

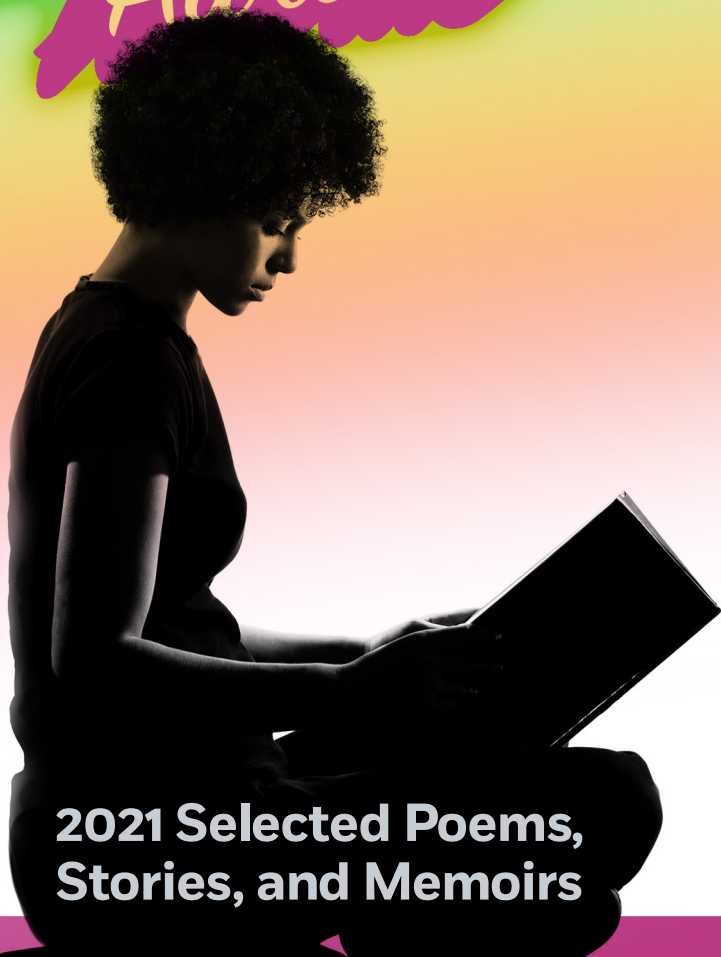
Penguin
Random
House

In partnership with

WNDB®

weneeddiversebooks.org

Creative Writing Awards



**2021 Selected Poems,
Stories, and Memoirs**

INTRODUCTION

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 young adults have to say. Our mantra is that we are looking for writing with a strong, clear voice, by authors who are daring, original, and unafraid to take risks. We want to recognize the unique vision and voices of high school seniors with scholarship awards while encouraging student writers throughout the writing process.

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.

Twenty-seven 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 \$2.8 million dollars in scholarships to public high school students for original poetry, memoir, fiction, drama, and graphic novel 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.

About WNDB

We Need Diverse Books is a grassroots organization of children's book lovers that advocates essential changes in the publishing industry to produce and promote literature that reflects and honors the lives of all young people. It is our mission to put more books featuring diverse characters in the hands of all children. You can learn more about our programs at www.diversebooks.org.

2021 Scholarship Winners

FIRST PLACE SCHOLARSHIP AWARDS

Award	Name, Title, School
\$10,000 Poetry	Evelyn Lee, <i>My Mother Rejected God When She Was 19 But I Don't Think God Ever Really Got Over It</i> , Sam Houston High School, LA
\$10,000 Fiction & Drama	Ally Guo, <i>Superstition</i> , William Mason High School, OH
\$10,000 Personal Memoir	Ajok Thon, <i>(Un)erasable Shade</i> , High Tech High Media Arts, CA

MAYA ANGELOU AWARD FOR SPOKEN WORD POEM

Award	Name, Title, School
\$10,000 Spoken Word	Chloe Cramutola, <i>Why</i> , Absegami High School, NJ

NEW YORK CITY ENTRANT AWARD

Award	Name, Title, School
\$10,000 Poetry	Tandika Somwaru, <i>How to Write the Great Guyanese Novel</i> , Midwood High School, Brooklyn, NY

HONORABLE MENTIONS Listed by School

School	Name, Title, Category
Academy of Information Technology & Engineering, CT.....	Carlee Reid, <i>Double Image</i> , Spoken Word
Alexander Hamilton Senior High School, CA.....	Djuna Appel-Riehle, <i>When I Start Panicking, I Play Joanna Newsom</i> , Poetry
Amador High School, CA.....	Nicolas Keys, <i>Best By 1/25/21</i> , Poetry
Amherst Regional High School, MA.....	Shreya Venkataraman, <i>Separation of Cultures</i> , Fiction & Drama
Amherst Regional High School, MA.....	Rohini Narayanan, <i>The Holding</i> , Poetry
Athens Drive Magnet High School, NC.....	Queen Isis Merck, <i>I Am Not Your Black Girl Dictionary</i> , Poetry
Baccalaureate School for Global Education, NY.....	Henry Trinh, <i>Interconnected</i> , Personal Essay/Memoir
Benjamin N. Cardozo High School, NY.....	Amanda Roa, <i>Pretend</i> , Poetry
Berkeley High School, CA.....	Ilana Handwerker, <i>Two Years, Two Sides</i> , Fiction & Drama

HONORABLE MENTIONS Listed by School

School	Name, Title, Category
Blanchard High School, OK	Kevin Zheng, <i>Transcribing to Translating to Communicating</i> , Personal Essay/Memoir
Bozeman High School, MT	Kross Carter, <i>Hooked</i> , Personal Essay/Memoir
Caroline High School, VA	Cayla White, <i>Same Sands</i> , Poetry
Chaffey High School, CA	Abigail Pratt, <i>A Dichotomy in Submission</i> , Poetry
Chancellor High School, VA	Amirah Ahmed, <i>Baba, Please</i> , Spoken Word
Chatham High School, NY	Kourtney Hotaling, <i>Deep Rooted Youth</i> , Poetry
Civic Leadership Academy, NY	Victory Ogunnaya, <i>Marches</i> , Fiction & Drama
Coppell High School, TX	Stacy Benjamin, <i>It's not me, It's you</i> , Poetry
Cypress Creek High School, FL	Emily Maldonado, <i>Fates Sealing in a Dark Truth</i> , Fiction & Drama
DC Everest Senior High, WI	Abigail Kurszewski, <i>Math Genius</i> , Poetry
Dunkerton High School, IA	Hannah O'Connell, <i>A Blessing or A Curse</i> , Fiction & Drama
Eastlake High School, CA	Paulina Zacharko, <i>Any Door, Any Where</i> , Personal Essay/Memoir
Edgemont Junior-Senior High School, NY	Chase Feng, <i>The Last Insignia</i> , Fiction & Drama
Edward R Murrow High School, NY	Elise Guzman, <i>Lost In The Stars</i> , Personal Essay/Memoir
Edward R Murrow High School, NY	Miguel Trejo, <i>Friends by Choice</i> , Personal Essay/Memoir
Everglades High School, FL	Alanah Maceus, <i>A Monster's Weakness</i> , Fiction & Drama
Fayetteville High School, AR	Amelia Lindsey, <i>Maria</i> , Poetry
Frank Sinatra School of the Arts High School, NY	Ashley DiLorenzo, <i>Hopefully</i> , Fiction & Drama
Glen Rock High School, NJ	Yejin Suh, <i>Batmen</i> , Personal Essay/Memoir
Granada Hills Charter High School, CA	Veronica Flores, <i>Cranberry Pie</i> , Fiction & Drama
Hellmann Homeschool, TX	Katrina Hellmann, <i>The End</i> , Fiction & Drama
Henry W. Grady High School, GA	Inaya Abdul-Haqq, <i>Felix</i> , Fiction & Drama
Highland High School, CA	Adia Luke, <i>My Blackness Surprises Them</i> , Poetry
Homewood-Flossmoor High School, IL	Lauren Proby, <i>Shining Like the Sun You've Never Seen</i> , Personal Essay/Memoir
Hunter College High School, NY	Amy Liu, <i>In Light Of</i> , Poetry
Hunter College High School, NY	Sylvi Stein, <i>AP Existentialism: Final Exam</i> , Poetry

HONORABLE MENTIONS Listed by School

School	Name, Title, Category
I H Kempner High School, TX	Stephanie Agu, <i>Curiosity Killed the Cat</i> , Personal Essay/Memoir
Indian Trail High School and Academy, WI ..	Abigail Herrick, <i>My Old Friend</i> , Personal Essay/Memoir
John Adams High School, IN	Emilio David, <i>He was my best friend.</i> , Poetry
Klamath Union High School, OR	Zoe Hill Sparks, <i>A Buttermilk Yellow Stranger</i> , Fiction & Drama
Livingston High School, NJ	Joyce He, <i>The Curry 4's</i> , Personal Essay/Memoir
Long Beach Polytechnic, CA	Krisalin Bergajo, <i>Five to Infinity</i> , Poetry
Los Osos High School, CA	Nic Kawecki, <i>The Parts Which Make the Whole</i> , Personal Essay/Memoir
Lower Merion High School, PA	Claire Sun, <i>File 100802: The Case of the Missing Chinese</i> , Personal Essay/Memoir
Loy Norrix High School, MI	Emerson Wesselhoff, <i>How to Write an Obituary with No Words</i> , Fiction & Drama
McKinney Boyd High School, TX	Ryan Walter, <i>Desiderium</i> , Personal Essay/Memoir
Meadow Brook School of Intellect, MI	Grace Scott, <i>The Three Sisters</i> , Fiction & Drama
Mountain View High School, CA	Roohi Joshi, <i>Pitts Falls: The Rakshasa Runes</i> , Fiction & Drama
Muriel W. Battle High School, MO	Marissa Moore, <i>G.E.N.E.V.A.</i> , Fiction & Drama
Murphy High School, AL	Lily Sloman, <i>The America that Kills Me</i> , Spoken Word
New Berlin West Middle & High School, WI	Ava Feider, <i>Broken Bowls</i> , Personal Essay/Memoir
North Houston Early College High School, TX	Kaleya Ervin, <i>Defiance</i> , Personal Essay/Memoir
Northwest Career & Technical Academy, NV	Paige Lawrie, <i>Tender Lessons</i> , Personal Essay/Memoir
Carrollton School of the Sacred Heart, FL	Jimena Menendez, <i>I Am</i> , Poetry
Northwest Guilford High, NC	Madison Lela McDonald, <i>Northern Star</i> , Fiction & Drama
Northern Utah Academy for Math, Engineering & Science, UT	Tre Wingle, <i>Asperger's and Me, Maybe</i> , Personal Essay/Memoir
Oconomowoc High School, WI	Leah Schneck, <i>Spilling the Tea on What Happened Between George and Amara</i> , Fiction & Drama

HONORABLE MENTIONS Listed by School

School	Name, Title, Category
Orange County School of the Arts, CA	Jonathan Truong, <i>Where Are You Going? Where Am I Going?</i> , Fiction & Drama
Palo Alto Senior High School, CA	Jennifer Solgaard, <i>Empty Plates</i> , Fiction & Drama
Pembroke Pines Charter High School, FL	Madison Bambino, <i>Something Yellow</i> , Fiction & Drama
Pensacola High School, FL	Ashley Wu, <i>Today</i> , Fiction & Drama
Rockledge, FL	Arrie Whitten, <i>Shoe Box</i> , Personal Essay/Memoir
San Dimas High School, CA	Chloe Jones, <i>My Black America</i> , Poetry
San Leandro High School, CA	Rahsaan Smith, <i>Where I Am From</i> , Poetry
Shadow Mountain High School, AZ	Isabella Johnstone, <i>The Glasswood Murder</i> , Fiction & Drama
South Kitsap High School, WA	Aurora Asay, <i>Aquarium</i> , Poetry
South Pasadena High School, CA	Matthew Tsai, <i>Today</i> , Personal Essay/Memoir
Southeastern Regional Vocational Technical High School, MA	Julie Canuto-Depina, <i>A Distant Home</i> , Personal Essay/Memoir
Stuyvesant High School, NY	Aki Yamaguchi, <i>The Little Girl in a Rice Patty</i> , Fiction & Drama
Stuyvesant High School, NY	Cindy Zheng, <i>Womanly (Chenxi: Market)</i> , Poetry
The Bronx High School of Science, NY	Jiada Valenza, <i>Road Trip Lessons</i> , Personal Essay/Memoir
Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology, VA	Sahaj Vederey, <i>What's More Important? Fruit or Cups?</i> , Personal Essay/Memoir
Toledo School for the Arts, OH	Angelina Sanders, <i>Thank You Nana, I'm Sorry Nana</i> , Poetry
Unionville High School, PA	Katie Cowart, <i>Creekside Preserve</i> , Personal Essay/Memoir
White Plains High School, NY	Lauren Azrin, <i>Every Time I Close My Eyes</i> , Poetry



Chloe Cramutola

SPOKEN WORD

Creative Writing Mantra:

"Write like you mean it." I can be so hard on myself, an unforgiving perfectionist—but if I can write with unabashed passion and feeling and honesty, then I can be satisfied with what I've created.

My Hobbies:

Writing, creating music, rewatching *The Office* (again), and downing my thousandth cup of coffee

College I Packed Up For: Atlantic Cape Community College



Ajok Thon

PERSONAL MEMOIR

Creative Writing Mantra:

Write the hidden songs of your heart.

My Hobbies:

Singing, playing piano, writing, and running!

College I Packed Up For: New York University



Ally Guo

FICTION & DRAMA

Creative Writing Mantra:

In the end, whether I love them or hate them, my words are my own.

My Hobbies:

Writing, reading, drawing, watching animated shows/movies,
overthinking things.

College I Packed Up For: University of Southern California



Evelyn Lee

POETRY

Creative Writing Mantra:

*"Perhaps I write for no one. Perhaps for the same person children
are writing for when they scrawl their names in the snow."*

–Margaret Atwood

My Hobbies:

Writing, slam poetry, photography, and listening to true
crime podcasts.

College I Packed Up For: University of New Orleans



Tandika Somwaru

NYC ENTRANT

Creative Writing Mantra:

My creative writing mantra is simple yet something that people tend to struggle with—I know I have in the past. It is to be patient. Not every idea or piece of writing you produce will come to you naturally or live up to your expectations. You need to be patient with yourself and take the time to really think things through.

My Hobbies:

Besides creative writing, I really like to bake. I find that it is a great tool for stress relief and can be very rewarding when you master a recipe or when something you bake comes out just the way you want it to.

College I Packed Up For: Siena College

CONTENTS

- 3 **Why** *by Chloe Cramutola*
- 9 **(Un)erasable Shade** *by Ajok Thon*
- 13 **Superstition** *by Ally Guo*
- 23 **My Mother Rejected God When She Was 19
But I Don't Think God Ever Got Over It**
by Evelyn Lee
- 27 **How To Write the Great Guyanese Novel**
by Tandika Somwaru
- 31 **Batmen** *by Yejin Suh*
- 41 **The America that Kills Me** *by Lily Sloman*
- 45 **Separation of Cultures** *by Shreya Venkataraman*
- 55 **I Am Not Your Black Girl Dictionary**
by Queen Isis Merck
- 63 **When I Start Panicking, I Play Joanna Newsom**
by Djuna Appel-Riehle
- 67 **Hooked** *by Kross Carter*
- 71 **Where Are You Going? Where Am I Going?**
by Jonathan Truong
- 81 **The Curry 4's** *by Joyce He*
- 87 **How to Write an Obituary with No Words**
by Emerson Wesselhoff

“If at first he isn’t strangled by injustice,
shot down by Hatred, harassed by words
and slurs and mauled by thoughts that
scream Discrimination—forget about life.”

—Chloe Cramutola

First Place

\$10,000 Scholarship Award

SPOKEN WORD

Why

By Chloe Cramutola

Absegami High School

Why is it
that a black man can forget his
license
and somehow find himself at the face of a life
sentence—?
if he is lucky.
If at first he isn't strangled by Injustice, shot
down by Hatred,
harassed by words and slurs and mauled by thoughts that scream
Discrimination—forget
about life, why is it
that a black man may have to accept
a *death* sentence?

Why is it
that an asian girl can
be blamed for a pandemic
a worldwide affliction that *should* encourage unification?

Instead

it has excused hate crimes, fueled suspicions and bigotry,
lumped ethnicities and nationalities—

“Wear your mask, be careful,
stay wary and away from the Yellow
Peril.”

Why is it

that people are so open to
expressing their views
but so against opening their minds to the truth—?
or to anyone’s variation of an interpretation

God forbid I disagree or try to enlighten
your blackout tunnel vision?

So against embracing our differences,
you only see color, the appearance,
not the soul
not the individual experience.

Despite improvement

in our idea of Acceptance,
I ask again:

Why is it

that still we find fault with
the shade of our skin,
the shape of our bodies,
our gender identities and

sexual orientation?

Why are we satisfied

finding time to criticize

instead of searching our souls

for more than what we loathe

or carrying Compassion or learning

Love—

the very assassin of Malice?

Why is it

that in the land of the free

in the 21st century

I still hear the words “Go back to your country”

“Your culture is not mine and mine is not yours”

“Go back to a place where you were never born”?

In what is supposed to be a place of

civility

diversity

beautiful Be You inclusivity

it sometimes feels like we’ve lost all affability,

all sense that is supposed to be common

courtesy

or even the bare minimum called human

decency.

Why is it

that we find it so difficult

to glance past our hatred?

If we were to simply
try—
learning and yearning

for a semblance of understanding a sliver
of acceptance
a pinprick-air-bubble of open
mindedness

It may never be enough,
but it would be something
it would be worth it
it would be worth the progress
that comes with it.

“I will teach you to not hide from the sun,
but to step into its light and appreciate its
gift. And while you may not be today’s
standard of beauty, I dare you to create
your own.”

—Ajok Thon

First Place

\$10,000 Scholarship Award

MEMOIR

(Un)erasable Shade

By Ajok Thon

High Tech High Media Arts

The idea of having “bad skin” always terrified me. Everyone in my family had the perfect complexion: even-toned and not a blemish in sight. However, at the age of 11, my perception of “good skin” took on a new definition. Underneath my bumps, acne scars, and dark spots was something far more permanent: my dark complexion.

From an early age, I learned to tie my worth to the shade of my skin. I can still hear my Sudanese aunts and grandmothers exclaiming, “La taqif fi alshams lifatrat tawilat wa’illa satusbih bashratak ‘aghmaq.” “Do not stay in the sun too long or your skin will get darker.” So, I made an enemy of the sun, hiding from it, thinking I could not afford to get any darker than I already was. Through my social interactions, I continued to face this stigma. My Black classmates and I would gather in a circle, pitting our wrists against one another to determine who was the lightest. I could never win this game. This led me to seek out a “solution” to the “problem” of my skin.

I could hear my mother’s heavy footsteps coming up the stairs, approaching my room. When I heard the creak of my frail wooden door, I shut my eyes and pretended to sleep. Once I heard my mother’s door slam, I emerged from my bed and tiptoed downstairs, hoping that the squeaky noises of our staircase would not wake her. With the use of my phone’s flashlight, I entered my mother’s bathroom. I slowly opened her brown cosmetics cabinet to find a white and orange bottle of face cream that read in bold letters, “CARO WHITE LIGHTENING BEAUTY CREAM.” On the bottle was a beautiful, dark-haired, and pale-skinned woman looking back at me, taunting my dark skin. There

we were, staring at each other like opposites on the color wheel. I slowly unscrewed the cap, lifted the lid, and faced the sharp, fragrant scent. I frantically lathered the smooth white cream throughout my body it seemed as though I was trying to wipe the tint of my skin off like a stain. But it was not that easy. Even with these efforts, it seemed as though my complexion only darkened over time. I lost hope.

I resented my reflection in the mirror. However, I realized I had one of two options: I could spend most of my life hating a part of me I could never change, or I could learn to appreciate it. To start this journey of self-love, I made small changes in my actions. I stopped telling myself “I wish I looked like her.” Instead, I took more self-portraits in admiration. I started listening to spoken word poetry about beauty and self-confidence, and I joined my school’s Black Student Union. To my surprise, the students in this club shared similar experiences. They uplifted me and helped me value my complexion.

By making these small changes in my daily life, I substituted the negativity I felt toward my skin with positive affirmations. My actions led the way, and my mind followed. Over time, it started to feel less like I was trying to convince myself of something and more like I was growing into myself. While I may not be able to change my past experiences, I will say this to my future Black daughter: There is no such thing as too dark. When others use that word as a weapon against your skin, create an impenetrable shield of self-love so strong that you cannot be shaken. I will teach you not to hide from the sun, but to step into its light and appreciate its gift. And while you may not be today’s standard of beauty, I dare you to create your own. I urge you to defy the world’s expectations and challenge the status quo. I urge you to love yourself as you are.

“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.”

—Ally Guo

First Place

\$10,000 Scholarship Award

FICTION & DRAMA

Superstition

By Ally Guo

William Mason High School

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 fiance'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 straightened 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 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 good-night. 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.

“When he caught me staring, he bared his sharp teeth in warning and quickly stole the form of a man.”

—Evelyn Lee

First Place

\$10,000 Scholarship Award

POETRY

My Mother Rejected God When She Was 19 But I Don't Think God Got Over It.

By Evelyn Lee

Sam Houston High School

I.

The first time I met God

I caught him gnawing holes through the wire fencing

that separated my backyard from

the old Jerry Falwell church on Thomas Road.

When he caught me staring, he bared his sharp teeth in warning

and quickly stole the form of a man.

When I asked him, *Why are you biting holes in my fence?*

he smiled and confessed that he wanted the televangelist static

from Thomas Road Baptist Church

to leak into my open

windows like polluted runoff.

II.

The second time I met God,
I was bathing in the blue glow of the tv screen,
mesmerized by how the televangelist preacher on tv
moved his arms like he was a slam poet,
how he emphasized every word when he asked his congregation for
A generous donation in the name of the lord.

With a cunning smile on his face, I watched God hover behind him,
invisible and whispering every word into the preacher's ear
like he was confessing.

When God noticed me staring at him through the glassy tv screen,
he cut his words short and narrowed his eyes on me.
But this time, instead of baring fangs,
he just shrugged and mouthed, *I'm broke. What do you expect me to do?*
And quieter, *And, hey, tell your mother I'm coming over for coffee in an hour.*

Preface:

My mother rejected God when she was 19.

She always told me,
When I pushed you out of my body,
pink and blind like a baby mouse,
it wasn't out of any god's will but my own.

(My mother rejected God when she was
19 but I don't think God ever really got over it).

And, with that being said, God glided over
the lawn of Thomas Road Baptist Church
into my backyard like a ghost,
letting himself through the holes in my fence
and knocking on the backdoor.

III.

Between sips of coffee and small talk at the kitchen table,
God smiled politely at my mother and said, *I brought your daughter a gift,*
handing me a neatly wrapped children's bible.

To amuse him, I read the story of Abraham and Issac out loud
and said, *Sir, if you're attempting to convert a child with a children's bible,*

you'd think the first story wouldn't be about child sacrifice, would you?

But God didn't laugh—

Instead, with a grimace, he gathered his coat and poured his coffee
down the drain.

My mother grabbed his wrist, shattering the coffee mug in the sink
and whispered violently in his ear,

If you ever ask me to sacrifice my daughter in the name of my faith,
I will sacrifice you in the name of my daughter instead, you hear me?
and slammed the door behind him on his way out.

“Her hair should be long and black as night.
It should glisten like the mane of a black
stallion under the sharp rays of the sun.”

—Tandika Somwaru

First Place

\$10,000 Scholarship Award

NYC ENTRANT

How To Write the Great Guyanese Novel¹

By Tandika Somwaru

Midwood High School

Skip the once upon a time. There is nothing remotely mesmerizing about a backward land overflowing with backward people.

The main character must be a woman. For the men are too busy being alcoholics or looking for their daily erotic fix.

She must be beautiful with buttery brown skin—not an imperfection in sight. Her hair should be long and black as night. It should glisten like the mane

of a black stallion under the sharp rays of the sun. Despite her copy-cat Caribbean culture and the displeasing taste of regarding her people as Indians, her name must be a standard Indian

¹I acknowledge full credit to the poem's structure to:

Alexie, Sherman. "How to Write the Great American Indian Novel by..." Poetry Foundation, Poetry Foundation, 1996, www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/52775/how-to-write-the-great-american-indian-novel.

name—rolling off the tongue like Avani or even Asha. She must concentrate on her studies—a *dunce* child will not be tolerated! And most importantly, she must know how to cook and clean.

Anything else and her husband will have no choice but to leave her for some *sweet woman pon de backroad*. If she's a *coolie gyal*, then her father must be Indo-Guyanese, and her mother

afro-Guyanese, because no pure Indo-Guyanese family will allow their daughter to engage in such an atrocity.

There must be themes of greed, arguments that erupt like active volcanoes, and a sprinkle of domestic violence throughout. This ensures you cover all aspects of the copy-cat Caribbean culture.

Sometimes there are special circumstances in which the protagonist can not be a woman. For example, she may be neurotic or drink poison as a rebellion against her forbidden

relationship with an Afro-Guyanese—a true Romeo and Juliet tale. Or even worse, her hair reflects that of cotton, and her skin dark and rusty. This is a flaw we can not have.

Therefore, the main character must be a lazy man. It is absolutely mandatory that his persona represents the epitome of masculinity. He must be patriotic to this backward land and disrespect

his wife—the woman that bore his five children and claps fresh roti until blisters cover her hands like cloth and turn as red as a newly sprouted rose.

In order to truly cover all aspects of the copy-cat Caribbean culture, there must be a conclusive ending—cliffhangers were not meant for people who lack mere common sense.

It should follow along the lines of this: In a land built on the blistering backs of African and Indian migrants, the people of Guyana are essentially one. Even though slavery and colonization have

lashed the people, and as Poverty continues to lash their blistered backs, the Guyanese people—fruitful in diversity, will always celebrate in the times of good and bad.

What is different about the Great Guyanese Novel is that unlike many, the Guyanese people have already found their sense of belonging. It is with each other.

“Across the wide mouth of water stretched
dappled trees like small Brussels sprouts,
country eventually fading into fogged city
skyline.”

—Yejin Suh

Honorable Mention

PERSONAL MEMOIR

Batmen

By Yejin Suh

Glen Rock High School

While I was sticking bandaids over my nipples, I realized I'd forgotten to lock the door. If my mom walked in, she'd ask, "What the hell are you doing," in that mild way of hers, and I'd have to explain that I always wear bandaids under thin shirts because it wasn't socially acceptable for women's nipples to be visible through thin shirts after centuries of patriarchal rule, except bras are physically detrimental to our bodies, and it was ninety degrees and climbing out, so I had to stick to the bandaids, like covering up an injury—two blasted wounds on my chest that weren't supposed to be there.

Luckily, she never walked in on me. Half an hour later we sat sprawled along my favorite spot along the Hudson—this rundown park bench on a cliff off the Palisades Interstate Highway—with my band-aids affixed. Across the wide mouth of water stretched dappled trees like small Brussels sprouts, country eventually fading into fogged city skyline.

We were talking about my dad. Actually, she was talking about my dad, and I was groping a dandelion between my thumb and index finger.

"He's good," she was saying.

I shrugged.

"He is," she insisted. "Just . . . misguided. He doesn't know how to show it. But he's trying his best."

I have this recurring daydream where the Founding Fathers come back to life. Through cryogenics, or something—the logistics don't

really matter—and I'm singularly tasked with the job of acclimating them to the modern, 21st-century world. I was trying to head back to this daydream now. First I'd take them to this very spot. "Look," I'd nudge George Washington with an elbow—because we were friendly and companionable like that. "That bridge is named after you." Him in his 18th-century garb, white linen knickers and knee socks, me in my Nikes and respectably thin shirt, no bra. He'd gaze on with muted, pleased surprise. He'd be so pleased, in fact, that I wouldn't mention that his bridge was a motorist's true nightmare, the source of endless, irrefutable misery and frustration for hundreds of thousands of commuters on the daily: the slow stretch of corporate cogs in clean-pressed suits, tapping wary fingers against the sides of their Lincolns; the college kickbacks with their feet up their convertible dashboards; my own mother hurling an evocative Konglish cocktail curse mix at her own steering wheel; every one of them strapped bumper to bumper in baking summer heat or that mind-numbing East Coast winter.

If I had all the Founding Fathers lined up side-by-side on my park bench, I could pick any one of them to be my new dad. Or all of them—a paternal horde.

"Are you listening to me?" she snapped.

I nodded. The flower was smithereens between my fingers.

She pressed, "So what do you think." It wasn't really a question so much as a warning that if I wasn't listening closely, she'd continue to talk, or if I was listening too closely, she'd also continue to talk—land-mines in every direction.

"I . . . agree." "With what?"

"With what you said."

She pinched the bridge of her nose.

My mom has this unyielding philosophy that people never change. Parts of us might, sure, but at our innermost, deepest core, we don't budge, not really. I think the opposite is true—which is why it was painful, really, for me to be insisting that my dad was more or less genetically programmed to be an asshole, while she waxed poetic about his spectacular growth. She looked at me, said earnestly, "He didn't mean it, you know. He loves you." I nodded.

There's that running joke where you can literally say anything you want under the sun in America except for one exception, one nuclear trigger. In episode 3 of the Harley Quinn show—this new “dark humor” animated R-rated spin on Gotham villains—no one bats an eye when a villain smashes cars together and slams Wonder Woman into the side of a building, but after he calls her the c-word during a fight, the Earth literally stops turning. He's disowned by his supervillain clique and desperately tries to salvage his rep on national talk shows.

Now, trying to learn the cuss hierarchy of a language I've been forgetting in increments since kindergarten? Kind of like playing with fire. I mean, it's like groping for something in the dark, like catching a ball in a game where you don't know the rules. I wanted the definition, the nuance, the subtle shades of this delectable word that made it this perfect verbal suckerpunch. I wanted the whole toolbox, see. Like, which word should I pull out today? The one that'll sting, one that's abrasive, the one that's honest to God funny, and should I pair it with this delectable word sandwich, between Jesus and Christ, or what? I'd stay up all night trying to translate a word and guess at its day-in-the-life context in its origin country three thousand miles away across the Yellow Sea.

Luckily, there are plenty of Internet discussions to peruse about learning the Korean language, between k-pop obsessed weaboo fetishists, slow first-generation immigrant children like me, and jobless white saviors with dreams of teaching English to rural South Asian villagers in run-down jungle huts. In one Duolingo chatroom, AnimeTittyLover3960 enlightened us:

*No, this one's a real curse word. It's usually only used in situations of serious anger, not casually. It doesn't really have a direct English translation, but it's like a combination of b*tch, wh*re, c*nt, and idiot.*

And [heart]Jimin[heart] countered: *really? my friend's mom calls her kids that affectionately all the time tho.*

And yet someone else said:

“He didn't mean it, you know.”

I sighed, nodded again. I imagined John Adams staring me in the face and screaming, C*nt! Parchment flying everywhere.

//

The most surprising part of it all is that it was never surprising to begin with. My dad's girlfriend at the time bust into a bar and threw her drink in his face because he was flirting with my future mom. When my mom tells that story now, I'm like, "Don't you think that's kind of a red flag?" and she shrugs and says, "I was impressed." Then I think something like: how in the ever living (cuss) could anyone fall for such a cocky, brash, emotionally constipated, borderline evil, self-loathing, brooding, narcissistic, apathetic, high-horse, womanizer male? Then I remember I crushed on characters like Batman for most of my childhood. Accusing my mom of giving into her misogynistic-inclined tendencies is sort of like blaming her for breathing oxygen. Kind of inevitable. It's the sort of thing that that makes me clamp down on my feelings, stick band-aids over my nipples, made me idolize this freak superhero/vigilante to the ends of the Earth because he was precisely everything I ever wanted to be, which was really, when it boiled down to it—not a woman.

So I'm thinking of my mom, maybe ten or eleven, wrapped up in her bed in this dingy little apartment somewhere south of Seoul trying to fall asleep, and her dad busting into her room at three in the morning, drunk off his ass, shaking her awake and slurring nonsense words in her ear. It's like how the crime rate in Gotham City has never gone down, even after all those nights of Batman's head-bashing and teeth-gritting. Villains just pop up over and over again like some kind of disease. And if I were a better person, maybe I wouldn't say things to her like, "I guess you like it when men treat you like dirt." And then I think about Bruce Wayne beating the ever-living shit out of me. Sometimes letting people hurt you is the only way you can get them to put their hands on you. Even I understand that.

//

I finally understand, vaguely, what makes a home a home. It's not really always the people, or the physical feel of it—it's really how much that cuss stings on a scale from one to ten, and how much that great, ugly thing burgeoning in your throat rears its head. It's how much you want to escape and how many times you're told to head upstairs and lock your doors. Because when someone is screaming in your face,

"This is my home/my rules/my ground/etcetera," it doesn't really feel you belong, surprisingly. And staring at the world map, I couldn't really do anything except head to some other world, where I was showing James Madison our roomba. "It's kind of like a pet, but it's not alive," I'd say, watching it bump around my desk legs. "It's a little robot that cleans the floors." He'd hum thoughtfully.

Every time she'd say, "He didn't mean it, you know," and I wanted to wring her out and scream, *That's the entire problem! The problem is, that he didn't mean it! The problem is, that he says and does a number of things with terrifying callousness.* But I didn't say a thing. Like how none of us ever said a thing sitting down at our dinner table, day after day, ignoring the elephant—or scratch that, not an elephant, an overgrown Tyrannosaurus Rex with freakish proportions—sitting dumbly in the kitchen. I never really did decode the cuss hierarchy, even though I looked it up over and over again grasping at straws, trying to cross this bridge I'd lost a decade ago through my ancestors, because I wanted to know this word just for that semblance of dignity. That little morsel of self-worth you try to salvage after someone's backhanded you across space—someone twice your size, someone larger and louder who takes up all the air in a room, someone who shows it on their face, worst of all, someone who knows all this, and does it anyway.

//

In the famous four-issue storyline *Batman: A Death in the Family* #428, Joker beats Robin to death. Then Robin comes back to life, and he's out for revenge against Batman. He trains for years to kill Batman.

The first time my dad left for Korea for a long while, we didn't know when we'd see him again. My mom wept in the airport. I hated her for it. I wanted to shake her by the shoulders and yell in her face: *Can't you see we are feeling the same thing inside? When you let it out, you make it worse.* You confirm the existence of a hole that isn't supposed to be there. You coalesce a feeling into reality, when you show it on your face. If I let go of anything, I'll catch myself. I have to watch myself. Sometimes I almost feel like I'm hunting myself—waiting for my face to slip up and confess, dissolve into prayer, right between my cross-hairs: *Gotcha. Where's your control now?*

I watched him board the plane. Trained my face into something I hoped was cold and hard. He'd call me once he landed on the other side, but I knew I'd just let my phone ring itself into oblivion.

Because I hated him. Because the truth of it was, I'd spent years loitering outside his office at home on the off-chance he might invite me in to ask about my day. I wanted nothing else in the entire world than for that office door to creak open, for him to gesture me inside. Give me that nod of approval. I was seventeen now, far past that childish idolatry, yet the part of me that strained for that nod, that murmur of love, was enough for me to turn against myself. I hated him. Because I'd slotted myself between my dresser and wall upstairs a week before, because I wanted to be surrounded on three sides, dreading that heavy thud of footsteps climbing up, the drunken breath slurring through the door. In the end, it all boiled down to control. The Bat lurking between walls, preying on whoever he deems the next suspect, taking down in the dark. He had power, absolutely all the power he could ever drain and suck out of the house, and I had none. I was terrified. I was hopeless. But most importantly, I was jealous, and I wanted it too.

Boarding that plane, he was choosing to give me absolutely nothing, not even rejection, and he knew it.

//

In the *Tower of Babel* Issues #43-36, Bats gets kicked out of the Justice League because it turns out he's got plans to wipe all of them out in case any of them go bad or get mind-controlled. That's his whole thing, I guess: stacking contingency plan under contingency plan under plan until every single variable has been more or less accounted for, and anyone who the plan's been written against has every exit blocked off. It's blatant paranoia and a desperate grab for dominance, but since a guy's doing it, he's just a mastermind planner.

My dad went halfway around the world, and I was sure that eventually, he'd recognize the people he depended on with crippling need, realizing that with no one to impress and no one to flatter, his purpose would extinguish. I was wrong. He detached. He found others. He was flexible. It was sort of like a game: I knew he didn't give

a shit about me, and he knew I didn't give a shit about him, yet we were still bound by an inextricable, fine thread. I updated him regularly on the monumental progressions of my coming-of-age narrative: driver's license, December SAT, 17th birthday in the city. It's because he knew, in the end, there would always be a nest for him here, in the States, once he'd destroyed everything there, we'd still be forced to open our doors for him, our doors that are lined by his pockets. That's when I truly discovered what a contingency was. His money's everywhere, really, it's bound to this house, and the walls reek of it, the foundation creaks with it.

//

In English class once we read this story about a woman in the 19th-century who finds out her husband's dead. Then when she finds out he's actually alive, she has a heart attack and dies. My class was apathetic about it, as things are with most English classes. I said, "That sucks." It did suck. It only occurred to me later that we were trained not to see these things, even if it was right in front of our faces. It's re-reading a book for the tenth time and noticing the details you missed before, except this time, it's in real life, and those details are the wagging remnants of a bygone era. I use the term *bygone* loosely.

It's in such simple terms as man versus woman. I'm those extra two letters, that pathetic tail hanging off the front, a burden. I'm the *Miss* and *Mrs* and *Ms* versus *Mr*; I'm too specific about my titles, I'm a lot to handle, I'm a lot of work. The catch-22 is that society dictates the extra ways in which we're required to make ourselves respectable for everyday life, and then berates us for the time it takes and the energy we use up. The catch-22 is the men who loiter outside to complain, *They take so long in the bathroom*, and what do they think we're doing in the bathroom? Adjusting our clothing, freshening up makeup, spritzing on perfume. Because you'll see our bra strap peeking out or our lipstick smudged and think *This is not what you should be*. Unlike you, there is no default for us. Every choice we make with our appearance or our demeanor constitutes to something. I'm that wish I think many women have: to be that default—inconspicuous and unnoticeable unless I choose to be.

In a worse universe, the woman in the story survives, and has to

live like every other modest woman in that time, forced to scramble under her husband's feet for the rest of her life, invisibly shackled by a man, and overlooked by society, a society today which still encourages young men of really a certain temperament and nature to amass fortunes in business and technology and science and bind them to a house and wife and by default, children, to construct what is really a failsafe contingency plan to trap generation after generation. We're surrounded by Batmen, really. In most issues, he's brooding on a Gotham City rooftop.

//

Robin (the first one) and Batman are characters eternally doomed to live out their mangled interpersonal relationship. I think about that first time my dad left for Korea. Something unfurled in me, like a newborn deer, fur wet and crinkled, legs unsteady—it was tentative, but unletting. I wasn't sure what it was, but it was new. It took unsteady breaths. When I came home from the airport, I breathed in the house. The walls still reeked of him, but before, when the stench was impalpable, now it was fading—no tension lined the walls, no floors unsteady like tectonic plates. No more tip-toeing on ice, beating around the bush. It was freedom I tasted. But above freedom, it was relief—this tangible, palpable relief that flooded my senses and flowered in the recesses of my head. I never asked my mom who she really wept for, but I could guess.

//

Robin never really succeeds in killing Batman, but I always wondered what he felt like when he came back to life. I wonder what it's like to be in that space between life and death. Sometimes more than anything else, I wish my dad was there. I wish I could be unburdened of something I never asked for. I don't want him to suffer alone; I don't want to know him, either. That space between stranger and loved one; between mere discomfort and abuse. In issue #238, Superman discovers the Phantom Zone—a mysterious pocket universe to throw criminals into, a place beyond space-time. I like to think there aren't just criminals there. Sometimes people who are just

fed-up go there to blow off some steam and sit in space. Sometimes people are trapped there, lingering between two uncertain worlds, waiting not for a rescuer but for their own bodies to come back. You never know who's in the Phantom Zone. It makes me eye people in a different way. You see a stranger and think, How often does she visit the Zone? Does she dread going home? I told my mom, too. Sometimes in the night she quietly agrees.

//

Sometimes I forget.

Last Christmas Day, the floors were chilly and the house glazed over in silence. We spent the day at the movies, just so for a brief two hours, we were surrounded by that artificial technicolor warmth, and the passionate air of the moviegoers around us. Back home, we lapsed again into black and white. I thought of that last Christmas with him—that Christmas had color, all right, this mismatched, haphazard craze like someone had ground every shade of pastel onto one another, loud and wrong, clunky. And I looked again to my home, saw nothing wrong with the muted colors and the dark.

“My father changed his life to be a part of
her. She will now consume me too.”

—Lily Sloman

Honorable Mention

SPOKEN WORD

The America that Kills Me

By Lily Sloman

Murphy High School

I stare down the barrel of the gun

Freshman year.

My mouth agape

My miniature hands shake.

Stars and stripes splay across his sleeve.

He can't look me in the eye.

Is this the America that kills me?

Not for who I love

Or the female body that I inhabit

Like I was always so prepared for.

Not this time.

But an act to be repeated (never repented)

Again, and again, and again

As bygone as our nation.

The fate of presidents

And martyrs

Is now that of schoolchildren and clubbers and worshippers.

It is America that kills me.

For all the love I've poured into her.

All the marching

And hours on the phone

Attempting to mend our tattered flag by hand.

America kills me.

My father changed his life to be a part of her.

She will now consume me too.

This is the America that kills me:

Disillusioned

Cruel

Grimy hot hands on an ancient trigger.

This is not the land or the people that I know.

The same crimes occur again and again.

But I loved her.

My neighbors my friends

Killed me.

Their steel hearts

Are the ones that shoot the final blow.

They lied, and they lied, and they lied.

It it not a bomb strapped to a terrorist's chest.

Or some invading army.

It happens during bio class.

It's just some kid.

Left to fester

In the hate and fear

Our nation spoon fed him.

He plots to slaughter us

For her.

But just this time

They don't pull the trigger.

“She walked out into the autumn air, feeling
chillier than she was before.”

—Shreya Venkataraman

Honorable Mention

FICTION & DRAMA

Separation of Cultures

By Shreya Venkataraman

Amherst Regional High School

On a lazy autumn morning, Maya Anderson rose before her child. She walked to his room. She looked down at her sleeping son and smiled. She saw her father in his curly hair, her mother through his nose, and herself and her husband through his skin. A perfect mixture of brown and white. She whispered, “I love you Kunal” before walking to the kitchen. On the wall next to the phone, she found a note: “Maya, Aunt Janu called asking for you again. I told her you would call back later. See you tonight. –George”

A number was listed at the bottom of the note, but Maya would never call it. She tore up the note and threw it away.

Aunt Janu had been trying to reach her since Kunal had been born three years ago, but for Maya, there was no point. Only days after he was born, she had begun to meddle.

“You aren’t feeding him enough Maya, look at him!” she would say one day and then suddenly it was “Maya! Too much food isn’t good! You have to portion everything! You should know that as a professional chef!” Sometimes it would even turn into “Why haven’t you taught him his mother tongue, Maya? Why is he only wearing American clothes, Maya?” Maya’s head ached with the mere thought. And she cut off all communication.

Maya started to fill the coffee pot when the calendar caught her eye. It was Sunday. Every Sunday morning, she called her mother and father in India. She picked up the phone and dialed their number.

“Hey Ma!”

"Maya, did you call Janu Auntie? She said she has been trying to contact you since Thursday."

"Ma I'm not letting her see Kunal no matter how many times she calls. She'll just say everything I do is wrong and I can't take it."

"How can you be so ignorant Maya?" her mother spat. "Mani Uncle just died and you won't even call her to ask how she's doing? She's in mourning and alone in her apartment. Absolutely disrespectful."

Maya let out a small gasp. She knew that her uncle was in the hospital for the past few months, but no one had told her that he had died.

"When did he die Ma? Dad told me he seemed well last Sunday when she called."

"Tuesday. She's been calling everyday crying, poor thing, ever since Mani Uncle died. But of course you wouldn't have known that," her mother scoffed.

"I'm sorry Ma, nobody told me."

"Just call her. I've asked her to come stay with you so that she isn't alone."

"Here? She's coming here? To Rhode Island?" exclaimed Maya.

"I want you to pick her up this Friday from the train station and take her in. Remember, she took care of you when you first came to the U.S. Without her you would've been starving on the streets of New York. Have some respect and be grateful." With that, Maya heard the click of the phone and then silence. After a long breath, she took the torn up pieces of paper from the trash and put them together again. She heard a small cry coming from the kitchen.

"Ma where'd you go?" Kunal whined while slowly waddling towards his mother. "I'm sorry sweetie. I had to take a phone call from Grandma." Maya walked over and picked him up.

"Is Grandma coming home?" Kunal asked.

"No, but Janu Auntie is going to be coming soon."

"I wanna play with my toys," said Kunal, disinterested. He wriggled out of Maya's grasp and ran into the living room. Maya looked at the number and took a deep breath. She picked up the phone and dialed.

With every ring her heart jumped up farther into her throat.

"Hello?"

"Hi Janu Auntie, it's Maya. I just heard about Uncle, I'm so sorry, I didn't know."

"Thank you Amayya. How could you? It's not like I've been calling or anything." Maya's hands tightened on the phone.

"I'm sorry Auntie. Ma told me you were going to come live with us and that you are coming Friday evening. What do you want George and I to prepare for you when you arrive?"

"Just some rasam. I want something warm before I go to bed."

"I don't know how to make that Auntie, George can heat up soup when you arrive. It's just as warm and will probably be better than rasam."

"You don't know how to make rasam? How did your mother forget to teach you? A notable cook can't even make her own country's food! I'll be sure to teach you when I'm there."

Maya rubbed her forehead. Cooking Indian food was never something she had cared to learn. Her blonde haired, blue eyed college roommate never liked Indian food, and eventually, she didn't either. Maya replaced every spice with pasta, cheese, anything to get rid of her Indian food.

"Ok Auntie. I'm looking forward to it, I'll see you on Friday." Maya wondered what she had gotten herself into.

Friday evening came too soon. As Maya waited for the train, she felt her palms start to sweat.

"She's just your relative, calm down," she whispered to herself. One person, then another, then a third walked out. And then Aunt Janu.

"Hey Auntie," said Maya quietly.

"Amayya!" Janu walked towards her with her suitcase wearing a bright yellow sari, embroidered with peacocks and paisleys. To another person, it would've seemed beautiful. To Maya, she seemed like an embarrassment. Janu held out her arms and Maya reluctantly took them in for a hug.

"How are you kanna?"

"I'm well Auntie, how was the train?"

"Absolutely terrible! The dinner was awful! There was no rice! Can you believe?" Janu continued her rant in Tamil which made Maya freeze.

"Janu Auntie, you can't speak that here. People are already staring. Let's pack up your bags to go home," said Maya briskly.

"Speak what Amayya?" questioned Janu.

"Tay-mil" replied Maya with an American accent.

"Tamil? Why can't I speak my language? It's your language, too," chided Janu. Maya gripped the edge of the suitcase she was holding. Janu would never understand.

"Just speak it in the car. Just not here." Maya picked up the bags and briskly walked ahead with Janu following behind in confusion.

At home, Kunal greeted them at the opened door, but he stopped when he saw Aunt Janu get out of the car.

"Ma that's not Grandma," he whined.

"Kunal, this is your Great-Aunt Janu." Aunt Janu looked at Maya in surprise.

"Great-Aunt Janu? You must call me Janu Periamma. That's how we say it in India. Go, on, say it." Kunal shyly looked away.

"Say it, kanna, Janu Periamma," urged Janu.

"Janu Perma!" replied Kunal giggling. Janu laughed and hugged the little boy.

"We will practice that. Not Perma, Periamma." She held out her hand for the little boy to take and together they walked inside. Maya stood outside with the suitcase and looked at them, slightly embarrassed. As they went inside, they were greeted with the scent of ripe tomatoes from the kitchen. Maya saw George at the stove stirring a pot. He looked up and waved his spoon.

"Hi Aunt Janu! Would you like some soup?" said George gleefully.

"Hello George. That is alright. If it's not rasam then I don't want to eat it, I'm sorry. I think I'm going to bed. Amayya, can you please show me where I am going to sleep?" Maya clenched her hands for a second before she picked up the bags and headed into Janu's

bedroom. She dropped them on the floor and left, suddenly tired from the day.

Maya woke up the next morning to an odd but familiar scent. As she walked towards the kitchen, she found Janu at the stove, pouring tea into three cups and warm pistachio milk into a fourth little one.

"Janu Auntie you didn't have to do this. I could've made tea for us." Maya remarked.

"Nonsense. I couldn't fall asleep so I talked with that husband of yours. He's never tried chai! Can you believe? I told him I would make it today, so here I am!" Cheerfully, she gave Maya her cup. Maya slowly sipped the brown drink. She tasted the cardamom and milk all coming together harmoniously. It felt like she was sipping India.

"Isn't it good?" asked Janu.

"Yeah. Thank you Auntie," replied Maya. She kept sipping the drink, savoring it until she saw George come down. Janu called him over and handed the drink over to him. Anxiously, Maya watched as George took a sip. What if he hated it? What if he made fun of the taste? His eyes crinkled from taking a sip of the hot drink, and then they lit up.

"This is delicious! Thank you Aunt Janu. I've never tasted tea this good!"

"Please call me Janu Auntie, I will make this for you whenever you want," said Janu with a smile. Maya wondered if George secretly hated the drink. She remembered her roommate making comments about the incense in the house that she burned every morning in her prayer, and her portraits of the gods that took over her half of the room. Everytime she drank her chai, her roommate asked her to stop, claiming the smell would be too much for her boyfriend staying over. Eventually, the box of chai leaves was found in the trash, along with the incense.

As the night sky covered the light of the day, Maya stopped working on a second draft of her cookbook and left her office to the smell of eggplants, tomatoes, and curry cooking on the stove.

"Janu Auntie you didn't have to make this. I was about to make dinner anyway," Maya remarked.

"Amayya, you've been working in your office here all day. Although it's not a real job, you still must be tired from writing. I made bean curry and tomato rasam."

"I don't think Kunal will eat that, I'll make him some noodles," Maya anxiously pulled out the box from the cupboard.

"How can Kunal not eat that? He is Indian! Of course he will eat it," responded Janu irritably. Maya, ignoring her, continued to pull out the pot and fill it with water to boil.

"No, it's fine, please, let me make it for him. I don't want to waste food." Janu folded her arms and looked at her.

"This is ridiculous, Amayya. Look at how much food I've made! I can't eat it by myself!" Janu hastily walked away carrying the end of her navy blue sari with her. Maya felt herself starting to panic. Kunal only liked noodles. If he ate something else, he would throw a tantrum in front of everyone. George would try to be nice, but then ask to leave the table. That left Maya and Janu to eat alone. Maya cringed at the thought and took the pot of water and placed it on the stove.

"Janu Perma, what's this?" asked the young boy, pointing to his plate. Janu looked over at him and smiled.

"They are green beans, kannna, try some! They are very good for your body, you know?" Kunal slowly picked up one of the beans with his hands and put it in his mouth. Maya held her breath as she watched him chew. Kunal's face started to crumple into a frown.

"Janu Auntie, I don't think he likes it, I'll try making something else," remarked Maya.

She started to get out of her chair and made her way to the stove.

"Maya, stop, look, he likes it! He's eating another one." said George. Maya turned around to see Kunal's face, broken into a smile while he stuffed more beans into his mouth. She saw Janu and George laughing along with him.

"I'm not feeling well. I'm going to bed. I have to drop off Kunal at his first day of preschool tomorrow. Thank you for dinner Auntie. Good-night." With that, Maya walked into her room and closed the door.

Maya woke up the next morning to a blinding light. She looked at the clock and saw it was ten. Kunal had to be at the school at eleven. Next to her, she saw Kunal, sleeping soundly next to her.

"Kunal sweetie, we have to get up, come on!" rushed Maya. She started to gather his things.

"Where is that Nemo bag?" She muttered to herself. As she walked around, she found it all packed and set near the door. She turned and saw Janu in the kitchen flipping a crepe-like dish on a tawa.

"Amayya, I packed Kunal's stuff in the bag. His lunch is in there too. He has already eaten Dosa, get him ready to go!" Without a second thought, Maya rushed to get his shoes on, and opened the door to leave. As they walked to the car, Maya noticed a red dot on his forehead.

"Kunal what is on your forehead?" she inquired.

"Janu Perma put it on me. She says that the gods say good luck." Maya licked her thumb and wiped the dot off of his head.

"Great-Aunt Janu shouldn't do that, ok? It's not good to do here." Kunal nodded and got into the car seat. Maya saw Janu angrily look at her through the window.

"I can't deal with this right now," she muttered again, and backed out of the driveway to go to school.

When she got back she saw Janu at the table, silent. The only audible sounds that came from her were the sips from her cup that she took. As Maya walked past her, she heard Janu speak.

"Why did you rub the kum-kum off of Kunal? It was for good luck."

"Janu Auntie, the kids will make fun of him. It's for the best."

"You say everything is for the best. What does that even mean Amayya? Yesterday you wouldn't even let him eat food from India!"

"Janu Auntie, I was afraid he was not going to like it, that's all! Kids in the school are ruthless, they'll make fun of Kunal and I don't want that to happen to him." Maya started to walk away.

"Amayya, they are three and four years old. What are they going to

do to him? There is also a teacher there to deal with the kids if anything does happen.”

“You just don’t understand, Janu Auntie.”

“What do I not understand? I have lived in this country for twenty years, Amayya! Tell me, what do I not understand?” Janu’s voice started to rise. “You think your life is so hard Amayya, you know how bad it was when I came to the U.S.? I didn’t even want to come here! I came for marriage. I was made fun of too, Amayya. Now look at me! I’m still proud to wear my sari and speak Tamil. I didn’t even change my name! Things are better now than they were before, people are changing. But you have changed the most, and it’s not even for the better.” Maya gripped the handle of her purse and turned around.

“People are still cruel. There is no point in trying to fight. Kunal will start to hate his culture anyway. Kids are going to grow up and make fun of him for bringing curry. I don’t want it to happen at an early age! Can’t you understand?” Maya pleaded.

“No. I cannot understand this nonsense, Amayya. I packed Kunal dosa for lunch, did you know that? He was excited after tasting it for breakfast. He will not hate his culture. You do.”

Maya’s heart dropped.

“You packed Kunal Indian food? After I just told you what will happen? Are you serious? I can’t believe you!” Maya stormed into the kitchen and threw the peanut butter, bread and jelly on to the counter. Angrily, she started to slather the peanut butter and the jelly onto the bread.

“Amayya! What are you doing?” yelled Janu.

“I’m going to drop off a different lunch. I’ll pick up the Indian one and bring it home.” “You are crazy. Absolutely crazy. I cannot believe you,” remarked Janu. Maya continued to smear on the jelly and peanut butter on the bread, her fingers gripped tightly around the knife, before throwing it into a box. Hurriedly, she ran out the door and pulled out of the driveway.

When she pulled into the parking lot, Maya rushed into the door of the school, and into the office. She saw a woman sitting at the front

desk with purple cat-eye glasses and long brown hair tied in a ponytail.

“Excuse me ma’am, can I help you?”

“My son forgot his lunch, I’m here to bring it to him,” said Maya.

“Ok, just leave the box here, and we’ll bring the lunch to him.” The woman held out her hand to take the box, but Maya held onto it tighter. She didn’t want the kids, or the woman to see the Indian food in the other box.

“No, my son will only like it if I bring it to him. Sorry.” The woman nodded and got up to bring her to Kunal’s classroom.

As they approached the classroom window, the woman stopped.

“Looks like your son found some food, and look, he’s sharing it too.” Maya looked over and saw Kunal, laughing while passing out little pieces of dosa to other kids. His face had never seemed so bright.

“Ma’am? Are you going to bring in the lunch?” asked the woman behind her. Maya slowly shook her head and started to walk away, tuning out the woman calling after her.

She walked out into the autumn air, feeling chillier than she was before. She got into the car and flung the box with the sandwich behind her. As she heard the box drop, she felt tears falling on her cheeks.

“She said it and she meant it. She didn’t
silence herself. Her voice was her weapon.”

—Queen Isis Merck

Honorable Mention

POETRY

I Am Not Your Black Girl Dictionary

By Queen Isis Merck

Athens Drive Magnet High School

I am not your
Black girl dictionary
I am not your

Insight on the black experience
This is not a scientific experiment
This is my life.
And I am the only one
Living it.

I am not your
Average black girl
Because there is no such thing
As being black and average
In this prejudiced world

Every day my life is not the same
And it's a whole continent of dead people

I could blame.
But right there
That's a black girl going insane.
That's the whole world ignoring her
Because she has no idea what she's saying.

I am not your
Protector
Your keeper
Your lover
Your shelter
I am not giving my life
For you
I am not giving my life
To you.

Black girls
And women
Have protected
The strength
The pride
The life!

Of a country
Of a man
Of a boy
That doesn't even love her
They say they want another:
Exotic

Submissive
Passive
Unassertive
Nonresistant
Obedient
Resistless

I'm too loud
Too vocal
Too aggressive
Too hopeful
Too independent
Too free
Self-reliant
That's me.

But these are all the things I had to be
Because I see more sisters
Than brothers protecting me.

We are the fighters
We are the protectors
Yes!
We are the loud ones
Yes!
We are the bold ones
Yes!
We are the only *ones*

Hoping for better
Believing that we all could truly
Work together

It's not about stating names
It's listing the number of times
We've had to say
"We need change"
Oluwatoyin Salau,

She said it
And she meant it
She didn't silence herself
Her voice was her weapon

But she spoke too loud, right?
Opening up about the wrong people

See we're supposed to
Speak up
But not speak out
We're supposed to
Do just enough
Smile like Melania
Have no fight
Shout over our biggest bullets
As if everything is alright

Everything's good
Just slide the money
Under the table, to cover
The cost of the tape
That will cover these mouths
And bind these wrists

That will open these eyes
But these lips,
These lips won't part

Can't silence these hurting minds
But silenced those hearts

But we're not good

Even when we are dying
Even when this world is dying
Especially when the voices
And protection of:

Natasha
Breonna
Michelle
Dominique
Riah
Sandra
Oluwatoyin
Secoria
Relisha

Asha Jaquilla
Maleah
Jessica
And so many more Queens

Have been buried
And disregarded

When will the time come
To invest in the mothers and daughters
Of *this* generation being guarded

I am nobody's black girl
I protect myself
I will be fighting for my
Own world.

I am the
Michelle
I am the
Betty
I am the
Fannie Lou

I am
the Maya
I am the
Anna
I am the
Angela

I am the
Sojourner
I am the
Cicely
I am the
Josephine
I am
Queen

And I pay my respects
To the known and unknown
Black women

That have put themselves
On the frontlines
So I can have a seat
So I can speak
At anybody's table

But most of all so I can create my own
For all of us to eat
And share peace

I earned my sweetness a mouthful of
mulch & clean sheets from a woman
who yells

I make my escape with silk feet from a
family trying to crawl out of itself

—Djuna Appel-Riehle

Honorable Mention

POETRY

When I Start Panicking, I Play Joanna Newsom

By Djuna Appel-Riehle

Alexander Hamilton Senior High School

just like my mother taught me

i cry when the song comes on

let the sound take me

sow a lake to sting my cuticles

bury my sorrow soft in the backyard

and plead for a darkness thick enough to drink

i earned my sweetness

a mouthful of mulch & clean sheets

from a woman who yells

i make my escape with silk feet

from a family trying to crawl out of itself

teach myself counting the blessings

hiding the scorch marks

playing lullabies loud enough to drown everything out

i remember my mother

playing joanna newsom with the same vengeance as the woman who

kicked down the door with one broken foot

anointed the first apartment with glitter and called it fairy dust

i remember my mother as

the woman hiding the divorce with tea lights & shrinky dinks

the woman throwing a cast-iron pan across the room

teaching me how to be soft enough to survive

remembering to sink her teeth in.

“Miniature ice-cold waves crash on my feet,
sending a shock wave through my body
that I felt in my bones.”

—Kross Carter

Honorable Mention

PERSONAL ESSAY MEMOIR

Hooked

By Kross Carter

Bozeman High School

One thousand steps down. Fishing rod in hand, I made my descent. The sand sprinkled upon each rocky step created a crunching sound as I skipped downwards, one foot after the next. While descending to One Thousand Steps Beach, my eyes locked on the sand, which stretched so far in either direction it made the horizon line appear infinite. I felt disconnected from cities and streets, left with only the music created by the crash of the tide and the squawks of gulls. The fishy and sandy aroma the beach has to offer filled my nostrils. Surf fishing is my happy place, and growing up in California made that possible.

People told me it is impossible to catch fish off the beach. We, the members of Southern California Surf Fishing, knew they were wrong. There are hundreds of different species you could catch, ranging from surf perch, to halibut, to sting rays. However, there are certain fish that you cannot catch from the shore. A yellowtail is a perfect example, considering they are about fifty miles out. The SC Surf Fishing community used to hold fish-offs that were scored based on the rarity of your catch. For example, surf perch were worth five points, calico bass were fifteen, and a yellowtail, one thousand. Catching a yellowtail would be an immediate win, but no one ever would.

I stopped for a snack at the bottom of the stairs. We cannot wait around too long, the best fishing is right before sunrise when the surf is low and the fish are hungry. Miniature ice-cold waves crash on my feet, sending a shock wave through my body that I felt in my bones. I unhook my lure, flip the bail, and plunge my line into the sea, target-

ing a rock jetty where calico bass might be resting. I cast for hours, but alas, I hook nothing. While casting, I thought about how I am an impatient person and I become easily frustrated when things work against me. But fishing is a very slow-paced sport and requires incredible patience, which makes me seem like the worst candidate. However, my impatience never stopped me from loving fishing, and over time it helped me manage my issue more effectively.

Later, my dad and I crossed through a purple cove to reach the outer stretch of the beach. Little pools with clusters of mussels made the hollow cove a sanctuary for bright orange starfish. Upon reaching the opening we were presented with infinite waters in which I continued to get skunked. My energy is draining as I move around and cast nonstop. I was beginning to feel robotic. It is easy to become frustrated when no fish are biting, and I felt my impatience lingering. Finally, my rod snaps down and the line starts pulling along; I can feel it.

"I'm hooked!" I vividly remember shouting to my dad. This was definitely the strongest fish I had fought. With both my wrists straining at the beast's power, I fear my rod will snap. Whatever this was, it was not meant for a light-tackle surf rod. Reeling with the tide and letting off against it, I eventually bring the monster in close enough for my dad to beach it with the net.

Gazing in awe at the beauty of the greenish-blue fish with yellowish fins, we struggle to identify it. Our attention is drawn to the tail, which was a very distinct, bright yellow. We make eye contact, and then our jaws simultaneously drop. Right then, more than ever, I realized the importance of waiting.

"Hey Dad," I asked in an astonished tone, "How many points did you say a yellowtail is worth in the fish-offs again?"

"One thousand, son," he said as a smile crept across his face. "One thousand points."

“It felt good to be suddenly airborne in this silk cocoon, and I have a surviving sense of excitement from that impossible feeling of weightlessness.”

—Jonathan Truong

Honorable Mention

FICTION & DRAMA

Were Are You Going? Where Am I Going?

By Jonathan Truong

Orange County School of the Arts

In the sophomore year of my undergrad I started taking aerial yoga classes in secret, which made a lot of sense given the trajectory of my life at the time—Point A never leads to Point B. The studio was on the eleventh floor and faced the rear of an apartment complex, so as I was suspended from the ceiling by aerial silks I could glimpse into these inverted images of people's lives: a woman reheating leftovers, a man trying to fix her leaky faucet. If for nothing else, I returned week after week just to see how these boxed vignettes played out. The answer was often violent sex.

It was a weeknight when I called him to join me. We were always doing strange things together, Saul and I, like sneaking into tennis clubs or going to tarot readings, so this invitation didn't seem all that peculiar. I didn't tell him that I'd been going to the studio, or about the catharsis I felt hanging upside-down in spread eagle, swinging. I didn't even tell him about those domestic window displays which I'd collected and filed away in memory.

Let me say that Saul was Dutch, and this detail informed almost every interaction I had with him. His Dutch-ness, in fact, was important to me. He was tall, of course. He had no upper lip hair and an immaculate physique, and it was casually rumoured among our classmates that his father starred in a terrible 1970s slasher film, which followed a serial killer lurking the Amsterdam canals. His being born in Rotterdam only fueled this rustic image I had projected onto him, and whenever he alluded to his upbringing I imagined aerial

views of large ocean going steamships, cargoes of crude oil and petroleum, the angles and pistons and vectors of a sort of postmodern carnage. He spoke about none of these things. Saul was unbearably centrist—unlawfully so, if I may suggest such a paradox—and radiated a proudness that was particularly un-American.

It was no wonder, then, that he was reluctant to shed his ego at the command of a woman who wore pink polyester leggings and who spoke with the rasp of a chain-smoker. That was the thing about Saul: he was always conspicuous in his disapproval.

But then the class was ending, and the instructor cranked the volume up on Black Sabbath's "Electric Funeral", and she was telling the whole class to start screaming. Saul looked at me and mouthed *What the fuck?* but I shrugged, joining the chorus. It occurred to me that there were few moments weirder than this—wailing at the top of my lungs in a class full of middle-aged white women—but this pseudo-guru had a way of penetrating straight to the heart space. Either that or the sound of her screaming "Let that out! Let that out!" over heavy metal was making me lose my mind. Then we were all crying, even Saul, lying in corpse pose in those hammocks. It felt good to be suddenly airborne in this silk cocoon, and I have a surviving sense of excitement from that impossible feeling of weightlessness.

Saul was too stubborn to try and find his inner light, which was, I am told, a very Dutch thing to do—straightforwardness is encoded into the language. This nonetheless bothered me, and I thought about it as we descended the dingy elevator.

Outside it was cold. It was wonderful. It was fall, the city rung out and flaccid. Technicolor lights were flashing everywhere. Everything had a heavy odor like nickels and vodka soda and Penhaligon's cologne. The night balanced on an empty wind-blown can of Coke Zero.

"Do you feel enlightened now?" he asked me.

"Perhaps. Self-work is a deeply personal thing, you know," I replied.

"I think you're starting to lose your mind," he said. After that, we walked in silence for a block or so.

"So is this like a thing? That you're doing?" he asked.

"I'm being happy."

"Maybe you should try getting shit-faced instead. Or download some dating apps?"

"Well, I love Grindr as much as anyone else, Saul, but love is dead." A pause. "I'll never live for the sake of someone else."

"Didn't Ayn Rand say something about that?"

"About Grindr? Doubtful."

He smiled. "About self interest."

"Ayn Rand is a war criminal."

Across the street, the final hours of sunlight were wasted upon a scaffolded building's face—all the windows boarded up, the curtains drawn. Beneath them: a woman haggling for a faux leather bag in Spanish (*¡Tómalo o déjalo!*), the vendor laughing (*Are you crazy?*). All of these little scenes happened around us, and yet we couldn't look into any of them, even if we tried.

The problem, Saul and I's problem, began the night we got bored with ourselves.

I was telling him a story from my hometown: my friends and I were not yet 17, and June's electric moon was blowing O's with us. Well, with them—I, on the other hand, could barely flick a disposable Bic lighter and was still traumatized from junior high propaganda, where we watched a teenager in a PSA get air-lifted to a Los Angeles hospital after taking—and I quote—a fat bong rip. What I mean is that I coughed up a few mouthfuls of smoke. Anyways, this was all besides the point, the point being that, that night, I realized how beautiful back home was. We were bent over the pier's guard rail. As I told Saul about the way the waves just sort of fizzled at night, I once again felt the heavy life of the ocean inside me. It could've swallowed me whole; I might've even allowed it to.

He said something about learning to swim, how it is odd that some people in the states can go their whole childhoods without ever learning to stay afloat. Then he began to work backwards. He was excavating through his memory, telling me all of the ways in which he arrived here: about patroons and big girthy plots of land, about the

splitting of bread and church, about drinking beer by the river with his friends, throwing the bottles at ducks, violently. I didn't know why he was telling me any of this, or how any of it related to him, right then, standing before me.

Under this brief moment of intimacy, I began to look at him—not just his body, but the “him” beyond the skin and breath and formalities. I was trying to be real, to communicate something beyond speech, like those electromagnetic signals between devices (*Hello? Can you hear me?*). In those moments I had a nagging feeling in my appendix—was this enlightenment? Well, no. Sometimes I felt like I was just an animal posing as a human, one of those biomimicry octopuses on PBS that could camouflage as a sea snake. It wasn't just me though.

We often played a game where we'd switch identities. I don't know: something about being young and impressionable in the city. The barista at some coffee shop downtown would ask for my name, and I'd grin and say: “Saul.” He wasn't as good at the game, which I attributed to my unequaled wit, but probably had more to do with his reluctance to assume my gayness.

Saul, Saul, Saul. It filled my ribcage and came out as song.

A portrait: me, Missy, and Saul, three NYU students, taking the NJ transit for a garage rock concert in Newark. I didn't know the proper attire, so I was dressed ambiguously: a proto-Punk, mod, '60s getup. I was always trying to be ambiguous. For example, when Missy texted me asking why I wasn't at Penn Station yet, I sent her four of the cat emojis: heart eyes, kissing face, crying, shocked.

We were alone in a four-seater, all of us grown enough so that our knees touched, smoking the last of Missy's weed. Something shifted, and everything got all moody, like a still-life from a Debussy soundtrack. I asked who was playing tonight. The Black Keys was the answer.

Saul was giving an impromptu lecture on probability, something about how: Given enough time, a monkey randomly striking keys on a typewriter could end up writing *Hamlet*. Missy threw her head back,

perhaps in laughter. You must be thinking of the Infinite Monkey Theorem, I replied, though I couldn't tell who "I" was at all: the I speaking or the I sitting across from me. Saul was probably bothered that I knew more than him in almost all avenues of life. Could he paraphrase Kierkegaard in casual conversation? Probably not.

We arrived in Newark with our heads down. The moon must have been late, because the night was completely blank. A mile away someone jangled their keys. We were walking for hours. Walking here, walking there. Walking was only half the battle. For no reason in particular I thought: it's a dog eat dog world.

"Life can only be understood backwards," Saul said, "but it must be lived forwards."

I went, "What does that mean?"

He kept walking.

I persisted: "What does that mean?"

And maybe this wasn't even Saul I was talking to. It was me, or Saul playing me, or me playing Saul playing me, and somewhere between Greenwich and Newark he had started playing our game without me. I realized as we walked that the whole city was a terrible disappointment. It was lonely, disarranged, dispirited. Everything moved dangerously here. There were hardly any streetlamps, and in that blackness everything lost its perimeters.

At the concert, the crowd became church for the hot and bothered. We were trying to push our way to the front, but then people started to dance in a way that was like fighting, and everything became bones and teeth and knees, hard edges jostled together. Missy mouthed something to me I didn't understand. Everyone recorded on their iPhones.

At first the music sounded terrible, and then it sounded wonderful. The bassist's liquid sixteenth notes had a way of reaching us, breaking through synaptic time no matter how far gone we thought we might be.

On another day, c'mon c'mon
With these ropes I tied, can we do no wrong?
Now we grieve, cause now is gone
Things were good when we were young¹

I realized then that my friends stopped listening to the music. What I mean is that Saul and Missy were kissing. His hand brushing the hem of her low cut jeans; her mouth touching whatever part of his face was closest. And the thing was I liked it. How it made me think of when the yoga instructor says bring your hands to the heart center, and the two hemispheres of the body were suddenly bridged.

Around me, as the young amateurs violated their instruments to unspeakable volumes, I once again felt myself losing my bearings. I was throwing myself out and looking in, racing the NJ Transit in 60 mph through space. In this scene, I imagined myself as Saul once more. I felt the stiffness of Missy's denim at my fingertips; I felt the prick of Missy's stabby tongue in my cheek; I felt my hands, id-driven, uncontrollable, pawing at the whiteness of her exposed back, heart-beat versus heartbeat.

In bed back at the dorms, I turned off the lights and went through the motions all over again. Saul, Saul, Saul, I whispered reassuringly, and then got on all fours. I moved swiftly. Lied prone over my duvet, tore off the sheets in my undressing. I was a man, an animal, a deep gnawing. I was radical, I was explosive, I was Rotterdam's aerial bombardment and its calcified remains.

What I feared: the NJ Transit was a time machine, and at some point from Point A to Point B all of our timelines had been unravelled. I didn't even know if Greenwich was Point B, or which direction I was moving towards. At that moment I chose downward, and shuddered onto my pillow.

¹"C'mon, C'mon" by The Von Bondies

I woke up the next morning and immediately walked down to the dining hall. By the time I'd finished watching Anderson Cooper on my phone, I realized that the only thing I'd heard was the shrill voice of a girl adjacent to me. I tweeted: *Anderson Cooper is hot, in a Mr. Clean sort of way.* Every fifteen minutes, I returned to the microwave to reheat my coffee, and I sipped on it as I walked up 14th Street.

It didn't make sense to skip my Intro to Political Theology lecture to go to an aerial yoga class, but I told myself that this was what my inner self wanted. After all, the cold and dark months were creeping up behind us. I passed a man in drag on the way there, plastic wig off to reveal unspectacular cropped hair, and sheer pantyhouse covering his lower half. He smiled with his teeth. I think I smiled too, but then he turned the corner and we settled back into our lives.

"No silks today," the instructor said at the studio. I'd never come this early, and so I didn't know how hideously empty it would look without them. I rolled out my rubber yoga mat. We did seven sun salutations. Everytime we got to downward dog she said something about checking in with our breath. Listening to the body and then letting go of the body.

She didn't play any Black Sabbath, or any rock music for that matter, just an odd medley of shamanic incantations and studio recordings of crystal bowls. All I knew how to do was stand there, dazed. Inhale the light, exhale the darkness.

I flew home the next weekend.

Mom was surprised to see that I didn't have any luggage save a single carry-on tote. I said, "Minimalism, Marie-Kondo-style." She said, "All that hippie shit is really making you a narcissist," and maybe it was something about being airborne or liminal spaces that made me realize then, right then, I was beginning my adult life.

It'd only been a few weeks since I'd been to the beach, but it felt like years. Maybe the NJ Transit had been a time machine after all. So much of it had been eroded that there was this gaping drop-off where

the sand should be, and the white foam came and dragged all that remained. The light, too, was retreating; everything was Novembering. I looked at my skin. I was in the final weeks of my July tan, developed from weeks of sitting beside the AC unit in my backyard where the sun was strongest, and drifting aimlessly in weak currents. Now, the only thing near the lip of the tide was a dead seabird that the other birds had started to eat.

“Mom,” I said, “I think I’m going to dye my hair blue. Or shave it.”

She nodded. Clearly the monkey who authored this life story was no Shakespeare, but regardless I continued, “What I mean is that I’m a twink, mom. I’m a total fucking twink.”

She laughed. “So are we thinking pad thai for dinner or?”

Eight hours it’d taken to get here, and for what? I still couldn’t find my inner light like they told me to in those five-minute-mindfulness-meditations, and there was no sun in my solar plexus. It came to me that somewhere within my brief residence here, time had washed cruelly over me, and there was nothing democratic about it. It had washed over me and now all I could do was watch myself tell my mother my sexual preferences seven years too late, after she’d already met one of my Grindr matches in the grocery store and taken me to see the musical rendition of *Jerry Springer: The Opera*. I couldn’t help myself; I texted Saul—

ME: tell me something about ur day.

ME: preferably good.

SAUL: I’m in the library. POV: I turn on my ringer and see how long it takes someone to tell me to shut up.

ME: you’re giving me ENFP-type energy right now

SAUL: So how’s home?

ME: good.

He texted me a picture of his face. For the first time, I thought that maybe he was envious of my proximity to home. The picture was lit in a way as to suggest something behind his face, but what, I didn’t know. He looked inconceivably all-American, like those pictures you find in frayed leather wallets where the blonde boys hold fish or dead animals, grinning ear-to-ear.

ME: hey do u think that the fat cats are getting fatter? what are they feeding us on our meal plans?

SAUL: They're distracting us with Breakfast-for-Dinner nights. But I think it's a soy meat substitute.

I wondered if Saul lived in one of those buildings below sea level, where a dike separated him from an entire wall of ocean. Or maybe he lived in one of those Brutalist constructions above the canals, and at night you could see straight into his window when his place was lit up. Could he hear the water? Could he hear passersby all throughout the day? Somehow I still knew nothing about him.

I'd been around long enough to know that things never die the right way anymore, so I kissed goodbye to the sea bird's body and its cannibalistic friends. I thought about it the whole drive home.

At a stoplight, a twenty-something-year-old woman in a tennis skirt paused for a moment in the center of the crosswalk, just briefly, and I thought about those two-dimensional window scenes that I could see from the studio. Of course, the moment never lasts. The woman blinked, then continued to the other side of the street. The leaky faucet was fixed by a man, and afterward she thanked him by getting on her knees.

For the first time in my life I thought about letting it all go, still unsure of what "it" was, but even after my one-month-unlimited-class-pack of aerial yoga I was no more wise and no more certain, and so instead I hoped for more red lights, just a few more red lights, and held onto myself tightly.

“They sit at the pit of my basement—almost pretentiously pristine, encased and embalmed like twin mummies.”

—Joyce He

Honorable Mention

PERSONAL ESSAY/MEMOIR

The Curry 4's

By Joyce He

Livingston High School

They sit at the pit of my basement—almost pretentiously pristine, encased and embalmed like twin mummies. Except instead of linen and fragrant spices, they're wrapped in tissue paper and the faint scent of maple floorboards. The cardboard sarcophagus is inscribed with abstract hieroglyphics of basketballs, hands, and a cryptic message: "6.5Y, UA GS CURRY 4 MID."

Those Curry 4's were my first—and last—pair of basketball shoes, an artifact of a single season of high school freshman basketball. I had meticulously handpicked those specimens from a sea of iridescent, beveled, and paint-splattered sneakers, swimming like tropical fish on the floor-to-ceiling shelves at my local mall's Finish Line. This was only after I had visited nearly a dozen different retail and shoe stores on two different shopping trips spanning two weekends. Prior to that, I had spent countless hours researching, reading reviews, and compiling detailed descriptions of the traction, durability, appearance, and of course price, of a bevy of shoes in a 20-page Word document.

Even before all that, I had to convince my mom why it was both extremely necessary and rational to fork over \$120—a \$40 disparity from the most expensive shoes I had ever owned—when I already had a pair of perfectly good sneakers.

"But they're not *basketball* shoes," I insisted. Just like I wouldn't wear slippers to church, I believed it was unfitting, simply heresy, to play basketball in my running shoes. In a sport that involved rapid side-to-side cutting and demanding vertical leaps, I couldn't afford exposed ankles and flimsy cushioning, else run the risk of an almost

certain ankle sprain or the “fracture of my fifth metatarsal base.”

More than that, I knew deep down that the sneakers I had just wouldn’t cut it when on the first day of practice, the ten other girls on my team wearing color-coordinated outfits and with hair pinched tightly under Nike headbands began pulling out their basketball shoes while I waited off to the side, in my faded t-shirt with “Venezia” peeling and my non-basketball shoes shuffling nervously. I watched them, envied them, for the way they stepped so surely in their sneakers, the way the ball cut so cleanly between legs and laces, and the way they’d sail up, up, up, so smoothly for a layup that I could see wings practically sprouting from their heels.

I already felt like an anomaly, an outsider, in many other ways. I was one of three Asians (a number that was surprisingly on par with my town’s Asian makeup), I was incompetent at understanding rap culture references, and I had only a year of eighth grade recreational basketball and a two-week YMCA basketball camp under my belt. Whereas most of my teammates grew up carpooling to basketball clinics and practices together, I spent my Saturday mornings and weekday nights going to Chinese school, taking art classes, and chatting on Hangouts with a group of friends whose parents had all played Chinese poker with mine at some point. These were unignorable differences tethered to the way we breathed and believed, a culture we could not pass to each other as easily as a flick of the wrist and a chest to chest pass.

Like dye spreading through a napkin, the desire to have basketball shoes became the paramount concern on my mind. I believed so fervently that they were two steps closer to becoming a more serious basketball player and a more serious member of my team; that I’d raise my right hand and place my left on a shoebox, as someone would secretly swear me in and say, “Welcome to the team.”

When I finally received the Curry 4’s, gently lifted those marbled eggs from their nest of tissue paper, and slid my feet through the ankle-hugging woven collars—they were very ankle-hugging—oh, how I loved them so. They were white and blue-soled, with black riding up the throat and clipping the heel. In their color and sleekness, they were almost penguin-esque—by the looks of them, they could cut through air and water. Most of all, I loved that they were the type of

shoes that could keep a straight face but also show off a little swagger. They were the projection of who I dreamed to be on the court: power rippling beneath a cool facade, a flash of black and white, the ball ripped away one second then plummeting through metal and net the next.

When I pulled them out of my drawstring bag the next day at practice, immediately the girl next to me said, “Are those new?”

“Yeah,” I said.

She half-smiled: “Cool.”

And *Cool* was *Cool*. I wish I could say *Cool* lengthened to *Yo, be on my team for 3 on 3's*, to *Are you gonna be there for the next game, 'cause we need you*. Defensive slides still hurt, suicide drills still left my lungs clawing for air. On the bus to away games, I still sat by myself or with the other two Asians, listening to the tik-tik-tik of the trap beat emanating from the back of the bus. My basketball shoes spent more time soaking in the artificial glow of the gym lamps by the benches than weaving through light-bending crossovers. I even tripped and fell, twice, in a game because I wasn't used to how much stiffer they were than normal sneakers. Slowly, the thought that I'd secretly suppressed so long began to unravel, that no matter how much I grew, I'd never be able to fill those shoes, shoes that began to feel like the world's most expensive clown shoes.

Nevertheless, I played my last high school basketball game wearing the Curry 4's. It was February, the month of love, and in the final quarter, I thought about my love for basketball. I thought about how much I loved the game, how much I sweated for it, how I even bought a pair of shoes for it. I thought about how basketball was more than just a game, how it was also the people that played it, fought for it, loved it—it wasn't a one-man sport. And I thought about how the court was passion, the court was spirit, and the court could only bring us together so much.

When the time came to turn in our uniforms, I quietly shelved my beloved Curry 4's as well. My mom was pissed—the shoes weren't a high return investment.

Though retired from the court in their glory, the Curry 4's still serve a purpose; that is, as another weapon in my mom's verbal arsenal.

Sometimes when I complain about not having enough shoes or clothes to wear—in the context of my suburban, upper-middle class lingo I mean I’m in a “let’s-go-to-Marshalls-and-buy-another-unnecessary-graphic-t-shirt” mood—if my mom isn’t berating me for buying the grunge leather jacket I thought looked cool but never wore six years ago, she’s devilishly reaching through the dust and aridity at the back of her mind and saying, “Remember that pair of \$120 sneakers you barely even wore?”

“How many times do I have to tell you,” I say, “they’re *basketball* shoes. You’re not supposed to wear them anywhere except on a basketball court.” I cite the fact that dirt can nestle in the folds and wear away the traction, and also that I’d look plain silly wearing them.

But really, it’d feel unfitting, simply heresy, to wrangle the shoes from their resting place and cuff them onto feet that haven’t touched a basketball court since freshman basketball season. Don’t disturb a mummy’s tomb, they say. Even the mildew of the basement wards off prying fingers, reminding me that despite the ample ankle support and responsive cushioning, the Curry 4’s still left me hurt. And yet, I still love them, write about them. They’re a tribute to my time on court, a time when my overwhelmingly naive and unrealistic dreams swept me up and sent me plummeting, stinging me with the reality that not all fights are worth fighting for. But it’s that dreaming that I’ll always remember, the courage to be bold, that I want to keep as sacred and youthful as it once was.

“At this, your eyes flitted up over the building and towards the blue-gray sky, where the last tendrils of morning fog were hightailing it for the headlands”

—Emerson Wesselhoff

How to Write an Obituary With No Words

By Emerson Wesselhoff

Loy Norrix High School

1987

For someone who was in such a hurry to get out of our hometown, you sure pulled me across the street fast when you saw those dinner plates. They were the same set your mother had so carefully stored in the cupboard above the sink, and they were leaning against the glass in the front window of a San Francisco consignment shop.

“You think it’s a sign?” you had asked, hands stuffed in pockets, eyes on the uneven cracks in the sidewalk. You knew the answer you wanted to hear, and you knew that it went against every fiber of my being to give it to you.

I knew it too, and still, I sighed. “What kind of sign do you want it to be?”

At this, your eyes flitted up over the building and towards the blue-gray sky, where the last tendrils of morning fog were hightailing it for the headlands. You flattened the corners of your mouth in the way you’d done since we were in first grade and you couldn’t figure out how to spell the word “because.” I waited silently, letting the letters float by in my stream of consciousness. B – E – C – A – U –

“A sign that we’re being looked after, even all the way out here.”

At this, I scoffed. You were 19, and I was four months shy; we were both fresh out of Lafayette, Indiana, starting our first semester at Cal, and we probably looked like complete weirdos ogling this store in the

Lower Haight neighborhood. “Who the hell is looking after us that closely, Nicolas?”

“Someone is.” You turned to look at me then, your unruly blond curls a curtain over your eyes—eyes the same color as the bay thirty-five blocks to the north. For someone who stopped attending church service after you were caught with your hand up the shirt of the pastor’s son, you sure did talk about God a lot.

1993

Maybe I didn’t talk about God enough when I was with you. Maybe that would’ve made a difference. I sure did yell at Him when I saw the camera under your bed, though. I still reeked of the hospital after the bus ride back to your flat, and when I leaned against your olive green bedroom wall, I could still hear the hollow ring of the heart monitor flatlining. I was surrounded by all the little things that made up your outline—the dog-eared beat poetry collection on the nightstand next to the Bible; a stack of cassettes on the dresser; your beaten-up Converse behind the door. Somewhere in between the doctors’ visits and sleepless nights of the past few months, though, I’d lost the rest of you. Your object-silhouette was all I had left: the perfect crime scene to which I was the only witness. It was then, with my head tossed back against the wall and knees tucked up against my chest, that I looked to my left and saw it: a Contax T2 35mm camera with a shipping tag attached, sitting between a box labeled “’92 drafts” and an empty Reese’s wrapper. Having willed my shaking hand to reach out and grab the thing, I allowed my eyes to scan the tag. Your long, loopy handwriting whispered gently: “To Molly.”

The breath I sucked in pushed up high against my heart, and I held the camera backwards in the air. The front of the lens revealed a scene I’m sure you were watching from afar. My reflection stared back at me: long brown hair, green eyes, my mother’s button nose above lips that were all too familiar with the kind of slow trembling I felt overtake them; my loose rugby shirt, striped in maroon and white (I would throw it out, later, and would hear your voice taunting me, “I liked that top!”). I saw none of it, though; all I could see was the space beside me and the person who would never fill it again. I could only see my best friend.

That's when I yelled at God, sobbed and screamed and pleaded with Him for an answer. I never much liked Him and the feeling must've been mutual, because He never answered. Somewhere amidst the desperate prayers, I turned the tag with my name over in my hands, and I saw what you had scrawled on the back.

"Molly, my darling—No matter the circumstances you are reading this under, I believe it's safe to say that Something Has Happened. And if that Something has left you all alone, well. I did tell you to get that nice girl's number from the karaoke bar in The Castro last week, did I not?"

I choked out a laugh at that. The last time we had visited The Mint had been months ago. True to your suspicions, I had not followed through with the striking brown-eyed woman who'd bought me a drink after my mediocre rendition of Duran Duran's "Come Undone." I had seen how tired you were getting even back then, and dragged you home.

"Assuming you didn't listen to me, as per usual, I'm giving you something to do. You know that the paper back home won't write about me. And there are too many of us out here for little old me to get any attention."

As if you were anything but an electric, enamoring Casanova that the world couldn't bear to tear its eyes from.

"Don't write me an obituary, Molly. If you become boring like that when I'm not around, I will never forgive you. Even from Heaven."

So sure of your salvation.

"I want you to use this camera and capture our life here, instead. Go to all our spots and make sure to get the good stuff. Get the film developed, save it for a while. You'll know when to play it back."

So sure of me.

"Have faith and have fun. Miss me a little, if you must, but remember: you must love gently and deeply and with your whole heart, darling, in spite of and because of. You will shake this world of ours if you do. I'll see you later, but not too soon. Always, Nico."

I squeezed my eyes shut as warm tears slid slowly down my cheeks. The whole room smelled like the incense you insisted on

burning, sandalwood and patchouli and you. I had already learned to love the way you described—I had loved you, didn't I? Clutching the camera to my chest, I willed my thoughts to find you, wherever you were. As the April sun shot its last rays over San Francisco, and your room was bathed in a pale golden light, I promised you an obituary with no words. None could ever describe you, anyway.

.....

2020

It hit here early, hard and fast. So different than before, and yet, so much the same. So much fear and loss. I can't help but picture you here, all the things you would have said about the virus, and the governor, and the world at large. You would've grumbled that this was "just another excuse for you lesbians to stay home," but you would've made sure we were bubbled together anyway. You would've sewn us masks out of the most outlandish fabric, and we would've walked up Ashbury towards the Panhandle to get our exercise in. You would've loved Dr. Fauci—you would have made him into a drag character before the end of the first week.

Instead, I watch the city slowly shut down around me. Doors closed and windows shuttered. None of the elderly Italian men you would impersonate are smoking outside of North Beach cafes, and the young girls in quinceañera dresses posing by the Palace of Fine Arts have all but vanished. The university, our university, is silent; no professor can answer the questions we have. There is nothing to do but wait for each dawn to come home.

The worst part about it is that I am not a stranger in this scene. I have been here before. From the first month after you were gone, it was like lights from the places we loved went out, but only in my eyes. For what might be the first time, I think they dimmed for everyone else, too. It's funny how this has all played out—you would've called it a sign. Because for what might be the first time since you left me, I know exactly what I need to do.

.....

My first stop is what was our first stop. Caffè Trieste in North Beach, where you'd order a cappuccino for yourself, and an almond croissant bigger than your face to split with me. Standing across the

street, camera in hand, I hear you scold me for drinking my cioccolata too fast after our first round of college exams were complete.

“You know the entirety of the Godfather was written here?” you said, as if you hadn’t whispered the same sentence three times before on the bus ride from campus. “That film is the greatest. That means this—” here’s when you spread your arms wide at our half-finished meal “—is also the greatest, by association.” And just like every time we had this conversation since that first day: “Greatness demands to be savored,” you declared, spewing crumbs all over the table.

I see the same table still outside the window, its seats heartachingly close together. While I kept all four chair legs on the ground, you always tipped the chair back, eyes closed and smiling softly like you were welcoming a blessing from above. You probably were. My finger hovers over the button as I gaze through the viewfinder at a sight so strange and familiar. I’ve learned, all these years later: I savor it this time.

I take the camera and my mask to City Lights Books a few blocks away, where you introduced me to Mary Oliver with an anthology and a wink. I focus the camera on the upstairs window, where I think the poetry room must be from the outside. “If I had another life, I would want to spend it all on some unstinting happiness,” wrote Mary in *House of Light*. Your writing is still in the margins of my copy, and I think that if I had another life, I’d spend it all reading poetry with you.

The doorway in Chinatown is still nondescript, and the paint looks the same as it did when you shook my shoulders and promised me an experience I’d never forget. The fortune teller’s shrine was stunning, I’ll give you that, but I can hardly recall what my fortune read. You swore yours to secrecy (“where’s the fun in revealing everything now, Molly? We have to keep this friendship exciting”), but time has me second-guessing why. The lens just fits around the entirety of the entry, so I snap the picture and turn away. You would have told me to leave my doubts at the doorway, and I do.

I’m not alone when I stare down The Mint. I can feel a pair of warm brown eyes glance at my profile, and I take her hand in my own. If you were a symphony, Nico, Louisa is my easy silence. Her eyes somehow saw past my shaky singing voice, and that hand caught mine in a chance encounter months after you berated me from the great beyond. You would call it divine intervention. I’d just call it you.

.....

It's when I'm aiming the lens at the upper floor of the Oak Street rental you lived in when things went from bad to worse that it hits me. You gave me the camera, and I've got a store in mind that will still develop images from one this ancient. You shunned the idea of words on a page, so I've eulogized you in pixels rather than prose. Now what? I'd bet my half of our almond croissant that these cameras won't connect to my computer, or any cable I have tucked away in my junk drawer. So how the hell do I "play it back?" How am I supposed to pay my respects to your state of perpetual motion in this paralyzed world?

When the nurse glanced over with tired eyes and asked me if you had a will, I didn't have a response. You're not supposed to have an answer for a question like that at 24. You're not supposed to watch your best friend die though, either, from a sickness they told you to keep inside conversations behind closed doors. You hated closed doors almost as much I hated not having the answer.

Walking through the Lower Haight I realize I'm back in that same situation: I don't have the answer, and I don't have you—until I do. Until I look up across the street to see the consignment shop that sold you your mother's plates our first week in the city.

"You think it's a sign?" I just know you're asking me. The piece of paper taped to the glass door that reads "Open; Masks Required" is proof enough of the answer. I cross the street at the same pace you pulled me when we were teenagers, and throw open the door with as much gusto I can muster (never as much as yours).

"I'm looking for a carousel projector that will accept pictures from this camera," I try to enunciate from behind the mask. No one else is around to question why I'd need that in a time like this. The man at the counter, whose rumpled bowling shirt and squinty eyes are giving me absolutely no sense of security, looks at me good and hard for a minute. It feels like hours, though, before he finally chuckles softly under his breath and points towards an aisle near the back of the store.

"Right hand side, about halfway down, second shelf up from the floor. It's been here for almost twenty years collecting dust. Whatever price it is, knock five bucks for taking it off my hands."

I follow the stained carpet to the shelf instructed, and there it is. I close my eyes and take a deep breath, because this new development, this freak-of-nature probability stunt is just so very you. Handing over cash, I tuck the projector under my arm and begin the walk home. I read over your letter in my mind, long since committed to memory. You wrote with such certainty that I'd know when to play it back. I lived with such doubt, wondering if I was wasting precious time saving the task for an unknown date. But Nico, I'll hand it to you, this makes more than a little bit of sense. I couldn't capture your obituary immediately, because the world was too much without you in it. In the years that followed after, it was simply not enough. But the moment the world turned upside down this year, I bet you said a prayer and danced. You knew that it would be time for you to be known again, if only just for an instant. You knew I'd need your light now more than ever. As always, you were right. As always, I do.

.....

It's nearly a week later when I set the projector on the coffee table in my living room; beside it is a neat stack of developed slides. Turning to watch the wisps of fog and sunlight dance together outside, I can't help but shiver in the early morning breeze that floats through the window. There's a quilt sitting in a wicker basket beside the chair, but I don't take it. It reminds me of the one I sent off to Washington D.C., to be part of the remembrance ceremony. I know you would've complained about the colors spread over the National Mall—"There's tasteful pattern mixing, and then there's this free-for-all," I can hear you whisper, mockingly scandalized. I know you would've listened to every single name read that day, though, if only one of them hadn't been yours.

I carefully insert the slides into the carousel, and turn my attention to the cream-colored sheet I draped over the wall. The outlines of picture frames peek out from beneath: my wedding day, a particularly beautiful Big Sur sunset; you and I, grinning ear to ear in matching college sweatshirts in your dorm room. Pressing a button on the side of the projector, I hear it slowly whir to life. Before my eyes, I see you do the same. The pictures I've collected over the past week flash on the wall, and turn golden in the dawn's light. I see our table at the cafe, and stare at the windows of the bookstore; I watch the fortune teller's awning, the karaoke club, and many more as they appear on the wall.

Each one depicts the emptiness crafted at the hands of this year; each is full of you. Louisa enters the room, armed with two mugs of coffee and softly padding barefoot across the floor. As we quietly observe this polaroid homage to you, she leans into my side.

“Why didn’t you go closer?” she whispers. I turn, confused, but she just links our fingers with one hand, and gestures towards the slides with the other. As I watch our life move by with each click of the projector, I realize what she means.. Every picture is a degree removed—I captured every single scene from the other side of the street.

.....

For someone who’s been absent Earth-side for twenty-seven odd years, you sure have a funny way of coming back home now and again. All my pictures are taken from so far away because I needed someone to follow to the other side—someone whose reckless optimism and abounding faith could challenge my perspectives in the most incredible, Nico-like way. Only for you would I dare to cross the street, hand in hand as you look for holy signs in the form of dinner plates. Only for you would I dare to write an obituary without words.

I don’t know if I believe in God, but I do believe that someone is looking after me, all the way out here.

I believe in you.

I’ll see you later, but not too soon.

Penguin
Random
House

In partnership with

WNDB®

weneeddiversebooks.org

Creative Writing Awards

Chloe Cramutola

Ajok Thon

Ally Guo

Evelyn Lee

Tandika Somwaru

Yejin Suh

Lily Sloman

Shreya Venkataraman

Queen Isis Merck

Djuna Appel-Riehle

Kross Carter

Johathan Truong

Joyce He

Emerson Wesselhoff

Penguin
Random
House

1745 Broadway, New York, NY 10019
(212) 782-9348 FAX (212) 782-5157

creativewriting@penguinrandomhouse.com

social-impact.penguinrandomhouse.com/creativewriting