The moment her hands leave my scalp I dunk the whole of me underwater.

The quiet is pressurized there. I hold onto the corner of her shirt under the murk and, miraculously, breathe.

JULIANA GABRIEL

Play or Script | Batavia High School, Batavia, IL

Prey

FADE IN:

INT. PET STORE - DAY

A teenage girl (JUNE) stands on a step ladder feeding fish in a large tank. She is wearing her work uniform - a blue polo and nametag. Her demeanor matches that of the betta, which swims lazily showing complete disinterest in the flakes that crop up on the water's surface. MILES (24) snaps her out of her reverie.

MILES
Hey...HEY, KID!

JUNE
Sorry, what?

MILES
I said I'm gonna go on break. You good out here by yourself?

JUNE
Ya, it's pretty dead anyways.

MILES
Alright. I'll be in the back if you need me.

Miles walks away, leaving June to resume her work. It is not long before a grizzled, middle-aged man walks in the store. He wanders around until he spots June.

CUSTOMER
Ma'am?

JUNE
What can I do for you?

June steps down off the ladder.

CUSTOMER
Y'all sell rabbits here? Didn't see any 'round the place but if I left without askin' and y'all did.
I- I'd feel like a real mooncalf.

He chuckles. June perks up at the mention of rabbits.

JUNE
We do. They're kinda in the back though, so I can see how you missed them. I'll show you, just give me a sec...

June puts the fish food away underneath a nearby sink.

CUSTOMER
Thank ya, ma'am.

JUNE
Oh, yeah. No problem.

She leads the customer to the rabbit cages.

JUNE (CONT'D)
You know I actually have a rabbit so I can help you with maintenance questions or anything like that. I've only had mine for like two months so I'm not like an expert or anything but-

The Customer stares intently at the rabbits, examining them.

CUSTOMER
Do you know which one's the fastest?

JUNE
Oh, um. I don't really know. Do you mean out of the rabbits we have or all breeds?

CUSTOMER

Outta these.

JUNE

Ya, they mostly stay in that little cage all day- sleeping or whatever, so I don't really know.
Sorry.

He points to one of the rabbits in a cage.

CUSTOMER

Can I get a better look at this one?

JUNE

Yeah, sure.

June takes a KEYRING out of her back pocket, opens the cage, and picks up the RABBIT. She sets her keys on top of the cage.

JUNE

Do you wanna hold him?

CUSTOMER

Oh, alright. Uh..

She transfers the rabbit over to the customer. For a moment, the rabbit and June lock eyes. It stares at June- shaking, petrified.

JUNE

Here you go.

He inspects the rabbit further- checking the pads of its feet and lifting up its ears.

CUSTOMER

I think Molly'll like this one.

JUNE

Oh, is Molly your daughter?

CUSTOMER

Naw, my basset.

He takes out a beaten-up, leather wallet, and opens it to reveal a portrait of a basset hound.

CUSTOMER (CONT'D)

Yep, that's my pride and joy right there. She's a looker, huh?

He returns his wallet to his back pocket.

CUSTOMER (CONT'D)

And she ain't some woosy eating kibble out'a bowl neither. Least we know where this feed comin' from rather than that processed bullshit.

JUNE

Sorry, I don't think I'm understanding.

June grins nervously.

CUSTOMER

You're gonna let me buy it still, right? Got the money no problem and it's really all natural, predator prey, circle of life crap anyhow... I'm only askin' 'cause I tried 'xplainin' this to this lady at the PET DEPOT in St. Albion and this young fellow down in Campton, but those too just stared at me like they didn't know whether to check their ass or scratch their watch.

The customer laughs at his own joke. June does not.

JUNE

Oh, um ok. Sure? Yeah, sure.

CUSTOMER

'ventually my goal is to breed 'em all myself, you see. It'll cost me less in the long run that way.

JUNE

I have to go get, um, a-a carrier from the back and I'll be right back to ring him up for you.

June hurries through double doors labeled "EMPLOYEES ONLY."

CUSTOMER

Look at those hind legs. This one 'ill give good chase. It's good for the girl to be challenged every once in a while... (to himself)

The customer stands alone, still clutching the trembling rabbit, stroking it.

INT. PET STORE BACKROOM- DAY

A narrow and bleak storage room. Boxes. Garbage. Exposed Pipe. Two lawn chairs sit on either side of a folding table. Miles is sitting in one of them. He's smoking a joint, using an empty dog food bowl as an ashtray. June paces back and forth. They are in mid-conversation.

JUNE

I think it's against the law. It feels like it should be if it isn't. Right?

MILES

Laws are simply a way for the man to keep us down, kid, for the deep state to control us. I told you about the fluoride, right?

JUNE

Yeah, yeah cause communist China's weakening America one tooth at a time.

MILES

Keep laughing. You're on the wrong side of history, my friend.

JUNE

How do you always find a way to make everything about your insane theories? He's out there waiting for me. Why did I think it would be a good idea to ask you for advice?

MILES

How's he holding it?

JUNE

The rabbit? I-I don't know, normal, petting it. What did you think, he'd have it in a choke hold or something?

MILES

I don't know! Geez, you're so, like, *on edge* today... Why are we even arguing about this? Tell him you found out that it was against store policy to sell rabbits to perverts and that's that.

JUNE

Should I?

MILES

I mean, probably not the pervert part, but yeah. You know that I couldn't care less either way, but if you feel that strongly about it. What do you think he'll do if you say no, you'll get fed to the dog too?

JUNE

I don't know. If I say no, he's gonna go to another store and another until someone eventually says yes, so what's the point of saying no? It's either going to be me or someone else.

MILES

I guess.

JUNE

How do I keep finding myself in scenarios like this?

MILES

This seems like a real unique situation, kid. If you have been in a lot of situations like this, Pet Depot has a much different clientele than I thought it did.

JUNE

No, that's not what I mean. Like, have you ever read one of those choose your own adventure books?

Miles nods.

JUNE (CONT'D)

They give you these questions at the beginning that don't change the outcome. They're just there to create this illusion of choice and either decision you make you still end up getting hit in the head by a coconut or whatever and dying. And I can't help but see my life as this series of pointless decisions that feel like they should add up to something or make a difference, but they don't.

MILES

Are you sure you're not getting a contact high right now, that was some deep shit?

JUNE

No, ugh, I don't know. I feel fine. I've just been thinking about a lot of dark stuff recently.

MILES

Why? Like what?

JUNE

I'm finishing up high school and everyone's making these plans for the future, figuring out what college they're going to, what job they're gonna have, what the rest of their life's going to look like, but I haven't decided any of that yet. People keep telling me I have all this time because I could always transfer or change my major or whatever but I still feel this weight of these infinite

possibilities of what my life could look like and it excites me, and it terrifies me, but then something changes and I just end up staring at myself in the mirror at 2 am asking "What's the point? What's the point when whatever choice I make I'm gonna end up miserable?" And in that moment I accept that *maybe* that's who I am. A person destined to be miserable no matter the choices I make "right" decisions, or even making one at all?

MILES

Fuck me... Are you sure you don't wanna hit? You seem tense.

JUNE

So, first I sound high and now I sound too sober.

MILES

You know I was like you 'til I started smoking, completely changed my outlook-

JUNE

Weed is like religion. The people who are really into it won't shut up about how much it changed their life and the people who are casually into it just use it to sleep at night.

MILES

That's good, kid. That's good.

Miles laughs lethargically. June pops her head out of the backroom to check on the customer. Nothing has changed.

JUNE

He's still out there. I almost expected him to have disappeared. Like I made it up or dreamt it or something.

MILES

A rabbit does not a magician make.

June sits down on the chair opposite Miles.

JUNE

Hey, this is kind of a strange question, but have you ever heard of biological determinism?

MILES

What is that, some kinda religious shit? Cause you know I'm not into organized religion. I'm not about to voluntarily brainwash myself with that Jesuit, Zionist propaganda. No way... No offense or whatever if you're into all that.

JUNE

No. No. It is this theory I learned about in Sociology that some people believe that in the first six months you become who you're going to be because of your environment and genetics and stuff. So like, if you're an asshole kid, you're gonna be an asshole adult. And it's not even really your fault, cause you were born into those circumstances.

MILES

That's why I like you, kid. You've accepted it. Life's a blackjack table. Sometimes you get dealt shitty cards and all you can do is try to play the best hand you got. People like us- we don't make plans, follow dreams, because we are smart enough to know we're not the ones pulling the strings.

JUNE

That's what I'm saying, like, maybe rabbit guy out there can't help that he's a creep who gets off on letting his dog murder domesticated rabbits because his uncle touched him or something. Who am I to judge if that's right or wrong? Who is moral or amoral? And- And it's not even my fault what he does with the rabbit once he leaves this store, anyway. If he never told me I wouldn't have known and I would have just sold it to him without a second thought. So that's what I should do. I'll ring it all up and pretend like he never told me... Yeah. And now that I'm really thinking about it, like about how forthcoming he was with his motives, maybe it's some kinda weird twisted joke or prank or something. Yeah, that would make sense. Right?

MILES

Yeah, maybe.

JUNE

Ok Ok.

June stands up and pulls a carrier off of the shelf in the back. She takes a deep breath, then boldly steps through the doorway.

INT. PET STORE - DAY

Junes walks over to the cages. Her jaw drops. The carrier in her hands falls to the ground with a BANG. The keyring sits where she left it: on top of the cage.

Every enclosure door is now wide open. The customer is gone and so is every single one of the rabbits.

FADE OUT:

THE END

SAMUEL GETACHEW

Creative Nonfiction | Oakland Technical High School, Oakland, CA

Loud

I still cringe when my father speaks in public. When I was younger, I didn't really know why. I just knew that he was attracting attention, and not the kind I wanted.

Ethiopians are, for lack of a better word, loud. They walk noisily, heavily, like there is no consequence for their movement. When we all lived together, I remember being able to tell whether the footsteps I heard from bed were my father's or my mother's because my father's would send deep vibrations through the house. I have inherited his sneeze. When we sneeze, windows rattle, everyone within earshot jumps, and the ground shakes. Over time I learned how to anticipate sneezes and hold them in, sometimes make them quieter, but if one catches me by surprise, I still make heads turn and ears throb. When my father and uncles and godfather talk on the phone, they bellow as if they are trying to be heard from afar without the use of the phone at all. When I was younger, I would sit in the backseat of the car trying to slouch so I wouldn't be seen as my father would roll down the window when he got a phone call, seemingly to involve the entire vicinity in his conversation.

Back-to-school nights, soccer games, cross country meets, and every single other possible setting in which my father might interact with my friends or their parents sent me into unnerved panics. I would avoid bringing him whenever I could, ensure that I went to my friends' houses and never the reverse, and pretend to forget to tell him about my meets or games. It wasn't just because of the volume - we already didn't see eye to eye on a myriad of topics and the appropriate inflection of public conversation was not the most dire issue nor the most contentious. At that point I didn't want him to be present during those events. But my anxiety about his interactions with people I cared about would continue to build and build until we had an unspoken mutual understanding that my life outside of home was not for him to participate in, and vice versa.

Still worse than the volume was his accent. Even after 20 years in Oakland, after which my mother spoke almost without a trace of Ethiopia in her voice, my father's thick mispronunciations and harsh inability to make "th" sounds did not relent. I still feel shame sometimes when I resent his accent. It seems to serve as proof that no matter how hard I try not to, I have permanently internalized everything I have been told it means.

During the recession, my father could not find a job. Despite a decade's worth of post-secondary education and more degrees and certifications than I can count, no one would hire him. Regardless of his other failings, he is really good at financial analytics. *Really* good. His resumé would get him as far as it could, and every time, the sound of his accent in an interview would blow it all to pieces. I know that my father is not stupid. He is one of the smartest people I know. He knows he is not stupid. But for the few years when he had to spend all day and all night driving a limo, taking richer, whiter people without his qualifications but with his dream job to and from the airport, it was hard not to feel like there must be some other cause for his abysmal luck. When the economy stabilized he was able to find a secure job doing what he was good at for the salary he deserved. Now, so many years later, it's hard to believe that the man that routinely produces the best results in the office was reduced to driving limos.

When I feel my cheeks burn and throat itch when I hear his accent in public, I feel like I am reducing him to that limo driver again. Not because driving isn't honest work - it is - but because it is the position he was forced into. When I feel that shame, I am forcing him into a position of inferiority in my mind that he does not belong in. When he speaks, yes, he speaks loudly. He speaks with his accent. He speaks in the way

that feels natural to him. In my better moments I admire his refusal to carefully restrict his words and roll his vowels tightly, his refusal to let his tongue forget Ethiopia every time he speaks the language of the country that is not his home. In the moments where I forget to be ashamed, I admire his volume. It takes most people their whole lives to stop being afraid to speak loudly.

I wrote my first poem at the age of 9 or 10, on the back of an index card in class when I should have been paying attention. My fifth grade teacher asked me a question, knowing my mind was elsewhere, and I swept the card to the ground in a rush to get the right paper out. Later that day, at recess, a boy I vaguely knew brought the index card to me and told me that what I had written was really good. That was the first time I realized I had something to say that was worth listening to, that merited praise not from my mother or the occasional doting schoolteacher but from someone whose opinion mattered a great deal more to me - a peer. I performed the poem for a school competition, and won, and continued to write. I would like to believe that everyone has an innate talent, and some of us are simply more fortunate in our access to opportunities to discover ours. I performed that poem for the first time at the age of ten - four years later I was performing on stages for thousands. Public speaking is ranked the number one fear among Americans. Sometimes I wonder why I rarely fear speaking in front of large groups of people - why I have not been afraid to be loud.

Despite my and my mother's perpetual admonishments and pleas *to please be just a little quieter*, my father never altered the way he spoke. To this day I don't know if it ever even occurred to him to try; I think perhaps what I thought was his courage was simply an absence of fear. I think perhaps I have inherited it.

But the same man who unintentionally gifted me with the technical ability to pursue this passion was also my biggest adversary in doing so. In his eyes, poetry (like all the arts), is an illegitimate career path; a money drain at worst and an unfortunate hobby selection at best. My father looked down upon my increasingly time-consuming new pursuit at first with a quiet and disapproving faith that I would quit on my own, and later with open disdain. *When are you going to find a real hobby and stop writing shit that's never gonna change your life?* In my better moments I see this as practicality above all else, a natural product of an impoverished upbringing. In other moments I bypass rationality and jump straight to furious resentment.

Once when I was maybe 9 or 10, my father dropped a friend and I off at his house. Within minutes of exiting his car, my friend turned to me and asked, "When does your dad plan on learning English?" I did not know how to answer. My father, like most Ethiopian children, had learned English in school between the ages of 8 and 12, and despite his accent often used vocabulary words I didn't know. I did not know how to answer, and so I said nothing. I am guilty to this day for my silence. Here I was, with the gift of untainted speech, with my unquestionably unaccented English, lacking the courage to defend my father. Lacking the courage to be loud. But in my most shameful moments, driven by our contention and disagreements, I find a guilty pleasure in the way his tongue always manages to betray him. I am paradoxically disgusted by the same xenophobic close-mindedness that I find myself participating in. In my most shameful moments, the only courage I lack is that which would allow me to confront him, to verbalize the foundations for the walls I put up between us. In my most shameful moments the only such courage I can muster is in the very poems he disdains.

I am my most natural, unrestrained self in performance; I find calm there. I trust a microphone in a room full of snapping strangers more than I trust my parents, or my best friends, or any god. I trust my notebook more than I trust myself. I will write poems about my relationship with my father and read them at an open mic before I ever face that conversation with him - I've done so more than once. This manifests itself in every form of storytelling and speech. I have been talkative since I learned to form words 6 months after birth. My friends always make me tell the story of what happened on the last adventure to the one boy who wasn't there, because I find ways to tell stories so immersive that in six months he won't remember if it was a memory or a retelling. None of this carries fear or nervousness for me; it comes as easily as breathing. I was born to speak. I was born to tell stories, to communicate. I am my father's son in all but one way - my inability to use my voice with him.

All art, all speech, all poetry is communication. I am too much of a cynic to claim that the world would be a better place with more of it, but even at my most cynical I cannot deny that the world would be a more empathetic and informed one. We all have something to say; but often we are too timid to say it, and despite my poems I am no exception. I have no issue using my voice to challenge any power except one.

I am already loud - but one day, I hope to fully live up to the shameless volume of my father.

ZOE GOLDSTEIN

Short Story | Newton North High School, Newtonville, MA

The Maple Tree

We learned how the sticky parts of the helicopter seeds stuck to our noses perfectly, like tiny green wings.

We learned how it was best to roll down the grassy slope three times in a row so that when we stood up the field spun and turned as if we were seeing it from upside down.

We learned how to make an acorn circle in the dust near the sandbox, inside of which we left gifts: the crusts of our peanut butter sandwiches, scented erasers, shiny rocks.

We learned that if we sat in the crook of two low branches in the maple tree outside the kindergarten classroom and were still for long enough, we could feel the tree moving slightly beneath us, in the same way our chests rose and fell with breath. And if we waited even longer, the birds we'd scared off would return to the tree, and sing. Of course, if the recess monitor noticed us up there during recess with our legs dangling down, our skirts blowing in the wind, and our dirty fingers in our mouths, she would blow her whistle and we'd have to shimmy down to earth. She said it was indecent to sit like that, and anyway we would hurt ourselves, pointing at our scabby knees and scraped-up palms. But we felt right that way, as if we were peeling away our outside bark to reveal the sapwood beneath.

We learned all that before grade three. Our lives then were simple and full. When we were inside, in class or at dinnertime, we listened to adults telling us about triangles and wiping dirt off our faces. When we were outside, we were ferocious beasts who dug in the mud and yelled loudly and sometimes bit when the first graders squashed the tall grasses we were hiding in. That is to say, we were ourselves.

But the summer before third grade changed everything. Our bodies lengthened in new ways, we were allowed to bike around the neighborhood alone, and for the first time we were tall enough to reach the taller branches of our beloved maple tree, which beckoned us upwards.

The tree had a thick sturdy trunk with furrowed bark, and although it was located on the edge of the playground, its branches shaded the swing set and the monkey bars. In the fall, the kindergartners built fairy houses among its roots. In the spring, the teachers looped it with pastel ribbons for May Day. When all three of us wrapped our arms around the trunk and touched fingertips, we encircled it perfectly. Although the tree was popular, it was ours during recess, and we belonged to the tree. If anyone broached the edges of its shadow to peel pieces of bark or grab at its twigs, we hissed until they ran away.

That summer we found that if we stood on our tiptoes and tilted our heads back into the deep green shade of the tree, we could grab onto the branches that granted us access to its lofty heights. We swung ourselves up at the exact same time, then stood in the sky. We climbed higher, so that we could sit on a wide branch and watch the sun set golden over the field, like it was dousing the world in syrup. The tree sighed beneath us, and we pressed our toes into it.

On the way down we decided we had to leap to the ground together like we'd come up or else we'd be cursed, like when you smashed a mirror, or leaned your desk back to balance on one leg. We jumped, but it was higher going down than up and we hit the ground hard, falling into each other in a tangled mess.

Our parents drove us to the hospital and we got matching orange casts for our matching sprained right ankles. In the evening the nurses released us to our fathers, who were waiting in the hospital dining hall. We ate rice pudding out of styrofoam containers as they talked and pushed fallen pieces of chicken back into their sandwiches.

"Girls," they said, "You're in third grade now. It's time to learn to

behave. The world can be a dangerous place for little girls and we don't want you hurting yourselves. Do you understand?"

We didn't. All we had done was jump and hurt our ankles a little, and only our right ones at that, and the nurses had fixed us up. So we stirred our pudding and stared at the grainy tabletop.

They told us there were three new rules for the year: Behave yourselves, Be nice to others, and No climbing trees.

When our fathers asked us again if we understood, we spilled our rice pudding on the table and walked out of the cafeteria into the summer air. In the middle of the parking lot, our fathers grasped our arms and told us we wouldn't be allowed to see each other if we didn't follow the rules.

We decided to comply.

When school started after the swollen ankle summer, we tried to be good. It was the first recess of the year and we were supposed to be drawing, like the other perfect girls who sat on the concrete gripping their colored pencils. We sat criss-cross-applesauce on the blacktop nearby, fanning our pencils out in a rainbow like theirs, but they turned their backs on us, and we thought we heard them laugh.

It was only then that we noticed how with our legs crossed, our skirts didn't sit flat over our knees and instead tented to expose the darkness underneath. Indecent. We shifted our weight onto our heels, like the other girls, and pressed our knees together, shoe soles grinding into thigh flesh until it hurt. *It doesn't matter*, we murmured to each other. *They don't know what we know. They don't know what it feels like to climb higher than anyone else and stand above the world.* We whispered until our voices blended with the wild undercurrents of the wind. *They're just stupid girls, and they will grow into stupid women.*

We decided to draw pictures of each other, but they turned into pictures of the trees. Branches here. Curve of a nose there. Until the pages were just thick dark lines.

We tried so hard to be good. So hard we ached. We walked carefully on our legs even after the casts came off. We chewed with our mouths closed. We sat on our heels and admired the reddish webbed marks they left on our thighs. Clean as porcelain for a week, until we started edging towards the roots of the old maple tree. Every day we edged closer until we could prop our sketchbooks on its huge skeletal roots.

One night we had a sleepover because of our good behavior. We ate slices of pizza and ice cream cones. Once our parents went to bed we gathered our flashlights and sleeping bags and walked ten minutes to the maple on the playground. Its roots spread like veins.

As we laid our sleeping bags among the roots we learned something new: that our bodies perfectly fit the contours of the roots, which were better than a pillow. We slept on our stomachs with limbs askew. When the sun broke over the playground, we ran home and pretended to sleep late, our hearts pounding.

From then on, every night we crept out to the roots that held us in the same way we held each other after we fell from the tree and hurt our ankles, our bodies locking into each other until we couldn't tell whose arm this was or whose leg that was or whose tears were falling on whose skin. We slept so well and we were so cheerful that our parents began to think their plan had worked and we were not wild anymore.

But we were. Our hearts beat at the same pace as the murmuring leaves on the blacktop. We moved in step with the grasses. We discovered that if we brought fallen twigs into class with us so our hands could

explore their textures deep in our pockets, we could focus on subtraction until we were free again.

And then one morning we awoke with a strange tracery on our arms: faded brown lines traveling up from the crooks of our elbows to our biceps. Neither washcloths nor handfuls of leaves could erase them.

The following night, we nuzzled our heads against the bark before laying our sleeping bags down. To thank, or to query, or maybe just to be let inside. We felt something hot pushing at our arms and we saw tiny fibrous roots growing just beneath our skin. We didn't worry. We knew the world was safe and even if it scratched us we could still fall into its soft arms every night, like the storybook mothers those perfect girls on the playground would one day become. But not like that at all. Because we had found something better.

November came warm and sticky, so warm that by the afternoon, we could strip off the fleeces our mothers forced us to wear. At the fall assembly we sat with hands in leafy pockets as the principal told us about the fall play. The bake sale. The coat drive. The maple tree which was dangerously close to the roof of the school and would be chopped down at the end of the month.

We all came down with fevers the next week. In our sleep we screeched and ripped at the sheets. Our mothers tried to adjust our blankets but we pushed back their hands again and again, only letting them touch us when they handed us cups of ginger ale.

Our fevers were gone on Monday and we went back to school with orders to sneeze into our elbows. At recess it was cold for the first time that year, real November cold. We shivered in our sweaters. We noticed that the helicopter seeds had turned brown and crumbled into dust when we tried to pry them open to stick them on our noses.

At the far end of the playground there was a group of construction men putting yellow tape around the maple. We knew exactly what we shouldn't do, saw it clearly outlined in our heads. But we did it anyways. Maybe it was the pulsing heat of angry roots in our arms. (For a second the pressure was so intense it hurt, and for the first time, during that instant, we feared our bodies.) Or maybe it was just that no one had ever told us what to do instead.

We ran at them. We screamed. We ripped their uniforms and kicked their knees. They ignored us. They thought we were playing a game. They chuckled to themselves. When we tore apart the yellow tape, the recess monitor grabbed us by our collars, rolling her eyes. We howled like wolves. She told us to behave.

"The tree is hollow inside," she said, turning from us. "Bugs are eating it. Nothing you can do."

So the tree came down.

But we knew the tree wasn't hollow. There was only a little hole at its center. We had known it was there weeks ago, before the yellow tape, back on the night the roots had spread beneath our arms.

It would have healed, with time. It would have filled.

The rest of that year is hard to remember. The tree was chopped down, that is what I am sure of, and all that was left was a stump and fine wood shavings that blew around on the breeze until there were none left. The other kids played with those shavings, sprinkling them in their hair, stirring them into mud pies. Some of them drew pictures of the stump that the teachers laminated and hung up in the library. We didn't do any of that.

I can't say that I remember much, but I do know what did not fade: the marks on our arms. Spreading from our elbows to our shoulders. That faint brown tracery that sits as if just beneath our skin, waiting to break through.

These days I wear long sleeved blouses and pencil skirts. I put on silver jangling bracelets. I wash my face every morning and exfoliate the dead skin off in the evenings. Sometimes I think of those perfect girls on the blacktop and how they would cluster at the far edges of the maple tree, like they were waiting to be let in. Waiting to curl against the tree like us. And I mourn.

And I mourn.

And every year in the late summer that is almost fall, in that thick syrupy light we used to drink from atop the maple tree, I let my eyes catch on each tree I pass on the street, as if to find the match to my marks, the one that would break me open at last. And while I haven't talked to them in years, I know that the others are doing the same, somewhere far away, all our bodies aching for what is almost disappearing in the deep changing light.

HANNAH HAN

Short Story | Harvard-Westlake School, Studio City, CA

Moonless

They took you on a Thursday.

The family planning officials pulled up to our house in a white truck in the late afternoon. They wore heavy boots and strained faces, the skin pulled tight around their skulls like raw leather.

Everything moved slower that summer. The nights flooded with a thick, syrupy heat, the crickets sang muffled, tuneless harmonies in the fields, and over the radio, we heard crackly refrains of the same song—*“Our lives are beautiful. Love your country, have one child.”*

Baba stepped outside, his hands curled around the spokes of the gate. His mouth was moving. His words leaked out into the marshy dampness.

“This isn’t necessary,” he said.

“We need to do a routine check,” the men said. “Only one allowed per family. That’s what the state says.”

“We follow the law,” Baba said, but the warmth was fading from his voice.

“*Meimei*,” Ma said. She reached over, pulling at my wrist. “*Meimei!* Come over here.” I clung to the doorframe, the slivers of wood dragging pale lines across my palms.

“Mama—”

“*Sbb*,” she said, and whispered, “*Jiejie!* Hold my hand.” You crept in from the kitchen then, a red bean bun cupped in your palm. Tendrils of steam snaked between your fingers, dissolved into the air like whispers. “What?” you said.

“Take my hand.”

“Why?”

“*Be quiet*,” Ma snapped, and she grabbed your wrist, held tight. She always had to hold on tight to you; when you were little, you drifted away in the market, wandering in crooked parabolas around the stalls. You’d bend down to stroke the dirt-ringed turnips and iridescent fish that lay in open crates, touching everything Ma told you was forbidden.

As we stumbled down the hallway, you tripped over the bathroom stool.

“Get up,” Ma said, yanking your arm. “Be quiet.” She led us outside, around the shriveled garden and the chicken coop, where *Mei Mao* called for you, mournfully. She opened the door of the shed in the back and shoved us inside.

“Don’t move. Don’t leave,” she said, shutting us in. You and I cowered in the hot silence, bewildered, frightened, the wet straw poking at our thighs.

I wanted to say, *Jiejie, who are they? Are they going to go away? Is everything going to be okay?* But, instead, I whispered, “You got Popo to give you one before dinner.” I pointed at the red bean bun still clutched in your fist.

“Shut up. Didn’t you hear Mama?” you mouthed, squeezing my wrist. Then you leaned back and took a bite of the bun.

I glared. You swallowed. There was a strand of hair in your mouth, and your skin was flushed brown from weeks of riding bikes around the rice fields and collecting wriggling tadpoles in plastic bags. The tadpoles looked like floating commas—hundreds of pauses and unfinished thoughts trapped in a bag.

I crossed my arms, and you held the last half of the bun to your lips, taunting, before dropping it into my hand, just as I knew you would. The paste was thick and sweet, and the beans got stuck in my molars. I ran my finger along the ridges of my teeth to dislodge them. “Thank you,” I mouthed.

The footsteps grew louder outside. The chickens began to protest in the yard, their calls shrill, urgent.

“You cannot come into my house.” It was Baba’s voice.

“We have our own families. We don’t want them to get hurt either. But as long as you follow the law, everything will be fine.”

“There’s nothing here,” Mama said. “Please. There’s no one here to take.”

“There are two children’s bikes over there,” the men said.

“*Jiejie*,” I said, and you reached out, fumbling, and found my hand. Salt pooled between our fingertips.

“It’ll be okay,” you whispered. “We’re safe, *Meimei*.”

“What’s that over there?” the other man said. “Is that a hut?”

“There’s nothing there,” Mama said, but you and I heard how the syllables faltered on her tongue. The men’s boots scratched against the tired weeds and stones outside. Stopped just outside. “Really, there’s nothing there,” Ma said, firmer this time.

We breathed. Flushed faces, dark pupils. Like cigarette holes burned in paper, or drops of animal blood. Your hand twitched in mine. I knew that meant you were scared.

“Open it.”

Your pulse skittered in your wrist. Wild ghost. Animal of undiluted fear.

Light shot across our faces, stinging our eyes, and all I could see was glittering white, as if the angels had come at last to claim us. Your fingers tightened around mine, a solid tether to earth.

“There are two of them,” one of the men said.

“No,” Baba said. He stumbled in front of us, braced his hands against the doorframe of the shed.

“Take her,” one of the men said. He pointed at you. Baba’s shadow was on its knees, and his body, proud and lean, folded in half like a wishbone. “They are all we have, please, you have families too, you must understand, I hear your son *Xiao Gao*—”

I could not see the men’s full faces, only the edges, seared a dirty gold. They peeled Baba away, discarding him, but he kicked and punched—“Get away from us, leave us alone, you motherfuckers,” and then, “Don’t make us hurt you, too.” Your hand twitched uncontrollably in mine, even though your face was still, and so I held on as if our skin would fuse, like *Yu Ming*’s twins with the interconnected hips, born so close together that their flesh forgot to cleave.

Our palms began slipping apart. *No no no*. Your hand trembled.

They were dragging you away. My hand grasped at air, and my skin ached where it had touched yours, as if it could still feel your fingers holding on. The skull-faced men grabbed you under the elbows, your red dress crinkling around your legs, and hefted you into their arms like a sack of rice.

“*Jiejie! Jiejie!*” I said, but the men were already melting into that grey afternoon. I ran, but Mama held onto me, her arms a cage around my ribs. The men opened that truck and shut you inside, and I only saw a flash of your brown face before they took you away.

Do you remember what happened to *Yu Ming*’s twins? I know you do. You always had the sharper memory.

A month after they were born, *Yu Ming* took them to a surgeon in the city, who attempted to separate their joined bodies. They died during the operation.

I waited for you to come back. I sat by the chicken coop, looking for the glint of that truck trudging down the road.

Baba punched the cement wall outside the kitchen, and when Mama leaned over to bandage his knuckles, her body split with grief.

They demanded two thousand yuan for you, twice as much as we had saved. Baba and Mama rode into the city at dawn and laid out sheets of cardboard to kneel on. They tucked their heads into their collarbones and cupped their hands, praying for a forgiving god. In the afternoon a policeman in olive spat on their laps and kicked the coins into the street, a shower of corroded gold. Mama scabbled for each metal shard, her hands sinking into the gutters of the road.

The next evening, Baba poured all of their savings on the dining room table and counted as the sun rose.

The skull-faced men placed a number on you that day. We could not pay the price.

The rice fields were flooding with water, and the grass lay calm and flat, as if tamed by the sky: a blue yoke choking swaths of green.

Ma washed the counters with soapy water and hung red lanterns from the doors and windows. Then she laid out two bamboo mats, side by side, on the ground, with cotton comforters.

“What are the lanterns for?” I said.

“People are coming.” She smoothed the wrinkles in the comforter.

“Go feed the chickens.” Feeding the chickens used to be your responsibility because I always hated them—their rubbery feet, their glittering eyes.

Ma glanced up at me. “*Meimei*, what are you doing? Go outside and feed them.”

“Can’t *Popo*?”

“*Popo* is too old. She needs rest.” Ma wrung the wash rag, and murky water slid across the counter.

“Then Ba, when he gets home?”

“Ba is working. You know, I could have you go out with him, break your back in the fields, but instead you laze around inside. The least you can do is feed the chickens.” She swirled the rag across the counter. “Your *jiejie* does it whenever I ask her.”

“You always talk as if *jiejie*’s still here.” I bit on my tongue, felt red leaking into my mouth. Swallowed. “*Jiejie*’s gone.”

Ma strode towards me, her thin sandals slapping the concrete.

“*Jiejie*, *Jiejie* is—don’t you dare—” She raised her arm, and I felt the rush of cold air, the certainty of pain darting beneath skin, like red electricity. Then, suddenly, her body wilted, surrendered to itself, and she lowered her hand. When she spoke, her voice was bleak. Her gaze drifted beyond my shoulder to the window.

“*Go*. I don’t want to look at you anymore.”

In the yard, the dogs were barking, a high-pitched howl. I patted their matted necks. “Shh, shh,” I said, but they continued barking, spit speckling their yellow teeth.

When I unlocked the fence, the chickens were running in tight circles. “What’s wrong with you?” I hissed. As I sifted feed through my fingers, *Li Guo* pecked at my feet. “*Aiya!*” I kicked at her, but her beak cut into my shin, feathers clinging to my blood. I dumped the rest of the grain on the ground, but the chickens flocked around me, pecking and pecking, except for *Mei Mao*.

Ba thought *Mei Mao* died after you were taken. She huddled in the coop, a bundle of feathers and pockmarked skin, refusing to eat. When we pressed our palms to her body, we felt her warm heaving breath. Ba said we should just kill her, but Ma told him to wait.

For the rest of that day, I avoided the house. I ran across the marshes, mud squishing between my toes, watching tiny silver fish thread between my feet.

And then, in a bamboo thicket, I saw it—a glimmer of red, a flash of brown skin.

I followed, pulse ricocheting like a bullet. “Wait!” I said, but the red shadow moved too quickly. Then it appeared again: the flash of a sandal, the edge of a smile, between the bamboo poles.

“Where are you?” The bamboo closed around me, a dark green shelter. And then the red vanished. I crouched down on the grass where I had last seen it, in front of a small, crescent-shaped creek. Tadpoles scissored between the roots of the weeds.

“Why did you bring me here?” I said.

The water bubbled. My reflection wavered, and my features began rearranging: my skin darkened, my eyes slimmed, my chin tapered.

I leaned closer. “Wait—*jiejie*, is that you?”

Then I saw you in the water’s surface, a mirage. Except you were wearing strange clothes—a stiff collared shirt, black, skin-tight pants, a pleated skirt. “*Jiejie*, it’s me! It’s me,” I called. But you did not look at me.

You were sitting in a white room, and all of the boys and girls around you wore the same uniform. When they blinked, their eyes were cold river blue. Some had swampy curls of hair. All had strange contraptions guarding their smiles, like chains of metal beads glued to their teeth.

You were writing at a desk on a piece of paper, a pencil clutched between your fingers. I leaned forward to see your paper, your hand forming loose letters. *My name is Victoria Reynolds*—

“What are you writing?” I touched your arm. But my finger came away wet, and you faded into sky, into grass. “*Jiejie?*” I stirred my hand in the water, trying to conjure you back.

In the mud, the fish, the tadpoles, began to swim in frantic circles. Lightning scarred the sky, and the clouds burst open. It started to rain.

Ba was plastering the windows with rusted sheets of metal. The rain ping ping pinged off the slats.

“*Meimei*, there are people here visiting. *Bai ren* from America. Act your best for your Ma,” Ba said. America. *Mei guo*. A pretty name for a pretty country.

“Why are they here?”

“The tourist agency is having them stay in the village for a night. For 100 yuan,” Ba said. “Now go inside. They should be coming soon.”

I entered the house from the back. Ma was speaking to a woman and a girl, both with hair thick like rope, gold-brown like seed, and impossibly narrow faces.

“We hope you like our home. We are very happy to see you.” Ma bowed. The vowels slid, slick as eels in her mouth.

I burst into the room. “Ma!” Muddy water and blood dripped down my bare shins.

When Ma saw me, her smile dipped. “*Meimei*, greet our guests and then wash yourself off,” she said.

“Hello,” I said in the little English you had taught me from wandering in the city streets. I gave the woman and the girl a small smile.

“*Meimei*, go wash off now.” I stayed. Ma’s eyes burned with warning.

“This is such a charming village,” the woman said loudly. “Thank you for allowing us to come. Such beautiful lanterns.” She turned to me. Her voice was thin, like wind funnelling through bamboo stalks. “And what a pretty little girl you are! *Meimei*, is that what your mom called you?” I looked to Ma, and Ma nodded to the woman.

“What does that mean? *Meimei?*” the woman said.

“Sister.” Ma tripped on the double consonants, the sss of a water snake with a blue tongue.

“Oh, where’s her sister? Is she not here today?”

“She is away. For a small time. She will come back.” Ma nodded, almost to herself, then clapped. “Now, you must be very hungry after travel. We will make dumplings for dinner.”

“Oh, how exciting. I’m assuming that this is the *authentic* way?” The woman turned to her daughter. “This is so exciting, isn’t it?” The girl rolled her eyes.

The movements were so familiar—Ma dicing the scallions with the knife angled to the side, a flash of quicksilver, her hands fluttering like wings. But now there was a restlessness in her movements, something unsettled.

Ma mixed the scallions with pork, sesame seeds, salt. As the woman—Mrs. Sanders—traced the edges of the dumpling dough with water and pinched each package closed, she said, This is so fun! *Amy and I came here for some mother-daughter bonding, you know? After Amy’s father left for North Carolina because of my ex-colleague Carly—well. It’s just... so exciting to be exposed to different cultures, isn’t it, Amy?* Ma and Mrs. Sanders nodded and smiled and nodded.

Ma paused in the middle of slicing. “Amy, you are very pretty girl.” Something violent pulsed in my chest. “Thank you,” Amy said. “You look like my older daughter. *Jiejie*.” “No, she doesn’t,” I said. But I understood what Ma meant. Amy’s gaze darted left, right, left, like yours: zei mei shu yan—crafty eyes, hidden under moon lids and inked lashes.

“Two very pretty girls,” Ma said, as if I had not spoken.

“No,” I said. “She’s different than *jiejie*.”

Ma turned to me sharply.

“*Jiejie* was prettier,” I said, in Chinese. “She’s nothing like *jiejie*.”

“*Meimei!* Go to your room now,” Ma hissed, her voice laced with danger. “And learn to treat your guests with more respect.”

Mrs. Sanders’ gaze shifted between Ma and me. “Oh, no, it’s quite okay, I don’t want to intrude...” she said, her voice tapering into a whisper. But Ma did not stop staring at me, her eyes two pinpricks between my shoulder blades, until I left.

With the door slightly open, I watched Amy sit on your plastic green stool by the table, her pale legs speckled pink with mosquito bites. Ma and Mrs. Sanders were quiet now. After an hour, Amy said, “I’m bored. Can we do something else?” She pulled out a slim phone from her pocket and began playing a game with jewel-colored candies that collided on her screen.

I looked towards the table, at the plates of dumplings. Mrs. Sanders’ were odd, misshapen, but Amy’s looked like sealed lips: a secret, waiting to be spilled.

That night, I dreamed of a tree, dark green, fragrant. Crystal bulbs rotated hypotically from its glistening branches. You were sitting on a chair in front of the tree, wearing a silky red shirt and loose pants embroidered with small bears.

“What are you doing here?” I whispered, but you did not look at me. A man and a woman stood on either side of you, their arms wrapped around your shoulders. They both had white-yellow hair and wrinkles gouged into the sides of their mouths. Their shirts spelled *MOM* and *DAD* in block letters. The woman mouthed something, and at once, all of you smiled, a platinum flash, like a bulb breaking.

I woke to the soft sounds of snoring. In the next room, Amy and Mrs. Sanders were sleeping on the floor, two solid shapes cast in a violet haze. I wondered if we looked like that when we were young, forming two quotation marks around each other in sleep: the beginning and end to our own sentence.

I imagined your quick smile, your quick fingers, and suddenly I found myself tiptoeing to Mrs. Sanders’s small leather suitcase in the corner of the room and unzipping it. I was uncertain what I was looking for—perhaps a ticket back to you, a way out of these flooded fields. I found a candy-bright pamphlet: *Yangxi Chinese Homestay. For a truly authentic experience in a charming ethnic village.* A Hershey’s bar, wrapped in gold foil. A diamond-encrusted tube of red lipstick. A wrinkled plane ticket printed in black, its words smeared. I shoved it underneath my shirt.

Then shuffling, cotton brushing against cotton.

“What are you doing? Are you going through my mom’s stuff?”

Amy’s amber eyes shifted from me to my hands to the suitcase.

I shook my head. *No no no.* You were always the clever one, not me.

“Chinese *trash*,” she said. “Get away from us.” Her eyes glowed the way yours did in the shed so long ago, and I scampered away, my teeth slashing my tongue, sweat running cold down my cheeks. The plane ticket fluttered to the ground. I heard the scraping of the suitcase, as Amy dragged it towards her, protecting its bulk in her sleep.

When Ma and Ba woke in the morning, Mrs. Sanders and Amy were gone.

After the Americans left, I began to hear scuffling at night, the sounds of water stirred, of mud churned. Ghost cries. My dreams of you grew more vivid, saturated with color.

On the day of the new moon, Ma set out a pair of chopsticks and scooped minced beef and rice, your favorite, onto a plate, and *qing cai* for health. She left them on the table with a bowl of red bean buns, as she did on the last Thursday of every month. She waited for you to stumble

into the house, to reclaim her. But the plate was always there the next morning, the fat congealed into white stones.

During the new moon, I dreamed of a warm room painted in shades of plum and pink pastel. You were sprawled on a floral bedspread with a pale, freckled girl, holding a glass bottle filled with neon liquid.

“Tony asked me to hoco,” you said. “Tony. Beckman.” You were painting your nails a hot magenta, each stroke careful and deliberate, but I saw the slightest edge to your smile.

“He’s really hot,” the other girl said. She glued rhinestones onto her nails, shifting them with a toothpick. “And super popular.”

“I *know*.” You flushed.

“But I don’t think you should say yes,” the girl said casually.

“What—why not?” You nearly spilled the bottle of neon on the coverlets and closed the cap.

“Because...well, isn’t it kind of obvious why he likes you? I mean, look at his track record. He’s always dated Asian chicks. Like Daniela and Mia. You know? It’s, like, yellow fever.” You stayed silent, blowing on your nails, long and clawlike. “No offense, Vic. You can try to be white all you want, but you just...aren’t.”

I saw your face: stunned, pale, hurt. “What’s *that* supposed to mean?”

“I don’t know,” the other girl said. She sighed and fanned herself with her glinting nails. “Okay. Promise you won’t get mad?”

“Yeah,” you said, too quickly.

“Well. I heard Nick—you know, Tony’s best friend—call you...um. Chinese trash.”

“She’s here! She’s here! She came back to us!” Ma’s frantic calls spiralled through the walls.

She was kneeling over the table, her hands fitting wildly around her face like hummingbird wings. She pointed to the table. Two bites had been taken out of the red bean bun, and the chopsticks were on the floor, the tips glistening with grease.

Ba rubbed the space between Ma’s shoulder blades. “*Ling*,” he said softly.

“She’s alive! We just have to find her. Where do you think she is now? In the fields?”

“I don’t think she is in the fields,” Ba said.

“No, it was her. I know it was her. Of course she needs to eat, she must be so hungry after so long—”

“*Ling*, it was probably a small animal that came into the house at night,” Ba whispered.

“Of course she’s still alive. I am her Ma, don’t be ridiculous.”

“*Jiejie—jiejie* is gone. *Jiejie* is not coming back.” Ba’s voice was soft, firm.

“But I am her mother, her mother...”

“I know,” Ba said.

And then Ma collapsed against Ba, as if she had been struck by a bright column of lightning, and Ba stroked her hair as she wept and the sunlight faded into charcoal dust.

When Ma sent me into the city to buy dragonfruit, I wandered around the vendors, weighing the sunset-colored bulbs in my hands. Then, behind the crates of fish, I saw a flash of crimson. I dropped my basket in the middle of the street and followed, calling your name.

You led me to the wreckage behind the city, where trash lay in makeshift towers: plastic bags, bottles, fruits soft with rot. But then you disappeared. I cried, shouted your name. A yellow plastic bag had been tossed into the street gutter, and I kicked it.

The plastic tore, and something pale and tender rolled out onto the cement.

A fetus, the size of my palm.

A partially-formed human with soft indentations for eyes, real yet not. A ghost, already taken by the skull-faced men. Seventeen years ago, you looked like that, *Jiejie*. Fifteen years ago, I looked like that. We were all once smaller than children, smaller than toddlers.

On the side of the public bathhouse, near the heaps of trash, someone had scrawled the words: *Better blood flowing like streams than children born outside the state plan.*

On the full moon, I dreamed of a yard with flat, perfectly trimmed grass, and a man flipping something dark and sizzling on a small grill. You were there, perched on a lawn chair, two piercings glinting from your ears.

“Dad?” you said to the man.

“Yes, Vic?”

“Where am I...where am I from?”

“Oh, Vic. You know your mom and I love you very much—”

“Dad. I know that. You always say that to me, every time. Just—please tell me. I want to know.”

“Well.” The man closed the red lid of the grill and coughed. “Your mom and I adopted you from Yangxi, a small village in China.”

“I remember fields, and my mom.”

“Yes, your mom was too sick to care for you.”

“I don’t remember that. I don’t remember her being sick.”

“That’s what the adoption agency told us. They—they said they found you in a crib on the side of the road and took you in.”

“No, my mom wouldn’t have abandoned me.” You were shaking your head wildly, your braids brushing your cheeks. “I know she wouldn’t have.”

“Vic, I—I’m just telling you what the adoption agency told us.”

“I don’t believe it.”

“I know it’s hard to believe, honey.” The man walked towards you, placed his hand on your shoulder, but you jerked away.

“I keep remembering more, the older I get. I remember the fields, how green they were, how the rice turned yellow in August. I remember my mom. I know she didn’t abandon me. I feel it. And...I know I had a sister. *Meimei*.”

It was the last Thursday of the month. As I prepared to sleep, I heard shuffling in the chicken coop, and then the soft scrape of footsteps in wild grass.

I peeked out the window and saw a flash of white. Mei Mao. She ruffled her feathers, a plume of white smoke. And then a flash of red, a glimpse of sandals, and you appeared, wearing a tattered dress, older now, nearly translucent. In your hand, you were holding a red bean bun. Mei Mao scuffled towards you, rubbing her head against your shin.

I strapped on my sandals and hurried into the yard. “*Jiejie?*”

You turned away, began running.

“*Jiejie*, wait for me!”

You glanced back. “No, *meimei*,” you mouthed. We stared at each other, the space between us thickening, shifting. “You cannot.” I could not hear your voice, only see your lips forming soundless syllables.

“I don’t understand,” I said. “Tell me, *jiejie*.”

You started hurrying away, your feet barely touching the ground, and I followed you, reached out to touch your shoulder. “*Jiejie*, please.”

And still you moved towards the rice fields, the dark reeds tipped in moonlight.

I heard them then—the scuffling, the sounds of water stirred, of mud churned.

There were spirits wandering across the fields, the ghosts of small boys and girls, their dresses fluttering. Some as old as you, others younger, carrying babies wrapped in threadbare cloth, faces kissed by mosquitoes.

But unlike you, these children were colorless smoke. I knew you were an ocean away, but these ghosts were a sky away, a life away. These were the children taken by the skull-faced men. These were the children that did not survive.

You sat down on the edge of the marshland, your feet dangling in the water, and I sat beside you. Mei Mao gently nudged my arm, clucking softly.

We watched the parade of girls and boys as the moon huddled heavy in the sky, spilling silver across the waters. This moon: the same one we sat under as children, playing with our dirty straw dolls, listening to the crickets’ humming, and the chickens shuffling in their coop. The same moon that rose after you faded into that ashen afternoon, your dress a single spot of red. The same one you now sleep under, an ocean away.

ELANE KIM

Short Story | Homeschool, Walnut Creek, CA

Small Things

Eomma¹ is 40, widowed. She and I live in a little blue house in San Francisco that Eomma and Appa² painted when they first got married. It's not the kind of blue that sticks in your mind, but the kind you see once and forget about. I say this to Eomma and Appa once, when I am twelve and ready to paint the house over in radioactive green. That day, Eomma tells me, "Sometimes, you're worse off being remembered."

Lately, I've been learning things I've known for years, like how Eomma's hair looks black only from a distance, and how small her feet are. This comes to mind mostly when we are in our beat-up Honda, and I am watching her accelerate far too much for a trip to the grocery store. Her hair glints white in the sun now. I rub my eyes, and when I open them, I see all the shades of blue I've forgotten.

I am 17 in October, and I still don't know how to drive. Eomma rags at me about it, but we both know that Appa was going to teach me before he died. We ignore the corner of the house that holds his polos, his sneakers. We still sit on the same side when we eat, facing his empty chair. We cancel his newspaper subscriptions, but pick up a copy of *The New York Times* whenever we start to miss him too much. Sometimes I can't help but think that we are silly and that this is just another stage of grief. Sometimes I stop thinking. *Sometimes you're worse off being remembered.*

The summer after Appa dies, Eomma and I live in cycles of seven. Every Saturday morning, we visit the local Chinese joint, because that's the closest to Korean food we can get around here, and she hates to cook. I think it reminds her of life when she was a teenager in Korea, when all she did was cook for her younger brothers. Eomma tells me not to have seven children, like her mother did. She also tells me not to have one child, like she did. When Appa was alive, he used to laugh at this, rubbing his belly.

We order two plates of fried rice each, and one bowl of black bean noodles to share. The rice always tastes the same, like MSG and black pepper and a bone-squeezing kind of warmth. When we return home, Eomma sets out the nice plates she got as a wedding gift from her sister that are reserved for dinner parties and Saturday evenings. Eomma asks me if the food tastes good. I nod. She scrunches her mouth the way she does when she is disappointed. She thinks it's a little salty. I nod again. Our mouths plateau into parallel lines. Like mother, like daughter. We swallow everything we want to forget.

Appa used to get excited at the thought of me driving him places. The supermarket, the Chinese restaurant, the movie theater, the drive-through.

"Will you forget how to drive when you have a daughter who will do it for you?" Eomma once asked from the passenger's seat, her eyes bright and briefly young. Appa shrugged, his stomach heaving against the steering wheel.

"Even if I forget, I have a daughter to teach me."

Appa was gray and drooping during the last few weeks of his life. By then, most of the fat had melted off his body. Because he hated the smell of antiseptic, Eomma and I brought him flowers, the fragrant kind placed in barrels at the front of the supermarket. He called them useless weeds, but he kept them by his bedside long after they had wilted.

"Don't buy more," he said, his chest rippling with his breath. "This is enough."

Eomma knew it was time when she told me to say my last words. I don't remember exactly what I said. Something about *I'm painting the house green if you leave* and *This isn't enough* and *I won't forget*. I don't know if it mattered in the end.

Appa told me to smile so I pinched my lips together.

"You look just like her," he said, eyes wandering to Eomma.

He said more, but his lips had cracked pale and I stopped listening. I don't like to think about what he looked like then: blue-tinted and so cold. When Eomma stood up from her chair, I left them together in the hospital room, heads bowed as if in prayer. The last thing I saw was Eomma whispering something in his ear. I've forgotten the rest.

Some nights, I see his blue face, his unwound body. When I dream, I paint him with my own skin. I shatter into petals and make mulch of my bones. When he recoils, I leave flowers for him to drown in: blue hyacinths, as if to say, *I am still here*; lotus flowers, as if to say, *I am waiting for you to come back*; white clovers, as if to say nothing at all.

Eomma gives me driving lessons at 6 a.m. in the parking lot of the nearest grocery store. We go early because I am scared that someone will report me for unlicensed driving. Eomma twists her mouth when I say this, and tells me I am old enough to not be afraid of this sort of thing.

"You are always so scared," she says, sighing. Then, "Who did you get it from?" like we both don't already know the answer.

Eomma teaches me how to brake before teaching me how to accelerate. The earth bakes as I slowly trace ellipses around the parking lot. The morning air is toothless and warm.

"You know," she says, "your Appa and I were going to spend our first night in America in a hotel."

"I didn't know," I say.

"Well, we were going to. But our room was so dirty, we slept in our rental car." She grimaces at this. "But in the morning—when we woke up—it was like this. Warm."

When I drive us home for the first time, Eomma is silent. She squints at the rising sun. The sun stares back as we melt in our seats. For a moment, she glows white, then radioactive green.

Translations:

¹ *Eomma* is mother in Korean.

² *Appa* is father in Korean.

SARAH MOHAMMED

Poetry | The Harker School, San Jose, CA

Halal Store

Amma² & I are soft-limbed & just enough. Sweat-sticky like the meat splayed out in front of us, growing under greasy light, the same color as our faces. When the butcher grips the meat, he rips the fat the same way a white man strips our dawn—with his fists, a pounding at the door of our mosque. I want to stop comparing nourishment to violence, but he wraps the meat until it is suffocating in plastic, a mouth still gasping for breath. In this shop, I whisper the word home to Amma & she understands, drinks the sound from its middle like a lantern drinking light. Still, I shape this home into all I know—the shop shuttering like all shelters, like Amma’s burka swishing, a swathe of dark red, the color of my hands when I pressed them to Amma’s forehead moments after the shooting at our mosque, a white man towering over us from behind, cloaked in shadow. He held the day smooth & metallic, familiar to him & us—just familiar in different ways. & while we ride the bus, two hours to return home, I trace English words I learned in school on her wrist, foreign and saltless as a dream: country, daughter, country, daughter. A white man kicks the back of her seat, Amma lurches forwards, all the English vowels scattering into a wilt. At night, Amma simmers the meat in coriander & yogurt, a dash of chili powder plumping in her hand like sleep. She holds the cooked meat out to me at the dinner table. I bring it to my hands like a face.

¹ “Permitted” in Arabic

² “Mother” in Tamil

Homeland, Gone

We begin as two bodies tightened
into bruises on the bus stop’s bench.

My mother holds four American pennies
blackened by time, like worship.

She tightens her grip as if she’s going
to lose them.

*
Rust, the only darkness
this nation bears.

White, the only color
this nation bares.

*
Pennies clatter on the sidewalk
like teeth, like all the ways
we can’t contain this country.

*
My mother apologizes
to the driver, her small body drooping

into itself, a wrinkled peach pit.
His face whittled into the tip

of the pocketknife on his dashboard
hardened steel.

*
If I were to run
my finger along the driver’s cheekbone

my hand would come back
stained with blood.

Every stoplight’s mouth weaponizes
in our wake.

*
What my mother means:
Forgive me / for wanting / something more

*than survival / than America wringing
my body / out of its deep waters*

*like a fish / pressed onto the blistering shoreline /
separating the scales. America / swallowed*

*the pink flesh / inside because
immigrants can only be / sustenance. All that’s left*

in me / mottled language / dirty brown / leftovers.

*
In Tamil, there is no word
for *Sorry*—repentance, a technology

of sunlight shredded by the spoonful.

In Tamil, forgiveness
is a birthright inherited

like the first blooms of spring.

In Tamil, when my mother finds
her hands empty of change,
the rickshaw driver slides his thin
hands through her hair.

*
Paravalla—
Naanga inga irokum.

*It’s okay, sister—
it’s okay. We are here,* he would say.

She used to drink this melody like milk.

*
English require beg. My mother repeats this
until we only know to stand
on our knees. *Especially for us.* She hits

her chest, palms her hijab. *We have
this only.* She pries my empty fist open.

*
Sometimes, I revise her words
into myth, oiled dark and wilting, pretend
I do not understand.

*
In my mother’s country,
Sati is when the woman burns herself

into memory during her husband’s
funeral, follows his spirit to heaven.

My mother burns herself
into survival for a country
that doesn’t love her back.

She gives herself to the white
half-light of the bus, to loose change

and cracked syllables, sharp Tamil
peeling into *Sohee*.

*
The driver rips the hijab from her head—
meaty, red hand reeking
of grease and sweat.

Pennies gone, bus seats slick
with prayer.

My mother whispering, *So-leyb*.

*
At night, I listen to my mother
language herself, echo
through the walls: *So-wee*. The word

slants: *Sobr-dee*. Her bed
rustling as she chases
days she can’t catch.

SARINA PATEL

Spoken Word | Carrollwood Day School, Tampa, FL

the legend of laadkis

The story of every girl, every *laadki*, starts with the woman who made her.

I: my mom.

My mom learned English from reading newspaper cutouts, but always skipped the astrology section.

She leaves the false prophecies to me, the Aquarius. Child of Saturn. The unluckiest.

I eat them up and she tells me to watch my carbohydrate intake. Such a Pisces.

I could swallow the weight of a thousand spoons, but not the sadness in her eyes.

Gods breakfast on dreams. And when the tear in her womb was too large for a child,

They devoured that too. Faith wasn't in her vocabulary until she had me.

My mom loved me so much she invented a new word to run away,

She cut open its stem like it was a lotus flower and buried us inside of it. Our home--good as any.

II: my *ba*.

If there were a movie about my life,

It would be inappropriate to cast my mother's mom as good as any, or even one of those women.

To us, she was the *only* woman and there was no other like her--

Her big black eyes and full mouth smudging beauty into gentleness.

Ba waited for us to arrive on the steps of her Indian apartment. When we did,

Her English was a bright, scattered crumble--congealed like pork fat in leftover tonkotsu ramen

The warm cinnamon of her verbs and vowels streusels as she oscillated and glittered, storytelling

Like she hadn't talked to anyone in ten months

The questions flowed, formal at first then disarmingly casual

She asked me where I lived now, what I wanted to do while visiting,

If I complained like typical Americans

When *daal* was hot and bathwater was cold

She said she could smell the lemon mosquito repellent on my body

I told her I was from the American South and could smell the rain,

Taste a hurricane on my breath. I only feared insects.

She laughed. *You've gotten cheekier.*

And even though mythology is just a myth

I swear on that wind I could hear the tinfoils of immortality,

Like her vocal folds under cigar smoke, wrinkling and wrinkling and wrinkling

For a woman footprinted on Forever.

III: my goddess.

all eight of my grandfathers are scattered on the ganges/

where even souls black as her waters have knelt into the nape of goddess ganga's neck/

and come out clean/the men of my country have polluted a woman into a tourist destination/

and even in death, they ask for her forgiveness/because a woman is only revered/

when she can scrub away a man's mistakes/my *ba* said/never underestimate a man's ability/

to take from you after he's said he finished/ he will and he will and he will again/

repetition/reinvention/reincarnation is a man's luxury anyway/

¹ laadki = girl

why i love hot sauce

You wonder why I love hot sauce:

A generational melody coated in capsaicin and culture

Whose painful beauty only my tongue can translate into words

The vowels of pain tasting like a promise

The more I speak them into existence.

I love pulling the gods out of the hot soil of my homeland,

Love bending their soft wrinkly frowns under my thumbs—eyes closed

I love coloring my family with tales of red and green, digging out each story's leaves from the earth,

And I love peeling its flesh along the pleats, calling these warriors by the names of their blood,

Byadgi, Dhani, Guntur, Jwala, Reshampatti, you see,

I love learning from the altar of spice, from my mother's instructional spirit

Love how the knowledge is seeded in my blood, which flowed through my ancestors' thumbs as they dried chilies.

Love that I can feed you what a Carolina Reaper smells like,

Love that I can teach you how to sharpen your breath into a serrated knife

And slice diagonally until seeds like white teeth pour from pepper guts

You wonder why it is I love hot sauce:

A generational tomb coated in capsaicin and cruelty

Whose singing stitches in my mouth translate into *right at home*,

The triumph of bittersweet over agony

Tasting like a starving immigrant's success story

Maybe because the pain on my tongue feels like a food group

Maybe because it is no different to how my *ba*² and *dada*³ were humiliated,

And forced to desecrate their own culture,

Shoving English into their mouths,

And I am suddenly the native speaker of so much heat.

Every lick a scar reopening my textbook

Every meal a struggle to turn the pages

Every stain of colonialism on the white granite

A European history lesson,

As if to say:

Watch how quickly we will make a meal out of you,

Call it authentic cuisine,

Sell it in a bottle at Trader Joe's

Watch how quickly I will buy into anything that brings me pain,

Claim it as my own

I wonder why it is I love hot sauce,

Maybe because my dad's customers ask for the white pharmacist

Maybe because my mom's friend is told to go back to her country

Maybe because pain is all I can communicate, all I can generate, all I can authenticate

I wonder why it is I love hot sauce,

Always ice my tongue so everything after tastes like cold needles,

Always apologize to my teacher saying "India finally contributes to more than gold & dancing!"

Always trained to love the pain, I wonder:

Does red feel as good as it tastes?

Which is to say:

Watch how quickly I think in Rupri Kaur but cite Emily Dickinson

Watch how quickly our mouths become good for skewering each other like those peppers,

Watch how this cuisine, a community seasoned with criticism, smudges each other

Out of the narrative, out of the history, out of our bodies holding more heat than our mouths can take

You wonder why I love hot sauce. I wonder why you don't

And this is to say: may this one chili seed become three

A third eye burning bright and bloody,

A ring of fire from a garden of chilies, too hot to handle,

Yet just enough to burn the hell out of this kitchen

¹ Byadgi, Dhani, Guntur, Jwala, Reshampatti = names of peppers

² Ba = grandma

³ Dada = grandpa

CINDY PHAN

Creative Nonfiction | Skyline High School, Salt Lake City, UT

Birdboned

While my grandmother dies for the last time I struggle to remember how to swallow. The smudged iPad screen flattens every last detail into pixels, but leaves intact the rot-white sterility of the hospital, its sheets, my grandmother's paper skin. Gossamer pure. So clean I almost choke.

My mother, eyes pooled dark with grief, tells me to say my goodbyes. My *Bye* comes out a croak. It hangs in the air, hoarse in its uncertainty, wrong like an offkey note. Behind the iPad, on the other side of the window, a bird spreads its wings as if it means to take flight, but it never leaves the ground. The momentum spills over. Skips it one, two body lengths forward.

My mother jostles me, and I look back to the FaceTime call, the asepsis of the clinic scoring like a knife against bone. I work my throat. Wince against its sandpaper flex. *Bye, bà ngoại. I love you.*

The farewell shudders, weak-walled, a wanting imitation of my mother's clenched-fist voice. But my little sister is old enough to understand death and young enough to still know tears, so I hold her hand tight, let her hiccuping distress shroud the both of us. In the background, the bird's wings fold and unfold like a heartbeat. I imagine them to be in time with the stuttering rise and fall of my grandmother's chest, and I stare, morbidly transfixed by the clasp of her ribs, somehow more fragile than avian wings. I blink. My eyes are so dry they hurt.

Okay, my mother breathes. Her syllables are ragged, tear-salted, catch themselves on sobs. *I love you, mẹ. Okay?* Eight thousand miles away, my uncles give the order to pull the plug, and I watch the thing on the bed hollow out, until there is only a grandmother-shape with nothing inside.

In my mother's memory, my grandmother lays all eight of her children out on the floor and runs her fingers across their scalps. Her hands are like mousetraps or hungry birds, catching lice in fistfuls that she brings to her mouth. My mother describes the crunch of a louse breaking open, how the meat of palm dips against tooth.

I imagine my grandmother sinking her teeth into louse, beetle, spider. I imagine my grandmother with her mouth around a moth, the gnarl of her left leg still and unmoving. I imagine my grandmother as a bird, locking her jaw around each many-legged thing, breaking through the brittle exoskeleton to get to the soft, vulnerable insides.

Before I meet my grandmother for the first time, my mother says, *Be respectful. Show her how good you are. Remember everything I told you.*

I am three and complain the whole taxi ride to my grandparents' house. *It's too hot, why is it so sticky, can we go home?* But when we get there, my grandmother is sitting alone on her hammock, and I clamber onto it without hesitation. Pour myself into the hollow at her side. I think it the most human of all instincts, to fill empty things until they are brimming.

In the span of an hour my grandmother teaches me half a dozen songs. I warble along cheerfully, vowels lilting from my mouth like wings, my Vietnamese better than it will be in fifteen years. I won't remember any of the songs, but I will remember how my grandmother laughs. How she pulls me closer. I remember this most of all: the balmy rush of tipping head-first into her embrace, the warm weight of her five fingers.

Years later my mother will tell me how her heart at first strung itself taut with trepidation, afraid that I'd cringe away from my grandmother and her crippled leg. Years later my mother will ask me how much of my grandmother I can remember, and I will lie and say, *Everything*. The aged memory of her palm on my side, aching like a phantom limb. It is

the most human of instincts to fill empty things until they are brimming: notebooks, and bowls, and places where memory or grief should go.

One summer, caught in the thrall of fitness, my mother and I decide to take a walk every night. It's not until the second week that I notice the sparrow, which I think dead, until I draw close and it twitches, a glassy-eyed tatter of feathers on the sidewalk.

My mother yanks me away by the wrist. *It's dying*, she snaps. *Do you want to get sick too?*

We leave it there. Stupidly, I think that if I cannot help it, then surely someone else will. Stupidly, I think that it can be helped at all, that something already half-carcass can somehow claw its way back to life. My mother and I take the same route every day, and I bear witness to how it wastes away, decays from bird to corpse to bone. A reverse metamorphosis, this unbecoming in stop motion. I do not know when it dies. Only when it is dead.

I want to remember my grandmother so that the body of her ripples with laughter, with love, with fullness. But in life I knew my grandmother as a story told secondhand, as something already dying before it was dead, and now in death I know her only in outline—in the vaguest snatches of memory, when I hold her up to the light. Please: I write to give wings. I write to give wings, but my not-grief is a featherless thing, sits ugly and formless at the base of my throat. I open my mouth to put it to words, and it quivers, unable to take flight.

This is my grandmother's first death:

My uncle calls at four in the morning our time and says, *She doesn't know who we are, she doesn't know where she is. She's talking about things that never happened.*

In the background, I can hear my grandmother's voice, high with agitation. It cracks with every iteration of this single word she clings to, like a reflex, child-like in her simple desperation. *Ồ đâu? Ở đâu? Ở đâu?* Where? Where? Where?

My uncle's response comes out muffled, like he's holding the phone against his chest. He says something about a baby, about someone's child. He says *No*. Maybe *I don't know*. There's a rustle, the phone changing hands, and then my grandmother's panicked breath crunches through the speakers like glass.

My mother pleads, *Mẹ ơi*. Her fingers are shaking. *It's me. Your daughter. Hiền.*

Hiền, my grandmother repeats, as if in a trance. Then: *Where is my baby? They stole my baby. Where is my baby? They took my baby away from me. Where is my baby? Where—*

Here is what I know of my grandmother: she was shot when she was forty and has not been able to use her left leg since. She has had eight children and four miscarriages. She is not afraid of ghosts. And I cannot talk about her without fracturing her into something else first, like a bird or a dream. Anything that holds light.

Here is what I do not know: her name. How old she is. Her hopes, her regrets. If there is anything she is sorry for. What she is afraid of, if not ghosts. Whether she would have recognized me in the street, or if we would have simply looked through each other, a pair of mirrors turned inwards.

A week after my grandmother dies, I look up the bird I saw in the backyard, the one that almost flew. Google pulls up its mirror image, plump and full, feathers a brown soft as buttercream. Says, *The mourning dove is one of the most abundant and widespread of all North American birds.*

The last time I meet my grandmother, she does not know who I am. We find her in the hospital, already half-ghost, a wrinkled sliver folded between the sheets. I am afraid a pointed exhale will crumble her into dust.

With clumsy fingers, I find my grandmother's hand and hold it in my own, its frail heft like a stranger's. She stirs but does not wake. Her teeth stumble over her tongue, sink shallowly into the edge of every muddled breath. I try not to dwell on her eyelids: their translucence, their thinness. When my grandmother is half a world away, I can morph her into a bird, a dream, a story, but up close like this, she is just a woman. Old and weak, airless as thread. I want to ask, *What is your name? Why aren't you afraid of ghosts? How many times have you died by now?* I want to ask, *Is there anything you have to tell me?* But each question dies bloodlessly in my mouth, its corpse quiet and unmourned.

I sit like that for hours, hunched over her bedside, my thumb rubbing gently over the skin of her hand and committing to memory the landscape of every bruise-purple vein. Turning over and over, the sepulchral weight of everything I do not know about her. Everything I never will. When my grandmother finally stirs, the movement is so faint I almost think I imagine it.

She opens her eyes. They land on me without recognition before they drag to the table, the nurse, the uncle behind me. Her pupils are the most alive thing about her, and it is their lethargic crawl that sends me hurtling from my seat, stumbling blindly for the doors. Outside the hospital, Vietnam bakes in a hundred degrees Fahrenheit, sweltering in the throes of a heat wave, but I shiver, cold with the memory of the blankness behind my grandmother's eyes. As if someone had reached into the cavity of her mind and gutted her of something crucial.

Bird bones are hollow but unbroken on the surface, giving them the illusion of substance. See also: what I know of grandmothers, and what I know of grief.

When people talk about dying, they make it out to be a ravenous, gasping thing, the way a fish thrashes on the shore or a gazelle strains against teeth. That livewire thrum of blood, of pulse. Of every breath buffeting on the tongue to make it out alive. But I think death is not always hungry—that sometimes it most resembles a bird on the sidewalk, vulnerability bared like a throat. Always, that infinitesimal moment of stillness before flight or decay. The boundary between intention and action. A grandmother dies, and there are not enough people to mourn her. All the want in the world means nothing if it cannot be translated into something real.

The night my grandmother dies, I dream of breaking a bird open. Crumpling its tissue paper wings, snapping its hairpin legs. Strangling all the hollow places of its body until they bleed light. The night my grandmother dies, I dream I split a bird open, and when I go to swallow it I cannot find the bird at all.

bà ngoại: maternal grandmother

mẹ (oi): mother

ISABELLA SANTONI

Spoken Word | Paradise Valley High School, Phoenix, AZ

Becoming Illiterate

The first letter I ever learned how to read was t.

It was hard not to, I saw them everywhere.

One stood between the two oak doors that looped into veins and dripped down in stains,
One swung between the breasts of the old woman as she swayed, clasped hands and prayed,
One gleamed in the early Sunday light that strained through the stained glass window frames.
This is where I learned how to read.

We painted the lyrics to hymns on the walls,
And read of Cain and Abel, Abraham and Saul.
I teetered through those reeling archways,
Mary Janes strapped tight, sit up straight, speak right,
Pray when you're told and when that old
Woman clasps your hand between both of hers and says "Peace be with you,"
The next words out of your mouth better be "And with you too."
And as I learned to read between the lines of the psalms and songs,
I peeled back the layers of old paint
to find I had been taught in a dialect of hate.
The empty pews started to look like headstones,
And I still don't know
If there were more skeletons above the stone or below.

My white block with the red brick and the sidewalk chalk
Brimmed with small talk in cookie cutters and smiles cocked.
My house was full of Bible beltters and sermon resellers
That stoked the brimstone flames of pain and shame.
They built me a funeral pyre and set it on fire.
They spat blood, it's ungodly, it's wrong to love
Someone of the same sex, it's not complex,
Sodom fell to sin, to lustful skin, are you next?
Sing songs then sling slurs and misconstrue
Matthew, Romans, Luke, and Paul
Read one, but quote two.

And every time I kiss a girl, I am looked at
Like I have slitted eyes and scaly skin,
A forked tongue winding its way down her throat.
With every move, I hear calls of faggot dripped into my ears,
Spat like they couldn't get it out of their mouths fast enough,
Launching a volley of verses as if Leviticus could trump love,
Echoing in the voice of my pastor.
In the voice of my grandmother.
In the voice of my classmate.
And I am tired of being crucified on a cross of old.
I am a 5'2" woman with poor circulation and an iron deficiency,
So the only reason I don't have cold feet,
Is because I need to be reminded of the eternity that awaits me when I am released.
But pomegranate juices taste so sweet.
And if I am falling, then at least
The view is divine.
The first letter I ever unlearned how to read
Was t.

The Women I Know

If one more person
Compares women to flowers,
I'm gonna lose it

The blooming and beckoning and the blushing
And the beauty, all fragile and delicate,
Petals welcoming into warmth,
Rosy cheeked and drippingly sweet.

You compare us to flowers because you see
Lips parted with gentle intent,
Legs petaled out in a silent consent
(As if that wasn't an oxymoron),
Ova to be taken and used as your own,
And crumpled once sown,
A promise of fruit to be won.

You compare us to flowers because you see
Something to be plucked,
Taken home,
Kept in a vase,
As an object of lust,
With each thrust crushed just a bit,
Until you find that we've been stripped
Of our rose.

But that is not like the women that I know.

The women I know
Are made of blood and iron.
They are canine teeth and sharp brows,
With scythes for spines,
And breastplates forged in the fire of every time
They have silenced, been made to feel powerless,
Because you still blame women for the length of their dress.

The women I know,
They're too big to fit your vase.
They pace the streets carrying broadswords of mace,
They crush roses to tear them in lines down their cheeks
And drip rue from their teeth
And tear their hair back in ropes
And rip screams from their throats
And pound their chests to the beat
Of all of their gathering red heat,
So I dare
One more person to compare us
To flowers.

CHARLOTTE SEDAKA

Play or Script | Viewpoint School, Calabasas, CA

A Day in the Life

INT. THERAPIST OFFICE - DAY

The office is a "model home" version of a therapist's office: safe, sterile, cold. The only bit of hominess comes from the strategically placed children's toys in the corner.

BECCA (15), a frail, guarded, girl dressed in an oversized uniform skirt and hoodie, sits in the corner with her knees to her face picking at her nails. Across from her sits THERAPIST, a 30-something, soccer mom dressed business casual, lounging in a chair that appears too big for her.

On the other side of the couch are Becca's parents. MOM and DAD are clean-cut, aloof and BICKERING.

MOM

How long is this gonna take?

DAD

Do you not care about what your daughter wants? Relax.

MOM

She doesn't actually need this.

DAD

I know. So let's just get it over with.

Beat.

THERAPIST

(stepping in)

What's your daily routine?

THERAPIST (CONT'D)

Becca?

No answer. Becca still fixated on her nails.

MOM

She's popular at school like her brother, and everyone loves her, she wakes up and ge--

The therapist, sits with a stern face and rolls her eyes at Mom.

THERAPIST

Becca, what do you do every day?

Beat.

THERAPIST (CONT'D)

Becca?

Becca looks up.

BECCA

Yeah

THERAPIST

What is your day like?

BECCA

Wake up, school, sleep, repeat.

There's a slight pause and an obvious tension in the room.

MOM

(under her breath.)

See, a normal kid. This is useless.

DAD

Why are you always so negative. At least try and act supportive.

Therapist looks over at Mom and then up at the ceiling.

THERAPIST

(sighing)

No, I want to know what happens from the second you wake up until you go to bed. Why is your day any different from anyone else's?

(beat)

Why are you here?

Dad can't stop himself as he inches towards the edge of the couch.

DAD

Is this what we're paying you for? To ask my daughter about her day? With all due respect, we don't need a--

BECCA

I wake up...

Startled by the interruption, Dad flinches and sits back into the couch.

Becca still has her knees to her chest but now looks up with a slight bit of hope in her eyes.

BECCA (CONT'D)

My alarm goes off at 5:45 am.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. BECCA'S BEDROOM - MORNING

The room is cluttered with ripped-up pages of writing and empty water bottles. There's an unmade bed and a desk scattered with schoolwork.

As Becca CONTINUES TO TALK IN VOICEOVER, we see the actions as she describes them. She hits the alarm clock on her crowded bedside table but accidentally knocks over a photo of her and a boy who looks very much like her, one could only assume her brother.

BECCA (V.O.)

I go on my phone for a second, but realize there are still no texts waiting for me... There never are.

Becca begrudgingly gets out of bed and drags herself to the bathroom, her hair is all knotted and her oversized t-shirt is all wrinkled. She looks in the mirror and uses her nails to pick at the imperfections on her face and cheeks. She lifts up the big t-shirt and looks at her body for a second, but quickly drops it back down. You can tell how insecure she is.

INT. BATHROOM - CONTINUOUS

Her bathroom is clean and empty. Above her sink is a large mirror.

BECCA (V.O.)

I get ready for school. I brush my teeth. I get dressed and run out of the house. My mom is usually fighting with my dad at this point. It's 6:45.

Becca is wearing a school uniform. The skirt is conservatively long and it's paired with an oversized cardigan.

She grabs a school bag the size of her torso and slowly makes her way to the kitchen while letting out a sigh.

INT. KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS

Dad and Mom are standing on the other side of the kitchen arguing behind the island.

MOM

Do you really think I'm gonna believe that you got back from "work" at four in the morning. Work?!

DAD

It was eleven at night, actually, and I was with friends.

As soon as they notice Becca, Dad exits and Becca trenches through the kitchen and past the island to Mom.

Mom puts on a painfully fake smile.

MOM

Good morning Honey. Ready to go?

INT. CAR - DAY

The car is in pristine condition but when Becca reaches into the glove compartment, to grab her earbuds, trash comes pouring out. The cup holders are taken up with diet cokes.

Becca reclines her seat.

She gathers the fallen papers. One reads "Divorce". Becca scurries to put it back into the glove compartment.

BECCA (V.O.)

I get in the car with my mom. In the car she tries to talk. I put in my earbuds and sit.

INT. SCHOOL HALLWAY- CONTINUOUS

The hallway is full of students socializing and laughing.

BECCA (V.O.)

I get to school and go straight to class at 7:15. It's fifteen minutes early but I'd rather sit in class than in the hall while people walk by me without knowing my name.

Becca speed-walks and slips through groups of students to the classroom and takes a seat in the back.

INT. CLASSROOM - CONTINUOUS

The classroom is clean. Old projects and posters decorate the walls.

The only other person in the room is the obviously uninvolved TEACHER. She sits with her to-go coffee cup while staring down at her phone and ignoring the abundant pile of ungraded papers in front of her.

BECCA (V.O.)(CONT'D)

I sit in class all morning. Taking notes and dreading the bell. It rings at 8:46. I run to the place I always go. The bathroom.

INT. SCHOOL BATHROOM - CONTINUOUS

The bathroom is covered in outdated tiles and chipped laminate. The stall is large and empty. Fully-clothed, Becca sits on the toilet with her elbows on her knees and a book on her lap.

BECCA (V.O.)

I sit. I sit in the stall furthest from the door. I sit and do work. I stay quiet so that the girls don't know I'm in there while they talk about me.

(beat)

The weird skinny girl who disappears out of class.

Two girls, dressed in their uniform skirts as short as they can go with the tightest polos they could find, walk in the bathroom and begin to admire their appearance and fix their hair in the mirror, while simultaneously silently judging each other. GIRL #1 gestures to the closed stall and grabs GIRL #2 by the arm.

GIRL #1

Shhhh. Someone's in here.

GIRL #2

It's fine. It's probably that Becca girl. Irrelevant.

Girl #1 rolls her eyes and laughs as Girl #2 drags her out of the bathroom.

BECCA (V.O.)

They leave, and I take a breath. Both relieved they left, and simultaneously shocked that they even knew my name. And disheartened that they already hate me. As soon as I know there is no one in the bathroom, I leave and go to my next class.

INT. THERAPIST OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

Mom and Dad's eyebrows are raised and the look of confusion takes root in their faces. Therapist sits at the edge of her chair looking straight at Becca. Becca's hands are by her side.

BECCA

I sit in the back and wait 'til lunch to return to the bathroom. I go back and forth until the bell rings at the end of the day.

EXT. PARKING LOT - DAY

Becca bypasses the lot full of expensive cars while staring at the ground, avoiding her peers.

BECCA (V.O.)

I sneak over to the car avoiding eye contact and really any contact at all, with anyone.

INT. CAR - CONTINUOUS

Mom is sitting in the car, her face lit up with the same artificial smirk. Becca gets into the car and quickly puts in her earbuds and once again reclines her seat back avoiding every interaction with her nosy mom.

MOM

So... Any new gossip today? Any drama? How was school?

BECCA

I don't know. It was fine.

Mom takes a breath, rolls her eyes and begins to drive.

INT. KITCHEN - CONTINUOUS

The kitchen is clean and the fridge is full. The house is quiet.

BECCA (V.O.)

Once I'm home I grab a snack.

Becca looks through the fridge but doesn't grab anything.

BECCA (CONT'D)

On the way to my room I pass my brother's room. The door is always closed.

She opens the door.

INT. BROTHER'S ROOM - CONTINUOUS

The room is full of his medals and achievements. Photos of him and his parents fill the room and dead flowers sit on the bed side table next to a trophy that says "#1 Kid".

BECCA (V.O.)

While my parents argue upstairs, I usually go into his room for a few minutes. I like to remember him.

INT. THERAPIST OFFICE - DAY

Mom's face drops and she suddenly clenches her jaw as she reacts to what Becca just said.

MOM

You go to his room?

The therapist shoots an arm at her, signaling quiet. She then encourages Becca to continue. After a beat, she does.

BECCA

I really miss him.

INT. BROTHER'S ROOM - DAY

Becca lowers herself onto the end of his bed with her legs crossed. She just sits there.

INT. THERAPIST OFFICE - DAY

The room is silent. The only sound is the air conditioner BLOWING.

BECCA

He was the one person in this world I knew I could tell anything to and the one person I wish I could still tell everything to.

Becca's voice starts to break. She looks at her feet and quickly recovers.

BECCA (CONT'D)

Umm... I... I go to my room and I do my work. I usually have too much work to leave my room for dinner.

INT. BECCA'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Becca sits on her computer doing work. Her stomach is growling but she ignores it and continues to type.

BECCA (V.O.)(CONT'D)

Once I'm done with my work I usually just go to bed.

Becca gets into bed and cries herself to sleep. Her parents walk in and she quickly goes quiet, pretending to be asleep. Once they leave, the crying continues.

INT. THERAPIST OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

Her parents sit on the end of the couch: frozen, speechless. The room is completely silent. Becca finally looks up from her nails and stares expectantly into the therapist's eyes.

CUT TO BLACK.

ELIZABETH SHVARTS

Play or Script | Staten Island Technical High School, Staten Island, NY

BRIGHTON BITCHES

Scene One

Present day. BABA 1 and BABA 3 play cards at a rickety old kitchen table in a Brighton Beach studio apartment. The room is spartan, save for some bottles of alcohol and glasses atop a checkered tablecloth, some plastic lawn chairs, and a giant Russian nesting doll, or a matryoshka, made of Styrofoam and wood center stage. We're not sure whether the BABAs can see it, or why it's there, but the audience is well aware of its presence.

BABA 1

(in a semi-thick Eastern European accent)

Ladies, who's ready for another round?

BABA 2

(from across the stage)

Of what? Durak or vodka?

BABA 2 waves a vodka bottle like a wand as she walks upstage left to the kitchen table.

BABA 2 (CONT'D)

Come on, you know the stereotypes are true.

BABA 3 remains silent. While BABA 2 takes a seat, joining BABA 1 and BABA 3, BABA 3 stares intently at a smaller Russian nesting doll perched atop a windowsill downstage left. BABA 2 whacks her with a copy of The New York Post.

BABA 1

Ty chto, gluhaya? (nudges BABA 3)

BABA 3

Huh?

BABA 1

It's your turn to play, Sveta.

(taps on BABA 3's pile of cards.)

Unless you admit defeat.

BABA 2

Don't be shy, take a card. "Be fruitful and multiply", just like Esther in the old story. (snorts)

BABA 3

Oh no, I was...

BABA 3

(gestures towards the windowsill.)

It's just, (inhales sharply) it's been a long time since I've seen matryoshka (rises from chair and moves toward the window, swiveling the nesting doll)
Reminds me of back then. Where'd you get it, Nadya?

BABA 1

Oh that old thing? Bought it at the 89-cent store. Storekeeper said it was real but I swear I saw him rip the little "Made in China" sticker off, the bastard.

BABA 3

(wistfully)

Ever wished you... were a matryoshka?

BABA 1 and BABA 2 stare at BABA 3.

BABA 1

You drunk already, Svet? Not that I care, but remember, Alexei has poker tonight so you're the designated driver...

BABA 3

I'm not drunk.

BABA 1

Or high...

BABA 3

(sighing)

Could you just answer the damn question?

BABA 2 nurses an empty vodka bottle as if deep in thought.

BABA 2

A matryoshka. A little wooden doll? That thing is like Barbie with 8 babies and none of the sex appeal.

BABA 3

Barbie is a children's toy, Olya.

BABA 2

And?

BABA 1

I mean, I wouldn't mind looking like one. Especially with those sexy hips. (does a belly dance ala Shakira in "Hips Don't Lie")

BABA 3

No, I mean... don't you ever wish you were something- more than yourself? Mama used to say I was just like one. A matryoshka. And to find out who I really was, I'd have to dig through layers and layers of old and young, wise and foolish, until finally, you struck the center and found the tiniest doll, the "you" no one knew was there. And eventually, these little dolls would become a little girl of your own! The fruit of your womb.

BABA 2

(snorts)

Bullshit. One daughter is more than enough for me. Besides, we have nothing in common and she wants nothing to do with me. Did I tell you she changed her last name?

BABA 1

BABA 3

No!

No!

BABA 1

(bowing head in prayer)

Bog have mercy.

BABA 2

I couldn't believe it either! She went from "Smalitsky" to "Small". Meanwhile she's got those sandbags hanging out of her chest like some prostitutka. (pushes up her own breasts for emphasis) Three generations of Smalitsky women fought for the right to have people say our name, our full name, and the suchka throws it all away... For what? Because "it's more convenient." (lights a cigarette) Convenient, my ass.

BABA 3

(pats BABA 2 on the shoulder)

It's all right, Olya. All the kids have some sort of crazy nicknames these days. "Slut, whore, hoe." (sighs) The world moves too fast for us, and now they're no different.

BABA 1

You know, I don't blame Alexis. As much as we might object - hell, as much as half the babas on Sheepshead Bay might object - she's right. Just because we can't keep up with the world doesn't mean we should keep them from catching up and if that means-

BABA 2 stands up so quickly she nearly knocks the table over.

BABA 2

Hiding, Nadya? Lying? Smoothing the edges of your big scary Soviet name so it tastes like American fucking apple pie?

(slams her first on the table, making BABA 1 jump)

BABA 1

You know that's not what I meant.

BABA 2

How can the world remember who we are when our own daughters don't?

Beat. BABA 1 purses her lips while BABA 3 continues staring at the nesting doll, unsure of what to say.

BABA 3

Well.. we're not going to forget about each other, are we? (clasps BABA 1 and 2's hands) Who needs the world when you have --

BABA 1

A tiny apartment on Brighton Beach with broken air-conditioning?

BABA 3

Something like that.

(smiles sadly)

Sometimes I wish I was a matroyshka. All painted smile and rosy cheeks and curves and nothing to worry about. Not like this old witch.

(gestures to her body)

I'm telling you, I find at least 5 gray hairs a day.

BABA 2

Ah where's the fun in that? We're old, not sterile! Us Brighton bitches have got plenty of kick in our step. (Raises shot glass) To being the badasses our daughters wish they were!

BABA 1

To never living in a nursing home!

BABA 3

To- us!

The women clink their glasses and chug a shot of vodka each. Suddenly, the stage goes dark and rotates like a turntable, while BABA 1, 2, and 3's bodies freeze, a deck of cards clenched in each hand. Lights dim.

Scene Two

Lights on. Though we can still see the backs of BABA 1, 2, and 3 and their kitchen, the front of the stage is now a subway station in 1970s Coney Island. No rats or discarded newspapers are to be seen; instead the floor is a shiny yellow. Spotlight on SVETA, a teenage BABA 3. She clutches a nesting doll as she struggles to keep pace with MAMA, who anxiously checks her watch and scans a map.

MAMA

(under her breath)

Kakovo hrena ... Why is map so confusing? All I see is lines and numbers with streets I can't pronounce. K-k- Kenny? Kanye? (rotates map continuously)

SVETA

It's Coney Island, Mama. Could you please slow down? (breathing heavily) We just got off boat. Why'd we have to leave in first place? Did you and Papa do something wrong? Did I? I miss my friends and ocean and...(beat) You took my whole life away and all I have left is stupid doll! (stomps foot on the subway floor)

MAMA lets the map flutter to the ground and turns around to face SVETA.

MAMA

(voice shaky)

Why we have to left? Here-

MAMA rummages in her purse. After a few moments, she shoves a passport in front of SVETA's nose. The front is embossed with the Soviet hammer and sickle. She flips open to a page.

MAMA (CONT'D)

(prodding her picture)

See what says? "Yevrei" I vos born in Kiev just like any other tax-paying mensch and yet I am not citizen of Ukraine or Soviet Union. I will never be. I am zhyd . If lucky, I just other. This is why we move. So if I have to pack up four lives into chemodan and sleep on floor for you to have freedom to call yourself an individual, or be treated with dignity, then you should be grateful for this "stupid doll".

Beat. SVETA lowers her head, not knowing what to say. We hear a train approaching, and it makes a screeching sound as a wooden car painted like the F train parks in the middle of the stage, obscuring BABA 1, 2, and 3 from view.

MAMA

Ahh there's train! Come on Sveta, ve'll miss it!

MAMA grabs SVETA, who tightens her grip on the nesting doll, ever polished and smiling. The subway doors swing open. A man spits a wad of gum on the otherwise spotless subway floor, inches from SVETA, while an elderly woman in a shawl blows her nose in a copy of The New York Times.

MAMA

To the land of milk and honey!

CONDUCTOR (O.S)

Stand clear of the closing doors, please.

SVETA and MAMA step into the car. Lights dim.

Scene Three

We're back in the kitchen interior with the BABAS, who unfreeze. BABA 1 and 2 stare at their cards intently while they play the final round of Durak. BABA 3 lurches forward, as if she just stepped off a moving train.

BABA 1

(throws down card)

Bitá ! I win!

BABA 2

Bitch.

BABA 2 tosses her deck on the kitchen table, cards scattering everywhere.

BABA 2

I call rematch.

BABA 3

We've played almost 20 rounds of Durak, Olya. Isn't there something else we can do?

BABA 2

Sveta, honey. We're middle-aged women with menopause and chronic back pain. Who would expect anything less, after carrying the future of our families on our shoulders for the past 20 years? This is the epitome of fun.

BABA 2 props her feet up on an empty lawn chair and lights a cigarette, taking a long puff of smoke.

BABA 3

What the hell, Olya?

(slaps cigarette from BABA 2's hand).

You can't smoke indoors, or- at all!

BABA 2

Whatever, mom.

BABA 3

I just don't want you to get hurt.

BABA 1

(crossing her arms)

It's really very selfish of you, Ol. You could lose your teeth, or get cancer!(brightly) Don't you want to live to see your grandkids and get drunk with us for another 20 years?

BABA 2

And have you yentas and my pain-in-the-ass daughter nagging me in the nursing home? Hell no. I haven't had a good time in a long time and goddamn if anyone tells me what I can and can't do in this country anymore...(scoffs) "Freedom."

BABA 1 and BABA 3 reshuffle the deck, while BABA 2 pushes in her chair and walks towards the windowsill, cigarette in hand, and clears her throat.

BABA 2

When I came to New York, I was told that the roads were paved with gold and candy. Yes, the roads were paved with gold and each block was lined with neat little houses, not subsidized apartments like we had back in Volgograd, but cream colored colonial houses and in each one a husband, a wife, and two-and- a half children. How a woman gives birth to half a child is beyond me, but anything is possible here. The American dream. (spreads her arms exaggeratedly and stares into the distance) What they forgot to tell me was that the American dream was just a dream. (laughs bitterly) But I should be thankful, I suppose. (Clasps hands together and sinks to her knees on the stage) Oh thank you Uncle Sam, for my 500 square foot studio with a front view of seagulls dive-bombing each other at 5 in the morning. Thank you, Uncle Sam, for my deadbeat husband who owns 20 pairs of muscle shirts but refuses to buy me one nice dress and for my daughter who likes to tell me exactly what I can and cannot spend my money on when she's 100,000 dollars in debt for a liberal fucking arts degree. Thank you, thank you Uncle Sam, because at least I got this little bundle of joy (grabs the nesting doll from the windowsill) to remind me how far I've come.

BABA 2 freezes and pants heavily, shaking both from rage and the 98 degree city heat. BABA 2 sets the cigarette down and pulls the smaller nesting doll close to her face, examining its intricately painted eyes and lips.

BABA 2
(to the doll)

You have no idea how good you have it.

BABA 2 strides back to the kitchen table and takes her seat. In the background,
BABA 1 and BABA 3 shuffle cards.

BABA 1
(slurred)

Is that an 8 or infinity?

BABA 3

Neither. That's a queen.

BABA 1
(spills vodka on dress)

Damn right I am!

BABA 2

You are the most- (slaps BABA 1's hand) don't look at my cards!

BABA 1

Ugh, you're no fun.

BABA 2

Only losers cheat.

BABA 1

"Only losers cheat," who are you, Mr. Rogers? How do you think we got out of ESL classes so early?

BABA 2

Speak for yourself, my brain was a sponge back then!

BABA 1

I sat right behind you in that class. You copied the words off your hands just like every other Russian immigrant son-of-a-BITCH (giggles)

BABA 2

I swear to God, if you don't-

While BABA 1 downs her fifth shot of vodka, BABA 3 slaps down the Ace of
Diamonds.

BABA 3

Bit!

BABA 1 slams her glass on the table and stands up to face the audience, the
spotlight shifting to her space on the stage. She snatches the nesting doll from
BABA 2, swaying before she gains her footing.

BABA 1

Wooo! I haven't drank that much since New Year's Eve, 1999. When I came to America, they told me there was no such word as "no." Maybe I was just bad at English, but you get the point. If you wanted something, you worked for it and you got it goddamn it, because if you could get out of that shithole, you could get anything and all you had to do was give back. Well, I gave every piece of myself to help them prosper in this beautiful country. I gave my soul to Uncle Sam, and what does he give me? Nothing! I can't do anything in this goddamn country. No smoking, no drinking, no carbs after 9 pm. All three of my boys Alex, Misha, and Pavel grew up with perfect English, so why "thank you" is not part of their vocabulary? (beat) I cannot find the words...

BABA 2
(clearly drunk)

Whose turn is it again?

BABA 3
(also drunk, but not quite as much as BABA 2)

Does it matter?

BABA 2

BITA!

BABA 1 hobbles back to the kitchen table and hands BABA 3 the nesting doll.
BABA 3 walks upstage and takes a deep breath.

BABA 3

I wish I could say it all worked out. I tried my best to build a life, to build a family. "Be fruitful and multiply," my mother told me when we got off our first train in Coney Island, but Esther didn't have a mortgage and a crippled vagina. (laughs) At this point, I've probably seen the inside of the OB/GYN more

than my own bedroom. (voice breaking) I tried so fucking hard, you know. Maybe God just thought I'd be better as an empty vessel. A hollow nesting doll, no life to pass on.

BABA 3 cradles the nesting doll but when she glances back at the kitchen table, BABA 1 and 2 aren't there. Instead, the two women rise, BABA 1 doing so with much grunting, and join BABA 3 downstage. They face the audience, drunkenly pointing their fingers at the crowd. A red spotlight shines on each BABA as they speak.

BABA 2

I got-

BABA 1

I gave-

BABA

I lost-

The giant nesting doll in the center of the stage shakes each time a BABA speaks.

BABA 1

My love.

BABA 2

My dream.

BABA 3

Myself.

The giant nesting doll cracks, wood and paint splintering everywhere, though the women don't notice in their passionate pleas.

And now I'm just a Brighton-

Lights fade to blue. BABA 1, 2, AND 3 whip around, facing each other.

BABA 1
Bitch.

BABA 2
Bitch.

BABA 3
Bitch.

End play.

MAIA SIEGEL

Creative Nonfiction | Interlochen Arts Academy, Interlochen, MI

Everything Lies Flat

Juliet's father was flying the plane, and I knew he had some issues, because once he cornered me in their kitchen and argued with me for an hour about the state of Israel while his wife and daughter stood silently on the stairs. Juliet's father handed us headsets in the plane. Juliet's mother and dog got in the other seat up front, the dog's white fur brushing the plane controls.

Flight MH370 disappeared somewhere over the Indian Ocean when I was 12 years old. I guess the theory everyone agreed upon was that the pilot crashed it on purpose. Ever since then, every time I get on a plane, I greet the pilot in a voice a few octaves above my regular one. I don't know where I got the idea that being cute would save us all from a mass murder-suicide. It feels important to stare at the pilot, though, to make him know I'm watching for an eye twitch that seems unhinged.

If a pilot seemed unhinged, would I get off the plane? Or would I sit silently and wait?

My friend Juliet from summer camp had a private plane, and I was not allowed on it by my parents. We all knew it, but that wasn't going to stop my friend, her mother in leather pants, her father in the pilot's seat. I was going with them in the plane, on a day trip to the Hamptons. My parents would never know, they said. I followed along to the tarmac with the hot young traffic controller, a bag of sugary granola in my hands. I told them if we crashed, I wanted the last taste in my mouth to be sweet. They laughed.

The voices piped in through the plane headsets were those of Persian Jews, Juliet's father said. Different from Juliet's family, from whatever type of Jew I was. Persian Jews all had huge mansions on the water, like mafia palaces. They were gauche, he said. Their planes were big, their piloting licenses bare-bones, he said. Their voices were muddled through the speakers. When Juliet's father mocked the Persians, we'd miss the traffic controllers' directions, and we would have to phone in and ask for them to repeat what they'd said. We stayed on the tarmac for an hour, listening to a constant stream of voices asking to be allowed to go.

The take-off was mechanical, automatic. Juliet's father sat there, barely touching the controls. The dog squirmed in Juliet's mother's arms. Once we were up in the air, Juliet's father went limp. Silent, eyes closed. Dead. Just lying there. The controls flashed and I looked at Juliet. She was reading a magazine.

In May 2018, a Boeing employee sent an email about the cover-ups involving the safety of Boeing 737 Max aircrafts. Many passengers had already died, entire planes in flames. The email: "I still haven't been forgiven by God for the covering up I did last year. Can't do it one more time...the pearly gates will be closed...."

I opened my bag of granola and started picking out the dried fruit, prepping my throat for a sweet end. We stayed like that for a bit, silent, motionless, suspended in air. I imagined a hand holding the plane. Like we were a toy. I imagined this hand dropping. I imagined this hand lifting me up. I started digging through the granola rapidly, ravenously.

He was just joking. He was just joshing with us, he said. He was alive. He could fly the plane, he was fine, totally fine, he said. He petted the whining dog beside him, its eyes crusty with bacteria. *I wasn't sleeping*, he said. He was resting his eyes, he was refueling. He was up now. We all were up.

Juliet's father turned the plane so we could look at the huge houses in the outer edges of the Hamptons, houses you could only reach by plane. The houses bubbled up on thin strips of green, locked in between large

squares of tennis courts and pools. I felt like I was viewing something secret, something I wasn't supposed to know about.

The pilot of flight MH370 turned the plane so he could look back at his hometown. He knew that it was for the last time. No one else did. No one else on the flight was conscious, knocked out due to severe depressurization—he was the only one able to look. What he saw was blue and green, probably. It was clear, probably. I wonder how much he could see, if he was too high up to see buildings, could only make out the outlines of the coast.

I held Juliet's hand the whole plane ride, tight, and I was worried she would think I was gay for it. A lot of what I did around Juliet seemed gay. The leather loafers, for one. The button-up shirts. The fact that every boy I pointed out as cute looked strangely, intensely female. The fact that, when we went to a New Year's party, a girl zeroed in on me for a kiss and I didn't pull away automatically. I said that the alcohol had stunted my response time, and Juliet still let me sleep in the same bed, deeming me free from blame. I was good at coming up with reasons to avoid the blow-up air mattress.

When we started circling the ground, Juliet's father told us all to shut up. This part was the only one that wasn't automatic. Juliet's mother pressed the dog to her chest. I pressed Juliet's fingernails into my palms, made tiny circles on her hand with my nails. The plane dipped, swerved. I imagined the hand holding us up, I imagined the hand with a tremor. I imagined the hand at rest. We circled towards the ground. No, we were shoved into the ground by the sky. Juliet's father said *Shit*. Juliet's father said *Not my best work*. Juliet's mother said *We're down now, aren't we?*

A private plane belonging to Jeffery Epstein was found rusting at an airport in Georgia. Juliet's father had been invited on this plane, once, at a party in Palm Beach. He declined. But what if he hadn't? He would've seen that everything in Epstein's plane lies flat to become a bed. Even the floors—they're padded. There's room for twenty-nine passengers, which is twenty-five more than Juliet's plane. The couches are bright red velour. The windows are tinted, as if anyone would be looking in from the sky. As if the passengers had to hide from a clown on the wing, an angel, a flock of geese.

In the Hamptons, the plane we came in looked so small compared to the others lined up on the tarmac. To exit, you had to step on the wing. When I looked back, I saw a small puddle of oil underneath the belly of the plane. All the other planes were dry underneath. I said nothing.

The Epstein plane's black book revealed more names of suspected co-conspirators than anything else. *New York Magazine* did a whole issue titled *The Black Book*. It was name after name after name. After riding in Juliet's plane, I was scared that she had a black book, too. If there was a record of me in the air, in that machine, I wanted to find it and destroy it. I felt vaguely wrong, like I had been trapped, or had done something against my will, even though I had willingly stepped into that plane. On top of that wing.

I wonder who flew the Epstein plane to Georgia. I wonder how they got back home.

The Hamptons jitney is a bus that takes you there from the city. Beachgoers, rich ones, stand in line for the bus. No, you can't call it the bus, or they get mad. It is the jitney, strictly the jitney. I stared at the jitney-riders with disdain. Time was flexible for me now, I had seen secret islands and beaches and houses that they couldn't. I could leave any time

I wanted. Except—I couldn't. Except—I would never go back to the Hamptons, because the jitney was expensive.

Juliet visited me where I live, in Appalachia. She came in the plane, piloted, again, by her father. The dog didn't come this time. The plane was too small to sail over the mountains, and so they went up and down each individual one. I loved that. She had scaled the Appalachian mountains in order to visit me. Yes, I loved that she had gone on an odyssey for me, tracing the ranges. It was a four hour car ride; she made it to me in an hour.

Juliet had me pick her up at the private wing of the airport, and I got lost on the way there; I didn't know such a thing existed. The entire airport was one-story, much smaller than the Wal-Mart a few roads down. The private wing looked like the DMV, but it had a popcorn machine and hot cookies. I felt like I was seeing something I wasn't meant to see. The Hamptons private islands had turned into rotating hot dog racks, and they still seemed so gorgeous, and rare, only revealed to me in flashes.

My Grandpa Stanley had a plane, apparently, before he went to prison. That sounds very dramatic, but it wasn't—he was a criminal defense lawyer, he got too close with one of his clients who had escaped the law, and then he was in jail. The family went from a good lawyer's salary to none, and so the plane was sold. I never met Grandpa Stanley, or saw the plane—this was all before my time. When I think of a criminally left-behind plane, I think of his.

Is his plane rusting in Georgia? Did he fall asleep at the pilot's controls? Would he have flown me somewhere? Would he have had that MH370 twitch in his eye? Would I have sat silently and gone with him anyway? Yes, yes. Yes.

My uncle trained to be a pilot, then stopped to take some photos for lingerie brands (and, once, pictures of Miranda Cosgrove twirling pearls around her feet) and then got too old to become a pilot for any real airline. Too old is thirty-five. He's now a customer service operator for a camera store. And him, would I let him fly me? Would I sit silently and hope he woke up?

After my grandfather Stanley died, my grandmother took up with her high school sweetheart, Victor. We all knew Victor would not reach the pearly gates. Victor ate sticks of butter like bananas, and had a bullet wound in his face. Victor said he had been a jeweler, then moved to Mexico to sell bibles with a druggie girlfriend, then was scouted by the Russian government to spy on the United States but refused. Victor and my grandmother threw canned goods at each other in a supermarket and were kicked out. The only respectable thing Victor did was make very intricate model planes, shiny ones that could really fly on miniature runways.

When Victor died, we cleaned out his apartment, and found his model planes hanging from the ceiling. When no one was looking, I put my hands on the underbellies of the planes. I imagined myself inside, a dog in the front seat, a fake-sleeping pilot. I held the underbelly and I felt it. I held the underbelly and I let my hand down and the plane was still hanging from the ceiling, yes, it would not fall.

YEJIN SUH

Short Story | Glen Rock High School, Glen Rock, NJ

My Neighbor Justin

Lying with Lucia was walking into the proverbial lions’ den. She knew it, and I knew it. What still fuzzed me up and made my eyes cross inelegantly, was how she knew this wouldn’t be a one-and-done deal from the start. This was practically forever. She’d signed her soul away for life. In the middle of doing it, I put a hand on her chest and said, “Wait.”

She cursed at me. “What?” She wore this hot biker strappy lingerie thing that I just couldn’t get a good grip on—maybe that was the point—and I could tell she’d been sinking mascara onto her waterlines. “What, Arthur?” She was sweating.

“I’ve been having dreams.”

She opened her mouth and closed it again, like a fish. “I didn’t know that,” she frowned. “They’re nightmares, aren’t they? I could tell you were having nightmares, as soon as I saw you. I knew there was something wrong with you.”

“Thanks,” I said dryly. I was kind of pasty, kind of short, and my hair shot up like lightning sometimes if I didn’t brush it. Other than that, I thought I was fine. My sister Kira always told me I resembled a Jingfenopteryx, which is a small birdlike dinosaur from the Cretaceous period.

“So tell me about your—” Lucia started, but I cut her off by closing my mouth over hers—not romantically, but like an open suction that rimmed around her entire mouth, lips and all. She reeled back in disgust.

Afterwards, we lie on the bed next to each other. She was on her phone, typing furiously.

“Who are you texting?” I asked.

“My boyfriend,” she said. “Such a tool.”

I nodded, feeling myself starting to drift off to sleep. After a strangely unidentifiable length of time, I blinked my eyes open blearily to find her propped up on one elbow, staring at my face. I garbled something unintelligible.

“So,” she said, “how do you feel? This was an important landmark in your life.”

“The same.”

“Well, at least you had the experience,” she said. “At least you can say, *Hey guys, I started college not a virgin*, or however you say things like that.”

“Technically I already started college as a virgin.”

“Oh, relax. School just barely started.” Lucia rolled out from under the covers and started to unslung the strappy biker thing from her chest, strap by strap. “Do you want to go grab lunch with me and my boyfriend?”

I conceded. It occurred to me later that Lucia, with her mass of curling black hair and bangs and seductively applied eyeliner and enveloping perfume smell, had chosen me as her latest deviance because I was a virgin. Or maybe it was to make me feel better, because even for a guy it wasn’t normal to be skipping class thrice a week just to lay in bed to do nothing but stare at the wall. Or maybe it was because I was a virgin. She even confirmed with me again during lunch.

“That was your first time, right?” she asked around a burger, and I nodded, watching her boyfriend tuck a lock of dark hair behind one of her ears, from which hung a tiny gold hoop. Then she asked, “Why aren’t you eating anything? Not hungry?” and I opened my mouth to reply but instead vomited all over the floor and promptly passed out.

*

My mom will tell anyone who asks that she moved into our suburban McMansion for the *windows*—yes, the windows, not the six-foot-two bronzed hunk of single surfer jock next door, but I digress.

The kitchen is on a higher floor than the living room, so when you stood at the sink doing dishes, you were omnipresent, watching everything through those wide, gaping windows that stretched from floor to ceiling: the neighbors’ latest public spat, the Jingfenopteryxes, the bobbing heads of my friends—of which I had few—wandering to my door.

I hadn’t opened windows today. Hadn’t opened the blinds in my own bedroom, either. It neared four PM, eyes burning from no sleep, and I stared listlessly at the *Star Trek* poster on my wall in nothing but socks, boxers, and a blue cotton shirt, all of them rubbing against my skin in the wrong way, making my body ache.

I knew my mom was standing outside my door. She thought she was stealthy—and maybe she had been, in the past—but now her breathing was ridiculously loud. Loud, angry breathing. In the end, she decided to talk through the door. “Arthur,” she said in a blanketed, civil tone, “I know you’re in there, and I know you know I’m here.”

I rolled over to face the other wall. Jesus Christ.

“I’m leaving in ten,” she continued, “with your father. Can you get ready by then?”

I stayed silent. She did too, for a few moments. I wondered how long it would take to blow her fuse this time. Usually took about a minute, but today she sounded particularly snappish, and maybe it would only take—

“You’re really not going to go,” she said, voice straining with disbelief. “Really. It’s been three weeks, Arthur. I know this is hard for you, but really, no one’s asking too much of you.”

“Honey,” sounded Bruce’s voice from downstairs. “Let’s go.”

“Seriously,” my mom protested, flinging open the door, “Arthur is not coming with us. Can you talk some sense into this child? What is wrong with you?”

“Give him some time,” Bruce said uneasily. “Let’s go, I have an appointment at three, can’t be late.”

“It’s been weeks. There is something wrong with him. After *all* he’s done for you, Arthur.”

“I’m right here,” I retorted loudly, trying to strike that perfect balance between pissed-off and moody.

It worked. My mom snapped open her mouth to say what exactly she thought about me being *right here*, but luckily Bruce appeared in the doorway like a ghost. “Honey,” Bruce said again, putting a hand onto her shoulder. I stared. He didn’t make eye contact with me. “Time.”

After a few long moments, I heard my mom storming out and heading downstairs. Bruce lingered in the doorway.

“This has been fun, but you can go now, Bruce,” I said, ‘cause I knew he hated it when I called him that.

I felt the bed dip as he sat down. “Let’s have a talk, you and I, Arthur. Man to man.”

Man to man. That’s what Justin would always say. I don’t think he actually ever knew what it meant. Man to man game of football, man to man Subway lunch. On Saturdays when my mom would be called out on emergency shifts dawn to dusk he would take me out to the city, buy me hot aluminum-crikkled gyros from street carts that I balanced between my fingers so we could watch strangers loll around the square—purse snatchers and break dancers and naked girls painted in the American flag. So how’s school? he’d ask, and I’d stutter about my math teacher being hard and he’d ask, Hot or not, and I’d say, Not, but my ears told him otherwise, and he’d tease, and it would make me giggle in spite of myself. We always got along like that, I never really could help it.

“No,” Bruce was saying, “You’re getting a job this summer. Okay? I’m making sure of it. You’re going to go out and do some work.”

“What?” I stared at his looming, moon-like face from my pillow. He needed to clean his nostrils out. “I don’t need a job. Nowhere’s hiring this late, and I already have money.”

“This isn’t an option, Arthur. I’m telling you to get a job. The cinema in town is hiring.”

“Joe doesn’t hire anyone under twenty.”

“I just called and asked him about it yesterday night, he said he’ll make an exception for you. He knows you. You’re gonna call him up today, work out the schedule, and show up for work. Make me proud. As for the money... think of it as paying us back. For college. You gave us quite a scare.”

Us. As if he’d contributed. “I didn’t lose any of my scholarships.”

“Yeah, but you almost did. Think of your job as repayment for that potential loss of hundreds of thousands of dollars.”

“That makes no sense. I’m repaying you money I never lost?”

“Come on. Your mom’s sitting fuming in the car right now. She’ll lighten up once she sees you heading out and working. Arthur, I’m worried about you.” It looked like it physically pained him to say it. “You know I’m here to... talk, if you need it.”

“I hate you,” I said with venom, propping myself up on my elbows.

Justin wasn’t saying *man to man* now. Justin was lying comatose at Brook Field Hospital fifteen minutes away, tubes running up his nose into his sickly, colorless face. At least, I assumed his face looked sickly, I hadn’t actually seen it for myself. And I assumed there was a heart rate monitor beeping regularly beside him, that dastardly rise and fall of a beat.

“Love you,” he replied, getting up to leave.

“No,” I said, suddenly feeling foul. “I hate you. Stop making this out like it’s to appease mom. It’s never been me and you versus mom. It’s never been me and you for anything. I have no idea why you’re even here. I know you don’t give two craps about my life, you barely know me. You’re literally a stranger to me.”

“Arthur—”

Then I heard the small creak of a footstep. “Kira,” I said sharply. She showed her face, fidgeting nervously. I looked at him again. “You’re making her go with you?”

“She wanted to come,” Bruce spread his hands. “Besides, she can’t be alone in the house all day.”

“Leave her here,” I said, the venom in my own voice surprising me. “I’ll watch her. She shouldn’t have to go see that. Just go, you and mom.”

I watched Bruce’s face settle into complacency, a quiet disappointment only betrayed by the tight purse of his lips. I knew what he was probably thinking, like my mom: *After all Justin’s done for you.* I laughed out loud at that thought, rolling over as nausea clenched my gut. “Yeah,” I said into the pillow. “After all he’s done for me.”

*

The first time I met Justin was actually very alarming. He stood outside the window in nothing but boxer briefs clutching a Frisbee to his chest, shark-tooth necklace dangling. My mom was at work, so I came down to open the screen door where we stood eyeing each other appraisingly. His hair wasn’t long and blonde and stringy like stereotypical surfer men, but dark and cropped. I said in hostile tones, “Why are you in boxer briefs?”

He rubbed the back of his neck sheepishly. “Laundry mishap. Have any detergent to spare? Also, want to play Frisbee?”

“No.”

“No? Listen, kid, it’s fifty-five outside, at most. And there’s a breeze,” he said, looking genuinely distraught. “Also, man to man? I know you just moved here, and I know you probably don’t like me all that much because I’ve been spending so much time with your mom. But she tells me you’re super smart. Like, prodigal. Precocious. I thought we could hang.”

“I don’t want to hang. You clearly lack common sense if you can’t match your clothes to the forecast. Even my sister Kira could do that blindfolded, and she’s eight. And I don’t have detergent.” I stepped back and let the screen door slam satisfyingly in his face, glaring at him through the screen.

“Quite a mouth you’ve got on you,” he said incredulously. “How old are you?”

“Twelve.”

When it became clear he wasn’t going to leave, I turned to march back upstairs. He called after me, “I hate this kind of weather.”

“Why?” I snorted, not stopping.

“It’s like a mean prank. The sun’s out, shining and in full force, but it’s freezing outside. You ever look up at the sun on days like this and think, *Are you serious?* Man to man, if I could have a talk with the sun, I’d tell it off. It’s just up there looking nice and hot for laughs, when it’s really too high up to be of any real use right now, and we’re all just feeling chilly outside. I always hated that. I mean, don’t you?”

There were about a million things I wanted to say right then, starting with *No one cares about your weird weather obsession and most importantly, The sun isn’t actually higher up, that would imply that the Sun is moving away from the Earth regularly when Earth really just has an elliptical orbit and seasons arise due to the tilt of its axis, and the sun’s actually closest to the planet in the dead of winter—*

But he stood there with this smug, punchable grin on his face like a squashed-nose pug. I imagined kicking that expression off his face and then eviscerating him. “Not a Frisbee guy, huh?” he said. “What do you want to do, then?”

“Nothing.”

“Well, we’ll think of something.”

*

“Yeah, you’ve told me this before,” Lucia sighed, scrolling through the screen propped up in front of me for ticketing times. Usually I’d usher her out of the booth, but it was slow today—every day was slow in a small town cinema. And it didn’t smell romantically like butter.

“But don’t you think—”

“Arthur,” she said slowly, “You need to go visit him. Before it’s too late.” She stared at the screen. “You guys are doing a 10-year anniversary *Les Misérables* screening?”

“...Yeah.”

“That’s a thing?”

“I don’t know. Maybe Joe wanted to do it. He likes stuff like that.”

“I think I’ll buy a ticket for that.” She glanced at me sideways. “*Les Mis* is one of my favorite stories, you know.”

“Okay.”

“You know who my favorite character is?”

I rung up her ticket and frowned.

“It’s Eponine,” Lucia continued, “She’s, like, the most interesting character in the whole story. Because of her undying, beautiful, impossible love for Marius. Like, her love for him isn’t just regular love. It’s a reflection of her own imperfections. She’s broken, yet so brave, and sacrifices everything for him, even if it means losing him. But in the end, she still dies in his arms, and she’s redeemed through her love.”

I nodded slowly. “Okay.”

“Yeah.”

“You think you’re being subtle.”

“Mmm.”

“Let me rephrase—did you think that was subtle?”

“I’m just saying, Arthur,” Lucia sighed, rubbing the stub between her fingers, “She died in the end.”

“A little dramatic, don’t you think?” I asked. She just stared at me.

*

“Jesus Christ,” I murmured, heading to my backdoor, head throbbing. It was a good thing, I decided, that this was sort of a pity job, or else I wouldn’t have been let off the hook so early. After Lucia left a migraine had begun to wash up the back of my neck, relentless. I moved to swing open the door carelessly before I heard the quiet hum of voices wafting out to the backyard, and something that sounded suspiciously like my name. I froze, strained to hear.

“... not like him,” My mom was saying, and another low husky voice joined in. Lucia. Bruce then asked a question, too faint to make out.

“...feelings run deeper than that,” Lucia replied, “...or I think maybe...”

“Deeper?”

Then they all fell silent.

Carefully, heart pounding, I retraced my steps back to my car, started up the engine, and sat there. Holding the steering wheel too tightly,

waiting as the headache grew in intensity. I watched as the front door popped open and Kira came rushing out, nosing through my window. “Arthur,” she said urgently. Her brown hair, cropped short like a boy’s and feather-like, made her resemble a small flightless bird. “They’re talking about you in there.”

“I know,” I said. “How’d your tutoring go?”

“Fine. We did some algebra. Lucia’s good at algebra.”

“That’s good. Kira, listen—Does Lucia talk about me to you?”

“Lucia? Sometimes, yeah.”

“What does she say?”

Kira fidgeted. “She—well, she told me not to bother you so much. ‘Cause you’re going through things. I guess.” Her voice dropped a few octaves. “Mom said we’re going to the hospital today. Are you coming?”

I shook my head, fingers tightening on the wheel.

“I was mad at you, at first, for not coming,” she said.

“I could tell.”

“But I asked Lucia about it, and she said it was just because you miss him. But that didn’t really make sense because I miss him, too, but I’m visiting. And she said—” Kira peered at me sideways. “Are you in love with him?”

I shut my eyes briefly. “No, Kira. Whatever Lucia told you is a load of bullshit. You don’t even know what that means.”

“Yeah I do. That’s kind of messed up,” she said darkly. “Justin’s like our dad. He’s like Bruce.”

“Yeah, no shit,” I said. And there was a voice in the back of my head, an all-too familiar voice, crooning, *C’mon do it for your mom your sister don’t tell don’t tell yourmom yoursister*. I looked at my sister then—with a know-it-all expression plastered across her face, but her eyes were still curious, still tentative. She was untouched—innocent, really.

I wanted to reach out of the car, grab her by the shoulders, and scream, *The things I’ve fucking done for you that you don’t even know. The shit I catch with my bare hands before it ever falls on you*. I wanted to pound her skull into the pavement, like some sick murderous revenge, and mom’s too, and maybe even Bruce’s, too, all three of them ground up into blood and bone, while I got to rage and toss around and scream. And maybe after that I would feel better, freer, truer, but then I’d turn around and see—and see—

I didn’t do any of that. Instead, I rolled up the window. “Don’t listen to Lucia,” I said again, weakly, before driving away.

*

“Are you aware,” Lucia snapped, bursting into my dorm at four in the morning, “that you just called me a whore?”

I blinked. “I didn’t call you a whore. The girl in your Gen Ed class did.”

“Then explain the text.”

“The text. The text where I said to reconsider your social appearance? Lucia, it’s four in the morning.”

“Right there. You called me a whore.”

“No, I didn’t—I never said you were a whore. I’m saying other people are labeling you a whore because, like, from an outside perspective, to people who know jack shit about you, you could be possibly, slightly, kind of be misjudged as like...” I trailed off.

“That’s rich, coming from you. What do you think people think of you? I’m pretty sure your RA thinks you moved out six months ago.”

“Please leave now. I’m having an actual problem,” I said, rolling to face the wall, “unlike you.”

“Or maybe you’re just a delusional fucking psychopath who can’t get a grip on reality, judging by the literal pharmacy in your bathroom cabinets.”

The bluntness of it sliced me across the middle. I sat up. My extremities suddenly felt cold—numb, even, tingling. “You saw.” My cabinet was locked for a reason.

“Shit,” she said, rubbing a hand over her face. “I’m sorry. Shit. I wasn’t—I—”

She deflated, then, and it chased the anger from me all too quickly.

Here she was probably thinking: *You’re not messed up in the head, I’m messed up in the head, too, probably way worse than you, but I just don’t want to show it*. “It’s okay. I get it,” I said.

She just looked at me. Now she probably thought: *You’re not a telepath*.

“Yeah,” I said, “But you know what I mean.”

She came to sit beside me on the bed, staring at the ground. I thought she’d probe into my official diagnoses, but the silence stretched on for so long that I thought she’d fallen asleep or was having a minor aneurysm. Right before I turned to look at her, she started to talk.

“Here’s the thing,” she was saying, “Here’s what I’m thinking. And you can stop me if I’m wrong or laugh in my face, whatever, but just hear me out. So a few months ago, we had sex.”

“Yes.”

“And then you fell into what is probably the worst depressive slump of your college life. And you won’t shut up about your neighbor Justin.”

I was silent at that.

“I know,” she said, “I’m not exactly the first person to be preaching on matters of the heart. You know I don’t—I don’t feel things, like that, really, for other people. It’s not personal or anything. I just never have. I get off on sex—I love sex, sure, God, I could just spend days just having sex, the feeling is indescribable and I couldn’t go a week without—”

“Lucia,” I said.

“Sorry. My point is, I like sex. But not the other stuff that comes with it. I have a boyfriend, but I don’t feel things for him. I’ve never felt things like that before. That’s just how I was born. It’s more like—a mutual sexual agreement. I think he just does it for his rep—I mean, can you even believe that? Rep? Like we’re in high school? But anyway—so I’m not exactly Cupid here.”

“Okay,” I said.

“But even if I don’t *feel* things for myself, I still think I can see it pretty clearly in other people. So here’s the thing, here’s what I’m thinking,” she said, and I nodded as if I didn’t already see where this was going, like a slow train wreck approaching. “I’m thinking sometimes in our life we’re pretty vulnerable, and scared, and we’re not really sure what’s going on in life, just that we feel kind of empty and left alone. So the first bright thing in our life we latch onto, maybe a little too much, maybe more than we’re supposed to, even if it’s not all that great in the first place, or wrong, or whatever. And then once you’re on, you can’t let go, and you spend your whole life thinking you know what you want, but it’s just so far out of conceivable reality that you just let it settle in the very back of your mind. Like something in your pocket. You always know it’s there, you just let it stay. And then there’s this entire world in your own head.

“And then you grow up. And we have experiences with other people, and the people themselves might not be that amazing or great, but the experience is something different—the experience makes you open up, and changes you, and maybe even guts you, and it makes you think some thoughts you shouldn’t, but also it makes you realize what you’ve been missing out on. You know? Like you always knew you were missing out on something, and you had an idea of what, but then you start to understand this entire world that’s just out of your reach, and you get the full extent of it. And in the end you’re still latched to that thing in your pocket, in the back of your mind, because it’s yours and you’ve had it forever. You can’t let go. And it makes you sick to realize you can’t let it go.”

She lapsed into silence. “Lucia, but—it hit me all at once, it’s—.”

“I know. It’s like... like putting eye drops in. You do eye drops? The first times I started putting them in, I really didn’t like it—like just poking this thing way too close to your eyeball—your poor, delicate eyeball—and squeezing juice all over it, like a violation. And then you keep doing it like ten times a day every day, and eventually it becomes a minor annoyance. And then I stopped. And then like a year later I started putting them in again and even though I was technically used to them I remembered in that moment how much I couldn’t stand them, made me sick to even look at them. So I chucked the bottle.”

I grimaced. “Ten times a day?”

“Chronic dry eye. Don’t look at me like that—I paid for the new bottle. Obviously.”

“So you’re saying right now, I just got the biggest eye drop of my life.”

“Enormous, like a drop the size of the planet. And it’s heading into your shriveled up, tiny sphincter-looking eyeball at this unimaginable speed and it made you flinch, that cold stuff heading in there.”

“Thanks for the description,” I said dryly. “And also, you’re not a whore.”

“You’re welcome. And I know.”

And I looked up to see that she was already looking at me—beaming, even, and I didn’t have the heart to tell her she was so far off the fucking mark I couldn’t even see the target anymore.

*

The first time I met Justin, I saw him standing outside through the windows clutching a Frisbee to his chest in nothing but boxers. I ran down to the screen door to glare at him.

“Hey, kid,” he said gravely, licking his lips with his pink tongue. “You wanna play a game?”

“Stranger danger,” I said, unimpressed.

“C’mon, kid,” he said. “Think of your mom. D’you think she’d be happy if you were mean to me?”

“I don’t like games.”

He nodded to something behind me. “New state-of-the-art gaming system, huh? I’ve been saving up for that for months.”

“Clearly unsuccessfully.”

“Okay, how about this,” he was bargaining, and I scowled because I’d never agreed to the bargaining phase, which would soon inevitably lead to the agreement phase, and somewhere in between terms were included that dictated Justin could come in. “I order us a veggie pizza, we play games. C’mon, multiplayer’s more fun.”

*

Lucia had left me an hour ago. She’d been pressed up against me—not by choice, really, but because there were so many people packed in the room there was hardly a square inch of space to move in any direction. I’d accused her, “You didn’t tell me it was so... so...”

“Neon?” Lucia said without turning around, slowly gyrating to the music. I was thankful that she’d chosen to wear nothing but black, because anything else would’ve lit up under this lighting like a goddamn apocalyptic foreshow, and the last thing I needed was to spend an entire night staring at the backside of some paintball-laser-gun--arcade vomit glitter mash of color that made me feel vaguely epileptic. Lucia, studying a shot glass of what literally resembled jelly molded over, asked “Does this look good to you? Ghost shot. Should I drink it?”

“Drink? I think you’d have to chew through that. Which tells me that you shouldn’t,” I replied. She’d just laughed and disappeared into the crowd.

Now I was really pressed on all sides by this fumbling, churning neon mass that made me want to sit in a cave of darkness for hours. I was high. There was this pleasant buzzing sensation that started near my groin and was working its way up and down my legs, body awash in this strange, tingling pleasure that kept on going and going and—

It was my phone. I sighed, slipped it out of my pocket.

10 missed calls, 5 missed messages from BRUCE

BRUCE: Art, pick up?

BRUCE: Really important u’ll want to pick up for this

BRUCE: Where are you??

I stared at my screen and simply stopped moving.

Somehow I found the exit, pushed my way out, and sat on the cold road. There was a couple ten feet away from me doing... things, in the dark, but we didn’t really notice one another. I sat there for a long while before picking up one of Bruce’s calls on the third stretch of vibration.

“Arthur,” Bruce answered, sounding harried. “Jesus. Where’ve you been?”

“With Lucia,” I answered. “We were at a club, it’s really loud here.”

“Oh. Okay. Well, listen, son,” he said. And stopped. Beside me, one half of the couple moaned very loudly.

“Yeah,” I said. My lips were numb.

“I know... I know we’re not on the best of terms right now, and I hate to be the one to bring you this news, I...” His voice trailed off in my head as I listened as if from far away, barely there. After what seemed like an eternity of him talking and me nodding absentmindedly even though he couldn’t hear my nods, I murmured something unintelligible through the phone and went to hang up abruptly.

“Wait,” he said. “Arthur. Your mom and I want you to know—we understand, really. We’re not judging you. I’m sorry—for not being there like I should’ve. I know Justin filled that hole, I do. And I know, whatever kind of person you are, it doesn’t matter to me—to us, silly things like your sexuality, it’s your life. And we—”

I hung up.

One-half of the couple moaned again. I shot them a half-hearted glare. The backdoor swung open to reveal Lucia glossed in a faint sheen of sweat. I guess something must’ve shown on my face, because she immediately dropped down on the ground next to me. She said, “Arthur.”

Once, when I was younger, Justin took us on a trip to Alaska. On our first day we all piled in this helicopter and flew over this beautiful glacier in the southern peaks, and we trekked up one side of it. At the top I knelt down to watch the ice—because wouldn’t you believe it, the ice was like a moving thing, like it was alive, and it had these arteries running through it like bloodstreams, and I saw this quick flash of green in one of the veins. I looked closer to see this little emerald bit, and I was sure that I’d found a rare gem of some kind like the explorer I was, a solid bit of beauty that I could excavate and bring home, that the lands of Alaska had pressed up just for me.

Of course a few minutes later Justin examined it under the ice and told me it was just the Trident mint gum that must’ve fallen out of my mouth the moment I knelt down. But before that, it was just my bare fingers plunging in the icy water, trying desperately to grab at this jeweled bit sinking down further and further into nothing, where eventually it would become a glint in my eye, and then nothing. It was disappearing before my very eyes, the light.

“Oh, Arthur,” Lucia said mournfully, sitting and wrapping an arm around me. I turned my head to look at her, and she was watching the ground. She didn’t say anything else. Vaguely I smelled her vanilla perfume, the strange feeling of tight latex across my arms, the smudge of eyeliner across one of her collarbones—but I wasn’t really seeing her so much as through her. All at once I had this strange, unexplainable urge to kiss her—no, not kiss her, bury my face into that juncture of her neck— and then a wave of nausea hit me like a freight train. Someone exited behind us and accidentally sloshed a few drops of beer on my back. I closed my eyes and felt them slide down my back, slimy and fast, like cold fingers trailing down each of my vertebrae. When I opened my eyes, she was watching me. For a moment I thought I’d been figured out—that it was written plainly on my face.

“That bad?” she said softly.

“No,” I said, feeling this sick relief flush through me, even though I desperately wanted her to read through me, be telepathic, to tell the truth.

“When?”

“Like an hour ago, apparently. Flatlined. Not unexpectedly.”

“I’m sorry.”

I looked at her. “You don’t get it. I lied.”

“About what?”

“When I told you I was a virgin. At school. I’m not a virgin.”

She blinked at me, giving me a squeeze around the shoulders. “Let’s get you home. I told you not to drink the ghost shots.”

“Lucia,” I said, putting everything I had into my voice, which was admittedly not that much. “Lucia.” I worked my mouth, but nothing came out. “Do you ever... do you ever remember things—like, in different ways?”

“Arthur—”

The words rushed out. “Like sometimes you remember a moment one way and sometimes another way, but that’s impossible, right? It had to have happened one way or the other. And I don’t—the truth, it—”

“Sssh.” she dropped her head on my shoulder. “Sssh, it’s okay, Arthur. You don’t have to speak. It’s okay.” Nonsense words, soothing words. And I clutched the collar of my shirt, pressed it up against my eyes, wanted to scream.

*

First time I met Justin I didn’t hear him come in because I was gaming. My mom always said there was a kind of detective in me, like a Sherlock Holmes or maybe a Batman, uncovering clue after clue. But a detective has to love the thrill of the fight, too. They gotta love the hunting and the bleeding and be ready to play bad cop-good cop. I destroyed the absolute knuckles off these game demons, slicing and beheading and electrocuting, and my headphones were pretty nice, too, new and sound-proof, and I never heard Justin come in. The goons on my screen were like futuristic cyborg-human hybrids clawing after me in some cyberpunk city, and I liked watching their neon violet and electric

blue guts and blood splatter across my screen, and they were so pink—bubblegum pink—like the back of Justin’s gums, all the way back, this raw flesh, they were crooning to me, saying things, and the monsters were dying one by one, dropping heavily, and I imagined I was playing a game, that my controller was gripped tight in my hand, instead of my eyes on this wall, this wall of flesh. pink in between my fingers, sloppy and wet, preening *That’s quite a mouth you’ve got on you*. I watched the automatic vibration of my unattended controller on the couch as I died in my game over and over again, pummeled by pink gross fleshy monsters, and I watched myself die, *C’mere, sit down, Let’s play a game, man to man, man to man, mantomantoman—*

Later, at dusk, when the sun was slopping over into this cocktail sherbet mess of pinks and oranges, I watched, through the open windows, my mom’s Camry pull into the driveway. The single finger of smoke unfurling into the sky was really what gave him away—sitting on the porch, out of my view. From this point I could only see my mom’s face looking down at him, lips moving soundlessly, smile lines crinkling. I watched them for a moment or two, probably longer than necessary, before I slid my windows shut. Slowly, so no one would hear.

ELYSE THOMAS

Poetry | School for Advanced Studies – Wolfson, Miami, FL

for sky-soft brown boys

“I know a boy who is sky-soft brown.”
—Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*

sky-soft brown boys don't melt
into seasons, they stutter into them.

shoes scuffing summer
as they trip backwards into fall.

like leaves, they change color:
first black then purple then blue.

a bruise growing on the pavement
they float above. here, black boys

are angels holied by a brown sky.
watch them stare through you

with their gaping, pothole eyes.

•

on new year's: boys, sky-soft
& brown, watch fireworks

wound the air like a bullet.
they crush ice below their feet

& call it dancing, call it music.
we pretend we're not staring

but we are & they notice.
they snowball down the sidewalk,

tumble winter to ash.
wake up in the morning,

sweating a pool of snowflakes.

•

in spring, black skin peels
off of bone & falls around us

like rain. we strip naked
& stick our tongues out.

nothing is as sweet as a boy that blooms.
nothing will ever be this holy.

press your hands together in prayer
& thank them for this.

sleep now in their afro garden.
tomorrow, we'll untangle ourselves

from a black boy on our way out.

•

don't call them missing.
they are still here slicing

oranges into smiles.
tangy & spilling with pulp,

the boys drift on popsicle stick wings
into their sticky, brown sky.

don't be afraid when the sun reaches
down into them & licks their bones

clean of darkness. their shoelaces
stringing through the clouds.

this time, they do not fall.

Self-Portrait as Mixed & Water

Why you talk white? Like my aunts with the bleached skin & blue contacts. The ones that boom down the beach, *Get out of the sun.* Waving their arms like seagulls skimming saltwater. How these women fear blackness like my death. Hide me in the shadows of umbrellas so my skin never rusts copper.

They have raised me to answer to niggas *that only mess with them pretty, little lightskins.* Boys that ask, *Where you from? Like from, from?*

& I think: I found myself seven years ago when my best friend—ghostly & freckled—swiveled her loose hips around my curls like hula hoops; the first time I was full of whiteness.

Or maybe it was when a black woman told me, *Baby, life ain't a horror movie. No ghost finna run up in here & scare the black outta yo skin.* I understood then that this darkness was permanent.

The boy tells me, *I like my black girls watered down.* Like my seagull aunts, turned milky by skin whitening cream and oatmeal baths. He pulls me in now, his hands dipping below my waist, searching for seashells—I drown in his mouth.

KATHERINE VANDERMEL

Poetry | Bergen County Academies, Hackensack, NJ

Elegy with Singed Rope

I.

Divorced from bone, we are left
with snow tooth, jowl. The wind
chews stars through our wool.

Give them what they ask.

We shucked the corn we saved for ourselves.
Peach seeds, sugarcane, girl

harvests, passing through narrow hips
to rough hands: gifts for God.
What we have left: our fingers.

Door je tranen heen zul jij weer lachen, consolation
spread thin, marmalade melted over cornbread:
through your tears you will smile again.

II.

Come spring & the prairie is still white,
leeches ritual. Our friends: planted
north of the farm for five months now,

in the dirt of daemons. Men
of metal & dusk, eyes lit
with melted gold, teeth gleaming:

glasses of mint julep at sunfall.
That was the spring Father saw a pistol flicker,
the season of fallen oaks, of blazing

dewberry fields,
& charcoal leaves,
upturned.

III.

Nazi uniform, soldier in the grass. Every sun,
a new bride grows at His feet:
strands of golden hair held by singed rope.

Beyond the wrinkled bark ships stretch
over a skyline of ashes reaching
for more blonde hair for Dutch blood.

Unbandaged

after Jane Kenyon

When I was born, you hid
behind a pile of linen in the nursery, a shadow
bleeding into the knuckle-white
wall. I thought you were invisible
like the tooth fairy:

sending messages inside baby
bones, tied with red ribbon.

I was wrong—

five years later, I met you
formally in the Friesland dirt.
Into my arm you carved red craters.

Mother covered you with gauze, but I wanted
to keep you, unbandaged.

In the epilogue of my childhood,
I saw you again on the toilet. Carmine ink
running down my legs. I was forced
to hide you under my dress.

When war came, we wrote
on the asphalt until it was neither black nor grey. Words
smothered by smoke and soldier.

I have not forgotten your letters—

I realized you were following me
everywhere: colonizing the pure canvas
of my body, now overgrown
with your blood-pink orchids.

Brother's orchids, his hands covered
with cherry stains. Father's orchids, stems
of scars hatched along his back—

our cuts sterilized by the Reich,
our memories treated, wiped clean.

To the Germans, you are a promise
of heritage notched too deep. They want
to erase the heirlooms of our bodies:
the bloodline by which we are bound.

But I want to leave you
untouched, save your teeth-marks,
save the map of my silhouette.

Only by red pen poetry
can our bandages be peeled.

YASH WADWEKAR

Spoken Word | Phoenix Country Day School, Paradise Valley, AZ

A Tale of Two Browns

His city is cropping mom and pop shops,
To crop up new towers that stretch across blocks,
The smell of pot stopped,
The peaks of stocks topped,
He was raised in a place where bills have one face,
That's not his race,
That's not his race,
That's not his race,
But still, face it: he needs bills,
So he trades snow for dough,
Mom, no more pills,
Pop, no more kills,
Family, we can heal,
But shiny teal towers cost a fine to dine in,
And his pay doesn't find fine dining an option,
He tries buying a loan for a home he can reside in,
But his town is now white,
More fight is arriving.

He was raised in a place where bills have one race,
I was raised in a place where bills have one race,
That's not his face,
That's not my face,
That's not his face,
But still, face it: I have bills.

Stocks give me more, I might buy five films,
Or a contest for zeal,
Thirty-five dollar fees are heartbeats for me,
'Cause, to me, the government said: "Here's the deal,
You're brown but Indian, so take this meal,
And your innocence affirms that your wage is real,
I'm sensing dense digits,
You'll make sense for our country,
A brown white picket fence,"
So I'm the type of Indian who still has land,
So I'm the type of brown who's "in demand,"
So my house replaced *his* mom and pop shops,
So my high school stretches across blocks,
And too often I pretend to know *his* struggle,
Like "I'm brown too holmes, you're like my brother,"
Or "I'm black too, just a tad discolored,"
But I'm a trust fund baby, I expect my checks,
I'm not stopped by cops,
I bought TSA pre-check,
So I'm sorry.

I'm sorry for my pretending,
I'm sorry for pretending.

Punctuated

At the age of four,
I was plopped into kindergarten,
Red, yellow, and blue tiles,
Covered by a brown boy.

I was never reticent when it came to phonetics,
I never fretted with words,
Tongue twirling, gums swirling, the beauty,
Of language was never a question,
Until it was punctuated by English.

You see, the dialect in which I speak now,
Is not my mother tongue,
It's been tongue-tied, twisted, and twiddled with,
Anglicized from too many angles for all sides of me to comprehend.

At the age of four,
I forgot my own language,
Replaced Baba with Daddy and Aji with Granny,
Assimilation is a twelve letter word but I could spell it in the mirror,
Metaphorical, isn't it?
That's also a twelve letter word I happen to reflect on a lot,
I forgot my own language, I forgot Marathi, the first time I stepped out of my home,
And I never returned.

And I fear,
I fear that I will forget my culture before I get to share it with my child,
I fear that he will be able to pronounce the teacher's name before he can pronounce mine,
I fear that he will use American and Indian in two separate independent clauses,
I fear that he will be quick to define mutually exclusive,
I fear that Yash will become Josh and Deven will become Devin,
I fear that we are teaching our kids to spit on their mother's food because it doesn't smell like a peanut butter jelly sandwich,
I fear that our kids will sit on kindergarten floors all their lives never to realize that blue, yellow, and red make brown,
That blue, yellow, and red make brown.

At the age of sixteen,
Me Marathi parat shikto aahe,
Ani mala abhimaan ahe,
Mala abhimaan ahe,
I'm learning Marathi again,
And I'm proud,
I'm proud

ALORA YOUNG

Spoken Word | Hillsboro High School, Nashville, TN

Generation of the Bomb

At my school, *high school*
is in direct reference to the amount of Juuls
you can find in the boys' bathroom,
to the beakers seen as bong
in every science classroom,
to the constant threat of bombs and bullets flying past you
In my school, high school correlates
to the number of students past their sell-by dates,
to the Gravestones dropping faster than graduation rates,
to the fervid fear of having only today
Every death could be a breath away
In my school, high school concentrates
on remaining in the top teen pregnancy states
The Bible belt binds our minds so our brains can't contemplate
safe sex without becoming a sinner

Hillsboro is where private school staff
go to feel "cultured"
they make mission trips
to the prison bricks
under the condition
that they don't need to drink the water
or smell the children
My school is forgotten Nashville
The global annex was once Edgehill
They say a place is a people
and I wonder, is this what has become of the Congo?
Instead of love, they pass out tardy slips
like microaggressions,
and every day we march to fire drills
like funeral processions,
there were two gun threats
the first week of my freshman year
stack up expulsions like evictions in the high-rises here
the bomb is coming, in moments
three degrees of heat and war align
MLK Overton Hume Fogg Columbine
they say the world is ending right here in our lifetime,
science says the world will end before the day we turn 29

I,
am sorry
that my classmates have to live in such fear,
I'm sorry
Goldman Sachs is growing bigger each year,
that they have blown up your home
and left you with nothing,
though the neighborhood's gone
the bullets
keep
coming,
that your living room is where they now meet
and wealthy men stand planning their next corporate retreat
because bombs don't hit the homes that are warm through the winter
My school like Maplewood High School is at home in a zone
where one in six children are food insecure
but school lunches cost money so hungry kids must endure—

in Davidson county, the most expensive thing is being poor
I'm sorry,
that my children
may never get to breathe the pollen packed air
because the towers downtown have taken more than their share,
that they will never see the grass move
to hear the cicadas war cry,
I
am sorry
I spent most of my life not knowing
how to say those three simple words,
or any words to the deaf students that go
to our schools, because no metro high schools have sign language classes
(*I'm sorry they can't tell you we're all waiting for the end times together*)

Sometimes the only way to break a barrier is an apology.
But young Nations fall victim to parents' mythology and children inherit
elders' damnation
so we've got tied up tongues
and pre-cocked guns
and we're riddled
with bullet holes
and touch starvation here in
the generation of the bomb
but the good thing is we don't walk the flaming earth alone
we're taking back our burning ball

and I'll be damned if we don't call it home
no firewall no hand grenade
no president or climate change
no nuke or phobia can steal the Zion
because volcanoes scorch the ground
for new life's dawn
In my school, which is every
metro high school, I hope one day
I'll learn to say I'm sorry in all your native languages
because that's something that unites
before the fire,
People
who live in constant fear of dying
in these places made to give a better life are different,
we're fighting for a world that hates us
because we love it more,
cause we embrace the changing skyline but revere the town before
In my school, we are the generation of the bomb—we're loving,
because that's all we have left—we're rising,
the reincarnation of a war-torn silent generation
we're louder than they could ever be before
cause our constitution mandates love and understanding,
cause prejudice is no match for Google translate we are
seven thousand days away from burning ourselves to the ground
Maybe in the ashes Nashville, Hillsboro, will still be around
because this city is a people not a place
I can see Nashville in every single face
and I know when music city sends that song of embrace
Even the cicadas will listen.

To Have A Name

I wonder if a mother's love
Can be found on the second X chromosome
If God built a womb as a portal from heaven's own
If Eve could have known that womanhood was a power
That God never wanted to be revealed
But the forbidden fruit sewed Eden into our DNA.

I wonder if Claudet Colvin knew
That something as simple as refusing to
Rise could incite something prophesied in Negro hymns for centuries
If she knew her revolutionary movement
Would live in the shadow of Rosa Park's memory
Black womanhood is being asked to bring gifts to
Parties you were never invited to
Its lighting everyone's candles with the fire alight in you
It's standing in solidarity with women who didn't fight for you
Because you know what oppression feels like
And I think that god just might
Love like black women do.

My great great grandmother was a slave
She took thoughts of freedom to her unmarked grave
Her daughter stood alongside
Sisters for rights that would never be hers in a lifetime
Revolution is embedded in my bloodline
She couldn't have dreamed
What the next century brought in
The law, in the hands of Justice Jane Bolin
The first judge in this country to be a
Black woman
Changing a future she would never see
Every vote we cast should honor her memory.

Cast that ballot like that candle burning with
Ancestral flame
It is the legacy they fought for
Let them see what became of the children
Of the country
Of the women who got the chance
To have a name
If words are bullets then your ballot is a semi-automatic
It's the way your voice can shoot through the silence and the static
If the sealing of your lips is far more than systematic
Look back at all the mothers who wielded their weapons for you
This holiday is an empty promise if we don't use it
To see there's more to our mission
Look at Atlanta's lines
Voting booths with locked shut doors
By governors with flimsy spines
My people who can't vote for
Nonviolent crimes committed back in 99,

I watch my sisters best friends go to prison
I watch the boys I saw become
men become felons and lose every right
Our ancestors fought for
I see pictures of today's suppressed voters in black and white
So people still think this is history.
It's not my tomorrow I'm fighting for
It's my daughters
I'll stand guard at her door
As grandma waded in the waters
Every vote is hope that no more of my blood
Will lie in unmarked graves.
It's the hope that my babies will always be called
By their names
Burn your textbooks if they tell you there's nothing
More to change.

Women the world has tried to silence are women who
Know what needs repair
Shirley Chisholm said if they don't give you a seat, bring a folding chair
For black women, this privilege has not been here for one hundred years
But when it comes to revolution ask Eartha, Angela, we have always been
The pioneers
The love my great-great-grandmother held for me from pasts afar
Was strong because it drew its power from and burned just like
The nearest star.

From Mallala to Assata from the classroom to the polls
Womanhood and the suns fire reside inside our souls
That through every election
And the world we change in kind
the garden in our bodies will find solace in our minds
And the waters that we waded in
Bring joy in gentler times
That my daughter has the future eve,
and every other mother dreamed
That Eden will be home again
And America will be redeemed.

SERRINA ZOU

Poetry | BASIS Independent Silicon Valley, San Jose, CA

Abecedarian for American Assimilation

& how we lose ourselves against the new year
burning brighter with each dying
candle, baiting our breaths in the temple's
dimness. Already, the newborn lantern light
ebbs away from our fluttering fingers, echoing
fireflies mating at dusk. How we used to sink into
grey, muted by the silhouette of a nation
hungering for our heads; our hands clasping
in between gasps for mercy. Tell me, is my
jaded tongue invitation for this prayer of
knives? At night I toil among the reaping ghosts,
listening to the thunder of fireworks my ancestors
mistake for the revolution's canons. In my family
no spirit escapes the altar where orange incense &
opium drown the cries of a body lingering against
perfumed mortuary of language. Like a daughter, I
quiet the rebellion knotted inside my throat; in
rigor mortis, morning excavates my ashes inside
sutured skies. In every dream, I consider coming clean
through my skin like a shadow, every bare bloodline
unedited & untouched. In every reality, I play
vulture to my native vocabulary; carve the exit
wounds into the spine of teeth, whispering
xīn nián kuài lè in worship of the newness
yellowing the old. Somewhere in the next life, I want to
zip these sacred scars, memorialize the forgotten.

Napalm Girl

For Phan Thi Kim Phúc

War thick like jelly on breakfast bread
& we finish breathing a new summer
stilting in rice paddy June. Our temple
cries an elegy lodged in the throat
of mercy. Mama paws me to the empty lantern
light; teaches me the throat is a pipe
organ: tubing calcified with teething tragedy.
In what life is a nine-year-old girl
abandoned to soldiers, we ask. I tell my children
the story of a scar like an old folk tale: look,
the land lacquered with entire histories of violence
is dyed the color of your mother's ao dai,
indigo for immortality, indigo for *i'm still alive*.
In mourning, the america they pledge
allegiance to is the same america that loves the smell
of napalm in the morning, a mouthful of ash
sweetened by agent orange. Vietnam is the dust
in my bones burying & baying for the burn.
It's a common belief: how Cao Dai uncorked
my body to a diaspora, unpeeling persimmon
skin from the flesh that domesticated disaster
like a name. In my next life, the picture
is my prison: a reminder of earth plumped
with watered grief & new God blooming
from the belly of Bible; a thousand words
to say a daughter thirsting for home.