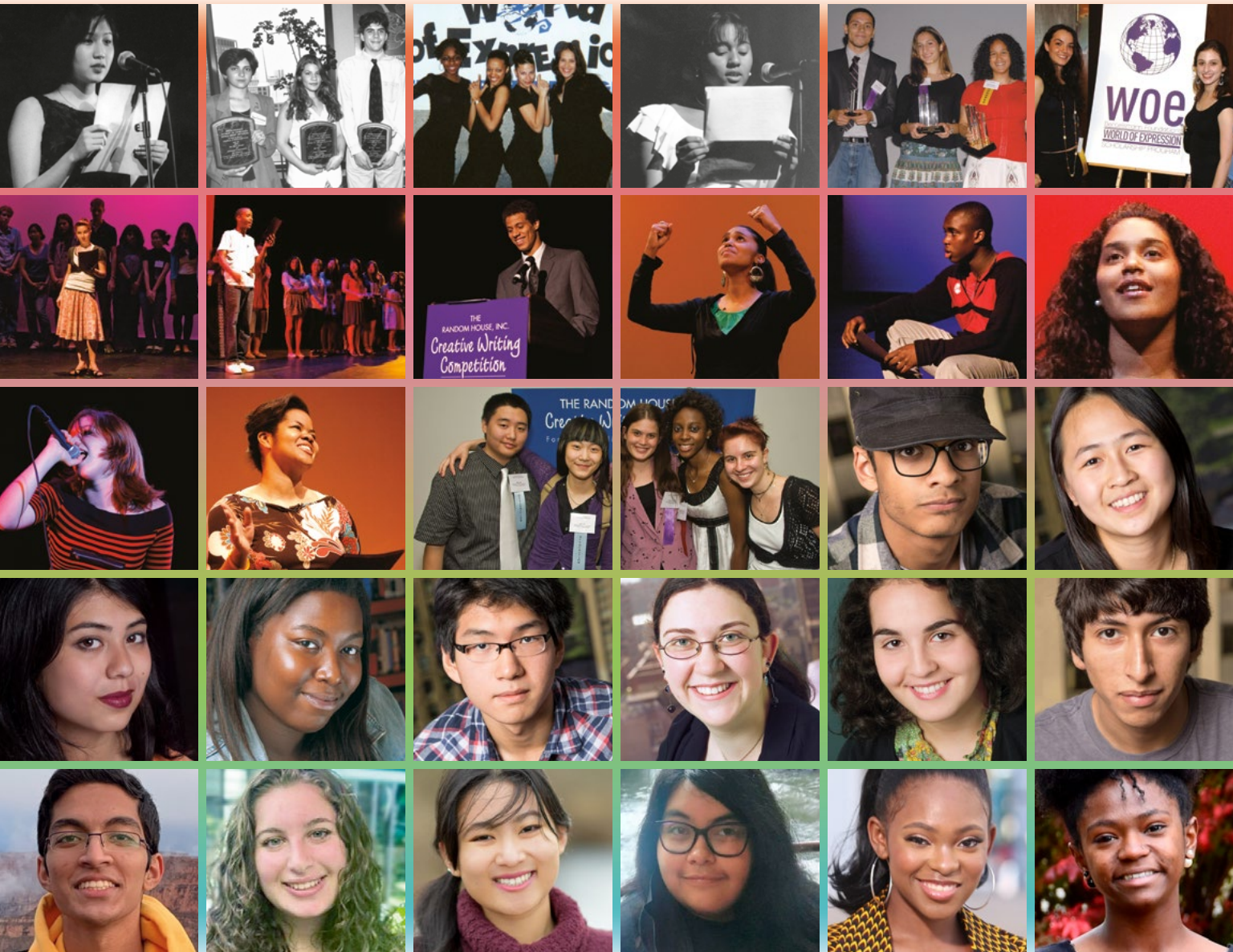


Penguin
Random
House



30 Years of Nurturing the Next Generation of Literary Talent



In partnership with

WNDB[®]
weneeddiversebooks.org

Imagination is more important than knowledge

—Albert Einstein

Giving every child a voice has been the GOAL of the Penguin Random House Creative Writing Awards—formerly known as the Random House Foundation, Inc. Creative Writing Competition, in 2003, and ten years previously as Bertelsmann World of Expression. Beginning in 1993, the program began encouraging New York City high school students to express themselves. Awarding scholarships in recognition of exemplary displays of self-expression in stories, poems, memoirs, plays, and, since 2003, graphic novels, it does more than just bestow money. Each entry to the program represents a success—one more student who HAS discovered their voice, who believes that they have something special to impart and to express. This special program has inspired and engaged thousands of New York City high school students, as well as many teachers, administrators, artists, authors, and executives who have been involved over the years.

In 2019, Penguin Random House partnered with We Need Diverse Books to widen the applicant pool beyond New York City and to invite hundreds of students from across the country to submit their written work. Our partnership with WNDB underscores a critical element

of the CWA program: to nurture the next generation of literary talent by supporting young writers from a variety of backgrounds. As the publishing industry continues to reckon with issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion, the CWA program is an opportunity for its sponsor to support students from underrepresented backgrounds and to encourage their expressing themselves. This program is but one facet of PRH's continued effort to elevate diverse perspectives and to increase equity representation among our authors and staff.

Three Decades Of Selected Poems, Stories & Memoirs is an offering of compositions that have been collected from over the years—written and submitted for scholarship consideration by New York City high school seniors since 1993, and since 2019 by public school students across the country—with a strong, clear voice, who are daring, original, and unafraid to take risks. It is also the efforts of a committed group of mentors who have worked to inspire the youth in NYC and across the country, and to commend their creative risks.

It is exciting proof that when public schools partner with committed organizations, great things can happen.

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“For 30 years, Penguin Random House’s Creative Writing Awards program has amplified the voices of exceptional public high school students. Our partnership with We Need Diverse Books helps us reach students in underrepresented communities across the country, and the new Michelle Obama Award for Memoir—alongside Mrs. Obama’s unparalleled support and advocacy—have given us an even larger footprint. We are thrilled to honor this year’s brilliant winners and the decades of changemakers who have preceded them.”

— Claire von Schilling, EVP, Director Corporate Communications and Social Responsibility, Penguin Random House

“Each year it’s wonderful to hear the diverse perspectives of young voices across the country. Amplifying these students’ stories and learning from what they have to say is an invaluable experience. We look forward to seeing what these students accomplish in the future.”

— Caroline Richmond, Executive Director of WNDB

“I want to congratulate you all on believing in your own voice and your own writing enough that you submitted for this award. I am so proud of each of you . . . and I can’t wait to see the kind of work that you all continue to do.”

— Elizabeth Acevedo, 2006 Creative Writing Award awardee and New York Times bestselling author

“Winning the CWA was one of a few key points growing up when I felt, unequivocally, that my writing made people want to listen to what I had to say.”

— Rowana Miller, 2018 Creative Writing Award winner and founder of creative writing nonprofit Cosmic Writers

Photos

1993–2022



Tasha Rudolph,
Pinkus Nisanov,
Whitney Nimitpattana,
Dan Whalen



Mirza Tanovic, Pinkus Nisanov, fellow winners.



José Morales and Sofia Johnson



Music Vocal Winners:
Crystal Zacharoff,
Amanda Brown,
Kelly Porter,
Rachel Gonzalez



Winner Andre Mozeak,
his parents, and
Elissa Goldstein



Janice Erlbaum

Mrs. Acevedo, Elizabeth Acevedo, and Richard Hoehler



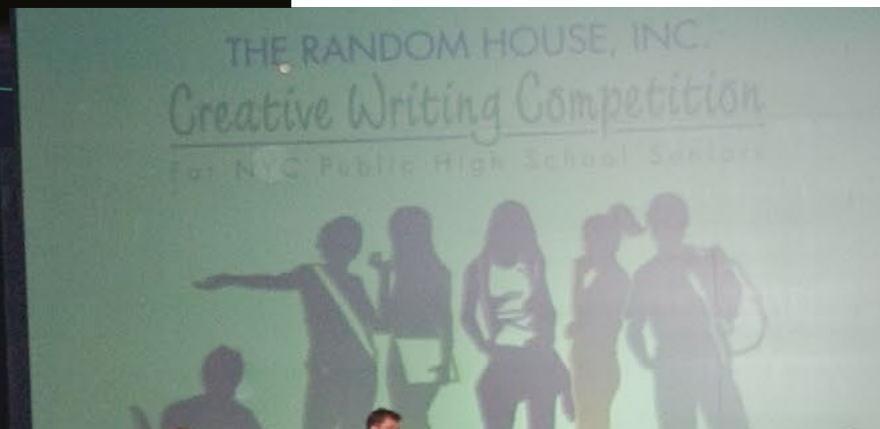
Rachel LaPerle, Lizeth Cruz, Melissa Goeltsch, and Shawlini Nanjunath



Singha Hon



Ananth Panagarly, Mariella Molloy, Yuko Ota, Tess Banta, Maurisa Fraser, Cindy Lee, Thuya Naing, Melanie Fallon-Houska

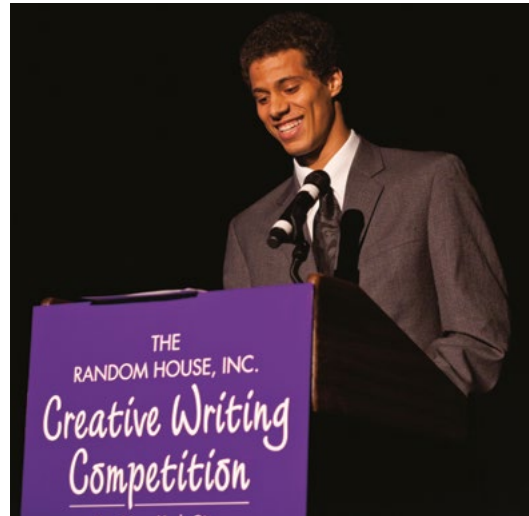


2012 Winners





Alicia Walters



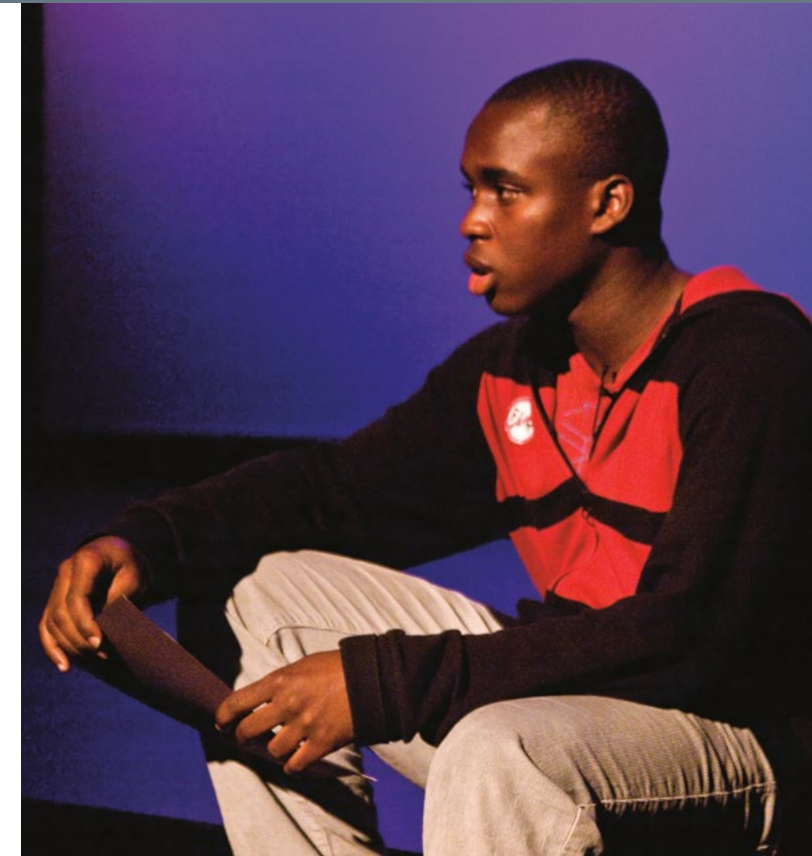
Rafael Klein



Angel Rendon, Rebecca Cohn, Maya Nathan, Melanie Fallon-Houska, and Megan McCafferty



Elissa Goldstein and Winners



Emmanuel Agbanyo



Charlotte Ahlin, Chelsea John, Filipa Ioannou, and Jalilah Byrd



Lily Akerman



Melanie Fallon-Houska and Barbara Rothenberg





Kevin and Serge Morell



Lindsey Stowe-Berns and Iris Lan



Lisa Apatini



Julian Jeremiah



Chelsea John



Deane Holness



Richard Hoehler and Workshop Class



Thomas Bellino and Workshop Class



Patrick Moy



Elizabeth Acevedo



Melanie Fallon-Houska and Richard Hoehler



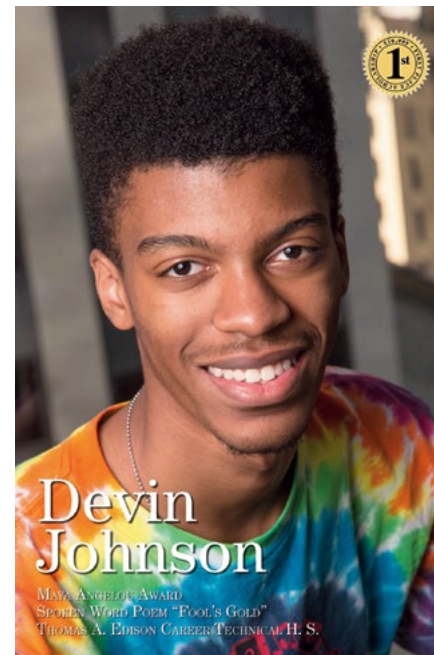
Samantha Kirschman reading her Fiction & Drama winning entry



NICOLE JOHNSON
We Need Diverse Books, Executive Director



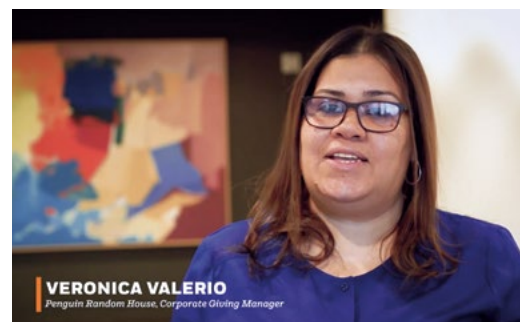
2019 Awards



Devin Johnson
MAYA ANGELOU AWARD
SPOKEN WORD POEM "FOOL'S GOLD"
THOMAS A. EDISON CAREER TECHNICAL H.S.



PRH hosted a Fireside Chat with author Natasha Díaz, as part of the professional development week for the winners of the 26th annual Creative Writing Awards.



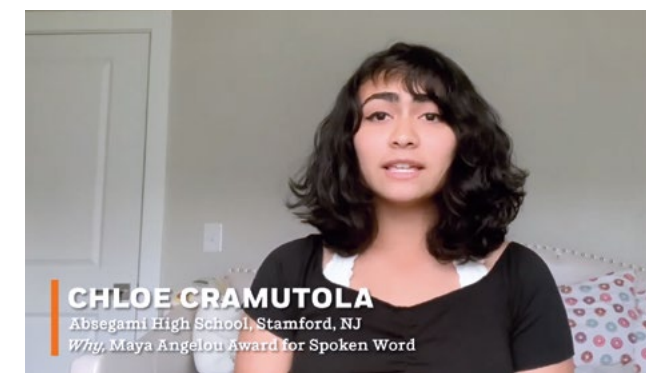
VERONICA VALERIO
Penguin Random House, Corporate Giving Manager



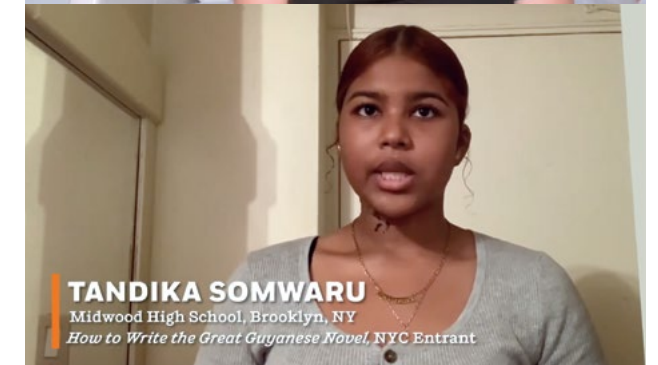
2019 Award Winners: Siobhan Cohen, Nora Carrier, Samantha Kirschman, Katherine Sanchez, and Kiara Brooks



Nora Carrier and Veronica Valerio



CHLOE CRAMUTOLA
Absegami High School, Stamford, NJ
Why, Maya Angelou Award for Spoken Word

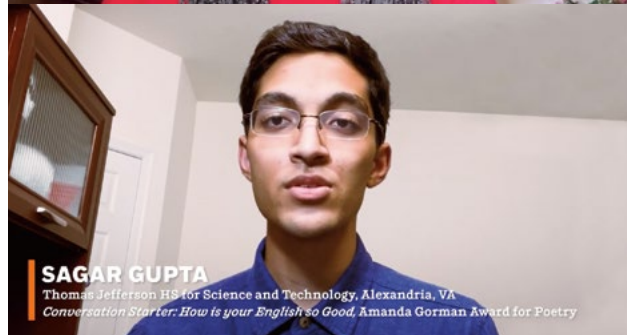


TANDIKA SOMWARU
Midwood High School, Brooklyn, NY
How to Write the Great Guyanese Novel, NYC Entrant

Winners Chloe Cramutola and Tandika Somwaru, reading their entries for the online 2021 Awards Ceremony



Kiora Brooks accepting the award for Spoken Word



Winners Ajok Thon (2021) and Sagar Gupta (2022), reading their entries for the online awards ceremony

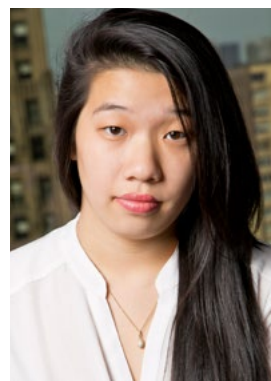


Winners at the PRH in-house awards ceremony

Hazien Lyles-Saunders and Diana Vidal



Emma Benayoun



Emily Yip



Dakota An

Stories, Poems, and Memoirs

from the past 29 years

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- 32 Calligraphy • 2000
- 33 Six Pack • 2001
- 37 Black Perplexity • 2002
- 39 La Coquette in Memoriam • 2003
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- 44 Flutter • 2005
- 46 Avian Flu • 2006
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- 52 Red Planet • 2008
- 56 Polar Fever • 2009
- 60 Dan • 2010
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- 64 Sheltered Art • 2012
- 66 Of Girls of Wintry Lakes • 2013
- 72 Bus Warfare • 2014
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- 87 Planet: Elkhart, Indiana • 2020
- 89 Superstition • 2021
- 93 Conversation Starter: How is Your English So Good • 2022

Gordon Roots

Robert Kyle Sosin • Hunter College High School

The problem was this: Saying that the rain fell like teardrops was a meaningless statement to Gordon. The rain meant nothing to Gordon, and the teardrops only meant a trifling bit more. The rain didn't fall like tears or innocence of thin crystalline needles. It just fell. It got him wet. The rain was neither touching nor enlightening; it was damp and cold and sometimes took on a slightly metallic smell if he was in it too long.

And that made Gordon seriously wonder if planting himself in the ground was such a good idea.

The plan had been developed and redeveloped over long stretches of time. Gordon bought the field from a real estate developer on the basis of its seclusion. The field was in upstate New York, kind of between farms. It was only kind of between two farms since they were a mile away on either side. Gordon had figured the total isolation would be absolutely necessary. The minimum he could buy was one acre of land. He had repeatedly told the developer that all he needed was seven or eight square feet of land and that an acre was too big, but the only place he found that would do that for him charged extra air space over twenty feet. Not that Gordon was freakishly tall or anything, he was nowhere near twenty feet tall. Gordon stood five feet and seven inches tall when above the ground, and two feet and four inches tall when planted. Gordon wanted the air space on the off chance that his plan was so much of a resounding success that he grew like a mighty Sequoia tree, high up in the heavens.

Gordon still stood two feet and four inches tall now. He knew because he brought a yardstick and would check every few hours. Gordon actually brought a lot of things with him. He figured that as long as he had an acre of land, he might as well be prepared and keep some stuff with him.

Gordon figured that it might be boring just waiting to grow, so he brought along some cards to play Solitaire with and some books in languages he didn't understand. Gordon hoped to learn the languages by reading the books and deciphering them by the tone of the paragraph, but it just didn't work. Even the picture book by Hans Christian Andersen he had in the original Dutch only befuddled and frustrated him.

Gordon also brought along some canned pineapples and canned beets and Chef Boyardee spaghetti and meatballs, and he was sure to bring a can opener. Gordon sure as

hell wasn't going to be caught there, he had watched the episode of the Twilight Zone with Burgess Meredith not having a spare pair of glasses for the apocalypse. Gordon kept the can opener very close to the cans, specifically so he wouldn't lose it and picture Rod Serling laughing at him from beyond the grave. Gordon liked the canned pineapple a lot, so there were about seventy cans of them scattered around him and the hole. Gordon hated beets, but thought that maybe they would be one of those acquired tastes and that he'd like to have them with him if, during his metamorphosis, he acquired a taste. He still only brought two cans. The 28 cans of spaghetti and meatballs would of course have to be served cold, but Gordon didn't mind. Gordon seriously believed that after a couple of days he would root and get his nutrients straight from the soil.

Well, it was the twenty-third day and there Gordon was, still hungry and down to 41 cans of pineapple, three cans of spaghetti and meatballs and two cans of beets. It was raining, and he was sick of Solitaire. The field was still lovely, although Gordon had buried himself in the ground so well that he found it difficult to see directly behind him. By the second week Gordon started to worry that the field was only lovely in the front of him, and had foolishly forgotten to look behind him to check whether or not the woodlands there were a disgusting, wretched place. Gordon knew that he would like to think that behind him was grass as lush as in front of him and plants as lovely as those to his sides, but he couldn't be sure. Such was life. Gordon thought for a while that he should have simply lifted his waist out of the soil so that he could move it and turn around. But spontaneity had won out over careful planning in how deep Gordon was to have made his hole, and as it stood the soil was up to his solar plexus. It was too late to go back now anyway. He had lost all feeling below the waist due to atrophy. Though the shovel stood beside him and his arms were as strong as ever, it seemed to Gordon that getting out of the hole without his legs helping to ease the burden would be extremely difficult.

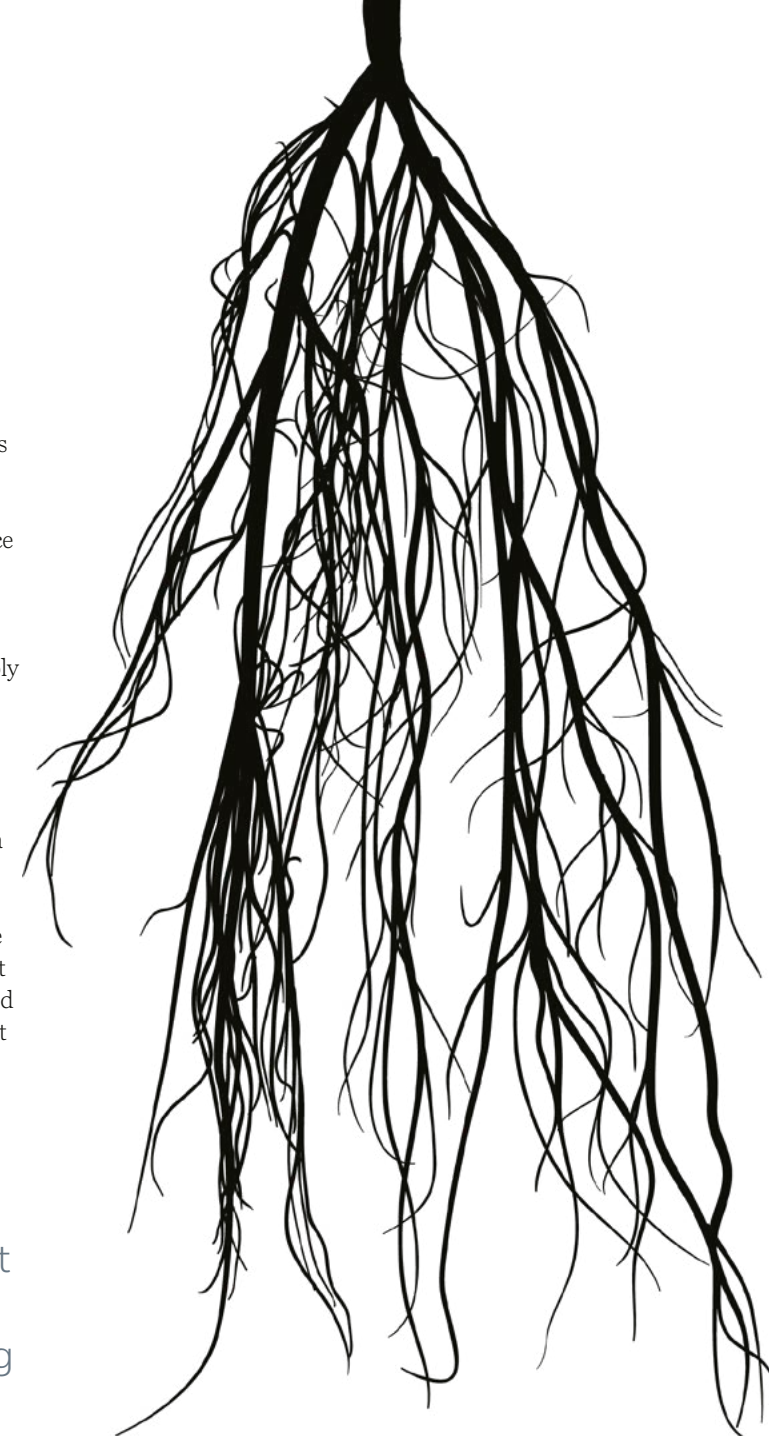
But the more he thought about it Gordon didn't really want to get out. Well, actually that wasn't exactly true. He didn't want to get out unless he had something better to do. Planting yourself in the name of science was a noble aspiration, unlike everything else Gordon did. His life was so mundane and regular. It wasn't noble or gallant in the least. It seemed to Gordon that there were

so few noble aspirations out there these days. Gordon still believed in the project, at night he would sometimes dream of swaying in the wind and rustling his little leaves in perfect tranquility. He was still determined to become a tree. But the relatively slow moving experience tried even his faith. For every beautiful moment he felt at peace with nature, there was a moment when a chipmunk would crawl over his back and dig his little claws into Gordon and the temperature would be unseasonably cold.

Of course, Gordon was naked in the hole. Gordon was the last person on Earth who would want to wreck perfectly good clothes by turning into a tree. Clothes were for people not for trees, and if Gordon were to be a tree the least he could do was to dress like one. Gordon did have the scarf his mother gave him for cold nights, though. He didn't tell his mother where he was since he didn't want any visitors to dig him up or something, but he had told a few people of his plans. No one really cared much. No one but Gordon. That was the only important thing that Gordon cared about. Gordon believed in the power of belief.

“But the more he thought about it, Gordon didn't really want to get out. Well, actually, that wasn't exactly true. He didn't want to get out unless he had something better to do.”

Yet there were so many flaws. Gordon brought along a box of chocolate donuts for periods of self doubt, for Gordon had often noted how helpful chocolate donuts are for solving not only physical but spiritual hunger. Gordon would think of a problem and then nibble his donut. Somehow it put the whole problem in perspective. The rain was a problem, nibble nibble. Then there was a rabbit, nibble nibble. And he was fond of his legs, and it was painful to lose them, nibble nibble. And that was behind him and the smell of damp soil and the cold spring nights and self-doubt and worries and Solitaire and stupid old Hans Christian Andersen and eating those beets . . . nibble nibble nibble nibble. The chocolate donuts lay in crumbs in the soil. Gordon stood still in the hole, only vaguely satisfied.



Gordon began to feel lonely in the hole, which was something Gordon had hardly ever felt. Gordon tried to make friends with some of the plants around him, but the trees were too far out of speaking range and the grass just ignored him. Sometimes weeds and dandelions would talk to Gordon, but they all seemed to be eyeing Gordon suspiciously, which made Gordon uncomfortable. The weeds were visibly hungry when they spoke to Gordon. They made Gordon feel very self conscious and wonder if he had roots yet. Still, the very fact that Gordon was in verbal contact with weeds made Gordon realize that one of two things had happened: he was well on his way to becoming a tree, or he was going crazy and talking to flowers. Gordon could not decide which of the two were true. Surely if he were insane the weeds would be

Endless Summer

Kasla Zarebska • Brooklyn Technical High School

mmm . . . Another beautiful morning. The sun's warm rays caress my face and lifts me from that wonderfully relaxing state we call sleep. I'd say it's about eight, since I already hear the scuffling of feet outside my door. Suddenly, I hear the doors swing open, and a tense woman in high heels prances in, mumbling a cold "good morning" under her breath. She stops by the window and jerks the shade up until the few warm golden rays turn into a flood of uncomfortable heat, drowning my face. I want to scream at her, but before I can even try, she does a quick pivot and briskly prances back, accidentally slamming her leg against my bed. This sends a strange vibration through my entire body, starting at the tips of my toes, then pausing briefly at my elbows, until it becomes a quiet ringing in my ears. Then it ends. Once again she mumbles something, an obscenity I think, while she slams the door behind her. This time the bed remains still.

I guess I should explain. My name is Denise Williams. Thirteen days ago I was in a near-fatal car accident. I'm not even sure about what happened. All I can remember is driving down Route 17 in my Taurus. I wanted to change the radio station, so I glanced down, and before I had a chance to look up again, I remember hearing a loud noise, like an explosion, with me in the middle. Then, all at once, everything starting spinning and I started to black out—less and less aware of the indescribable pain encasing my entire body. After that, all I recall is the steady muffled pulse of a siren. I can still hear it. And I think of it not as being only a sound, but also some force which can't decide whether or not to let me die.

I think this happened thirteen days ago, but the first few days were kind of fuzzy, so it could have been a few days more. I've been in a coma since the accident. It's not something easily put into words. It's not sleep, because I do that as well. It's like that moment right before you fall asleep. If I focus enough, I can hear what's going on around me. I have a sense of touch, yet I feel it without a clear intensity.

At times I enjoy my deep "high." Sometimes it's frustrating. I can't even open my eyes. I can't squeeze Lauren's hand as she holds mine. I can't speak to Anthony and reassure him that I will come out of this soon. I do plan on it. Being in a coma is like being rolled up tightly in a long sheet. You can't move. The more you try, the more futile your attempts become. You can't scream because somewhere between you and the outside, your voice dwindles, even though you hear it.

Being in a coma is lonely. Sometimes two people in a coma can talk, just like I "talk" with Katrina. She's the woman in her late sixties with whom I share this room. At times I feel her communicating with me. I don't know how she does it; she doesn't use words. Katrina is very lonely. Her family has given up on her, and they don't come to visit her anymore. If they only knew that now she'll never break free. That's how you do it; you gather energy from the people that love you to break free. I've come close many times.

Fortunately, I have a family that loves me and will never give up. Anthony is my wonderful husband, the man whom I have loved since the day we met, and Lauren is our beautiful six-year-old daughter. They both visit me every day.

The nurse, who comes to check all the machines that I'm hooked up to, just left. This means that Anthony should come in any moment. As usual, I am proven correct by the tender little voice echoing through the room, and by the touch of a tiny hand. "What are those little scribbly lines on the computer Daddy?"

"That's the machine that monitors Mommy's heart, baby. Now go get Doctor Banks, so that Mommy and I can talk."

Suddenly the tiny hand slips off mine and I feel a large masculine, yet gentle hand caressing my face. I love you so much, Anthony. I'm feeling stronger today. I think that today is the day. Help me slip out of this grasp, Anthony. I'm trying so hard. Don't leave me, Anthony. What am I thinking? My Anthony will never give up. Our love is strong; a bond like this can never be broken.

"Hi Denise. Baby, I miss you so much. I wish you could hear me right now."

I do! I do! Don't you know? Can't you feel me?

"Oh Nee-Cee. I'm so sorry. I did everything I could. It's been three months, and I know you're gone."

That's the machine that monitors Mommy's heart, baby.

much more interesting, and not so predictable. But why wouldn't the grass talk to Gordon? Why the weeds and not the grass? Both hypotheses were flawed. Gordon sighed and measured himself again.

Gordon was a very patient person by nature. But how long could one man wait? Three weeks and nothing. Not a branch, not a leaf, not a flower. Gordon would twiddle his fingers, trying futilely to pass away the time. Night fell and day rose again and again, and Gordon would wake up and not want to open his eyes to see

that he hadn't grown a single leaf yet. He would keep his eyes closed tight, like a young child trying desperately to go to sleep on Christmas Eve. But the same urge of trying to catch Santa always got Gordon, and he would open his eyes and find his pale white arms glow-

ing in the dawn's light. And Gordon would stare at his arms and curse them for not having bark. Gordon was tired and cranky now. Second thoughts were his only thoughts. But it was too late now, the project was in high gear and Gordon was still buried.

Maybe Gordon should have stayed home and just should have abandoned the idea when he thought of it originally years ago. Home had TV and a fridge and readily available legs and only a few annoying weeds. Gordon cursed for being so stupid. It was a dumb plan anyway. It obviously didn't work and cost him his legs. Stupid stupid stupid. If the worms hadn't chewed off his legs already, there was a minor chance he could save them, but that would require Gordon to: a) get out of the hole, and b) crawl the many miles on his forearms to the hospital. Maybe Gordon could get to his Chevy, which was only fifty feet behind him, but then he would have to push the gas pedal with his leg to drive, which Gordon didn't feel was very likely. No, Gordon was doomed, and he had doomed himself. Gordon felt very depressed and alone suddenly. He buried himself alive in the name of nobility, and nobody even tried to stop him. Gordon ruminated on his own death. He thought of who would eventually find him, and what they would think. Would they understand what happened? Gordon wasn't optimistic. They could just find Gordon's decaying body with lots of empty cans of pineapple and some wet books and two cans of beets and just forget about him. Gordon had never been too memorable a person. Everyone just looked right past him or through him, practically nobody ever looked at him and even less people saw him. He thought of himself as

invisible. And though his corpse would be very interesting, he would of course just be forgotten. Again.

And then Gordon felt a sharp stabbing pain in his left shoulder. Gordon gripped his shoulder tightly, it felt like someone had jabbed a huge thick needle into his arm. Gordon winced in pain. This was it. This was the end. Gordon was having a heart attack or atrophying in his arm or dying of immune deficiency caused by not eating enough beets. Tears of agony trickled down Gordon's cheek. It hurt so bad, it was so painful. Gordon's hand dropped from his shoulder as he resigned himself to his fate. And then the skin of Gordon's shoulder started to rip like wrapping paper, but from the inside out. Something was coming through his shoulder. Dark red blood spewed out all over the soil. A green tentacle came flowing out of the shoulder. Gordon was in minor shock, which numbed him somewhat from the pain. The thick tentacle was dark green, but took on a brownish appearance from the blood. It stretched out before Gordon. It was almost the size of his arm, thick and tender with a large ball where his head should have been. It waved a bit in the cold wind, as if it were dancing, and then gradually stood still. Gordon was mesmerized. It danced in front of him, and Gordon had no idea what it was. His arms lay limp at his side. The tentacle, with soft easy movements, pointed its ball at Gordon. And then the ball opened up, right in Gordon's face. Inside was a beautiful pink and yellow flower, like the ones he had seen in story-books. The petals were satin-like, soft and shiny. They were perfectly arranged, each petal aligned perfectly with each other. Inside was a center that was golden yellow.

The scent from it was astoundingly sweet, it was a smell Gordon could taste. It was more beautiful than Gordon ever had seen. It looked at him and smiled, and Gordon smiled right back at it. It made Gordon cry some more. Gordon hesitated a bit, but finally looked the flower right in the stamen. His eyes were filled with tears, and each tear would reflect the beautiful petals on the flower as they rolled down his face. Gordon was so happy. He looked dreamily at his flower. "Hello," Gordon said to it softly.



As You Lead the Classroom Discussion, I Daydream

Beth Lebwohl • Townsend Harris High School

Three months? What? It's only been thirteen or fourteen days. What do you mean I'm gone? I'm right here. I love you. If I still haven't given up, how can you? Now?

"I can't look at you like this anymore, your frail body hooked up to all those machines, all the tubes. You don't deserve this, Nee-Cee. I'm going to help you today. Good-bye baby. I love you."

At this, he kisses me. It's a short, gentle kiss; yet it's filled with passion of our love. It is a sad kiss. I don't understand. He said he's helping me, so why is he sad? How does he plan to help me? Does he have some new medication that will awaken me? What is he up to? I'm so excited. I'll finally see his face again and be able to smile at little Lauren. It will be back to normal again. Finally I hear that there are more people in my room now, strangers. Lauren is holding my hand and singing something softly. I think I hear Anthony crying. I haven't heard him cry since we lost our first baby. What's happening?

Someone is touching my body . . .

It sounds as if . . .

As if they're turning the machines off? . . .

Oh my God! . . .

No! . . .

Anthony! I'm still here! . . .

Can't you hear me? . . .

Don't let me die! . . .

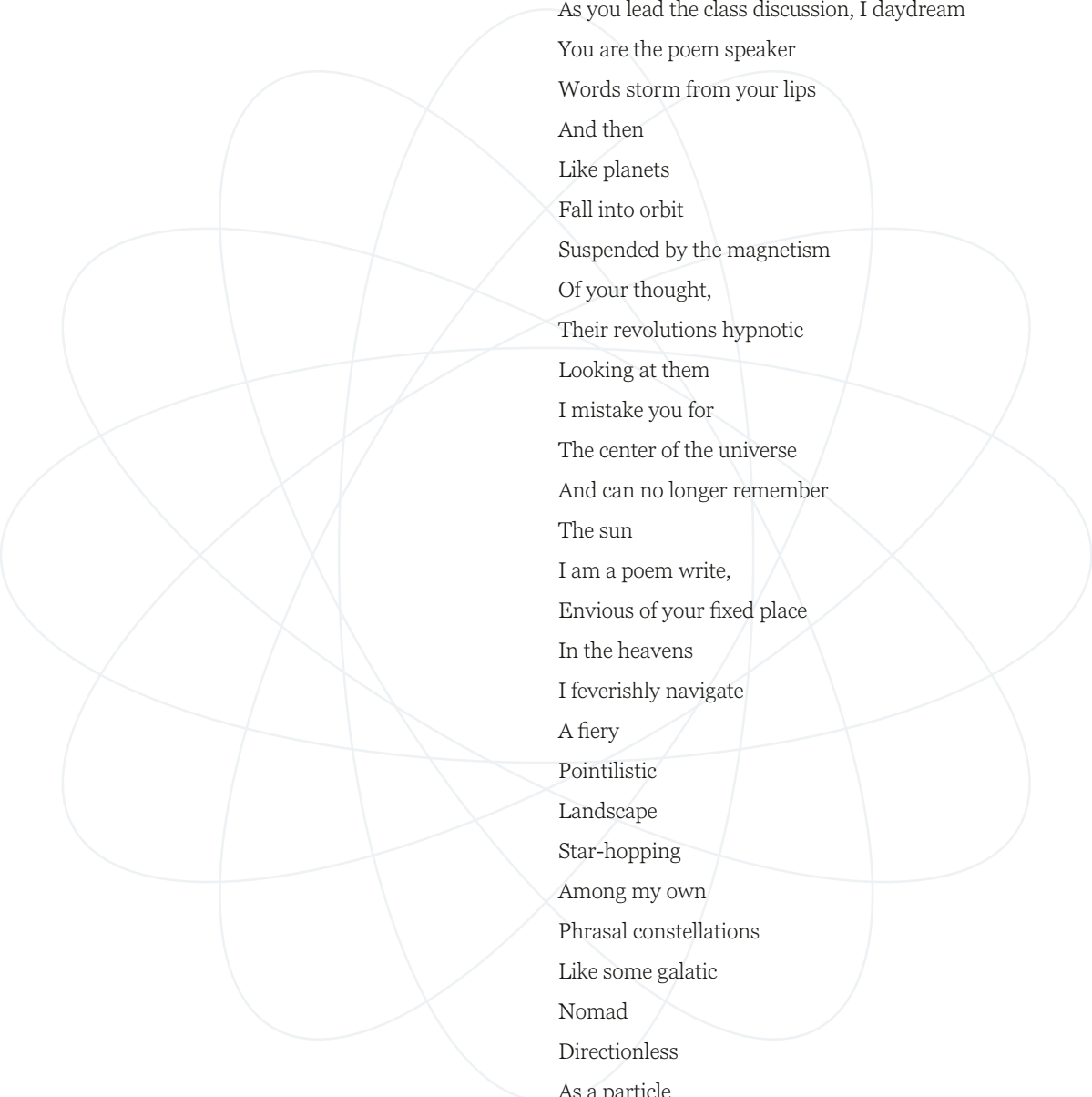
Please! . . .

I feel tired. I don't hear much anymore. I'm so scared.

What's happening to me? God help me! Please! . . .

Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among wom—

"Daddy, why are Mommy's scribbly lines flat now?"



As you lead the class discussion, I daydream
 You are the poem speaker
 Words storm from your lips
 And then
 Like planets
 Fall into orbit
 Suspended by the magnetism
 Of your thought,
 Their revolutions hypnotic
 Looking at them
 I mistake you for
 The center of the universe
 And can no longer remember
 The sun
 I am a poem write,
 Envious of your fixed place
 In the heavens
 I feverishly navigate
 A fiery
 Pointilistic
 Landscape
 Star-hopping
 Among my own
 Phrasal constellations
 Like some galatic
 Nomad
 Directionless
 As a particle
 Of dust

A Crescent, Crescent Moon, A Small, Small Boat

Jie Li • Stuyvesant High School

Her name is Ling Di, which means bring a brother. His name is Lao Qian, which means a thousand, because his parents had to pay a thousand yuans to the Chinese government just because he was born. They didn't have a thousand yuans, so the officials searched their house and took everything away.

Ling Di is welcome at my house. Lao Qian is not. Once he sneaked in and marched straight to the refrigerator and helped himself to ice cream. Grandma stared at him as he let the sugary mixture drip down his plump lips onto his belly and then his navel. Ling Di knocked his head and scolded in country dialect.

They live across from us in 361, which means third hole, sixth floor, and first unit. There are five holes in our building. It's a building for artists. Ling Di's parents are not artists, but her aunt is, or is she? She lives alone now and never smiles. Ling Di told me that her aunt lost her husband to a fox spirit and now wants to make a lot of money to hire someone to break that woman's leg.

Ling Di's mother looks a little like a fox, but she is not a fox spirit because she is not beautiful. She has big square teeth whiter than Ling Di's. When she smiles she makes you feel cold and warm all at the same time. She is a seamstress. Although her sewing machine was included in that lao qian, she got another one and made colorful shirts and pants for Ling Di and Lao Qian with the leftover patches of rags. Ling Di asked me if I wanted one. If yes, she said, she'd ask

her mother to make one for me. I said I'll ask Mom. Mom said what the hell if I wanted clothes she'd buy me some cloth and make me one. We don't have to look like riffraff, do we.

Ling Di is not a riffraff. She has big pretty eyes; her lips are nicely closed and a little tilted. Her face is yellow

and lean, and her hair is soft and black, though not quite straightened out. She has a green tongue sometimes because she eats Chinese onion raw. Lao Qian eats it too, but it seems to stay only on her. Dad said her face has a bitter touch of misery. One could almost pity her. I said mine has a touch of misery too, but he just laughed.

We laugh a lot together, me and Ling Di. Lao Qian just barks with us. When Lao Qian's happy he likes to put his right hand inside his pants and Ling Di smacks the furry back of his head. He then looks like a frightened rat and mumbles to himself. Ling Di smacks him every now and then when they're at my house. She can't do that at home. Her father would paddly her with a ruler.

Ling Di's father is shorter than her mother, but he's an ogre anyway. His beard seems to ooze out of his face and his eyes look like black glass beads we used to put in the snowman. When he laughs, his teeth seem to grow out of his mustache. He had mounted a list of characters on the living room door and made Lao Qian memorize it so when Lao Qian goes to school he would be smarter than the other kids. He took it from Chairman Mao's Little Red Book. Lao Qian knows how to recite it forwards and backwards. He recites it backwards when he wants to show off, which is always. World the in thing precious most that is life human, he says glibly, and his father laughs and gives him a chopstick full of meat. Ling Di and I giggle under the table and say he's a dog.

Ling Di tried to learn the list once, but she did not finish reciting the first two lines before her father walked out of the room. She bit her knuckles, and I could tell she didn't want me to be there, the same way she did not want Lao Qian to be there with us when we played in the Artist's Backyard.

When we go to the Artist's Backyard we have to think of terrific lies so Lao Qian will not follow us. We tell him we're going to the hospital, but he soon tells us that the doctor is three bus stops away and our parents are never going to let us go by ourselves. Finally, we have to take him along. He makes a lot of trouble. Once he jumped into the mud after the rain, and Ling Di had to wash his pants after we got home. I never wash anything, not even my socks, because we have a washing machine and because the tap water is so cold. I wanted to ask Mom

if Ling Di could use our washing machine sometimes, but Ling Di told me she could handle it. She does it all at times. And besides, she said as she wiped her face with her wrist, in the village she has to wash clothes in the river, which is freezing in the winter.

The winter here is freezing too. Harbin is called the Ice City. It starts snowing in November and doesn't melt till March or April. Even the air smells cold. I have a three-month vacation from school so I can fool around with Ling Di all winter. We play in the snow until our ears burn. Lao Qian just follows us around in baggy pants and a tiny vest. When we run and trip in the snow, he would laugh until his eyes disappear.

I don't know why but I was wicked that day. Ling Di too. I told her you could stick your tongue on a piece of metal and it would freeze there forever and ever. She looked around for metal and fixed her eyes on the handrails near the flower bush. Then she dared Lao Qian to lick it. Lao Qian did. Didn't I tell you he's a dog? He started screaming and tried to yank it off. Oh that hurt! He bounced back and whimpered, so Ling Di and I each took one of his arms and pulled him back. His tongue came off in two seconds. As we dragged him back into our hole, we all had little icicles on our chins.

As soon as he found out what happened, Ling Di's father locked up their door and I heard the smacking sound of a ruler, one of those thick, wooden rulers often with splinters, then the slow crescendo of sobs. I waited breathlessly at the door, my heart shriveling with every beat.

Lao Qian did not eat for two days. I guess he'd never be as slick with his recitation again, though he still stuck to us. Ling Di never hit him again, nor did she ever tell her father it was my idea in the first place. And I, I gave her half of everything I got—candies, cookies, bananas, etc. She gave half of everything I gave her to Lao Qian. Exactly half. Except when it couldn't be separated into halves, like a pen or a piece of hard candy. She just gave it all to him after sniffing or fumbling with it a little.

Ling Di says when she turns seven in July she's going to be too old for hard candies and cookies. At seven years old you're supposed to go to first grade in Harbin, so I told her about my elementary school.

It's very big and there are sixty to ninety people per class; you get to play with so many people; you read books and you do sums.

When I talk to her about school, Ling Di's eyes light up like when I read her fairy tales. Then she would be dim and unhappy. Not even candy can make her smile. Ling Di doesn't know how to read. She knows how to write her name, but that's all she knows. I wanted to teach her to read a long time ago, but she said, "What's the point for a girl to read?" She sounded so much like her dad that I never brought it up again.

But one night Dad brought it up with Ling Di's father. "Are you going to send her to school or not?" he said. "If she goes to school here you have to report to the local authorities to change her domicile."

"We have no relations with the authorities," Ling Di's father puffed on a pipe as he coiled his legs on the chair. "Getting a change to permanent residence here is like climbing a glass mountain." He purred deeply. "If we don't get a change, we would have to pay 3,000 yuans to get each non-local kid into school. Where are we going to get that kind of money?" He puffed some more. "If, with all the money from Lao Qian's aunt—if we can talk her into the divorce—and if the officials would lend us parts of it in the next two years . . . we can only send one of them to school."

Dad was silent. I looked at him wistfully. He started saying something but decided against it. He took my hand and we went home.

The next day, when Ling Di came over, I told her to sit in front of my desk.

"We're going to learn how to read," I said. "We're going to match your brother."

We learned ten characters that day from the first grade language textbook. She embroidered her characters that day from the first grade language textbook. She embroidered her characters again and again, and her fingers were soon inky. She wiped her mouth with her wrist and drew out a smile.

"No, we're going to do better than my brother," she said.

When school started in March Ling Di continued to come over in the evenings. Mom and Dad patted me on the head after I told them what we were doing. "Just don't be disappointed if it doesn't work out," Dad said. But I told him Ling Di was smart and could already read *A Crescent, Crescent Moon, A Small, Small Boat*, and I made her recite it one night: A crescent, crescent moon, a small small boat—

The crescent, crescent moon
that's pointy on both ends

Sitting alone in the small, small
boat, I can only see

Encompass the Light

Matt Levy • Edward R. Murrow High School



The crescent, crescent moon and the blue, blue sky.

Mom and Dad applauded. Ling Di blushed, and I was proud.

The Moon Festival was in August this year. We agreed it was a good time to disclose our little secret to Ling Di's family. Ling Di was nervous all day. By sundown she started crying:

"I can't do it," she sobbed. "What's gonna happen to Lao Qian if I go to school?"

"What? After all these months you're not gonna go for it?" I jumped.

"If I were never born . . ."

"Shut up! What are you talking about?" I went to the bathroom and got her a towel. "Blow your nose and wash your face, we're going to talk to your parents in 10 minutes."

No . . . she whimpered. I dragged her by the sleeve, but she would not move.

I asked help from Mom and Dad. Dad told me to leave her alone for a while. He told me to gather up all the work Ling Di had done, every piece of paper with her bird-like strokes and the textbook with jaded corners, and to go with him next door. Ling Di followed us demurely. She was no longer crying.

Dad and I were invited to sit down.

"We're here to show you what an educated daughter you have now," Dad said. I loved him so much that second. He gently laid down Ling Di's works on the table as if they were ancient scriptures from a museum. Her mother and aunt approached slowly from the gallery. Her father gazed at the collection out of the corner of his eye.

"She?" He pointed to Ling Di. "She did all this?"

"Yes, and I taught her," I said in a voice that surprised myself. It was the first time I actually spoke to him.

"Is . . . that true, Ling Di?" asked her mother, enchanted.

Ling Di nodded slowly.

"If you still don't believe it, she can recite A Crescent, Crescent Moon." I nudged Ling Di. She started, her voice barely above a whisper.

"She can write it out too," I said.

Her father waved no to me and took out Mao's Little Red Book from the shelf and squeezed it into Ling Di's hand.

"Read," he commanded. My heart grew tight. I had not prepared Ling Di for this. Ling Di turned to Lao Qian's page and read through it, not pausing at a single character.

Nobody breathed. Ling Di's father dropped his pipe. It made a tinkling sound.

"You're going to school next week," he said. "We're going to send both of you to school if it costs ten thousand yuans." Then he repeated himself, again, and again, and again. His wife smiled wryly. Lao Qian stared at the ceiling. Ling Di had begun to cry.

I.

Hospital

Bed, my mother lies.

The floor is carpeted, a light shade

Of pink: the walls are also pink.

Peach, maybe-pleasant, peaceful shades of love.

Portraits—an artistic creation

intended to give

an air of determination

and life.

However, the understood mental anguishes

are different.

The 10th floor

of Memorial Sloane Kettering

Cancer Hospital

Breast Cancer Floor.

But it's worse than that.

II.

My Mother

(my love)

is in room 1011A.

Lying prone, on a white bed

white sheets

white pillows

My Mom.

No hair, frail arms

big beautiful dilated blue-green eyes

skinny legs, swollen stomach

glucose bag

and I.V.

(transparent hospital gown)

laugh lines criss cross her

wisdom aged face

III.

Her history is a

Long and tired one, by far.

Five years of war with

A degenerative

Incurable disease.

Did she look it?

Hardly.

All Cheer and

love

and love

and love.

We talked

we cried.

The whole family.

Mom needed surgery.

Mom needed treatments

of Chemotherapy

and Radiation

So Mom is here.

at

the

hospital.

IV.

Lightly sleeping, I

see an angel hover over

her inert form.

The nearly invisible angel is silent.

Grace-given wings sparkle silver

Flowing gown, made of

eternity fabric,

shimmering.

No harp,

no halo but
The angel is smiling,
The angel knows.
And then she evaporates.

V.

My mother awakens.
She is no longer at
Memorial Sloane Kettering.
My mother, God bless her soul
her heart
her mind
her spirit
and her infinite wisdom
has decided to discontinue all
treatments.
It is not giving up
God, no
It is not giving in,
How dare you think so.
It is passing on,
Another life
another world
another miracle
another place
for her
and her angel.
Mother, in all her wisdom
in discontinuing her treatment,
is staying at home one last time
for the memories to flood back.
Then she will stay at
Calvary Hospice
A hospital for terminally
ill people.
Average stay is 27 days.
Mom is under average.

VI.

Mom is home.
flowers are abundant.
Me and my brothers master
a complete cleaning of the house.
We sweep, scrub, cleanse, move.
We vacuum!
I arrange flowers,
While Jonah and Gideon clear out the kitchen
and make Mom's bed
with her favorite quilt on top.
She arrives from the hospital,
and is placed in the backyard,
for some sunlight and fresh air.
Friends and family visit.
Eager to chat and love her.
We all love her.
But three days at home
is too much.
So we make the long
lasting
melancholy
drive
to Calvary Hospice.
The split of my Mother
from her life
is overwhelming depressing
But so necessary.

VII.

Calvary Hospice
6th floor
Room 620.
Days click by
Calendars, clocks,
Suncycles
what have you.
Her condition degenerates
she has trouble seeing,
trouble hearing
but still, she loves and knows
and brings light to the room.
Brings light to her visitors.
My family, our friends.
She has trouble hearing.
The noise in her ears
is tremendous.
But she knows that I love her.
And that's what's important.

VIII.

Family, friends
Visitors, guests
Want their "time-share"
with Mom.
We're considering applying
a Saint-hood
to match her wonderful spirit
and holistic aura.
Me and my brothers act as
Gatekeepers.
"Sorry, your time is up.
Thanks for coming.
Number 43? Please go in.
She's expecting you."
Who knew she was so popular?

IX.

I score my
"alone time" with my saint
my angel
my life-giver
my love
my mom.
Armed with a tape recorder
(for future generations)
and my naturally
inquisitive mind.
I clasp her hand,
and hug and kiss
and talk and love.

X.

That was awhile ago.
When she could still
talk and laugh.
Not anymore.
The last sound she was making
was
Heavy, labored breathing.
And an oxygen tube up her nose
Her breathing—not
mechanically,
but hollow. Her spirit has left,
and is patiently waiting for her
body to follow.
The last thing she said to me
As I gazed into her dilated
Blue-green eyes
I was smiling, she told me to stop.
"You hide behind your smile."
She said.
So I stopped smiling,
and gazed,
softly in her eyes.
"You'll do fine" she said.
and I left the room.

Wishes for Sons

LaMarr J. Bruce • Hunter College High School

XI.

The angel
has returned.
As she hovers, on
grace given wings
sparkling silver
She knows secrets
 That we cannot understand
 That we cannot comprehend.
The eternity fabric shimmers
and catches my mother's eyes.
She is excited
and joyed
at the sight of
a long awaited friend.
The angel
Floats down,
Leans forward
and whispers
in my mother's ear.
 Silent, precise, serene
a cathartic wish granted.
My mother closes her eyes
and smiles
a holy, magical
all-knowing smile
as the angel
 evaporates
again.

XII.

There is something
intrinsically,
ineffably poetic
about a last
Shabbat
with the cantor
and her choir
sing-song voice
 “Baruch atta adonai . . .”
As we chatted along.
Mom was at peace
 with her closed eyes,
 and labored breathing.
We all cried.
 not her.
She was one
 with herself, she knew
that the time had come
to lay down her inhibitions
make peace with the Earth
 and rise
 in spirit
with her angel
who has come
to take her onward
and leave us behind
and I can hear her
talking with God.
And she is asking
“God, exactly when was I
ready to encompass the
light?”
And God is replying
“Ruth,
You were always ready.”

earned from my father to convert my sadness into anger and to smear it across my face, layer upon layer, the consistency of oil, carefully, so as to avoid eyes that already stung, and thoroughly, so that everyone might see it against my soft brown temples. I now understand that sadness is weak, pitiful, and self-perpetuating; anger is strong, dynamic, and hopefully self-destructive. Yet I am far from sad and not altogether angry. Do not be misled by my tone.

This conversion is a necessary routine for a boy like me—a boy who should explode for the sake of rage, rather than implode in defense of grief. On the day I met my father, he spoke this truth so urgently that I became fearful. But I smile now, for this is not nearly as harsh as it seems. He showed me, after all, how to encounter myself. Invoked in me the commands beyond those vague wishes for sons. Sought in me a presence that few can grasp.

He noticed on my weighted eyes that the roaming fry, which so many try to restrain or domesticate, had settled calmly upon my brow. I had observed its untamed form in the sidelong glances of raving men who stomp along cars declaring apocalypse. I had measured it running wild in those beggars in Harlem and Tennessee who speak to implore, suggest, command, and finally force a passerby to spare some change. Dark-skinned, light-eyed, questionable men, who come much too close, speak too loudly, too intimately—those who dare to challenge when it will be easily mistaken for a threat.

It was not until I met my father that I realized I must be brooding. My face is driven in hard curves, my eyes throw light back at the source, my cheekbones deliberately protrude, my upper lip can curl in disdain or even contempt (though I use my hatred sparingly). To challenge, not to threaten. It was not until I met my father that I learned that etiquette can intimidate—especially white folks in subway cars. The key is to say excuse me at the precise pitch and tone, accenting the right syllables, allotting breaths correctly, elongating the uuu, deepening voice until it is almost inaudible. One must deepen their voice according to the occasion: At a certain depth deeper yet and it is a command, deeper yet and it is a curse, inevitable, like some magic, and it can inspire a divine fear. At the lowest depth a voice like mine elicits a wonder, and deeper still, a perfectly smug oblivion. And on those occasions when white folks in subway cars deny

or defy that fear I've learned to inspire, I retreat, lest they discover what wasn't there.

I learned from him to speak in fluctuating, vigorous tones; with eyes that pay only enough attention to look past (as opposed to looking through) the engaged. He taught me to notice and monitor my own smile, that my laughter must be hard and conscious. What he wished for me, he taught me well. And in exchange for all these lessons, I allowed him to see that when the I love you is too much to bear, to respond with likewise, or better yet thank you, would suffice.

It is almost a shame to know that this allegory had been told, and will take shape just to be told again. So something nearby or inside of me tells me that this rambling is cliché. Unoriginal even. Darker brother, black boy, invisible man, it says, there is no need for distinction. It assures me that I have been spoken for and have no need to complain. It has heard my story, the similarities it shares with others, and is waiting to accuse me of plagiarism. To hush that sound, I will explain only the first and last encounter.

An unfamiliar though consoling man entered a doorway, smiling. I had always imagined he'd be a tall, broad-shouldered, megablack silhouette—a sort of extended version of my own. And though I could see no resemblance, I realized that the speed and angle of his movements were mine. To curl my upper lip, to stroke the side of my face, to tense my jaw, to grasp my chin, to wrinkle my forehead, all confirmed our sameness. I had only encountered, except in a frail image of a basketball court ten years removed, vague hope of what should have been, and a conspicuous all the while.

I shook his hand with the force of a blow. Had it been less of a show of strength, I might have transferred some forgiveness to him in exchange for some redemption. He had no use for forgiveness, and I wouldn't know redemption if it shook my hand. Then a hug. Stiff, but not lacking that thing that is too much to bear between father and son. I speak low (like quiet, not deep) when I say it, and wouldn't place it here for everyone to see. It was a heavy thing that ran stiff and ran slowly—not because it was thick, but because it hesitated.

Darker
brother,
black boy,
invisible
man

With a challenge mistaken for a threat, he proceed to say: “I ain’t no soft bella, you gotta excuse this crying man . . . I appreciate you giving me . . . Shit, I was so young . . . but you know I’m . . . and I can’t, I’m not . . . I know . . . it’s fucked up . . . and your mother raised you right . . . and, damn, all I can ask is . . . and shit, seems you already a man,” and so began his teaching.

On this day we were supposed to drive to Brooklyn, to meet some of his friends. Had it been Bronx or Queens or Harlem, I might be soothed by the familiarity. As we walked, I sometimes led, sometimes followed, a step-and-a-half before or behind. Riding in the new Saturn that he sighed should have been a Land Cruiser, silver rims, tinted windows, deluxe caps, I had to sit beside him. As we rode the BQE, he said:

“LaMarr? I see the look on your face, and you, I understand, or I know, how angry you are. I don’t know what to say, I fucked up. Understood. I apologize you listenin’. Too many black boys around like this. You know what? You can snuff me if you want. One time. I won’t guard. To my face if you want. I know I deserve worse for what I been.”

Though I said, “I’ll keep that in mind.” I thought: you don’t know what you saying. One day soon I’m gon’ concentrate all of this shit right into one swift, massive blow. Gnaw my teeth, bite my lip, inhale til I’m filled, clench my fist, tense my muscle, shift my weight, lean my arm back, and Pow muthufucka! Invoke all the intensity of a man who’s been wrong. Knock you down as if I was the father and you were my son.

“You play ball?” he asked.

“A little.”

“You think you could take me?”

“I don’t know. Depends on you.”

“Well, we got to see. I doubt it. Maybe when you eighteen or something. That’s my thing, that’s what I do, you know? I’m getting old though. My knees are fucked up. But I was a monster when I was twenty-five.”

“Nah. That’s no excuse man. You’re the same age as Michael Jordan. Thirty-five. You not old enough for age to be an excuse. I’m young enough though.”

“You got a girl?”

“Nah. No time or energy for one in particular.”

“You sexing yet?”

“Nah. Not really. I tried some shit. I won’t lie. What I’ve done doesn’t count dough. But I handle mine.”

“Well, you know, you don’t have to rush. You only 15, man. But you know how to handle yourself, right?”

“Yeah. I know all about that . . . But you was sexin’ by the time you was my age, right?”

“Those girls back then liked my eyes. These eyes got me into alota trouble come to find out. Always chasing the cat in the light eyes. Made me easily identifiable. That reminds me. Any of this niggas out here fuckin’ you? The expression on you face might keep most of these kids from messing with you. Looks like you mad as shit. Damn. That’s why I had to get out this city. You living in New York, all this bullshit to deal with. Ain’t no space up here. That’s why I moved out to Maryland. All this niggas piled on top of each other tryina be big and bad and ca’t even breathe. Shit.”

“Nah. Nobody’s messing with me. When somebody does, I hold my own. I’m not no thug, but I have friends who got my back—I guess.”

“Why you always answer with Naaaaah or Yeeeeeah? I do the same thing. Try and say yes and no, man. Anyway, I remember when I was living up here about your age. Cats use to fuck scared niggas up, and rob them sometimes on the subways. What kept them outta my way a lot of the time, honestly, was the look on my face too. Like I was so fuckin mad I might haul up and kill a muthufucka. Like I was just waiting. So when I was alone on the train thugs avoided me for the most part.”

“I don’t always answer with Naaaaaaahs and Yeeeeeeeahs. Shit, I usually enunciate. Sometimes I got a tendency to speak low (like quiet, not deep) when I only half-mean what it is I’m saying. I mean, never got anything below an A in English. And yo, an English teacher once told me that I was among the most astonishing she’d ever encountered. The way I write . . . and the way I speak. Guess I speak differently depending on who I’m speakin to. Whatever though . . . People use to always tell me that I was articulate, before I realized that it was more profitable to be Black.”

“More profitable? You think kinda wild, huh? I can tell you’re intelligent. That’s cool. I was never into schoolwork myself. School was never my thing. Didn’t have the patience for those muthufuckas. Anyway, how much you weigh?”

“I don’t know. Maybe 155. I’m about 5’10”, I think. But I got a question for you. What’s your middle name?”

“You only about two inches behind me. And you look like a strong kid. You lift weights and shit, I can tell. You got some biceps on you. My middle name’s Brian.”

“What a y or i?”

“I.”

“Brian. Yo, I bet you forgot my name has two r’s. Everybody does. You probably proud of the fact that you remembered the space between the a and the M, and the fact that the M should be capitalized. But I know you ain’t remember it has two r’s. You probably don’t know what it means either. But you’re half Puerto Rican, right? You might know cause it’s Spanish. I got some Hispanic friends. Mostly Puerto Ricans. A few Dominicans. Not from school though. Ain’t no real Latinos in my school. Some of them have Hispanic last names but they really white. Bunch of white and Asian kids at my school. They have me saying Asian now. Believe that? Before I would just say Chinese. I didn’t make any distinction. People in my school and otherwise think I’m angry or arrogant or conceited or suspicious or lack insight. They think I need to shave. They think I dress too nice or try too hard or sing too loud or brood too deeply (but I’m really just sad). I’ve digressed and shit. Where was I?”

“I’m not half Puerto Rican. Why’d you think that? You were talking about your name.”

“Oh. That’s what I was told. (That you were half Puerto Rican.) It means the sea in some antiquated (old) Spanish, poetic, vernacular. You know how back in the day English poets would use e’er and e’en instead of ever and even in poetry? Well, some Spanish poets would say la mar instead of el mar, when using it po-e-tic-al-ly. Maybe in the sixteenth, seventeenth century. The sea is a kinda cliché image in poetry. But they only used one r so it’s really not the same. When I tell people about my name, I don’t tell them about the r discrepancy. I know there was some old white man that ran for president named Lamar Alexander. And that faggot in Nerds was Lamar. Some MC’s real name is Lamar. Somebody famous, but he goes by something else. I forget who. I know you got two daughters and a son, right? Your son’s name is Rodney junior, right?”

“Yeah, but we call him Man-man.”

“Yeah . . . that’s your son. Like a man twice over.” And I lifted my eyebrows despite that weight.

“So are you man. (My son.) But where’s this fuckin’ exit? What is it, Flatbush Avenue? Shit. If this was the Bronx I’d be cool. But I don’t know anything about no Brooklyn.”

“Shit, I only know Queens and Harlem myself.”

“I shouldn’t swear so much, and neither should you, man.”

“Only around you. I’d sooner bite my tongue, and I have, than curse in front of my mother. But the bridge is coming up. We’ve got to exit soon. Once we get on that bridge we’ll be going to Manhattan. To Delancey Street.

We won’t be able to turn around until we get to the other side.

Once, the only time I looked directly into his muted eyes, I caught glimpse that was a hint of something that had recently fled from them. Something nearby, or inside of me says that the something, the something leaving his eyes had not fled—it had simply undergone some conversion. And I find myself smiling in spite of myself. He proclaimed his wished for sons, but averted promises with eyes like mine.

My father and I have only encountered on six occasions since. On the final occasion, for lack of dependable memories regarding these matters, I only know that he shrugged his shoulders and dismissed me. Disembarked and cruised back to that place where there are no consequences wrought upon sons. But do not be misled: this is not nearly as harsh as it seems. I was fourteen on the verge of fifteen, and convinced, as I am now, that I am old, things are still. He appeared and then receded, and it was not enough to unnerve me. He supplied me with some knowledge, a point of reference, a taste, a glance. And this, I will always claim, is enough for me. Much later, too recently, I beeped him. He once said beep anytime—so I did, left a message, but forgot to press pound.

In the fall that followed, I attended an interview at a program for Black and Hispanic high school students. I was asked to describe myself in three words. Two elude me and the other was exhausted. Something nearby, or inside of me, asked me what right had I, having lived for such a short time, to call myself exhausted? Even though I can cause many creases in my forehead, the lines are not permanently there, as would be a clear sign of age.

It might be a lie when I tell you: I was born on the same day that some wishful fellow died. I sometimes wonder if I displaced him. I will begin now—as I walk, brooding, with the comical stride of this pompous Black man, tense and forever reserved, conspicuous and unaffected, timing and numbering smiles, paying enough attention to assure that I am simply looking past, not through, the engaged. Had that invisible man stepped aside for me? Had he knowledge of my arrival or had I suddenly superimposed him? Up to this point there has been a distinct collection of rules, ideas, obligations, and presumptions, wishes that might be said to affirm my existence. But hush, I say, because this story has been told before. Nevertheless, my father taught me in his presence and tests me in his absence. For this I must [love] him, as I walk painfully, unerringly, to wherever it is I think I’m going.

Calligraphy

Jenny Ma • Martin Van Buren High School

If you ask most people to show you pictures of their mothers, they would probably select a wedding photo, a snapshot from a family function, or some type of portrait. The photo would be a flattering picture to convey their mothers' beauty and kindness, whether through a smile or her expression. However, if you were to ask me to show you a picture of my mother, I would take out a photo of her with her hair in a messy ponytail, her brows furrowed in deep concentration, and her hands stained with black ink. She is holding a brush while cocking her head slightly to the left, as if to angle the brush to just the exact degree. In this uncomfortable pose—shoulders back, arms out, and back erect—my mother is practicing calligraphy. Years later, I am still amazed at how stunning she looks in this photograph.

While most childhood Sundays were filled with trips to the park or movies, mine were at home, watching my mother. I remember Sunday as the day when my mother practiced calligraphy, the Chinese art of character writing, with the aid of a brush and black ink. She would sit at the kitchen table for hours, using the strength and energy of her entire body to write each stroke. I watched her do this so many times. Even her mannerisms, such as the tip of her tongue protruding while writing an especially complicated character, are part of my visual history. First, the brush was dipped and swirled around to loosen the tightness of the hairs. Saturated with black ink, the bristles of the brush glided over the paper effortlessly. One stroke was finished, but with a flick of a wrist, another stroke was born. The sweeps became heavier and the tip of the brush seemed like a razor piercing the piece of paper. The black ink crept along the fibers and seeped deeply into the paper, completing the character. I watched until my desire to go fill my time with more entertaining activities took over, or until my patience ran out, whichever came first. I sometimes threw my hands in the air, surrendering to her devotion and diligence. Her passion for this art baffled me. How could one person sit at a desk for hours, repeating the same movements and strokes over and over?

Looking back on it now, her composure and desire for perfection should not have surprised me at all. When I came home from elementary school with a garland of zeros, my mother sat by my side and explained to me the logic of long division with such dedication and care that I sometimes wondered why she was not a math teacher. She was never one for short explanations, and when I

started to complain that my cartoons were waiting for me, she would say, "Jennie-ah, only by doing things slowly and patiently, with serious intentions and effort, will you be successful." I regarded those talks as schemes to make me sit longer, and dismissed them as my mind would wander again and again to Bugs Bunny and Garfield. Seeing my thoughts drift, my mother would become even more persistent. So, for endless hours I sat in the kitchen, my behind slowly fusing to the chair, knowing the less I paid attention the longer I would have to stay.

Since then, I, myself have taken up calligraphy. It started as a mild interest to learn why my mother was so entranced by it, but now I use it as a method to calm and relax myself. I practice it when I feel confused or worried, and somehow the firmness and the sureness of the strokes I write always alleviate my burdens. In some way, I view the brush as a symbol of my relationship with my mother and the lessons I have learned from her. My life has been the calligraphy brush, once guided patiently and completely by my mother, but now by my hands alone. The characters drawn quickly and without thought, with the tip of the brush just grazing the page, look weak, unsteady and ready to collapse with the huff of a breath. The strokes that take time, the ones that I learned from my mother, drawn with the power and concentration of the entire body, are sturdy and solid.

My mother has since had less time to devote to her beloved hobby; the demands of our household and her work often take precedence over her art. Now, whenever I feel I am about to falter, and when I feel the desire to rush through important things, I am reminded of my mother's love for calligraphy. If she could spend hours writing characters and placing all of her concentration and effort on the strokes of a brush, then surely I can apply the same attitude to my life. It is at these times I take out my mother's picture, hands stained with black ink and eyes filled with determination, and I am reminded of just how amazing she is.



Six Pack

Yaron Aronovicz • Stuyvesant High School

I want a six pack. For my 16th birthday, when I blow out the candles, I'll ask God or the birthday fairy or whoever is supposed to be giving you all of those birthday wishes for a six pack. Maybe I'll ask for some arm and leg and chest muscles too. I don't want to be huge, and it's not like I'll all of a sudden start wearing tight, ribbed shirts or start talking about how I lift weights every day and run for miles and swim and swim and swim. If someone asks how I suddenly got this six pack, I'll say that it was a gift.

If I had a six pack, I would know what it felt like to touch your stomach and feel something besides skin and bone and weak flesh. I would not have to wonder about these things in the boy's locker room. I would be able to do the fifty crunches and fifty push-ups that Mr. Webber asks for in gym class. I would be able to say that my hobbies included admirable things like death sports and hiking. If it rained, and my shirt got wet, that would be cool instead of just wet and uncomfortable.

But mostly, if I had a six pack I would have something to write about when my English teacher, Ms. Hall, asks us to write about our first kiss. I mean, I'm sure that six-pack people can barely remember their first kiss from ALL kisses that they have participated in since then. But I'm sure I would be able to remember, seeing as how I just got my six pack.

I could write about how I was nervous and she was beautiful and she was scared and how we were playing spin the bottle at camp. Or maybe it happened later, when I was a freshman and how we were in the park and she had to go and then I reached over and . . . Maybe I would be bad. And she would smile and say, "Let's be friends."

Maybe I would be good. And she would melt in my arms and I would be able to hold her and smell her hair for a few seconds. Maybe she would be good and teach me.

Do girls teach guys how to kiss? Christina says that all guys suck at kissing until a girl teaches them how. I guess I'll have to explain to whoever it is I first kiss that I haven't done this before and she'll have to teach me. That is, if you don't mind because I can perfectly understand

it if you don't want to spend all of the time and energy and embarrassment it would take to teach someone like me, who doesn't even have a six pack, how to kiss properly.

And now I'm talking to some imaginary "You." Maybe I should ask for a little more sanity and intelligence and focus for my birthday. Then again, what I really need is a large capacity for boring work and a little more energy late at night so I could finish all of my homework. When I come right down to it, what I really need is to go back in time.

If I could go back in time, I would be able to do well in school. I would never have failed or done poorly in any of my classes. I would be able to start doing push-ups and sit-ups freshman year so that I would eventually have a six pack. If I could go back in time, I would have asked Melanie out when she liked me instead of a year later when I liked her.

I met Melanie a few days after I broke up with Christina. This all happened freshman year. We've been friends ever since. We see each other every day after school and we talk and cheer each other up. Like last week, when she was upset because Alex dumped her and I sat next to her and we leaned against her locker without shoulders touching and she just kept going on about Alex. She was wearing tight, beige pants and a pink sleeveless shirt and she looked really good. So I told her a story about the boogers in Alex's nose and how they always fight about who's the BEST booger of them all and when one loses it and begs Alex to put it out of its misery and that's why he picks his nose so much. She was laughing by the end of the story. That's the type of friends we are. She does the same for me. She always knows what to say when I'm upset about my dead brother. I love her. Mark teases me about it but it's not like he's getting so much play so it's ok. I love Mark too.

When I'm walking home from school, I imagine an Angel coming down to me and telling me that his has been a mistake. The Angel says that I am going to get another chance for a six pack and for Melanie and my brother. The Angel takes me back in time. I walk into my house and say "Hi Ben." But he doesn't come.

If I could go back to when I was 11, I would tell my mom

Do girls
teach
guys how
to kiss?

that Ben, my little brother, has pneumonia and that doctors don't know what they're talking about. I would tell her not to give him Pepto-Bismol like Dr. Richardson said and not give him Perventol like Dr. Robinson said because those things would not help him. Maybe this way Ben wouldn't have died in Brooklyn Hospital when he was two because he took Pepto-Bismol instead of penicillin. Maybe this way I wouldn't have gone to his funeral.

What I really need for my birthday is a direction in life. I wanted to be a doctor. Now I want to kill Dr. Richardson and Dr. Robinson and the people that make Pepto-Bismol pink. But this is not a career and I doubt that my dad would smile and tell me how I have finally gotten my head out of the clouds if I mentioned killing people to him. I think he's looking for something along the lines of Lawyer or Business Man or President of the United States of America.

A few weeks after the funeral, Dad called me outside and pulled a cigarette and said that he is sure I will have a period of grieving and remorse. He said that I had suffered a great pain and that he is sure that my school-work will suffer a little bit. He said that I must remain focused so that I can become a doctor one day. I told him that I don't want to be a doctor anymore. Nonsense, he said. You'll see, he said. You've always wanted to be a doctor, he said. Perhaps I'll become a chemist. This way, I could change the color of Pepto-Bismol. This would probably lead to a Nobel Prize.

Melanie says that I should become a physicist. I could build a time machine and get a six pack and ask her out at the right time. Maybe I'll become a Rabbi. I'll pray every single day for a six pack. I'll pray for the color of Pepto-Bismol to change. I'll pray for a time machine. And God or the Rabbi fairy will give me these things because I will always pray with a sense of purpose and direction.

Melanie has a beautiful stomach. It looks like a very comfortable pillow. It looks soft and warm. I used to lie down on Ben's stomach. It was soft and warm. I used to let him sleep on my stomach. I used to sneak into his bed late at night and fall asleep with him. I read him dinosaur books because that's what Dad used to read to me before his sister died of cancer. I used to know all the names of the dinosaurs. I used to want to be a paleontologist. I used to do well in school.

Now I lie. I lie about brushing my teeth and about doing my homework and about how many times I've kissed a girl. I lie so much I don't know what has actually happened to me. My father says that I am running away from the world. Sometimes I tell myself that Ben is at home and when I get back from school he will be reading Little House books like I used to and I will hug him and Dad will still be living with us instead of in an apartment in Manhattan.

When I walk into my house I say, "Hi Ben."

I say it very quietly so mom won't hear. She went a little nuts after Ben died. She was in the hospital with him every day. I didn't see her for the whole month and a half that Ben died there. After I say hello to Ben, I wait by the door. I wait and he never comes to me so I go to the living room and up the stairs and past his room to my room where I take a seashell and put it in a jar.

I used to collect seashells with Ben. We would go up and down the beach looking for big clamshells and Chinese staircases and whelks and periwinkles. One time we found a clam whose hinge had not been broken. The two shells were stuck together. I have half of that clam in my room. Ben loved our big clams. Our buckets would be full of them and mom would say that we were taking hundreds of the same shell home. She would dump most of the clams. Ben would cry. I want to go to the bottom of the ocean and rip out every single clam and bring the shells home and tell mom how stupid she is to throw away things that Ben touched. She threw Ben away. We don't go to the beach anymore.

So every day that Ben doesn't come I take a seashell and put it in a big jar in my room. The jar has 1245 seashells in it. Every day I tell myself that this must stop and it has been over three years now and Dad seems to be over it. I sit down and look through my old books that have names like, "So You Want to be a Piece of Crap." I look for a sense of direction. I haven't found it yet in those books. Then I do 20 sit-ups and five push-ups so I'll get a six pack eventually. Then I go downstairs and eat Ben and Jerry's Cherry Garcia ice cream.

Mom likes to talk about things. At dinner it's just me and her at the table. She still cooks enough food for four people. When she makes fish, she says she wonders if Ben likes fish because most little kids don't. She doesn't let me turn on the TV and the whole house is so quiet. Mom talks about her day and she asks how my day was



and I tell her that my day was great, just great. My day was great because it was the same. The same as yesterday and the day before that, and the day before that, and the day 1245 days ago when Ben died. But I didn't say that. You can't mention Ben to Mom. She went a little nuts after he died.

Mom says that she enjoyed her day too. I ask her what she did today and she tells me how she went shopping and how at work she got promoted and now she's Assistant Manager at the realty firm she works for. She never worked until Dad left. Dad works at an insurance firm. I tell Mom how wonderful that is.

At school, during lunch, Mark asks me if I saw the college advisor to plan out my whole future in the next half an hour. Ms. Arnov called me down so I say yes. Mark asks what my future looks like. I take the ice cream cone out of my mouth and say, "Crap." He laughs and tells me that he'll be right there with me.

Then I say bye to Mark and go to the pay phone that we have outside the lunchroom. I call Mom up every day. Mom is fat. She could die of a heart attack or stroke or cancer or anything else. Mom always picks up the phone and says, "Hello," and I hang up. I don't want her to worry about me worrying about her. She complains that we get a lot of crank calls during the week.

At the funeral, Dad told me that I was his only son now. He said that Ben was gone. He said that I would be all that was left of him and Ben and Mom. He said that he would die one day and Mom would die one day and I would be all that was left. I could have thought about how awful that would be and how alone I would be, but I'm so focused that I did not. I listened to Dad. I focused on listening to Dad. Dad said I must have children. He said I must become successful. He said this to me while we were driving home from the funeral. I think Mom decided to get rid of him then. I think that was why she did it.

In the hospital, Ben had IVs running through him. I can see the doctors hooking Ben's arms and hands up to the bags of Pepto-Bismol and that pink shit flowing through his veins and all the while his pneumonia was getting worse. Except in the hospital they knew he had pneumonia and would have hooked him up to antibiotics. I wonder what would happen if his blood would start flowing up the tube and into the bag. The medicine burned his veins so they had to wake him up in the middle of the night to change the syringes. You could see swollen, dark holes in his arms and hands when he was in his coffin. The doctors drained my brother away. Mom said that Ben never wanted to have the needle changed because it hurt so much. If I had a six pack I would have protected him.

The doctors told my Mom and Dad and me that that year had a rather bad strain of pneumonia going around and

that three other children died. We never met the parents of those children. At the hospital, Mom said a girl who swallowed a silver dollar came in. On the x-ray of her throat you could see the circle of money. The doctors got it out. She is alive today. They did not give her Pepto-Bismol.

Robert Fishman was complaining about his little brother in the hallway. He said his little brother always bugs him when he's on the phone or the computer and that he's an obnoxious little brat. I went over and put my lips next to Robert's ear and asked him if his little brother has burning veins that will never heal. I ask him if his little brother has Pepto-Bismol flowing through him in his coffin. That shut Robert up.

My math teacher, Mrs. Yoon, talks to me about how when she was 20 her sister died at 23 and how upsetting that was. Now she's in her fifties and she says that she never completely healed, but that one day she got up in the morning and said to herself, "I must live my life for my sister." Mrs. Yoon says that this conviction has brought her much peace and happiness. Mrs. Yoon says that when she was really depressed, she never thought she would smile ever again. She says that that's how it always seems when you are depressed and that the main thing to do is not commit suicide or do drugs.

Christina, my first girlfriend, who I never kissed, told me that Life Is A Beast, Get On It And Ride. She also said that I should Roll With The Punches. Melanie said that bad things happen all the time and that I will be okay one day. Mark asked if I'd like to talk about it. None of them ever had brothers or sisters. So fuck them.

I've only asked three girls out my whole life. Christina said yes but she didn't know about Ben yet and that didn't last after she told me to Roll With The Punches. I mean, I can see how Life Is A Beast, but I really don't get Rolling With The Punches. Actually, it's my fault. I failed to realize how comforting Rolling With The Punches would be. Melanie said no because I have "too much emotion." The other girl, her name is Iris, said that she really didn't want to because she "didn't feel like having to break up with someone with a dead brother." I am as you can imagine, exceedingly sympathetic to these reasons. Exceedingly sympathetic.

The hole they dug for Ben was so small. His coffin was so small. It was wood. The inside looked soft. I went up to it and touched Ben's arms under his sleeves and felt his burned veins. They woke him up every night and they didn't even save him. The needle holes were screaming at me.

Life Is A Beast, Get On It And Ride.

Black Perplexity

Derick Bowers • Canarsie High School

Eleven-year-old hands
 creating life.
 With every pinch and grasp,
 molding from lifeless clay,
 whatever face that comes to light.
 Instincts guiding finger movements
 through a focused daze,
 a mechanic artistry,
 a passive rage,
 and divine intervention.
 The boy used
 marbles for its eyes,
 hair from his last cut,
 and brown paint for its complexion.
 The head was finished,
 leaving him the impression,
 that the face was not of aggression,
 but rather a black man with a perplexed expression
 His mouth opened in a
 bewildered fashion,
 while gazing
 over the boy's shoulder.
 Telling his story through his
 strange marble eyes,
 as his face seems to be getting older
 Wrinkled from the long-line
 of his people's oppression
 like a sidewalk mime
 creating comprehensible dialogue
 through his facial expression,
 while passersby pass him by
 every time
 Nobody's attention,
 and no pennies in the hat
 that lays on the ground
 empty and flat.
 Perplexed
 about the issues not
 addressed,

I walked up to his coffin and took half of the clam shell that we found on the beach, the one that was still hinged to another shell, and put it in the coffin. The other half is in my room.

Mom did not cry. She was on a pill. Dad did not cry. He is a Man. I did not cry. I broke every mirror in the temple's bathroom. I cried when I got home. Home is the best place to cry. You can see where you cried every day.

I had a dream that I was holding onto Ben and that he was about to fall off a cliff and I woke up screaming and I could almost see Ben still holding on to my arm. Usually I go to Mom's bed and sleep there when I dream about him but she was on a business trip and I was home alone. So I took my jar of seashells and I opened my window and started throwing them. I threw them at houses and at trees and cars and I set alarms off and people opened their doors and went outside to turn off their car alarms so I threw seashells at them. I was throwing them from behind my shades so I don't think anyone noticed that it was me. I took a hammer from the basement and hit the glass jar and got a few small cuts and I bashed all of those seashells to pieces. The last shell was a huge clam. I hit the clam so hard that wedges of it cut into the wood floor. I could have cut my throat on that triangle, but Mrs. Yoon said that the main thing to do was not commit suicide. Instead, I kept hitting that clam. I hit that clam. I hit through the floor. I opened my mouth and bared my teeth and I screamed at the floor and at the bits of broken shells. A dog started barking. Then I collapsed with bits of white shell in my black hair. When I woke up, my hair looked like it had snowflakes in it.

When they knew Ben was going to die, Mom forced Dad to let me see him. Dad never wanted me to see Ben. He thought that it would be a negative experience. Dad drove me to the hospital and told me how I must behave myself and be quiet and be nice to my brother. I said "Uh-huh" when he asked if I understood him and he got mad and cursed at me so I repeated everything he had just said back to him. Ben's room was full of flowers. There were flowers on the little table by his bed and on the window-sill and on the desk and on the floor. I looked at the roses and daffodils and narcissus and saw little tubes coming out of them and into Ben's arms and pink, thick fluid flowing into him from the flowers. All of the flowers had a card on them and all of the cards said, "Love, Dad." I imagined Dad growing hundreds and hundreds of flow-

ers in the basement or at his store or somewhere where I wouldn't see and then bringing them here.

Ben was asleep in his bed. I crawled in and put my arms around him. He woke up and said, "Hi Sam," very softly and hugged me back and that was it. In the morning he was dead and Mom had taken me off the bed because he was cold and the doctors had to take him away.

Then Mom told me to sit down on the bed and I asked where Dad was and where Ben was and Mom said that Dad was outside smoking a cigarette. Then Mom said, "Sam, Ben died last night. He's gone." And she was crying and I said, "What?" but I didn't hear her. I heard a very loud, painful buzzing noise like a fly that was buzzing in front of a hundred blowguns and I threw up, except I could feel my stomach falling down and the throwing up hurt in a violent, hard way but the falling hurt more and more.

I threw up again and again and again. Then again and again and again and again and my stomach, oh God, my stomach had nothing left inside it to throw up and I fell off the bed and I felt the vomit on my pants and on my face and suddenly Mom was all around me and she picked me up. Out of my vomit. I tried to throw up again, but there was nothing left. But I wanted to throw up more. I wanted everything in me out. My stomach was empty and falling and it hurt.

It's been different, you see. It's just been so different since he died. It's like when you have a headache and you can't imagine what it feels like to not have a headache. Maybe I should take some Pepto-Bismol. Maybe that would get rid of my headache.

Look. Ok. Here it comes. You see, ok. I want Ben. I want him. I want him for my 16th birthday. That's it. That's what I want. Ever. I want to hug him. I want him to be alive and I want to stop dreaming about those holes in his little arms and burning veins of Pepto-Bismol. I don't care about the six pack and I don't care if I never kiss a girl or have kids or I never have a career or a direction in life.

I want my little brother to come when I say, "Hi Ben."

Hi Ben Hi Ben Hi Ben Hi Ben Hi Ben Hi Ben Hi Ben.

"I think it's time to blow out the candles, sweetie."

"Ok, Mom."

I bend down to suck in some air and look at the icing on the cake, which is salty and smudged from my tears. I say, "Hi Ben." And I wait.

La Coquette in Memoriam

Noelle C. Maragh • Lafayette High School

thinking,
 “Why are you treating
 my people less
 than the worth buried
 beneath their breasts?”
 “Black Perplexity”
 was the title given,
 and now the boy
 proudly displays
 his jewel,
 sure of receiving the blue ribbon
 in the art contest at his Catholic school.
 Three nun judges examine the head
 and pose questions.
 And the boy explains
 the black man’s expression
 due to his people’s oppression.
 They looked at the head
 like it was Medusa,
 but their hearts were already stone,
 rock hard giving room
 to believe that this idea wasn’t
 born and carried out
 from the boy’s mind alone;
 so they decided to disqualify him
 and send him home.
 Another black achievement denied
 because it was too good.
 And the boy was not given the gold,
 but rather the rotten wood,
 broken off the plank of Amistad
 where many slaves once stood,
 fighting to be free,
 and shoved off to the sharks
 of the deep black sea
 A black boy left to society’s
 cruel discretion,
 and the beginning
 of a life-long lesson
 Carrying the sculpture,
 staring at his gutter puddle
 reflection,
 and very stressed to see
 two faces identical in the state of
 black perplexity.

It’s not every day that I have a mild hallucination, a trippy moment where the recent past and the actual present collide. It’s not every day that I momentarily confuse my father with my lover, who is almost three decades my senior. But I’m getting ahead of myself. I’ve been having a lot of strange days lately.

It was raining something hard this morning. I was thinking, naturally—the day I was to decide to wear my hair down, it rains. Then my father knocked on the bathroom door, asking if I wanted a ride. Of course I did. He knew it, that’s why he asked. He likes to feel useful, and knows I’m always willing to take advantage of his aggressive handiness. Daddy and I are more alike than anyone knows.

He was blasting “Imagine” when I stepped into the Ford, the family’s spunky, sexy silver bullet. I should have known, John Lennon has probably been the soundtrack of many tripped out happenings. We rolled out of the driveway, raindrops plopping on the windshield, the piano keys haunting, my neck getting tense. What was happening? Grayness and trees whirled by in my peripheral vision. Everything looked like a photograph taken with a shaky hand. Blurred, blending. Lines of definition bleeding into one another. My father was speaking musically, notes where his voice should be. I made out the melody; he wanted to show me something. He reached for me. That’s when it happened.

What I figured was my first hangover ever and possibly the worst experience in all the history of teen drunkenness turned into a gathering of burnt out brain cells and undigested memories. That past weekend, that very Saturday, when my parents thought I was at school tutoring freshmen. I wasn’t at school. I wasn’t tutoring. You could say that I was getting an education. That’s how I tried to think of it, it was less serious that way. Almost funny. It was what I wanted. I made the first move. It would have never happened if I hadn’t started it.

My mind’s eye heard “Imagine” in the car with my dad and “Imagine” on the stereo in B’s apartment. What a coincidence, huh? No, not really. There’s a strong possibility that the first time both my father and B heard that song, they were at the same party, in the same New York apartment, puffing on the same passed around joint. Intimately touching the same young girl. Difference is, that was when I was a baby and my dad bathed me. Sometimes B bathes me, but he gets in.

His face was on the inside of my eyelids; I forced myself to blink him away. If only that worked in the life outside my mind!

The sensory overload passed, and my father’s hand coming towards me was open like B’s and I tensed suddenly but then I realized. I realized and my father looked at me strangely and I relaxed and smiled weakly. He popped open the glove compartment, what he had been really reaching for in the ten-second interval that crystallized into a momentary forever.

“I found these in a book at your Grandmother’s house.”

In the pictures, I couldn’t be a shade over a year old. My hair was dark and curled at the ends, my cheeks full and shiny. My dad’s hair was jet black and long, much longer than I can remember ever seeing it. He wore blue shorts but no shirt, and was holding me up for the camera. In the last photo, he was lying on his back on the couch. I lay atop him, my lips planted firmly on his stubbly cheek.

I got out of the car on shaky fawn legs with my allowance in my hand.

I’m sorry, daddy.

If I wasn’t so much like you, I could have been the daughter you wanted.

I was fifteen when I came to Lawson High School. I’d gotten myself kicked out of Pearson Prep at the end of freshman year. My mom thought I was a screw up, my dad thought I was confused, I knew what I was doing. I wanted out of Pearson, and I wasn’t leaving quietly. Why escape at all unless you’re gonna do it with a bang? That’s all I really have to say on that subject. I don’t like talking about it.

My nine years of proper education had taken place in the stuffy, glossy halls of private schools. These places are training grounds for Stepford wives. I was the only brown-skinned girl in the school I attended for eight years, but that was okay. I was smart, pretty, cruel, and developed early, so the girls looked up to me. I made myself numb enough to find pleasure in my place in that youthful hierarchy. The thought now makes me sick.

No one really knows how public school is until they’ve been part of it. Even I, a cynic at the age of ten, wasn’t

prepared for the bombardment of ignorance. The total lack of respect for authority. When students were surprised to find out that I live with both of my parents and they're still married, the looks of envy helped me understand where a lot of this chaos came from. I sympathized with the overworked, underpaid teachers. The building itself seemed to sag with disappointment at the younger generation. But of course, it took the newbie—the intelligent, cute, mature one from a good family—to find a whole different brand of trouble in the halls and half-empty classrooms of Lawson High.

Talking to teachers after class proved to be fun. Being spoken to as if we were equals (and in a good way) was rare and interesting to them. I was often asked where I had been raised; and I was beginning to discover something that wasn't true in private school—grades weren't the only thing that counted. Charisma could get one far, alliances with teachers weren't just helpful, they were essential. I learned this very quickly. And like I do with a lot of things, I took it overboard.

I'll admit it. I liked flirting with teachers. It was fun, it caught them off guard, the old guys had a spring in their step afterwards. It was helping me come out of my shell. Developing early didn't help me with the opposite sex, it only ensured that inappropriate men—which is any man when you're eleven—were always hitting on me. I perfected escapes. But avoidance only worked for so long, because the boys and men and everything in between just keep coming. So my harmless flirtations with teachers were practice, really. So I could wield a little power and see how I liked the feel of it. The effect I had on men wasn't bad. It wasn't bad at all. I'd always been a good girl. I just wanted to have a little fun.

The funny thing is, I hated Mr. B when I first saw him. I guess that's the funny thing.

He sauntered into the classroom fifteen minutes late. Trench coat and sunglasses at noon. The slow walk. Who did he think he was? He was just a teacher at just another high school and he had that walk. It looked stolen to me. That sexy, young man's stride. Please. My mother would have called him mutton dressed as lamb. Salt at the temples, pepper everywhere else but his not-so-terrible bald spot. Something about his body and skin. He looked gaunt but pudgy. Soft but gnarled. Had he been sick? Or

was he just struggling to keep the same hours he did in college? The flare of rage that burst inside me when I first saw him was the single strongest reaction I'd ever had to anyone in my life. Until the tide changed.

I assimilated into the new school well. Good to average grades, teachers who liked me, deans who told me to come to them if anyone bothered me, friends I loved, and boys who went out of their way to annoy me, but in a sweet way. My days were pretty full. I was actually enjoying school! There was so much going on for me at that moment in time that I can't accurately pinpoint when the immediate rage I felt for Mr. B softened into an affection as comfy and crannied as the skin on his face. Part of it could have been his voice. I'm a sucker for voices and his was melodic although it didn't have any really standout qualities. It could have been the laugh, now that was yummy. Men's laughs . . . I don't know what it is. It could have been the sarcastic way he spoke to the class and told adult jokes that only I could laugh at, because only I understood them. Some of it most definitely came from the oversized blue shirt he wore. It was long in the sleeves and covered his hands when his arms were at his sides. It made him look boyish and complemented his eyes.

I hate to think it was the addiction thing, but I think it's pretty obvious. Psychologists and doctors who specialize in addiction will tell you about it. People who have addictions—drugs, alcohol—will be able to seek out others who have addictions. (This also applies to children of abusers.) Not at AA meetings or at crack houses although I'm sure it happens, too. What I mean, is . . . there's a vibe. A way. A pheromone. Something. Two people who can't stop staring at each other in a coffee shop talk, date and eventually know that she is a drunk, and his mother sprinkled painkillers on her cereal. It could be coincidence, just life. But what if all of his exes have had alcohol problems or she dates druggies on purpose because her addiction looks minor next to theirs? What then?

My mom has always found a friend in the bottle. And while cooking is not her forte, I've heard she can take any combination of alcohol and turn it into a divine cocktail. B was in AA. And Narcotics Anonymous. He drank, he shot up, he lived, he fell. He was forty-four years old. He had lived hard, and now was sitting in an empty classroom, telling me his life story. I think he still believed he could have been someone special. Even at the height of my infatuation, I knew this was not true. His self-obsession was unflinchingly hallucinatory.

Class with him became an ethereal, floaty experience. My whole day was built around the forty minutes of sitting back and watching him moving, trying to avoid my eyes. I became obsessed with his chalky hands. I found his nose pleausurably distracting. I once called it "aquiline." This pleased him. We spent time alone before and after class. I left my body during these times. The posturing, winking, vivacious schoolgirl who wasn't me but

controlled me when I was alone with Mr. B. I called her La Coquette.

She spoke only in double entendres, hints, suggestions. She wasn't me or she was me turned all the way up. Mr. B liked her. Was excited by her. The looks he gave her ignited a fire just beneath the surface of her—my—skin. Finally, after three or so months of La Coquette's performance, Mr. B hesitantly said:

"I don't know if you're a young girl just trying out her skills and seeing what she can do . . . or if you're really serious."

La Coquette was serious, and said as much, topped off with a misleadingly innocent lower lip bite that always made Mr. B inhale sharply.

"When school is out . . . in the summer . . . would you like to . . . see me? Away from school?"

I was fifteen years old.

Silly me leaked out and I nodded furiously, yes, yes, yes, it was the culmination of everything of months of want. Pure undistilled want. Coquette ironically had a bit of pride that I lacked, and she stopped my nodding and looked accomplished, almost contemptuous. Of course, I knew then that I would seek to fulfill my desires immediately. Screw summer. Screw waiting. It was like my impulsive, stunning father always said: What about now?

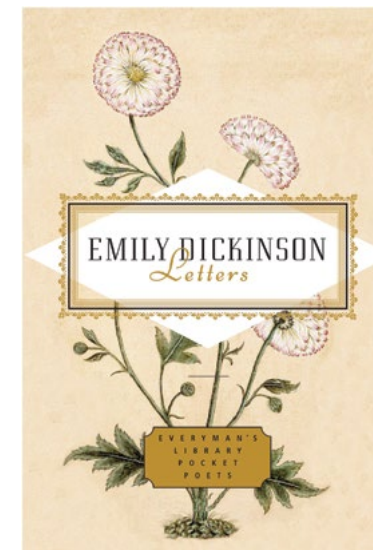
What about now brought me into Mr. B's bed the week I turned sixteen. He had bought me a book of Emily Dickinson's Poetry. It lay on his nightstand and I tried to read it as he generally ravaged me. I started with her more morose works but soon his hands went and my body went and the whole room fell away and so did the little book.

And he—he followed close behind;

I felt his shiver heel

Upon my ankle, —then my shoes

Would overflow with pearl.



We would sometimes meet to kiss and grope in a designated stairwell. It was crazy and dangerous and most of all stupid, but he was a recovering addict and I was his new drug of choice. Class was always steamy, I smoldered and I don't know how I lived. I don't know how I could go home every night and face my father whose World's Greatest Dad mug wasn't sappy sentiment but a probability. Sometimes I stared at him and weighed the possibilities in my head: to go to him and cry, to lay down in his arms and beg his forgiveness for letting someone more virus than man get the best of me. Sometimes I wanted to tell so bad I could feel the secret leaking out of my pores. But daddy never knew. It was too risky.

The murder was easier.

I killed La Croquette the first day of junior year. I vowed to avoid Mr. B and his pleading eyes and be steely and cold like he was at his core. Who knew I would ever aspire to possess his defining characteristics?

I know who I am now. I know enough to move about freely in this world—away from his eyes and arms and tobacco taste. I'm ambitious. Intelligent. Strong. And recognizing my weakness and flaws makes me even more powerful. I don't need to be the seductress to get what I want. That's something my father had told me for years before I could ever interpret it correctly. He'd touch the tip of my nose and say:

"Use what you've got, but never give it away."

Her giggle sometimes haunts me. Her giggle and her stride. Sometimes, sometimes—she really wants out. You see, I couldn't really kill her. She refused to vacate my premises. She's too stubborn. Too powerful. So, I did the only thing I could do. I merely suppressed her. Saved her in case of future need. I could break the glass around Coquette in case of emergency.

Some things never die.

Forever

Jeanne Su • Stuyvesant High School

People say forever because it rolls off thick and easy on their tongue; like honey it is sweet and vicious and stays around for a long, slow while. We'll be best friends forever, she says, and I'll love you forever, he says. But such a short lifetime can only hold so many eternities.

Forever.

We've been friends since the fourth grade, when she sat next to me in the playground. I was drawing Pocahontas. She said, hey I like that, I draw too. She took out her note-book and showed me, and there it was, Pocahontas, better than I could do. I was surprised that her chubby hands could wrap themselves around a pencil and make such long, smooth lines. As I looked through her note-book I realized that she drew everything I did, all the slender women, the bright flowers, the sad eyes; because like me she drew all the things that were not but envisioned ourselves of becoming—beautiful.

We dreamed of being beautiful just like we dreamed of being animators of Disney one day and being filthy rich. We'd invite each other to our lavish weddings. She dreamed of being in newspapers and shaming both of the parents that I knew far too well. We traveled hand-in-hand through the years together, and we shed together the pieces of ourselves that we hated. I grew taller and she grew thinner, our braces and glasses became lost somewhere on our path to high school.

She gave me a necklace with a broken heart. My half said Best and her half said Friends. She smiled and said, Forever.

Now the best lies by itself rusted on the bottom of my jewelry box but don't get me wrong, it doesn't bring me any pain. It used to but it doesn't really any more. I took it out the other day and thought about throwing it out, but what's the use of that, because it's just a reminder of another time when I thought I knew what forever meant. As if we'd somehow find ourselves next to each other, hand-in-hand, blasted through the eons of infinity.

She blew the bangs that had fallen on her face with her smoky breath, and her mascara was running. Yeah, I

fucked him, she told me. She sipped her Starbucks latte and retched. Too hot, she said, fanning her mouth.

How was it? I asked.

Good, she said. I mean, it can never be that bad.

Oh.

So, she said. How have you been?

Okay, I guess.

Just okay? Why? You didn't fuck him yet?

I turned red and looked away. No.

Oh my god, You're lying! She was so loud the entire cafe had turned around to stare at us.

I'm not, I insisted.

I CANNOT believe it. A year and you haven't?

I stared out the window at the fine rain that had formed. People were beginning to open their umbrellas.

What are you waiting for? she asked.

I shrugged.

Oh, you're such a fuckin' baby, she laughed. My little baby Jeanne.

The next time she calls me is two months later, and the first thing I hear over the static is a caught sob. Don't tell anyone this, she whispers. I think I'm . . .

What?

I haven't gotten my period in three months.

Oh my God.

I know.

Well, what do you want to do?

Do you think, she trailed off. Do you think you can go down to the Duane Reade for me?

Later we're both sitting at her house, looking down at the two lines on the third test. She falls into me and cries softly.

I stroke her hair. It's okay, baby. It doesn't matter any more. You should be glad.

Next time you gotta be more careful, that's all.

Do you think I was being stupid?

No. Why? You didn't get it for like, three months. You had every reason to be worried.

She turned and stared at me blankly. With her swollen eyes behind glasses and no makeup, she looked for a split second like the girl I had met eight years ago in the playground drawing Pocahontas. My best friend forever.

But I never even had sex, she choked. After that she cried harder than I'd ever seen anyone cry, and never spoke to me again.

She had pride.

So did I; and along with these things came an assortment of minor betrayals. She told me that she had sex when she didn't, and I told her that I didn't when I did. I saw her face pressed up against mine, her full, grape-colored lips, mouthing, So did you lose it yet, did you, did you?

I thought of what she'd say as I laid there next to him, a fine sheen of sweat covering his bare shoulder. If I pressed my nose against his neck he smelled of the cologne I had gotten him for Christmas, and deeper down, of the laundry detergent of his clothes. Aqua d'Gio and Tide. Ted.

What are you thinking, he asked.

I don't know.

I know what I'm thinking, he smiled. He wrapped my hand in his and looked at me with his spectacular grey eyes. I could feel his other hand reach back and comb gently through my hair.

I'm thinking he said. I'm thinking that you're beautiful. I buried my head in the crook of his shoulder, and smiled. I love you so much, he said. He squeezed my shoulder harder. I'll love you forever.

I don't move. Against the neck of his skin I mouthed, I love you too, and breathe in deeply. I was getting suffocated but I didn't care, and for a brief eternity I was drowning in Tide and cologne; Ted.

He said he'd love me forever and maybe he wasn't lying. He looks at me now and I see it, the question that hangs in the air for a split second before I turn around and avoid his gaze.

You know I'll always care about you, he tells me. I know. I tried, he says. I want you to know that. I'm different now. Everything I've done last year, that was a mistake, and I'm sorry.

Okay, we're at a table in Starbucks, and I stare down at the foam on my cappuccino. He hates coffee, so he's drinking grape soda. Say something, he begs.

I never get over anything, I said finally. You know that.

I blink away the tears in my eyes and I look outside at the people leaving school, milling around. A freshmen couple walk kiss, pimply, happy. I wonder if one day he'd walk away from her as she cries, saying, sorry babe, I gotta go to practice, or hang up on her when she calls. Or tell her, dry-eyed, that he's changed and he can't help it. Just like that. I know, he says sadly, I know that.

The freshmen girl is leaning against the window now, the Columbia label of her blue jacket pressed against the glass. She smiles and laughs after the boy whispers something in her ear. I can see it now—five months later, his parents not home, his hand finding the soft skin of her body, her breasts. He'll comb through her hair with his hands. She'll breathe deeply as he kisses her. He'll say, you're beautiful, and I love you forever.

I look at him then, hard. He's peeling the label off the soda, bit by bit, until they gather into a little white mound.

People say forever because it rolls off thick and easy on their tongue; like honey it is sweet and vicious and stays around for a long, slow while. Best friends forever, we write in each other's yearbooks. BFF4EVA, 143 FOREVER, initials engraved in sloppy ink. We are all eighteen now, and going off to places with manicured lawns and professors and dorms, romantic encounters and bongs and drunken initiations. And in our books of memories, we write, Always Remember, Never Forget. We carve circles in each other's existences, orbiting through each other's lives, bump around. We tell each other to never forget. We make promises for eternity; to remember each other forever, to love and cherish each other forever, till death do us part. To remain friends forever, to love forever; all these promises to the stars, to infinity that we swear to keep in the walls of our hearts. To think of each other every time the slow beat pumps blood through our bodies, circulates through our toes, our fingers.

But what no one ever realizes is this; that such a short lifetime can only hold so many eternities.

Flutter

Danica Tiu • Stuyvesant High School

1970

Delirious with fever, my mother looks up, finally come to after days of thrashing in the throes of sickness, sees a moth fastened to the wall like an upside down heart. She is eleven, maybe twelve, always too big for her age, and she has learned that moths are signs of rain. She does not want rain, not while she's sick, not while she lies in bed, so she calls Guama to the room, wants the moth brought outside, but Guama smiles, refuses.

My child, she says, I have been praying for your health, and my prayers have been answered. These brown wings have carried your grandfather's soul to this spot on the wall, and he stays for two days until the fever breaks, leaves as quietly as he entered, floating gently, so gently on the waves of an unseen breeze.

1988

She does not know how the house will be filled, such large, vacant space an extravagance for a family of three, and she worries how they will afford the house and the baby, the new job has given her more asthma than paychecks, but at least the baby does not cry at night, only during the day because she is left in the care of strangers while her mother ruins her lungs in an office of recycled dreams. She cannot interpret her daughter's cries like Guama, but Guama is back home, back in the Philippines, and mother is left in an unknown land with a baby, a scared husband, and sometimes, at night, her small family can hear her breathing wishes and regrets, inhale, why did I leave, exhale, why do I stay. In the hallway, she hears a flutter, a pulling and pushing of wings, like pistons, perched above the thermostat, so she smiles, says she'll buy the house. In seventeen years she has learned of no regrets, only whispers of flight woven into walls more vivid in the absence of light.

1997

It has been years since she last went home and the islands cry the tears she has been unable to find. She knew before the call, heard her father come knocking at our window, it helped to dull the pain but she still saw him in her dreams. She is tired, jetlagged, did not want to come home to bad news, did not want to come home like this, sick, tired, unable to sleep. At the wake, she stares outside, at the rain, listens to the syncopated drops hit glass, eulogies are shallow, she wonders if he was in pain. In between wet streaks, he sees color, pulls Guama's sleeve, points. They laugh, watch butterfly and moth sidestep each water droplet through intricate dance, waiting to teach Guakong to sing with wings, and Guakong has always been a fast learner.

2004

It is cold tonight, autumn day unraveled, and I stand out the side door, cup in hand, the being inside sitting still, so still, paper wings folded in waiting, I can see through them as I lift the glass, like a lantern, against streetlamp silhouettes bowing metal heads to the moon. The street is quiet, dried leaves create a scritch-scratch symphony against the sidewalk, the earliest of lullabies, this is what I know, the wind keeping time in gusts and blows, the smell of damp rust and metal, the weight of exhaust fumes heavy and sour in my mouth. She has taught me to catch moths in cups, in papers, to offer them up to the night and I murmur, we're okay, we're okay, as I let go and stay to watch the moth rise into black, hand still clutching glass, rim fogged white where my frozen words refuse to thaw.



Avian Flu

Serge Morrell • Stuyvesant High School

The mere thought—of taking the phone and dialing the number—was sickening. As if yesterday’s hamburger, half-digested inside, was coming up my throat.

Beating off nausea, I went to the bathroom, leaned on the sink in front of the mirror and looked at myself. This is how it can be. This is how it sometimes is. A pale, freckled face was looking at me, so familiar and so foreign. Blue-gray eyes. Rurik’s family eyes, that now did not mean anything. Anything special, anything meaningful. A straight nose with a distinctive small protuberance. Nothing stood behind the protuberance now. Nothing, other than emptiness. Two days ago my mom told me the truth . . . She told it to me over a hamburger, in a cheap Turkish eatery on First Avenue. Well, actually—she let me finish the hamburger and waited till I started drinking my Coke. She waited till I drank more than half. And then she told me. “This is a bad place. A wrong place.”

“Oh, please, don’t worry.” I thought that she was apologizing for not having invited me to a better place. “I always wanted to go with you someplace. On a Friday night. Does it make any difference which restaurant it is? The food is good here.”

“This is a bad place,” she insisted. “And a bad time. But we do not have another one.” I kept looking at her still not understanding what she was talking about.

“See, you always thought you had two fathers—Dad and Papa. But in fact, you had a third father.”

She said the name. Something burned in the kitchen. Through the stench rising from the oven and filling the entire eatery, I hardly deciphered the words: “He has only days to live . . . maybe a week . . . he might still make it through the Old Russian New Year if . . . I thought you need to know . . .” My stomach tied into a knot.

She was telling me something about the times, about the époque, for a long time, or maybe she did not, I frankly don’t remember. The hamburger stuck in my gullet.

“I understand,” I said and got up from the table.

We left the eatery and went home. Or better say, we ran home. I was running and she was running behind me. It seemed like she was expecting some other words from

me. Probably, she thought I was insensitive and callous. A cynic. I did not even shed a tear.

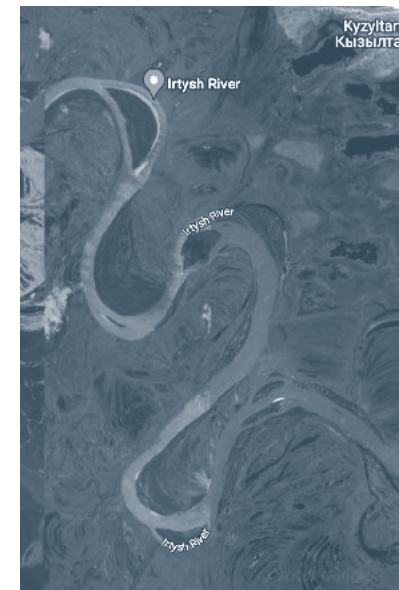
I was stoic. I was not struck by thunder, I did not scream and I did not cry from sorrow. The fact is that I already had two fathers and my life has been torn between them since I was six. And now—there is a third one. Which is the real one?

One father I call Dad. He is American. He raised me. I was four when we met. My other father is Papa. He is my father according to the papers and my Russian birth certificate. All my earliest memories of life—sun, river, ice-skating rink in the Gorky Park, tanks shooting at the Parliament next to our house in Moscow—all of that is from him. And also—blue-grey eyes, the family feature of the Ruriks, the ancient rulers of Russia, his direct ancestors, and a small protuberance on the nose, which you may see in all the history books in the portraits of the Princes Hovanski, his great grandfathers. Dad and Papa. This, third one, did not even have a name. He did not have a name, or a face. He, simply put, did not fit. All of that made perfect sense if . . .

. . . If his brother had not called today and said: “He already lost his vision. The doctors said, a week, maybe. Please, ask Sergunya to call him, he is all that he has left. Let him talk to him, one last time. Please.”

Apparently, he had cancer. In the last, fourth stage. Cancer was everywhere—in his brain, in his lungs, in his bones, in every single corner of his body. He had been paralyzed for a year now, only the fingers of his right hand still moved. That was the story. And now I had to call him. Tomorrow. Because the day after tomorrow might be too late.

After midnight, when everyone went to bed, I searched the Internet. I quickly found the name. A few articles, a few pictures of low resolution, all black-and-white, even sort of yellowish, all taken in the 80s when his name was omnipresent in the papers. He was a famous scientist, a demolition engineer, who was trying to divert some of Siberia’s mightiest rivers to the parched former Soviet republics of Central Asia. He started building a canal some 200 meters wide and 16 meters deep. Going southwards for some 2,500 kilometers, from the confluence of the northern-flowing rivers Ob and Irtysh, to replenish the Amudarya and Syrdarya rivers near the Aral Sea. The diversions would water the



desert sands of the Kyzylkum desert in Central Asia. All of this was so strange, so absurd and so far away from me. This was a foreign man from a foreign world whose life, even though praised in dozens of articles, had nothing to do with mine. But

even so, there was something that did not let me just turn off the Internet and go to bed and sleep. This man, even in the black-and-white and a little bit yellowish images, was a perfect copy of me. Or, maybe I was the perfect copy of him. “A perfect clone,” was what those pictures were screaming to me.

If I only hadn’t seen those pictures. But now, as I saw them, my life was gone. Everything in what I believed turned out to be a lie. Everything I was proud of was not mine any more. In a matter of a second, abruptly, unceremoniously, my life was taken away, forever. The tombs I was taking care of in the summer, all the ancient tombs in the shade of three-hundred-year-old oaks, were not mine any more. And the beautiful marble buildings in downtown Moscow that belonged to my grandfather before the Revolution immediately lost their connection with me.

And the eyes—blue-grey Rurik eyes and protuberance on the nose turned out to be just a mere coincidence, a joke of nature.

And now I am asked to call him. And what do I have to say? That I am sorry? That I am deeply sorry that he has appeared in my life? That I sincerely regret the fact that my mom had met him some eighteen years ago on the shores of the foggy Enisey in Siberia?

How wrong can we be thinking that having understood something, one can forgive anything. I tried to calm down and sort things out. But nothing came out of it, other than nonsense. He did not want me to be at all. He left my mom because he had some duties of a grander importance. And now, all of a sudden, he needs me.

Why do we love and care for the distant, faraway, remote and invisible ones? Why do we neglect the ones who are so near and close?

I found two more articles on the Russian Yandex.

This is what The Red Driller of Novosibirsk was writing

about him in the year 1980: “He has a plan . . . a simple plan . . . to water the desert . . . to dry up the swamps . . . he wants the tropical gardens to blossom in the deadly sands . . . he lives a life of a Spartan, he even chose not to have a family of his own to be able to sacrifice all his life for his Motherland . . .”

Here you go. He loved his Motherland so much that he chose it over me. It was justified. And praised in the media. And now things just went wrong. The Motherland he loved so much collapsed. The country he was sacrificing his life for does not exist any more. It is even no longer on the map. And now he needs me. I understand.

In the morning my mom told me in a whisper, so that no one else could hear: “When you reach him, don’t tell him anything about cancer. He does not know anything. In Russia they don’t tell people such things because it is inhumane. Pretend that you don’t know.”

Of course. I was lied to all my life and now I am asked to lie on my own. Because it is humane. I was sitting in my room. My computer, portable TV, and my Iron Horse trophy look at me with the same expression. As if they are all saying the same: “This is just a call. You call tens of people every single day. Come on, call him.”

I take the handset in my hands. The battery is almost dead. Very good, I think, the conversation will not last long.

I dial the number. 7 for Russia, 095 for Moscow . . . and hang up. I just cannot do it. And again, I go on the web, and search, jumping from one search engine to another. Awkward scientific magazines. Explosions. Ecologists. Progressive ecologists fighting against the diversion of the great Siberian Rivers. Progressive mankind is protesting against the river diversion which would threaten the Ob basin with eco-catastrophe and socio-economic disaster. Demonstrations in Novosibirsk. This is the year 1991. These articles have a different tone. Nothing is said here that he is a patriot, a genius and almost a saint.

This is how it turned out. Rivers stayed unturned, deserts did not blossom with tropical flowers, swamps kept on being swamps, and he is dying from cancer.

This is how it happened. He was left alone—by his friends, by media, by his colleagues. With no family or children, alone—face to face with death.

And that’s exactly why I am asked to call him now.

I hear several different voices in my head, talking at the same time, interrupting.

With no family or children, alone—face to face with death.

“So, what exactly might this conversation change? What will be different?”

“Nothing will change. Everything will be exactly as it was.”

“Everything will be as it was. Except he won’t be here.”

“You don’t like him because you don’t know him.”

“But if you know him, if you win some time to know him, then you might like him. You might even love him, who knows?”

Ok, ok, I’ll call him tomorrow.

“Tomorrow? What does it mean—tomorrow? Today! Call today!”

I am dialing the number.7-095- . . . Long long rings. I feel a temporary relief and I am almost ready to disconnect. And all of a sudden, on the other end:

“Yes . . .”

Silence. It lasts forever. Then it finally occurs to me that I have to say something.

“This is me, Seriosha.”

“Hi.”

This time the pause lasts even longer.

“I was not sure you would call. I was afraid that you won’t call.” Pause.

“How are you doing? How is life, how is school? You don’t have school today?” His tongue is stumbling. He speaks slow, too slow.

“Today is Saturday.”

“Is it Saturday? I lost the count of days . . . Is it cold now in New York?”

“Pretty cold.”

“Is it snowing?”

“Not anymore.”

I will never see him. I will never know him in a way that I would have known if everything went right. I will never remember him, never. Even this will not be. And what will be? This telephone conversation, short and senseless.

“I want to know everything about you.”

What does he want to know about me? What can I tell him other than bare facts? Senior of the specialized science school, 96 average. I play trumpet for the school orchestra and piano for my own self . . . However, I do not have to mention about the piano . . .

“I would like to know what you look like.”

“I’ll send my picture to your brother, I have his e-mail.”

That was rude. He can’t see. How could have I forgotten that? Slow, as if it was a humongous piece of ice melting,

our conversation continued. But the sun—a short polar sun—was not strong enough to melt down such a huge amount of ice. It dripped a little bit and froze again. And then the sun hid behind the horizon. It got cold again. Cold and silent.

I imagined how our conversation was squeezing through a black cable stretched across the bottom of the Atlantic ocean, in the absolute darkness and silence, underneath the megatons of salty waters. And you are expecting this conversation to be humane?

Isn’t it clear that such a forced conversation would not lead anywhere, it will stay formal and empty as a ping pong game when it is played not to score, but out of boredom?

At times the silence was such as if we were sitting in the very depth of the missile silo on the eve of the nuclear war.

“Are you still there?” I asked.

I felt how he squeezed the phone. I heard how he dropped it. I heard how he was trying to find it in his bed. How blind fingers were crawling through the weary sheets. They crawl and are unable to find what they are looking for. He groaned.

And all of a sudden, I realized how hard it was for him to talk. Some minutes ago, it seemed to me that we were playing ping pong, throwing light and meaningless words at each other. And now, all of a sudden, I realized how hard it was for him to lift up any of those words and throw them at me. Each of those words was not a light empty plastic ball, but a heavy cast-iron weight. He gathers all his energy to throw it, but there is no energy left.

He still does not have a name.

“I am here . . .” he echoed and fell into a cough attack. He was coughing and coughing, endlessly. I wondered if there was anyone there to help him? A doctor? A nurse? Hello! Is anybody there? What if he chokes? What if he dies? And at this point, I realized that I was the only one who was next to him. There was no one else.

“Calm down,” I said. “Just breathe slowly, not so fast, and it will be fine. Just fine.” Whether my words worked, or not, he stopped coughing.

“Talk to me,” he said.

He wants me to talk to him. And I think I know now why. He is afraid to die. Everything, almost everything has already died in his body, but he is still afraid to leave. To go—where? He does not know. But neither do I.

I recently ran across a line by Francis Ponge that absolutely struck me. Something like: “it’s not enough to live the life, it takes to live a death as well.”

And it happens to be that I am his only companion on the way to the other world. Why me? And what should I do? What should I say?

Something about immortality of a soul? But he is an atheist, he does not believe in God. What about energy conservation law? If you think, there is no way for all this energy that has been generating and accumulating in him for the last fifty-five years to just simply disappear. This energy was sufficient to divert the mightiest Siberian rivers . . . If the energy conservation law exists then it should not disappear. If the energy conservation is true then not everything is lost irrevocably, then there is still hope there.

I hear him breathing heavily in the phone. “Say something,” he whispers.

In Russia I knew a girl who photographed the death of her mother. The mother was dying of cancer and the girl was photographing the process—three hundred pictures every single day. She was doing it for a year or so. In the end she had ten thousand pictures in her portfolio. Later on she made an exhibit in downtown Moscow. She was a very honest and fearless girl. I am not like that at all. I don’t have such courage. I am afraid.

What should I say?

“You know,” I hear my own words with an echo, as if it is not me saying it all, “our neighbors bought three tons of flour, rice, and dry beans. They think it’s just not enough for them and they keep buying more.”

“Why?” he asks.

“Because they are getting ready for H5N1. Haven’t you heard of it?”

“Sort of.”

“Well, it’s a pandemic strain of flu. Everyone is going to die.”

“Really?”

“Yes, of course, I thought you knew. This flu will erase the entire planet. Everybody is talking about it now. It will kill seventy percent of the population in America. And in Norway. And in Australia . . .” I omit Russia. “We bought only four big bottles of water and two kilos of rice, do you think it’s enough?”

“I don’t know,” he says. “I really don’t.”

“There will be a quarantine. There will be no water, no food, no nothing for a year or so. You have to prepare well to survive. Only those, in their confinement, will get a chance.”

He is in a confinement.

I am telling him that the flu will come soon, in the very

beginning of February, at the latest. He will not be that scared if he knows that it is not only him, not only . . . that everybody . . . almost everybody . . . And if he is in a confinement, he might have a chance . . .

He tells me that the scary flu will not come. That it is all Hollywood. That nothing bad will happen. That I should not be afraid.

I am trying to console him, and he is trying to comfort me.

“I would like to see you right now,” he says. “I would like to be with you.”

“Me too.”

“Let’s start from the very beginning.”

“From the very beginning.” I repeat after him. “Let’s just do that.” He is tired. He is falling asleep.

I tell him good bye: “I will call tomorrow.”

But there may be no tomorrow. During the night his sleep may smoothly go into death. And this world will go on without him. I don’t know when it happens.

It’s after midnight again. And it’s snowing now. Our street, so busy during the day, is now empty. I am sitting at my window and looking at the snow falling. If you look for a very long time, you will start seeing someone in the distance, walking in the snow towards you—quietly, upright, from far away.

Fissure

Rafael Kline-Cloud • Brooklyn Technical High School

Though I've been sitting for awhile, the chair feels cold beneath me. I look around the room. The sun's rays shine through the window at an angle, illuminating the dust particles and casting angular shadows on the wall. The room is warm, and the soft brown colors of the plush furniture breathe the sweet smell diffusing from the Glade plug-in in the wall, I look at the middle-aged woman sitting across from me and my head fills with questions—too many for my mouth to handle. The silence only widens the fissure between us.

This scene has played out a million different times in my head. Whenever I am reminded of my birthmother, I revisit this reverie. The daydream recurs.

Slaving over homework at the computer, I am approached by Avery, my adopted sister, who places a wrinkled letter in front of me and nods her head towards it. I can tell she has read it many times over. I pick it up and begin to read. My whole world shatters as I realize the magnitude of what she is showing me. It is a letter from her birthmother.

Until that moment the thought of finding my birthmother had only been a recurring image confined to the back of my mind. Sure, I had thought about it many times, but I had not gotten further than having a brief Internet conversation with Matthew, my biological brother, about searching for our mother.

Court-mandated visitation turned into habit, which ensured that we would remain in contact. It was a sunny mild-weathered day in Long Island. Speaking slowly, he said to me, "I'll race you to the end of this block." "You're on!" Like most boys our age, I naturally accepted this challenge, and after taking off together, I quickly and easily pulled ahead. We raced down the street dodging pedestrians, our little hearts thumping. Three-quarters of the way, I looked back to see him sprinting behind me, a determined look on his tan face. He was my older brother, exhausted. Laughing, he plucked a small purple flower out of the grass and gave it to me as my prize. "Here, little bro. Here is your trophy." That was the first time I realized something was wrong.

Much later I would find out what was different about us. Matthew was born with both Gestational Syphilis and Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, and I was not. While I learned to read at age 3, Matthew learned a decade later, at age 13. While I became a nationally ranked long-distance runner and a classical guitarist, Matthew became a diagnostic mystery shuttled from one specialist to another. When I tested into a competitive science high school, Matthew entered a special education program.

Matthew moved out to Las Vegas with his adopted family to be enrolled in a school program there. I could not see him because neither my family nor his family had the finances to afford for us to visit each other. So I talked to Matthew online. Brrring! "Hey, little bro!" And thus began yet another of my procrastination sessions. As I minimized whatever paper I was working on I replied, "Nothing much. Just doing homework." The computer screen lit the room during the late hours of the night. The time zone difference ensured that the times next to our screen names were often past midnight EST. He told me about his girlfriends, what music he liked, how he got a job at a modeling agency. "What's your girlfriend like?" I asked. "She's really cool. She's Mexican and she has long black hair," he replied. He uploaded a picture of her and sent it through AIM. "Do you have a girlfriend too, little bro?" he asked. He was the older brother I never had, always calling me "little bro" and giving me relationship advice.

It was during one of these Internet conversations that we first discussed trying to find the other members of our birth family. He brought it up.

"Ever thought about finding our mother?"

I froze, "Um, yeah. I've thought about it. What made you bring it up?" I replied slowly.

"Dunno, little bro."

For the first time, I could actually see myself finding the part of my family and the part of myself that I had never known; my mother, our mother. At that moment, Matthew seemed so close, so much like a real brother.

The next time I saw him was in Nevada. I went to Reno for the cross-country Junior Olympics at Rancho San Rafael Park. We stayed at the Circus, Circus Hotel. It was magical. There were lights, casinos, game rooms, circus acts, candy stores (forbidden by the coaches

until after the races). The weather was beautiful. It was December and people were ice skating in shorts. This made for optimal racing conditions, excellent competition, and thousands of excited kids—but then there was Matthew.

Seeing him in person again shattered all the mental images of him I had formed from our Internet conversations. There he stood, wearing khaki pants and a striped shirt, a sloppy grin plastered on his happy face. He was a good-looking fellow, handsome enough to fit the modeling criteria. But something was not quite right. We spent the first couple of hours running around the mall and the hotel, but the whole time I could not put my finger on it.

I found my teammates and introduced him. All of a sudden it made sense. This was the first time I had ever hung out with Matthew while my friends were present. I had never seen him interact with anyone but me, let alone a group of kids our age. The contrast was striking. For lack of a better term, he was childish. His maturity level was far below mine or that of my teammates. He was a completely different Matthew—an in-your-face, very physical, hyperactive, annoying Matthew. It made me feel awkward and embarrassed in front of my friends; friends who would later ask innocent yet provocative questions like, "What's wrong with your brother?"

I was torn. Looking back, I realized I chose wrong. I panicked. Every chance I got, I would leave him with our mothers and run off with my teammates. I ran from him because I was scared of what I was feeling. I felt guilty for being the lucky one.

In order to contact my birthmother, I needed to write a letter to the adoption agency, and my birthmother must consent to the contact. Only then can I truly live my daydream and finally meet her. Sitting in my bed, listening to John Mayer acoustic performances, I look at the pen and pad in my lap. I drift back into my daydream. Or is it my nightmare? Once again, the room material-



izes around me. I look at him, and across at my birthmother. The room is darker. Again, my head fills with questions.

I stare at the empty piece of paper in front of me for awhile and then throw it on the floor out of frustration. Sighing, I lay back on

my bed. I look at the white ceiling, the light orange walls to my left and right, and the soft blue one framing the window. They offer me no help in figuring out just what to write to my birthmother. Maybe I should ask my sister. The letter Avery received was beautiful. Her birthmother sounded so close, so loving, and so sincere. My birthmother seems worlds away.

Still I cannot choose between all the questions crammed into my brain. Why did you abuse crack and alcohol while you were pregnant? Was it ignorance? Did you care? Did you know that you could pass Syphilis to your son during pregnancy? Did you fight when the court stripped us from your custody? Were we accidents? . . . Where is our father? What was he like? Do we have other siblings? How many? How old are they? Where do they live? What is the rest of our family like? What is our family history? Is there a history of Alzheimer's . . . Huntington's? . . . Who do I take after? . . . Where did I get my green eyes from?

. . . Is six feet tall about right for males in our family? . . . can I meet them—my brothers sisters uncles aunts cousins grandparents . . . where do they live . . . do you have family reunions . . . where do you live now?

When . . . where . . . when . . . how . . . Do you think about us?

Do you wonder how our lives have played out what kinds of

people we have become since our first day in detention at the JCCTJ?

Red Planet

Naeem Stewart • High School of Art & Design

Russell Chase looked out the window at the rust-covered surface of Mars more than a thousand miles below. After ten years of planning, five years of training, and six long months in space, humans had finally arrived at the fourth planet from the sun. Now, inside their ship, the astronauts ringed the planet in a rough, elliptical orbit, awaiting confirmation from Houston Control that everything was A-OK for lander descent.

They were nearly twenty light-minutes from Earth, and communication with mission control was agonizingly slow. Throughout the mission, the crew had engaged in short trivia contests to kill time while waiting for responses. Once they all had gotten an initial look at Mars “up close,” Jackie suggested they revive the game one last time to set the mood for the historic handing to come. “Okay, new game—other names of Mars.”

Sam reluctantly surrendered his prize spot at the viewport. He was incredulous at the timing of Jackie’s suggestion, but quickly realized that situations like this fell under her expertise. On a four-man mission, everyone wore several hats. Among other things, Jackie Llewellyn served as doctor and counselor, responsible for both the physical and mental health of the crew. With some of the mission’s most critical moments just minutes ahead, she had noticed the anxiety level getting a little higher than desirable, and decided to defuse the situation with a diversion. “Other names? You mean like Ares?” Sam was competitive, and quick to engage in any sort of friendly contest, though slightly less so when there was no wagering involved.

Jackie smiled. She was in her forties, and she’d let her hair go brownish-gray after spending most of the training as a blonde. Her face, along with those of the rest of the crew, was puffy and bloated due to weightlessness. “Greek is too easy. But yeah, that’s the general idea. What other cultures called the planet, or what they call it now.”

“Okay then,” Sam said. “I’ll start. Her Descher—it’s Egyptian. It means ‘the red one.’” Sam, aside from being the main engineer and secondary mission geologist, was also well-versed in archeology and ancient cultures. This kind of challenge was right up his alley.

“Nice,” Jackie said. “How about Mangala? Sanskrit.”

“Auqakah,” Russell chimed in. “From the Incas.”

“Now we’re rolling. Wally?”

Wally was the Mars One mission commander, and he looked the part. He was of medium height, stocky, with thinning sandy brown hair and a determined look permanently etched onto his face. “Nirgal. Babylonian.”

Back to Sam, “Next round. Al-Qahira. Arabic.”

Jackie: “Hrad. Armenian.”

Russell: “Misengwe. From the Abenaki tribe, in southern Quebec.”

Wally frowned. “I’m drawing a blank. I don’t know. ‘Red Planet.’”

“No nicknames,” Jackie chided.

“I’m out, then.” Wally seemed relieved to be granted his freedom and he went back to rechecking various monitors.

“Me too,” Sam said, pushing his slim body off the wall to follow Wally’s lead. “Good idea, Jackie, but I can’t concentrate on this stuff right now.” Jackie sighed as Sam retreated to his window on Mars. She noticed that Russ was preparing to join him, and she called the American Indian geologist aside. “Hey, Russ,” she said cheerfully. “Most of the names we gave for Mars, we knew because the valleys are named for them. They’re on all the maps, standard planetary nomenclature. But those ones you gave, I’ve never heard them before.”

“They’re Native American,” Russ said. “They—”

A flashing red light on the wall panel stopped him. A response from Earth had been received.

Jackie pushed herself over toward Wally and Sam, leaving Russ to finish his thought in silence. Of course you’ve never heard Native American names for Mars. They’re missing from our maps, as if the future of Mars didn’t belong to Indian tribes, as if they never even existed.

“Looks like the relay satellite is working,” Sam said. The Mars One mission’s first major task had been to deploy a communications satellite into Mars orbit. Mars was only about half the diameter of Earth; the short horizon, plus the various mountains and rocks dotted across the Martian landscape, would severely limit the range of line-of-site based radio on the surface. With the satellite in orbit, the range of surface communications would be substantially boosted. The satellite would also serve as a backup antenna to send messages to Earth in the event of

a malfunction in the lander’s primary communications array.

“Good to know we haven’t screwed up so far,” Wally commented. He pressed a button to start the video feed, and a familiar, middle-aged woman appeared on the screen: NASA’s main liaison with the crew. “Mars One crew, you are cleared for landing,” she said, emotion strangely absent from her voice. “Proceed at your discretion. End message.”

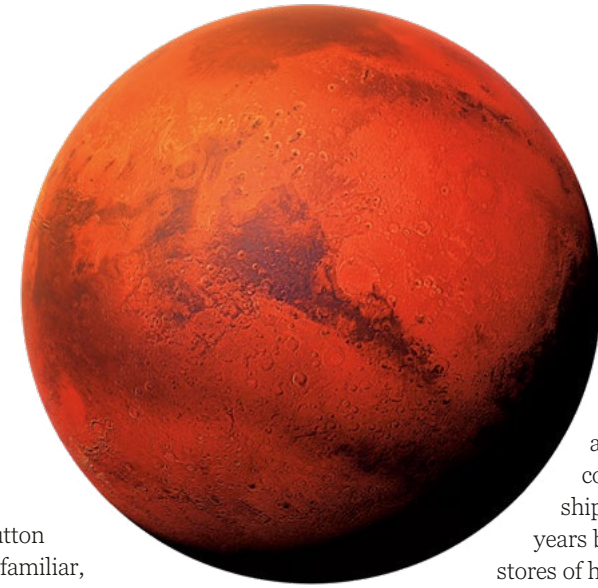
“I can’t wait to get some gravity back under me,” Jackie said. She noticed Sam, who would stay in orbit, purse his lips. “Sorry, Sam. At least you’ll get a little privacy.”

The lander’s computers would take care of everything automatically, from minor adjustments of approach angle to timing the firing of the landing thrusters. Because of the delay in communication, any kind of remote assistance from Earth was impractical. As the main pilot and mission commander, Wally would have complete control; if anything went wrong with the computers in the Patriot lander, their fate would rest with Wally’s training and skill.

“Meridiani Planum, here we come,” Wally said aloud, more for posterity than any need to inform the crew. The entire landing, start to finish, was being recorded, sure to be heard millions of times in the next few weeks, by space enthusiasts and casual observers alike. “Mars One Patriot lander, beginning landing sequence.”

Patriot was an appropriate name for the lander, as this was a distinctly American mission. Ten years ago the space race had reignited when it became obvious that “international cooperation in extraterrestrial matters was no longer politically sustainable”—the diplomats’ fancy way of saying that the United States had decided to go it alone. As the once-naïve idealism of colonizing Mars became more practical, so too did discussions of the Red Planet’s future turn from grand visions of a conflict-free political utopia to the same kind of carved-out, built-up society the Mars One crew had left behind.

“Nothing to it,” Wally said, moving his hands to rest them on top of his head. Indeed, the first manned landing on Mars seemed almost an afterthought to the incredible



accomplishments of the computer-operated supply ships. The ships launched two years before were busy using their stores of hydrogen to complete the

Sabatier reaction, converting the carbon diox-

ide atmosphere of Mars into methane and water. The methane was stored as propellant, and any water not needed for the astronauts’ sustenance was broken down by electrolysis into its component hydrogen and oxygen. The oxygen would be used to help sustain a breathable

environment inside pressurized domes constructed by the astronauts, while the hydrogen would be recycled to begin the Sabatier reaction again. The process was simple and elegant, and it was the key to human life on Mars. There was other machinery in the supply ships too, all packed with self-checking algorithms and multiple redundancies to make sure everything kept working properly, even in the absence of human supervision. Mission engineering had ensured that most of the difficult work would be performed mechanically, freeing the crew to take soil samples, explore, and make impromptu adjustments as needed.

Planting the flag on the sandy red surface of Mars was the moment everyone would remember, but in fact the first humans on Mars had one simple but crucial task: to survive. The crew of the Patriot was methodically preparing to go out to the surface. Jackie extended the main video camera from the underside of the lander, where it would film the first steps on Mars. After she had tested it and found it functioning properly, she joined Wally near the airlock.

“Where’s Russ?”

The process was simple and elegant, and it was the key to human life on Mars.

“Already in the airlock suiting up. I guess he’s excited.”

“He’s not the only one.” She smiled.

Inside the airlock, Russell climbed into his pressure suit and hardshell in record time, under the watchful gaze of the empty suits and helmets lined along the wall like Martian scarecrows. The suits were all black, to better absorb heat from the distant sun. Average air temperature on Mars was -67°F, with ranges from -13°F during daytime to -125°F at night. The climate-controlled suits would compensate, of course, but every bit of ambient heat would help.

The order of exit had been predetermined by mission control, carefully choreographed as the public relations landmark it would be. Wally, as mission commander, would take the first steps on Mars, followed by Jackie, and then Russell. Sam would get his chance another time; for now, he remained in orbit to maintain the link with Earth and monitor the vitals of the astronauts from a safe distance. That was the way it was supposed to happen, as far as mission control was concerned.

Russell drew a few deep breaths to test whether the suit’s air valves were working, then checked the gauges on the small wrist-mounted readout panel. He grabbed one of the heavy drills designed to penetrate the thick Martian permafrost and walked to the exit door of the airlock. Through the small reinforced window on the inner door he saw flashes of movement—Wally and Jackie were about to enter. He turned and frantically pressed at the button that would open the outer airlock door. He saw the light above the exit door switch from red to green, as the light above the interior door switched from green to red. Wally and Jackie were locked inside the lander. Outside was Mars. Russell Chase poked his head out of the Patriot and gazed in wonder at the salmon sky and the crimson-brown plains before him. He moved out onto the short gantry ladder. Then he stepped down to the surface.

“Russ, what the hell are you doing?” Wally’s voice was a shriek that echoed inside Russell’s helmet. “You can’t do this!” Russell debated whether to respond. His plan had been to maintain radio silence until he was ready to deliver his message to Earth, but he couldn’t resist playing with Wally’s level-headed, by-the-book modus operandi.

“Why not?” he asked calmly.

An angry silence followed, then the sounds of a whispered consultation with Jackie. “We’re coming out,” Wally finally growled. Russell spun as quickly as the bulky suit allowed, as the airlock’s exit door sealed

shut behind him. They had recovered from their initial shock, and had used the computer override to retake control of the airlock. Wally and Jackie were suiting up, getting ready to try to salvage the landing. Up in orbit, Sam relayed the events back to mission control with the passive, matter-of-fact frankness of a veteran of the space corps. Russell knew that now there was no turning back. A few moments passed, the only audible sounds the amplified inhaled and exhaled breaths of his own lungs.

The exit door retracted and locked into place. Wally appeared in the opening gripping the doorway with both hands. Russell imagined the furious stare that lay hidden behind Wally’s sun visor, and clutched the soil drill tightly.

“Don’t come out here,” were the first words spoken on the surface of Mars.

“What do you mean, ‘Don’t come out here’? What’s gotten into you, Russ?”

“Wally, I have a core sample driller out here with me. If you or Jackie go extravehicular, I will press the driller against your suits and hit the on button.” Wally gasped. This was much worse than a mere attempt at hijacking a more prominent place in history. Russell was threatening murder. If the suits were compromised, their bodies would not explode; there would be no instantaneous boiling of body fluids. But oxygen would rush out of the breach, and after as little as ten seconds, they would fall unconscious. It might not be a dramatic death, but it was death just the same.

Wally wondered if Russell was bluffing. The Indian geologist was a prominent member of the scientific community; he had spent five years training and traveling alongside his crewmates. Could he really kill them so easily? Was it worth testing him? How could the mission psychologists have missed the potential for something like this in Russ’s psychological fitness exams? Was it madness, brought on by six months’ confinement in a small ship? Or was it simply. . . mutiny?

Wally closed his eyes, then blinked a few times, hoping this would all disappear. It did not. His lifelong dream had become something out of a nightmare. He took a step down the ladder and was matched with an equal advance by Russ. The drill bit gleamed its readiness as Russ waved it wildly from side to side in the thin Martian gravity. What were the options? Grab one of the other drills from inside and challenge Russell to a duel? Not the way NASA wanted people to remember the first landing on Mars, and not the way Wally envisioned himself dying. Talk, Wally told himself. For now, just talk.

“Russ, you may feel like you have us trapped up here, but it’s just the opposite—you’ve stranded yourself on the outside! You’ve got a couple of hours of air, no more than that. Leave the drill outside and come back to us.” He wasn’t sure how they would secure Russell during the rest of the mission if he did surrender, but right now that would be a good problem to have. Russell listened to their words and thought about being alone on Mars for the next year or so. It was a small sacrifice, and certainly not suicide. Plenty of air, and food, and water in those supply ships. The radiation shelters practically build themselves.

“Sorry, I have a speech to deliver,” he said.

“Well, it’s not going to be heard. Sam cut off the relay to Earth.”

“You got it,” Sam’s voice crackled.

“Russ, only we can hear you now. Your words won’t reach Earth. It’s over.”

“It’s not over, Wally. This is just the beginning. It’s over for you, though. You have twenty minutes to rejoin the orbiter and prepare to return to Earth. If you leave Mars now, you can make a free-return trajectory and be back on Earth in two years. If in twenty minutes you’re still on the surface, I’ll take this drill and its damage-resistant diamond bit to the Patriot’s hull and wreak so much havoc that you’ll never make it back to Earth orbit alive. It’s your choice.”

“He’s bluffing. You’re bluffing!” Sam screamed over the now-closed channel. Wally was somber. As mission commander, his primary duty was to the safety of his crew. That meant playing it safe. Through gritted teeth he said, “Contact mission control and apprise them of the situation.” He turned toward the airlock and stepped inside. The exit door began to close behind him, and Russell breathed a sigh of relief. Jackie cut in over the channel. “Russ, listen to me. Russ, are you there? Russ—”

“But why . . .” Then it dawned on her. “Oh my god!”

“He’s going directly through the relay satellite,” Sam said quietly.

“Can we shut him down?” Wally asked.

“The satellite is designed to accept priority override messages sent from our spacesuits, in case of emergencies. I don’t think that the engineers back home ever imagined a situation like this.”

“Is that a no?”

“That’s a no.”

The sunlight was fading, and Russell Chase watched as

Mars grew dark. Could it really work, he wondered? As soon as the success of his mission was made public, the launch from Star City, Kazakhstan, would occur, carrying the first group of—what were they? Pilgrims? Settlers? Immigrants?

Reinforcements.

World opinion would keep the Americans at bay for a while—virtually every country would prefer to see Mars under separate Indian control than as a new colony of the United States. As long as the Indians paid for their space-flights up front, Mars was theirs. It would not always be the way. They would have to buy weapons, and create new ones, to protect their new home. The Americans would attempt to close their casinos and the many business ventures that had sprouted from them, but it was too late for that. Native Americans had moved into the international realm, made alliances with the right people, and as they did, their attachment to the land of their fathers was worn away. Instead, they looked to the stars. Russell Chase sighted Earth in the sky, a small, bright, bluish-white star from this distance, and began the words he’d been preparing to deliver for the last five years.

“Indians of All Nations, I address you: This is Russell Chase of the Sioux, born on the Pine Ridge Reservation. On behalf of the indigenous people of the Western Hemisphere, I claim this planet, which the white man calls Mars. I call on my Indian brothers and sisters to join me. Gather your belongings, your most sacred treasures, and leave your birthplace. Here, we will build a new world for ourselves. This is the Fifth World of the Hopi Prophecies. Come, Navajo from the desert and Inuit from the Arctic. Come, Kayapo from the Amazon. Come Promo, Crow, Comanche, Nez Perce, Iroquois, Algonquin, Pawnee, Iowa, Seminole, and all the rest.

“Let us make a new start away from the Trail of Tears, and the Massacre at Wounded Knee, and away from fire water and blankets laced with smallpox. Remember the spirit of our people. Remember Alcatraz and Red Power.

“We will transform the surface of this planet, melt its ice and free its water. We will plant seeds so that one day the color green will appear. We will build bricks from the dust, and our homes from those bricks. And one day, the buffalo will roam free again, here.

“This is the ultimate product of Red Power. This is the fulfillment of the Red Man’s destiny. This is, and will forever be, a Red Planet.”

Polar Fever

Kevin Morrell • High School of Art & Design

“That’s just . . . preposterous!” My friend Mike, already accepted early into an Ivy League School, said when I finished my story. “You better not tell anyone. Keep your mouth shut, for your own good.” And I did . . . for the time being. And even now, when I decided to break my vow of silence, I will tell you my story only cursorily, without excessive details, just bare facts. They won’t be too daunting. Mysticism is the last thing you will find here. I promise.

When I was sixteen many things happened to me for the first time. For the first time I caught lice. For the first time death looked me in the eye. And for the first time I slept with two adult women whose names will mean nothing to you unless you speak Tundra Nenets—this little version of Uralic Eskimo. Naiku (The Bald One) and Dyarne (The Crying One), both in their fifties, smiley and toothless, their chins greasy with seal fat, did not think twice before giving me away their bodies to save me from the Reaper. And in the morning, they caudled me with warm caribou blood.

It may seem that catching lice was the most insignificant event of all those mentioned above. But it depends from which perspective you want to look at it.

Polar fever, or Rasmussen fever, is an acute disorder of an unclear etiology that may afflict a cultured urbanite upon his arrival to the Great Tundra. Symptoms, prognosis, and outcome vary. It all started on the night of my sixteenth birthday when I discovered that my real father was not a famous anthropologist as I was always told or rather chose to believe, but a caribou herder, an Eskimo, of a Komi descent.

The appalling news came when I was finishing my ice cream sundae. Komi was just another weird word. It sounded like . . . nothing special, just non-esthetical.

My parents are very progressive people, intelligentsia type. Despite multiple divorces, they stay in close, even cordial touch with their exes. They regularly talk on Skype, vividly discuss the major universal problems such as pollution, global warming, and dangerously growing xenophobia. That is to say, after revealing the Truth about my heritage they were more than happy to welcome a new arrival into the family—the exotic Eskimo father. Almost immediately, they started building a bridge to reach out to him. And almost immediately, it turned out that it was a bridge to nowhere. The gracefulness of

style or even basic politeness were not my new father’s virtues. Worse yet, he spoke very little English.

My new father—or rather the one who made one single effort to send me out into the world some seventeen years ago, bluntly told my parents that I was a pantywaist, a ballet school sissy, and suggested that for the summer I would be heading to the Tundra to become a man.

Astonished or perhaps amused, they voiced no objections. And he already had a plan. He had arranged for me to serve as a helper and translator for three Inuit explorers from Uummanaq, Northern Greenland, who were about to sail along the coasts of the North-Eastern Passage in search of their own heritage. Was he going to accompany me? “Not this time,” he said. This time he had other important matters to take care of.

I looked at the picture of a boat and of the three Greenlanders standing in it. A priest, a policeman, and a school principal, three frolicking guys with barefaced bellies under anti-Bush t-shirts. They looked like three joyful porcupines. I decided that I would go with them on the trip. My best friend Christian, who was Japanese, came to see me off. He bought me an expensive Godiva chocolate. “I will miss you,” Christian said as he handed me his treat. “But I hope you get laid in Russia.” In Christian’s understanding, Russia is all Moscow, with its glitterati, golden church onions, bears on the street and teenage hotties with vicious smiles and pincerlike legs in tight Lycra ready for anything, anywhere. Booze, hotties, dancing, and assassins—as shown on CNN. I thanked my kind-hearted Christian for the Godiva which he thought would serve me as a door-opener.

Most of my friends including Christian have had sex by now. They had already lived through this. I could have had it too, had I wanted. These glazed-eyed indistinguishable girls whose faces are scarred with acne, whose hands are sticky from hard candy and terminal insecurity, they are always around. But I am waiting. I am still waiting for something transcendent, unique, and maybe even divine. But now my horses were saddled up and ready to take me to the shores of the White Sea, to the most awkward adventure in my life which I had neither designed nor dreamed of.

. . . Tundra was flat and identical till the uttermost horizon. Frozen bogs, white patches on the blue blanket of moss and lichen; a dried up ocean without water, a lunar

plain. The land did not look filthy; but quite the opposite, antiseptic and therefore—deathly: no roads, no villages, nothing. I thought that this is exactly how the Earth might look after Armageddon.

. . . A strong smell of urine hit my nose as I entered the Chum. Clutter was everywhere: Strings of drying fish, random pieces of wood, rusty harpoons, bones, dirty pots, and caribou’s skins hanging on the lines to dry. “Where do you live?” the old man, cigarette hanging from his lip, finally asked when we sat down around the dirty table. It was not clear whether he was happy or saddened by our sudden appearance. “America and Greenland.” “That’s far,” he decided. He reached out for something in the greasy pot and handed me a piece. In the twilight of the Chum, I did not realize right away that it was a chunk of meat dripping with blood. I put a slippery slab in my mouth and immediately spit it out into my hand. I had an urge to run out and vomit. The man laughed, while my Greenlandic masters explained that it was a delicacy—a seal’s liver, a special treat for an important guest.

What I took for the smell of urine, was indeed the smell of seal guts intricately laced with smells of dog shit, unwashed bodies, and other impurities. The seal itself was everywhere: on the floor, on the walls, on the table, in the air. The table and benches shone with its grease as the midnight sun penetrated through a seal-gut window.

Seal stew was served. In our globally aware but racially homogenous neighborhood in Norway’s Stabekk where I spent my childhood, Tundra was a cliché word for those who did not travel the world, who did not appreciate a sea urchin or sopolse (sea cucumber), preferring a hamburger instead. Tundra was a symbol of locality, or parochialism, of narrow-mindedness, and, therefore, of absolute backwardness. I was never a Tundra. I even ate rakefisk or rakorret—a fermented trout or char—a Norwegian delicacy that many, especially foreigners, considered outrageous. I was anything but a Tundra. But the seal liver was beyond my limits.

The Greenlanders busied themselves eating seal intestines, drinking vodka, and taking pictures of the Chum. The old man fell asleep on the platform with his mouth open, snoring loudly. Then I realized that this putrid platform covered in seal and caribou skins was the only

sleeping place in the Chum. There was only one bed, a communal one.

And then all of a sudden I saw them—lice. And fleas. These little creatures were ever present. I had never seen them before, except for in pictures in my AP biology book, but I immediately recognized them. They were all over here, and they were waiting for me. My thoughtful parents supplied me with contraband Cipro but they forgot to buy an anti-flea collar in the pet store. This is what I needed most tonight.

Lice. Fleas. Seal liver, a delicacy. A communal bed. At the dawn of the twenty-first century, it called into question the entire concept of historical progress.

It no longer mattered whether I covered my eyes with a scarf or counted the 600 sheep. Seal gut essence oozed into my brain. Insects were crawling all over my face, and a perpetual sun, like a machine gun, was bursting megatons of light at me from its height through the seal gut window. There was no escape.

When I opened my eyes I discovered an old woman lying next to me on the platform and watching me in silence. She gave me a toothless smile. Then I noticed another woman behind me who poked the patch of skin with a bone needle. Through an awkward conversation I found out that their names were Dyarne and Naiku. Were they related? I did not have a clue. They could be sisters or products of incest, they looked alike. The Greenlanders were nowhere to be seen. After breakfast I took a promenade on a filthy path strewn with bones, dog shit, and seals’ intestines. The mere thought that only two days ago I walked on the cobblestones of downtown Amsterdam seemed absurd. The thought of staying here for seven more days seemed nightmarish.

Greenlanders and Girmancha, the old man, returned by late afternoon. They were in great spirits. They killed a little deer which Ole Jorgen proudly dragged into the Chum. Cigarette still hanging from his lips, Girmancha sharpened his knife. He made some quick movements and a minute later he offered me an aluminum cup with something inside. It was a baby caribou’s blood, there was no mistaking it. I looked at it and it came up again.

. . . By the time of dinner, I was hit by a sudden wave of nausea which I attributed to my empty-stomachness. I went outside for a quick walk. I peed on the white moss and noticed that my urine was dark brown. My head felt leaden. I returned into the Chum to take a Tylenol when another wave nausea hit me, this time harder, forcing me to run out and throw up on the pathway, adding to its array of impurities.

. . . Tylenol did not help and neither did Cipro. Greenlanders were sitting next to me, their rude faces alarmed. They looked panic stricken, helpless. Falling back into the dark abyss, I heard them calling my name, dialing their cells, crying out for somebody.

The next time I emerged to the surface, I saw a dreadful old man in a tall furry hat right next to me. He had a carrot orange beard, freckled skin and long curvy yellow fangs that were hanging from his neck. A shiver went through my body. I shut my eyes and screamed but only a gurgle broke out of my throat.

A thousand times I flew through the seal-gut window, straight to the sky and then back to my platform. The nuclear flames kept licking me, but it seemed as if finally I reconciled with them, or even became one of their own. Colors seemed brighter, more saturated, but they were not blinding me like before. I saw the trees with emerald leaves and I heard voices, first a falsetto, high-pitch whine, then a deep chest baritone, they chanted, alternating with hail, rain, water running, wind blowing, wolves howling, seals barking, snow foxes sniffing, bears growling . . . Uda-da-da . . . Uga-ga-ga . . . then all was quiet again.

I opened my eye, just one and quickly closed it again. The devil with fangs, stripped to his bearskin pants was rocking above me and whining, moaning, growling, laughing . . . I also saw the two moons right next to my face. They were holding me tight, shoulder to shoulder, leg to leg, stomach to stomach, we were three naked bodies entwined as one.

. . . It must have been midday when I woke up. Or maybe midnight. The sun was still hanging high in the sky—the same place where I saw it last. It didn't move an inch. The air was clear and fresh. I could not smell the seal guts any more. "Drink this," I heard the voice of the moon. Naiku offered me a cup.

Pure, delicious, nurturing liquid flowed into my system. It was neither too sweet, nor too salty. The vital energy streamed along my veins and filled my body with a new essence. Simple thoughts were growing in my head.

From Ole Jorgen I learned what happened since I got sick two days ago. When the ambulance did not arrive, Girmancha brought in Habecha, the flying Shaman, who called for invisible forces. He placed my failing body, shivering from fever and pain between the two naked bodies of Naiku and Dyarne. They held and healed me through the night, while Habecha sat next to us throat-singing.

"And the blood," Ole Jorgen said with a smile. "You don't dislike it any more, do you?"

"Was this blood, Ole Jorgen?" I cried in amusement staring at the cup.

Next day we went out to visit Habecha (literally, Still-Born). He spoke little Russian, yet he was able to explain that the cause of my "hot-headedness" as he put it, was my angriness. "You got upset and you got sick." He was short and not much to look at, yet his powers noticeably exceeded those of Mayor Bloomberg. Habecha could talk to the wind. He could also talk to the fish and make them swim against the current. He knew magic formulas—tadebya. He could treat sick people without drugs. And rumor had it, he could even fly.

To say the truth, I did not see him fly. Fly above my head that is. Yet, when we accidentally ignited our Chum with a portable Greenlandic high-tech oven, Habecha flew up to the top of the roof in a blink of an eye, much like a bird does. We were still screaming "Fire," when he was already on the roof extinguishing the flames with his bare feet. His feet were small and yellow. Size six, at most.

By the end of July I knew exactly what I wanted to be in life. A Flying Shaman. This occupation was definitely not on the list of the majors suggested by my college adviser. I asked Habecha if I could, if I had powers. He said tarem nengu, maybe, and then he added that there was "an important thing to be considered." "Namgem pidar mevanharvan? What is that, Habecha?" I asked. "It is to give away everything, but not to give away your own self," he answered in his broken Russian. I translated that into English for my fellow Inuits; they tried it in Danish and Greenlandic. Yet, none of us could understand what he meant.

In the beginning of August we moved to Naryan-Mar, the Nenets capital on the Barents Sea. There our journey in the great Tundra continued. I got used to falling asleep to the dogs howling under the midnight sun. I learned to eat seal liver and blubber. I learned to appreciate boredom; I discovered that it could be useful because it cleansed the mind of impurities. I also learned that the word Eskimo did not mean race or ethnicity; it meant only this: a person who eats raw fish, exactly what my early childhood Stabekk friends were bragging about.

In two months I learned to live without luxuries, without gadgets that in America seemed indispensable to me. I also noticed that my mind became sharper than ever before. I realized that my five senses had been primitive and underdeveloped because I did not use them fully. Tundra people can see in the darkness and forecast the weather changes well before they occur. In our structured world we can't. We have trouble observing the world around us closely. We have trouble seeing things hidden behind the horizon. Maybe that's why we missed "the perfect storm" in our economy?

In the KLM plane from Moscow to Amsterdam I opened the WSJ. I had not seen newspapers since late June. All these events, all this breaking news had sped past me. "Fy faen! (How gross!)," my neighbor, a Swede, said catching

a break from his shrimp with marber sauce and terrine of foie gras. "Lice," he said. "You have lice, don't you?" Upon arriving back home I went to the barber shop and had my hair cut. Christian was waiting for me at the steps. He was eager for news. We went to McDonalds. In the restroom I stopped in front of the mirror. A sun burnt moon face was looking at me, so familiar and so foreign. "I don't understand," Christian said when I finished my story. "Did you sleep with them or what?" The Big Mac tasted like plastic, I discarded it.

After my return, my old life ceased to make sense. Early in the morning, instead of going to my AP chemistry class, I went to Times Square to see if I could make crowds change their flow. From there I would head to the park where I endlessly ran up the walls of the Belvedere Castle trying to break away from gravity. I spent my afternoon in the library learning about magic and herbs. From Habecha I already knew that all sicknesses, including cancer, came from stress, anger, self-pity, and desperation. I tried my healing powers on my friends and strangers. Using my bare hands, I learned to heal headaches and back pains. Yet, I failed to learn to fly. And I also failed the semester. It was quite obvious by the end of March.

Loser became my name. In May I started rebuilding my life from scratch, trying to repair the damage done. But even now, between memorizing math formulas and SAT words I kept thinking about how much we do not know; and how little we are ready to accept. It turned out, that even the most liberal people in our neighborhood did not approve of my journey. In their eyes, there were more grounds to be a fundamentalist than to be a Shaman. In their eyes, it was just not ok to talk to invisible spirits and drink caribou blood. In their eyes, Naiku and Dyarne were primitive pedophiles and should be persecuted. And of course, the lice that I contracted from them just made everything worse. But I kept asking myself: where did I go wrong? Did I follow Habecha's request to give away everything but not your own self? Or did I lose myself in a desperate attempt to catch my elusive dream?

On the eve of my SAT I finally put away my books. To entertain myself, I again started reading the Komi-Nenets-Russian illustrated dictionary. I ran into the word to give away. In English it is a simple word with an obvious meaning. Yet in Nenets it had more than ten different meanings, almost as many as the polar bear has. Some of these meanings coincided with the word "to take." To give meant to take. And to take meant to give. It finally made sense to me. In order to save me, Naiku and Dyarne gave away their bodies, but they did not give away themselves. They gave me their love—the heat and energy of their tired and worn out bodies for nothing, for no reward, for no apparent reason. And this—together with caribou blood, herbs, and mushrooms, made a miracle. That's what Habecha meant!

There was a magic formula. So, I thought, if people learned this formula, they would then agree that you could drink caribou blood instead of soy milk in the morning and wear a skin instead of a Fendi coat. They would then agree that if there is anything left in the end, which is love. And that love sometimes comes with lice; and that there is nothing wrong about it. Lice are just a part of the equation. Eliminate lice and what is left? Vanzer tsui vada . . . the wrong answer.

Dan

Deidre Flood • Urban Assembly School for Media Studies

October 21st, 2008

I was convinced I was the girl who'd spend days on end in tears because she was so broken that her legs wouldn't move. But I am the destroyer. If you lived here, you'd be home now.

There is no justification. I am an asshole because I choose to be. Promiscuous. Borderline. I refuse to feel. I refuse to recognize the anguish anymore. I have become a robot who fucks to feel. I don't need razor blades or drugs. I just need to get undressed. I am manipulative, a crusader marching to territories unknown, trying to take back the promised land and killing everyone in my path.

"Does it faze me?" you ask, the murder—the victims, the streams of blood down these roads, crashing at my ankles, running through my toes. Apparently it doesn't anymore. I have taken everything I've always tried to get rid of. These people, these broken people, I've hated who they are and what they do, and now that they're gone, I've taken their place. I am James, Dan, and my father, the one who manipulates and breaks people's hearts, the coward who is so sick they ruin everyone around them, the one who seeks sympathy, crying, sobbing to strangle you of feeling, so you're no longer mad. I've complained my whole life and now I've become those. Them.

I have taken everything from other people and I have taken from myself.

I am surprised at how empty I've become. How numb. I am aware of the damage. I know it's there, but I've dried up. I'm cracked and dusty. No more emotion, no more tears. I am as hollow as a bubble, but as rough as a rock.

It's come to a point where being the causer of pain feels more sufficient than the receiver. I have proved to be able to take it, but apparently I can dish it out too. The strange thing is, I don't know which I'd rather have. To want to die and feel or to not care, live or die and not feel anything at all. Because I'm not having panic attacks. I can breathe, but I have stolen all joy from myself. I've drowned myself. Covered with a shield, I cannot feel a blade or flower petal. I cannot see the gallows or the sunset.

What have I done?

I should feel guilty, but lying has become a routine. If I'm able to convince myself that something is true, then I can definitely convince someone else.

I don't feel guilty because nothing happened. When Jesse

goes to kiss me today, I won't say a word. I'll smile and erase my past.

I've been erasing my whole life.

I was seven and everyone went to the store. I was alone with him. No one was home that day. I was lost. I sat on the corner of the couch, pants around my ankles. I could feel his beard on my inner thighs. I drowned myself in thought. I froze. Afterwards, he told me, women like men who do stuff like that. He thanked me for being a good girl and being cooperative.

I wasn't always.

But I've gotten used to myself taking my clothes off.

October 11th, 2001

I sat in the courtroom, and wept. Ashamed I was, ashamed that I had let him get to me. I was weak. I am weak. So I wept. The last time I was to see him with life in his being. But that's okay because he destroyed mine. I am still there, in that room clenching Mr. Periwinkle, the softest dolphin you can imagine. I am still there in that room.

I sat in the rows with my mother, sisters, and my therapist, Debbie. She came prepared with stuffed animals and tissues. I was convinced we wouldn't be needing them. Dan walked out of a room and stood before me in a jumpsuit with handcuffs on his fragile wrists. He looked as though he had aged fifty years in six months. I felt terrible; I did this to him. I put him in those leg irons; I created the pain and regret that shone through the wrinkles in his face. He stood facing the judge. When my mother went up to read a statement my therapist and I had worked on together, her tears soaked the page. The ink ran. I could barely understand her through the gulps of air she swallowed, trying to remember how to breathe. Everyone was crying, the jury, even strangers, everyone except me. When my mother had come back to the rows and sat down next to me, her head in her hands, Dan asked the judge permission to turn around to look at me. He did. I remember thinking that it had been over a year since the last time he saw me, and I was convinced he wouldn't be able to tell me apart from my sisters. His eyes locked with mine. "I'm so sorry," he said. I looked at his eyes, and couldn't stop the tears from streaming down my face. I didn't cry when they went over the evidence,

when my mother read the letter, when they carried out his sentence. I cried when he was able to pick me out of a crowded room instantly. I cried because I spent my life with him, utterly unrecognizable. An object. I cried because it was then that I knew I was significant.

It was ages ago. But it's still fresh in my mind. No matter how many walls you put up, it seeps right through. Birds. They terrify me. Literally everyone gives me these looks when I flinch and run from the pigeons that have taken up New York. But they don't understand. No one does. When I was young, my sisters' grandfather molested me. We estimated from about ages six to ten almost Every. Single. Day. He was a trustworthy old man to the rest of the world, but I knew who he really was. He babysat my sisters and me a couple times a week after school. He's the kind of grandfather in all the stories—buys you ice cream and takes you to the park, walks real slow, and absorbs all his surroundings. The kind that teaches you the difference between oak trees and maple. The kind that tells you stories from the war. He was a perfectly harmless old man to the rest of the world. Only I could see the demon in his eyes.

He had a bird; actually I think it was two. He kept them in his bedroom. That's how he'd get me in there. "Deirdre, we have to go feed the birds." Trapped, voiceless in a metal cage they sat; so did I. And eventually because of these actions I put him in a metal cage as well. They have wings but they cannot fly. I used to let them out when he wasn't looking; I wanted them to fly because I couldn't.

It became routine after a while. It had been happening for so long that I was used to it. It was all I knew. I'm not saying I didn't know I was being molested. I knew. But I could do nothing. I tried so many times to write it, to say it, to scream it, but the words never came out of my mouth.

I remember once standing in my kitchen crying while he was making a cup of tea. "If you want me to stop, just say so." I cried and cried and caught my breath. I looked at him dead in the eye. "STOP. I want you to stop." And I left.

Victims of such abuse tend to feel ashamed, guilty, and worthless. And I think it's because of moments like that. If they're sick enough to use you as a sex object then they're sick enough to think you want it. Or to at least make you feel like it's your fault.

By the way . . . he never stopped.

He would do it in front of people too; he thought he was too smart for them. But apparently he wasn't. I would

consistently try and sit with my sisters so he'd have no room. Or invite them under the blanket so he couldn't get in.

When I was seven, right after one of the "incidents," he got up to leave my room. And I sat on the edge of the bed, legs hanging limp inches from the ground. His hand grasped the doorknob, but he never opened the door.

He turned around and told me, sort of threatening, "You can't tell anyone about this. If you do, they'll send me to jail. And then I won't be here to teach you how to paint. It will ruin both our lives. So you have to promise that you'll keep it a secret."

I didn't say a word. He left the room. I spent the rest of the day staring at a journal I had bought the week before, wondering how to write that.

I don't think I knew the words. I was so small. I was afraid they would find it. They would read it.

So I left it blank. You have no idea how much I regret that. My father had suspicions about what was going on.

He knew it all too well. My father molested my sister; he could see it in my eyes. I'm sure—same house, same time, and none of us knew. I grew up in a house infested with liars and abusers. It took a long time to trust grown men again. Everyone I knew was a monster. My father has some anger issues; when he suspected what was going on he yelled at me, and threatened Dan. It was after we moved out that I told someone. For four years I thought I'd tell my mother, my sister, Niamh, or my grandmother (on my mother's side). But no, I told my father.

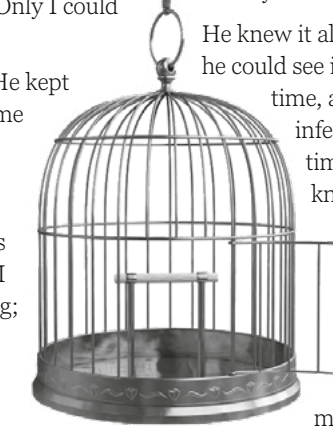
He scared it out of me in a tearful interrogation. We went through the whole process—tell the police, he gets a lawyer, go to the doctor for evidence. And testify.

October 11th, 2001, the court date, was the last time I saw Dan alive. And every year since then it's been a bad day. Next year. I guess, we'll see. Every time I tell that story, people give me this look of pity or sympathy. But what they don't know is I'm fine. I've told so many people—police, my family, the jury, my friends. Everyone knows. And I'm okay. It happened. So I could have something to write about.

And it'll be published one day.

The only thing that gets to me, are the little things. Like how I can't pick up a paintbrush anymore, or the birds. So don't pity me because I was abused.

Pity me because I can't paint.



I Write

Patrick Moy • Stuyvesant High School

I've crafted entire worlds with my very hands
I've molded the jagged cliffs and crystal clear lakes of distant lands
I've sired empires, stoic soldiers, and tribal clans
Through imagination, I assure myself of what I can do
Yes, I can

Words on canvas, candid; they can show you who
I am
They can always, through existence, exude comfort
They can be whispered, screamed, sung
Yes, they can

I can carve words into slivers of meat, lessons to be consumed
I can take the pauses between phrases, potent, peaceful
Prescribing breathy breaks, bearing feeling
I can arrange letters so their echoes flow on and on
Yes, I can

I can turn inky scrawls and spontaneous thoughts into
Dastardly plots and golden mead-halls
I can decipher this undecipherable beating flesh and convert it
Into an even messier array of ink-blots and
immersive cursive
I can turn one memory into a thousand ways to
bombard the senses
And with but one missing or misplaced word,
I can make you want to know the whole damn story
And yes, yes you can

I can make a simple act of verbal creation the
Method and madness of quiet meditation
Through my words, I am, letter-by-letter, line-by-line,
Raking the leaf-strewn floors of my mind,
Shelving the clutter that shutters the self
I can jot my thoughts on a crowded train and erase everyone else around me
Yes, I can
I can take a crappy campaign slogan and strip it of its political ties and tuck it
Into the hook of this poem and the motto every dejected soul out there needs to have
For preserving we, for saving you, for consoling me, We can

So I live, I hope
I bleed, I fight
I persist, I survive And I can—
Because I write.

Sheltered Art

Catherine Valencia • Long Island City High School

It all starts with a beginning
Then the pieces go on clipping
Themselves together, on a canvas soft and dripping
And all the work that you invested life in . . . quietly starts slipping
A dream holds it tight, yet you find out some things missing
Was it lost connection with your art, or the light around you dimming?
Or maybe time is asking you to get up from where you're sitting
And look around a little more, and feel the pulse in living
Walk out to hear the beats, of every season singing
But the world seems so deeply cold, and home is just so warm
And you've been painting portraits ever since your hands were born
And all the shadows that surround you are filled with mental porn
How could a human walk into hell, and expect to change its form?
You think everything that you create symbolizes truth
Innocence and purity things not shown as news
But the poem the WORLD recites is pouring out its blues
Begging to be rescued, but its savior won't be you

. . . So you lie down on your empty bed and try so hard to sleep
The silence in the air is haunting and it only wants to creep
Into the spaces between your hands, your fingers seem to freeze
The tingles are unbearable; it makes you want to scream
And yell and pound the confusion out your head, to find out what it means
Before the vacancy begins to grow, and take over your dreams
And all of a sudden your surroundings aren't what they seem
The ceiling crumbles into you and the atmosphere feels free
And you look up to find the darkness hugging every eye inside the sky
And tears swell up because you realize that you forgot to fly
Into the center of the universe with your art as a reply
To any insecurities that the lightless space might cry
But you don't fret 'cause you're fulfilling a promise your tongue signed
Way back then, when it wasn't wrong to cry
When you laid upon the grass and smiled with a sigh
And the world was still with shadows, but you were so up high
That darkness wasn't scary, 'cause you controlled the light

. . . And now you wake up to the canvas of colorless trimmings.
How was it that you didn't see the reason they weren't sticking?
Every masterpiece you thought you made was just a moments feeling
And maybe you were lost inside the indentions of the clippings
Now it seemed so very clear this wall isn't enough
To color all the anger, hurt, lust, and the love
That you were trying so hard to run away from
But resistance caged the totality of what you thought you were made of
And one step out the door gave you insight to what you were missing
A world exists out there, and you were only sitting
In the safety of your home, and you finally burn the clippings
You walk among an endless canvas here goes a new beginning . . .

Of Girls and Wintry Lakes

Victoria Pavlov • The Bronx High School of Science

My sister Lissy comes home with a bruise the day Annabelle Lewis is reported missing in our town of Rodalee, Ohio, population 3942. We don't know this yet, though. My mother tries to find out how Lissy got the bruise, smooths her hair and helps her take off her coat, but my sister stays quiet, staring at her fingers as she twirls them into shapes.

"Go ask her, Alex." My mother runs a tired hand through her hair in front of the mirror and mutters as she rifles through her purse, looking for her mobile and license.

"Why?" My eyes drift to Lissy, still sitting on the floor with her long legs splayed out in front of her. She's trying to undo her shoelaces, fingers slipping clumsily over the knots. Her brow is knit in concentration and her lips move with a silent song. "She probably just bumped into something. She always looks at the floor when she walks."

"The bruise is on her stomach. I just want to know how she got it. Be a brother, Alezae. Please." Be a brother. She says that whenever I tell her I can't take Lissy to the park or go over her homework with her. She's angry because Lissy had to go home on the bus today instead of walking home with me. I couldn't walk her home because I'd stayed for the school musical, and I couldn't tell my mother why because then I'd have to tell her about Clarissa being an extra and why that means I had to stay and watch. So Lissy had to take the bus and now she's home with a bruise. Be a brother, Alezae.

Lissy is still trying to undo her shoelaces when I sit cross legged beside her and push her yellow hair behind her ear and whisper to her, "How'd you get the bruise, Lissy? Someone give it to you?" She lets me take over the job. "You're okay, Lis."

I finish untying the shoelaces when Lissy turns to look at me. She drifts her eyes over my nose and chin and lets them land on my folded knee. "Rock."

"Who threw the rock?"

"Who threw the rock?" She intones. "Get out, retard." She changes her voice for each mimicry, but the second phrase makes her nervous and she jerks her fingers with the impersonation. "Go home, retard," she repeats, and breaks into a frantic humming of Clementine. I know the voice, and turn to my mother as she walks back into the room.

"I'm seriously going to kill him this time."

"Who?"

"Tyler. He must have thrown a rock at her as she was getting on the bus. I'll kill him."

"You're not killing anyone, Alex. You don't even know it's him."

"He's the only one who calls her a retard."

She stiffens. "He called her that?"

But there's a knock on the door as I'm about to reply and my mother moves to answer it. She lets out a groan when she checks the peephole but dons a smile as she lets in our neighbor Helen.

Helen's hands are fluttering and her perpetually rosy cheeks are redder than usual as she walks in. "Oh, it's terrible, Olivia, just terrible."

"How are you, Helen?"

"Oh, the poor thing, you just wouldn't believe. I couldn't myself when I first heard, it's too terrible, it is."

"What is, Helen?"

"Why, the disappearance. Haven't you heard? The whole town is talking about it."

My mother and I exchange a glance. "Who disappeared?"

"Oh my, you haven't heard! It's the Lewis girl, that Annabelle. She's been missing for two days now."

My mother lifts a hand to her lips and looks at Lissy, leaning on the kitchen counter and taking a sloppy drink from an opened milk carton. She's still looking at Lissy but her question is to me.

"Do you know Annabelle, Alex?" I do, but in the weakest sense of the word. She's in three of my classes and sits in the back of each one of them, twirling her hair round her pencils and doodling butterflies in the margins of her notebooks. Helen cuts in.

"Of course he knows her. She's his age, after all. Well, and Lissy's too, of course." Helen suddenly notices Lissy and gives her a wave, uncharacteristically nervous and timid. "Hello, Lissy."

Lissy ignores her and keeps drinking until the carton's empty. She throws it into the sink and burps, turns and walks out of the kitchen in that swaggering way of hers, what my mother calls Lissy's John Wayne walk. Helen turns redder and changes the subject.

"The police are going to be on the lookout tonight. If you know anything, be sure to tell them." My mother escorts

Helen out the door, then grabs her purse from the table and puts on her coat.

"I have to cover Cara's shift tonight. Lissy's yours until your father comes home. If he comes home," she adds as a side note, and blows a kiss in my direction. "Take her to the park. It's lovely weather." As she closes the door, we finish together, "Be a brother, Alezae."

Annabelle Lewis's body is found four days later in Peter's Lake, called in by a frantic couple at dawn. She's fished out by a fireman and taken to the hospital, but the ambulance can barely get through the mass of people who've crowded by the lake to see them take out the body. They have to turn on the siren and pretend to speed up to scatter the people, curious and complaining, some still following as the ambulance climbs the hill and turns the corner.

No one really knows why it's called Peter's Lake, it's been called that so long, but now there's saying that a little boy named Peter had fallen in and drowned and now with this tragedy the lake should be banned from public entirely. Mayor Adamson promises to do something about this and has a gate built around the lake, but it doesn't take a week for some kids to rip through the mesh for an easy entrance, and it hasn't been fixed. Over the next few days, the town turns Annabelle Lewis into a sudden celebrity.

"She was so smart," I hear a teacher sigh. "Could've been the valedictorian, I'm sure of it. Or at least the salutatorian."

"So beautiful," Helen wails with the other mothers by the grocer's. "Such a loss. Such a lovely girl." I don't remember Annabelle Lewis being all that beautiful, though. She was pretty, sure, but where her waist was thin and pleasant to see in the T-shirts she liked to wear, her thighs were pretty heavy and didn't look too nice in shorts. She had this gap between her front teeth too, like that girl in *True Blood*, but she wasn't blond like the girl in *True Blood*, and she'd come from Alabama so her accent wasn't as cute or softly cadenced either. But she had nice hair, really thick and black, and I remember she had a splatter of freckles across the bridge of her nose that made her pretty cute, especially when she wrinkled her nose to laugh.

The girls in school all turn out to have been her best friends at some point in her short life, and make a silent competition of who mourns her the best, in the most artful and honest way. They come to school in black—miniskirts—grey if they don't have black, brown if they don't have either, and so on—and look longingly out the windows in class, as if catching a memory of a moment with Annabelle outside in the grass or by the benches. Some refuse to eat lunch or do homework or do chores at home, because everything reminds them of Annabelle.

But mostly, people are curious. Every question starts with a why. Why the lake? Why a lake? Why Annabelle? Why a Tuesday? Why now?

"Who dies at seventeen?" my mother whispers, and I catch her looking at Lissy again, and then at me, trying to predict if there is a chance either one of us will disappear and wind up bloated and pale in the lake. No one says anything about why it might have happened, though. Maybe she was walking by the lake after school and slipped and fell. The lake had been swollen that whole week, an accidental drowning wasn't impossible. But her mother had hung herself when Annabelle was eight years old, and who knows, maybe those kinds of things are genetic. People whisper, but words aren't formed.

Clarissa is one of the only girls who doesn't make a show of missing Annabelle Lewis. She wears normal clothes and still turns in her homework, presses her books closer to her chest as she passes the girls in the hallway who glare at her yellow jeans and denim shirts, the French braid she faithfully plaits every morning. I watch that braid bouncing against her back and ending in a curly tip at her waist as she walks home from school. I want to tell her about the play, that I saw her, but she leaves school so fast that by the time I pick up Lissy from her class all I see is the braid and Clarissa's white sneakers tapping brusquely on the pavement. I finally catch her one day when she stays a little later to speak to a teacher, and when she finishes, I'm waiting for her.

"Hi," I find that my tongue can't seem to push out the word and have to repeat myself to make her hear me and stop.

"Hello, Alezae." She pushes back a strand of brown hair that falls over her eyes and watches me, waits.

"I can take you home if you want."

"Sure," a smile.

"Let me just get my sister." But when I turn around, Lissy isn't next to me but crouched against the farthest wall, where Tyler and two other guys are taunting her. I throw down my book bag at Clarissa's feet, I guess to tell her to wait for me, and break into a sprint towards the wall. I hear Clarissa say something, but by then I'm two inches away from one of the guys and I punch him on the side of the head, making him yowl.

Tyler stops smirking at my sister to turn around and look at me, and I slam my knee into his stomach. He retreats with an oof and the friend throws a punch at my nose but I catch it and slam him in the face instead. But by then Tyler and the first guy recover and I'm being showered with fists and kicks. I see Lissy, she'd been crying, and though my ears are ringing and all I hear is the sound of my insides being torn apart by track shoes and heavy fists, I know she's humming Clementine, and I know her

voice is getting more high pitched as she's getting more nervous, and I know she's going to get more nervous when I can no longer keep the three pairs of hands and feet from hitting me and go down.

It's probably been only two minutes or so, but it feels like an hour passes until two gym teachers, then a third and fourth, run over to break away Tyler and his friends. I'm being helped up by someone but I'm not sure who it is. My eyes see in black, which turns into dots and red squares, and slowly clears away to fuzzy shapes and then pain and pain and pain.

"I promised Lissy I'd kill him," I sputter, but my words are gnarled by two shaking teeth and a rivulet of blood that trickles down my chin, so I'm not sure anyone hears me. There's a series of movements around me, and I hear Tyler cursing and an older man's voice shouting, and above it all, Lissy humming. My brain registers everything slowly, and by the time the fuzzy shapes turn into more distinct red-toned images, I can tell that they are trying to get Lissy to go on the bus so that I can be taken to the hospital and she's refusing. She protests in animal-like whimpers and squeaks, and spreads her fingers apart the way she does when she's scared. This is the part where she would start screaming, she hates it when people touch her, but I've been teaching her not to scream so now she's just humming wildly, a fast-paced Clementine coming from somewhere deep and desperate in her chest.

"Leave her alone," I try, but end up spitting out more blood. I swallow a few times and spit out the rest, push my tongue into the tooth that fared the worst and spit that out too. Then I try again. "Leave her alone. She can come with me. She won't go on the bus that scared."

The teacher in charge of reasoning with her looks relieved and lets Lissy go, and when I move the one arm I can in an upward motion, she lets herself fall into my chest in anxious exhaustion, her humming finally ceasing in a wispy sigh.

My mother cries when she sees my face, and when she's told why it happened, she cries a little more and wraps her arms around Lissy. Lissy lets our mother hug her, but as soon as she's let go, she jolts and ends up on the opposite side of the hospital bed, fingers at my arm. I'm allowed to go home with a few bandages wrapped half-heartedly round my face and a cast on my wrist for the crack in the bone from one of the kicks.

My mother takes Lissy to the park so I can sleep but they come back twenty minutes later with Lissy anxious and tear-streaked and my mother looking like she's also going to cry. I try to explain to her that there's a process, a series of unwavering steps developed from all our years of going to the park together. We have to get ice cream from Fred's, chocolate for me, vanilla with cherries for

Lissy. We sit on the chairs and watch the cars, start walking when a red car passes, finish the ice cream before we reach the curb, then break into a sprint until we reach the park. Things get more relaxed there. Lissy likes the swings and the slides and the monkey bars, and she likes playing with the smaller children who don't ask her questions and play chase. Some mothers take their children away and keep them in the sandboxes until we leave, but most of them are used to Lissy by now and have resorted to just watching her warily from the corner of their eyes as they gossip, the long legged girl with yellow hair in thin braids running after their toddler and just as tickled by it.

I try to explain this to my mother, but my lips are swollen and speaking is an Olympic task in itself, so I just lie on the couch and let Lissy sit on my legs, the only place where it doesn't hurt. My mother brings Lissy her Rubix cube, the square so old and overused that the colors are fading, and those that haven't are peeling at their corners. Lissy takes it, ponders over it, mutters to herself, and starts solving it. Her fingers fly over the colored stickers as she shifts row by row and several minutes later, the colors are all matched, and she's shoving the cube in my hand so I can mix them up again, make it hard for her to solve. My mother watches us as she drinks her tea at the table and I can see her replay her favorite phrase in her head over and over again, and I want to tell her that it's okay, that even though I complain, I want to do this. I try to tell her with my eyes but her gaze is distant and she's in another world, staring at Lissy's hair and it's like I can hear her thinking it. Be a brother, Alezae.

Talk of Annabelle Lewis has ceased to a quiet drone and ultimately disappears after the funeral. The funeral was overcrowded and even those who never met Annabelle came to pay their respects. It seems that so many bugs had gotten trapped and tangled in Annabelle's hair that her father just asked for it to be cut off and Lady who owns the salon down on Royce had come to the funeral home and done Annabelle's hair in a pixie cut for free. When she comes back, she tells all the women that the look on Clarence Lewis's face was "just god-awful" and she sure hopes something good lies in his future, maybe a new woman, a young one preferably, who can give him a new baby, or maybe just a dog for starters.

Clarissa likes to talk about Annabelle Lewis whenever we meet, which we've been doing more often since the fight. She talks about her during lunch and during group discussion in English, and whenever we walk home, my hand in Lissy's. It's not a morbid kind of talk, more like reflective. She wonders whether Annabelle is watching us, whether she hears us, whether she was scared when she was drowning and whether she misses being alive. She's tried to conduct a few séances, but either the candles go out or it turns out the pencil she took from Annabelle's desk wasn't actually Annabelle's, but had

been borrowed from Stacey Crewe. One time, Clarissa's mother caught her, and she's had to stop the sessions for a little while or else her mother will take her to a doctor. When I don't walk her home, Clarissa crawls through the gash in the gate and visits the lake, sometimes staying there for hours.

One day, three months after Annabelle Lewis was found in the lake, I ask if Clarissa wants to see Lissy solve her Rubix cube. Clarissa blinks as if suddenly realizing that Lissy has been walking with us all these times, then smiles, bemused. "She's cute," and I can't help feeling proud, proud that someone as pretty as Clarissa thinks of Lissy as something other than strange. "Lissy," I call to her.

But she walks on, swaying her hips in her thin jeans and straightening her fingers to make shapes with them. "Hey, Lis," I reach into my bag for the Rubix cube. "Wanna solve this?" She keeps walking. "Look, Lis, I'm twisting it around, making it really hard to solve." Clarissa watches us, her smile expectant, and I suddenly feel eager to show her, desperate to impress her. I take Lissy by the shoulder and press down, making her stop. She turns halfway to look at my arm, her eyes straying over the Rubix cube, watching the faded white corners of the stickers where they are starting to peel. I watch her solve the cube in her mind, telling her fingers where each box would go if she had the cube in her hands, but she makes no move to take it from me. "Take it, Lis." Clarissa shifts her feet and I suddenly feel frustrated, angry that Lissy is pulling her stubbornness as if to embarrass me.

"Take the cube, Lissy." And I shove it into her hands, but she makes her palms flat and the cube drops to the ground with a sharp sound of plastic on cement. "Take it Lissy," she repeats, her voice deep. "Take it, take it, hard to solve. Take it Lissy."

I feel ashamed. Clarissa clears her throat and reaches to pat Lissy on her head to shush her but Lissy jolts sharply and comes to my side. I pick up the cube and nudge Lissy to walk, take her by the hand as we begin to move again. I feel the papery dryness of Lissy's hand and I squeeze it gently, my head light with guilt and anger. Clarissa walks beside me, her brown hair lifting with the wind. When we reach her street, she smiles at us and thanks me for walking her home. Her face shows no signs of what had happened, and I'm grateful. I stand with Lissy as we watch her enter her home and then we turn to walk back to the park.

We walk in silence. I cast my eyes to watch Lissy as she takes in the breeze, shifts her face so that it smoothes her hair, smiles lightly at the invisible hands that touch her. I can't tell if she's angry at me, in whatever way she can get angry. But I feel horrible for that small moment of anger, the misplaced frustration that made me treat her so meanly. Be a brother, Alezae, the wind whispers in my ear, and I shove it away with a shrug of my shoulder.

After our ice cream, before we reach the gates of the park, she turns and drifts her eyes over my face, never meeting my eyes, but at least watching my nose and cheeks as she parts her lips to say something. "Take it easy, Alex." She pats my hand and I watch her, confused. "Take it easy, love is just the same." And she turns and runs toward the swings.

I wonder where she learned that.

We're taking Clarissa home when she turns to me and asks, "Do you want to visit the lake with me?"

I pause, and lift the hand holding Lissy's a little so she'd see. "Maybe, you know, another time or something."

But Clarissa is unrelenting and pulls at my other hand. "She can come too. It's perfectly safe. She'll sit right next to us."

It takes me a moment to agree and we take a detour and find the lake in several minutes. We crawl through the broken gate; Clarissa first, pulling Lissy through by the hand, and then me, gently pushing at her back until she bolts through the gate and runs past us to the pebbled shore of the lake. The water has swollen again, throbbing languidly at the banks and sucking the pebbles smooth. I sit Lissy down a few feet away from where Clarissa lays down her jacket, hidden a little behind a branch but we can hear her humming and clinking pebbles together. Clarissa sighs and smiles at me, reaching into the back pocket of her jeans to pull out a silver box. "It's so nice to smoke here," she says by way of explanation, and takes out a skinny cigarette.

"You ever smoked Camels?"

"I never smoked." I tell her, and I suddenly feel so stupid for it; ashamed that I have so much catching up to do. She doesn't say anything, though. She puts her cigarette on her knee and fishes out another from the silver box.

"If you want the menthol to kick in, just press on the camel with your nail. Here, see?" She leans forward, putting her nail over the camel print on the paper. "Like this." Her braid dances over my shoulders and I can smell the cinnamon lotion that makes her throat sparkle.

She takes out a lighter and I lean in with the cigarette in my mouth, my tongue curling at the taste. The paper hisses as it lights and I wrap two fingers around the stick, breathing in. I feel the smoke rush into my mouth and climb down my throat and into my lungs, rip into my bloodstream and curl like licks of fire around my veins. There's no attack of coughing like in the movies. Just a thick, burning sensation that snarls in my throat with every breath.

"I like to talk to her sometimes." She switches the hand with the cigarette and puts it down on the ground, leaning back. "Just asking her those questions I ask you."

"Does she answer?" I feel genuinely interested, then sheepish when she gives me a sideways glance.

"So, Alezae. How'd that happen?"

I figure she's asking about my name and breathe in my cigarette before answering. "My mother picked it. It's French, I think."

"And Lissy?"

"Her name's Felice. My father wanted Felicity, but my mother didn't. They compromised."

She sniggers at this, thinks a little, then talks again.

"Daddy's a surgeon." She puffs lightly on her cigarette and watches the smoke as it curls in ringlets about her head. "Momma's an artist. She fills these balloons with paint and throws them at canvasses she stretches over the walls," she makes her hands into a large circle, one of them holding the cigarette. "Then she blends it all with her arms and her feet. She's gotten quite popular. She's barely even home nowadays." The cigarette simmers lightly between her fingers as she swirls her hands with the circle and I can see the faint smear of red her lips had left on the paper. I never realized that she wears lipstick, but I can see it now. A gentle shade of cherry, neatly covering the delicate swirl of her lips.

Her lips. I imagine their softness, the cushion of her pouty bottom lip, the smooth concaves of her teeth brushing against my tongue. A shiver rushes through me, and she breaks through my thoughts with a question.

"What about yours?"

My parents. I have no idea what to say about my parents. So I start from the beginning.

"I was born a few minutes before Lissy. They didn't know about what might have happened to her when she was born, but she wasn't really ever normal since we were babies. My father blames me for it. I mean," I puff at my cigarette and realize that it doesn't burn so much anymore. "I mean, he doesn't really say it, but you know he thinks it. He's at a bank, but he doesn't really come home anymore. Not really."

Another puff, and I blow out the smoke and she blows a plume in my direction.

"My mother's a nurse. That's about it."

Clarissa nods, puts out the stub of her cigarette on a pebble beside her, and folds her hands under her chin.

"Do you ever wonder what she was doing here?" It takes me a moment to realize that she's back to Annabelle, but I don't reply, just finish my cigarette.

"I mean, what made her come here? What made her jump, or fall, or whatever?"

It's never bothered me before, but as I put out my cigarette, I get a sudden chill thinking about the dead girl found not ten feet from where we sat talking about her. It wasn't this creepy talking about her on the sunny street walking home, but here it's just too morbid. It makes me shiver thinking of Clarissa sitting here by herself, talking to Annabelle, for hours on end. I can hear her asking another question, but I tune her out and watch the water ripple with water bugs, until I realize that I don't hear Lissy humming anymore. I get up.

"Do you hear Lissy?"

Clarissa looks around, a look of irritation flashing on her face for being cut off before she hides it. "She's probably just playing."

I jog behind the bush but Lissy isn't there, and I feel this sick, sick feeling as a hand grips my heart, a cold hand, Annabelle's hand.

"Lissy!" I rasp, and by this time, Clarissa's gotten up and is looking for her too. "Lissy!" I can see images running through my head, words, but the most awful thing is that I keep seeing Lissy's face in Annabelle's. Try as I might, I can't see Annabelle anymore, just Lissy, pale and gone, gone gone gone because of me.

"Lissy!" I pause for breath and hear a splash by the deeper bank hidden behind a tree, and sprint in that direction, Clarissa jogging after me.

A blonde head emerges from the murky water, and

desperate hands reach for something to grab but find more water instead. I see Lissy's forehead and eyes break through the surface, then disappear again as her strength weakens.

I back a few steps and jump into the water. It's cold, the bubbles from my jump rushing past my face and erupting under my nose and chin as I descend. I swim back up in even strokes once I hit the muddy floor, my eyes closed against the thick cold of the water. I feel for Lissy when I break through and grab her around the waist, pulling her up so she could get a breath before dragging her to the bank as I paddle with one arm. Clarissa reaches for her and hauls Lissy up, choking and sputtering, then takes my hand and helps me up too.

We lie there a moment, panting, my hand stroking Lissy's head as she shivers and pants, reaching for my arm and squeezing tight. She's shivering, but I can feel her calm down as Clarissa wraps her coat around her, and she leans her head against my chest and sighs in a hiccup like a colicky baby.

"I'm sorry," Clarissa begins, but I cut her off with a hand.

"Look, I like you, but you really have to grow up." I see the indignation flicker across her face, and then the submission as she lowers her eyes. "I get it, really. Annabelle was nice and she was alive, and now she's dead. But you have to get over it. The town did. So you have to, too."

Clarissa stays quiet as I give her back her coat and lift Lissy to her feet, and watches us as we leave. Once we slip through the gate, I can feel the sun warming our skin and drying our hair and dripping clothes, and Lissy turns her face to it and smiles at it.

I take her by the hand and we stand there a little and let the sun dry us with gentle hands and smooth the fear from faces, and when we start walking again, I feel new.

"Let's go to the park. We'll get ice cream and go to the park. Which do you want today?" I ask for good measure, and like she's playing along in a game, Lissy thinks for a moment.

"Vanilla with cherry." She decides, like the idea is new and unexplored. "Vanilla with cherry and the park. Vanilla with lots of cherries."

"Lots of cherries," I promise. And as we turn the corner and head down Gale towards Fred's, we both take in a breath and start a new bout of Clementine, clear and strong.

Bus Warfare

Dakota An • Brooklyn Technical High School

Been a Brooklyn boy
17 years.
Canarsie (under)represent
17 years
an enclave under siege.
Alone
in the brisk air, I
wait and prepare.
The B(82)us, like a pressurized can on wheels,
lurches to a
Stop, for me.
I step up into Laughter that
Stops, for me,
only briefly.
Hood up, Head down
still and silent I remain.
But they know what I am.
The slits in my face, or the color on my skin,
give me away.
They call me out, and like
Word Warlords
they start firing.
I die
I become
Ching-Chong Chinaman
not even Chinese.
One of them begins a mocking martial arts, slicing the air
And the bus floods with his gleeful screeching.
Another asks for a new pair of sneakers,
tossing a gracious 50 cents like a pair of grenades.
The heart hardens into iron
and the chest splinters under its weight.
The familiar blood, hot and angry, rushes up

and threatens to erupt
the ears that took these shots for years.
The white fists, choking the trembling, metal bar,
redden and tense with desire
for flesh and bone.
The young cannon on the face,
imprisoning a furious breath and a toxic tongue,
wants to spit their bullets
right back at them.
I can't see the world passing me by
outside the foggy glass.
I can't hear beyond,
the monstrous roaring of the engine.
The lights flash green.
I strike the Yellow tape that throw the doors open,
and leap down to let my boots crush the Frozen Earth.
The Laughter continues behind the doors that violently swing shut
on the suffocating steam of that warzone
with no ethnic ethics.
In icy isolation
slapping my feet on the murky slush decorating the cracked concrete,
I cast off my hood, my gloves, my scarf,
and open my jacket.
The harsh cold pushes against the pores of my face
wraps around my ears
enters my veins
and embraces me.
I made it home.

Pendulum

Anna Learis • Edward R. Murrow High School

1

I have lived for sixteen years.

I have lived for sixteen years and ten months.

I have lived for sixteen years and ten months and twenty-nine days.

It has been the longest sixteen years and ten months and twenty-nine days of my life.

2

Melanoma is a cruel ailment.

The blotches of brown spread across my hips faster than they can be treated.

The blotches of brown spread across my mother's arms faster than they can be treated.

It doesn't skip a generation.

3

sometimes I kiss people I really shouldn't kiss and let them unbutton my jeans sometimes I leave physics class and walk in circles until I can hear the blood pulsing under my skin because I'm ashamed sometimes I smoke as much as my lungs will inhale sometimes I smoke to quell my appetite sometimes I don't eat because eating scares me sometimes food makes me want to scream sometimes I scream until I can't breathe sometimes I sit in the empty bathtub to stop screaming sometimes I only sleep for two hours at night because I can't make the screams stop

sometimes I don't sleep for days and become slightly delirious and don't remember crying myself to sleep sometimes I cry about books and about people who died hundreds of years ago sometimes I cry about songs and people who will die tomorrow sometimes I don't cry even though I want to more than anything sometimes I hold myself to keep the tears in sometimes I can't hold everything in and it spills out of me like coffee from the cup that I sometimes spill in the night

4

My father is an alcoholic.

I was raised by beer bottles.

Beer bottles have no place in the life of a four year old.

Is a parent a parent if they fail to parent?

5

My sister is fourteen years old.

My sister is fourteen years and one month old.

My sister is fourteen years and one month and seven days old.

It has been the longest fourteen years and one month and seven days of my life.

6

He was only nine.

The treatment wasn't working.

His parents couldn't afford better. He was only nine.

The coffin was too large. He was too small.

He was only nine.

His sister, only five. His brother, only two.

He was only nine.

7

My mother, the ice queen, never allowed herself to get too close to me.

If she did, I may have melted her.

I was six when I first asked for help with my homework.

She told me to solve the problem on my own.

I have solved my own problems since.

8

sometimes I drink coffee at night to keep me awake so I can't have nightmares sometimes the nightmares come when I'm awake during the night sometimes the nightmares come when I'm awake during the day are they still nightmares if they haunt you at all hours

9

What does a sixteen year and ten month and twenty-nine day old know about being a parent?

Not enough.

10

My Gram was the mother I never had.

She never told me my hair made me look like a boy,

She never told me my expanding waistline made me less appealing, She never told me my scars made me look damaged.

She lovingly combed my hair,
Cooked me all the pasta I wanted,
Traced her fingers over my scars.

My Gram was the mother I never had.

11

I find it funny.
 Our love story, a haiku.
 Please don't ever leave.

12

Parents, not siblings, should always put young children to bed.

My father fell asleep on the couch before dinner, as usual.

We were out of frozen dinners.

I biked to the store and bought a pizza for my sister with the allowance I had been saving up for Pokémon cards.

On the ride back up the hill, I cut my knee.

I pushed my bike home, holding the pizza.

After feeding my sister, I put her in bed and read her a book.

My father woke up while I was cleaning my wound.

I received no apology.

I was nine years old.

I was nine years and two months old.

I was nine years and two months and four days old.

It was the longest night of my life.

13

sometimes I think of you and feel better sometimes I think of you and feel worse not that you ever make me feel worse but I feel worse when I compare myself to you sometimes I think it's unfair that you're stuck with me sometimes I feel so lucky that you love me sometimes I feel beautiful and flawless and special sometimes I feel ugly and misshapen and worthless sometimes you make me feel better about myself sometimes you try really hard to make me feel better about myself but it doesn't really work sometimes I want you with me sometimes I need space because I'm drowning in my head and I can't tell which way is up and which way is down sometimes you try to give me directions when I'm lost in my head sometimes it works sometimes I'm too lost to hear the directions but I know you're trying to help sometimes I feel alone when you're far away sometimes I feel alone when you're next to me but that's only when I'm stuck in my head sometimes I feel so confident about us sometimes I think about college and I get anxious and cry sometimes I want to grow old with you and blend my life with yours the way the grains of sand blend on a beach sometimes I love you always I love you

14

I had lived fifteen years.

I had lived fifteen years and nine months.

I had lived fifteen years and nine months and seventeen days.

He stopped drinking when I had lived fifteen years and nine months and seventeen days.

15

I tango with death

On a floor of broken eggshells. The pain sinks in

So cautiously

That I barely notice it's arrival.

I cannot live this way much longer

Or I will crack like the eggshells

On which I trod.

16

My grandmother is bipolar.

As was my greatgreat grandmother.

It skips a generation.

17

When my grandfather died, I felt a part of me die with him. The part of me that died was the part that

Sang the Lord praises before every family dinner

Ate buckwheat pancakes every Sunday before church

Bowed my head in prayer before falling asleep

When my grandfather died, so did my spirituality.

18

sometimes I scratch at my skin when I get anxious sometimes I get overwhelming anxiety every day for a week those are the weeks where I wear long sweaters because my arms are covered in bloody scratches sometimes the scratches don't heal quite right and I'm left with the scars my mother dreads so much sometimes I just bite my lip instead sometimes my lip will start to bleed without me even noticing sometimes I leave blood stains on the coffee cups I sometimes drink from in the night sometimes I try to stop the bleeding sometimes I let the blood run down my chin and drip onto my sheets sometimes my boyfriend asks me why my pillowcases are always bloody

I blame it on my imaginary nosebleeds

19

I surround myself with empty coffee cups.

They make me feel comfortable.

I surround myself with gum wrappers.

They make me feel safe.

I surround myself with makeup palettes.

They make me feel pretty.

I surround myself with your letters.

They make me feel loved.

20

I am no artist, but if you let me I can connect the freckles on your cheeks into constellations, I can shade your skin red from my lipstick kisses, and I can draw promises on your back with my fingertips.

21

I last saw her on November 28th, 2014.

Her dementia was getting worse.

She no longer spoke words,

Just counted down from one hundred.

When she got to zero, she would start all over again.

I sat next to her for hours,

Trying to comfort her, stroking her hair the way she used to stroke mine.

When I was leaving, she grabbed my hand.

Her eyes begged me to stay longer.

I left.

Gram died on December 11th, 2014.

22

It is August and we are sitting on our lawn,
hands stained from the wild berries we picked.

You left in a huff,

throwing your bag in the bed of your truck

and driving off so fast that you almost ran me over.

My father swung in and out of my life like a pendulum.

Las Mujeres No Hablan Las Cosas de Familia (Women Do Not Speak Of Familial Matters)

Roberta Nin Feliz • The Bronx High School of Science

My mother was the second oldest of 8 children, although her father had 18 other children with women other than my grandmother. My mother was rowdy and tenacious, a woman who changed her own name from Ana Mercedes to Yadira. In the Dominican Republic, children do not receive birth certificates until their father goes to the Civil Registry Office and recognizes them as legitimate children. When at the Civil Registry Office my grandfather, who was one to forget names, asked my mother what her name was, she replied “Just call me Yadira.” She was the matriarch of the family, assuming the position over my grandmother who was weary from years of enduring my grandfather’s behavior. My mother left Barahona to travel the world when she was in her 30s. She went to Aruba to work, Bonaire to party, and eventually ended up in Curacao, a Dutch colony off the coast of Venezuela. She learned the native creole, Papiamentu, met someone and then she had me. I was born 12 days overdue, unable to drink milk through my mouth, and purple from being in the womb too long. They told my mother I would suffer from permanent brain damage and she promised she would love me forever.

My bathroom reminds me of family secrets kept by women and leftover cilantro burning on stove pilots. There, my mother told me of my brother’s HIV diagnosis. Like a young girl discovering rays of stretch marks on her thighs, we assessed the implications of the diagnosis, of what it would mean to face the world with it. I first thought about his wife and five children and what would happen if they contracted the virus as well. I thought of my mother who has supported my brother and his family because he refuses to work and how she could use the money she sends him to buy herself new clothes instead of buying hand-me-downs. I thought of my grandmother whose arthritic leg lumbers to the side of her rocking chair. But mostly, I internalized all the risks

and complications the disease would have on a man who has been sickly all his childhood. I was no longer just a teenage girl; I was a girl with a brother who had HIV and his disease filled me with purpose and a pity that remains unparalleled. I worried that he would not survive because of his extensive medical history of measles, bronchitis, and asthma. I felt pity mostly, for my mother, who despite her best efforts was not able to save my brother from himself and the decisions he has made.

My brother and the rest of my family live in Barahona, Dominican Republic. In the slums of La Calle 78, lies my grandmother’s house, collecting the memories of my grandfather’s 26 children and of neighbors rendered immobile to teenage pregnancies by 30-year-old-men. When my grandfather died, he visited me in a dream. He bent his body over and laid his chest and face on mine. Later, I dreamt of milking cows with my grandmother as a baby. These dreams have been the only glimpses of my grandparents I have had. I last saw them when I was a toddler. When my grandmother and I catch up on the phone, the dwindling familiarity and bass in my grandmother’s voice remind of the years I lost with her because I am undocumented. In the years that I could not board a plane to visit, her arthritic leg has undergone surgery twice and her black curls have faded into a misty gray. She has broken her TV twice and has starved before asking my mother for money. Her stories remind me that I come from poverty, that my mother’s dreams, buried in poverty as they were, bore fruit.

My grandmother worked as a nanny for a rich family affiliated with Rafael Trujillo, a bloody dictator obsessed with whitening the Dominican people. Trujillo was infamous for his infatuation with young girls and for the

I was a
girl with
a brother
who had
HIV

Truth B TLD

Quameesh English • Brooklyn Generation School

disappearance of people who disagreed with him. My grandmother says she would see the people hanging like platanos every corner you turned. When Trujillo killed the Mirabal Sisters, Dominican revolutionaries determined to overthrow Trujillo's regime also known as Las Mariposas (The Butterflies), my grandmother thought they would all die. "Once they killed the butterflies, I lost all hope. It was only a matter of time before he killed us all," she said. "But crime was at an all-time low during Trujillo's era. Yes, sir. You could sleep on the street at night and nothing would happen to you." My grandmother's skin was like cinnamon sticks glossed over with honey, brown enough to be mistaken for a Haitian but not light enough that you would know she was Dominican. In the midst of Trujillo's racial cleansing, only her association with this white family saved her from Trujillo's wrath.

The day after my grandfather died I hung out with my boyfriend at the time. My mother has just boarded a flight to the Dominican Republic and I needed then to be loved and held. He had been waiting outside my building for a while and when I opened the door for him, he began to scream and yell about how long he had been waiting and how inconsiderate I was. After I internalized all his abuse, like I often did, I reminded him that my grandfather had just died. He softened up and once again, I was able to look past his abusive patterns. I looked past the time he yelled at me in front of my teacher for taking the train with two male friends. I looked past the time he yelled at me in front of his grandfather. I looked past the times he cheated. I looked past the times I was struggling through an eating-disorder and he made me feel "too skinny." My mother was not aware of the abuse I endured for two years of my adolescence, just like I was not aware of the time a man threw her against a glass table leaving a gash in her side, just like she was not aware of the 18 other children her father had with other women, just like my brother's wife is not aware of his HIV diagnosis. The women in my family guard the secrets of the men who trample through their lives like precious family heirlooms passed down through generations.

Against my water-damaged wall lies a picture of my mother in her 20s. Her curls caress her face and her legs look glossed over with glitter. Her mahogany skin is sun-kissed from years of prancing on Caribbean islands. She would remind me everyday of how much she hated her "black" skin, of how my brother's father was a light-skinned man with green eyes, with "class." She would tell me that only her mother who has "bad hair" is dark and ugly. Her father was dark but he too had class. When I ask my grandmother about her parents, she tells me, "Only my mother was black and ugly. My father was a light-skinned man, handsome, just handsome."

Her grandfather was also a light-skinned man and her grandmother tarnished the family image with her dark cinnamon skin. As with many of the clandestine effects men have had on the women in my family, my features show mysterious traces of the light-skinned men whose blood I share. My curls closest to my scalp cling to it while the curls at the end curl lazily and my skin turns a deep russet in the summer.

My lips are like shriveled up plums confused on the canvas of my big round face. The women in my family must bear the shame that is not

being white enough. How defeated they must have felt, the brown women in my family when discovering that despite their most earnest efforts to whiten our family, all they had for proof were children whose race could not be told and aching bones and hearts wary from the ravages of loving someone in an effort to love yourself. The denial of our African ancestry has left me desperately wading in a pool of confusion. Who am I? Is it wrong that I love my hair and skin? Am I wrong for loving my dark-skinned boyfriend?

We do not speak of my brother's HIV diagnosis, although like a clumsy dance partner, it dances with us through the waltz of our life. I suspect we believed that if we ignored it, it would go away. I remind my brother through WhatsApp messages that he must tell his wife he is sick and although he ignores my message, he cannot ignore his disease. My mother tells me only a psychologist is fit enough to tell his wife that her husband is sick, that they must prepare her for the truth. Like the women carrying babies who crept up our house on La Calle 78 to tell my grandmother of her husband's betrayal, my mother attempts to make the truth pretty in order to protect her only son. She tells me, "Las mujeres no hablan las cosas de familia." (Women do not speak of family matters.) We protect our men and keep our grievances to ourselves. We attempt to disguise our blackness through the light-skinned men who lay on top of us. We hide in their stomachs and their pleasure and guard their secrets like family heirlooms, cracked and rusty to be handed down through generations.

The women
in my family
must bear the
shame that
is not being
white enough.

I gotta tell you where I'm from cause they don't believe me where it's killed or be killed and the streets getting greedy mama neva finished skool but she always could read me momma said don't play the hood but the streets are deceiving at the age of 15 when my life was misleadin at at the age of 16 moneys all im receiving still up on the block i know we all had our reasons jayo did a bid he was gone for some seasons the streets contain murder everybody was bleedin kids raising kids everybody was breeding forced to pray to god cause it aint much to believe in smoke a few to get threw and to fight off my demons cant trust a soul even ur mans b schemin young boy out robin cause his pockets receedin family aint pay bail they okay with him leavin then u get locked up he won't be home for some season when the judge make the sentence aint copping and pleading and they got the nerve to judge him without asking his reason what you know about having to sleep with your stomach growling mother wollen toilet cant flush and plus the bills is pollen in the hood man the death is pollen my side of town always down i take a look at the world i see the rest is smilin they just sign you a conviction send you straight to the island i be tryna tellem the lissen wat im saying so exiplit my city is broke and im just tryna fix it we had nothing but something came from under dat the rose grew outta concrete i came from under dat streets gave me royalty bros gave me loyalty i put dat work in on dat block i had my brother back touch my first band in the streets i fell inlove with that mother told stayaway but i kept on running back cancer took my queen away i just want my mother back things happen we wont understand like if dont finish skool then im dumber then the other man but then i thinking on the other hand wat if i blowup nd by the summer nd i endup right on summer jam nwver was the type to complain but we aint have it given teacher couldnt realate to me i felt i aint have to lissen clothes old kids lauged they was foul on it floods in my house no mop we thew towels on it tired onda block dat curve i spent hours on it same blk bro got shot nd they now leave flowers on it the system want Us to fail its because were black and wats worse then that is they still do it just wit a badge cops look at us like prey call us a deadbeat they the same ones that dressing themselves in bed sheets rip them fallen soldiers just let the dead sleep my mind got stronger pocket was dead weak bullets holes

in Martin Luther who's the shooter they aint catthem though molcom got exed off his killer they they aint catch him though jfk got stained nd they telling us to let it go its 2017 and i could tell u wat we headed for obama outta office we was cautious with with our options corruption nd disruption wit society is oppin information they hold out sold us out like a auction goverment need a mint from all the shit they been talkin dont think i just be talkin was posted up inda cold aint have my coat on trump for our president dats who we want us to hope on they rascist i can't stand it Get all touched smokem like a newport in newyork untill they all dust nowim from them towns where they dont visit at where the mylife u gotta vision dat 33 rd i lived in dat the streets take ur life in return u dnt get it back they took eddy back in 14 nd i remember that this lifestyle put him into dat he was tryna eat got tired of 2dollar chicken wraps but instead they rather gettem clap and i changed said i rather spit arap sell drugs to hood cause they paid us this way taught to never ask nd they raised us this way chains on us cause they slaved us this way they wonder why we move grimey cause they made us this way its 2017 we can change

Of Filling Empty Space with Bodies

Kadidiatou Diallo • Brooklyn Technical High School



Sets the scene.

Seventeen and rebellious. Boy sits on mattress sitting on the ground. She sits to his right. Music swells.

Cigarette smoke fills the air and lungs, suffocating them. No one disturbs the silence.

Boy puffs smoke in air.

The—still—smoked filled air compresses, girl's chest gets heavy

As the weight of bodies (like the weight of fear) often seems to do Girl can't remember how they got like this.

Can't remember how she got like this.

Eyes close.

Girl was never taught to value her time

Always running after little boys that didn't deserve it

Daddy left when she turned 8

Said he couldn't handle it

Weaved in and out her life.

Letters every birthday

until only letters she saw signed by him was child support.

Always gave up her happiness living for moments

That never came

She gave too much

Girl was never taught to value her time Instead she was

Taught to be babysitter but still lover.

To be mother but still wife.

Taught to pick up where boy's parents left off. At the beginning.

Flashback.

7.

At seven years old with beaded, box braids running past her collarbones down her back in a sea of 4C hair

And bubblegum pop confidence that could not be popped

Hand in mama's

Girl doesn't notice when group of men lining the street

Turn towards them

What you tryna do shawty?

Mama says nothing

She thinks how she wants to go home

Up and down. Eyes rove over body.

Footsteps quicken.

Blinks.

Girl and boy lie in quiet contemplation on the mattress on the ground.

Boy holds her hand in his.

Girl tries to remember last time he held her

Hours after the cigarette smoke had escaped the room.

Answer:

Never.

Boy says three words. Girl doesn't believe him.

This time boy closes eyes, boy sighs.

Almost apologizes.

Quiet.

Girl bends at waist to make excuses for him.

Breaks her teeth and will to comfort him.

Twists her tongue and does stunts to will herself to speak submission.

Wills her body to speak submission.

Girl feels like everything and nothing simultaneously

Girl was never taught to love herself

She sought validation in the heavy breaths and quick temper

Of little boys that couldn't care less

She could never appreciate the curves and dips Of her own body

Never thought it could be worshipped But she could be worshipped

The queen in her, hadn't yet found a crown that fit quite right

So instead she settled

In her often hazy drunkenness

Let them impose themselves on her

Let them force themselves into spaces where they couldn't fit With egos too big and minds too small

She couldn't make up for its emptiness So she filled the space left in her heart With short-lived pointless promenades.

Blinks.

Sets the scene.

Seventeen and rebellious. Boy sits on mattress sitting on the ground. She sits to his right. Music swells.

Cigarette smoke fills the air and lungs, suffocating them. No one disturbs the silence.

Boy puffs smoke in air. Scene.

The Misinterpretation Of Dark Skin

Kiora Brooks • Topeka West High School



Melanin.

Rich melanin.

My rich dark skin.

To love it or to hate it is the question,

One I never asked yet I get answers.

My skin seems like a trap as they hunt me down because of it

Armed with “playful” words, comparisons, and blatant disrespect.

My life it seems to start to shift when the reality of the my dark skin hits.

Mauled perspectives drop me down a bit, my hopes and dreams no longer seem to fit into the reality others forced upon me.

Media feeds into this corruption connecting black skin with all kinds of ugliness.

To them we define that word while incorporating violence and a lack of intelligence.

The masses take this as a solid truth.

They’re taught that dark skinned people are lazy, always acting crazy,

Sitting in a hole they can easily get out of if they try.

Stereotypes like this continue to persist.

But we’re different than these lies being sold as truth.

I represent people with skin like me.

I strive to create a name, that’ll trigger a chain

of positive images of me and others with skin the same.

I’ll have no need to hide in shame or try to change.

I come from my mother.

What a beauty, whose brain is like no other.

She has rich skin like mine that people try to smother.

They pack the negatives a top our skin as if being dark is a sin.

As if our melanin causes them offense.

Makes them go on defense

And their defensive goal is to tear the color off our skin.

Of course that’s not literal, but imaginations have gone far.

Death and life are in the power of the tongue

Light is right, gets whispered in our ears.

Our melanin dipped children repeat the phrase.

When they’re out playing they stick to an area of shade saying,

They’re dark enough already, why make it worse.

The sun which gives us energy, makes our skin glow, is now the enemy

For bringing our skin to its true hue.

In the summer black girls would rather swim in bleach than in a pool.

If only you were lighter,

No one’s gonna like a girl with dark skin,

These are the things being said to our little dark girls.

Images of pretty light skinned woman on the T.V., yet no one to positively represent the little dark girls shade.

How is she left to think of herself? Who’s going to show her that her melanin isn’t a mistake.

She isn’t old enough to understand that her mother is the only positive image she needs.

But even if she is, her mother might be fighting demons in her skin as well.

Where does that lead the little dark girl?

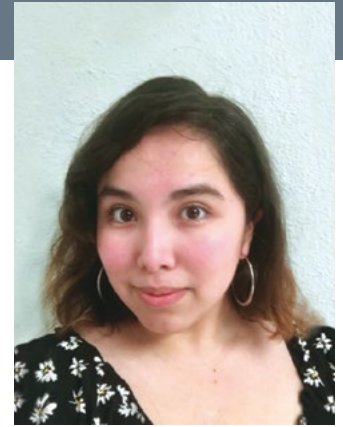
Back to the T.V. to images that don’t positively represent her shade.

Making her play hide and seek with the sun when it’s recess because

She’s dark enough already why make it worse.

Planet: Elkhart, Indiana

Ivana Cortez • Galena Park High School



These words always trap us in, a cycle of negativity smothering our skin:

Them dark skin girls they ain't feminine.

When the lights dim, where did the dark skins go? I can't see you?

We don't have that in your shade.

You'd be pretty if you weren't so dark.

You've been in the sun too long.

I hope I don't get as dark as you.

Getting stuck in this can take us to the brink of madness. We need it to break.

Dark skin is . . .

Dark skin is ugly

Dark skin is . . .

Dark skin is weird

Dark skin is . . .

Dark skin is gross

Dark skin is . . . to you always something negative

Dark skin is not what you say it is

My skin is not what you make of it

Dark skin is magnificent.

Dark skin holds beauty.

The statement:

"Beauty is in the eye of the beholder"

is true.

Looking in the mirror is beauty what you see?

Do you behold magnificence?

A confidence that you're created how our Creator made you to be? With your skin baked to a Perfect shade.

That's what I see. Beauty.

I recognize I'm designed by someone who doesn't make mistakes.

Knowing that I can freely say without doubt as a weight.

My skin is black on this I'm proud

And I'll say this for the millions feeling trapped inside their black feeling down.

Cursing the sun and our Creator. For what?

Our skin is black on this be proud.

Our melanin's a blessing.

Let them hunt us down for it.

Just realize that our skin is not a trap, but

A prize only we can win.

With my face buried in the snow, and my tongue caught in my throat—I prayed. I prayed that the laughing would stop, that the sticks would stop coming down on my back, that this thoughtless act would end. I hear a boy shout down at me as he strikes the back of my head with a branch, “Never forget this, dummy.” I always chuckle at the memory of the boy calling me a “dummy.” We were only nine when I was attacked in the woods by my classmates. The word “dummy” seems so childish. A playground insult. But the disdain and hatred behind it that December day made the word sound grown up. But this was not the playground. This was not a game.

I moved from Houston, Texas to Elkhart, Indiana at age eight. The two cities seemed worlds apart. Mexican supermarkets were replaced with Whole Foods. The taste of pan dulce was replaced with McDonald's. The delicate twinkling of Spanish was replaced with the heavy thudding of English. I felt as though I was on a different planet. My classmates treated me as though I was from a different planet. They pulled at my long braids and mimicked everything I said. I was a little brown alien on their planet. They wanted to poke and dissect everything about me. I thought maybe this all meant that I would be well liked in this new environment. I would turn out to be wrong.

That first year on planet Elkhart was turbulent. The popular white girls whose faces were in magazines and on TV liked to spray me with their perfumes because I smelled like a “taco stand.” A boy on the bus would not leave me alone until I admitted I was not as good at English as he was. And the neighborhood kids enjoyed throwing rocks at the windows of my house. My mom promised that it would not be forever. She told me that the white kids were just “not used to me yet.” But what was there to get used to? My light accent? My darker skin? My presence? I began to think I was imposing on the planet Elkhart, Indiana. It was clear that although I came in peace, my visit was viewed as invasion.

The following year, during recess, in the dead of December, a group of boys had stolen a basketball from me and my friend. Any other day and I might have just let them

take it. But I felt this burning inside of me. This flame of defiance in the blizzard that told me that I had to go after them. Before I could talk myself out of it, I was off. Snow crunched underneath my boots as I followed them. I chased them into the woods behind the school, an area we were prohibited from entering during recess. Soon my breathe fogged up my glasses and the cold air stung my lungs. I stopped to gather my bearings.

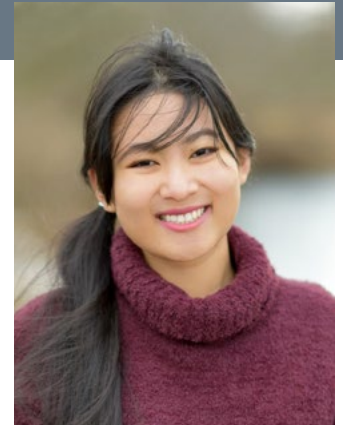
I remember the calm before the storm. The moments before my world would be swallowed with white. I recall how bare the trees were. How they crawled up to sky like thin brown arms from the earth, reaching for the sky. I recall how the snow was virtually undisturbed. It lay on the branches and on the ground in a thick white heap. I recall the soft hum of the children playing on the playground from whence I came. The light laughter and yells like white noise in this white environment.

Before I knew it, a sharp pain sprang across my back, completely knocking the wind from my chest. I landed face first in the snow. One strike after another came down on my back, my head, arms and legs. My mind raced faster than I could keep up with and the panic started to set in. I turned my neck in snow to look up. The three boys were now lifting fallen branches up over their heads and bringing them back down on me. They were a group of scientists taking apart an alien in their lab. The laughing and name calling seemed so far away from where I was lying paralyzed in the snow. All I could hear was my hearting beating inside of me, and my thoughts bouncing off the sides of my skull. I prayed. I prayed for it stop. It did not.

I opened my eyes and looked around in the snow. My eyes darting left and right in their sockets, seeking an escape. Beside my right hand was the ironic answer to my prayers: a fallen branch. All at once the burning was back. The fire had started again. I grasped at the branch, clutching firmly in my cold red hand. With my eyes shut tightly, I rolled onto my back, flailing my newfound weapon violently in the air. The three boys all at once stepped backward. Before they could come back down on me, I brought myself to my feet. I held the branch out before me like a sword.

Superstition

Ally Guo • William Mason High School



I remember the calm after the storm. The four of us in the woods, wild eyed children. The boys looked out to me with varying degrees of confusion and disgust. I recall the trees looking more sinister than they had before. They were no longer reaching up, but they were looking down mockingly. I recall the snow looking as though it had seen war. In the fight, the violence had revealed the dead brown earth under the white snow, making the area look muddy. I recall the high pitch buzzing in my ears, my brain crying out in my head.

I heard a familiar voice call out my name over the buzzing. A teacher off in the distance yelled out to me. Salvation, I thought. The teacher rushed to us and immediately pulled the branch from my hands. “What on earth do you think you’re doing to these boys?” All at once the flame was extinguished. Stuttering, I tried to explain myself. I was not the threat here. I was not hurting anyone. I was hurt. But the words did not come out quickly enough. The teacher would not hear any of it. She gripped her large hands on my shoulders and shoved me out of the woods, the boys close behind us. The buzzing grew louder and louder as she guided us into the school and then to the principal’s office.

As a child, I had always tried to stay out of the principal’s office. I did as I was told. I followed all the rules. I said please and thank you. I wanted to be the best child I could be. But as I sat in the principal’s office, bloodied and cold I felt like I was the worst child. It did not look good for me. The dirty alien pointing a weapon out to the three clean boys threateningly. The teacher who caught us clearly felt as though I was the one at fault. I was starting to believe I was the one at fault. No matter what I say, I thought, no one will believe me. I felt sure that whatever story the boys would come up with, it would most certainly paint me to be the threat everyone thought I was.

Tearfully, I told the principal what happened in the woods. I still remember the way his face frowned at me when I recounted the actual attack. The way the corners of his mouth dragged his whole face down. In the middle of my sputtering he handed me a wad of tissues and when I went to put them to my eyes he stopped me. “No,” he said, “sweetie, those are for your nose.” I pressed the white tissues to my nose and when I looked down at it, it was stained red. I had not even noticed how injured I was. My hands were covered in mud and were decorated with red streaks from where branches had met them. Later, I would note the bruises on my back and ribs, the bump on my forehead, and the swelling in my left ankle. The principal stood suddenly as I paused. “Go to the nurse, sweetie, I think I know what I have to do.”

Shakily, I rose from my seat and walked to the nurse. Sympathetically, she handed me an ice pack. Later in the

day the principal approached me in the nurse’s office. He told me the boys were dealt their punishment—being made to sit alone during lunches for the rest of the month. I was in the clear, I was not in trouble. I was the happiest at the fact that I was believed. I was not to blame for what happened to me. An hour later, the smallest of the three boys approached me in the office that day. He was thin and short. His eyes cast downward were puffy and pink. His nose was a bright red, like a cherry stuck to the end of it. He looked up to me with remorseful eyes, “I’m sorry,” he began uneasily, “the other guys said you were a dirty beaner and I believed them. I’m really sorry.” Over nine years later, those words still echo coolly in my head. “Dirty beaner.” No one told me that this planet would be so cruel. He went on to tell me that he told our principal everything. He promised to me that he did not lie. He looked deep into my eyes and told me not to worry. He was sorry.

At the time, the wounds were too fresh, my nose was still bleeding, and my coat was still muddy. I was not prepared to hear an apology. I was not prepared to accept an apology. I began to sob into my bloodied hands, and I asked the nurse to get him to leave. I never told him that I forgave him. I think about him and his puffy eyes often. He seemed truly remorseful and I never thanked or formally forgave him. I wish now that I had.

My stay in Elkhart after the incident in the woods would last another year or so. In that year, the harassment seemed to intensify. I would wake up to loud bangs in the night to discover cracks in my window. I would walk outside and discover human feces on my driveway. I would be physically assaulted another three times before I left. The beating in the woods was a turning point for me. In the moment that I grabbed that stick off the ground I decided, no one was ever going to keep me down again. I decided I was not going to give up. I decided that I would stand my ground. Anytime anyone would tease me or get physical with me after that, I never let it show how much it hurt. I refused to show weakness. I refused to yield. I refused to be kept down.

Although my time in Elkhart, Indiana was full of bullying and casual racism, I learned so much. I learned how to deal with negativity. I learned that in the face of adversity and discrimination that I must be brave. No matter how cold the snow is, no matter how much my hands stung, no matter how hard it was to breathe; I had to get back up. There are moments where I feel beaten down and that maybe I cannot do it anymore. Moments where my knees begin to buckle, and my throat feels caught in a trap. Moments where everything seems out of reach and impossible. Then I remember the snow. I remember what it was like to be down. And then I remember to get back up again.

She made a living investigating the occult, but Lilith had never been a superstitious person. Yet, when she saw the fallen owl, white wings brilliant against the trampled black petals, she couldn’t resist the fluttering feeling of dread that nestled in her heart. It looked like it had been specially prepared, specially made for her, wilting flowers furled around wilting feathers. A gruesome bouquet serving as an unwelcome welcome gift.

She’d never liked dead things. Not since she was little and her grandfather had lined the house with jars of dried flesh and bone. Not since her latter years of school and her cousin’s fiancée’s books had been filled with pictures of preserved cadavers. And certainly not now, when the eyes of the dead owl stared soullessly back at her, blood dripping from its beak, maggots gnawing at its tissue.

It had nothing to do with her, and it would never have anything to do with her, but as she eyed the crimson gash that decorated the creature’s neck, she couldn’t help but wonder what it would feel like, the cold terror of something sharp tearing at the soft flesh of the throat.

Gulping as she ran a hand through her black hair, Lilith forced her legs to move, each booted foot thumping against the cobblestone as the manor loomed nearer. The closer she got to it, the more the itching in her spine grew. She’d felt it ever since she’d entered town, the scrambling of ghostly fingers up her back, hands clutching at her, telling her to leave. Telling her something was wrong. Telling her something was missing.

Her arm was heavy as she lifted the mahogany door’s silver knocker. It boomed once, twice, before Lilith stepped back to wait, knuckles white around her bag’s strap.

Twelve unsettling heartbeats passed before the door opened without a creak.

Madame Neoma was a thick-boned woman who still managed to seem delicate. She greeted Lilith with a warm smile, golden flecks in her eyes. “Lilith Xu, I presume?”

“Madame Neoma.” Lilith swallowed hard. “A pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

She laughed—a heavy sound. “Please, come on in. It’s awfully brisk outside.”

As she said that, Lilith felt a shiver run down her spine. Strange. She hadn’t noticed the chill earlier. It was probably just her nerves.

Madame Neoma led her through the house. But though it was beautiful, Lilith felt colder and colder the further she ventured. Perhaps it was the stained glass, people from years long gone immortalized in its surface, jagged eyes drilling down at her. Lilith knew it was stupid, but she felt judged, evaluated. It was like the specters of those who’d once dwelled in the abode were saying, why is she here? She doesn’t deserve to be here.

Felix and Menae would berate her for saying this, but she didn’t entirely disagree with the ghosts. Not for the first time in her life, she wondered why her cousins had sent her ahead.

“Lilith.” Madame Neoma broke the silence. “An unusual name for someone like you.”

“Indeed,” Lilith agreed. “But my grandfather named me.”

“Your grandfather. Wasn’t he—”

Lilith smiled wryly though Madame Neoma couldn’t see. “He quite loved irony.”

“Irony indeed. One of the greatest Hunters named his granddaughter after a demon. And your parents let him?”

“The family profession skipped a generation. My parents never drew the connection.”

Another weighty chuckle.

They arrived at a carved archway. Through it, Lilith spotted a massive dining table. Both women took a seat at either end, a cup of steaming tea already waiting for them.

“Make yourself at home, dear. Please, feel free to have some tea.”

“Thank you, Madame.”

“Now, Lilith, I’d like to outline the details of your assignment at once. Normally, I’d make your first day as a guest more comfortable, but I’m afraid the matter is urgent.”

Lilith nodded, her racing nerves settling as she straight-

ened up. This was familiar. This was business. This she could handle. “Of course, ma’am. I understand strange occurrences have been happening around town? And you believe there’s a supernatural cause?”

Madame Neoma tilted her face toward the ceiling with weary yet steely expression. “Erlheim is a lovely home. I may be biased, but I don’t think there has ever been a more wonderful town. To know that something has disrupted its beauty infuriates me.”

Lilith remained silent.

“There is no magic in Erlheim—never has been, and never will be.”

Lilith opened her mouth. “I’m sorry, ma’am, but you must be mistaken. There’s always magic. You might not always notice it, and it might not be active, but I assure you it’s there.”

The smile Madame Neoma gave her was as eerie as it was patronizing. “That may be true elsewhere, dear, but there is no magic in Erlheim.”

So you say, Lilith wanted to mumble. Instead, she said, “Until now, that is?”

Madame Neoma’s smile fell like the tumbling water of a roaring waterfall. “Of course, it is only mischief. Paranormal mischief from traveling sprites. But they are not welcome here, and I’m sure you can make that clear?”

“Certainly, ma’am. My partners and I will do everything we can to remove this unwanted magic. We’ll personally oversee the transfer of any magical entities away from here.”

“Transfer?” Madame Neoma leaned forward in her seat.

“Yes, ma’am.”
Lilith took a breath.
“You must be aware that we don’t kill.”

Madame Neoma tapped a ringed finger on the table. “Ah, yes, that was in your contract, wasn’t it? Hm . . .” She hummed to herself. “Very well then, that will suffice. I assume your partners will be here soon?”

“Yes, that’s correct. They had to finish up our last case, so I went ahead to iron out the logistics of this one.”

“You didn’t finish the last case yet?”

The words weren’t in an accusatory tone, but Lilith felt strangely defensive. There wasn’t much she took pride in—and perhaps pride wasn’t the right word for this feeling—but she knew she and her cousins did their job, and

they did their job well. “No, we were successful. There were just some legal matters to resolve.”

“That’s wonderful to hear.” Madame Neoma took a sip of tea. She continued after she’d finished. “Once again, I apologize for the rush, but I have prepared a guide for you. The son of our town’s head carpenter knows the surrounding forests well. He’ll show you where the mischief has been occurring.”

“Right now?”

“If you’re able. I’ve yet to call him, for I was unsure what time you’d arrive. But if you head into the village square, I’m sure you’ll find him near the apothecary. Goodness knows half the things sold there are gathered by him.” She tapped her cup with a neatly trimmed fingernail, a frown curling her features despite her suggestion. “Ask for Misael there. He’ll be around.”

The woman at the apothecary looked about Lilith’s age and about three-quarters of her height, but the cunning glint in her glaring brown eyes intimidated Lilith anyway. She spent an embarrassing amount of time lingering around the corner before approaching.

When she finally did, it was the storekeeper, looking up under heavy lids, who spoke first. “You’re new. What are you doing here?”

Lilith cleared her throat. “I’m here to investigate some disturbances. The mayor said I could find a Misael here as a guide.”

“Ahhhhhh,” the woman drawled, “you’re with that bunch.” She grinned, the suspicious atmosphere evaporating. “I’m surprised they hired you.”

“You . . . are?”

“Mhmm, I know your clan. Don’t kill, do they? That’s funny, cause pretty much everyone here wants those tricksters dead.”

“I did get that feeling earlier,” Lilith admitted.

The woman still hadn’t stopped grinning, white teeth glimmering like pearls as she leaned forward against the counter. “But don’t worry; I’m not mad at you anyway.”

“That . . . thank you.”

The woman, introducing herself as Channary, seemed more than happy to chat with an uncomfortable Lilith before Channary suddenly straightened up. “Yah! Misael! Someone’s looking for you.”

Lilith turned around to see a young man with dark brown hair approaching. There were stray twigs caught in his locks, and his arms, carrying two straw baskets laden with herbs, were covered with mud and scratches, but Lilith swore that the smile on his face, eyes crinkling into crescents, was the purest thing she’d ever seen.

“Channary,” he greeted, giving the storekeeper a hug over the counter before turning to Lilith. Lilith had to remind herself not to tremble when the bright smile focused on her. “You must be Lilith. Welcome to Erlheim!”

“Thank you for agreeing to show me around.” Lilith was proud her voice didn’t falter.

He waved a hand. “Happy to help. I relish any excuse to spend more time in the forest.”

Lilith found herself smiling as Channary cackled.

“Now, if you don’t mind,” Misael said, “I know you’ve already been waiting, but I’d like to wash off this dirt before we begin. I’ll be out in a moment.”

The trek into the forest was nowhere near as uneasy as Lilith had feared. Misael moved with such graceful ease through the dark brambles, chattering lightly along the way, that Lilith couldn’t help but feel that nothing could go wrong. Time passed so quickly that though they were deep in the forest, Lilith felt like they’d just begun their walk when Misael stopped at an expansive clearing.

“Here we are.”

Lilith instantly tensed, eyes narrowed as she examined the glade. Nothing seemed too unusual at first. The only things that caught her attention were a massive tree with gnarly, swinging branches on the other side of the clearing and a smaller tree with an X carved into its trunk. But all her senses were on edge, trying to detect anything that set her the wrong way.

Misael watched her with interest. “Do you feel something?”

“It’s faint,” Lilith said, “too faded to be recent. Are you sure this is the right place?”

“That’s what the reports say. A goat was hauled here a fortnight ago. Many people saw it. It was unconscious as an invisible hand dragged it by its scruff. Later, it was found against that tree, skull broken and body fluids drained.” He pointed toward the X-marked tree.

Lilith pursed her lips. An invisible hand sounded like a specter, but only a strix would drain blood, and the two creatures never worked in tandem. “Has there been anything else?”

“There have been sightings of fae dancing here at night. I myself have stumbled across a few fairy rings in the surrounding perimeter, but I left them alone and they faded a day later. Oh, and one of the other foragers has heard strange mutterings nearby.”

“That’s bizarre,” Lilith mumbled, more to herself than anyone else. “The different beings don’t tend to operate in the same area. Perhaps there’s something drawing them here? But the incidents are so recent, so it would have to be a new trigger.”

“We can look around,” Misael suggested. “Nothing bad will happen while we’re here.”

Lilith tentatively padded around the clearing, boots crunching softly among the bristly grass. She rested her hand against tree trunks, feeling for nymphic pulses she didn’t find. The soil was cool to her touch, but no supernatural life squirmed within it. And though the breeze brushed against her cheeks, the telltale tingle of magic was absent in its caresses.

It wasn’t until she’d reached the other side of the sprawling glade that the hair shot up on the back of her neck.

Underneath the largest tree she’d ever seen in her life, its leafless branches clawing at the sky like bony fingers, was a swath of sanguine-colored earth. If that were the only thing, Lilith wouldn’t have been so alarmed, but as she approached, an inexplicable sense of dread washed over her, bathing her in a sickeningly sticky sensation, like strokes of blood were being painted across her body. She stopped in her tracks before her toes crossed into the discolored soil.

Lilith’s voice wobbled. “Misael. Why is the ground there red?”

Misael, who had been rummaging through some underbrush, turned to where she was pointing. “Oh. That.” He stared up at the long tree branch swinging above the spot, a glassy look in his eyes. “They hung a witch there. A couple years ago.”

Lilith’s head jerked so sharply her own neck almost snapped. “What?”

“It was a woman. Used black magic to endanger the town. So they hung her.”

“I-I see . . .” No, Lilith really did not like dead things.

Misael must’ve noticed her discomfort because he faced her again with a warm smile. “But you wanted to know why the ground was red, correct?”

Lilith gave a nearly imperceptible nod. “If you’re willing.”

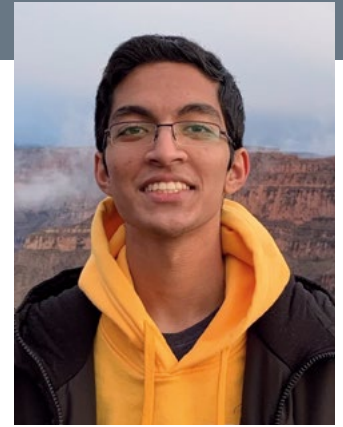
“I was there when they executed her, perhaps four years old. I don’t remember much, besides that I thought she was pretty, but then again, a four-year-old thinks every woman is pretty.” He looked up at the branch again. “I knew her and didn’t believe it was true, but when she died, her body crumbled into ash and blood.”

Then there was no doubt the woman had been a witch.

Misael continued, faraway eyes blinking slowly. “That’s why the soil is stained. Her blood was so polluted the rain could never wash the curses away.”

Lilith, as always, didn’t know what to say.

Felix and Menae arrived the next day, Menae’s ribboned hat fluttering like a butterfly as she waved it from a window. Lilith waved back, putting more energy into her



Conversation Starter: How is Your English So Good

Sagar Gupta • Thomas Jefferson HS for Science and Technology

you see, i was devouring books since
before i lost my baby teeth
ravenous for distant lands and
wise dragons that spouted proverbs
washed it all down with warm onyx ink
and drowned in the mildew and saccharine
of aged leather and wood pulp
i grew up watching WordWorld and Sesame Stre-

but you speak so well! where are you from?

oh, you mean how is my english good?
i was born and raised on the east coast
lived in northern virginia all 16 years
so i don't have the southern drawl
that my kindergarten teacher had
(sometimes she mixed her i's and a's)
anyways i pick up new words from
cheesy rom coms & sunday crosswords
& the Shakespeare we analyze in school
my friends and I make flashcards
to study for grammar quizz—

but where are you really from . . . like . . . where are your parents from?

smile than she actually felt. But she had to admit, seeing her cousins lightened her mood an iota.

Felix's hair had the same golden glow she'd seen a few days ago. It had changed color during an unfortunate incident with a swamp troll some months before, and though the old creature, who'd eventually become rather friendly, had offered to fix it, Felix had liked it too much to accept. Lilith thought the glowing shade was a horrible idea—it made him look like a beacon, a target—but she trusted Felix would never let himself get killed so foolishly.

He pulled her into a jovial hug as soon as his feet landed. "Lilith! Long time no see."

Menae snorted, leaning in for her own embrace. "Yes, four days is a long time, indeed."

"Hey, four days is four generations for adult mayflies."

Lilith laughed for the first time in what felt like forever.

She brought them to the restaurant she'd dined in the evening prior. They chatted briefly, Felix gleefully reporting on their previous case, before the topic returned to the job at hand.

"So how's Erlheim been treating you?" Menae asked, cutting up a broiled pork chop. "It's a pretty little place, isn't it? A bit quaint, but that's to be expected, no?"

Lilith felt the dread that had temporarily dissipated begin to return. "About that . . ." She leaned forward, voice faint. "Did either of you feel anything . . . off . . . when you arrived?"

Felix tilted his head to the side. "Off?"

"Yes. The mayor told me there's no magic in this town, and I didn't believe her at first, but thinking back, I've felt that something was missing ever since I got here."

"No magic?" Menae's elegant eyebrows arched in disbelief.

"They hate magic here." Lilith hesitated before she spoke again. "They hung a witch a few years ago. She did commit a crime, but I thought a hanging was . . . extreme."

Both cousins tensed, Menae dropping her fork. "A witch," she repeated.

Lilith nodded. She'd thought the same thing when she'd first heard of the hanging. Menae's soon-to-be-husband was a witch—a non-practicing witch who'd chosen to study human medicine instead of magic, but a witch nonetheless. "And apparently, most of the townsfolk want whatever's causing trouble dead."

Felix's frown deepened. "They know we don't do that, right?"

"I made that clear, but I just wanted you to know what we're working with."

"Well, what's done is done," Menae said, crossing her arms. "All we can do now is make sure nobody else gets hurt."

"Did your investigations turn up anything, Lilith?" Felix asked.

Lilith reached into her bag. "I've written down everything I've gathered."

"Perfect." The grin returned to Felix's face, and Lilith instantly felt reassured. "Let's get to work then."

The trio spent the rest of the day hunched over the notebook, whispering urgently as they scraped out a plan. By the time dusk had fallen, lavender hue bathing their faces, Lilith felt relieved in a way she hadn't felt in days.

But when she stood back up, hooking her bag over her shoulder, her eyes caught sight of the forest once more, the tips of the ancient trees peeking over the town rooftops. Their skeletal fingertips waved at her, swaying smoothly in the evening breeze, bidding her goodnight. And as Lilith jerkily spun around to follow her cousins back to the inn, she swore she saw a parliament of white owls take flight, ghostly silhouettes emerging from the black shadows of the trees.

Lilith had never been a superstitious person, but she went to bed that night with hooting in her ears, blood on her mind, and unease in her soul.

yes, my parents speak english too
they were taught it in school just like us
i picked up hindi from dinner table banter
but it felt clunky and awkward in my throat
carved Himalayan contours in mouth
uncharted, yet to be mapped with tongue
and so i never bothered repeating it back
instead i worship taylor swift and bruno mars
fill voids with their autotuned soliloquies
learn of heartache and young love
belt out each lyric like it's gospe—

wow i didn't know they spoke english there.
and you don't even have an accent!

actually, it's the second most spoken language in india
but don't take it from me
take it from my grandfather
who sees the scarlet colour of his ancestor's blood
staining pale british hands where you and i
see the same scarlet color and picture Target bullseye
take it from his father
who hid for his life in the hollow of a drum
only a child when they descended upon his village
so no, i'm not proud of my english
of these force-fed diphthongs and steamroller fricatives
i'm not proud of a choice i didn't get to make

but please, no need to be impressed
i'm just playing by your rules

Audio

*Listen to the past four
years of Spoken Word*



A Letter to Dr. King

Ife Martin • West Bloomfield, MI
2022 Maya Angelou Award for Spoken Word

[Listen to Ife in her own words](#)
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Why

Chloe Cramutola • Stamford, NJ
2021 Maya Angelou Award for Spoken Word

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Evolution of the Black Woman

Orlane Devesin • Hiram, Georgia
2020 Maya Angelou Award for Spoken Word

[Listen to Orlane in her own words](#)
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The Misinterpretation of Dark Skin

Kiora Brooks • Topeka, Kansas
2019 Maya Angelou Award for Spoken Word

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CWA Alumni

Support for Penguin Random House Creative Writing Award winners extends beyond scholarship funds; winners are welcomed into a community of award alumna, where professional development and networking opportunities are regularly offered.

“I come from a very impoverished and predominantly Hispanic community, in my senior year of high school I was still back and forth between if English was a career path I could rely on to keep my head above water,”

said **Ivana Cortez, Personal Essay winner, 2020**. But winning the CWA, “meant that English was an option for pursuit.”

With an annual professional development workshop series, as well as networking opportunities and online engagement, CWA alumna are encouraged to continue their love of writing, and to pursue careers in publishing if they so desire. CWAs put alumna on a path to success!

Anna Learis, 2015, Poetry

Pendulum, Edward R. Murrow High School, NYC

What did winning the CWA mean to you?

Winning the CWA gave me confidence! A scary, new chapter of my life was starting, and I was convinced it would go awfully. I was about to leave for college in a state where I knew nobody to study a topic I wasn't sure I'd ever be able to grasp. Putting pen to paper and turning my nerves into a poem offered me some emotional relief, but I had never expected that my nervous ramblings would mean much to anyone. When I got the call that I won the CWA, I could barely believe it. My nerves resonated with people! Here I am, eight years after my CWA win, still a bundle of nerves, but a bundle of nerves full of confidence.

What are you doing now?

Anna Learis is a Senior Business Analyst on the Diversity, Inclusion and Belonging People Strategy and Analytics team at Capital One focused on establishing and supporting data-driven diversity strategy. Anna has led initiatives around DIB forecasting and goal-setting, executive success and retention predictors, employee sentiment, selection and compensation equity, and more. They hold a B.S.E. in Industrial and Operations Engineering from the University of Michigan and have a Diversity and Inclusion for HR certificate from Cornell University. Anna's recent speaking engagements include "Creating a Data-Driven Diversity and Inclusion Strategy" at Women in Tech Boston 2022 and "Careers in DEI" at the University of New Hampshire DEI Conference 2023.

Jordan White, 2015, Memoir

How to Kiss the Only White Boy in the Room, Hunter College High School, NYC

What did winning the CWA mean to you?

Winning the CWA is an achievement that I still look to when I'm struggling with self-doubt in my own writing, and honestly, my everyday life! Though it was almost 10 years ago at this point, the piece I submitted was one of the first times I had sent any of my personal writing out into the world like that—to have it received and celebrated in such a concrete way was incredibly meaningful to me, in ways that continue to amplify as I get older. As a Black student in a predominantly white school, it was not often that I was met with opportunities to see my thoughts, words, or voice as worthy of attention. Of course, one should not need an award to believe in oneself. But it helped!

What are you doing now?

I went to Wesleyan University for undergrad. I now work at City Arts & Lectures in San Francisco, hosting live, onstage conversations between writers and thinkers from all over the world!

David Ortiz, 2016, Graphic Novel

Full Circle, Marta Valle High School, NYC

What did winning the CWA mean to you?

For me, winning the CWA probably changed the trajectory of my life. During my last year of high school, it was a gamble to dedicate so much time to creating something that might not even get seen by anyone. Between exams and college applications, if I wasn't doing something that was directly productive towards my future, then I was wasting time. I never wrote for pleasure, I never drew more than floating potato faces, I never created anything for fun. But my English teacher Mrs. Ramos encouraged me to write something and apply, just from seeing my few writing assignments in her class. So I did. And I also drew. And I created. And I began to feel something.

And a few months later, I was in the audience watching my graphic novel be read on stage in front of more people than I ever imagined. Something so intimate to my heart, that I skipped sleep to write and draw in my room during the most stressful time in my life, was being shared with complete strangers, and actually enjoyed. I felt bare, like the contents of my heart were being excavated for all to see.

If it wasn't for the CWA, I would have never discovered my love for creative expression, for art, for storytelling; and the potential I have for one day sharing the sincerest parts of myself with the world. I'm still at the beginning of my journey—hell, I've barely even started—but the path I'm going down is one I owe to that one summer in 2016.

What are you doing now?

After the CWA, I went to college for illustration at the Fashion Institute of Technology in Manhattan. There, I was able to stretch my wings a bit and test the wind in the illustration field before deciding anything. That's when I was introduced to a few things that put an extra glint in my eye, one of those being the field of children's books. I now know that I will for sure create one or two children's books in the future, it's a seething idea in the back of my heart right now.

After graduating from FIT in 2020, I decided I wasn't ready to pursue my illustration career. I decided writing wasn't something I wanted to do alone, either. It had to be both in tandem, and when I felt ready. I decided to just focus on writing and illustrating in my free time, and in the meantime get by with working outside of my passion: short life-span things like data entry and transcription work during the pandemic.

So for now, my creations are confined to the four corners of my room—but of course I've got plans to share more of my art and stories through social media, which I haven't really done yet for personal reasons. It took a lot of time and work for me to see it, but I think I can confidently call myself an artist now.

Ashley Brier, 2017, Poetry

Growing Pains, Queens High School of Teaching, NYC

What did winning the CWA mean to you?

It meant everything to me. Creative writing has always been part of my life. At six years old, I wrote stories on computer paper with a red crayon. I graduated to writing on Word Docs once I got a laptop of my own, each piece saved lovingly in a USB drive. The piece I submitted for the CWA in 2017 was something I wrote in my school's writing club. I spent months editing it. When I submitted it, I didn't think I would win anything. There were so many applicants, after all. I was still in bed when I checked the results for that year, and seeing my name on the list of winners had me shooting out of bed. "Best of Borough." "Ashley Brier." I couldn't believe my eyes. Back then, it was the happiest I'd ever been. I still have a love for creative writing and engage in it whenever I have free time. Winning the CWA is a memory I keep in my heart.

What are you doing now?

I went to Queensborough Community College, where I got my Associates in Liberal Arts. Then, I went to Queens College and got my Bachelor's in Psychology. Now, I work as a tutor at a local Kumon center and I am working on my graduate school application! My goal is to become an elementary school teacher!

Yueying Guo, 2018, Poetry

School Land Hell, Queens High School for the Sciences, NYC

What did winning the CWA mean to you?

Winning that competition four years ago changed my life, as I came from an Asian household that didn't believe in majoring in things that didn't give stable income. When I finally became an English major people asked what I wanted to do, and I always said "editor." When I relive the moment of being in Penguin Random House, talking to people who worked with writing and books, I gained motivation as I wrote essays and finally graduated. I desperately looked for internships involving work in a publishing house. I still get rejections, like my pieces got rejected from online journals, but I persist, because that one time I was in Penguin Random House, I felt truly alive.

What are you doing now?

I went on to graduate from Stony Brook as an English Major and Creative Writing Minor four years after winning the CWA. I usually publish things under my name in online journals such as Eunoia Review, Underwood Press, Lagom Journal, and Newtown Literary 2018 Contest, first for poetry. I still experiment between writing stories and poetry, and like most writers out there, aim for publication and have been drafting query letters.

Maven Nzeutem, 2018, Poetry

My Epidermis is Gone, Edward R. Murrow High School, NYC

What did winning the CWA mean to you?

MADE ME BELIEVE I WAS A WRITER. I never called myself one, never felt it was a label I could own. Never felt like I had any merit. I had only written small poems, school papers, and diary entries before CWA. Winning (just an honorable mention) gave me SO MUCH confidence and led me to the position I'm in now. Writing for massive brands and global campaigns. I'm so happy and it all stems back to the CWAs. THANK YOU.

What are you doing now?

I went to FIT for advertising and marketing communications. I then worked at a startup marketing agency as a content writer for multiple brands. Now I'm a "junior verbal designer" at R/GA working on massive clients!

Maria Grijalva, 2019, Memoir

First Generation, Hostos Lincoln Academy, NYC

What did winning the CWA mean to you?

Winning the CWA meant a lot to me. Talking about my parents' situation is something that I had avoided for years. I wrote this personal essay in one night and just cried while writing it. At first, I didn't think I would submit it anywhere because of how personal it was. But it helped me realize how many other individuals have been or are currently in my shoes. I felt heard and seen. There's power in sharing our stories. We begin to see how strong we are and that we are capable of so much more than we think. It was empowering.

What are you doing now?

I graduated from St. Francis College in 2022 with a B.A. in Political Science and a double minor in Sociology and Public Health. I am now in graduate school at UAlbany, pursuing my master's in social work. The goal is to eventually go back home to the Bronx and work in my community to ensure that kids have the resources necessary to get to where they want to be. As a first-generation everything, I had to figure everything out on my own, and it wasn't until I got older that I realized how much it affected me mentally. I want to make sure that all kids feel supported in all aspects of their lives. I want to help them become well-rounded individuals and go on and live comfortably after academia. There is a lot I want to do, and I feel like social work is the field in which I can help people the most.

Orlane Devesin, 2020, Spoken Word

Evolution of the Black Woman, Hiram Park High School, GA

What did winning the CWA mean to you?

Everything. My counselor encouraged me to submit one of my spoken word pieces into the competition and I ended up doing “Evolution of the Black Woman.” During that time, I had no idea where it’d take me and it’s given me so much confirmation on my artistry and creative path. It has also gifted me the opportunity to graduate with zero debt. It’s helped me so much with school and engaging in all of my creative pathways. For instance, I needed a new laptop because my old one had broken down, the summer BEFORE my freshman year of college. I was a fully online student (the dilemma is immense!) My community college had given me CWA as a refund bonus and this is the same MacBook that I am using to submit this survey. It’s the same one that holds my poetry books, novels, videos, and my podcast episodes. I am immensely grateful for what this opportunity has brought me as a writer, artist, and creative. I keep my trophy in my bookshelf too, where I can always look to it as a gentle confirmation. CWA was everything for me and more! I’m very honored to submit this application.

What are you doing now?

I went to community college and completed my English degree summer 2022! I’m currently a content creator, YouTuber, BookTuber, and podcast host. On my podcast, I dissect society, film, and media. I’ve been having the time of my life and enjoying collaborating with many brands.

Ivana Cortez, 2020, Memoir

Planet: Elkhart, Indiana, Galena Park High School, TX

What did winning the CWA mean to you?

Winning the CWA award meant so much to me. I come from a very impoverished and predominantly Hispanic community, in my senior year of high school I was still back and forth between if English was a career path I could rely on to keep my head above water. When I won the CWA for Personal Memoir not only did it show me that I could write stories that were worth winning but that MY story was worth listening to. It meant everything for me to win. It meant I could go to school. It meant that English was an option for pursuit. It meant that I had something to share with others. And all that made where I am now possible!

What are you doing now?

I attended Houston Baptist University for a year but felt the desire to leave the city. I now attend Stephen F. Austin university in Nacogdoches, Texas. At SFA, I am a junior English/Secondary Education major. I am a part of LULAC as the Vice-President of Civil Rights for my collegiate council (#22351) where I work to spread unity between marginalized groups across campus. I am also involved in other organizations on campus such as Subplots, a creative writing club and am working to enroll with Sigma Tau Delta, our English Honor Society.

I have worked in administrative assistance in offices of Higher Education and with digital classroom management. Currently, I work as the Manager of Training Operations at SFA’s One-Stop Shop where we answer calls relating to the Registrar, Res Life, Student Business Services and Financial Aid.

Carlee Reid, 2021, Spoken Word

Double Image, Academy of Information Technology & Engineering, CT

What did winning the CWA mean to you?

Being recognized by the CWA validated me as a poet and a Black creator. Because I use poetry to come to terms with difficult feelings in my life such as discrimination, seeing my art and story appreciated in that way has encouraged me to keep developing as a writer and champion of the marginalized.

What are you doing now?

I am currently a student at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania. I am concentrating in Entertainment & Media Management looking to enter the film industry as a producer and writer.

About Us

A Company with Creativity at its Core

Penguin Random House’s commitment to individuality and artistic expression has led to unparalleled success in publishing the best literature by writers in the United States and worldwide. Our company philosophy and dedication to creativity, education, and innovation are the cornerstones of our publishing mission as well as our corporate philanthropic activities. Penguin Random House is passionate about fostering the freedom to create for our authors and our employees.

This freedom to create is at the very heart of the Penguin Random House Creative Writing Awards.

The Mission

The Penguin Random House Creative Writing Awards wants to know what the kids across the U.S. in public high schools have to say. Looking for writing with a strong, clear, voice, by authors who are daring, original, and unafraid to take risks has become our mantra. We want to recognize the unique vision and voices of high school seniors with scholarship awards while supporting student writers throughout the writing process with online workshops in partnership with WNDB.

Outreach Leads to Growth

The Penguin Random House Creative Writing Awards extend beyond the scholarship phase, as we work to help alumnx begin to grow their careers. Through the Creative Writing Awards partnership with We Need Diverse Books, alumnx are offered:

Access to professional development programming, including an annual summer series of lunchtime virtual workshops with literary agents, editors, and authors discussing their careers, as well as roundtable events with PRH staff and more.

The History

In 1993, immediately after establishing its world headquarters in New York City, Bertelsmann sought innovative ways to give back to the city that offered such a wealth of creative talent. Among its many philanthropic ventures was the Bertelsmann Foundation's World of Expression Scholarship Program, designed to encourage, support, and reward young writers and musicians growing up in this cultural capital.



The program began with scholarship awards for excellence in literary and musical expression and then quickly expanded to include programs that would foster that expression. Fall workshops in public high schools across the city offered a jolt of creativity to high school seniors, jumpstarting students to create original work. Classroom teachers clamored for materials that would help them infuse creative writing into the classroom; World of Expression teaching artists responded with a booklet of lesson plans and staff development workshops for teachers and administrators. A summer writing program for juniors offered an intensive course for developing writers. The World of Expression website provided access to writing- and music-related resources for teachers and students year-round.

Thirty years later, and now known as the Penguin Random House Creative Writing Awards, the commitment is apparent. Program winners have gone on to study at a wide variety of colleges and universities around the country, from City University of New York to Harvard. Many have also continued their education at trade or technical schools. To date, the program has awarded more than \$2.9 million dollars in scholarships to public high school students for original poetry, memoir, fiction and drama, and spoken word compositions.

In addition, the program brings together educators, teaching artists, community leaders, authors, and industry professionals (including Penguin Random House executives) to inspire, guide, read, judge, and celebrate the work of hundreds of diverse writers each year.



The Program Today

In 2019, Penguin Random House partnered with We Need Diverse Books (WNDB), a national grassroots organization that advocates for diversity in children's literature, to facilitate the expansion of the competition beyond its origins in New York City to graduating seniors from public high schools across the country. The goal is for youth from coast to coast to join previous recipients, who include award-winning and published writers and journalists as well as distinguished professionals in a variety of fields. Winners will receive a total of \$50,000 in college scholarship funds, in addition to other awards for runners-up. The top five winners are invited to attend a week of summer professional development from Penguin Random House that includes one-on-one coaching from some of the industry's best editors, networking workshops, a panel about career opportunities in publishing, and a fireside chat with a Penguin Random House author. The week concludes with a virtual awards ceremony.



Both the poetry and memoir award have been renamed. In 2021, we launched the Amanda Gorman Award for Poetry and in 2022 the Michelle Obama Award for Memoir.

The Future

At Penguin Random House, we are passionate about encouraging the next generation of readers and authors and promoting diverse voices and stories.

Young writers are our future, and we are proud to partner with We Need Diverse Books to identify and nurture new literary talent and support these inspiring, emerging voices.

About Penguin Random House

Penguin Random House, the world's largest trade book publisher, is dedicated to its mission to ignite a universal passion for reading by creating books for everyone. The company, which employs more than 10,000 people globally, was formed on July 1, 2013, by Bertelsmann and Pearson. As of April 1, 2020, Bertelsmann is full owner of the company. With more than 300 imprints and brands on six continents, Penguin Random House comprises adult and children's fiction and nonfiction print and digital English- German- and Spanish-language trade book publishing businesses in more than 20 countries worldwide. With over 16,000 new titles, and more than 700 million print, audio and eBooks sold annually, Penguin Random House's publishing lists include more than 80 Nobel Prize laureates and hundreds of the world's most widely read authors.



About WNDB

We Need Diverse Books is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that runs twelve exciting initiatives united under one goal—to create a world where everyone can find themselves in the pages of a book. Established in 2014, WNDB strives to support and amplify diverse literature by mentoring marginalized creators, providing resources to diverse publishing professionals, and donating diverse books to schools and libraries nationwide. Learn more at diversebooks.org.

Young writers are our future, and we are proud to partner with We Need Diverse Books to identify and nurture new literary talent and support these inspiring, emerging voices.

Thanks

It has been said that it takes a village to raise a child. By extension it takes a committee community of true believers to encourage and inspire the youth of a city and nationwide.

Over the last 30 years, the growth and evolution of this program has been the result of the coordinated effort of a network of consultants, teachers, executives, volunteers, agents and authors to name a few. Each individual is dedicated to nurturing and cultivating the creative spirit of today's youth. Just as important, these committed professionals understand and recognize the unique voice of each and every high school student.

The success of Penguin Random House's Creative Writing Awards could not have been achieved without the dedication of many who volunteered their time and expertise. Many helping hands took the time to pitch in and reach out, helping to bring the program to the widest possible audience.

We Need Diverse Books for helping us expand our reach with students in underrepresented communities across the country. Our partnership with WNDB underscores a critical element of the CWA program: to nurture the next generation of literary talent by supporting young writers from a variety of backgrounds.

Special Thanks to

Melanie Fallon-Houska for all her work, enthusiasm, and dedication to the program since its inception.

Trish Heimers-Dantzic for conceiving and creating the program 30 years ago.

Richard Hoehler for selflessly giving himself both personally and professionally to the students and teachers involved in the program throughout the years.

Barbara Rothenberg for her wisdom and constant dedication in maintaining and perfecting a quality writing program.

The Penguin Random House employees that have consistently lent their time and knowledge over the years.

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What I Wish I Knew: A Suburban Black Girl's Guide

Madison E. Corzine • Timber Creek High School

Madison E. Corzine
Memoir



Creative Writing Mantra: I would say my mantra is “Creativity takes courage.”

My Hobbies: I love film and reading anything Jane Austen or Octavia Butler! I also enjoy painting every once in a while.

College I Packed Up For: I will be attending Spelman College in the fall as an English major on a pre-law track!

“Are you the cool black girl? The one who loves Jordans and loud rap music? Are you the funny black girl? Do you make loud jokes and remind everyone of that comical character from every preteen Disney show?”

—Madison Corzine

When being a suburban black girl at a predominantly all-white wealthy school that caters to the one percent; you learn very quickly that there are roles to fill, and like a video game, you get to choose your character.

Are you the cool black girl? The one who loves Jordans and loud rap music?

Are you the funny black girl? Do you make loud jokes and remind everyone of that comical character from every preteen Disney show?

Are you the “Chameleon”? Do you code switch, listen to Taylor Swift and generic pop while making sure to use your advanced vernacular?

Or are you the smart one, the erudite? The one who turns in her homework with no mistakes and is always sought after for “study groups”?

If you decide that being pigeon-holed into one archetype for the entirety of your academic career isn't really for you, the general public will watch you just long enough to assign your character. You get the chance to play the game by going back to being the supporting character in the background. It must be noted that “fading into the background” is never truly an option, because you're black at an all-white school, remember? Eyes are on you at all times, even if you think they aren't.

These eyes will continue to follow you from class to class, watching for the slightest indication or shift in character that was created for you. Watching eyes will observe, but never with enough interest to remember your name, as they'll continue to “confuse” you with other black girls, because they do not see you, they see black, and to them, that's all.

There will come a time when a teacher will take your existence in their classroom as disrespect, a time when boys will subtly say “nigger” to gauge your reaction, a time when administrators and faculty are genuinely surprised you speak so eloquently, confidently, and with poise because you've been taught who you are.

This is the moment where you must ask yourself a series of questions to determine your next move. How will you

engage to survive and move to the game's next level of microaggressions?

Are you confrontational? Do you mind being seen as mean for sticking up for yourself?

Are you kind in correcting racism? It's certainly not a requirement for this interaction, but you do run the risk of being judged and ridiculed for not handling the situation in an “appropriate manner.”

Are you smart-mouthed? Do you want to respond to your English teacher with a witty quip about how you're a native speaker, so she really shouldn't be all that surprised that you have a working command of the language?

There will come a time when suburbia makes you feel small, but do not slump your shoulders in an attempt to make suburbia comfortable.

Slumping and shrinking will become a habit you will be hard-pressed to break as you age because you'll realize, growing black girl, that you have attempted to clip your wings before you had the chance to fly. You will regret the slumping and shrinking, as it will require physical therapy of the soul to fix it. It will require stretching, massaging, and moving, until you are comfortable in who and what you are again.

Though all of what has been written for you, dear black girl, is critical, the following is the most valuable information ever. You're not a video game character; you're not pixelated, or two-dimensional, nor do you have to be. You are no one-sided character, and you are more than an archetype. You are not Sapphire or Jezebel, you are black girl magic personified. Spread your pixie dust by being as dynamic, loud, funny, or smart as you want to be because no one can play the game like you.

do not
slump your
shoulders in
an attempt
to make
suburbia
comfortable

America

Melissa Vera • Edgewood High School



Melissa Vera Spoken Word

Listen to Melissa
in her own words

[CLICK HERE](#)

Creative Writing Mantra: My creative writing mantra is to let your heart be your guide and be true to yourself.

My Hobbies: My hobbies include reading, writing, singing, and dancing.

College I Packed Up For: The college I am going to is University of California: Los Angeles

“Leave everyone else,
cast to the shadows underrepresented,
underprotected, outsiders.”

—Melissa Vera

I pledge allegiance to the flag
We've been taught to recite each morning

But why?
Why are we made to say these words
Before we even know what these words mean

One Nation, under god
But only if you believe in him
Only if you fit his standards
Only if you conform to theirs

With Liberty and Justice for all.
But justice for who?
Justice for my grandma, whose brother was lost at the border,
Never seen again
Justice for my mom?
Whose life saving abortion is illegal in at least 15 states.

But this is the land of the free
They crow
The the home of the brave
They preach

But where was this freedom when my grandpa first arrived?
Where was this freedom when he walked to a restaurant
Starving after a backbreaking day of work
Only to be met with a sign
“No Dogs and No Mexicans”

Where was this bravery when my uncle was harassed by the police
Put in handcuffs because he dared to take the bus to work
Because he dared to be a little darker than acceptable

Where were these promises then?

America the beautiful!
God shed his grace on thee!
And in return you shed your grace
On the rich, the white,
the heterosexual.
Leave everyone else cast to the shadows
Underrepresented, underprotected, outsiders.

But please continue,
Spread your false American Dream
Your lies, your broken promises
Let our voices go unheard
Our faces unseen
Because sooner or later
You'll crumble under the weight
of it all
I pledge allegiance to the flag.

Cafecito para dos, sin leche

Isabella Rayner • Marvin Ridge High School

Searching the planet of your dark sunspots, wrinkled smile lines,
wispy curls framing your greying hairline in an unassuming way
inconspicuous, careful mother,

I plead.

thin lips, scathing eyes, staring at each other across the half-crooked table

washed-out white lights of the cafe flickering at an interval above our heads

tell me every place on your face where you need botox, how you want every sign of life and age and turmoil

wiped away, forgotten,

I plead again: I'll listen.

So then you ask me, stirring sugar into black Cuban coffee

Mija, how are you?

And I could not be less broken.

I am your *muñecita*

fractured, porcelain human doll, motes of dust caked on every cracked chip and shard

dazedly watching as small pieces of myself float by

like little swimming pieces of debris in polluted waters by the Miami shore.

I am the kind of ghost that lingers in its curled-up sanctuary, your shadow

who gathers dust, and no one wonders

how or what or when or why

merely is, am, are, will be, *para siempre*

unquestioned despair breathing in rotten, youthful death.

See me, see me, *porfa, mirame*, I ask you how can I breathe?

how can I continue living?

how can I exist in this world you brought me into?

La tostada y cafe. Buen provecho.

I place the silver spoon down. Light reflects the gleaming curve of porcelain.

Whirring air conditioning muffling our silence.

I'm okay, Just Fine, how are you?

A mi tambien, hijita. Just Fine.

Isabella Rayner

Poetry



Creative Writing Mantra: Let it marinate.

My Hobbies: Reading, writing, eating good food, playing video games, and spending time in nature.

College I Packed Up For: North Carolina State University

“I am the kind of ghost that lingers
in its curled up sanctuary.
Your shadow who gathers dust, and
no one wonders how or what or when or why
merely is, am, are, will be, *para siempre* unquestioned
despair breathing in rotten, youthful death.”

—Isabella Rayner

Chicken Feet

Karen Yang • West Windsor Plainsboro High School South



Karen Yang
Fiction & Drama

Creative Writing Mantra: Always write in your voice, for yourself.

My Hobbies: Working out, sketching, curating Spotify playlists, museum hopping.

College I Packed Up For: Harvard University

“Her eyes glaze like glass,
a delicate membrane sheen.
She doesn’t elaborate,
her crimson mouth a quivering line.”

—Karen Yang

You’re still scared of her, so you ask her out to the first restaurant that comes to your mind: Lucky Dragon. You’ve been here a thousand times because it’s the only Chinese restaurant in town and Ma craves “home food” every weekend. A two minute drive from your house and boom! You arrive at the beige, rotting plaster columned America Luxury strip mall. There, next to a greasy McDonald’s and a Sears with a fifty percent discount sign for half the year and a seventy five percent the rest, Lucky Dragon’s broken sign reads “Luck Drag N” much to your dismay.

Surprisingly, she says yes. You tell yourself you’re not surprised but it’s obvious. In school, she’s the blonde ice queen ruling over everyone, forever entwined with built, towering football players—right now, it’s Andy White, the college frat boy wannabe, and the best quarterback Montgomery High has ever seen—and the Saturday parties in someone’s dimly lit, CBD scented basement, stolen Budweiser in full flow and Pitbull pulses all night. On the other hand, you’re the quiet nerd, Science Olympiad sessions on Friday nights, endless symphonies on the violin, and forever lost behind a colossal chemistry textbook.

Like the characters in the beginnings of the *New York Times* best sellers that shadow you in the school library during lunch, where you eat Ma’s stinky tofu whose stench even the Best YA Novel in a Billion Years can’t hide, you and she were never meant to be.

November 17th. 9:42 am. AP Chemistry, Room 302.

You remember the first time you saw her. Her blond hair looked like the sun.

“New seats everyone! This will be your lab partner, for . . .” Mr. Mendez squints at his attendance sheet, “probably the rest of the year, so be friendly and get started on the lab!”

She glances up at you. “Well, you’re smart.” Thankfully, you’re Asian is left unsaid. “Can you do the lab? I kind of have an issue right now.” Her eyes glaze like glass, a delicate membrane sheen. She doesn’t elaborate, her crimson mouth a quivering line.

“Hey, uh, what’s up? Why are you crying?” Your voice comes out reedy. It radiates confusion and unfamiliarity; other than Ma at Ye Ye’s funeral, you’ve never seen a

girl cry. But, to be honest, you’ve never really seen a girl up close. They’ve always been as hazy as an unfocused microscope.

“My boyfriend broke up with me,” she says, chewing on her lip, gloss shimmering under the harsh fluorescent lights. You glance around. Andy isn’t here, his hefty dimensions of a body unable to push over AP Chem. How should you respond?

Your mind scrambles to think but comes up with nothing. After all, studying can only do so much for your negligent love life. Then you think of him.

In addition to being a Harvard graduate, Brian, your older brother, got all of the good genes: the smooth, slick, Bruce Lee swagger that attracts girls like flies to honey. He left you nothing but noodle arms, nervous tics, and vocal cords that wobble every nanosecond.

Nonetheless, you’ve spent all your life following his footsteps; join Science Olympiad, man first violin in orchestra, study at every waking hour, and then some more. Take the APs, get into an Ivy League—you’ve memorized this formula forwards and backward, even as you forget what a sober Ba looks like. Brian’s supposed advice has also found a niche in your brain, wedged in between the formula for calculating the energy of a wave and Ma’s worn wavelengths of love.

Navigate it towards something you know, little bro. Right. You like science.

In-your-head-Brian responds. *Remember when Mr. Mendez made that horrible joke about the chemistry between two people?* You inwardly nod. *Let’s do a chemistry experiment: Reactant 1: tears. Reactant 2: comfort. Product: don’t embarrass yourself.* But how? You test the waters.

“Tha—that sounds rough.” Your voice quavers again. In-your-head-Brian monologues. *Alright, let’s add in some more coolness, kid.* You reply: *Coolness? Like when you add ice to a chem lab?* In-your-head-Brian rolls his eyes. *Oh, man. Why do you always think in scientific*

terms? You're such a nerd, even compared to me. You mentally shrug. *Whatever. Ice, coolness, blah, blah, blah. Just some more confidence.* As if from another planet, you know what to say, your voice bubbling.

“Well, I think you’re too good for him.” You notice her staring at you, brow wrinkled. She probably didn’t expect that. In all honesty, you didn’t either.

“Wow. Thanks. That’s actually really nice.” She waves at the microscope. “Can you get started while I finish something up?” Sweetly, without waiting for your reply, she spins around, her gold strands of hair ever shining. You turn on the microscope, the light illuminating your flaming face. Product achieved.

November 20th. 6:41 pm. Interior of the Lucky Dragon Restaurant.

She shows up ten minutes late, Louis Vuitton purse in hand, looking beautifully misplaced. You pay close attention to her outfit and burn her sparkly magenta dress into your retina. Even in the dim smear of light from the Sears logo, she radiates like Sirius A, the brightest star in the whole universe.

Inside, she grimaces at the haphazard fold out tables, but oohs and aahs at the tacky red lanterns up above when she notices you watching her. After sitting down, she studies the menu closely. Questions after questions arrive, like an AP test on How To Answer Obvious Questions without Upsetting Anyone: “What’s Beef and Broccoli?”

“It’s exactly that. Beef with broccoli.”

She looks taken back at your sarcastic humor, your abruptness. You’re a little pissed; after all, she came ten minutes late. Brian drones in your head: *Chill it, man. Ba’s crazy punctuality rule only exists at school and home.* That’s true. In all honesty, Ba never followed the rule himself either; it was a miracle if he came home before one in the morning.

She asks again: “Chicken low man?”

“I don’t know, some noodle thing.”

Finally, she shuts the menu and stretches.

“Let’s try something adventurous!” Her mouth says adventurous, her eyes scream exotic.

“Sure,” you say, noting any dishes you haven’t explained. “How does General Tso’s chicken sound?”

She pouts (*pouts!*) like Marilyn Monroe. “General Tso?” She pronounces Tso like So, like SO WHAT, YOU PIECE OF CRAP, YOU CAN DO BETTER THAN THAT.

In-your-head-Brian agrees. *What happened to that coolness, kid?*

“I was thinking . . .” She taps the menu. “Chicken feet?”

November 18th. 9:12 am. AP Chemistry, Room 302.

On the day after your experiment, Mr. Mendez is absent and the substitute asks for everyone to work on the lab. When you arrive, she glances up.

“Hey,” she says. “I promise I’ll help on the lab today—if you’ll do one thing for me.” You grow cold; does she want you to beat up Andy? Andy’s rife with muscles that Human Anatomy 101 didn’t even bother discussing; your bony body doesn’t stand a chance. You’ve seen him in gym class, running faster than the speed of light, hitting softballs into the ceiling until they become hard and gravity defying. “Tell me where you’re from.”

You furrow your brow. It’s the classic question, parodies found on every facet of the Earth: “Where are you from?” *Boringville, USA.* “No, like where are you **really** from?” *um, China.* Light bulb!

In-your-head-Brian appears again. *Cool, okay? Remember yesterday? Cool.*

“What do you mean? Like America,” you gulp, “or China?”

“China. Duh.” She smirks, the leer of a cat pawing with a frightened mouse. “America is boring. Tell me about China.”

You weren’t expecting this question. “It’s weird to discuss this here.”

“What’s so weird about it?” She asks, tilting her head, genuine bemusement splashed across her face.

You realize that it isn’t weird for her. In a classroom filled with white lab coats and a near equal number of white people, your foreignness stands out, a peasant crow in a herd of elegant swans. In a school the poster child of the glossy white that fills *Life* magazine, your black hair and coal eyes burn, the smoky end of a crisp Camel cigarette. The tendency to trip up your words, your parents’ half hearted English occupies every element in your body, your identity.

“I don’t know. China’s big.” Too big and filled with countless people trying to claw their way out to *mei guo*, Beautiful Country, thinking that a better life exists. Only once they arrive will they realize that it only is the same routine of struggle under shinier, whiter buildings.

November 20th. 7:02 pm. Interior of the Lucky Dragon Restaurant.

The feet come with the claws down, thank God. Set in a wooden basket, you watch her lift the top off, her face a cloudy outline from the steam.

“I’ve never had chicken feet.” She fingers her chopsticks, stroking them the way you’ve seen her touch Andy’s back. The wooden splinters probably dig into her pearl hands.

“Neither have I.”

She doesn’t respond. You look up from your plate. “What?”

“You’ve never had chicken feet?” She asks. “Never?”

You nod. Why is she so surprised? You never order true Chinese “delicacies”—not the ones Ma enjoys, not the Fish Head Stew, the Beef Tripe Tendon that jiggles with fat, and a culture that you’ll never understand. That you don’t want to understand—embracing it would make you stand out even more, the sole drowning spider in a sea of snow. Embracing it would make you smell like Ba’s favorite *shaoyiu*, acrid Chinese alcohol perfuming hallways. Embracing it would make you the outcast of The (White) American Story, forever relegated to the margins where no one ever wants to be.

“Really?” She stretches out “really” until it sounds like reaaaaalllllyyyyyy, until it sounds like you’ve done something wrong.

November 19th. 9:01 am. AP Chemistry, Room 302.

As if everything were in a movie, Mr. Mendez is absent for the fourth day in a row. She tries again, right after the bell. “Come on, just tell me about China. It’s not even that big of a deal.” You sigh and take a peek at her. She’s smiling, quietly. For once, she’s not on her phone.

“Okay, fine. Well, what do you want to know?”

She thinks for a second. “Your favorite memory there. No, your favorite place to visit.” She scrunches her golden eyebrow. “No! Both.”

You hide a laugh at her eagerness and answer her question. “The Great Wall of China was pretty cool. It was hot though—I think we went in one hundred something degrees.”

“For real? Sheesh. What did y’all do?”

“To be honest, I don’t remember. Ran around, terrorized Mom and Dad. You know.”

She giggles, a foreign sound both to you and to the classroom. Everyone looks up. She’s laughing and Andy isn’t the one making her laugh? That was new. They zone in on you, analyzing. They’ll whisper after class but for once, it won’t be about whether anyone had the chance to cheat off your paper and use your answers. Oddly enough, you smile at the change.

“That sounds dope though. I wish I could travel.” She looks up onto the ceiling, past the harsh lights, the doomed suburbia, the ethnic labels. “I wish I could travel,

try something new, different, never seen before. Wouldn’t that be fun?”

“I’m sick of the same-old, same-old.” As she says this, she looks into your eyes. You think: *Andy? Me? Different?* In-your-head-Brian wolf whistles. On cue, the bell rings.

“See you tomorrow. That was fun.” She laughs again, and your heart, unknowingly, is sucked into her blackhole.

Huh. Maybe you just did something there, little brother.

November 20th. 7:32 pm. Interior of the Lucky Dragon Restaurant.

“I’m sorry, but I don’t think this is going to work out.” She says this with one hand in her hair and the other one slyly under the table, on her phone.

“Why did you come with me then?” Your voice trembles, a mere whisper above the havoc from nearby tables wrestling over oil slicked noodles. She puts her chopsticks down.

“Because you were nice. You were different. You were . . .” Her voice is flat, her eyes trained on the road outside the window. Hunting. Searching. “New. I mean, look, I’ve tried a lot of things tonight. But Andy and I aren’t over yet.”

On cue, her phone glows with Andy’s text. “Still. This was really, really fun.” Her eyes, once swirling galaxies when you told her about the Great Wall, look like dull ponds of mud—or even worse, the murky house special sauce sitting next to the chicken feet, untouched and growing cold.

You snort. Fun? You’ll pay twenty-six dollars for chicken feet leftovers. Fun? You’ll pay your father’s soul to explain inadequate Chinglish and overlook a reliance on drink. Fun? You’ll pay a lifetime to play the sidekick, the ethnic lover who will never make it past the first date.

November 20th. 9:39 am. AP Chemistry, Room 302.

Some otherworldly force has kept Mr. Mendez out of Room 302 for yet another day. You abandon all pretense of the lab, focusing on her as if she were your Harvard admittance letter that will—hopefully—come next year. Or MIT: you aren’t that picky.

“So. About last time.” She says, spinning her phone on the table. It lights up, her wallpaper a picture of her and Andy. She shuts it off immediately. “Can you tell me more?”

Where did you leave off? In-your-head-Brian comes to the rescue—*Just lay on the Chinese stuff, man. The Great Wall, terracotta warriors. Anything to get her to look at you like that again.*

You oblige, describing the heat on the Great Wall, the vendor selling overpriced knock off sodas at the entrance. She asks for a taste of the faux Fanta and you give her a sip, watching her savor the sweetness and the artificial memory.

You paint a picture of the terracotta warriors, solemn in their stance and filling the air with the musky scent of time. You illustrate The Forbidden City in its intricate splendor, golden roofs and jeweled jade galore, the statues of bronzed lions standing over centuries of war, slaughter, fanfare.

Skip the confrontations with Ba that happen at the peak of the Great Wall, where you swear you will never be like your old man—backward, Chinese, tangled in the web of some drunken past.

Ignore the feeling of inadequateness when the tour guide at the terracotta warriors speaks to you in Chinese but you can do nothing with your thick, sticky tongue. The rusty Chinese, choked in your throat, fights and claws, only to die with the “uh huh, yeah” you mutter in his direction.

Gloss over the confusion at the Forbidden City’s restaurant, where you asked for iced water instead of the sewage colored tea. The waitress looked over in confusion. *You want bing? Ice in your water?* Ma tried to laugh her uncertainty away—“no, no, he’ll have cha, foolish American boy”—and when she leaves, try to convince you that true Chinese people only drink century old tea leaves; why not try the lü cha anyway?

Too soon, class is over. You leave with her, rushing into the crowded hallway. She nearly trips and, in that process, breaks the facade of perfection you have attributed to her every being.

It’s this little act that convinces you that you have a chance.

The words tumble out before you even know it, your brain a half second behind your mouth. Maybe it’s a sign, a sign that you should have listened to Ba’s advice to *duo xiang yi xiang*; think a little more, even as he failed to follow his own words. Regardless, you should’ve considered how this would all unfold. Nevertheless, here it was. “Will you go to the Lucky Dragon with me?”

November 20th. 7:46 pm. Interior of the Lucky Dragon Restaurant.

When the waiter comes and sets down two fortune cookies, she sees her ride. Andy’s driving.

“I’ve got to go.” She tips her head towards the car, grabs her bag. “I’ll see you in chem, alright?”

You nod mutely. She’ll just ignore you from now on.

You’ve served your purpose, given her a taste of the other. She’s seen that the flavor isn’t quite right and that the stench is too strong. The gap between China and America is unbridgeable, forever determined by foreign language, foreign food, and foreign ideals.

You know she won’t ever truly see you. She’ll only see a shy boy, sitting in Lucky Dragon radiating exoticism. Next to him is a pile of cold chicken feet that he doesn’t know how to eat.

Global History 2: 10/26/2020

Gloria Blumenkrantz • Frank McCourt High School

Gloria
Blumenkrantz
Poetry



Creative Writing Mantra: You know how they say you should dance like no one's watching? Write as if you're the only one who will ever read it.

My Hobbies: Cooking and baking, photography, reading, exploring NYC, traveling.

College I Packed Up For: Binghamton University

“the article comes crashing down at my feet.
I think nothing of his comment at first ...
zoom school can be terribly monotonous.

—Gloria Blumenkrantz

at 10 am
we go into breakout rooms.
cameras off.
“so who's reading out loud?”
they tell me i'm
the only one who
could pronounce the
german names.

of course!
my last name is
blumenkrantz.
german for rose garland.
which means,
obviously,
that i know how
to pronounce names
from languages i don't speak.
places i have never been to.
people i never got the chance to meet.

and, i'm jewish.
that adds another reason:
of course i'm best to read this out loud.
i'm the one who goes
to hebrew school,
who went to israel,
as one does in 8th grade.

but someone has to read.
so i do.
i used to spend hours
reading memoirs from survivors of
scary places like auschwitz and dachau.

but today, the words on my computer
slapped me in the face.
instead of seeing stars,
i saw magen davids.
i saw the yellow triangles,
sewn into a six-pointed marker
of my peoples' vulnerability.

i spoke out loud of
the horrors of kristallnacht.
beautiful synagogues,
burnt to the ground.
sacred torahs,
scrolls full of knowledge,
destroyed unceremoniously.
shofars violated,
with kisses of hate from ignorant men
on the delicate mouth of reflection.
family businesses
smashed to pieces,
driven down by scared ex-customers.

that was 80 years ago.

two years ago tomorrow,
a man entered
a synagogue in pittsburgh
and fired shots
killing 11 innocent humans,
and hurting more.
zikronim l'bracha.

it's 2020.
synagogue is over zoom, and so is school.
before COVID,
CBE was my home away from home. i was supported
and loved,
but i still knew
that i was never fully safe there.

at 10:30,
i finish reading the article out loud.
a classmate writes in the chat:
"yo, what are we doing now? not gonna lie,
i was 50% asleep during that"

the article comes
crashing down at my feet.
i think nothing of his comment at first . . .
zoom school can be
terribly monotonous.

but i can't shake the feeling that
this boy, my whole class:
they just don't get it!
to them, we finished studying WWI, and
now, we're just learning about WWII.

so i write in the chat a reflection:
"This article was really hard for me to
read out loud. I can normally read
about the horrible events of the
Shoa, but today was different. It felt
like the words on my computer
screen slapped me in the face, so
hard I could see the lost members of
my family that died in Poland,
Germany, Russia, and Romania.
Torahs and shofars violated and
disrespected made my heart ache
this morning. I never used to look for
the closest exit in my home away
from home (my synagogue); After
Pittsburgh, I do. I'm sorry for ranting
but I just need to get my thoughts out."

it's 10:40,
breakout groups close,
no one read my message.
i paste it into the whole class chat.
we're already talking about next class.
nobody responds.
class ends.

The Soup Between Us

Sasha Forke • Dundee Crown High School

Raindrops streamlined down the balcony window. Their mess created a blur of colors of the buildings below. I watched the droplets intertwine and blend with one another until the worn down gas station came to be nothing but fog. The monstrously loud Metra train station of Arlington Heights that resided directly outside of my Yiayia's one bedroom apartment barely made a dent through the fog. Despite the apartment's location in the hub of downtown Arlington Heights, it felt completely secluded. The warm lamps glowed, casting an isolated golden hue, as if the apartment existed in a world yet rendered. My parents, my Yiayia, my aunt, uncle, and cousins all lived in this miniscule apartment. One could not make their way to the bathroom without bumping into another person. Yet, I felt so alone.

My family gathered on Thanksgiving, the first family gathering without my Papou, my grandfather, who passed away a few months prior. However, we actually gathered on a day adjacent to Thanksgiving. My Yiayia and Papou, Greek immigrants, never fully grasped the concept of Thanksgiving. I have still yet to learn what day Thanksgiving actually occurs on.

During elementary school, the other children spoke about their Thanksgiving meals—their families preparing turkey, stuffing, mashed potatoes, and cranberry sauce. My Thanksgiving could not have been more different. Turkey rarely attended the dinner—a juicy rack of lamb would be served instead. We reserved lamb for special occasions, such as Easter, where one would cook an entire lamb on a spit for hours, surrounded by family. A dish of chicken legs and sliced potatoes, soaked in lemon, that had been slowly baking for hours usually accompanied the lamb. Salads full of crisp cucumbers, tomatoes, olives, and feta cheese doused in olive oil always sat on the left side of the dining table. A roll never once touched the table, but rather spanakopita, a flaky bread pie that encased salty chunks of feta cheese and spinach. Believe it or not, we also added spaghetti to the menu. We served the pasta with sauteed peppers instead of tomato sauce. The only instance in which turkey made an appearance, was when my Yiayia made her signature keftedes, Greek meatballs, because we must add another meat dish.

Over the years, we excluded a certain dish for various reasons. Perhaps the tomatoes lacked in quality at the

European market that year. Maybe my Yiayia struggled to cook as many dishes, now with her older age. Only one dish, however, remained unforgettable. One, that had it not graced the dining table with its presence, my family would be spun into a tizzy. Avgolemono soup, otherwise known as lemon soup in my family, must be served in order for a gathering to be complete. This soup tethered my family together. No venture ensued without lemon soup. My mother and I could have beaten the world record in having the most miniscule reason visit to my Yiayia's abode, and still be expected to sit down and enjoy a warm bowl of lemon soup.

Lemon soup comprises only four, simple, key ingredients, chicken broth, egg yolks, orzo, and lemon. However, something deep, and intense boils at the bottom of the pot. The chicken broth is supple, a liquidy wonder with an unforgettable flavor. The chicken broth is an overcast day spent inside a toasty house with my Papou, sprawled on the carpet playing hours and hours of blackjack. Now the egg yolks, while it may seem odd, provide a crucial function. They are the heart of the soup, a foundation. The egg yolks hold the fervor

my Papou had for the newspaper, as every single day he made the trek to the newspaper stand to purchase a copy. He could not fully understand all of what it read, but that never stopped his journey. The orzo acts as the life of the soup. While tiny in size, the grains soak up the broth, becoming plump. When swirled around with a spoon,

The chicken broth is an overcast day spent inside a toasty house with my Papou, sprawled on the carpet playing hours and hours of blackjack.

the grains dance through the soup, only to rejoice after the spoon has been removed. The orzo represented the bright days spent frolicking in the park with my Papou. I would run and jump into his arms as he lifted me higher and higher into the crisp blue sky. The final ingredient was the lemon, the life of the party. The three spoonfuls of lemon juice were just as full of spunk as Papou, as he loved to host nights full of dancing and laughter. All of these events always concluded with a bowl of lemon soup. Now that Papou is gone, the ingredients do not come alive like they once had. My family of grains had been dumped into a hurricane of sticky broth and rotten eggs. When violently jabbed by the spoon, we did not reconvene. We just floated further and further away.

My heavy feet found their way to the compact kitchen, where my Yiayia stood, attending to the various pots and pans. I suppose my presence caught her eye, and she turned and gave me a knowing smile.

“Remember how Papou used to always finish his food before everyone else?” She said after some time. I smiled to myself. My family always laughed about this for years. My Papou ate every meal quickly. No matter the time of day, or how much he had eaten previously, he was the first one to finish every time.

“He ate so fast so he could sit and watch everyone else enjoy their food. He loved to watch everyone enjoy each other. And he loved Avgolemono,” she said, gesturing to the large pot of soup boiling beside her. I realized what called me into the kitchen, the smell of lemon soup. It enchanted me, beckoning my body closer. In this moment, I felt more connected to my Yiayia than ever. My Papou still remained: His memories, his laughter, his soul, buoyed to the top of the pot.

When my Yiayia bestowed the large pot of soup upon the dining table that night, a cloud of peace settled above us. Small smiles turned to giggles, which turned into great bursts of stomach clenching laughter. It was a type of joy that these walls had not seen in months. Below me was an empty bowl of lemon soup, and I slowly relaxed back in my chair. Surrounding me was the image of my family participating in lively conversations. Food was passed around, jokes were shared, and gossip was exchanged. Life was going to be just fine, and Papou was right. It was such a sight to see.

Pantry Line Road

Deborah Auguste • The Brooklyn Latin School

I revisited the pantry for the first time in a long time today . . .
I found that even though I was unsure of where I was going,
My body,
Which no longer ached too terribly with hunger pangs,
Knew which way to go.
It felt natural,
Like a homecoming.

One passed on the way,
One sprung as if from air,
I met two elderly ladies today.
They both felt like my grandmother from a distant reality.

Bold, Confident, Risk Taker.
Meek, Wise, Soft-Spoken.
I just wish I knew their stories . . .
All of theirs.

She had no hair, only wisps.
She seemed to mourn them in this relentless summer heat.
She spoke of weak knees, how this slowness persisted in her youth.
That
And how she used her broken cart for walker
Reminded me of my grandmother.

Her voice held a sing-songy rhythm that could only be described as oriental.
In her there was a certain resilience, boldness that was akin to that which I saw in many of my closest
friends and family.
Unafraid to tell harsh stories of existence.
Unapologetically alive.

I wanted to try
living like her.

Now her voice had a twang to it.
She spoke of Golden Crust and Gizzada*.
Her ponytail,
smooth and colored,
was a radiant shade of fiery red.

So eager to help a lost little girl,
Quick to defend and interact.
She was also knowledgeable,
Knowing of ailments before they were spoken.
And there was a kindness in her firm words,
That shone like a lantern
Which carried the guiding light.
A wisdom which could not be manufactured.

Among a sea of the poor and needy were children mixed in,
Were women,
Were men,
Were the elderly,
Were teens,
Were Asians,
Were White,
Were Black,
Still here in this long winding line
They all seemed familial.

Yet,
Strangers who walked through the crowded sidewalks,
Looked upon us with a mixture of pity and disgust,
Worth less than dust,
As if people like us shouldn't exist in this city.
They didn't see the importance behind the stories these grandmothers told.
The wisdom that was contained within her heavy Caribbean accent,
nor the beauty that was shone from her wisps of hair.

They only saw my torn coat.
Her broken "walker,"
Our skin color
And it seemed they understood enough.
But I wish they knew our stories,
all of ours.

Dear Durga Maa

Devisi Goel • Horace Greeley High School

How these grandmothers
Became my home.
How
I was no longer a 15 year old
Standing in line alone.
Mom sick, No fix,
Surrounded by strangers.

It was no longer
get your feed
Then leave.
They changed that for me
Now it's
“Come back next week,
No need to sneak
We await you eagerly,
My dear.”

On some days
I have the sentiment
that even if I weren't starving,
I'd thank God for my good memory
While taking this winding familiar road
Leading back to this pantry line home.

**Gizzada is a Jamaican dessert also known as Pinch-Me-Round, it is a tart filled with sweet spiced coconut filling.*

please accept my apology.

i have not taken good care of your name—
she deserved to be swaddled and spoken
in hushed tones, upon silver threads of speech
just as you never scrape off the superficial
layer of the *kaju katli* before savoring.

the dress your name wore—it was beautiful, i swear
its fabric would listen to contentions, and conclude
that the given words would dissolve under the tongue,
a sublingual medicine we would inevitably swallow. the pattern
of the diamonds could trace the path to hindsight
before an occasion developed.

and the *churiyaan* your name wore, spoke through
their collisions, words that had no space for frivolity, they could
concisely contain the meaning of the world
in a vacuum-sealed ziplock bag.

your name did not warrant the metallic taste
in my throat after i hid the accent from her voice
and flattened every syllable so she could become universal.
i felt like a stranger to her. the uniqueness that she wore
as *jhumkas*, felt like a bittersweet state of existence and i
feared the isolation it could bring. it consumed me until—

Durga maa, i sold her dress. but now

On the Curve of Infinity

Brenna Koester • Trout Lake High School

i remove my hand from my eyes and realize
i can remake it, sew each and every stitch
into the dress. i will rub my fingers together
to clear my fingertips before fixing her diamonds
on anew, they deserve to be cloudless.

i still may speak our name with some hesitation,
the rounded sounds stumbling on my tongue—
but with practice, she will slip effortlessly
from my lips and announce her presence to the room, i will
now & always stand behind her, smiling
as her diamonds dimple my cheeks.

Durga maa,
thank you for the gift of your name.

Love, Devisi

When I was five years old, I decided eight was my favorite number. It was a bold number in my mind, red and unafraid, and I loved the way the line of the eight curved and crossed over itself to form something unbreakable. I would sit at an easel and draw eights over and over again on a large pad of paper, pressing so hard with my pencil that ghosts of the eights haunted the pages underneath when I was done. And then I would tear off the page and start over.

The year I turned six, I learned the symbol for infinity: an eight, fallen onto its side. I couldn't comprehend the concept of infinity, but I loved the idea of it. I loved the possibility of forever, the way every star and planet and year can be captured in a single shape. Maybe, I thought, the infinity symbol loops in on itself the way time could. Maybe, if we go far enough in one direction, we'll have no choice but to turn back, and we'll end up where we started.

The day I flew to Beijing, the airport was quiet, the colors muted in the light of dawn.

The footsteps of the passersby clicked on the floor with a hollow sound, and even the voice over the intercom system seemed hushed. Through the windows that faced the rows of airplanes outside, the sun was rising in faint lavender, and the sky was streaked with clouds like watercolor, wispy and pale. I sat next to my parents, waiting to board our flight, watching those colors and moving a crayon absently across the sketchpad that was balanced on my lap. I was bundled in a black sweatshirt just large enough to pull over my knees, the fabric soft under my fingers of my left hand that absently tugged at the hem.

Beside me, my mother's face seemed like a canvas stretched too tight, tense with her wrinkles pronounced. I leaned my head into her shoulder, seeking comfort, and felt the vibration of her voice as she spoke to my father. It's an odd experience to hear someone's words through them; the sounds are muffled and you feel the words as much as hear them. But it's a safe feeling as well, and I was content to stay like that for a while more, before we left to wherever we were going, before the world opened itself to me.

As my mother spoke, her words not quite distinguishable, she slipped the crayon from my fingers and moved it across my sketchpad in thick, confident strokes before holding it up for me to see. Reluctantly, I raised my head off her shoulder and squinted at what she had drawn: Chinese characters in the firetruck red of the crayon, fluid and firm at once, beautifully foreign.

"What does it say, Mimi?" she asked me.

I moved my eyes across the page, recognizing the characters but unable to pronounce them. The meaning, too, was frustratingly out of reach. I shook my head.

"Don't be scared." She gave the sketchpad to me and I wrote okay in English, a bit sloppily, my letters tilting to the right. I knew she thought I was scared of the plane ride, the first in my life, or maybe the move, but those were the least of my fears. I was afraid of the way my parents talked to each other, their words underscored by anger and resentment even when their voices were mere whispers. I was scared of the way their apologies seemed like the paper cranes I'd fold, clumsy and creased from starting over and over again. My mother's shoulders curved inwards more and more each day, her eyes grew more and more weary, and trying to read her thoughts was like trying to read Chinese; you can grow up surrounded by the characters and yet never understand a word unless someone bothers to help you learn.

And I was scared of change. When you live in a house of cards, the slightest tremor can bring everything down around you.

In preschool, I was told that the earth was shifting and spinning under our feet, orbiting the far-off star we call the sun. Nothing could have seemed more impossible to

When you live
in a house
of cards, the
slightest
tremor can
bring every-
thing down
around you.

me. I remember my classmates and I asking, “How come we can’t feel it moving?” I paid extra attention to the floor beneath me, thinking that maybe if I concentrated enough I could sense the motion, but I felt nothing. The only evidence of our orbit I could find was the rising and setting of the sun.

For a while, it seemed my life was shifting in that way: too gradually to be felt, only to be seen. I saw it in the bills piled at my kitchen table, empty boxes of takeout, voices that bled into the darkness, books of Chinese and the search history on my father’s computer. But I didn’t worry too much, because for every night I lay awake, listening to the sounds of my parents’ anger, there was a night my mother would stroke my hair, her soft smile as reliable as the moon, until I fell asleep. The flowers of spring bloomed and withered, the tides came in and went out, and my parents would say they loved each other even after their worst fights. The constants in my life kept me from feeling the ground moving beneath my feet.

Then came the Chinese lessons, the talk of Beijing, the whispers of leaving. My mother had lived in China for several years when she was younger, and I knew she missed it in the way that we all miss our homes, the way we are pulled back to our past, following the curve of infinity to the beginning again. But San Francisco was her home too, and despite the landlord, despite the bills, despite the arguments between her and my father, I tried to convince myself we wouldn’t leave. China was the country people talked about when they were referring to somewhere far, far away: *I dug a hole to China*. It was a shapeless place in my mind, blurred and strange, and I had no idea what to expect of such a foreign country. I clung to memories of my parents in San Francisco and tried to convince myself that we would stay. But whatever hope I held in my heart was temporary, as most beautiful things are. The leaves, petals, rain, they all pass. Some days, we cannot even see the sun.

The intercom announced that our flight was boarding, and my mother stood, brushing off her slacks and slinging her purse over her shoulder. Every line in her face was precisely drawn, her features hardened into something resolute.

I closed my sketchbook and stuffed it into the backpack at my feet, but made no move to leave. Around me, other people waited for their flights, all of us brought together by some insignificant twist of fate before life ricocheted us apart again.

What would I see if I could look at this moment through a stranger’s eyes? Would I see the turmoil, the sadness that lurked under my mother’s features? Would my father look as broken and small as he did to me now? Would I know that we were leaving him?

Maybe I wouldn’t spare a thought for the family of three in the terminal, nothing more than passing silhouettes in my peripheral vision. We’re all on trajectory courses, on our own paths as we careen through space, brushing past each other’s lives. We are ablaze in our own light, our own fury and joy and misery following us wherever we go, to the ends of the earth and into the stars. But so often we do not spare a thought for those who pass us by. We do not consider that they, too, are heading somewhere, and leaving somewhere else behind.

One night, we went out to eat at my parents’ favorite Chinese restaurant, an unusual change from the takeout we normally ate at the folding table in our living room. I was worrying at the paper napkin in my lap, shredding it into tiny bits, when my mother said abruptly, “Mimi, your father and I have something to tell you.”

As my mother began to speak, I tore bigger pieces from my napkin, balling the paper into my fist so my father would not notice the habit he had tried so hard to break me of. All I could feel was a sinking sensation, like the one you get when you jump cannonball into a pool and for a moment, when everything around you is blue, you forget you were supposed to swim to the surface.

“China is a beautiful country,” my mother said, her words reaching me through a thick fog. “You will be happy there.”

I was quiet for a while, the sounds of the restaurant muted around me. I could hear the faint buzz of silence in my ears. “Are we moving?” I asked finally, and then I couldn’t pretend anymore, and the water had been cold but the sunlight when I surfaced felt harsher somehow.

The week before we left, I found out my father wasn’t going with us.

I finally rose from my seat, lifting my backpack from the floor. My father stood as well. He looked as fragile as origami, like a breeze could blow him away. But he reached for me anyway, and I was drawn to him like the tide. There, in his embrace, I was safe, no longer teetering on the edge of the world. Take a step, and I could fall. If he let me go, I might never return. But for those few seconds, I was okay.

My parents had already signed the divorce papers, and my mother had booked tickets that would fly the two of us over oceans and mountains and continents, halfway across the world.

The time difference between San Francisco and China, my mother told me, is 15 hours. As I awoke, my father would sleep; as the sun rose for him, the moon would stare down at me. I would leave each day without him.

My father was the one who showed me the symbol for infinity. He told me the names of the stars, explained how vast the oceans are. He introduced me to the universe, taught me my first words, woke me up in the morning and tucked me in at night. A world without him was as unfathomable as a world without the sun.

My mother made me read countless books on China before we left, about history and culture and language. Most I read reluctantly, finding nothing of interest within the pages. But there is a singular, obscure fact from my readings that has always stayed with me: in Ancient China, an eclipse was believed to be a dragon swallowing the sun.

Despite the incredible speed of a plane as it hurtles down a runway, nothing could have prepared me for the moment it rose into the air. It’s a miracle of some sort, to feel the plane leaving the ground. It makes you wonder, as cities and the stories they hold shrink beneath you and clouds rush in to take their place, if leaving is always this easy. If the price you paid for a window seat is the price of beginning again.

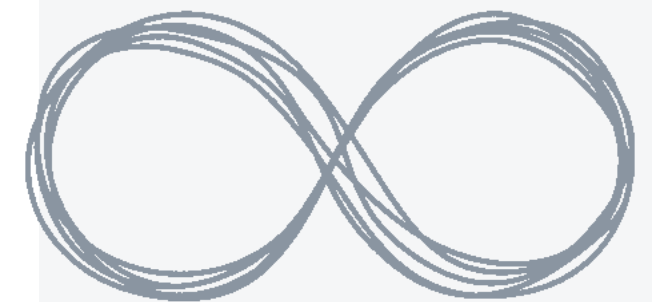
My sketchbook was open on my lap, the blank pages pleading for color. My mother said that my art will be at home in Beijing, which is a world brought to life in the colors of crayon, vibrant and saturated hues.

My art will be, I thought as I watched the clouds outside my window, even if I’m not. And that was a small comfort.

The plane rose higher and higher into the sky. I thought about my father growing increasingly small somewhere beneath us. I thought about Chinese characters, origami, houses of cards. Dragons swallowing the sun, the spinning earth and oceans and moons. And I thought about infinity.

Someday, I would go far enough that I would end up where I started. Someday, I would come back to my home, to my father. I would come back to this exact moment, a girl of eight years old on a plane, her sketchpad blank with possibilities, tears on her cheeks. So I decided that I was not afraid.

I picked up a red crayon and drew infinity.



Tapioca Dough

Keidon Quach • Castro Valley High School

“One or two?”

“Two.”

“One or two?”

“Can you show me again?”

“One or two?”

“One.”

As I sat in the dark examination room staring through the phoropter, the optometrist flipped the lens like a magician with his deck of cards. With each flip of the lens, I could see the letters on the SNELLEN eye chart differently. Can this machine really help me see clearly again? I wondered to myself.

My eyesight had gotten progressively worse from staring at my laptop screen all day long from online school. The pandemic happened at the worst time. It was my freshman year, and I was still trying to figure out what I wanted to be when I grew up. I wanted to be cool, but the lack of social interaction coupled with my poor eyesight made me feel anything but cool. My vision for myself was blurry, just like my eyesight.

“One or two?”

“Two.”

My grandma never saw clearly because she had a slew of eyesight issues. Glaucoma, near-sightedness, and far-sightedness never stopped her from making the most delicious Vietnamese desserts.

Growing up, I helped her knead tapioca dough for my favorite dessert. I poured the tapioca flour into a large stainless steel bowl, and my grandmother added the steaming hot water to it. I used chopsticks to mix it all together because it was too hot to touch. Once the bumpy mixture cooled down a bit, I dug my hands into the dough and began kneading. The more I kneaded, the cooler and smoother the dough became. My grandmother checked it by touching it with her hands. She would say, ‘Not smooth enough. Not cool enough. Keep kneading.’ I kept kneading until it met my grandmother’s satisfaction. When it was at perfect temperature and smoothness, I was then allowed to wrap the dough around the roasted peanuts and drop it into the hot ginger syrup my grandmother had on the stovetop.

It amazes me that my grandmother was able to tell precisely when the dough was perfect without being able to see clearly how it looked. I asked her how she knew. She chuckled and answered, “Many years of life.” She explained that the dough needed to feel soft and smooth but not sticky. It needed to be more on the warm side. If not, it would crack as soon as it was too cooled and would be harder to wrap around the peanuts. She would always rush me to work fast when wrapping the dough. Through years of practice kneading tapioca dough, she relied on her hands to see. She kneaded until it was perfect and gained her wisdom through years of experience.

“One or two?”

“One.”

Everyone sees the world differently. For example, when you see a glass of water filled to the halfway mark, one might say the glass is half empty, while another will say the glass is half full. Some people can’t see but know how to discover the world around them. Some are fortunate to see clearly without any help from corrective lenses. Yet, seeing clearly does not necessarily mean you have wisdom. My grandmother taught me this.

“Your lenses are ready.”

Everything became crystal clear as soon as I put on my corrective lenses. But it was not just my physical eyesight. The vision for myself finally came into focus. Wisdom. I long to have wisdom like my grandmother, and higher education would be the vehicle to get me there. I know it will take time, hard work, and dedication. I want to see the world in new ways, not just with my eyes. I am ready to knead my life’s perfect tapioca dough.

Some people
can’t see but
know how to
discover the
world around
them.

Soul Ties: To Be Lost or In Lust

Daya Brown • Westlake High School

Truth is

I struggled trying to find

the the right words.

I don’t even know if I should

classify this story as a love story

or not,

glorified heartache or not.

Her awakened soul and his lost soul or not,

boy meets girl or not.

He existed inside springtime.

He brought the warm fire during

winter time, and left on his time.

As I was cursed by lust

I learned to readjust my

heartstrings for another being yet again.

Crushed by the idea of him

longing for the need of him

rushed out of heartache because of him.

My tongue revealed mysteries

that were buried in my memories.

Remedies no longer became an option

for my wounds.

Though he became the home to my secrets,

now I found myself in a solemn mood locked in

my solitude.

Mind was intertwined

because he became my dreamcatcher.

Blinded by his beautiful stature

Confined to the reflection because

I no longer can define the curves and

assets that lay upon this body.

When he left,

starvation embodied a being that

was too cold to touch.

When he left,

it was too much to stand up

because this heartbreak made its self clear.

Ha, soul ties

The thought of change

is loves worse enemy

Drowned in prettification

Deranged out of sorrow

I was told never to rearrange

my limbs for another being.

Tonight I realized

that your touch is theorized

from what I hoped you would be.

No—wait hoped that you would have become.

I used to want for you to write the scriptures

embedded within my limbs that was paralyzed

by acceptance.

Yet

Alexandria Carroll • Garrard County High School

As if I thought this moment would be everlasting
As we inhaled and exhaled
the music of magnetism

The same way your hands searched for praise
as if you were the sinner and I was the God.
As you lingered into my temple, I should've known
to never let you praise within this
sanctuary.

If I may ask, why won't you
make a home out of this temple?
A place where you can return but
never say goodbye to.
To think I let you cowardly
worship me.

My soul has erupted out of despair,
whipped by the constant need of acceptance.
His measurement of my value does not
equivalent to a being scared to love.
These ties will forever make my worth self evident.
I refuse to avoid the emotion that became a residence
of my centering organ.

Though my body finally roars a state of contentment,
I no longer can hold resentment for a being who
tried to love me.

Indeed he guided me with joy and sweet kisses.
Though these cries used to ache;
now these ties just reminded me of this divine nature
that does not equivalent to no other being.

This is soul ties.

Yesterday, my friend was sent to the Ridge.
She said she was ready to go.
The letters were written and
she'd already picked her pills.
I didn't bother to talk her out of it.
It never works.
So I called 911,
and they said they'd take care of it.
They see this every day, they said.
My friend told me the Ridge was
the most horrible place to be
when your mind is already mean.
At least she's not dead, though.

Last week, this girl was beaten.
The Proud Boys had gotten her.
Her brown skin was marred with abrasions,
bruises dotted every surface.
She told me they didn't like her hijab.
So when she was walking home,
they ambushed her.
They ripped the fabric from her hair,
just like how they ripped away her dignity.
She's not been the same since.
At least she's not dead, though.

A month ago, this boy was shot.
He was walking in the street,
on his way to school.
It was his first day at high school.
The officer said he was menacing
and that he fit the description of
a forty-year-old African-American man.
I saw the mugshot.
The man had a full beard, tattoos up his arms,
biceps as huge as my head.
The boy just turned fourteen.
He spent his birthday in the hospital.
At least he's not dead, though.

Two months ago, this girl was raped.
She was real good friends with the quarterback.
One night, they went to a party together.
He had too much to drink or too much to smoke.
He dragged her up the stairs, into a dark room.
She, apparently, also had too much to drink.
She told me she couldn't feel anything, she couldn't think.
She said she said no.
She said she couldn't bring her arms up to fight.
But she said no.
The boy had to write an essay.
She got expelled.
At least she's not dead, though.

Boreal

Bich-Diem Bui • Alief Early College High School

Three months ago, this boy was killed.
 He had met this guy online
 and was super excited to meet him.
 But the guy wasn't real.
 The reports say he was just an old, Christian man
 who hated the LGBTQ+ community.
 He was just an old man with an opinion,
 the news said.
 He pleads psychosis,
 said God told him to do it.
 But the boy was just happy to believe
 there were others like him out there.
 He believed he found someone
 who would accept him for him
 and look beyond his sexual orientation.
 He's dead, though.

In the past year, I've gotten scared.
 My friend went to the Ridge.
 My friend was beaten.
 My friend was shot.
 My friend was raped.
 My friend was killed.
 The news only covers deaths, though.
 Only one of my friends got a fraction of
 the justice they deserved.
 The suicides, the beatings, the shootings, the rapes,
 don't matter until we die.
 I wonder,
 What will become of me?
 At least I'm not dead, yet.

For as long as Dacey Nguyen could remember,
 everyone had always told her how hard she worked.

Her long-since dispersed friend group said it, her
 brother said it, her teachers said it, and even her mother—
 who had replaced naptime with long division lessons
 when Dacey was a child—said it, albeit with pride making
 her obsidian eyes shine.

He had certainly said it.

*I barely see you. You're always working. What kind of
 girlfriend never spends time with her boyfriend?*

She shivered, and it was not from the cold of the library's
 dark halls. Mr. Tram had left a couple of hours before,
 with a sad, knowing smile thrown over his shoulder at
 her as he did. That was another indicator of how hard
 she worked: the fact that the university librarian was her
 best friend.

Dacey closed the textbook in front of her and took off her
 glasses to rub the bridge of her nose. There was an ache
 in her abdomen that ebbed and flowed, though most of
 the time she could just ignore it. The desk lamp she'd
 brought with her cast a fluorescent orb of light over the
 long table, whose empty seats sent another shiver cours-
 ing through her. She reached into her bag and pulled
 out her oversized hoodie, relishing in the feel of the thick
 cotton sliding over her prickled flesh.

Cold, it was always so cold. Mr. Tram had to tum the AC
 off after locking up, naturally, but this cold was deep in
 her bones, this cold had seeped in from that night.

It had been meant to be a simple night out, even if Dacey
 had not actually wanted to go.

She'd had an essay to edit, but words of, *Come on, baby. I
 just want to spend time with my girlfriend*, had sunk into
 her mind and guilted her feet out the door.

He had not spent much time with her at all, preferring to
 guzzle down one beer after another.

A simple night quickly morphed into pleas of, *stop, don't
 touch me*, and slurred words of, *You're my girlfriend, so
 stop fucking moving*.

*White mists puffed out in front of her as she forced her
 breaths out over the weight of him pressing down on her
 chest. The surface of the bench scraped her bare back
 and in spite of her quiet pleas he only bore down on her
 harder and it was cold, so cold—*

She stood and shoved her chair back in with a harsh
 scrape against the wooden floor. She left her supplies
 on the table; she'd have to leave the library this way
 anyways, through the employees' emergency exit.
 Retrieving a flashlight from her bag, she set out into the
 library's circular entrance hall. Her shoes clicked along
 the tile and echoed, again and again.

*His apologies had echoed the morning after. She'd lain
 in bed on her stomach since her back was still too raw,
 her cheek sinking into the cool surface of her pillow. The
 slightest wrong movement had her hissing at the burn
 between her legs.*

*"I'm sorry," he said from his place at her bedside. His
 shadow fell over her. She pulled the blanket tighter
 around herself as a makeshift shield. "I drank too much
 and you looked so gorgeous. When was the last time we
 even—"*

"No," she said aloud. She didn't have time for distractions.
 She had a physics exam she had to pass. Her mother
 made certain she never forgot anything like that. She
 never let her forget.

*Her mother reached over and gripped Dacey's hands in
 her own white-knuckled grasp. "I wanted to succeed, con
 gai, but then I had you and could no longer afford my
 schooling, since I had to raise you on my own." Her thin
 mouth twitched into a sneer before stretching into a tense
 line. "With how hard I've worked to give you everything,
 you must now succeed where I couldn't."*

*"Da, m," Dacey replied, having long since accustomed
 herself to this conversation as if she was an actor read-
 ing off a script.*

*Scene one: M reminds Dacey of how much she sacrificed
 for her. Dacey replies submissively.*

*Her mother cupped Dacey's cheek with a cold, calloused
 hand. "I'm just glad you have all the responsibility your
 father never had, eve vang."*

*Scene one cont.: M brings up Dacey's lowlife, deadbeat
 father who ran back to Vietnam with a woman half his
 age after M told him she was pregnant.*

She shrugged the distraction off and passed the flashlight
 over the titles atop each threshold, leading into different
 sections of the library. *Fiction. Classics. History. Medical.*

A sharp pain stabbed her abdomen as she read the last

2023 Scholarship Winners

MICHELLE OBAMA AWARD FOR MEMOIR

AWARD	NAME, TITLE, SCHOOL
\$10,000 Personal Essay/Memoir	Madison Corzine, <i>What I Wish I Knew: A Suburban Black Girl's Guide</i> , Timber Creek High School, TX

AMANDA GORMAN AWARD FOR POETRY

\$10,000 Poetry	Isabella Rayner, <i>Cafecito para dos, sin leche</i> , Marvin Ridge High School, NC
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MAYA ANGELOU AWARD FOR SPOKEN WORD

\$10,000 Spoken Word	Melissa Vera, <i>America</i> , Edgewood High School, CA
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FICTION & DRAMA AWARD

\$10,000 Fiction & Drama	Karen Yang, <i>Chicken Feet</i> , West Windsor Plainsboro High School, NJ
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NEW YORK CITY ENTRANT AWARD

\$10,000 Poetry	Gloria Blumenkrantz, <i>Global History 2: 10/26/2020</i> , Frank McCourt High School
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HONORABLE MENTIONS LISTED BY SCHOOL

SCHOOL	NAME, TITLE, CATEGORY
47 The American Sign Language and English Secondary School, NY	Ciro Ortiz, <i>The Wholly Unholy Knight</i> , Fiction & Drama
Academy of the Canyons, CA	Skylar Morales, <i>Maria Bertha Hernandez</i> , Poetry
Alfred M. Barbe High School, LA	Emma English, <i>Hurt People, Hurt People</i> , Poetry
Alief Early College High School, TX	Bich-Diem Bui, <i>Boreal</i> , Fiction & Drama
Animo Venice Charter High School, CA	Alondra Sanchez-Felix, <i>My Life</i> , Memoir
Arizona School of the Arts, AZ	Amalia Nevarez, <i>Event Though</i> , Memoir
Arroyo Grande High School, CA	Zoe Lodge, <i>Red Balloons</i> , Fiction & Drama
Belleville High School East, IL	Ava Hamilton, <i>A Yellow Sphere with Red Seams</i> , Memoir
Benjamin N. Cardozo High School, NY	Mariah Massari, <i>Leaving Colors</i> , Poetry
Berkeley High School, CA	Nevaeh Esacario, <i>But I'm Not a Culture Vulture</i> , Memoir
Blanco High School, TX	Chloe Luna, <i>Life Beyond Chronic Illness</i> , Memoir
Braintree High School, MA	Samantha Quigley, <i>Papa's Pearls</i> , Memoir
Branham High School, CA	Alyssa Schneider, <i>Chains of Words</i> , Poetry
Bristol Central High School, CT	Mathew Biadun, <i>The Beast of Autumn</i> , Poetry
Bronx High School of Science, NY	Finley Heesch, <i>Swamplands (after Florida by Audre Lorde)</i> , Poetry
Castro Valley High School, CA	Keidon Quach, <i>Tapioca Dough</i> , Memoir
Central High School, PA	Soren Bungard, <i>Hornet Home for Devils and Haunts</i> , Fiction & Drama
Central Magnet School, TN	Maria Kime, <i>Pertenencia</i> , Memoir
Chattahoochee High School, GA	Taylor Rakestraw, <i>Our History Books</i> , Poetry
Cherry Hill High School West, NJ	Francesca Coleman, <i>The Magic of a Spoon</i> , Memoir
Columbia High School, FL	Samantha Davison, <i>Grief</i> , Fiction & Drama

title. She gasped, her hand shooting out to brace against the wall. The pain persisted for several minutes. When it eased, she straightened and marched into the medical section, her flashlight out in front of her. Had she eaten today? She couldn't recall. Perhaps that was it. She would eat. Later.

She had a physics exam to pass.

She took a deep exhale of the musty paper scent that surrounded her. She knew every inch of this library, and still she walked along the room's perimeter, using her flashlight to expose the tall columns of shelves, the cherry wood tables, and the ornate iron-barred window that, during the day, allowed fractured rays of sun to illuminate the room.

She walked along the rows and rows of books, seeking the title she needed. The light beam passed over the *Journal of Applied Physics*, seven shelves up. She scanned the flashlight around the room, stopping when she spotted a ladder leaning against the shelf a few feet away from her. It was a standard one, not made for climbing bookshelves, due to the meager budget the library had been afforded.

She approached it gingerly and wrapped a hand around a cool metal rung. A memory came to the surface of her mind then. Mr. Tram's face a mix of frustration and pity, his hand squeezing hers in comfort as they talked behind the reception desk.

"I don't want you using the ladders, Dacey. If you need something high up, just tell me," he'd said, kind eyes creased in worry.

"I'm not a kid; I can handle myself" She'd shrugged his hand off and turned away from him, arms held protectively over her chest, not wanting another glimpse of the soft look in his eyes that made her feel so small and breakable, like the slightest wind would have her shattering and scatter the pieces of her far and wide.

. . . Would that be so bad? To be broken into tiny shards that were carried by the mercy of the wind, far from the grasp of mothers' expectations and professors' due dates and monsters that waited for her at home with lingering kisses and arms wrapped tight around her waist?

He'd sighed then. "I just worry about you, Dacey."

Well, Mr. Tram wasn't here now and she needed that book. It was completely innocent. She had a physics exam to pass, after all.

The flashlight went between her teeth, her hands wrapped around the ladder and pushed it over. Her feet found purchase on each rung slowly, the movement unfamiliar. The side rails chilled her bare hands.

Why did it have to be so cold?

She stopped and gripped the left rail tighter, using her right hand to take the flashlight out of her mouth and

shine it upon the book. It was about two feet away. She reached for it, her mind empty of any true thought until the world fell away from under feet, a loud crash sounded, and she landed hard on the floor, all the breath taken from her. She didn't scream.

The tile was achingly cold against her cheek. Her chest heaved up and down, but she stayed still until a horrible, crushing pain started in her abdomen. She cried out, clutching her stomach as she felt liquid beginning to run down her legs. The flashlight lay abandoned on the floor. She touched her hand between her legs and in its light she saw that her fingers came away red.

She gasped and seized. She had never felt such terrible pain before in her life; it felt like her intestines were twisting in a thousand knots, only to rip apart and repeat the process again.

It's worth it.

The thought came unbidden. Dacey shut her eyes tight and gave it no heed, instead focusing on a single mantra: *No one has to know, no one has to know, no one has to know.*

It felt like time didn't move as she lay there, though eventually, she found it within herself to stand on quivering legs and glance out the window to find it still dark outside.

She grabbed her flashlight, righted the ladder, and limped down the halls all the way to the janitor's closet. She took stock of how the items were arranged so that she could put them back later, before grabbing a mop and a bucket.

A light was still on in the women's restroom, courtesy of Mr. Tram, and as Dacey waited for the bucket to fill with sink water, she took a glimpse of herself in the mirror.

Her eyes were red and swollen, her hair was matted with blood, and several dark spots had formed on her hoodie and jeans.

No matter, she thought. She would shower when she got home, put her clothes in the washing machine. No more time than that could be spared for distractions.

She had a physics exam to pass, after all.

2023 Scholarship Winners

HONORABLE MENTIONS LISTED BY SCHOOL

SCHOOL	NAME, TITLE, CATEGORY
Cooper City High School, FL	Nicole Nadler, <i>Nikki Nadler's VerNADcular</i> , Memoir
Corona Del Mar High School, CA	Nadia Khazei, <i>Well Wishes</i> , Fiction & Drama
Cosby High School, VA	Alexia Pittman, <i>Today I</i> , Spoken Word
David Crockett High School, TN	Kaitlyn Marino, <i>Figure</i> , Fiction & Drama
Dublin High School, CA	Prajna Boreddy, <i>Orange</i> , Poetry
Dundee Crown High School, IL	Sasha Forke, <i>The Soup Between Us</i> , Poetry
Eleanor Roosevelt High School, NY	Ruby Hentoff, <i>Epilepsy: The Musical</i> , Memoir
Forest Hills Northern High School, MI	Maria Curcuru, <i>A Trip to the Rough Pool Floor</i> , Memoir
Fountain Valley High School, CA	Keilani Bafim, <i>Who Am I?</i> , Fiction & Drama
Garrard County High School, KY	Alexandria Carroll, <i>Yet</i> , Poetry
Gatlinburg-Pittman High School, TN	Mara Klein, <i>Lavender</i> , Memoir
Godinez Fundamental High School, CA	Katie Tran, <i>Star-Crossed Lovers</i> , Poetry
Horace Greeley High School, NY	Devisi Goel, <i>Dear Durga Maa</i> , Poetry
It Takes A Village Academy, NY	Samia Leslie, <i>Home</i> , Memoir
J. Graham Brown School, KY	Keaira Carr, <i>Him</i> , Fiction & Drama
James Benson Dudley Senior High School, NC	Nylen Brewington Al-Ahmar, <i>Untitled</i> , Poetry
John Marshall High School, MN	Alexandra Vander Pol, <i>In the Pursuit of Happiness</i> , Memoir
Johns Creek High School, GA	Alisha Tan, <i>This Girl is a Gun</i> , Poetry
Kinder High School for the Performing and Visual Arts, TX	Edlyn Escoto, <i>Memories of Love and Hate</i> , Fiction & Drama
Lawrence North High School, IN	Sawyer Rebennack, <i>What it Means to be Healthy</i> , Memoir
Liberal Arts and Sciences Academy, TX	Thahn-Lan Nguyen, <i>Downpour on South 1st Street</i> , Memoir
Lindblom Math & Science Academy, IL	Zalayah Bryan, <i>Mawu</i> , Poetry
Linganore High School, MD	Promise Green, <i>Stop this Violence</i> , Poetry
Livingston Collegiate Academy, LA	Katerra Williams, <i>Stalking You, Stalking Me</i> , Fiction & Drama
Marion Senior High School, VA	Jaelyn Alexander, <i>A Think Piece on the Domestication . . .</i> , Memoir
Marvin Ridge High School, NC	Mikayla Smith, <i>The Pale Garden</i> , Poetry
MAST Academy, FL	Isabelle Cineas, <i>Phoenix</i> , Fiction & Drama
Maynard Jackson High School, GA	Logan Pinkston, <i>Educational Pursuits—Equality and Equity</i> , Memoir
Mechanicsburg Area High School, PA	Ariel Howell, <i>A Day Like Any Other</i> , Poetry
Mira Mesa High School, CA	Jasmine Phuongmy Do, <i>Overdose</i> , Fiction & Drama
New Trier Township High School, IL	Daria Volkova, <i>Their Stories</i> , Fiction & Drama
North Fort Myers High School, FL	Leah Basora, <i>To the Heavens and Back</i> , Memoir
Novato High School, CA	Marguerite Marley, <i>Stay Over</i> , Fiction & Drama
Oconto High School, WI	Faith Patenaude, <i>Bones</i> , Fiction & Drama
Park Hill High School, MO	Yulisia Parker, <i>Self Love and Basketball</i> , Fiction & Drama
Pioneer Valley Chinese Immersion Charter School, MA	Avery Richards, <i>Sucker for Blood</i> , Fiction & Drama
Rockville High School, CT	Anaya Tolton, <i>Dear Black Girl</i> , Poetry
Round Rock High School, TX	Ansh Patel, <i>The Curse of Time</i> , Fiction & Drama
Royal Oak High School, MI	Kaylah Snell, <i>May Freedom Ring</i> , Poetry
San Ramon Valley High School, CA	Angelina Ge, <i>Death to the Glory Days</i> , Fiction & Drama

2023 Scholarship Winners

HONORABLE MENTIONS LISTED BY SCHOOL

SCHOOL	NAME, TITLE, CATEGORY
Sanderson High School, NC	Samantha Roberts, <i>The Other Person</i> , Spoken Word
Saratoga Springs High School, NY	Katie Mattes, <i>Picturing the Summer Days</i> , Fiction & Drama
Springboro High School, OH	Sienna Parks, <i>7/14/22</i> , Poetry
Stuyvesant High School, NY	Anisha Singhal, <i>I Hate that I Care</i> , Memoir
Sunlake High School, FL	Kaitlin Doran, <i>Fiction to Freedom</i> , Memoir
Tampa Bay Technical High School, FL	Uchechi Ibewuikwe, <i>Breath of a Butterfly</i> , Poetry
The Brooklyn Latin School, NY	Deborah Auguste, <i>Pantry Line Road</i> , Spoken Word
Trout Lake High School, WA	Brenna Koester, <i>On the Curve of Infinity</i> , Fiction & Drama
Trumbull High School, CT	Julia Wilkinson, <i>She Shells</i> , Poetry
Urban Assembly School for Leadership and Empowerment, NY	Halla Albukhaiti, <i>The Fifth Position</i> , Memoir
Virginia Virtual Academy, VA	Zoe McBride, <i>Duty</i> , Fiction & Drama
Walnut Hills High School, OH	Kennedy Ly, <i>Just Like Everyone Else</i> , Memoir
Walter Payton College Prep, IL	Annie Wu, <i>The Self Told From Three Scales</i> , Poetry
Warren High School, CA	Alyssa Ramirez, <i>It's Too Late</i> , Poetry
Warren High School, TX	Emery Benton, <i>E Stands for Dreamer</i> , Fiction & Drama
Westlake High School, GA	Daya Brown, <i>Soul Ties</i> , Spoken Word
Wiregrass Ranch High School, FL	Alyssa Cortes, <i>Chapter 1</i> , Memoir

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