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

In 2019, Penguin Random House partnered with We Need Diverse Books to widen the applicant pool beyond New York City and to invite hundreds of students from across the country to submit their written work. Our partnership with WNDB underscores a critical element of the CWA program: to nurture the next generation of literary talent by supporting young writers from a variety of backgrounds. As the publishing industry continues to reckon with issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion, the CWA program is an opportunity for its sponsor to support students from underrepresented backgrounds and to encourage their expressing themselves. This program is but one facet of PRH’s continued effort to elevate diverse perspectives and to increase equity representation among our authors and staff.

Three Decades Of Selected Poems, Stories & Memoirs is an offering of compositions that have been collected from over the years—written and submitted for scholarship consideration by New York City high school seniors since 1993, and since 2019 by public school students across the country—with a strong, clear voice, who are daring, original, and unafraid to take risks. It is also the efforts of a committed group of mentors who have worked to inspire the youth in NYC and across the country, and to commend their creative risks. It is exciting proof that when public schools partner with committed organizations, great things can happen.
“For 30 years, Penguin Random House’s Creative Writing Awards program has amplified the voices of exceptional public high school students. Our partnership with We Need Diverse Books helps us reach students in underrepresented communities across the country, and the new Michelle Obama Award for Memoir—alongside Mrs. Obama’s unparalleled support and advocacy—have given us an even larger footprint. We are thrilled to honor this year’s brilliant winners and the decades of changemakers who have preceded them.”

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

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

— Caroline Richmond, Executive Director of WNDB

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

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

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

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

“Photos
1993–2022

Winner Andre Mozeak, his parents, and Elissa Goldstein

José Morales and Sofia Johnson

Winner Andre Mozeak, Pinkus Nisanov, fellow winners.

Mirza Tanovic, Pinkus Nisanov, Whitney Nimitpattana, Dan Whalen

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

Tasha Rudolph, Pinkus Nisanov, Whitney Nimitpattana, Dan Whalen

Alex Moraes and Sofia Johnson

Janice Erlbaum

Janece Ehrbaum
2012 Winners
Ananth Panagarlya, Mariella Molloy, Yuko Ota, Tess Banta, Maurisa Fraser, Cindy Lee, Thuya Naing, Melanie Fallon-Houska

Mrs. Acevedo, Elizabeth Acevedo, and Richard Hoehler

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

Singha Hon

THE RANDOM HOUSE, INC.
Creative Writing Competition
for NYC Public High School Students

2012 Winners
Alicia Walters

Elizabeth Acevedo and 2010 Winners

Rafael Klein

Elissa Goldstein and Winners

Emmanuel Agbanyo

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

Lily Akerman

Melanie Fallon-Houska and Barbara Rothenberg

Charlotte Ahlin, Chelsea John, Filipa Ioannou, and Jaiyah Byrd
FWR hosted a Fireside Chat with author Natasha Díaz, as part of the professional development week for the winners of the 26th annual Creative Writing Awards.

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

2019 Awards

Nora Carrier and Veronica Valerio

Devin Johnson

2019 Award Winners: Chloe Cramutola, Tandika Somwaru, reading their entries for the online 2021 Awards Ceremony.
Stories, Poems, and Memoirs from the past 29 years

16 Gordon Roots • 1994
19 Endless Summer • 1995
21 As You Lead the Classroom Discussion, I Daydream • 1996
22 A Crescent, Crescent Moon, A Small, Small Boat • 1997
25 Encompass the Light • 1998
29 Wishes for Sons • 1999
32 Calligraphy • 2000
33 Six Pack • 2001
37 Black Perplexity • 2002
39 La Coquette in Memoriam • 2003
42 Forever • 2004
44 Flutter • 2005
46 Avian Flu • 2006
50 Fissure • 2007
52 Red Planet • 2008
56 Polar Fever • 2009
60 Dan • 2010
62 I Write • 2011
64 Sheltered Art • 2012
66 Of Girls of Wintry Lakes • 2013
72 Bus Warfare • 2014
74 Pendulum • 2015
79 Las Mujeres No Hablan Las Cosas de Familia • 2016
81 Truth B TLD • 2017
82 Of Filling Empty Space with Bodies • 2018
84 The Misinterpretation of Dark Skin • 2019
87 Planet: Elkhart, Indiana • 2020
89 Superstition • 2021
93 Conversation Starter: How is Your English So Good • 2022
The problem was this: Saying that the rain fell like tears was a meaningless statement to Gordon. The rain meant nothing to Gordon, and the tears only meant a trufing bit more. The rain didn’t fall like tears or innocence of him crystalline needles. It just fell. It got him wet. The rain was neither touching nor enlightening; it was damp and cold and sometimes took on a slightly metallic smell if he was in it too long.

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

The plan had been developed and redveloped over long stretches of time. Gordon bought the field from a real estate developer on the basis of its seclusion. The field was in upstate New York, kind of between two farms since they were a mile away on either side. Gordon had figured the total isolation would be absolutely necessary. The minimum he could buy was one acre of land. He had repeatedly told the developer that he was seven or eight square feet of land and that an acre was too big, but the only place he found that would do that for him charged extra air space over twenty feet. Not that Gordon was freakishly tall or anything, he was nowhere near twenty feet tall. Gordon stood five feet and seven inches tall when above the ground, and two feet and four inches tall when planted. Gordon wanted the air space on the off chance that his plan was so much of a resounding failure. Such was life. Gordon thought for a while that he was behind him was grass as lush as in front of him and plants as lovely as those to his sides, but he couldn’t be sure. Such was life. Gordon thought for a while that he should have simply lifted his waist out of the soil so that he could move it and turn around. But spontaneity had won out over careful planning in how deep Gordon was to have made his hole, and as it stood the soil was up to his solar plexus. It was too late to go back now anyway. He had lost all feeling below the waist due to atrophy.

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

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

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

Yet there were so many flaws. Gordon brought along a box of chocolate donuts for periods of self doubt, for Gordon had often noted how helpful chocolate donuts are for solving not only physical but spiritual hunger. Gordon would think of a problem and then nibble his doughnut. Some of the doughnuts had tiny seeds in them that would make him sneeze, but Gordon didn’t mind. Gordon still believed in the project, at night he would sometimes dream of swaying in the wind and rustling his little leaves in perfect tranquility. He was still determined to become a tree. But the relatively slow moving experience tried even his faith. For every beautiful moment he felt at peace with nature, there was a moment when a chipmunk would crawl over his back and dig his little claws into Gordon and the temperature would be unseasonably cold.

Of course, Gordon was naked in the hole. Gordon was the last person on Earth who would want to wreck perfectly good clothes by turning into a tree. Clothes were for people not for trees, and if Gordon were to be a tree the least he could do was to dress like one. Gordon did have the scarf his mother gave him for cold nights, and a warm jacket, but no pair of glasses for the apocalypse. Gordon kept the can opener very close to the cans, specifically so he wouldn’t lose it and picture Rod Serling laughing at him from beyond the grave. Gordon liked the canned pineapple a lot, so there were about seventy cans of them scattered around him and the hole. Gordon hated beets, but thought that maybe they would be one of those acquired tastes and that he’d like to have them with him if, during his metamorphosis, he acquired a taste. He still only brought two cans. The 28 cans of spaghetti and meatballs would of course have to be served cold, but Gordon didn’t mind. Gordon seriously believed that after a couple of days he would root and get his nutrients straight from the soil.

“...faced with some of the plants around him, but the trees were too far out of speaking range and the grass just ignored him. Sometimes weeds and dandelions would talk to Gordon, but all they seemed to be saying was Gordon suspiciously, which made Gordon uncomfortable. The weeds were vascus hungry when they spoke to Gordon. They made Gordon feel very self conscious and wonder if he had roots yet. Still, the very fact that Gordon was in verbal contact with weeds made Gordon realize that one of two things had happened: he was well on his way to becoming a tree, or he was going crazy and talking to flowers. Gordon could not decide which of the two were true. Surely if he were insane the weeds would be
Endless Summer
Kasla Zarebska • Brooklyn Technical High School

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

I guess I should explain. My name is Denise Williams. Thirteen days ago I was in a near-fatal car accident. I’m not even sure about what happened. All I can remember is driving down Route 17 in my Taurus. I wanted to change the radio station, so I glanced down, and before I did that as well. It’s like that moment right before you fall asleep. If I focus enough, I can hear what’s going on around me. I have a sense of touch, yet I feel it without a clear intensity. At times I enjoy my deep “high.” Sometimes it’s frustrating. I can’t even open my eyes. I can’t squeeze Lauren’s hand as she holds mine. I can’t speak to Anthony and reassure him that I will come out of this soon. I do plan on it. Being in a coma is like being rolled up tightly in a long sheet. You can’t move. The more you try, the more your body becomes. You can’t scream because somewhere between you and the outside, your voice dwindles, even though you hear it.

Being in a coma is lonely. Sometimes two people in a coma can talk, just like I “talk” with Katrina. She’s the woman in her late sixties with whom I share this room. At times I feel her communicating with me. I don’t know how she does it; she doesn’t use words. Katrina is very lonely. Her family has given up on her, and they don’t come to visit her anymore. If they only knew that now she’ll never break free. That’s how you do it; you gather energy from the people that love you to break free. I’ve come close many times. Fortunately, I have a family that loves me and will never give up. Anthony is my wonderful husband, the man whom I have loved since the day we met, and Lauren is our beautiful six-year-old daughter. They both visit me every day.

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

That’s the machine that monitors Mommy’s heart, baby. Baby go get Doctor Banks, so that Mommy and I can talk.”

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

“Hi Denise. Baby, I miss you so much. I wish you could come to visit me anymore. If they only knew that now she’ll never break free. That’s how you do it; you gather energy from the people that love you to break free. I’ve come close many times. Fortunately, I have a family that loves me and will never give up. Anthony is my wonderful husband, the man whom I have loved since the day we met, and Lauren is our beautiful six-year-old daughter. They both visit me every day.

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“As You Lead the Classroom Discussion, I Daydream”

Beth Lebwohl  •  Townsend Harris High School

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

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

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

Someone is touching my body . . .
It sounds as if . . .
As if they’re turning the machines off? . . .
Oh my God! . . .
No! . . .
Anthony! I’m still here! . . .
Can’t you hear me? . . .
Don’t let me die! . . .
Please! . . .
I feel tired. I don’t hear much anymore. I’m so scared. What’s happening to me? God help me! Please! . . .

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

“Daddy, why are Mommy’s scribbly lines flat now?”

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

Ling Di’s mother looks a little like a fox, but she is not a fox spirit because she is not beautiful. She has big pretty eyes; her lips are nicely closed and a little tilted. Her face is yellow and white. Ling Di is not a riffraff. She has big pretty eyes; her lips are nicely closed and a little tilted. Her face is yellow and white. Ling Di is not a riffraff. She has big pretty eyes; her lips are nicely closed and a little tilted. Her face is yellow and white. Ling Di is not a riffraff. She has big pretty eyes; her lips are nicely closed and a little tilted. Her face is yellow and white. Ling Di is not a riffraff. She has big pretty eyes; her lips are nicely closed and a little tilted. Her face is yellow and white. Ling Di is not a riffraff. She has big pretty eyes; her lips are nicely closed and a little tilted. Her face is yellow and white. Ling Di is not a riffraff. She has big pretty eyes; her lips are nicely closed and a little tilted. Her face is yellow and white. 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The crescent, crescent moon and the blue, blue sky.

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

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

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

“What? After all these months you’re not gonna go for it?” I jumped.

“If I were never born . . .”

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

“Shut up!” she whimpered. I dragged her by the sleeve, but she would not move.

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

Dad and I were invited to sit down.

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

“She?” He pointed to Ling Di. “She did all this?”

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

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

Ling Di nodded slowly.

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

“She can write it out too,” I said.

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

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

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

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

I.

Hospital

Bed, my mother lies.

The floor is carpeted, a light shade
Of pink: the walls are also pink.
Peach, maybe—pleasant, peaceful shades of love.

Portraits—an artistic creation
intended to give
an air of determination
and life.

However, the understood mental anguishs
are different.

The 10th floor
of Memorial Sloan Kettering
Breast Cancer Floor.

But it’s worse than that.

II.

My Mother
(my love)

is in room 1011A.

Lying prone, on a white bed
white sheets
white pillows
My Mom.

No hair, frail arms
big, beautiful dilated blue-green eyes
skinny legs, swollen stomach
glucose bag
and I.V.

(My love)

Lying prone, on a white bed
white sheets
white pillows

No harp,

1998—POETRY—1st Place

Encompass the Light

Matt Levy • Edward R. Murrow High School

I.

Hospital

Bed, my mother lies.
The floor is carpeted, a light shade
Of pink: the walls are also pink.

Pooh, maybe—pleasant, peaceful shades of love.

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My Mom.

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big, beautiful dilated blue-green eyes
skinny legs, swollen stomach

Pooh bag
and I.V.

(transparent hospital gown)

laugh lines criss cross her
wound aged face

III.

Her history is a
Long and tired one, by far.

Five years of war with

A degenerative

Incurable disease.

Did she look it?

Hardly.

All Cheer and

love

and love

and love.

We talked

we cried.

The whole family.

Mom needed surgery.

Mom needed treatments

of Chemotherapy

and Radiation

So Mom is here.

at

the

hospital.

IV.

Lightly sleeping, I

see an angel hover over

her inert form.

The nearly invisible angel is silent.

Grace-given wings sparkle silver

Flowing gown, made of

eternity fabric,

shimmering.

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

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

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

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

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

X.
That was awhile ago.
When she could still
talk and laugh.
Not anymore.
The last sound she was making
was
Heavy, labored breathing.
And an oxygen tube up her nose.
Her breathing—not
mechanically,
but hollow. Her spirit has left,
and is patiently waiting for her
body to follow.
The last thing she said to me
As I gazed into her dilated
Blue-green eyes
I was smiling, she told me to stop.
“You hide behind your smile.”
She said.
So I stopped smiling,
and gazed,
softly in her eyes.
“You’ll do fine” she said,
and I left the room.
The angel has returned.
As she hovers, on grace given wings
sparkling silver
She knows secrets
That we cannot understand
discover what wasn’t there.
That we cannot comprehend.

The eternity fabric shimmers
and catches my mother’s eyes.
She is excited
and joyed
at the night of
a long awaited friend.
The angel
Floats down,
Leans forward
and whispers
in my mother’s ear.

Silent, precise, serene
in spirit
She was one
with her angel
who has come
to lay down her inhibitions
and make peace with the Earth
and rise
with her choir
sing-song voice
“Baruch ata adonai . . .”

As we chatted along.
Mom was at peace
with her closed eyes,
and labored breathing.
We all cried.
not her.
She was one
with herself; she knew
that the time had come
to lay down her inhibitions
and rise
with her angel
who has come
to take her on board
and leave us behind
and I can hear her
talking with God.
And she is asking
“God, exactly when was I ready to encompass the light?”
And God is replying
“Ruth,
You were always ready.”

XI.
There is something
intrinsically,
infinitely poetic
about a last
Shabat
with the cantor
and her choir
and her choir
“Baruch ata adonai . . .”

As we chatted along.
Mom was at peace
with her closed eyes,
and labored breathing.
We all cried.
not her.
She was one
with herself; she knew
that the time had come
to lay down her inhibitions
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Wishes for Sons
LaMarr J Bruce • Hunter College High School

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

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

He noticed on my weighted eyes that the roaming fry, which so many try to restrain or domesticate, had settled calmly upon my brow. I had observed its untamed form in the sidelong glances of raving men who stomp along cars declaring apocalypse. I had measured it running calmly upon my brow. I had observed its untamed form in the sidelong glances of raving men who stomp along cars declaring apocalypse. I had measured it running calmly upon my brow. I had observed its untamed form in the sidelong glances of raving men who stomp along cars declaring apocalypse.

It was not until I met my father that I realized I must
be brooding. My face is driven in hard curves, my eyes throw light back at the source, my cheekbones deliberately protrude, my upper lip can curl in disdain or even contempt (though I use my hatred sparingly). To challenge, not to threaten. It was not until I met my father that I learned that etiquette can intimidate—especially those whom I dare to challenge when it will be easily mistaken for a threat.

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

On this day we were supposed to drive to Brooklyn, to meet some of his friends. Had it been Bronx or Queens or Harlem, I might be soothed by the familiarity. As we walked, I sometimes led, sometimes followed, a step-and-a-half before or behind. Riding in the new Saturn that tinted windows, deluxe caps, I had to sit beside him. As we rode the BQR, he said: “LaMarr? I see the look on your face, and you, I understand, or I know, how angry you are. I don’t know what I said, so I fucked up. Understand. I apologize if you listenin’. I thought: you know that I’m smart, and I can’t, I’m not . . . I know . . . you giving me . . . Shit, I was so raised you right . . . and, damn, all I can ask is for those muthufuckas. Anyway, how much you weigh?”

“Maybe in the sixteenth, seventeenth century. The sea is the sea in some antiquated (old) Spanish, poetic, vernacular. You know how back in the day English poets would use e-r and e-instead of ever and even in poetry? Well, some Spanish poets would say the man of the sea, or in some instances, the Sea itself. Maybe in the sixteenth, seventeenth century. The Sea is a kind of chiché image in poetry. But they only used one r so it’s really not the same. I think what people tell me about my name, I don’t tell them about the r discrepancy. I know there was some old white man that ran for president named Lamar Alexander. And that faggot in Nerds was Lamar. Some MC’s real name is Lamar: somebody famous, but he goes by something else. I forget who. I know you were a girl. And a boy, right? Your name’s son’s name is Rodney junior, right?”

“How’s that?”

“Yeah . . . that’s your son. Like a man twice over.” And I caught glimpse that was a hint of something that had recently fled from them. Something nearby, or inside of me, asked what right had I, having lived for such a short time, to call myself exhausted? Even though I can cause many crescendi in my forehead, the lines are not permanently there, as would be a dear sign of age. It might be a lie when I tell you: I was born on the same day that some wistful fellow died. I have known wonder if I displaced him. I will begin now—as I walk, brooding, with the comical stride of this pompous Black man, tense and forever reserved, conspicuous and unaffected, timing smiles, paying enough attention to assure that I am simply looking past, not through, the engaged. Had that invisible man stepped aside for me? Had I been of knowledge of my arrival or had I suddenly superimposed him? Up to this point there has been a distinct collection of rules, ideas, obligations, and presumptions, wishes that might be said to affirm my existence. But hush, I say, because this story has been told before. Nevertheless, my father taught me in his presence and tests me in his absence. For this I must [love] him, as I walk painfully, unerringly, to wherever it is I think I’m going.

“We’ve got to exit soon. Once we get on that bridge we’ll be going to Manhattan. To Delancey Street.”

“Nah. That’s no excuse man. You’re the same age as Michael Jordan. Thirty-five. You not old enough for age to be an excuse. I’m young enough though.”
Calligraphy
Jenny Ma  •  Martin Van Buren High School

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

While most childhood Sundays were filled with trips to the park or movies, mine were at home, watching my mother. I remember Sunday as the day when my mother practiced calligraphy, the Chinese art of writing, with the aid of a brush and black ink. She would sit at the kitchen table for hours, using the strength and energy of her entire body to write each stroke. I watched her do this so many times. Even her mannerisms, such as the tip of her tongue protruding while writing or her brows furrowed in deep concentration, and her hands stained with black ink. The black ink crept along the fibers and the tip of the brush seemed like a razor piercing the paper. The black ink, the bristles of the brush glided over the paper effortlessly.

One stroke was finished, but with a flick of a wrist, another stroke was born. The sweeps became heavier as the tip of her tongue protruding while writing an asher, the bristles of the brush glided over the paper effortlessly. In some way, I view the brush as a symbol of my relationship with my mother and the lessons I have learned from her. My life has been the calligraphy brush, once guided with my mother’s love for calligraphy. If she could spend hours I sat in the kitchen, my behind slowly fusing to the chair, knowing the least I paid attention the longer I would have to stay.

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

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

Six Pack
Yaron Aronovicz  •  Stuyvesant High School

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

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

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

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

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

Do girls teach guys how to kiss? Christina says that all guys suck at kissing until a girl teaches them how. I guess I’ll be the first kiss that I haven’t done this before and she’ll have to teach me. That is, if you don’t mind because I can perfectly understand if you don’t want to spend all of the time and energy and embar- rassment it would take to teach someone like me, who doesn’t even have a six pack, how to kiss properly.

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

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

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

When I’m walking home from school, I imagine an Angel taking me back in time. I walk into my house and I’m surprised of just how amazing she is. I’m sure I would be able to remember, seeing as how I just got my six pack. I’ll say that it was a gift...

6包装的人可以轻易记住他们的第一吻，而六块腹肌的人则很难分辨出他们的第一吻。我甚至可以分辨出来。当我坐在她旁边时，她告诉我她吃了多少。我告诉她，她的名字印在她的嘴里，所以她要打喷嚏。她笑了。所以当我说完后，她笑了。我笑了。这就是我们朋友的样子。她是我的朋友。她也爱我。她总是知道我说什么。当我在同学面前感到很不安时，她总是告诉我，这是一场游戏。她总是大声问谁是“最强”鼻涕虫，谁赢了，谁输了，谁会赢。这就是她拿他的鼻子那么多。她笑了。她笑了。这就是我们朋友的样子。她是我的朋友。她也爱我。她总是知道我说什么。当我在同学面前感到很不安时，她总是大声问谁是“最强”鼻涕虫，谁赢了，谁输了，谁会赢。这就是她拿他的鼻子那么多。她笑了。她笑了。
that Ben, my little brother, has pneumonia and that
doesn’t know what they’re talking about. I would
tell her not to give him Pepto-Bismol like Dr. Richardson
did not and give him Pertusel like Dr. Robinson
because those things would not help him. Maybe this way
Ben wouldn’t have died in Brooklyn Hospital when he
was two because he took Pepto-Bismol instead of perci
lin. Maybe this way I wouldn’t have gone to his funeral.
What I really need for my birthday is a direction in life.
I wanted to be a doctor. Now I want to fail Dr. Richardson
and Dr. Robinson and the people that make Pepto
Bismol. But that is not a career and I doubt that my
dad would smile and tell me how I have finally gotten
my head out of the clouds if I mentioned killing people
to him. I think he’s looking for something along the lines
of Lawyer or Business Man or President of the United
States of America.
A few weeks after the funeral, Dad called me outside
and pulled a cigarette and said that he is sure I will have
a period of grief and remorse. He said that I had
suffered a great pain and that he is sure that my school
work will suffer a little bit. He said that I must remain
focused so that I can become a doctor one day. I told him
that I don’t want to be a doctor anymore. Nononsense, he
said. You will be a doctor. You’ve always wanted to be a
doctor, he said. Perhaps I’ll become a chemist. Thus way,
I could change the color of Pepto-Bismol. This would
probably lead to a Nobel Prize.
Melanie says that she should become a physicist. I could
build a time machine and get a six pack and ask her out
at the right time. Maybe I’ll become a Rabbi. I’ll pray every
single day for a six pack. I’ll pray for the color of Pepto
Bismol to change. I’ll pray for a time machine. And God
or the Rabbi fairy will give me these things because I will
always pray with a sense of purpose and direction.
Melanie has a beautiful stomach. It looks like a very
comfortable pillow. It looks soft and warm. I used to lie
don Ben’s stomach. It was soft and warm. I used to let
him sleep on my stomach. I used to sneak into his bed
late at night and fall asleep with him. I read him dinosaur
books and put in it a jar.
I used to collect seashells with Ben. We would go up
and down the beach looking for big clamshells and Chinese
statues and weels and periwinkles. One time we
found a clam whose hinge had not been broken. The two
shells were stuck together. I have half of that clam in
my room. Ben loved our big clams. Our buds would
be full of them and mom would say that we were taking
hundreds of the same kind of shell. She would dump most
of the clams. Ben would cry. I want to go to the bottom
of the ocean and rip out every single clam and bring the
shells home and tell mom how stupid she is to
throw away things that Ben touched. She threw Ben away.
We don’t go to the beach anymore.
So every day that Ben doesn’t
come I take a seashell and
put it in a big jar in my
room. The
jar has 1245
seashells in it. Every day I tell myself that this must stop
and it has been over three years now and Dad seems to
be over it. I sat down and look through my old books
that have names like, "So You Want to be a Piece of Crap." I
look for a sense of direction. I haven’t found it yet in those
books. Then I do 20 sit-ups and five push-ups so I’ll get
a six pack eventually. Then I eat downstairs and eat Ben
and Jerry’s Cherry Garcia ice cream.
Mom likes to talk about things. At dinner it’s just me
and her at the table. She still cooks enough food for four
people. When she makes fish, she says she wonders if Ben
likes fish because most little kids don’t. She doesn’t
let me turn on the TV and the whole house is so quiet.
Mom talks about her day and she asks how my day was
and I tell her that my day was great, just great. My day
was so much better than her day. The same as yesterday
and the day before that, and the day before that, and the
day 1245 days ago when Ben died. But I didn’t say that.
You can’t mention Ben to Mom. She went a little nuts after
he died.
Mom says that she enjoyed her day too. I ask her
what she did today and she tells me how she went shopping
and how at work she got promoted and now she’s Assis
tant Manager at the really firm she works for. She never
worked until Dad left. Dad works at an insurance firm. I
tell Mom how wonderful she is to
her brother with me.
At school, during lunch, Mark asks me if I saw the college
advisor to plan out my whole future in the next half an hour.
Mr. Arrow called me down so I say. Mark says what
future looks like. I take the ice cream cone out of
my mouth and say, "Crap." He laughs and tells me that
he’ll be right there with me.
Then I say bye to Mark and go to the pay phone that we
have outside the lunchroom. I call Mom up every day.
Mom is fat. She could die of a heart attack or stroke
or cancer or anything else. Mom always picks up the phone
and says, “Hello,” and I hang up. I don’t want her
to worry about me worrying about her. She complains
that we get a lot of crank calls during the week.
At the funeral, Dad told me that I was his only son now.
He said that Ben was gone. He said that I would be all
that was left of him and Ben and Mom. He said that he
would die one day and Mom would die one day and I
would be all that was left. I could have thought about how
awful that would be and how alone I would be, but I’m
so happy that I listened to Dad. I focused on
listening to Dad. Dad said I must have children. He said
I must become successful. He said this to me while we
were driving home from the funeral. I think Mom decided
to give up on the two of us.
In the hospital, Ben had IVs running through him. I can
see the doctors hooking Ben’s arms and hands up to
the bags of Pepto-Bismol and that pink shit flowing through
his veins and all the while his pneumonia was getting
worse. Except in the hospital they knew he had pneumonia
and would have hooked him up to antibiotics. I wonder
what would happen if his blood would start flowing up
the tube and into the bag. The medicine burned his veins
so they had to wipe him up in the middle of the night to
change the syringes. You could see swollen, dark holes in
his arms and hands when he was in his coffin. The
doctors drained my brother away. Mom said that Ben
ever wanted to have the needle changed because it hurt
so much. If I had a six pack I would have protected him.
The doctors told my Mom and Dad and me that that year
had a rather bad strain of pneumonia going around and
that three other children died. We never met the parents
of those children. At the home coming when they swallowed
a silver dollar came in. On the way of her throat
you could see the circle of money. The doctors got it out.
She is alive today. They did not give her Pepto-Bismol.
Robert Fischman was complaining about his little brother
in the hallway. He said his little brother always bugs him
when he’s on the phone or the computer and that he’s an
obnoxious little brat. I went over and put my lips next to
Robert’s ear and asked him if his little brother has burn
ning veins that will never heal. I ask him if his little brother
has Pepto-Bismol flowing through him in his coffin. That
shut Robert up.
My math teacher, Mrs. Yoon, talks to me about how
when she was 20 her sister died at 23 and how upset
that was. Now she’s in her 40s and she says that
she never completely healed, but that one day she got up
in the morning and said to herself, “I must live my life
for my sister.” Mrs. Yoon says that this conviction has
brought her much peace and happiness. Mrs. Yoon says
that when she was really depressed, she never thought
she would smile ever again. She says that’s how it
always seems when you are depressed and that the main
thing to do is not commit suicide or do drugs.
Christina, my first girlfriend, who I never kissed, told me that I should
Roll With The Punches. Melanie said that
bad things happen all the time and that
I will be okay one day. I ask if I’d like to talk about it.
None of them ever had brothers
or sisters. So fuck them.
I’ve only asked three girls out my whole life. Christina
said yes but then I think that know about Ben yet and that
didn’t last after she told me to Roll With The Punches.
I mean, I can see how Life Is A Beast, but I really don’t
get Rolling With The Punches. Actually, it’s my fault. I
failed to realize how comforting Rolling With The Punches
would be. Melanie said no because I have “too much
emotion.” The other girl, her name is Iris, said that she
didn’t want to be with someone with a dead brother. “I am as you
can imagine, exceedingly sympathetic to these reasons.
Exceedingly sympathetic.
The hole they dug for Ben was so small. His coffin was
so small. It was wood. The inside looked soft. I went up to
it and touched Ben’s arms under his sleeves and felt his
burned veins. They woke him up every night and they
didn’t even save him. The needle holes were screaming
at me.
**Black Perplexity**

Derick Bowers • Canarsie High School

Eleven-year-old hands, creating life.

With every pinch and grasp, molding from lifeless clay, whatever face that comes to light. Instincts guiding finger movements through a focused daze, a mechanic artistry, a passive rage, and divine intervention. The boy used marbles for its eyes, hair from his last cut, and brown paint for its complexion. The head was finished, leaving him the impression, that the face was not of aggression, but rather a black man with a perplexed expression. His mouth opened in a bewildered fashion, while gazing over the boy’s shoulder. Telling his story through his strange marble eyes, as his face seems to be getting older. Wrinkled from the long-line of his people’s oppression like a sidewalk mime creating comprehensible dialogue through his facial expression, while panasery pass him by every time Nobody’s attention, and no pennies in the hat that lays on the ground empty and flat. Perplexed about the issues not addressed.
It’s not every day that I have a mild hallucination, a trippy moment where the recent past and the actual present collide. It’s not every day that I momentarily confuse my father with my lover, who is almost three decades my senior. But I’m getting ahead of myself. I’ve been having a lot of strange days lately. It was raining something hard this morning. I was thinking, naturally—the day I was to decide to wear my hair down, it rains. Then my father knocked on the bathroom door, asking if I wanted a ride. Of course I did. He knew it, that’s why he asked. He likes to feel useful, and knows I’m always willing to take advantage of his aggressive handiness. Daddy and I are more alike than anyone knows.

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

What I figured was my first hangover ever and possibly the worst experience in all the history of teen drunkenness. I walked into B’s apartment, puffing on the same passed around joint. I could have been having a lot of strange days lately. The sensory overload passed, and my father’s hand coming towards me was open like B’s and I tensed suddenly but then I realized. I realized and my father looked at me strangely and I relaxed and smiled weakly. He popped open the glove compartment, what he had been really reaching for in the ten-second interval that crystallized into a momentary forever.

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

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

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

My nine years of proper education had taken place in the stuffy, glossy halls of private schools. These places are training grounds for Stepford wives. I was the only brown-skinned girl in the school. I attended for eight years, but that was okay. I was smart, pretty, cruel, and developed early, so the girls looked up to me. I made myself numb enough to find pleasure in my place in that youthfull hierarchy. The thought now makes me sick. No one really knows how public school is until they’ve been part of it. Even I, a cynic at the age of ten, wasn’t thinking, “Why are you treating my people less than the worth buried beneath their breasts?” “Black Perplexity” was the title given, and now the boy proudly displays his jewel, sure of receiving the blue ribbon in the art contest at his Catholic school. Three run judges examine the head and pose questions. And the boy explains the black man’s expression due to his people’s oppression. They looked at the head like it was Medusa, but their hearts were already stone, rock hard giving room to believe that this idea wasn’t born and carried out, but rather the rotten wood, because it was too good. So they decided to disqualify him so they decided to disqualify him and send him home. But that was the title given, “Black Perplexity” beneath their breasts?”

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

La Coquette in Memoriam

Noelle C. Maragh • Lafayette High School

 cashier, driving home from work, saw the girl in the passenger seat. The day was hot and it was only past five. When she got off the parking lot, she decided to leave her small vehicle and walk to the house. The girl was still there and the woman approached her. The girl looked surprised and scared. She kept her head down and mumbled something that the woman couldn’t hear. The woman asked if she needed help and the girl nodded. She explained that she was lost and didn’t know where she was going. The woman offered to take her home. The girl hesitated but then accepted. They walked into the house and the woman asked the girl if she wanted something to eat. The girl said yes and the woman offered her a sandwich. The girl ate it and then the woman helped her with her belongings. She gave the girl some money and wished her luck on her journey. The girl thanked her and left. As the woman watched her go, she felt a pang of sadness. She had just helped another person, but it didn’t feel like enough. She wished she could do more, but she didn’t know what to do. She decided to go back to her car and continue with her day.
The funny thing is, I hated Mr. B. when I first saw him. I guess that’s the funny thing.

He sauntered into the classroom fifteen minutes late. Trench coat and sunglasses at noon. The slow walk. Who did he think he was? He was just a teacher at just another high school and he had that walk. It looked stolen to me.

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

Forever.

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

We dreamed of being beautiful just like we dreamed of being animators of Disney one day and being filthy rich. We'd invite each other to our lavish weddings. She dreamed of being in newspapers and slamming both of the parents that I know far too well. We traveled hand-in-hand through the years together, and we shed together the pieces of ourselves that we hated. I grew taller and she grew thinner, our braces and glasses became lost, of the laundry detergent of his clothes. I look at him then, hard. He's peeling the label off the soda, bit by bit, until they gather into a little white mound.

People say forever because it rolls off thick and easy on their tongue; like honey it is sweet and vicious and stays around for a long, slow while. Best friends forever, we write in each other's yearbooks. BFP 4EVA, 143 FOREVER, initials engraved in sloppy ink. We are all eighteen now, and going off to places with manicured lawns and professors and dorms, romantic encounters and bongs and drunken initiations. And in our books of memories, we write, Always Remember, Never Forget. We carve circles in each other's existences, orbiting through each other's lives, bump around. We tell each other to never forget. We make promises for eternity, to remember each other forever, to love and cherish each other forever, till death do us part. To remain friends forever, to love forever; all these promises to the stars, to infinity that we swear to keep in the walls of our hearts. To think of each other every time the slow beat pumps blood through our bodies, circulates through our toes, our fingers.

But what no one ever realizes is this; that such a short lifetime can only hold so many eternities.
Delirious with fever, my mother looks up, finally come to after days of thrashing in the throes of sickness, sees a moth fastened to the wall like an upside down heart. She is eleven, maybe twelve, always too big for her age, and she has learned that moths are signs of rain. She does not want rain, not while she’s sick, not while she lie in bed, so she calls Guama to the room, wants the moth brought outside, but Guama smiles, refuses.

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

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

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

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

T he mere thought—of taking the phone and dialing the number—was sickening. As if yesterday’s burger, half-digested inside, was coming up my throat.

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

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

“This is a bad place,” she insisted. “And a bad time. But we don’t have another one.” I kept looking at her still not knowing what to say. “This is a bad place. And now—there is a third one. Which is the real one?”

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

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

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

After midnight, when everyone went to bed, I searched the Internet. I quickly found the name. A few articles, a few pictures of low resolution, all black-and-white, even sort of yellowish, all taken in the 80s when his name was omnipresent in the papers. He was a famous scientist, a demolition engineer, who was trying to divert some of Siberia’s mightiest rivers to the parched former Soviet republics of Central Asia. He started building a canal some 200 meters wide and 16 meters deep. Going southwards for some 2,500 kilometers, from the confluence of the northern-flowing rivers Ob and Irysh, to replenish the Amudarya and Syrdarya rivers near the Aral Sea. The diversions would water the desert sands of the Kyzylkum desert in Central Asia. All of this was so strange, so absurd and so far away from me. This was a foreign man from a foreign world whose life, even though praised in dozens of articles, had nothing to do with mine. But even so, there was something that did not let me just turn off the Internet and go to bed and sleep. This man, even in the black-and-white and a little bit yellowish images, was a perfect copy of me. Or, maybe I was the perfect copy of him. “A perfect clone,” was what those pictures were screaming to me.

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

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

And now I am asked to call him. And what do I have to say? That I am sorry? That I am deeply sorry that he has appeared in my life? That I sincerely regret the fact that my life has met him some eighteen years ago on the shores of the foggy Enisey in Siberia? How wrong can we be thinking that having understood something, one can forgive anything. I tried to calm down and sort things out. But nothing came out of it, other than nonsense. He did not want me to be at all. He left my mom because he had some duties of a grander importance. And now, all of a sudden, he needs me.

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

I found two more articles on the Russian Yandex. This is what The Red Driller of Novosibirsk was writing about him in the year 1980: “He has a plan . . . a simple plan . . . to water the desert . . . to dry up the swamps . . . he wants the tropical gardens to blossom in the deadly sands . . . he lives a life of a Spartan, he even chose not to have a family of his own to be able to sacrifice all his life for his Motherland . . .”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I hear several different voices in my head, talking at the same time, interrupting.
I'll send my picture to your brother, I have his e-mail.

I would like to know what you look like.

I want to know everything about you.

Not anymore.

Is it snowing?

I was not sure you would call. I was afraid that you won't call today. I am dialing the number. 7-095- . . . Long long rings. I feel silence. It lasts forever. Then it finally occurs to me that I need to say something.

This is me, Seriozhka.

"Hi."

This time the pause lasts even longer.

I was not sure you would call. I was afraid that you won't call. 

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

"Today is Saturday."

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

"Pretty cold."

"Is it snowing?"

"Not anymore."

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

"I want to know everything about you."

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

"I would like to know what you look like."

"I'll send my picture to your brother, I have his e-mail."

That was rude. He can't see. How could have I forgotten that? Slow, as if it was a humongous piece of ice melting, our conversation continued. But the sun—a short polar sun—was not strong enough to melt down such a huge amount of ice. It dripped a little bit and froze again. And then the sun hid behind the horizon. It got cold again. Cold and silent. I imagined how our conversation was squeezing through a black cable stretched across the bottom of the Atlantic ocean, in the absolute darkness and silence, underneath the megatons of salty waters. And you are expecting this conversation to be humane? Isn't it clear that such a forced conversation would not lead anywhere, it would stay formal and empty as a ping pong game when it is played not to score, but out of boredom?

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

"Are you still there?" I asked.

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

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

He still does not have a name.

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

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

"Talk to me," he said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

What should I say?

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

"Why? " he asks.

"Because they are getting ready for H5N1. Haven't you heard of it?"

"Sort of."

"Well, it's a pandemic strain of flu. Everyone is going to die."

"Really?"

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

"I don't know," he says. "I really don't."

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

He is in a confinement.

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

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

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

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

"Me too."

"Let's start from the very beginning."

"From the very beginning. " I repeat after him. "Let's just do that." He is tired. He is falling asleep."

I tell him good bye: "I will call tomorrow."

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

It's after midnight again. And it's snowing now. Our street, so busy during the day, is now empty. I am sitting at my window and looking at the snow falling. If you look for a very long time, you will start seeing someone in the distance, walking in the snow towards you—quietly, upright, from far away.
Much later I would find out what was different about us. Matthew was born with both Gestational Syphilis and Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, and I was not. While I learned to read at age 3, Matthew learned a decade later, at age 13. While I became a nationally ranked long-distance runner and a classical guitarist, Matthew became a diagnostic mystery shuttled from one specialist to another. When I tested into a competitive science high school, Matthew entered a special education program.

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

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

“Ever thought about finding my mother?” I froze. “Um, yeah. I’ve thought about it. What made you bring it up?” I replied slowly.

“Dunno, little bro.”

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

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

I found my teammates and introduced him. All of a sudden it made sense. This was the first time I had ever hung out with Matthew while my friends were present. I hadnever seen him interact with anyone but me, let alone a group of kids our age. The contrast was striking.

For a lack of a better term, he was childish. His maturity level was far below mine or that of my teammates. He was a completely different Matthew—an in-your-face, very physical, hyperactive, annoying Matthew. It made me feel awkward and embarrassed in front of my friends; friends who would later ask innocent yet provocative questions like, “What’s wrong with your brother?”

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

In order to contact my birthmother, I needed to write a letter to the adoption agency, and my birthmother must consent to the contact. Only then can I truly live my daydream.

Still I cannot choose between all the questions crammed into my brain. Why did you abuse crack and alcohol while you were pregnant? Was it ignorance? Did you care? Did you know that you could pass Syphilis to your son during pregnancy? Did you fight when the court stripped us from your custody? Were we accident? Where is our father? What was he like? Do we have other siblings? How many? How old are they? Where do they live? What is the rest of our family like? What is our family history? Is there a history of Alzheimer’s? Huntington’s? Do I who take after? Where did I get my green eyes from? Is she six feet tall right for males in our family? Can I meet them—my brothers sisters uncles aunts cousins grandparents?—where don’t I live? Do you have family reunions? 1-where do you live? When when when... Where do you live? Do you think about us? Do you wonder how Ollie lives ha? PLA_yed Oll what kinds of people we have become since: our ft rd they r at the J CTJ?
Red Planet

Naeem Stewart • High School of Art & Design

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

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

Sam reluctantly surrendered his prize spot at the viewport. He was incredulous at the timing of Jackie’s suggestion, but quickly realized that situations like this fell under her expertise. On a four-man mission, everyone wore several hats. Among other things, Jackie Llewellyn served as doctor and counselor, responsible for both the physical and mental health of the crew. With some of the mission’s most critical moments just minutes ahead, she had noticed the anxiety level getting a little higher than desirable, and decided to defuse the situation with a diversion. “Other names? You mean like Ares?”

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

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

Jackie: “I’d say Armen.”

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

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

“No nicknames,” Jackie chided.

“Me too,” Sam said, pushing his slim body off the wall and heading toward Wally. “Looks like the relay satellite is working,” Sam said. The Mars One mission’s first major task had been to deploy a communications satellite into Mars orbit. Mars was only about half the diameter of Earth; the short horizon, plus the various mountains and rockies dotted across the Martian landscape, would severely limit the range of line-of-sight based radio on the surface. With the satellite in orbit, the range of surface communications would be substantially boosted. The satellite would also serve as a backup antenna to send messages to Earth in the event of a malfunction in the lander’s primary communications array.

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

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

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

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

Patriot was an appropriate name for the lander, as this was a distinctly American mission. Ten years ago the space race had reignited when it became obvious that “international cooperation in extraterrestrial matters was no longer politically sustainable”—the diplomats’ fancy way of saying that the United States had decided to go it alone. At the once-naïve idealism of colonizing Mars became more practical, so too did discussions of the Red Planet’s future turn from grand visions of a conflict-free political utopia to the same kind of carved-out, built-up video camera from the underside of the lander, where it would film the first steps on Mars. After she had tested it and found it functioning properly, she joined Wally near the airlock.

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

A sharp intake of breath followed, then Russell spun as quickly as the air valves were working, then checked the gauges on the control panel as he did so again. He saw the light above the exit door switch from red to green, as the heavy drills designed to penetrate the thick Martian soil were engaged. The suits were fully inflated, and air was circulating through them. Russell raised his Browning and aimed it at the Patriot and gazed in wonder at the salmon sky and crimson-brown plains before him. He moved out to the boundary of the airlock entrance and pointed his gun at Wally and Jackie. They watched him as he walked out onto the Martian soil, toward the horizon. Russell knew that now there was turning back. A few moments passed, the only audible sounds the engine roar and the distant rustle of the suit’s air filters. The exit door retracted and locked into place. Wally appeared in the opening gripping the doorway with both hands. Russell imagined the furious stare that lay hidden behind Wally’s sun visor, and clutched the soil drill tightly.

“Don’t come out here,” were the first words spoken on the surface of Mars. “What do you mean, ‘Don’t come out here?’ What’s gotten into you, Russ?”

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

Wally wondered if Russell was bluffing. The Indian geologist was a prominent member of the scientific community; he had spent five years traveling and traveling alongside his compatriots. Could he really kill them so easily? Was it worth testing him? How could the mission psychologists have missed the potential for something like this in Russ’s psychological fitness exams? Was it too late for that? The Americans had moved into the international realm, made alliances with the right people, and as they did, their attachment to the land of their fathers was worn away. Instead, they looked to the stars. Russell Chase sighted Earth in the sky, a small, bright, bluish-white star from this distance, and began the words he’d been preparing to deliver for the last five years.

“Indians of All Nations, I address you: This is Russell Chase of the Sioux, born on the Pine Ridge Reservation. On behalf of the indigenous people of the Western Hemisphere, I claim this planet, which the white man calls Mars. I call on my Indian brothers and sisters to join me. Gather your belongings, your most sacred treasures, and come, Navajo from the desert and Inuit from the Arctic. Come, Comanche, Nez Perce, Iroquois, Algonquin, Pawnee, Iowa, Seminole, and all the rest. Let us make a new start away from the Trail of Tears, and the Massacre at Wounded Knee, and away from fire and water and blankets laced with smallpox. Remember the spirit of our people. Remember Alcatraz and Red Power. We will transform the surface of this planet, melt its ice and free its water. We will plant a new home for the proud children of this land. The new home of the fifth world. The new home of all nations. A new home for all the people who have come before us, and the color green will appear. We will build bricks from the dust, and our homes from those bricks. And one day, the buffalo will roam free again, here. This is the ultimate product of Red Power. This is the fulfillment of the Red Man’s destiny. This is, and will forever be, a Red Planet.”

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

Wally finally growled. Russell spun as quickly as the airlock’s exit door sealed shut behind him. They had recovered from their initial shock, and had used the computer override to take control of the airlock. Wally and Jackie were suiting up, getting ready to try to salvage the landing. Up in orbit, Sam relented the events back to mission control with the passive, matter-of-fact frankness of a veteran of the space corps. Russell knew that now there was turning back. A few moments passed, the only audible sounds the amplified bladders and exhalers of his own lungs.

The order of exit had been predetermined by mission control, carefully choreographed as the public relations landmark it would be. Wally, as mission commander, would take the first steps on Mars, followed by Jackie, and then Russell. Sam would get his chance another time; for now, he remained in orbit to maintain the link with Earth and monitor the vitals of the astronauts from a safe distance. That was the way it was supposed to happen, as far as mission control was concerned. Russell drew a few deep breaths to test whether the suit’s air valves were working, then checked the gauges on the small wrist-mounted readout panel. He grabbed one of the heavy drills designed to penetrate the thick Martian permafrost and walked to the exit door of the airlock. Through the small reinforced window on the inner door he saw flashes of movement—Wally and Jackie were about to enter. He turned and frantically pressed at the button that would open the outer door. He saw the light above the exit door switch from red to green, as the airlock door switched from green to red. Wally and Jackie were locked inside the lander. Outside was Mars. Russell Chase poked his head out of the Patriot and gazed in wonder at the salmon sky and crimson-brown plains before him. He moved out onto the shuttle’s gantry ladder. Then he stepped down to the surface.

“If the suits are compromised, their bodies would not explode; there would be no instantaneous boiling of body fluids. But oxygen would rush out of the breaches, and after as little as ten seconds, they would fall unconscious. It might not be a dramatic death, but it was death just the same.”

Russell Chase said quietly. “Can we shut him down?” Wally asked.

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

“Is that a no?”

“That’s a no.”

The sunlight was fading, and Russell Chase watched as Mars grew dark. Could it really work, be wondered? As soon as the success of his mission was made public, the launch from Star City, Kazakhstan, would occur, carrying the first group of—what were they? Pilgrims? Settlers? Immigrants? Reinforcements.

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Polar Fever
Kevin Morrell  •  High School of Art & Design

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

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

It may seem that catching lice was the most insigniﬁcant event in my life, but nothing could be further from the truth. I am sure that you will agree once you read this story. It in no way intends to teach you how to catch lice, nor is it interested in any of the descriptions of lice or their effects published in medical journals. It is intended to serve as a door-opener. It may seem that catching lice was the most insigniﬁcant event in my life, but nothing could be further from the truth. I am sure that you will agree once you read this story. It in no way intends to teach you how to catch lice, nor is it interested in any of the descriptions of lice or their effects published in medical journals. It is intended to serve as a door-opener.

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

Seal meat was served. In our globally aware but racially homogeneous neighborhood in Norway’s Trøndelag where I spent my childhood, Tundra was a cliché word for those who did not travel the world, who did not appreciate sea urchin or soppise (sea cucumber), preferring a hamburger instead. Tundra was a symbol of locality, or parochialism, of narrow-mindedness, and, therefore, of absolute backwardness. I was never a Tundra. I even ate rakfisk or rakorret—a fermented trout or char—a staple in the Chum, I did not realize right away that it was a chunk of meat dripping with blood. I put a slippery slab in my mouth and immediately spit it out into my hand. I had an urge to run out and vomit. The man laughed, while my Greenlandic masters explained that it was a delicacy—a seal’s liver, a special treat for an important guest.

The table and benches shone with its grease as the midnight sun penetrated through a seal-gut window.

Whooping cough, or Rasmussen fever, is an acute disorder of the respiratory tract. Symptoms, prodromal period, and outcome vary. It all started on the night of my sixteenth birthday when I discovered that my real father was a caribou herder, an Eskimo, rather than the Reaper. And in the morning, they cauﬄed me with warm caribou blood.

I was anything but a Tundra. But now my horses were saddled up and ready to take me to the shores of the White Sea, to the most adventurous adventure in my life—which I had neither designed nor dreamt of.

. . . Tundra was ﬂat and identical till the uttermost horizon. Frozen bogs, white patches on the blue blanket of moss; a dried up ocean without water, a lunar plain. The land did not look ﬂitzy, but quite the opposite, antiseptic, and therefore—deviously: no roads, no villages, nothing. I thought that this exactly how the Earth might look after Armageddon.

. . . A strong smell of urine hit my nose as I entered the Chum. Clutter was everywhere: Strings of drying ﬁsh, random pieces of wood, rusty harpoons, bones, dirty pots, and caribou’s skins hanging on the lines to dry.

Where do you live?” the old man, cigarette hanging from his lip, ﬁnally asked when we sat down around the dirty table.

I returned into the Chum to take a Tylenol when another wave nausea hit me, this time harder, forcing me to run out and vomit. The man laughed, while my Greenlandic masters explained that it was a delicacy—a seal’s liver, a special treat for an important guest.

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

The Greenlanders and Girmauncha, the old man, returned by late afternoon. They were in great spirits. They killed a seal, a hamburger instead. Tundra was a symbol of locality, or parochialism, of narrow-mindedness, and, therefore, of absolute backwardness. I was never a Tundra. I even ate rakfisk or rakorret—a fermented trout or char—a Norwegian delicacy that many, especially foreigners, considered outrageous. I was anything but a Tundra. But the seal liver was beyond my limits.

The Greenlanders buried themselves eating seal intestines, drinking vodka, and taking pictures of the Chum. The old man fell asleep on the platform with his mouth open, mouthguard in hand. Then I realized that this platform covered in seal and caribou skins was the only sleeping place in the Chum. There was only one bed, a communal one.

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

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

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

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

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

I opened my eyes, just one and quickly closed it again. The devil with fangs, stripped to his bea-rist pants was rock-ing above me and whining, moaning, growling, laughing . . . I also saw the two moons right next to my face. They were holding me tight, shoulder to shoulder, leg to leg, stomach to stomach, we were three naked bodies entwined as one. . . . It must have been midday when I woke up. Or maybe midnight. The sun was still shining high in the sky—the same place where I saw it last. It didn’t move an inch. The air was clear and fresh. I could not smell the seal guts the same place where I saw it last. It didn’t move an inch. I reconciled with them, or even became one of their own.

“Drink this,” I heard the voice of the moon. The air was clear and fresh. I could not smell the seal guts like before. I saw the trees with emerald leaves, and I heard voices, first a falsetto, high-pitched whine, then a deep chest baritone, they chanted, alternating with hail, rain, water running, wind blowing, wolves howling, snow foxes sniffing, bears growling . . . Uda-da-da . . . Uga-ga-ga . . . all was quiet again.

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

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

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

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

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

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

In the KLM plane from Moscow to Amsterdam I opened the WSJ. I had not seen newspapers since late June. All these events, all this breaking news had sped past me. “Fly fast! (How gross!),” my neighbor, a Swede, said catching a break from his shrimps with mariner sauce and terrine of foie gras. “Lice,” he said. “You have lice, don’t you?” Upon arriving back home I went to the barber shop and had my hair cut. Christian was waiting for me at the steps. He was eager for news. We went to McDonalds. In the rest-room I stopped in front of the mirror. A sun burnt moon face was looking at me, so familiar and so foreign. “I don’t understand,” Christian said when I finished my story. “Did you sleep with them or what?” The Big Mac tasted like plastic, I discarded it. After my return, my old life ceased to make sense. Early in the morning, instead of going to my AP chemistry class, I went to Times Square to see if I could make crowds change their flow. From there I would head to the park where I endlessly ran up the walls of the Belve-de-re Castle trying to break away from gravity. I spent my afternoon in the library learning about magic and herbs. From Habecha I already knew that all sicknesses, including cancer, came from stress, anger, self-pity, and desperation. I tried my healing powers on my friends and strangers. Using my bare hands, I learned to heal headaches and back pains. Yet, I failed to learn to fly. And I also failed the semester. It was quite obvious by the end of March.

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

On the eve of my SAT I finally put away my books. To entertain myself, I again started reading the Kom-Nenets-Russian illustrated dictionary. I ran into the word Vanzer tsui vada . . . the wrong answer.

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

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

“Was this blood, Ole Jorgen?” I cried in amusement staring at the cup.
Deirdre Flood
Urban Assembly School for Media Studies

October 21st, 2008
I was convinced I was the girl who’d spend days on end in tears because she was so broken that her legs wouldn’t move. But I am the destroyer. If you lived here, you’d be home now. There is no justification. I am an asshole because I choose to be. Promiscuous. Borderline. I refuse to feel. I refuse to recognize the anguish anymore. I have become a robot who fucks to feel. I don’t need razor blades or drugs. I just need to get undressed. I am manipulative, a crusader marching to territories unknown, trying to take back the promised land and killing everyone in my path.

“Does it faze me?” you ask, the murder—the victims, the streams of blood down the roads, crashing at my ankles, running through my toes. Apparently it doesn’t anymore. I have taken everything I’ve always tried to get rid of. These people, these broken people. I’ve hated who they are and what they do, and now that they’re gone, I’ve taken their place. I am James, Dan, and my father, the one who manipulates and breaks people’s hearts, the coward who so sick they ruin everyone around them, the one who seeks sympathy, crying, sobbing to strangle the one who teases you of feeling, so you’re no longer mad. I’ve complained I was the girl who’d spend days on end in tears, crying, gulping of air she swallowed, trying to remember how to breathe. Everyone was crying, the jury, even strangers, everyone except me. When my mother had come back to the rows and sat down next to me, her head in her hands, I could barely understand her through the wrinkles in his face. He stood facing the judge. When I felt terrible; I did this to him. I put him in those leg irons. From there, I pushed the judge to try me, to try me, and couldn’t stop the tears from streaming down my face. I didn’t cry when they went over the evidence, when my mother read the letter, when they carried out his sentence. I cried when he was able to pick me out of a crowded room instantly. I cried because I spent my life with him, utterly unrecognizable. An object. I cried because it was then that I knew I was significant.

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

He had a bird; actually I think it was two. He kept them in his bedroom. That’s how he’d get me in there. “Deirdre, we have to go feed the birds.” Trapped, voiceless in a metal cage they sat; so did I. And eventually because of these actions I put in a metal cage as well. They have wings but they cannot fly. I used to let them out when he wasn’t looking. I wanted them to fly because I couldn’t. It became routine after a while. It had been happening for so long that I was used to it. It was all I knew. I’m not saying I didn’t know I was being molested. I knew. But I could do nothing. I tried so many times to write it, to say it, to scream it, but the words never came out of my mouth.

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

Victims of such abuse tend to feel ashamed, guilty, and worthless. And I think it’s because of moments like that. If they’re sick enough to use you as a sex object then they’re sick enough to think you want it. Or to at least make you feel like it’s your fault. By the way . . . he never stopped.

He would do it in front of people too; he thought he was too smart for it. But apparently he wasn’t. I would consistently try and sit with my sisters so he’d have no room. Or invite them under the blanket so he couldn’t get in.

When I was seven, right after one of the “incidents,” he got up to leave my room. And I sat on the edge of the bed, legs hanging limp inches from the ground. His hand grasped the doorknob, but he never opened the door. He turned around and looked at me, sort of threatening. You can’t tell anyone about this. If you do, they’ll send me to jail. And then I won’t be here to teach you how to paint. It will ruin both our lives. So you have to promise that you’ll keep it a secret.

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

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

So I left it blank. You have no idea how much I regret that. My father had suspicions about what was going on. He knew it all too well. My mother molested my sister; he could see it in my eyes. I’m sure—same house, same time, and none of us knew. I grew up in a house infested with liars and abusers. It took a long time to trust grown men again. Everyone I knew was a monster. My father has some anger issues; when he was young, he used to be a monster. That was going on he yelled at me, and threatened Dan. It was after we moved to that told someone. For four years I thought I’d tell my mother, my sister, Niadh, or my grandmother (on my mother’s side). But no, I told my father.

He scared it out of me in a tarantual interrogation. We went through the whole process—tell the police, he gets a lawyer, go to the doctor for evidence. And truthfully. October 11th, 2001, the court date, was the last time I saw Dan alive. And every year since then it’s been a bad day. Next year, I guess, we’ll see. Every time I tell that story, people give me this look of pity or sympathy. But what they don’t know is I’m fine. I’ve told so many people—police, my family, the jury, my friends. Everyone knows. And I’m okay. It happened. So I could have something to write about.

And it’d be published one day.

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

So don’t pity me because I was abused.
I Write

Patrick Moy • Stuyvesant High School

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Victoria Pavlov • The Bronx High School of Science

My sister Lissy comes home with a bruise the day Annabelle Lewis is reported missing in our town of Rodake, Ohio, population 444. We don’t know this yet, though. My mother tries to find out how Lissy got the bruise, smoothes her hair and helps her take off her coat, but my sister stays quiet, staring at her fingers as she twirls them into shapes.

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

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

“The bruise is on her stomach. I just want to know how she got it. Be a brother, Alezae. Please.” Be a brother. She says that whenever I tell her I can’t take Lissy to the park or go over her homework with her. She’s angry because Lissy had to go home on the bus today instead of walking home with me. I couldn’t walk her home because I’d stayed for the school musical, and I couldn’t tell my mother why because then I’d have to tell her about Clarissa being an extra and why that means I had to stay and now with this tragedy the lake should be banned from public entirely. Mayor Adamson promises to do something about this and has a gate built around the lake, but it doesn’t take a week for some kids to rig through the mesh for an easy entrance, and it hasn’t been fixed. Over the next few days, the town turns Annabelle Lewis into a sudden celebrity.

“Of course he knows her. She’s his age, after all. Well, and Tyler. He must have thrown a rock at her as she was getting on the bus. I’ll kill him.”

“You’re not killing anyone, Alex. You don’t even know it’s him.”

“‘Who threw the rock?’“

“Why?” My eyes drift to Lissy, still sitting on the floor in front of the mirror and mutters as she rifles through her purse, looking for her mobile and license.

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

“You’re not killing anyone, Alex. You don’t even know it’s him.”

“‘Who threw the rock?’“

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

“Lissy’s too, of course.” Helen suddenly notices Lissy and swings her about the play, that I saw her, but she leaves school so fast that by the time I pick up Lissy from her class all I see is the braid and Clarissa’s white sneakers tapping brusquely on the pavement. I finally catch her one day when she stays a little later to speak to a teacher, and when she finishes, I’m waiting for her.

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

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

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

“Take her to your sister, Alex.”

“Sure,” a smile.

“Why, the disappearance. Haven’t you heard? The whole town is talking about it.”

“Sure,” a smile.

“She's been missing for two days now.”

““My mother and I exchange a glance. “Who disappeared?”

“‘Oh, you, haven’t heard! It’s the Lewis girl, that Anna belle. She’s been missing for two days now.’

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

“Do you know Annabelle, Alex?”

“Sure,” a smile.

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

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

2013—FICTION & DRAMA—1st Place

Of Girls and Wintry Lakes by Victoria Pavlov

66 Creative Writing Awards Thirtieth Year
voice is getting more high pitched as she is getting more nervous, and it’s hard not to get more nervous when I can no longer keep the three pairs of hands and feet from hitting me and go down.

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

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

“She’s okay,” I try, but end up spitting out more blood. I swallow a few times and spit out the rest, push my tongue into the tooth that fared the worst and spit more blood in her chest.

“Leave her alone,” I try, but end up spitting out more blood. I swallow a few times and spit out the rest, push my tongue into the tooth that fared the worst and spit more blood in her chest. I try to explain this to my mother, but my lips are swollen and speaking is an Olympic task for herself, so I just lie on the couch and let Lissy sit on my legs, the only place where it doesn’t hurt. My mother brings Lissy her Rubix cube, the square so old and overused that the colors are fading, and those that haven’t are peeling at their corners. Lissy takes it, ponders over it, mutters to herself, and starts solving it. Her fingers fly over the colored stickers as she shifts row by row and several minutes later, the colors are all matched, and she’s shoving the cube in my hand so I can mix them up again, make it harder for her to solve. My mother watches as she drinks her tea at the table and I can see her replay her favorite phrase in her head over and over again, and I want to tell her that it’s okay, that I know I can’t do it. I try to tell her with my eyes but her gaze is distant and she’s in another world, staring at Lissy’s hair and it’s like I can hear her thinking it. Be a brother, Alezae.

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

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

We’re taking Clarissa home when she turns to us and asks, “Do you want to visit the lake with me?” I wonder where she learned that.

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

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

“What about yours?”

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

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

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

“My mother’s a nurse. That’s about it.”

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

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

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

It’s never bothered me before, but as I put out my cigarette, I get a sudden chill thinking about the dead girl found not ten feet from where we sat talking about her. It wasn’t this creepy talking about her on the sunny street on a hickey day, when Annabelle’s hand.

I take her by the hand and we stand there a little and let her face to it and smiles at it.

She takes out a lighter and I lean in with the cigarette in my mouth, my tongue curling at the taste. The paper is covering the delicate swirl of her lips. I imagine their softness, but I can see it now. A gentle shade of cherry, neatly left on the paper. I never realized that she wears lipstick, barely even home nowadays.” The cigarette simmers in my mouth, my tongue curling at the taste. The paper is curling like licks of fire around my veins. I inhale and let the cigarette burn between my lips. I can feel it in my mouth, my tongue curling at the taste. The paper is curling like licks of fire around my veins.

Clarissa looks around, a look of irritation flashing on her face, and like she’s playing along in a game, Lissy thinks for a moment.

“Let’s go to the park. We’ll get ice cream and go to the park. Which do you want today?” I ask for good measure.

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

“She’s shivering, but I can feel her calm down as Clarissa wraps her coat around her, and she leans her head against my chest and sighs in a hiccups like a colicky baby.

“I’m sorry,” Clarissa begins, but I cut her off with a hand. “Look, I like you, but you really have to grow up.” I see the indignation flicker across her face, and then the submission as she lowers her eyes. “I get it, really. Anna belle was nice and she wasn’t really home anymore.”

“I’m sorry,” Clarissa begins, but I cut her off with a hand. “Look, I like you, but you really have to grow up.” I see the indignation flicker across her face, and then the submission as she lowers her eyes. “I get it, really. Anna belle was nice and she wasn’t really home anymore.”

“I’m sorry,” Clarissa begins, but I cut her off with a hand. “Look, I like you, but you really have to grow up.” I see the indignation flicker across her face, and then the submission as she lowers her eyes. “I get it, really. Anna belle was nice and she wasn’t really home anymore.”

But you have to get over it. The town did. So you have to, too.”

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

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

“Let’s go to the park. We’ll get ice cream and go to the park. Which do you want today?” I ask for good measure, and like she’s playing along in a game, Lissy thinks for a moment.
Been a Brooklyn boy
17 years.
Canarsie (under)represent
17 years
an enclave under siege.
Alone
in the brisk air, I
wait and prepare.
The B(82)us, like a pressurized can on wheels,
lurches to a
Stop, for me.
I step up into Laughter that
Stops, for me,
only briefly.
Hood up, Head down
still and silent I remain.
But they know what I am.
The slits in my face, or the color on my skin,
give me away.
They call me out, and like
Word Warlords
they start firing.
I die
I become
Ching-Chong Chinaman
not even Chinese.
One of them begins a mocking martial arts, slicing the air
And the bus floods with his gleeful screeching.
Another asks for a new pair of sneakers,
tossing a gracious 50 cents like a pair of grenades.
The heart hardens into iron
and the chest splinters under its weight.
The familiar blood, hot and angry, rushes up
and threatens to erupt
the ears that took these shots for years.
The white fists, choking the trembling, metal bar,
redden and tense with desire
for flesh and bone.
The young cannon on the face,
imprisoning a furious breath and a toxic tongue,
waits to spit their bullets
right back at them.
I can’t see the world passing me by
outside the foggy glass.
I can’t hear beyond,
the monstrous roaring of the engine.
The lights flash green.
I strike the Yellow tape that throw the doors open,
and leap down to let my boots crush the Frozen Earth.
The Laughter continues behind the doors that violently swing shut
on the suffocating steam of that warzone
with no ethnic ethics.
In icy isolation
slapping my feet on the muddy slush decorating the cracked concrete,
I cast off my hood, my gloves, my scarf,
and open my jacket.
The harsh cold pushes against the pores of my face
wraps around my ears
enters my veins
and embraces me.
I made it home.
I have lived for sixteen years.
I have lived for sixteen years and ten months.
I have lived for sixteen years and ten months and twenty-nine days.

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

Melanoma is a cruel ailment.
The blotches of brown spread across my hips faster than they can be treated.
The blotches of brown spread across my mother’s arms faster than they can be treated.

It doesn’t skip a generation.

sometimes I kiss people I really shouldn’t kiss and let them unbutton my jeans and sometimes I leave physics class and walk in circles until I can hear the blood pulsing under my skin because I’m ashamed and sometimes I smoke as much as my lungs will inhale and sometimes I smoke to quell my appetite sometimes I don’t eat because eating scares me sometimes food makes me want to throw up sometimes I scream until I can’t breathe sometimes I sit in the empty bathtub to stop screaming sometimes I only sleep for two hours at night because I can’t make the screams stop sometimes I don’t sleep for days and become slightly delirious and don’t remember crying myself to sleep sometimes I cry about books and about people who died hundreds of years ago sometimes I cry about songs and people who will die tomorrow sometimes I don’t cry even though I want to more than anything sometimes I hold myself to keep the tears in sometimes I can’t hold everything in and it spills out of me like coffee from the cup that I sometimes spill in the night.

My father is an alcoholic.
I was raised by beer bottles.
Beer bottles have no place in the life of a four year old.

Is a parent a parent if they fail to parent?

What does a sixteen year and ten month and twenty-nine day old know about being a parent?
Not enough.

My Gram was the mother I never had.
She never told me my hair made me look like a boy,
She never told me my expanding waistline made me less appealing,
She never told me my scars made me look damaged.
She lovingly combed my hair,
Cooked me all the pasta I wanted,
Traced her fingers over my scars.
My Gram was the mother I never had.
I find it funny.
Our love story, a haiku.
Please don’t ever leave.

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

My father fell asleep on the couch before dinner, as usual.
We were out of frozen dinners.
I biked to the store and bought a pizza for my sister with the allowance I had been saving up for Pokémon cards.
On the ride back up the hill, I cut my knee.
I pushed my bike home, holding the pizza.
After feeding my sister, I put her in bed and read her a book.

My father woke up while I was cleaning my wound.
I received no apology.

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

It was the longest night of my life.

I surround myself with empty coffee cups.
They make me feel comfortable.
I surround myself with gum wrappers.
They make me feel safe.
I surround myself with makeup palettes.
They make me feel pretty.
I surround myself with your letters.
They make me feel loved.

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

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

My bathroom reminds me of family secrets kept by women and leftover cilantro burning on stove pilots. There, my mother told me of my brother’s HIV diagnosis.

In the Bronx High School of Science, 2016

I was a girl with a brother who had HIV.
Her granddaughter was also a light-skinned man and her grandmother tarnished the family image with her dark cinnamon skin. As with many of the clandestine effects men have had on the women in my family, my features show mysterious traces of the light-skinned men whose blood I share. My curls closest to my scalp dip to it while the curls at the end curl lastly and my skin turns a deep russet round face. The women in my family must bear the shame that is not white enough.

When I ask my grandmother about her parents, she tells me, “Only my mother was black and ugly. My father was a light-skinned man, handsome, just handsomely.” Her lips were closed at the age of 16 when my life was mislead to the point of my mother’s wrath.

The women in my family must bear the shame that is not white enough. How defeated they must have felt, the brown women in my family when discovering that despite their most earnest efforts to whiten our family, all they had for proof were children whose race could not be told past the times he yelled at me in front of my teacher for taking other children her father had with other women, just like a gash in her side, just like she was not aware of the 18 attempts to make the truth pretty in order to protect her love. My grand mother’s skin was like cinnamon sticks glossed over with honey, brown enough to be mistaken for a Hashian but not light enough that you would know she was Dominica. In the midst of Trujillo’s racial cleansing, only her association with this white family saved her from Trujillo’s wrath.

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

Against my water-damaged walls lies a picture of my mother in her 20s. Her curls caress her face and her legs look glossed over with glitter. Her mahogany skin is sun-kissed form years of prancing on Caribbean islands. She would remind me everyday of how much she hated her “black” skin, of how my brother’s father was a light-skinned man with green eyes, with “class.” She would tell me that only her mother who has “bad hair” is dark and ugly. Her father was light-skinned, so had class.

When I ask my grandmother about her parents, she tells me, “Only my mother was black and ugly. My father was a light-skinned man, handsome, just handsomely.” You could not read me momma said don’t play the hood but the streets are deceiving at the age of 15 when my life was mislead at the age of 16 moneys all i am receiving still up on the block i know we all had our reasons jayo did a bid he was gone for some seasons the streets contain murder everyday was bleedin kids raisin kids everyday was breeding forced to pray god cause it aint much to believe in smoke a few to get through and to fight off my demons cant trust a soul even ur mans b schemin young boy out there cause his pockets recordin family aint pay hab they okay with him leavin then u get locked up won’t be home for some season when the judge make the sentence aint coping and pleading and they get the nerve to judge him without asking his reason what you know about having to sleep with your stomach growling mother wollen toilet cant flush and plus the bills is pollin in the hood the man is death is pollin my side of town always down i take a look at the world i see the rest is all i am just sign you a conviction send you straight to the island i be tryna tell em the lennon wat i am saying is expul my city is broke and i just tryna fix it i had nothing but something came from under the rose grew outta concrete i came from under dat streets gave me royally bros gave me royalty i put dat work in on dat block i had my brother back touch my first band in the streets i fell inlove with that mother told stayaway but i kept on running back cancer took my queen away i just want my mother back things happen we wont understand like if dont finish skool then im dumber then the other man but then i thinking on the other hand wat if i blowup nd by the summer nd i endup right on summer jay never was the type to complain but we aint have it given teacher couldnt relate to me i felt i aint have to iinen clothes old kids lauged they was foul on it floods in my house no mop we threw towels on it tired oanda block dat curve i spent hours on it same blek bro got shot nd they now leave flowers on it the system want Us to fail its because were black and wars worse then that is us they just want us die of a cancer take at us like prey call us a deadbeat they the same ones that dressing themselves in beds sheets rip them fallen soldiers just let the dead sleep my mind got stronger pocket was dead weak bullets holes in Martin Luther who’s the shooter they aint cathem though momick got exe of his killer they aint catch him though life got stained nd they telling us to let it go its 2017 and i could tell u wat we headed for obama outta we was cautious with with options corruption nd disruption wat society is oppin information they hold out sold us out like a auction government need a mint from all the shit they been talkin dont i just be talkin was posted up inda cold aint have my coat on trump for our president dat who we want us to hope on they racist i cant stand it Get all touched smokem like a newport in newyork until they all dust noomin from them towns where they dont visit at where the stydie u gotta vision dat 33 rd i lived in dat the streets take u life in return u dnt get it back they took eddy back in 14 nd i remember that this lifestyle put him into dat he was tryna eat got tired of 2dollar chicken wraps but instead they rather getten clap and i changed said i rather spit arap sell drugs to hood cause they paid us this way taught to never ask nd they raised us this way chains on us cause they slaved us this way they wonder why we more gravy cause they made us this way its 2017 we can change
Sets the scene.
Seventeen and rebellious. Boy sits on mattress sitting on the ground. She sits to his right. Music swells.
Cigarette smoke fills the air and lungs, suffocating them. No one disturbs the silence.
Boy puffs smoke in air.

The—still—smoked filled air compresses, girl’s chest gets heavy
As the weight of bodies (like the weight of fear) often seems to do Girl can’t remember how they got like this.
Can’t remember how she got like this.

Eyes close.

Girl was never taught to value her time
Always running after little boys that didn’t deserve it
Daddy left when she turned 8
Said he couldn’t handle it
Weaved in and out her life.
Letters every birthday
until only letters she saw signed by him was child support.

Always gave up her happiness living for moments
That never came
She gave too much

Girl was never taught to value her time Instead she was
Taught to be babysitter but still lover.
To be mother but still wife.
Taught to pick up where boy’s parents left off. At the beginning.

Flashback.

7.
At seven years old with beaded, box braids running past her collarbones down her back in a sea of 4C hair
And bubblegum pop confidence that could not be popped
Hand in mama’s
Girl doesn’t notice when group of men lining the street
Turn towards them

What you tryna do shawty?
Mama says nothing
She thinks how she wants to go home
Up and down. Eyes rove over body.
Footsteps quicken.

Blinks.

Girl and boy lie in quiet contemplation on the mattress on the ground.
Boy holds her hand in his.
Girl tries to remember last time he held her
Hours after the cigarette smoke had escaped the room.
Answer:
Never.

Boy says three words. Girl doesn’t believe him.
This time boy closes eyes, boy sighs.
Almost apologies.
Quiet.

Girl bends at waist to make excuses for him.
Breaks her teeth and will to comfort him.
Twists her tongue and does stunts to will herself to speak submission.
Wills her body to speak submission.

Girl feels like everything and nothing simultaneously

Girl was never taught to love herself
She sought validation in the heavy breaths and quick temper
Of little boys that couldn’t care less
She could never appreciate the curves and dips Of her own body
Never thought it could be worshipped But she could be worshipped
The queen in her, hadn’t yet found a crown that fit quite right
So instead she settled
In her often hazy drunkenness

Let them impose themselves on her
Let them force themselves into spaces where they couldn’t fit With egos too big and minds too small
She couldn’t make up for its emptiness So she filled the space left in her heart With short-lived pointless promenades.

Blinks.

Sets the scene.
Seventeen and rebellious. Boy sits on mattress sitting on the ground. She sits to his right. Music swells.
Cigarette smoke fills the air and lungs, suffocating them. No one disturbs the silence.
Boy puffs smoke in air. Scene.
The Misinterpretation Of Dark Skin

Kiara Brooks • Topeka West High School

My rich dark skin.
To love it or to hate it is the question,
One I never asked yet I get answers.

My skin seems like a trap as they hunt me down because of it
Armed with “playful” words, comparisons, and blatant disrespect.
My life it seems to start to shift when the reality of my dark skin hits.
Mauled perspectives drop me down a bit, my hopes and dreams no longer seem to fit into the reality others forced upon me.

Media feeds into this corruption connecting black skin with all kinds of ugliness.
To them we define that word while incorporating violence and a lack of intelligence.
The masses take this as a solid truth.
They’re taught that dark skinned people are lazy, always acting crazy,
Sitting in a hole they can easily get out of if they try.
Stereotypes like this continue to persist.
But we’re different than these lies being sold as truth.
I represent people with skin like me.
I strive to create a name, that’ll trigger a chain of positive images of me and others with skin the same.
I’ll have no need to hide in shame or try to change.

I come from my mother.

What a beauty, whose brain is like no other.
She has rich skin like mine that people try to smother.
They pack the negatives a top our skin as if being dark is a sin.
As if our melanin causes them offense.
Makes them go on defense.
And their defensive goal is to tear the color off our skin.
Of course that’s not literal, but imaginations have gone far.
Death and life are in the power of the tongue.

Light is right, gets whispered in our ears.
Our melanin dipped children repeat the phrase.
When they’re out playing they stick to an area of shade saying,
They’re dark enough already, why make it worse.

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

For bringing our skin to its true hue.

In the summer black girls would rather swim in bleach than in a pool.
If only you were lighter,
No one’s gonna like a girl with dark skin.
These are the things being said to our little dark girls.
Images of pretty light skinned woman on the T.V., yet no one to positively represent the little dark girls shade.
How is she left to think of herself? Who’s going to show her that her melanin isn’t a mistake.
She isn’t old enough to understand that her mother is the only positive image she needs.
But even if she is, her mother might be fighting demons in her skin as well.
Where does that lead the little dark girl?
Back to the T.V. to images that don’t positively represent her shade.
Making her play hide and seek with the sun when it’s recess because She’s dark enough already why make it worse.
These words always trap us in, a cycle of negativity smothering our skin:
Then dark skin girls they ain’t feminine.
When the lights dim, where did the dark skins go? I can’t see you?
We don’t have that in your shade.
You’d be pretty if you weren’t so dark.
You’ve been in the sun too long.
I hope I don’t get as dark as you.

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

Dark skin is …
Dark skin is ugly
Dark skin is …
Dark skin is weird
Dark skin is …
Dark skin is gross
Dark skin is . . . to you always something negative
Dark skin is not what you say it is
My skin is not what you make of it
Dark skin is magnificent.
Dark skin holds beauty.

The statement:
“Beauty is in the eye of the beholder”
is true.

Looking in the mirror is beauty what you see?
Do you behold magnificence?
A confidence that you’re created how our Creator made you to be? With your skin baked to a Perfect shade.

That’s what I see. Beauty:
I recognize I’m designed by someone who doesn’t make mistakes.
Knowing that I can freely say without doubt as a weight.

My skin is black on this I’m proud
And I’ll say this for the millions feeling trapped inside their black feeling down.

My skin is black on this I’m proud
Knowing that I can freely say without doubt as a weight.

I recognize I’m designed by someone who doesn’t make mistakes.
That’s what I see. Beauty.

Perfect shade.

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

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

That first year on planet Elkhart was turbulent. The light laughter and yells of scientists taking apart an alien in their lab. The laugh and name calling seemed so far away from where I was lying paralyzed in the snow. All I could hear was my beating heart and my thoughts bouncing off the sides of my skull. I prayed. I prayed for it stop. It did not.

I opened my eyes and looked around in the snow. My eyes darting left and right in their sockets, seeking an escape. Beside my right hand was the ironic answer to my prayers: a fallen branch. All at once the burning was over. The fire had started again. I grasped at the branch, clutching firmly in my cold red hand. With my eyes shut tightly, I rolled onto my back, flailing my newfound weapon violently in the air. The three boys all at once stepped backward. Before they could come back down on me, I brought myself to my feet. I held the branch out before me like a sword.
I remember the calm after the storm. The four of us in the woods, wild eyed children. The boys looked out to me with varying degrees of confusion and disgust. I recall the trees looking more sinister than they had before. They were no longer reaching up, but they were looking down mockingly. I recall the snow looking as though it had been war. In the fight, the violence had revealed the dead brown earth under the white snow, making the area look muddy. I recall the high pitch buzzing in my ears, my brain crying out in my head.

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

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

Tearfully, I told the principal what happened in the woods. I still remember the way his face frowned at me when I recounted the actual attack. The way the corners of his mouth dragged his whole face down. In the middle of my sobbing he handed me a wad of tissues and when I looked down at it, my hands were covered in mud and were decorated with white tissues to my nose and when I looked down at it, I recall the snow looking as though it had been specially prepared, specially made for her, wilting flowers furred around wilting feathers. A gruesome bouquet serving as an unwelcome 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 fiancé’s books had been filled with pictures of preserved cadavers. And certainly not now, when eyes still mocked and then to the center of the dead owl stared soullessly back at her, blood dripping from its beak, maggots growing 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 but help but wonder what it would feel like, the cold terror of something sharp tearing at the soft flesh of the throat.

"So you ran a hand through her black hair, Lilith forced her legs to move, each booted foot thumping against the cobblestone as the man moaned 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."

"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.”

She laughed—a heavy sound. “Please, come on in. It’s awkwardly 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 Menas 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.

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"Thank you, Madame.”

"Now, Lilith, I’d like to outline the details of your assign—"
ered 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 felt 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 curving her features despite her suggestion. "Ask for Musael 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 Musael here as a guide."

"Ahhhhh, the woman crawled, you’re with that bunch. She grinned, the suspicious atmosphere evaporating. ‘I’m surprised they hired you.’"

"You . . . are?"

"Mmhm, 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! Musael! 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 hair approaching. There were stray twigs caught in his hair, carrying two straw baskets laden with herbs, were covered with mud and scratches, but Lilith swore that the smile on his face, eyes crinkling around the corner before approaching.

"Channary," he greeted, giving the storekeeper a hug over the shoulders 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," Musael said, "I know you’ve already been waiting, but I’d like to wash off that 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. Musael 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 Musael smiled 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.

Musael 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 un chociaż 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 brutes creatures never worked in tandem. "Has there been anything else?"

"There have been sightings of fae dancing here at night. People said it was gorgeous, 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.”

There then was no doubt the woman had been a witch. Musael continued, faraway eyes blinking slowly. "That’s why the soil is stained. Her blood was so polluted the rain couldn’t flush it away."

Lilith tentatively patted around the clearing, boots crunching softly among the briers. 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 tinge of magic was absent in its caress.

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 drawing at the sky like bony fingers, was a swath of auburn-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 strangely 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. "Musael. Why is the ground there red?"

Musael, who had been ruminating 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 see . . . No, Lilith really did not like dead things.

Musael 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 ago. I don’t remember much, besides that I thought she was pretty, but then again a four-year-old thinks every woman is pretty."

"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," Musael suggested. "Nothing had happen while we were here."
you see, i was devouring books since
before i lost my baby teeth
ravenous for distant lands and
wise dragons that spouted proverbs
washed it all down with warm onyx ink
and drowned in the mildew and saccharine
of aged leather and wood pulp
i grew up watching WordWorld and Sesame Stre-
but you speak so well! where are you from?

i was born and raised on the east coast
lived in northern virginia all 16 years
so i don't have the southern drawl
that my kindergarten teacher had
(sometimes she mixed her i's and a's)
anyways i pick up new words from
cheesy rom coms & sunday crosswords
& the Shakespeare we analyze in school
my friends and I make flashcards
to study for grammar quizz—

but where are you really from . . . like . . . where are your parents from?

smile than she actually felt. But she had to admit, seeing
her cousins lightened her mood an iota.

Felix’s hair had the same golden glow she’d seen a few
days ago. It had changed color during an unfortunate
incident with a swamp troll some months before, and
though the old creature, who’d eventually become rather
friendly, had offered to fix it, Felix had liked it too much
to accept. Lilith thought the glowing shade was a horrible
idea—it made him look like a beacon, a target—but she
trusted Felix would never let himself get killed so fool-
ishly.

He pulled her into a jovial hug as soon as his feet landed.
"Lilith! Long time no see."

Menae smirked, 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 report-
ing 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
wanted 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 note-
book, 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, hoisting her bag over her
shoulder, her eyes caught sight of the forest once more,
the tips of the ancient trees peeking over the town roof-
tops. Their skeletal fingertips waved at her, swaying
smoothly in the evening breeze, bidding her goodnight.

And as Lilith jerkily spun around to follow her cousins
back to the inn, she swore she saw a parliament of white
owls take flight, ghostly silhouettes emerging from the
black shadows of the trees.

Lilith had never been a superstitious person, but she went
to bed that night with hooting in her ears, blood on her
mind, and unease in her soul.

yes, my parents speak english too
they were taught it in school just like us
i picked up hindi from dinner table banter
but it felt clunky and awkward in my throat
carved Himalayan contours in mouth
uncharted, yet to be mapped with tongue
and so i never bothered repeating it back
instead i worship taylor swift and bruno mars
fill voids with their autotuned soliloquies
learn of heartache and young love
belt out each lyric like it’s a gospe—
wow i didn’t know they spoke english there.
and you don’t even have an accent!

actually, it’s the second most spoken language in india
but don’t take it from me
who sees the scarlet colour of his ancestor’s blood
staining pale british hands where you and i
see the same scarlet color and picture Target bullseye
who hid for his life in the hollow of a drum
only a child when they descended upon his village
so no, i’m not proud of my english
of these force-fed diphthongs and steamroller fricatives
i’m not proud of a choice i didn’t get to make

but please, no need to be impressed
i’m just playing by your rules
Support for Penguin Random House Creative Writing Award winners extends beyond scholarship funds; winners are welcomed into a community of award alumnx, where professional development and networking opportunities are regularly offered.

“I come from a very impoverished and predominantly Hispanic community, in my senior year of high school I was still back and forth between if English was a career path I could rely on to keep my head above water,” said Ivana Cortez, Personal Essay winner, 2020. But winning the CWA, “meant that English was an option for pursuit.”

With an annual professional development workshop series, as well as networking opportunities and online engagement, CWA alumnx are encouraged to continue their love of writing, and to pursue careers in publishing if they so desire. CWAs put alumnx on a path to success!
Anna Learis, 2015, Poetry

Pendulum, Edward R. Murrow High School, NYC

What did winning the CWA mean to you? Winning the CWA gave me confidence! A scary, new chapter of my life was starting, and I was convinced my CWA win, still a bundle of nerves, but a bundle of nerves full of confidence.

What are you doing now? Anna Learis is a Senior Business Analyst on the Diversity, Inclusion and Belonging Strategy and Analytics team at Capital One focused on establishing and supporting a data-driven diversity strategy. Anna has led initiatives around DIB forecasting and goal-setting, executive success and retention predictors, employee sentiment, selection and compensation equity, and more. They hold a B.S.E in Industrial and Operations Engineering from the University of Michigan and have a Diversity and Inclusion for HR certificate from Cornell University. Anna’s recent speaking engagements include "Creating a Data-Driven Diversity Strategy" at Women in Tech Boston 2022 and "Careers in DEI" at the University of New Hampshire DEI Conference 2023.

Jordan White, 2015, Memoir

How to Kiss the Only White Boy in the Room, Hunter College High School, NYC

What did winning the CWA mean to you? The CWA was an achievement that I still look back upon. I think about winning the CWA while I'm struggling with fear and doubt. I think about it to remind myself to be grateful for my achievement, and I think about it to remember to not give up. The CWA reminded me that I'm a writer, and I have talent. Winning the CWA meant that my writing was good enough to be published. Winning the CWA meant that my work was good enough to be recognized. Winning the CWA meant that I was good enough. I won the CWA in 2015. I was a 12th grader at Marta Valle High School, NYC.

What are you doing now? I went to Queensborough Community College, where I got my Associates in Liberal Arts. Then, I went to Queens College and got my Bachelor’s in Psychology. Now, I work as a tutor at a local Kumon center and I am working on my graduate school application! My goal is to become an elementary school teacher!

Ashley Brier, 2017, Poetry

Growing Pains, Queens High School of Teaching, NYC

What did winning the CWA mean to you? It meant everything to me. Creative writing has always been part of my life. During my last year of high school, it was a gamble to dedicate so much time to creating something that might not even get seen by anyone. Between exams and college applications, if I wasn’t doing something that was directly productive towards my future, then I was wasting time. I never wrote for pleasure, I never drew more than floating potato faces, I never created anything for fun. But my English teacher Mrs. Ramos encouraged me to write something that I could apply, just from seeing my few writing assignments in her class. So I did. And I also drew. And I created. And I began to feel something. And a few months later, I was in the audience watching my graphic novel be read on stage in front of more people than I ever imagined. Something so intimate to my heart, that I skipped sleep to write and draw in my room during the most stressful time in my life, was being shared with complete strangers, and actually enjoyed. I felt bare, like the contents of my heart were being excavated for all to see. If it wasn’t for the CWA, I would have never discovered my love for creative expression, for art, for storytelling, and the potential I have for one day sharing the sincerest parts of myself with the world. I’m still at the beginning of my journey—hell, I’ve barely even started—but the path I’m going down is a path that I’ve never been on before. Winning the CWA is a memory I keep in my heart.

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Maven Nzeutem, 2018, Poetry

My Epidermis is Gone, Edward R. Murrow High School, NYC

What did winning the CWA mean to you? MADE ME BELIEVE I WAS A WRITER. I never called myself one, never felt it was a label I could own. Never felt like I had any merit. I had only written small poems, school papers, and diary entries before CWA. Winning (just an honorable mention) gave me SO MUCH confidence and led me to the position I’m in now. Writing for massive brands and global campaigns. I’m so happy and it all stems back to the CWAs. THANK YOU.

What are you doing now? I went to FIT for advertising and marketing communications. I then worked at a startup marketing agency as a content writer for multiple brands. Now I’m a “junior verbal designer” at R/GA working on massive clients!

Maria Grijalva, 2019, Memoir

First Generation, Monticello Lincoln Academy, NYC

What did winning the CWA mean to you? Winning the CWA meant a lot to me. Talking about my parents is something that I had avoided for years. I wrote this personal essay in one night and just cried while writing it. At first, I didn’t think I would submit it anywhere because of how personal it was. But it helped me realize how many other individuals have been or are currently in my shoes. I felt heard and seen. There’s power in sharing our stories. We begin to see how strong we are and that we are capable of so much more than we think. It was empowering.

What are you doing now? I graduated from St. Francis College in 2022 with a B.A in Political Science and a double minor in Sociology and Public Health. I am now in graduate school at UB’s M.S. Pursuing my master’s in social work. The goal is to eventually go back home to the Bronx and work in our community to ensure that kids have the resources necessary to get to where they want to be. As a first-generation everything, I had to figure everything out on my own, and it wasn’t until I got older that I realized how much it affected me mentally. I want to make sure that all kids feel supported in all aspects of their lives. I want to help them become well-rounded individuals and go on and live comfortably after academia. There is a lot I want to do, and I feel like social work is the field in which I can help people the most.
Orlane Devesin, 2020, Spoken Word
Evolution of the Black Woman, Hiram Park High School, GA

What did winning the CWA mean to you?
Everything. My counselor encouraged me to submit one of my spoken word pieces into the competition and I ended up doing “Evolution of the Black Woman.” During that time, I had no idea where it’d take me and it’s given me so much confirmation on my artistry and creative path. It has also gifted me the opportunity to graduate with zero debt. It’s helped me so much with school and engaging in all of my creative pathways. For instance, I needed a new laptop because my old one had broken down, the summer BEFORE my freshman year of college. I was a fully online student (the dilemma is immense)! My community college had given me CWA as a refund bonus and this is the same MacBook that I am using to submit this survey. It’s the same one that holds my poetry books, novels, videos, and my podcast episodes. I am immensely grateful for what this opportunity has brought me as a writer, artist, and creative. I keep my trophy in my bookshelf too, where I can always look to it as a gentle confirmation. CWA was everything for me and more! I’m very honored to submit this application.

What are you doing now?
I went to community college and completed my English degree summer 2022! I’m currently a content creator, YouTuber, BookTuber, and podcast host. On my podcast, I dissect society, film, and media. I’ve been having the time of my life and enjoying collaborating with many brands.

Ivana Cortez, 2020, Memoir
Planet: Elkhart, Indiana, Galena Park High School, TX

What did winning the CWA mean to you?
Winning the CWA award meant so much to me. I come from a very impoverished and predominantly Hispanic community, in my senior year of high school I was still back and forth between if English was a career path I could rely on to keep my head above water. When I won the CWA for Personal Memoir not only did it show me that I could write stories that were worth winning but that MY story was worth listening to. It meant everything for me to win. It meant that English was an option for pursuit. It meant that I had something to share with others. And all that made where I am now possible!

What are you doing now?
I attended Houston Baptist University for a year but felt the desire to leave the city. I now attend Stephen F. Austin university in Nacogdoches, Texas. At SFA, I am a junior English/Secondary Education major. I am a part of LULAC as the Vice-President of Civil Rights for my collegiate council (#22351) where I work to spread unity between marginalized groups across campus. I am also involved in other organizations on campus such as Subplots, a creative writing club and am working to enroll with Sigma Tau Delta, our English Honor Society. I have worked in administrative assistance in offices of Higher Education and with digital classroom management. Currently, I work as the Manager of Training Operations at SFA’s One-Stop Shop where we answer calls relating to the Registrar, Res Life, Student Business Services and Financial Aid.

Carlee Reid, 2021, Spoken Word
Double Image, Academy of Information Technology & Engineering, CT

What did winning the CWA mean to you?
Being recognized by the CWA validated me as a poet and a Black creator. Because I use poetry to come to terms with difficult feelings in my life such as discrimination, seeing my art and story appreciated in that way has encouraged me to keep developing as a writer and champion of the marginalized.

What are you doing now?
I am currently a student at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania. I am concentrating in Entertainment & Media Management looking to enter the film & entertainment & media management looking to enter the film industry as a producer and writer.
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 Today
In 2019, Penguin Random House partnered with We Need Diverse Books (WNDB), a national grassroots organization that advocates for diversity in children’s literature, to facilitate the expansion of the competition beyond its origins in New York City to graduating seniors from public high schools across the country. The goal is for youth from coast to coast to join previous recipients, who include award-winning and published writers and journalists as well as distinguished professionals in a variety of fields. Winners will receive a total of $50,000 in college scholarship funds, in addition to other awards for runners-up. The top five winners are invited to attend a week of summer professional development from Penguin Random House that includes one-on-one coaching from some of the industry’s best editors, networking workshops, a panel about career opportunities in publishing, and a fireside chat with a Penguin Random House author. The week concludes with a virtual awards ceremony.

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 Future
At Penguin Random House, we are passionate about encouraging the next generation of readers and authors and promoting diverse voices and stories. Young writers are our future, and we are proud to partner with We Need Diverse Books to identify and nurture new literary talent and support these inspiring, emerging voices.

About Penguin Random House
Penguin Random House, the world’s largest trade book publisher, is dedicated to its mission to ignite a universal passion for reading by creating books for everyone. The company, which employs more than 10,000 people globally, was formed on July 1, 2013, by Bertelsmann and Pearson. As of April 1, 2020, Bertelsmann is full owner of the company. With more than 300 imprints and brands on six continents, Penguin Random House comprises adult and children’s fiction and nonfiction print and digital English- German- and Spanish-language trade book publishing businesses in more than 20 countries worldwide. With over 16,000 new titles, and more than 700 million print, audio and eBooks sold annually, Penguin Random House’s publishing lists include more than 80 Nobel Prize laureates and hundreds of the world’s most widely read authors.

Both the poetry and memoir award have been renamed. In 2021, we launched the Amanda Gorman Award for Poetry and in 2022 the Michelle Obama Award for Memoir.

Young writers are our future, and we are proud to partner with We Need Diverse Books to identify and nurture new literary talent and support these inspiring, emerging voices.

About WNDB
We Need Diverse Books is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that runs twelve exciting initiatives united under one goal—to create a world where everyone can find themselves in the pages of a book. Established in 2014, WNDB strives to support and amplify diverse literature by mentoring marginalized creators, providing resources to diverse publishing professionals, and donating diverse books to schools and libraries nationwide. Learn more at diversebooks.org.
Thanks

It has been said that it takes a village to raise a child. By extension, it takes a committee of true believers to encourage and inspire the youth of a city and nationwide.

Over the last 30 years, the growth and evolution of this program has been the result of the coordinated effort of a network of consultants, teachers, executives, volunteers, agents and authors to name a few. Each individual is dedicated to nurturing and cultivating the creative spirit of today’s youth. Just as important, these committed professionals understand and recognize the unique voice of each and every high school student.

The success of Penguin Random House’s Creative Writing Awards could not have been achieved without the dedication of many who volunteered their time and expertise. Many helping hands took the time to pitch in and reach out, helping to bring the program to the widest possible audience.

We Need Diverse Books for helping us expand our reach with students in underrepresented communities across the country. Our partnership with WNDB underscores a critical element of the CWA program: to nurture the next generation of literary talent by supporting young writers from a variety of backgrounds.

Special Thanks to

Melanie Fallon-Houska for all her work, enthusiasm, and dedication to the program since its inception.

Trish Heimers-Dantzic for conceiving and creating the program 30 years ago.

Richard Hoehler for selflessly giving himself both personally and professionally to the students and teachers involved in the program throughout the years.

Barbara Rothenberg for her wisdom and constant dedication in maintaining and perfecting a quality writing program.

The Penguin Random House employees that have consistently lent their time and knowledge over the years.

2023
Selected Stories, Poems, and Memoirs

109 America by Melissa Vera
111 Cafecito para dos, sin leche by Isabella Brayner
113 Chicken Feet by Karen Yang
119 Global History 2: 10/26/2020 by Gloria Blumenkrantz
122 The Soup Between Us by Rasha Parle
124 Pantry Line Road by Deborah Augustine
127 Dear Durga Maa by Desi Chin
129 On the Curve of Infinity by Brenna Coester
132 Tapioca Dough by Kevin Quach
133 Soul Ties: To Be Lost or In Lust by Dago Brown
135 Yet by Alexandria Carroll
137 Boreal by Bich-Diem Bui
When being a suburban black girl at a predominantly all-white wealthy school that caters to the one percent; you learn very quickly that there are roles to fill, and like a video game, you get to choose your character.

Are you the cool black girl? The one who loves Jordans and loud rap music?

Are you the funny black girl? Do you make loud jokes and remind everyone of that comical character from every preteen Disney show?

Are you the “Chameleon”? Do you code switch, listen to Taylor Swift and generic pop while making sure to use your advanced vernacular?

Or are you the smart one, the erudite? The one who turns in her homework with no mistakes and is always sought after for “study groups”?

If you decide that being pigeon-holed into one archetype for the entirety of your academic career isn’t really for you, the general public will watch you just long enough to assign your character. You get the chance to play the game by going back to being the supporting character in the background. It must be noted that “fading into the background” is never truly an option, because you’re black at an all-white school, remember? Eyes are on you at all times, even if you think they aren’t.

These eyes will continue to follow you from class to class, watching for the slightest indication or shift in character that was created for you. Watching eyes will observe, but never with enough interest to remember your name, as they’ll continue to “confuse” you with other black girls, because they do not see you, they see black, and to them, that’s all.

There will come a time when suburbia makes you feel small, but do not slump your shoulders in an attempt to make suburbia comfortable. Slumping and shrinking will become a habit you will be hard-pressed to break as you age because you’ll realize, growing black girl, that you have attempted to clip your wings before you had the chance to fly. You will regret the slumping and shrinking, as it will require physical therapy of the soul to fix it.

It will require stretching, massaging, and moving, until you are comfortable in who and what you are again.

Though all of what has been written for you, dear black girl, is critical, the following is the most valuable information ever. You’re not a video game character; you’re not pixelated, or two-dimensional, nor do you have to be. You are no one-sided character, and you are more than an archetype. You are not Sapphire or Jezebel, you are black girl magic personified. Spread your pixie dust by being as dynamic, loud, funny, or smart as you want to be because no one can play the game like you.

Madison E. Corzine

2023—MEMOIR—1st Place


Madison E. Corzine • Timber Creek High School

Creative Writing Mantra: I would say my mantra is “Creativity takes courage.”

My Hobbies: I love film and reading anything Jane Austen or Octavia Butler! I also enjoy painting every once in a while.

College I Packed Up For: I will be attending Spelman College in the fall as an English major on a pre-law track!

“Are you the cool black girl? The one who loves Jordans and loud rap music? Are you the funny black girl? Do you make loud jokes and remind everyone of that comical character from every preteen Disney show?”

—Madison Corzine
I pledge allegiance to the flag
We’ve been taught to recite each morning
But why?
Why are we made to say these words
Before we even know what these words mean
One Nation, under God
But only if you believe in him
Only if you fit his standards
Only if you conform to theirs
With Liberty and Justice for all.
But justice for who?
Justice for my grandma, whose brother was lost at the border,
Never seen again
Justice for my mom?
Whose life saving abortion is illegal in at least 15 states.
But this is the land of the free
They crow
The home of the brave
They preach
Where was this bravery when my uncle was harassed by the police
Put in handcuffs because he dared to take the bus to work
Because he dared to be a little darker than acceptable
Where were these promises then?
America the beautiful!
God shed his grace on thee!
And in return you shed your grace
On the rich, the white,
the heterosexual.
Leave everyone else cast to the shadows
Underrepresented, underprotected, outsiders.
But please continue,
Spread your false American Dream
Your lies, your broken promises
Let our voices go unheard
Our faces unseen
Because sooner or later
You’ll crumble under the weight of it all
I pledge allegiance to the flag.
Searching the planet of your dark sunspots, wrinkled smile lines, wispy curls framing your greying hairline in an unassuming way, inconspicuous, careful mother, I plead.

thin lips, scathing eyes, staring at each other across the half-crooked table washed-out white lights of the cafe flickering at an interval above our heads

tell me every place on your face where you need botox, how you want every sign of life and age and turmoil wiped away, forgotten, I plead again: I’ll listen.

So then you ask me, stirring sugar into black Cuban coffee,Mija, how are you?

And I could not be less broken.

I am your muñecita fractured, porcelain human doll, motes of dust caked on every cracked chip and shard dazedly watching as small pieces of myself float by like little swimming pieces of debris in polluted waters by the Miami shore. I am the kind of ghost that lingers in its curled up sanctuary, your shadow who gathers dust, and no one wonders how or what or when or why merely is, am, are, will be, para siempre unquestioned despair breathing in rotten, youthful death.

See me, see me, porfa, mirame, I ask you how can I breathe? how can I continue living? how can I exist in this world you brought me into?

La tostada y cafe. Buen provecho.

I place the silver spoon down. Light reflects the glistening curve of porcelain. Whirring air conditioning muffling our silence.

I’m okay, Just Fine, how are you? A mi también, hijita. Just Fine.
You're still scared of her, so you ask her out to the first restaurant that comes to your mind: Lucky Dragon. You've been here a thousand times because it's the only Chinese restaurant in town and Ma craves “home food” every weekend. A two minute drive from your house and boom! You arrive at the beige, rotting plaster columned America Luxury strip mall. There, next to a greasy McDonald's and a Sears with a fifty percent discount sign for half the year and a seventy five percent the rest, Lucky Dragon’s broken sign reads “Luck Drag N” much to your dismay.

Surprisingly, she says yes. You tell yourself you’re not surprised but it’s obvious. In school, she’s the blonde ice queen ruling over everyone, forever entwined with built, towering football players—right now, it’s Andy White, the college frat boy wannabe, and the best quarterback Monterey High has ever seen—and the Saturday parties in someone’s dimly lit, CBD scented basement, stolen Budweiser in full flow and Pitbull pulses all night. On the other hand, you’re the quiet nerd, Science Olympiad sessions on Friday nights, endless symphonies on the violin, and forever lost behind a colossal chemistry textbook. Like the characters in the beginnings of the New York Times best sellers that shadow you in the school library during lunch, where you eat Ma’s stinky tofu whose stench even the Best YA Novel in a Billion Years can’t hide, you and she were never meant to be.

***

November 17th. 9:42 am. AP Chemistry, Room 302.

You remember the first time you saw her. Her blond hair looked like the sun.

“New seats everyone! This will be your lab partner, for . . .” Mr. Mendez squints at his attendance sheet, “probably the rest of the year, so be friendly and get started on the lab!” She glances up at you. “Well, you’re smart.” Thankfully, you’re Asian is left unsaid. “Can you do the lab? I kind of have an issue right now.” Her eyes glaze like glass, a delicate membrane sheen. She doesn’t elaborate, her crimson mouth a quivering line.

“Hey, uh, what’s up? Why are you crying?” Your voice comes out reedy. It radiates confusion and unfamiliarity; other than Ma at Ye Ye’s funeral, you’ve never seen a girl cry. But, to be honest, you’ve never really seen a girl up close. They’ve always been as hazy as an unfocused microscope.

“My boyfriend broke up with me,” she says, chewing on her lip, gloss shimmering under the harsh fluorescent lights. You glance around. Andy isn’t here, his hefty, dim and blurry dimensions of a body unable to push over AP Chem. How should you respond?

Your mind scrambles to think but comes up with nothing. After all, studying can only do so much for your negligent love life. Then you think of him.

In addition to being a Harvard graduate, Brian, your older brother, got all of the good genes: the smooth, slick, Bruce Lee swagger that attracts girls like flies to honey. He left you nothing but noodle arms, nervous tics, and vocal cords that wobble every nanosecond. Nonetheless, you’ve spent all your life following his footsteps; join Science Olympiad, man first violin in orchestra, study at every waking hour, and then some more. Take the APs, get into an Ivy League—you’ve memorized this formula forwards and backward, even as you forget what a sober Ba looks like. Brian’s supposed advice has also found a niche in your brain, wedged in between the formula for calculating the energy of a wave and Ma’s worn wavelengths of love.

Navigate it towards something you know, little bro. Right. You like science.

In-your-head-Brian responds. Remember when Mr. Mendez made that horrible joke about the chemistry between two people? You inwardly nod. Let’s do a chemistry experiment: Reactant 1: tears. Reactant 2: comfort. Product: don’t embarrass yourself.

But how? You test the waters.

“Tha—that sounds rough.” Your voice quavers again. In-your-head-Brian monologues.

Alright, let’s add in some more coolness, kid. You reply: Coolness? Like when you add ice to a chem lab?

“Tha—that sounds rough.” Your voice quavers again. In-your-head-Brian rolls his eyes.

In your head, Brian is right. You like science.


Tha—that sounds rough.” Your voice quavers again. In-your-head-Brian rolls his eyes.

In your head, Brian is right. You like science.
**November 20th. 6:41 pm. Interior of the Lucky Dragon Restaurant.**

She shows up ten minutes late, Louis Vuitton purse in hand, looking beautifully misplaced. You pay close attention to her outfit and burn her sparkly magenta dress into your retina. Even in the dim smog of light from the Sears logo, she radiates like Sirius A, the brightest star in the whole universe.

Inside, she grimaces at the haphazard fold out tables, but oohs and aahs at the tacky red lanterns up above when she notices you watching her. After sitting down, she studies the menu closely. Questions after questions come to mind. In-your-head-Brian appears again. Cool, okay? Remember yesterday? Cool.

“What do you mean? Like America,” you gulp, “or China?”

“China. Duh.” She smirks, the leer of a cat pawing with curiosity. “China is a country, you know.”

You weren’t expecting this question. “It’s weird to discuss this here.”

“What’s so weird about it?” She asks, tilting her head, genuine bemusement splashed across her face.

You realize that it isn’t weird for her. In a classroom filled with white lab coats and a near equal number of white people, your forenames stands out, a peasant crowd in a herd of elegant swans. In a school the poster child of the rules of struggle under shinier, whiter buildings. The tendency to trip up your words, your parents’ half-heard English occupies every element in your body, your identity.

“I don’t know. China’s big. Too big and filled with count...
You oblige, describing the heat on the Great Wall, the vendor selling overpriced knock off sodas at the entrance. She asks for a taste of the faux Fanta and you give her a sip, watching her savor the sweetness and the artificial memory.

You paint a picture of the terracotta warriors, solemn in their stance and filling the air with the musky scent of time. You illustrate The Forbidden City in its intricate splendor, golden roofs and jeweled jade galore, the statues of bronzed lions standing over centuries of war, slaughter, fanfare.

Skip the confrontations with Ba that happen at the peak of the Great Wall, where you swear you will never be like your old man—backward, Chinese, tangled in the web of some drunken past.

Ignore the feeling of inadequateness when the tour guide at the terracotta warriors speaks to you in Chinese but you can do nothing with your thick, sticky tongue. The rusty Chinese, choked in your throat, fights and claws, only to die with the “uh huh, yeah” you mutter in his direction.

Gloss over the confusion at the Forbidden City’s restaurant, where you asked for iced water instead of the sewage colored tea. The waitress looked over in confusion.

You want bing? Ice in your water? Ma tried to laugh her uncertainty away—"no, no, he’ll have cha, foolish American boy"—and when she leaves, try to convince you that true Chinese people only drink century old tea leaves; why not try the liu cha anyway?

Too soon, class is over. You leave with her, rushing into the crowded hallway. She nearly trips and, in that process, breaks the facade of perfection you have attributed to her every being.

It’s this little act that convinces you that you have a chance.

The words tumble out before you even know it, your brain a half second behind your mouth. Maybe it’s a sign, a sign that you should have listened to Ba’s advice to duo xiang yi xiang; think a little more, even as he failed to follow his own words. Regardless, you should’ve considered how this would all unfold. Nevertheless, here it was.

“Will you go to the Lucky Dragon with me?”

***

November 20th. 7:46 pm. Interior of the Lucky Dragon Restaurant.

When the waiter comes and sets down two fortune cookies, she sees her ride. Andy’s driving.

“I’ve got to go.” She tips her head towards the car, grabs her bag. “I’ll see you in chem, alright?”

You nod mutely. She’ll just ignore you from now on.

You’ve served your purpose, given her a taste of the other. She’s seen that the flavor isn’t quite right and that the stench is too strong. The gap between China and America is unbridgeable, forever determined by foreign language, foreign food, and foreign ideals.

You know she won’t ever truly see you. She’ll only see a shy boy, sitting in Lucky Dragon radiating exoticism. Next to him is a pile of cold chicken feet that he doesn’t know how to eat.
at 10 am
we go into breakout rooms.
cameras off.
“so who’s reading out loud?”
they tell me i’m
the only one who
could pronounce the
german names.
of course!
my last name is
blumenkrantz.
german for rose garland.
which means,
obviously,
that i know how
to pronounce names
from languages i don’t speak.
places i have never been to.
person i never got the chance to meet.

and, i’m jew.
that adds another reason:
of course i’m best to read this out loud.
i’m the one who goes
to hebrew school,
who went to israel,
as one does in 8th grade.

but someone has to read.
so i do.
i used to spend hours
reading memoirs from survivors of
scary places like auschwitz and dachau.
but today, the words on my computer
slapped me in the face.
instead of seeing stars,
i saw magen davids.
i saw the yellow triangles,
sewn into a six-pointed marker
of my peoples’ vulnerability.
i spoke out loud of
the horrors of kristallnacht.
beautiful synagogues,
burnt to the ground.
sacred torahs,
scrolled full of knowledge,
destroyed unceremoniously.
shofars violated,
with kisses of hate from ignorant men
on the delicate mouth of reflection.
family businesses
smashed to pieces,
driven down by scared ex-customers.

that was 80 years ago.
two years ago tomorrow,
a man entered
a synagogue in pittsburgh
and fired shots
killing 11 innocent humans,
and hurting more.
zikronim l’bracha.

it’s 2020.
synagogue is over zoom, and so is school.
before COVID,
CBE was my home away from home. i was supported
and loved,
but i still knew
that i was never fully safe there.

at 10:30,
i finish reading the article out loud.
a classmate writes in the chat:
“yo, what are we doing now? not gonna lie,
i was 50% asleep during that”

the article comes
crashing down at my feet.
i think nothing of his comment at first . . .
zoom school can be
terribly monotonous.

but i can’t shake the feeling that
this boy, my whole class:
they just don’t get it!
to them, we finished studying WWI, and
now, we’re just learning about WWII.

so i write in the chat a reflection:
“This article was really hard for me to
read out loud. I can normally read
about the horrible events of the
Shoa, but today was different. It felt
like the words on my computer
screen slapped me in the face, so
hard I could see the lost members of
my family that died in Poland,
Germany, Russia, and Romania.
Torahs and shofars violated and
disrespected made my heart ache
this morning. I never used to look for
the closest exit in my home away
from home (my synagogue); After
Pittsburgh, I do. I’m sorry for ranting
but I just need to get my thoughts out.”

it’s 10:40,
breakout groups close,
no one read my message.
i paste it into the whole class chat.
we’re already talking about next class.
no one responds.
class ends.
The Soup Between Us
Sasha Forke • Dundee Crown High School

Raindrops streamlined down the balcony window. Their mess created a blur of colors of the buildings below. I watched the droplets intertwine and blend with one another until the worn down gas station came to be nothing but fog. The monstrously loud Metra train station of Arlington Heights that resided directly outside of my Yiayia’s one bedroom apartment barely made a dent through the fog. Despite the apartment’s location in the hub of downtown Arlington Heights, it felt completely secluded. The warm lamps glowed, casting an isolated golden hue, as if the apartment existed in a world yet rendered. My parents, my Yiayia, my aunt, uncle, and cousins all lived in this miniscule apartment. One could not make their way to the bathroom without bumping into another person. Yet, I felt so alone.

My family gathered on Thanksgiving, the first family gathering without my Papou, my grandfather, who passed away a few months prior. However, we actually gathered on a day adjacent to Thanksgiving. My Yiayia and Papou, Greek immigrants, never fully grasped the concept of Thanksgiving. I have still yet to learn what day Thanksgiving actually occurs on.

During elementary school, the other children spoke about their Thanksgiving meals—their families preparing turkey, stuffing, mashed potatoes, and cranberry sauce. My Thanksgiving could not have been more different. Turkey rarely attended the dinner—a juicy rack of lamb would be served instead. However, we actually gathered on a day adjacent to Thanksgiving. My Yiayia and Papou, Greek immigrants, never fully grasped the concept of Thanksgiving. I have still yet to learn what day Thanksgiving actually occurs on.

The chicken broth is an overcast day spent inside a toasty house with my Papou, sprawled on the carpet playing hours and hours of blackjack. The chicken broth comprises only four, simple, key ingredients: chicken broth, egg yolks, orzo, and lemon. However, something deep, and intense boils at the bottom of the pot. The chicken broth is supple, a liquidy wonder with an unforgettable flavor. The chicken broth is the first one to finish every time.

He ate so fast he could sit and watch everyone else enjoy their food. He loved to watch everyone enjoy each other. And he loved Avgolemono,” she said, gesturing to the large pot of soup boiling beside her. I realized what called me into the kitchen, the smell of lemon soup. It enchanted me, beckoning my body closer. In this moment, I felt more connected to my Yiayia than ever.

My heavy feet found their way to the compact kitchen, where my Yiayia stood, attending to the various pots and pans. I suppose my presence caught her eye, and she turned and gave me a knowing smile.

“Remember how Papou used to always finish his food before everyone else?” She said after some time. I smiled to myself. My family always laughed about this for years. My Papou ate every meal quickly. No matter the time of day, or how much he had eaten previously, he was the first one to finish every time.

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The chicken broth was served instead. We reserved lamb for special occasions, such as Easter, where one would cook an entire lamb on a spit for hours, surrounded by family. A dish of chicken legs and sliced potatoes, soaked in lemon, that had been slowly baking for hours usually accompanied the lamb. Salads full of crisp cucumbers, tomatoes, olives, and feta cheese doused in olive oil always sat on the left side of the dining table. A roll never once touched the table, but rather spanakopita, a flaky bread pie that encaused salty chunks of feta cheese and spinach. Believe it or not, we also added spaghetti to the menu. We served the pasta with sauteed peppers instead of tomato sauce. The only instance in which turkey made an appearance, was when my Yiayia made her signature keftedes, Greek meatballs, because we must add another meat dish.

Over the years, we excluded a certain dish for various reasons. Perhaps the tomatoes lacked in quality at the European market that year. Maybe my Yiayia struggled to cook as many dishes, now with her older age. Only one dish, however, remained unforgettable. One, that had not grazed the dining table with its presence, my family would be spun into a toasty Avgolemono soup, otherwise known as lemon soup in my family, must be served in order for a gathering to be complete. This soup tethered my family together. No venture ensued without lemon soup. My mother and I could have beaten the world record in having the most miniscule reason visit to my Yiayia’s abode, and still be expected to sit down and enjoy a warm bowl of lemon soup.

Lemon soup comprises only four, simple, key ingredients: chicken broth, egg yolks, orzo, and lemon. However, something deep, and intense boils at the bottom of the pot. The chicken broth is supple, a liquidy wonder with an unforgettable flavor. The chicken broth is the first one to finish every time.

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PANTRY LINE ROAD

Deborah Auguste • The Brooklyn Latin School

I revisited the pantry for the first time in a long time today. . .
I found that even though I was unsure of where I was going,
My body,
Which no longer ached too terribly with hunger pangs,
Knew which way to go.
It felt natural,
Like a homecoming.

One passed on the way,
One sprung as if from air,
I met two elderly ladies today.
They both felt like my grandmother from a distant reality.

Bold, Confident, Risk Taker.
Meek, Wise, Soft-Spoken.
I just wish I knew their stories . . .
All of theirs.

She had no hair, only wisps.
She seemed to mourn them in this relentless summer heat.
She spoke of weak knees, how this slowness persisted in her youth.
That
And how she used her broken cart for walker
Reminded me of my grandmother.

Her voice held a sing-songy rhythm that could only be described as oriental.
In her there was a certain resilience, boldness that was akin to that which I saw in many of my closest
friends and family.
Unafraid to tell harsh stories of existence.
Unapologetically alive.

I wanted to try
living like her.

Now her voice had a twang to it.
She spoke of Golden Crust and Gizzada.°
Her ponytail,
smooth and colored,
was a radiant shade of fiery red.

So eager to help a lost little girl,
Quick to defend and interact.
She was also knowledgeable,
Knowing of ailments before they were spoken.
And there was a kindness in her firm words,
That shone like a lantern
Which carried the guiding light.
A wisdom which could not be manufactured.

Among a sea of the poor and needy were children mixed in,
Were women,
Were men,
Were the elderly,
Were teens,
Were Asians,
Were White,
Were Black,
Still here in this long winding line
They all seemed familial.

Yet,
Strangers who walked through the crowded sidewalks,
Looked upon us with a mixture of pity and disgust,
Worth less than dust,
As if people like us shouldn’t exist in this city.
They didn’t see the importance behind the stories these grandmothers told.
The wisdom that was contained within her heavy Caribbean accent,
or the beauty that was shone from her wisps of hair.

They only saw my torn coat.
Her broken “walker,”
Our skin color
And it seemed they understood enough.
But I wish they knew our stories,
all of ours.
Dear Durga Maa

Devisi Goel • Horace Greeley High School

please accept my apology.

i have not taken good care of your name—
she deserved to be swaddled and spoken
in hushed tones, upon silver threads of speech
just as you never scrape off the superficial
layer of the kaju katli before savoring.

the dress your name wore—it was beautiful, i swear
its fabric would listen to contentions, and conclude
that the given words would dissolve under the tongue,
a sublingual medicine we would inevitably swallow: the pattern
of the diamonds could trace the path to hindsight
before an occasion developed.

and the churiyaan your name wore, spoke through
their collisions, words that had no space for frivolity, they could
concisely contain the meaning of the world
in a vacuum-sealed ziplock bag.

your name did not warrant the metallic taste
in my throat after i hid the accent from her voice
and flattened every syllable so she could become universal.
i felt like a stranger to her. the uniqueness that she wore
as jhumkas, felt like a bittersweet state of existence and i
feared the isolation it could bring. it consumed me until—

Durga maa, i sold her dress. but now

*Gizzada is a Jamaican dessert also known as Pinch-Me-Round, it is a tart filled with sweet spiced coconut filling.
i remove my hand from my eyes and realize
i can remake it, sew each and every stitch
into the dress. i will rub my fingers together
to clear my fingertips before fixing her diamonds
on anew, they deserve to be cloudless.

i still may speak our name with some hesitation,
the rounded sounds stumbling on my tongue—but
with practice, she will slip effortlessly
from my lips and announce her presence to the room, i will
now & always stand behind her, smiling
as her diamonds dimple my cheeks.

Durga maa,
thank you for the gift of your name.
Love, Devisi

When I was five years old, I decided eight was
my favorite number. It was a bold number in
my mind, red and unafraid, and I loved the
way the line of the eight curved and crossed over itself
to form something unbreakable. I would sit at an easel and
draw eights over and over again on a large pad of paper,
pressing so hard with my pencil that ghosts of the eights
haunted the pages underneath when I was done. And
then i would tear off the page and start over.

The year I turned six, I learned the symbol for infinity:
an eight, fallen onto its side. I couldn't comprehend the
concept of infinity, but I loved the idea of it. I loved the
possibility of forever, the way every star and planet and
year can be captured in a single shape. Maybe, i thought,
the infinity symbol loops in on itself the way time could.
Maybe, if we go far enough in one direction, we'll have
no choice but to turn back, and we'll end up where we
started.

The day I flew to Beijing, the airport was quiet, the colors
muted in the light of dawn.
The footsteps of the passersby clicked on the floor with
a hollow sound, and even the voice over the intercom
system seemed hushed. Through the windows that
faced the rows of airplanes outside, the sun was rising
in faint lavender, and the sky was streaked with clouds
like watercolor, wispy and pale. I sat next to my parents,
waiting to board our flight, watching those colors and
moving a crayon absently across the sketchpad that was
balanced on my lap. I was bundled in a black sweatshirt
just large enough to pull over my knees, the fabric soft
under my fingers of my left hand that absently tugged at
the hem.

Beside me, my mother's face seemed like a canvas
stretched too tight, tense with her wrinkles pronounced.
I leaned my head into her shoulder, seeking comfort, and
felt the vibration of her voice as she spoke to my father.
It's an odd experience to hear someone's words through
them; the sounds are muffled and you feel the words as
much as hear them. But it's a safe feeling as well, and i
was content to stay like that for a while more, before we
left to wherever we were going, before the world opened
itself to me.

As my mother spoke, her words not quite distinguish-
able, she slipped the crayon from my fingers and moved
it across my sketchpad in thick, confident strokes before
holding it up for me to see. Reluctantly, i raised my head
off her shoulder and squinted at what she had drawn:
Chinese characters in the firetruck red of the crayon, fluid
and firm at once, beautifully foreign.

"What does it say, Mimi?" she asked me.

I moved my eyes across the page, recognizing the char-
acters but unable to pronounce them. The meaning, too,
was frustratingly out of reach. I shook my head.

"Don't be scared." She gave the sketchpad to me and I
wrote okay in English, a bit sloppily, my letters tilting to
the right. I knew she thought I was scared of the plane
ride, the first in my life, or maybe the move, but those
were the least of my fears. I was afraid of the way my
parents talked to each other, their words underscored
by anger and resentment
even when their voices were
more whispers. I was scared of the way their apolo-
gies seemed like the paper
cranes I’d fold, clumsy and
creased from starting over
and over again. My mother’s
shoulders curved inwards
more and more each day,
her eyes grew more and
more weary, and trying to
read her thoughts was like
trying to read Chinese; you
can grow up surrounded by
the characters and yet never
understand a word unless
someone bothers to help
you learn.

And I was scared of change. When you live in a house
of cards, the slightest
tremor can bring every-
thing down around you.

When you live

In preschool, I was told that the earth was shifting and
spinning under our feet, orbiting the far-off star we call
the sun. Nothing could have seemed more impossible to

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me. I remember my classmates and I asking, “How come we can’t feel it moving?” I paid extra attention to the floor beneath me, thinking that maybe if I concentrated enough I could sense the motion, but I felt nothing. The only evidence of our orbit I could find was the rising and setting of the sun.

For a while, it seemed my life was shifting in that way: I closed my sketchbook and stuffed it into the backpack. The intercom announced that our flight was boarding, then came the Chinese lessons, the talk of Beijing, the thing resolute. But what so often we do not spare a thought for those who pass us by. We do not consider that they, too, are heading somewhere, and leaving somewhere else behind.

One night, we went out to eat at my parents’ favorite Chinese restaurant, an unusual change from the takeout we normally ate at the folding table in our living room. I was worrying at the paper napkin in my lap, shedding it into tiny bits, when my mother said abruptly, “Mimi, your father and I have something to tell you.” As my mother began to speak, I tore bigger pieces from my napkin, baling the paper into my fist so my father would not notice the habit he had tried so hard to break of. All I could feel was a sinking sensation, like the one you get when you jump cannonball into a pool and for a moment, when everything around you is blue, you forget you were supposed to swim to the surface.

“I am a beautiful country,” my mother said, her words reaching me through a thick fog. “You will be happy there.”

I was quiet for a while, the sounds of the restaurant muted around me. I could hear the faint buzz of silence in my ears. “Are we moving?” I asked finally, and then I couldn’t pretend anymore, and the water had been cold but the sunlight when I surfaced felt harsher somehow. The week before we left, I found out my father wasn’t going with us.

The intercom announced that our flight was boarding, and my mother stood, brushing off her slacks and sling down the floor. My father stood as well. He looked as fragile as origami, like a breeze could blow him away. But he reached for me anyway, and I was drawn to him like the tide. There, in his embrace, I was safe, no longer teeter staring down at me. I would leave each day without him.

My father was the one who showed me the symbol for infinity. He told me the names of the stars, explained how vast the oceans are. He introduced me to the universe, taught me my first words, woke me up in the morning and tucked me in at night. A world without him was as unfathomable as a world without the sun.

My mother made me read countless books on China before we left, about history and culture and language. Most I read reluctantly, finding nothing of interest within the pages. But there is a singular, obscure fact from my readings that has always stayed with me: in Ancient China, an eclipse was believed to be a dragon swallowing the sun.

Despite the incredible speed of a plane as it hurtles down a runway, nothing could have prepared me for the moment it rose into the air. It’s a miracle of some sort, to feel the plane leaving the ground. It makes you wonder, as cities and the stories they hold shrink beneath you and clouds rush in to take their place, if leaving is always this easy. If the price you paid for a window seat is the price of beginning again.

My sketchbook was open on my lap, the blank pages pleading for color. My mother said that my art will be at home in Beijing, which is a world brought to life in the colors of crayon, vibrant and saturated hues.

“My art will be, I thought as I watched the clouds outside my window, even if I’m not. And that was a small comfort.

The plane rose higher and higher into the sky. I thought about my father growing increasingly small somewhere beneath us. I thought about Chinese characters, origami, houses of cards. Dragons swallowing the sun, the spinning earth and oceans and moons. And I thought about infinity.

Someday, I would go far enough that I would end up where I started. Someday, I would come back to my home, to my father. I would come back to this exact moment, a girl of eight years old on a plane, her sketchpad blank with possibilities, tears on her cheeks. So I decided that I was not afraid. I picked up a red crayon and drew infinity.
Tapioca Dough

Keidon Quach • Castro Valley High School

“Two.”

“Can you show me again?”

“One or two?”

“Two.”

As I sat in the dark examination room staring through the phoropter, the optometrist flipped the lens like a magician with his deck of cards. With each flip of the lens, I could see the letters on the SNELLEN eye chart differently. Can this machine really help me see clearly again? I wondered to myself.

My eyesight had gotten progressively worse from staring at my laptop screen all day long from online school. The pandemic happened at the worst time. It was my freshman year, and I was still trying to figure out what I wanted to be when I grew up. I wanted to be cool, but the lack of social interaction coupled with my poor eyesight made me feel anything but cool. My vision for myself was blurry, just like my eyesight.

“One or two?”

“My grandma never saw clearly because she had a slew of eye issues. Glaucoma, near-sightedness, and far-sightedness never stopped her from making the most delicious Vietnamese desserts.

Growing up, I helped her knead tapioca dough for my favorite dessert. I poured the tapioca flour into a large stainless steel bowl, and my grandmother added the steaming hot water to it. I used chopsticks to mix it all together because it was too hot to touch. Once the bumpy mixture cooled down a bit, I dug my hands into it and began kneading. The more I kneaded, the smoother it became. My grandmother kept kneading until it was perfect and gained her wisdom through years of experience.

“One or two?”

“Two.”

My grandmother taught me this. “Your lenses are ready.” Everyone sees the world differently. For example, when you see a glass of water filled to the halfway mark, one might say the glass is half empty, while another will say the glass is half full. Some people can’t see but know how to discover the world around them. Some are fortunate to see clearly without any help from corrective lenses. Yet, seeing clearly does not necessarily mean you have wisdom. My grandmother taught me this. “One or two?”

“One.”

It amazes me that my grandmother was able to tell precisely when the dough was perfect without being able to see clearly how it looked. I asked her how she knew. She chuckled and answered, “Many years of life.” She explained that the dough needed to feel soft and smooth but not sticky. It needed to be more on the warm side. If not, it would crack as soon as it was too cooled and would be harder to wrap around the peanuts. She would always rush me to work fast when wrapping the dough. Through years of practice kneading tapioca dough, she relied on her hands to see. She kneaded until it was perfect and gained her wisdom through years of experience.

Some people can’t see but know how to discover the world around them.

Soul Ties: To Be Lost or In Lust

Daya Brown • Westlake High School

Truth is
I struggled trying to find the right words.

I don’t even know if I should classify this story as a love story or not, glorified heartache or not. Her awakened soul and his lost soul or not, boy meets girl or not.

He existed inside springtime. He brought the warm fire during winter time, and left on his time.

As I was cursed by lust I learned to readjust my heartstrings for another being yet again. Crushed by the idea of him longing for the need of him rushed out of heartache because of him.

Mind was intertwined because he became my dreamcatcher. Blinded by his beautiful stature. Confined to the reflection because I no longer can define the curves and assets that lay upon this body. When he left, starvation embodied a being that was too cold to touch. When he left, it was too much to stand up because this heartbreak made its self clear.

Some people can’t see but know how to discover the world around them.

I used to want for you to write the scriptures embedded within my limbs that was paralyzed by acceptance.

When he left, I was told never to rearrange my limbs for another being. Tonight I realized that your touch is theorized from what I hoped you would be.

Deranged out of sorrow
Drowned in prettification
I struggled trying to find the right words.

I don’t even know if I should classify this story as a love story or not, glorified heartache or not. Her awakened soul and his lost soul or not, boy meets girl or not.

He existed inside springtime. He brought the warm fire during winter time, and left on his time.

As I was cursed by lust I learned to readjust my heartstrings for another being yet again. Crushed by the idea of him longing for the need of him rushed out of heartache because of him.

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Some people can’t see but know how to discover the world around them.

I used to want for you to write the scriptures embedded within my limbs that was paralyzed by acceptance.
Yet

Alexandria Carroll • Garrard County High School

Yesterday, my friend was sent to the Ridge.
She said she was ready to go.
The letters were written and
she’d already picked her pills.
I didn’t bother to talk her out of it.
It never works.
So I called 911,
and they said they’d take care of it.
They see this every day, they said.
My friend told me the Ridge was
the most horrible place to be
when your mind is already mean.
At least she’s not dead, though.

Last week, this girl was beaten.
The Proud Boys had gotten her.
Her brown skin was marred with abrasions,
bruises dotted every surface.
She told me they didn’t like her hijab.
So when she was walking home,
they ambushed her.
They ripped the fabric from her hair,
just like how they ripped away her dignity.
She’s not been the same since.
At least she’s not dead, though.

Two months ago, this girl was raped.
She was real good friends with the quarterback.
One night, they went to a party together.
He had too much to drink or too much to smoke.
He dragged her up the stairs, into a dark room.
She, apparently, also had too much to drink.
She told me she couldn’t feel anything, she couldn’t think.
She said she said no.
But she said no.
The boy had to write an essay.
She got expelled.
At least she’s not dead, though.
At least I’m not dead, yet.

But I wonder, don’t matter until we die.

The suicides, the beatings, the shootings, the rapes, the justice they deserved.

In the past year, I’ve gotten scared.

He’s dead, though.

And look beyond his sexual orientation.

He believed he found someone who was just happy to believe said God told him to do it.

He pleads psychosis, the news said.

He was just an old man with an opinion, who hated the LGBTQ+ community.

But the guy wasn’t real.

She had met this guy online and was super excited to meet him.

He had not actually wanted to go.

Her mother reached over and gripped Dacey’s hands in her obsidian eyes shine. He had certainly said it. I barely see you. You’re always working. What kind of girlfriend never spends time with her boyfriend? She shivered, and it was not from the cold of the library’s dark halls. Mr. Tram had left a couple of hours before, with a sad, knowing smile thrown over his shoulder at her as he did. That was another indicator of how hard she worked: the fact that the university librarian was her best friend.

Dacey closed the textbook in front of her and took off her glasses to rub the bridge of her nose. There was an ache in her abdomen that ebbed and flowed, though most of the time she could just ignore it. The desk lamp she’d brought with her cast a fluorescent orb of light over the long table, whose empty seats sent another shiver coursing through her. She reached into her bag and pulled out her oversized hoodie, relishing in the feel of the thick cotton sliding over her prickled flesh.

Cold, it was always so cold. Mr. Tram had to turn the AC off after locking up, naturally, but this cold was deep in her bones, this cold had seeped in from that night.

It had been meant to be a simple night out, even if Dacey had not actually wanted to go.

She’d had an essay to edit, but words of, Come on, baby. I just want to spend time with my girlfriend, had sunk into her mind and galled her feet out the door. He had not spent much time with her at all, preferring to guzzle down one beer after another.

A simple night quickly morphed into pleas of, stop, don’t touch me, and slurred words of, You’re my girlfriend, so stop fucking moving.

White mists puffed out in front of her as she forced her breaths out over the weight of him pressing down on her chest. The surface of the bench scraped her bare back and in spite of her quiet pleas he only bore down on her harder and it was cold, so cold—

She stood and shoved her chair back in with a harsh scrape against the wooden floor. She left her supplies on the table, she’d have to leave the library this way anyways, through the employees’ emergency exit.

Retrieving a flashlight from her bag, she set out into the library’s circular entrance hall. Her shoes clicked along the tile and echoed, again and again. His apologies had echoed the morning after. She’d lain in bed on her stomach since her back was still too raw, her cheek sinking into the cool surface of her pillow. The slightest wrong movement had her hissing at the burn between her legs.

“I’m sorry,” he said from his place at her bedside. His shadow fell over her. She pulled the blanket tighter around herself as a makeshift shield. “I drank too much and you looked so gorgeous. When was the last time we even—”

“No,” she said aloud. She didn’t have time for distractions. She had a physics exam she had to pass. Her mother made certain she never forgot anything like that. She never let her forget. Her mother reached over and gripped Dacey’s hands in her own white-knuckled grasp. “I wanted to succeed, con gai, but then I had you and could no longer afford my schooling, since I had to raise you on my own.” Her thin mouth twitched into a sneer before stretching into a tense line. “With how hard I’ve worked to give you everything, you must now succeed where I couldn’t.”

“That,” Dacey replied, having long since accustomed herself to this conversation as if she was an actor reading off a script.

Scene one: M reminds Dacey of how much she sacrificed for her. Dacey replies submissively.

—You’re my girlfriend, so stop fucking moving—

Scene one cont. - M brings up Dacey’s lowlife, deadbeat father who ran back to Vietnam with a woman half his age after M told him she was pregnant.

She shrugged the distraction off and passed the flashlight over the titles atop each threshold, leading into different sections of the library. Fiction. Classics. History. Medical.

A sharp pain stabbed her abdomen as she read the last
She gasped, her hand shooting out to brace against the wall. The pain persisted for several minutes. When it eased, she straightened and marched into the medical section, her flashlight out in front of her. Had she eaten today? She couldn’t recall. Perhaps that was it. She would eat. Later.

She had a physics exam to pass.

She took a deep exhale of the musty paper scent that surrounded her. She knew every inch of this library, and still she walked along the room’s perimeter, using her flashlight to expose the tall columns of shelves, the cherry wood tables, and the ornate iron-barred window that, during the day, allowed fractured rays of sun to illuminate the room.

She walked along the rows and rows of books, seeking the title she needed. The light beam passed over the Journal of Applied Physics, seven shelves up. She scanned the flashlight around the room, stopping when she spotted a ladder leaning against the shelf a few feet away from her. It was a standard one, not made for climbing bookshelves, due to the meager budget the library had been afforded.

She approached it gingerly and wrapped a hand around a cool metal rung. A memory came to the surface of her mind then. Mr. Tram’s face a mix of frustration and pity, his hand squeezing hers in comfort as they talked behind the reception desk.

“Don’t you want using the ladders, Dacey. If you need something high up, just tell me,” he’d said, kind eyes creased in worry.

“I’m not a kid; I can handle myself” She’d shrugged his hand off and turned away from him, arms held protectively over her chest, not wanting another glimpse of the soft look in his eyes that made her feel so small and breakable, like the slightest wind would have her shatter in a thousand knots, only to rip apart and repeat the process again.

It’s worth it.

The thought came unbidden. Dacey shut her eyes tight and gave it no heed, instead focusing on a single mantra: No one has to know, no one has to know, no one has to know.

It felt like time didn’t move as she lay there, though eventually, she found it within herself to stand on quivering legs and glance out the window to find it still dark outside.

She grabbed her flashlight, righted the ladder, and limped down the halls all the way to the janitor’s closet. She took stock of how the items were arranged so that she could put them back later, before grabbing a mop and a bucket.

A light was still on in the women’s restroom, courtesy of Mr. Tram, and as Dacey waited for the bucket to fill with sink water, she took a glimpse of herself in the mirror. Her eyes were red and swollen, her hair was matted with blood, and several dark spots had formed on her hoodies and jeans.

No matter, she thought. She would shower when she got home, put her clothes in the washing machine. No more time than that could be spared for distractions.

She had a physics exam to pass, after all.
2023 Scholarship Winners

**HONORABLE MENTIONS LISTED BY SCHOOL**

**SCHOOL** | **NAME, TITLE, CATEGORY**
---|---
Cooper City High School, FL | Nicole Nadler, Nikki Nadler’s VerNA&Dcular, Memoir
Corona Del Mar High School, CA | Nadia Khazei, Well Wishes, Fiction & Drama
Cosby High School, VA | Alexa Pittman, Today I, Spoken Word
David Crockett High School, TN | Kaitlyn Marino, Figure, Fiction & Drama
Dublin High School, CA | Prajna Boreddy, Orange, Poetry
Dundee Crown High School, IL | Sasha Forke, The Soup Between Us, Poetry
Eleanor Roosevelt High School, NY | Ruby Hentoff, Epilepsy: The Musical, Memoir
Forest Hills Northern High School, MI | Maria Curcuru, A Trip to the Rough Pool Floor, Memoir
Garrard County High School, KY | Kailani Bafim, Who Am I?, Fiction & Drama
Garrard County High School, KY | Alexandra Carroll, Yet, Poetry
Gatlinburg-Pittman High School, TN | Mara Klein, Lavender, Memoir
Godinez Fundamental High School, CA | Katie Tran, Star-Crossed Lovers, Poetry
Horace Greeley High School, NY | Devisi Goel, Dear Durga Maa, Poetry
It Takes A Village Academy, NY | Samia Leslie, Home, Memoir
J. Graham Brown School, KY | Keaira Carr, Him, Fiction & Drama
James Benson Dudley Senior High School, NC | Nyalen Breweington Al-Shmar, Untitled, Poetry
John Marshall High School, GA | Alexandra Vander Pol, In the Pursuit of Happiness, Memoir
Johns Creek High School, GA | Alisha Tan, This Girl is a Gun, Poetry
Kinder High School for the Performing and Visual Arts, TX | Edlyn Escoto, Memories of Love and Hate, Fiction & Drama
Lawrence North High School, IN | Sawyer Rebenrack, What It Means to be Healthy, Memoir
Liberal Arts and Sciences Academy, TX | Thanh-Lan Nguyen, Downpour on South 1st Street, Memoir
Lindblom Math & Science Academy, IL | Zalayah Bryan, Mawu, Poetry
Linganore High School, MD | Promise Green, Stop this Violence, Poetry
Livingston Collegiate Academy, LA | Katerra Williams, Stalking You, Stalking Me, Fiction & Drama
Marion Senior High School, VA | Jaelyn Alexander, A Thin Piece on the Domestication..., Memoir
Marvin Ridge High School, NC | Mikayla Smith, The Pale Garden, Poetry
MAST Academy, FL | Isabelle Cineas, Phoenix, Fiction & Drama
Maynard Jackson High School, GA | Logan Pinkston, Educational Pursuits—Equality and Equity, Memoir
Mechanicsburg Area High School, PA | Ariel Howell, A Day Like Any Other, Poetry
Mira Mesa High School, CA | Jasmine Phuongmy Do, Overdose, Fiction & Drama
New Trier Township High School, IL | Daria Volkova, Their Stories, Fiction & Drama
North Fort Myers High School, FL | Leah Basora, To the Heavens and Back, Memoir
Novato High School, CA | Marguerite Marley, Stay Over, Fiction & Drama
Oconto High School, WI | Faith Patrenaud, Bones, Fiction & Drama
Park Hill High School, MO | Yulisia Parker, Self Love and Basketball, Fiction & Drama
Pioneer Valley Chinese Immersion Charter School, MA | Avery Richards, Sucker for Blood, Fiction & Drama
Rockville High School, CT | Anaya Tolton, Dear Black Girl, Poetry
Round Rock High School, TX | Ansh Patel, The Curse of Time, Fiction & Drama
Royal Oak High School, MI | Kaylah Snell, May Freedom Ring, Poetry
San Ramon Valley High School, CA | Angelina Ge, Death to the Glory Days, Fiction & Drama

**2023 Scholarship Winners**

**HONORABLE MENTIONS LISTED BY SCHOOL**

**SCHOOL** | **NAME, TITLE, CATEGORY**
---|---
Sanderson High School, NC | Samantha Roberts, The Other Person, Spoken Word
Saratoga Springs High School, NY | Katie Mattes, Picturing the Summer Days, Fiction & Drama
Springboro High School, OH | Sienna Parks, 7/14/22, Poetry
Stuyvesant High School, NY | Anisha Singhal, I Hate That I Care, Memoir
Sunlake High School, FL | Kaitlin Doran, Fiction to Freedom, Memoir
Tampa Bay Technical High School, FL | Uchechi Ibeawule, Breath of a Butterfly, Poetry
The Brooklyn Latin School, NY | Deborah Augustine, Pantry Line Road, Spoken Word
Trout Lake High School, WA | Brenna Koester, On the Curve of Infinity, Fiction & Drama
Trumbull High School, CT | Julia Wilkinson, She Shells, Poetry
Urban Assembly School for Leadership and Empowerment, NY | Halla Albukhaiti, The Fifth Position, Memoir
Virginia Virtual Academy, VA | Zoe McBride, Duty, Fiction & Drama
Walter Payton College Prep, IL | Kennedy Ly, Just Like Everyone Else, Memoir
Warren High School, TX | Annie Wu, The Self Told From Three Scales, Poetry
Warren High School, CA | Alyssa Ramirez, It’s Too Late, Poetry
Westlake High School, GA | Emery Benton, E Stands for Dreamer, Fiction & Drama
Wiregrass Ranch High School, FL | Daya Brown, Soul Ties, Spoken Word

Creative Writing Awards Thirtieth Year 2023 Scholarship Winners