



mangrove



# Issue 17

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# Masthead

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*Mangrove* is the University of Miami's undergraduate literary journal. It seeks to elevate voices of all kinds by publishing student art and writing that pulses with human language, sits under our skin, and settles into our soul. Mangrove is designed and edited by an undergraduate staff and advised by university faculty.

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# a city in picture

*Eric Ma*

light descends unto the street-level, and rooftop diffuses the excess  
a delicious breeze in the doorway  
the yellow wallpaper is fading, as if melting to the inside warmth  
a man, wrapped in orange like a candy, is playing music at the hotel bar

on-walkers disappear into the smoke, then memory  
It's been a few months -- maybe two -- but temptation flows and rhymes  
my friend, who has an honest principle, tells me about quitting  
It's a long story that began in April, then he asked if I wanted one

the skittish landing, it was the grey vapor entailing rain, the pilot said  
my home-town-down pours are brief and dissipate into the air  
I closed my eyes, the city -- here and back there and all the way  
I remember the wind-scattered canvas up above  
thin, loose branches nesting curly leaves  
shadows recede and return, a deceptive clock  
wet dirt falls into the road's frame  
some-where, an emerald gloss cut in half  
by a forlorn bridge, ducks under paddle across  
but winter colors, all grey, then dust  
the paint fades, and the light stills

# Pity in the Alps

*Cassidy Tucker*

consume me, an olive, but  
hold onto the pit—  
for the love of God,  
hold onto the pit

bury me in the garden  
under a tree's yellow leaves,  
next to the bench where  
you stare at the mountains,  
the gingerbread houses, the steeples,  
idyllic through the nylon

or carry me in your pocket  
and board the train  
and throw me out the window  
that i might see the steeples  
from unintended angles

hold onto the pit  
until i'm bitter

let the bitterness be the sign  
it's time to go home



# Zeus

*Nikole Vincze*





# Midwest in Memoriam

Clara Kernodle

*“That the Lord thy God may bless thee in the land...for He is thy life, and the length of thy days, that thou mayest dwell in the land which the Lord sware unto thy fathers to give them.”*

*- Deuteronomy 30:20*

*“Ye see the distress that we are in, how Jerusalem lieth waste...”*

*- Nehemiah 2:17*

This land was soft and rolling. Long ago one man planted thousands of broad-shouldered chestnut trees which for many years shaded the hills and valleys from the bright, warm sun. Among the drizzle of chestnuts there used to be great stretches of open fields, planted with berries and small fruits, or swaying corn and rye, yielding harvest in harvest-time and buzzing gently in planting-time. In the late summer before a hot day, a hazy fog would fill the rolling basin of land, moving slowly like the sea. In the winter the snow went heavily over this land, brightened at the corners by the small fire-lights. This was Ohio.

Ohio was a place for big-eared young men, for barefoot children, for dreaming old women. Apples hung ripe on apple trees. Chestnut branches hung low over quiet-moving creeks full of silver-blue fish that nibbled the small fingers searching for arrowheads. At night, fathers brought their daughters to the open rye fields to watch the arm of the Milky Way spin on its slow axis in the way it had done when no one but the deer and the Shawnee had walked the quiet valleys. It was a good thing to own a field of corn and sell a bushel of corn which you lifted with your own sunburned arms.

A child of this land could read the tales of pilgrims and pioneers and run freely into the world like one herself, could sit at the feet of her great-grandfather who still mowed the lawn every first of June with a

push-reel mower and learn the joys of summer, could swim with other children in a rain-fed creek, clean enough for drinking. A girl's summer afternoon could stretch into a long plain of eternal, orange-gold time, decades before being called in for dinner and bedtime, centuries to be spent crawling under hedges and picking wild strawberries. In a few years, children would be born to the young people walking quietly, shyly together down the shaded alleys. And they too would listen in the June mornings to their great-grandfather mowing the lawn and learn where wild strawberries grew and how to catch bluegill with a piece of old string and where to watch for Venus as she climbed the evening sky.

This was a land worth inheriting, a land worth working in and caring for and cultivating, a land worth finding.

We yearned for such a good and fruitful land, and once we had it, once we stood on it with our own feet, we ruined it. We razed the fields, built up and over the blue-gabled houses that had stood in rows for a hundred years and that had raised up four generations of barefooted children. We strung up the land in a noose of telephone wires, let the chestnuts die in a plague, starved the fish in the creeks, smothered the soft green fields in hot, shadeless concrete and shone bright false lights into the darkness to blind the sleepy night sky.

The Ohio of Sherwood Anderson, the Illinois of Ray Bradbury, are an almost mythical land, long left unremembered. Children of promise were born there, into a land they knew and learned to love. The sun strengthened their bodies like strong young plants, the cold creek water nourished them, the tall grass fed their daydreams and promised them worlds.

No one comes from Ohio anymore; no one watches the fireflies from their childhood bedroom and dreams of summertime, real summertime spent swimming and hunting strawberries. No one goes to Ohio anymore; it is flyover land. It lies choked and forgotten between northern lakes and southern ranches.

It is a tragic thing for a young woman to wake up one day and realize that her hopes and dreams were founded in a place that is no more, to wake on the first of June and hear nothing but the cars going by (for her grandparents have moved east and her great-grandparents are in a home in Detroit), to plant her feet on concrete under cloudless, unsympathetic sky instead of on cool wet grass. Her summertime life is colored-plastic signs, treeless highways, false-blue chlorinated pools that no one swims in, air-conditioned and insectless silence. City lights outshine the patient arm of the Milky Way and the lovely face of Venus. Everything magical, everything momentous has been taken. We have forgotten the way it used to be.

I myself will never return to Ohio. I cannot face it.

# Homecoming

William McCullough

Eighty miles outside of Omaha, I think of all the suffering I saw.  
Snowed in.

The mechanic, with his oil-lined wrinkles  
Fingering a blue pen and cigarette,  
Said to not take it too far.

*That 300,000-mile miracle is a few steps away from dying on you.*  
There is just no other way and no time to look for one.  
It only has to make it those last few steps.

A drop of blood, singular and alone and muted amongst the white.  
From a prick on some avian feathered passerby  
Looking for solace in the snowy down, maybe.  
Or a cut on my finger that I have not yet placed or know to be there.  
Or a rabbit, snared around a loose ankle and wounded,  
Who hopped through to its den for a taste of home  
Because there was just no other choice.  
Or at least one that made sense.  
No matter where or what the host, the blood is there,  
And only a single trace to show that it ever really existed.  
As if something had made the effort to be proven,  
And that the only way to know for sure was through the letting of blood.  
And it knew that this was the only way  
Through knowledge of bulls, virgins, or even manself.  
As if it knew this to be the condition,  
As if it knew this to be the terms;  
That all things real must bleed,  
One way or another.

# We are a Shoes On House.

*Emily Brigid O'Connor*

The YouTube priest said sin splintered our souls, said Jesus Christ binds them together with thick hairy twine but inside they're still splintered. I asked if five fragments formed a family tree would fruit and leaves come forth? Or would our split end souls look like broken popsicle sticks, held by hot glue in the shape of a mangled star, placed reverently on the Christmas tree, cherished and suspended where the back branches meet the wall.

Or is my family tree the sturdy pine we brought home one year when we decided to leave our fake one in the basement, choosing instead the sweet holiday smell, but when my brother and I were home alone, the wood anchored in the base shattered like the family ornaments shattered when the tree hit the ground.

Maybe my family tree is the carpet of fractured glass.  
Be careful where you step;  
keep your shoes on in the house.

# To Be Alone

Grace Sarick

The house arrives late in a long line of brownstones, and is the last before the block will take a hard left swing into those older, and, as Margaret once conceded, lesser. The street corner is what she has anticipated first, and by little surprise, what she recognizes first.

It is into the last spot before the corner that Margaret reverses her car and parks, before pulling out the keys and placing them, token-like, onto the dash. Beneath her, the engine has rumbled to a halt, but some rhythm of it vibrates still at the pit of her stomach, as if to encourage her out of the seat, but she only adjusts herself. She is still a few minutes too early to knock on the door. Waiting, she doesn't mind—but something about waiting here, at the same corner Catherine had once asked her to park only on the other side of, suggests to her an irony that only Catherine, naturally, would appreciate. She had even reminded Margaret to park here during their phone call last week—*Adam will be home, after all!*—although this time, she had been joking. Margaret was almost certain.

Years ago, when she visited Catherine and the house regularly, Margaret had found this request silly—embarrassing, even, although she couldn't quite articulate to Catherine as to why—but never had she strayed from it. Not even on weekends, when it was not entirely uncommon for any of the other PhD candidates in her cohort, self-established already into their rigid groups of twos and threes, to visit Catherine's house for dinner, or on the guise of some fantastic issue in need of debate, or perhaps for nothing more than to hear themselves speak for an hour straight, and to know that they were being listened to all the while. Margaret knew they came here; she suspected many of them knew she did, as well. But Catherine hadn't wanted to hear that. She had only wanted to hear that Margaret would park around the corner, anyway, where an elm would block the view of her car from the front porch, and the two-hour visitor parking sign would keep her visit just short enough to be explainable, although it never needed to be. Not once. Margaret



reminds herself of this as she steps out into the cold air, fuzzy and blue-grey with evening. The car locked behind her, she begins the short walk over and quickly zips her coat all the way to her throat against the wind, which stings the moisture from her eyes as she goes.

At the porch, she mounts the steps to the door—steeper than she remembers, although she certainly hadn't been climbing them in heels, back then—and waits for a moment at the stoop, one hand clutched around the iron railing while her breath is caught and slowed. *This is the part*, something in her, not so much a voice as a reflex, as automated as her heartbeat, repeats. *This is it. This is the part.*

Over the phone the previous week, Catherine had sounded normal. Perhaps tired, but, given her age and her profession, tired and normal were one and the same. And anyway, Margaret had been entirely too startled to mull over the quality of her voice so much as the novelty of it: while it was untrue that Catherine hadn't spoken to her in the ten years since they had last seen each other, she hadn't exactly *spoken* to her, either. There had been a phone call when Margaret graduated; another when she was hired at the philosophy department at Brown. A letter, mailed by Margaret two years ago, when Catherine retired. Unanswered. And then, last week, a text. *Can you call?*

Now, as Margaret considers it again, the message strikes her as less of a request and more of a plea. Not, *can you call?* but *why* haven't *you* called? *Can you call—or is that so far beyond you nowadays?* She feels herself grow heavy at the thought. She looks at her hand, still on the railing and singed white at the knuckles, and wonders, not for the first time, what Catherine will look like. "Maybe prepare yourself," Catherine had said on the phone. Margaret had thought she even heard her laughing afterward, but by then Margaret had become upset, holding the receiver away from her face as she fought to remain quiet, and hadn't really been listening at all.

And so she prepares herself, and she knocks.

For a moment, nothing. She's keenly aware of the blood pumping in her ears, its warmth returning to her empty hand. Another knock, despite herself.

Inside, there is movement—a short but audible screech, perhaps

of a chair on tile, a titter of footsteps as polite as a cat's—and then the doorway is open, and it is not Catherine who stands in it, but Adam. He studies her for what feels like a very long moment, although she thinks, not unkindly.

“Hi, there,” he says.

“Hello,” Margaret says. There is a pause, and she is about to speak again when something in Adam's face switches, quickly enough that she fears she's somehow managed to step on his foot—but it's just as quick that she sees he is laughing, and extending a hand toward her.

“Margaret! Oh, of course—Catherine told me! How awful of me to forget!”

Margaret quickly swipes her palm, where sweat had begun to bud and itch, against her pant leg, and shakes his hand. “Adam,” she says, breathless again, “It's great to see you.”

“And it's great to see you, too—truly. I'm happy you came.”

There is an edge to his voice, almost an excitement, that allows Margaret to wonder if he really *is* happy to see her again. She smiles and allows herself, just for a moment, to look unabashedly into his face: a face she has not seen in many years, could hardly have picked out of a busy street, and yet here she finds herself, measuring its critical changes.

Smile lines at his mouth, crow's feet stitched between his eyebrows. Teeth that have yellowed a bit, although in appropriate tandem to the whites of his eyes behind his glasses, also yellowed. There is a bit of red at either corner of his mouth: she has interrupted him at dinner. She starts to apologize when Adam suddenly speaks, and, realizing his mistake, laughs uncomfortably before stumbling on:

“You know, Margaret—I'm afraid Catherine isn't actually here. Not yet, at least. Has... I mean, I *assume* the reason for your visit is to, uhm...”

“Right,” says Margaret. “She told me.”

Adam nods once and bluntly, and clears his throat. “Right. Well, it'll probably be—” he pauses to push the sleeve up one arm, but in the absence of a wristwatch, shoves his hands back into his pockets. “Oh, I don't know. These afternoon treatments tend to go long, longer than the morning ones. I wouldn't expect her until after six. Didn't Catherine mention it?”

“She did, yes, but she thought six fifteen would be fine. I thought...” but here Margaret feels herself slow to an uneasy stop, color burning itself into her cheeks and a slight shrillness into her voice.

Had Catherine only been joking, telling her to come here while she wasn’t? But no, because Catherine rarely joked, and sixty seemed an unlikely age to start: had she been being cruel, then? Ironical? This, she can believe, although Catherine was rarely ever cruel, either. She suddenly feels as if she’s been standing there too long, knee-locked in a growing heat, despite the chill of early November. She wishes for a place other than the porch steps where she might sit down.

“That would make you a bit early, dear. It’s only a quarter after five.”

She smiles, and is about to argue—good-naturedly, but of course she knows the time, of course she has checked—when it occurs to her: November. She hasn’t set any of her clocks back. Not even the one in the car.

“Oh, God,” Margaret says, so quietly that Adam doesn’t seem to hear her. “Oh, I’m so sorry. I didn’t—”

“Don’t apologize! I just wasn’t sure if there’d been a mix-up—I didn’t want you to be disappointed with the choice of company.” Adam laughs, cupping a hand over his mouth as he does, “But please, come on in! I’m letting all the heat go out.”

“That’s okay,” Margaret tells him, preparing already to bolt back to the street corner, back to her car, all the way back home, and to an early sleep. “I’ll find somewhere to wait,” she adds lamely, but Adam waves a hand at this.

“Of course not,” he says. He moves aside. “Please. Catherine told me you’re all the way out in Providence now. You must have had some terrible traffic.”

Margaret pauses, but finds she can no longer argue. After a moment, she follows Adam inside.

The warmth hits her first, and then the smell it has undercut: pasta sauce and laundry sheets and something green and musty, like neglected houseplants. The hallway Adam leads her down is narrow and empty aside from its coat rack, where their long winter coats and unraveled scarves are

hung, and afterward will lead, as she remembers, to the kitchen. It is here that the house will find its breadth, with its twinned uncurtained windows and high, high ceilings: in her mind it's always evening in Catherine's kitchen, and the light there is always soft, and the shadows of the treeline are sliding over their arms, and then their faces, as if with the same caution Margaret had so often felt, herself, on those evenings.

She hesitates at the mouth of the room as Adam approaches the busy stovetop. She watches the light move around him as he walks, but finds it does not move very much at all, only slants down from the ceiling as opposed to in through the windows, which are both dark behind two pulled sets of gauzy curtains.

"It's me you'll have to forgive for the mess," Adam says with a chuckle. He stands over a pot at the stove and clatters a metal top over it. "Catherine would *not* approve, as I'm sure you could imagine. We usually wouldn't have dinner so early, but with the treatment times and all, well." He pauses and turns back to her, a hand back at his mouth. "Oh, I've done it again already, haven't I? We haven't had very many guests lately—my hosting skills are rusty. You must be starving! Can I grab you—"

"No," she says, quickly, "Not at all. But thank you."

"Then I guess I'll just have to pawn the rest off to Catherine when she gets back! How about some water?"

The shrill note of his voice has returned to impress upon her again—this time that she'd be doing them both a sure favor by saying yes to something, and so she nods and watches as Adam rummages through the many cupboards for the right glass. "Why don't you go make yourself at home in the living room, dear? I'm going to pack some of this mess up, but I'll be right there."

He doesn't point the way, but the double doors that lead to it have been left open. With some reluctance, Margaret walks through them.

It is, as Catherine had warned her in the phone call, not the room she remembers. Not the room it should be. Like the kitchen, the bay and bow windows are shrouded by curtains just thin enough that the light comes in muted, tinging the walls—adorned still with Adam's inexpert, auctioned art of European cafes and flower pots—a flat mustard yellow. One of the sofas, which she hadn't before realized was a pull-out, is

extended into a makeshift bed with a quilt folded atop and the cushions rearranged; the other, which is smaller and faces away from the window, has been left alone. She sits at the edge of the smaller one and waits.

On the counter beside her, there is an array of pill bottles, some with labels and some without. A half-drunk water bottle tinted pink with the powder that has gathered at its bottom. A dog-eared novel that she knows Catherine, at least, has already read: *Meditations*. On the floor between the counter and the other sofa, a similar array, but contained in a felt bin, and of gadgets: a blood pressure cuff, a pulse oximeter, and another boxy sort of monitor she doesn't recognize. Something close to her—the monitor, most likely—gives a quiet and methodical beep. The sound makes her hands restless in her lap. There is an equally unnerving smell to the room, unrecognizable but faintly acidic and unwashed. She stills her hands beneath her thighs and waits.

Adam comes in within a few seconds, juggling two glasses of water and a plate of sliced cheese and crackers. "Not too impressive in the snack department right now," he says, brightly, as he places the plate down on the counter. With no surface room left there, he hesitates for a moment before awkwardly handing Margaret her glass, which she accepts and thanks him for. Adam sits at the edge of the pull-out and smiles. His own glass is held with two overlapped hands, and gives her the uncomfortable sense that they have only just sat down in a ski parlor to talk as they wait, and he is a child with a mug of hot chocolate. "Not anything like Catherine would have at those little dinners she used to throw, huh?"

She is momentarily startled by the comment. It's as if she's forgotten where she is entirely. "Oh, no—it's great. Thank you." She stares at the plate. "There would be crackers, sometimes."

"Charcuterie," Adam corrects with a laugh. "Always destroyed by the end of the night. Just as it should be, of course. Hungry college kids, right?"

Margaret nods, but feels herself go cold. *College kids*. Is that all she amounted to, even then? Twenty-five, with two degrees and a fellowship and her very own apartment just twenty minutes from here, no roommates and no allowance—a college kid, half-starved and greasy-headed? As ungrounded as the rest of them, and as desperate for

grounding, too? Catherine hadn't seemed to think so. But then, there was no comparison: she and Adam had been in Cambridge for fifteen years, maybe more, already tenured, already rich. Already married.

But, "Definitely," she says, and Adam seems pleased.

"And now," he says, reaching for a cracker, "And now a professor, yourself! How are you liking Brown?"

"It's a great school, too, and I'm really enjoying it. It's—well, it's different, a little bit smaller, but that can be good too." She doesn't know what she's saying, what she's doing. It seems ridiculous to be talking about herself, and yet she doesn't know where to go next, or how, and so she slowly adds, "And you? How are things here?"

"Oh, well." He nods, solemnly, hand cupped over his mouth as he chews. "As well as to be expected. I'm still working, just two classes this semester. Catherine, as I'm sure you know, had to retire once she—" he gestures, vaguely— "once she knew. *We* knew. It all happened so quickly, but the department, you know, they understood. And she's kept busy. Some of the pills they have her on make her pretty tired, but also sort of relaxed. Lots of reading. Yoga, when she was feeling a bit better. Now, though, mostly reading. She'll ask to help grade a paper here and there, between you and me. Can't seem to help it. Plenty harsh on them, as always, although they'll probably end up thanking *me* for that down the line. Still. She's always right."

"She is." Margaret feels her face tighten, and she knows she is smiling, although she also feels all at once close to tears.

"Oh, Margaret, I'm sorry, dear. Are you okay?"

Realizing she is, in fact, crying, Margaret quickly swipes at her eyes. "Yes, *yes*, I'm sorry. Gosh. It's just strange to hear."

Out of what she assumes is some deluded form of respect, Adam is quiet. The silence reminds her of the beeping once again, a sound that clips her throat with an inexplicable and sudden dread. She almost asks Adam about it—if not what it is, then to at least make it stop—but she doesn't. She waits for him to speak again, and soon he does.

"I'm not sure how much you know."

A few years ago, Margaret would have still had the nerve to ask him the same thing. Or more so, she has enjoyed thinking that, over time,

she eventually would again. But sitting in front of Adam now, him with his cracker plate and unflattering, old man readers, his manners and his spaghetti-sauced smile, she knows that she never did have any nerve, and never would. After the letter that followed Catherine's retirement announcement had gone unanswered, there had been more letters: never sent, but letters nonetheless, addressed to the house at large, for either of them to open at chance. She hasn't looked at them since, but imagines now they would read something like the manifesto of a wounded teenager, left alone on the dancefloor at prom: Adam would've pitied her.

"We haven't really talked lately," she says, finally. "Just the once. On the phone."

"Well, then. I should probably leave the rest of the story to her." He leans back, a hand planted on both knees. One bounces slightly. "Won't be too long. It's not so much the *appointment* that takes so long as the *questions*. Her sister has been taking her lately, and she and the nurses, my God, they really get to talking. One time, they weren't actually home until six-thirty, and this was one of the earlier ones, so I was sort of worried. I thought maybe Catherine had gotten sick or something, and her sister tends to get a little too helpful when that happens. And can you guess what the holdup was?" He stops, and Margaret thinks he is trying for a theatrical pause, but then he begins to laugh again. "Actually, Catherine's the licensed storyteller here. I'll let her tell you. Or her sister, if she comes in for coffee. She usually does."

"Beatrice?" she asks, gently.

"Oh, yes, so you remember. She was here a few times when all you kids were. I'm sure you've had your fair share of questioning from that one—a retired nurse for twenty years now, but, as she would tell you, only retired in *practice*."

They share an unconvincing chuckle.

"Growing up all around that kind, I could never be too sure why Catherine thought to marry into it, too, if I'm honest. But I guess that's the beauty of it, as you hard-thinkers would say—right?"

She nods and sips her water, and for a moment, it is quiet.

"And what about you, Margaret? Are you—" here he hesitates, and Margaret could sense, as much as see, his search for a ring on her hand—

“Married?”

“No,” she answers, attempting, after many years of practice, to keep the apology out of her voice as she does, “I’m not married.”

“Seeing anybody special?”

“No, nothing at the moment. Just working.”

“Ah.” He smiles and gives her a confidential little nod. “That’s all right, too. Catherine did mention once that you preferred...” but he trails off, and his lips press into a hard line. Margaret stares at him and waits. In the short silence reemerges the beeping, which strikes her suddenly as more of a ticking, and her heart, beating so hard against her ribs now that she’s certain he could hear it, if he knew to listen.

“Prefer what?”

“To be alone.”

Margaret looks down, her face hot. Although she can’t see him, she could feel Adam, too, searching for the solace of some well-timed distraction. There is nothing to say. There is nothing, of course, except the innate and absurd urge to apologize. But as she raises her head and prepares to do just this, she sees his attention has already been captured by the window behind her head, and a renewed blip of light coming through it. He stands.

She, too, hears it then: low music, the rumble of a car just out front.

“That must be her,” Adam says, and sighs with what Margaret could only assume is relief. “Home early, too! She must’ve known you were here.”

“Must have,” Margaret hears herself agree.

And with that, he disappears back into the kitchen, where the front door will soon open, and where she and the brute air will rush in with a singular sweep, and he will be there to greet them both. Margaret wonders if she was meant to follow, or at least offer to follow, but in its emptiness, the living room has become a peaceful place to be once more, although not quite familiar yet. There is the ticking, and the smell she can’t place, and the light, which has grown reddish and heavy again without the headlights, but in which she had once liked to watch the dust rise and catch when one of the two of them stood up to go.



# Singular v.1

*Tyrese Fenton*

No one shall know me.

No one will know the geography of the dots that mark beauty on my body—however parallel or asymmetrical.

What those longitudes and latitudes possess are not hidden treasures for “one” to find, but they are dots of singularity.

Black holes that disturb the validity of one’s existence.

They are death to anyone but me.

So, there is no treasure.

There is no tune that curls and spirals with the wind.

There is no fluttering nor warmth nor spring

What I’ve found is cold and dry, like blood rusted metal.

For I’ve learned that even the winter dares to sing.

Still, when the winter croons the melody of love’s unholy runes, I will shun it.

I will shun its impious devotion to oneness.

I will keep my leaves to myself like a winter oak.

I will remain impervious.

I refuse to hear the winter’s gale flurry down the aisle of their tunnels.

I will block its blows with walls on all sides.

No, I will move to the shores and build myself a bar

to become drunk on fallacy, of course, neither love nor intimacy.

For even the sand that curves around my throat has a firmer grip.

I will mash every sand dune near for I know it is my fate to be eroded,

Rather, it is my will,

And fate has partnered with me.

Fate and death have partnered with me.

So that no one shall ever know me.

# Ars Poetica

*Beatrice Han*

When your mother returned from the hospital the poem followed her like an afterbirth. It tore the covers from all the mirrors in the house, gibbering to itself as it went, alight with a gleeful malignant greed. As for your mother the pitiless gleam of the mirrors produced in her an awful fragility. She was wounded by the sight of herself. You would have offered her something—contact, or care—suffused as you were with the peculiar tenderness that follows catastrophe, but as you reached your hand out to hers the poem dropped like a noose upon your neck and crooned that the only contact worth pursuing is the contact of witness, or conquest. You took back your hand. Then the poem unhinged its jaw and swallowed your mother down in great unseemly mouthfuls. It went on eating until you had no mother left, only the bright clarity of terror that overcame her at the end, a terror that the one thing left of her in this world was you.

# Improv

*Donna Steele*



# Sorry for your loss

*Jessie Storz*

I suppose the lights had been there for a very long time. Three faint headlights, pale spots of sight hovering just outside our bedroom window. The fog here gives it a mystical quality, splinters the light up, and makes it into great washes of shifting green. Piercing through that is the blinking (always blinking) small red light, which might be anything at all. Sometimes I find myself watching them back, blinking in time to the red light. On these nights, I think it's almost beautiful. I think of lava lamps and the aurora borealis. I didn't use to see them, but Jayden must have. I suppose they had been waiting for us from the beginning.

It always comes back to the window: what's in front of it, what's behind it. The dorm is all old wood, and the window is one of the ones you pull up — it's heavy and makes a sort of screeching sound. We removed the screen from it in the second week, and it's still leaning in the pocket of space behind my closet. Jayden's bed is set against the window. She dragged it there because she told me once she liked being close to escaping. I think that's the first thing we had in common.

I mostly imagine her like this: it's morning, and she's got the window open so that I can smell the flowers blooming outside, meaning it must be spring. Her hair glints in the sunlight. When we first met, it was dyed a bright green, which faded to a sort of blue. After that, she went purple, and then a darker purple. She's always reminded me of some sort of exotic flower. I told her this once, and she laughed at me. She wore beaded bracelets and long, patterned skirts. She had rings on all her fingers and a tattoo of a star above the knuckle of her thumb. She reminded me of fractals when the light hit her the right way, like long spirals of sharp colors.

She was in the room before I ever arrived, that first day. She was there alone, and I had my dad, old and half-deaf but willing to carry all the heavy things from the car. I remember, I was surprised by how beautiful she was. Jayden was like that. She made you feel something, made you think of mermaids and flowers and the sort of fae that might have bright

green hair. She had a box of chocolates and offered me one. I picked a dark chocolate cup with cherry filling. It had a fortune on the inside of the wrapper – *Land is always on the mind of a flying bird*. I still remember that.

If I think about it now, I had been seeing the lights for even longer. There were always signs. The summer before college, someone else was abducted, a girl from the high school about an hour from my house. Her name was Sara, I think. I didn't know her. I have a theory which is very simple. It goes: nobody cares until it happens to them.

I spent the summer before college disassembling my childhood bedroom like any other piece of furniture. I piled half of my clothes in boxes that got neatly tucked to the back of the closet, and sorted the rest into piles on my floor, which would be rolled up into suitcases. When I was finished, the empty walls of my room blinked at me, and my belongings sat in their duffel bags and suitcases in the trunk of my father's car. I slept with my face buried into my pillow so that I wouldn't see any of it.

The night before I left, I had a dream. In the dream, I was myself, only larger. I was standing out in my driveway in the twilight, tall enough to look out over the sprawling suburban grid. I was so big that my house only came up to my knees. When I knelt, the ground rumbled. In the dream, I tried to reach out and touch my house, but as soon as my finger brushed the wall, it collapsed into itself like wet paper.

It was that night that I woke up and they were there. I opened my eyes, and my room was bathed in light.

She told me her name was Jayden, which, from its Hebrew origins, means "thankful" or "God will judge." She sounded out my name, *Nat-a-lie*, and then *Ne-llie*. Nana-fo-fanna. Nellie-bo-bellie. Later, she introduced me to her bong, a big, used thing with rainbow loom bracelets wrapped all around the neck. Its name was Richard Bumpkin. Even her lighter had a name: she'd drawn a face on it with Sharpie and told me that its name was Rebecca *Bumpkin*, Richard Bumpkin's wife. She told me she made sure to smoke all the time so that they could be together. I think I

laughed at this.

I grew up in the Mississippi of hundred-degree summers, paired with the kind of Godfearing humidity that hangs off you like a tangible thing. Seattle is colder and more metropolitan. Sometime in my first week, I walked by a man on the street downtown who screamed at me to *Go Away! Go Home!* I became paranoid for a long time that everyone I met could tell that I did not belong. During orientation, the girl sitting next to me asked why I came “all the way here.” I let my mind run through synonyms for the word *escape*. Instead, I shrugged and told her that my dad went to school here, and anyway, I got a scholarship.

Jayden was my first and, for a long time, only friend. During our second week in the room, we went antiquing together and found a huge quilt, one of the Unicorn Tapestries, which we hung across the left wall of the room. The dorm became a refuge of which we were the only inhabitants. At night, we set up my laptop on the desk and huddled together on my bed. In the first month, we ran through *How I Met Your Mother*. Afterward, we started in on movies. On the first Thursday of September, she suggested *ET*, and I suggested *Men in Black*. We ended up watching *The Sandlot*. The whole next day, we were quoting to each other, “You’re killing me, Smalls”, and “Baaaaaatter up!” On weekends, we left the window open all day and smoked with Richard as soon as we woke up. We lounged around the room, stretching our bodies like cats in the sun.

On one of the warm nights, we left the room and climbed to the roof. We set out a blanket and lay down parallel to each other, stoned and buzzing with it. Jayden knew all sorts of constellations, so she was teaching me – I could only recognize the Big Dipper on my own.

“That’s Cygnus,” she told me, pointing. “People call it ‘the Swan.’”

“I see the wings,” I said, squinting. “Like it’s flying?”

Her throat made a low mumble of agreement.

“Do you wish you could fly?” I asked her. A breeze floated over us like a breath. It was starting to smell like fall, then.

“Do you?” she asked.

“I’m afraid of heights,” I told her.

“Oh,” she said. She tilted her head back, and I watched her look at the sky. “Maybe I wish I could fly. Maybe I wish I could climb. Get a

ladder and just keep going up. Right to the top.”

“The top of what?”

She sighed. “I dunno,” she told me. “Everything.”

In October, we told each other that we were each other’s closest friends, which made me feel both off-balance and warm. We did not have other friends. It became clear to me at some point that she somehow – purposefully, subconsciously, some way out of her control – set herself apart from other people. She saw herself as someone who “doesn’t fit in.” I also realized at some point that she had categorized me the same way. But I don’t think I don’t fit in; I think I’m just sort of quiet, maybe.

It started getting worse for me, eventually. I mean, I started getting lonely. As it got colder and the rain more frequent, I felt a more and more acute sense of estrangement from the outside world. At some point, I started smoking with Jayden immediately after class, even on weekdays. I ventured out of the room less. Jayden said she understood. “I don’t like being here either,” she told me. We watched *Interstellar* that night, and I sobbed my way through the end of the movie. I couldn’t tell what Jayden thought about it.

On Halloween night, we took mushrooms and made a nest of blankets on the floor. We made a list of words we liked: Superfluous. Eccentric. Rambunctious. Jayden put her head in my lap. She wanted me to tell her a story. I was still thinking of big words, so I told her about Jormungandr, the Midgard serpent of Norse mythology. I told her that Jormungandr is bigger than the world and lives in the sea. She told me she liked the idea of being *bigger than the world*.

On my birthday, we got wine drunk in the dorm. We took our shirts off and danced together in our underwear to Neko Case. *Hey, pretty baby, get high with me*, crooned the speaker. I felt like a cup of water that had been filled to the brim. I felt like there was a lighter that was flicked on in the cavity that is my chest. *The look on your face yanks my neck on a chain, and I would do anything (I would do anything) to see you again...*

It’s hard to describe what it felt like. Weeks passed like water. I was doing badly, and it felt like everyone else was too. I would wake up crying sometimes, and I could never remember why. I thought sometimes



about the man who had yelled at me to *Go away! Go home!* and I felt that my skin was too tight around my body. There was a heavy ennui that seemed to coat everything. The edges of things blur together, even now: people, places, events. Jayden told me she thought I was depressed. She thought this because she was, too, and she said it like it was normal, like everyone was.

I asked the same guy who sat next to me in class if he ever felt depressed. “Sometimes, I guess,” he said. He clearly did not want to talk to me. I made a game out of not speaking to anyone else for the rest of the day. The game was so easy that it made me feel tired.

Back in the room, we talked about aliens. I think they’re scary; I’m scared of them like I’m scared of the dark. It’s that they’re there and no one knows why, and no one knows where. Jayden laughed when I told her all this, and I could not understand what she found funny.

“You realize that aliens are out there,” I told her. “Taking people. And nobody knows where they take them.”

“Space,” she told me.

“Well, obviously.” I frowned at her. She wouldn’t turn her head to look at me. We didn’t watch a movie that night, and I went to sleep unsettled. I dreamed about aliens, and I dreamed that they were there, outside my window. I dream that I could see the light of a UFO through the smudged glass.

It was Sunday, and Jayden and I were smoking out the window again. I had my feet kicked up on her headboard, and I was asking her questions, and she was answering. “What about dreams?” I asked her. “What’s the scariest dream you’ve ever had?”

“I dunno. Quicksand,” she said. “Or I’ll have dreams where I’m moving in slow motion, or I’m trapped somewhere.” She used the end of a pencil to poke at the bowl again. “What about you?”

“Oh,” I said. “I guess I’ve had a lot of dreams about one of my parents dying.”

“Oh my god, I used to have those all the time,” she told me. “Sometimes it wasn’t even sad, though; sometimes they’d die, and I’d just get to party.”

I snorted. “That’s one way to look at it.”



“I dunno. I don’t feel like anyone cares.”

I watched her inhale. “About parents dying?”

“About anything. Cuz they can say, like, omg, I’m so sorry for your loss, but in the end it’s like, your loss. And that’s scary.”

I didn’t say anything. She glanced back at me, and I didn’t know what she was looking for. I didn’t know what to say. She shrugged and blew the smoke out the window. Her hair was purple like a bruise.

Jayden started to get restless after this. There became an aspect of hovering to everything, like she was primed to *jump* or *fall* or *explode*. I thought sometimes that I might rest my hand against her and feel shaking, like she was a machine that had been running too fast. “Are you okay?” I asked her.

She was knitting Rainbow Loom in her bed. She was quick with her hands, and I liked watching her work. She didn’t look up when she answered. “I’m just tired,” she said.

“Me, too,” I said. “So am I.”

She rocked back in her bed and looked at me. “Okay,” she said. “Then let’s go.”

“Go?” I asked. I instinctively pulled the blanket tighter around me. “But I’m tired.”

“Oh,” she said. She looked back down at the Rainbow Loom in her hands, and it was as if she didn’t recognise it anymore. I felt the vertigo I get before a fall.

It gets worse from here. I guess what I’m trying to say is, you don’t have to keep reading. I can try to tell you exactly how it happened, but I’m not sure I know. On Wednesday night, I came home from the library. I changed into my pajama pants. We didn’t put anything on because Jayden was in bed working on homework. We made small talk as I made tea. I drank the tea. The last thing she ever said to me was, “God, I hate biology,” and then, “G’night, Nellie.” I fell asleep sometime around 10:30. I guess in the end it was slow, and it was sudden. She just got more distant until she was gone. *Poof*. Disappeared in the night. Taken. Gone.

She left in the middle of the night. It was freezing cold in the dorm when I woke up, the window open. She must have just crawled out. I can imagine her doing this. It feels like a fairytale. She got out and climbed

her ladder all the way to the top, like a beanstalk, like a dream.

Jayden was gone, and I was still there. Everything felt loose and disturbingly immaterial. I picked things up and expected them to slip through my fingers, but of course, they didn't. The first week that she was gone, I cried for days straight. I tore apart the room and reassembled it over and over again, as if I might find her hiding in the closet or underneath a loose floorboard. I showed up at the police station twice, once to give my testimony and the second time just to talk to them. They didn't want me the second time.

A cop begrudgingly took me aside. He was tall and balding, with grey stubble all across his chin. He kept rubbing it and looking over my shoulder as he talked to me. "Shouldn't we do something about it?" I asked him. I wasn't crying this time because my body had run out of water.

The cop looked from me to the spot above my left shoulder. "Do what?" he asked me.

I looked down and twisted the ring on my finger. "I don't know," I admitted. My throat was tight. "I think people should care more."

The school assigned me to a crisis counselor. There had been enough cases then that the board got a therapist on retainer who specialized in aliens and abduction cases. Her name was Dr. Shelly, and she had a very soft voice that made me hate her a little bit. She got her own tiny office in the student center. The walls were painted blue, and we got two armchairs facing each other, though she also had a desk she sometimes sat at. Behind her was a bookshelf crammed with items, which I examined when I didn't want to listen to what she was saying.

"You have to imagine that she's happier out there," Dr. Shelly told me softly. I went back to looking at the bookshelf. There was a book there by Ottessa Moshfegh, titled *Homesick for Another World*. I kept thinking about it. Homesick for another world. Homesick. Jayden is homesick. I am home, sick. "Do you like living on Earth?" Shelly asked me. I shrugged. I told her I hadn't really thought about it. I was looking out the window for the rest of the session, trying not to pay attention. "The unknown is often scary," she told me wisely. I imagined getting up and slapping her. I imagined propelling my chair through the glass of her office window.

Instead, I sat there with legs crossed, and I nodded along: *Yes, Dr. Shelly, the unknown is often scary.*

I kept going to my classes, even though I didn't care about them. On a Wednesday, someone stopped me in the hallway. "I'm so sorry for your loss," she told me. She had big, earnest eyes. I smiled at her. "Thanks," I said. I imagined an anvil falling from the sky and crushing her as she walked away.

Another week, I sat down again in the ugly, cramped, blue office. "I'm angry at her," I told my therapist.

"Good," she said. "Why?"

"Because she got out." Dr. Shelly looked at me through her glasses. "And I didn't."

I stayed in the dorm over winter break because I couldn't afford to go home. This is when I started seeing the lights outside my window. The campus was cold and empty. I ate in a dining hall that had been abandoned by its students and slept in a dorm room that had an extra bed. This is when I start seeing the lights outside my window. I think I'd known they were there even before I started seeing them. I think they'd been waiting for me for a while. I am going to tell you something now that I have not told anybody.

I chose one of the coldest nights to go out. I didn't mean to; it just happened. I wandered out of the dorm sometime around midnight, walked until I landed on one of the rock ledges outside the Hebets Center for Physics and Chemistry. To my left was a light post with a sign attached saying ADMISSIONS, with an arrow pointing somewhere behind me. My breath came out in heaves of mist. I sat there for a while. It gave me time to look at things, to admire the way the edges of frost had defined the world. A leaf on the ground, outlined in white. The bush behind me grew spiked leaves. I thought that the spiked leaves were beautiful. In the morning, the frost would melt to dew, and they would glisten in the sun.

I don't know when exactly they came, but they did. The ship touched the ground gently as a dream. I stood up to greet them. A hatch unhooked from the side, and three green men stepped out. They had long arms and blank faces. No mist came out of their mouths – I wondered if they did not need to breathe. They stood in front of me, silent and still as

trees.

“Do you have my friend Jayden?” I asked them. “You took her in November. She has purple hair and rings. She has a tattoo of a star on the knuckle of her thumb.”

They shook their heads.

“Please,” I pleaded. “Can I see her? Can I talk to her?”

They shook their heads.

They pointed to the ship. I shook my head then, no. They pointed to the ship again. I took two steps back. “Her name is Jayden,” I said again. “She has purple hair.” They shook their heads and pointed to the ship. I turned my back and ran. They did not follow me.

I didn’t stop running until I had to. I ended up doubled over on a street corner, I don’t know where. I sat down on the curb. Beside me on the ground was a large leaf. I stared at it as I tried to breathe. The whole nervous system of the leaf was exposed by the frost. Frozen white traced its spine, its escaping ridges. *Leaf autopsy*, I thought.

I started going to a support group in the city. Shelly suggested it months ago, but I told her it sounded lame. I ended up going anyway.

I made friends with the woman who sits in the chair next to mine. Her name is Maya, and she’s 27 years old, and she works at the hospital. Her little brother got abducted last year. She saw it happen, I guess. She tells the story in fits and starts, like it’s clogging up her throat. She talks about other things too, her day-to-day life and stuff. I think that she is incredibly unhappy.

We meet over coffee sometimes on the weekends. On some visits, we talk about normal things, like the hospital or my pending useless college major, and other times, one of us ends up crying. On those days, I try to assure her that alien abductions don’t *run in the family*, but honestly, I’m not sure. On our fourth or fifth coffee date, she sits across from me and stares into the tabletop.

“They want me to go with them,” she admits to me. I nod. “I can see the lights at night,” she admits to me.

“I know,” I tell her. “I know, I do too.”

She looks up at me through her bangs. Her eyes are dry, and her face is pale. “How do you stay?” she asks me.

My throat has become very tight. “We’re alive here,” I say. “And I know it’s hard. But we’re here. And there is still life, and there’s still beauty.” I take another sip of my coffee. It’s smooth, and it warms my stomach. “Tonight,” I tell her, “I will smoke and watch the stars drift across the sky. I will cook a meal and eat it myself. I will pet my cat and brush my teeth, and I’ll sleep when I’m tired. I guess what I’m trying to say is that I’ll still be here in the morning, and the morning after that. What I’m trying to say is that there are still things to stay for: there always are.”

# You can't love me

*After Barbara Ras*

*Jane Amstutz*

But you can walk me to Place Verdun and kiss me under  
the bare branches of sycamore trees. You can open the door  
to your studio apartment, open the door to a woman  
who is becoming a stranger to herself. Your voice can worm  
it's way between my teeth like floss, in all six  
languages you speak. You can tell me the story of the wolf,  
her amber eyes two flickering candles burning  
in the Maghreb wilderness.

You can pay for my coffee,  
bitter and ardent,  
the same color of your hands in November  
sun, wearing the copper ring from the girl back home  
you are certainly not in love with.

You can show me your CD collection, the stolen Metallica  
disk that would've run you 25 euros. You can't play guitar,  
but you can place your fingers over mine on the fretboard  
and promise to practice. You can take me to the Gave River,  
where our city expands in swirls of  
Van Gogh light, stretching out into the night. You can  
offer me your jacket as you lament the loss of  
the sweet, clementine-colored sun.

You can't love me, but you can tell me  
your first love was physics, how stars are made  
of constellating strings of equations, how adrenaline  
exists only for men and women to find the courage to dance  
to the polyrhythmic hum of life, the current rushing past us  
on the flooded riverbank. You can't love me, but you can trace  
the scar on the hand I use to write, the cut  
from a cardboard box I opened too quickly,  
without thinking, without considering that split-  
second impatience can leave a lasting mark.

# Visiting You at Apartment 217

*Eric Chen*

Thin gray blinds open like spring petals,  
and sunlight drips through your room,  
thawing your cold marble table.

I imagine you again,  
pretending not to see, in my mind's eye,  
how your hands tremble  
when you tie your shoes, light fracturing  
on your worn Adidas.

Outside, the A train whistles past —  
metal wind enters the steam  
of our coffee machine; brief ghosts of winter rise  
and fade in the window sun's dance.

Walking downstairs,  
the landlady counts envelopes.  
I swear she has aged  
ten years in the past week.

Above, snow clouds swallow an airplane.  
Below, five pigeons peck  
over tiny pizza crumbs  
and three-inch territory.

Your imagined self mentions something  
about fat New York pigeons.  
For a moment, I am a boy, laughing,  
trying to understand my father's joke.

# To You, My Mother

*Eric Chen*

I am four years old and cannot solve two plus two.

It is 12:37 A.M. You, my mother, are teaching me math. I struggle to open my eyes.

“If I put two green and two red apples together, how many apples do I have?”

And I would reply, “If I put two green and two red apples together, how many apples do I have?”

The moonlight shines through the dusty windows.

Your face is emaciated, a pale ghost.

\*\*

Later, when I walk to the bed where my sister and grandmother sleep, I am careful not to wake them.

I let the blankets cover me, hidden away from the world. The heat coils around my body like a great guardian snake.

I feel my face in them, and they become warm.

\*\*

I am zero years old. I am somewhere in the Jade Emperor's Celestial Heaven, as my grandmother from my mother's side would say.

You are at Bellevue Hospital on a bed on October 16th, 2005.

When I am zero and thirty minutes old, the nurse says I am 7.42 pounds, and I cry a lot. I am a normal baby.

\*\*

When I am zero point five years old, you are in your very early twenties. You work as an office assistant, and father works in a takeout restaurant.

You both decided to send me back to Fuzhou, China, to be cared



for by my grandparents from my father's side.

In Fuzhou, I survive off fishballs, wonton soups, and the occasional paint peel from the walls with dead vines.

\*\*

I am four and a half. I returned to the States a little over half a year ago. When I talk, I repeat what everyone says. When I eat, I have to be spoonfed. I am always in detention at school.

Father says to you to abandon me on the streets.

Instead, you are on the phone with my grandparents from my father's side, demanding answers every day at 9:17 A.M. :

*Did he bump his head? Did he roll off the stairs? Why did you let him eat paint off the walls? You're incompetent!*

The only sounds I hear are my lungs. My breath is hot on my wrist under my blankets. I kiss and hug them. I imagine a great coiling snake protecting me from the cold vastness outside.

\*\*

I am nearly five. My memory is vivid. It has always been vivid; our family doctor cannot explain why. I can imagine an entire room in my head, exploding with shadows, colors, details, and lights.

I remember being in the doctor's office. The autumn colors crack through the windows, yellow on red, red on green. The floors are light amber colored. The receptionist smacks her mouth, which is filled with unhealthy pink gum, and it annoys me to the point where I want to shout, scream, and cry.

I tug and tug at the piece of blanket within me. I picture myself hugging the blankets, kissing them, drooling, embracing them with my arms till I become calm again. Tug, pull, and yank it from the bed. Jump on them. Smash my face on them, just like how I repeat words.

"The doctor is here to examine you today," you say gently, handing me a *zòngzi*, a classic Chinese sticky rice dumpling wrapped in bamboo leaves.

“The doctor is here to examine you today,” I grin aloud in my imperfect Mandarin.

Your fingers are on your *zòngzi*, bamboo leaves cracking under pressure.

\*\*

Four hours after visiting the doctor, father comes home drunk like always since I returned from China.

Four of his friends have to carry and drop his body onto the hundred-year-old floor. It makes a resounding *thud*, even though he weighs very little.

In the kitchen, I overhear you quoting a medical report with grandmother (from mother’s side) about my visit to the doctor.

When you finally stop, you take a sip of one-day-old water you bought with EBT.

‘Some are more serious than others...’ ”

As you finish quoting, I feel your voice trailing off into the autumn night.

I am beneath my blankets. This time, even the snake I conjure in my mind cannot protect me from what you say next.

Because the report officially says I have autism.

Grandmother’s sentences suddenly trail off. It feels like the room has cooled by ten degrees. I smell father’s Marlboro-Heineken scent mixing with incense from grandmother’s Buddha statue.

Even though I am barely five, I feel a great wave of dread roll over me.

Autism, whatever that beast is, is the great monster slaying my great guardian snake in one round.

I hug my blankets, wishing to be a sailor shipwrecked at sea.

\*\*

I am seven. Over the past two years, I have slightly improved my speaking ability. But for the most part, I am still repeating what others say.

Most importantly, I have made a friend.

My friends are Prismacolor and Canson; you bring them to me one night while I visualize a great dragon coiling around my blankets.

"I bought some paper and colored pencils for your birthday!" You hug me, and I hug you back.

"What's Prismacolor? C-canson?" I say the names out loud, nervously, imperfectly.

You sit beside me on the bed and flip through the pages, saying something about colored pencil brands: "Prismacolor is from Mexico, and Canson is French!"

The great dragon roars aloud with brilliant blues, whites, and reds. I imagine the flags of Mexico and France. The dragon coils around you and me as the room fills with colors.

\*\*

I am ten. I sit in the office of the ugly principal with a giant mole. I am here because I said the f-word to the fifth-grade teacher, whom I imagine as the devil incarnate. Some days, I imagine bringing in a rope and strangling him, or kicking him in the balls and running away. Some days today, I recount my gym teacher and remember what my Buddhist grandmother would say: things will only worsen if you get angry.

The gym teacher always picks on me, and the whole class laughs when I stutter or repeat words. He also likes putting me in the detention corner. Worst of all, he tickles me randomly, and I think he even likes touching me.

Suddenly, a loud voice pierces through the hallway, distracting my thoughts. It is you, dressed in all black. You are ferocious and beautiful. Father is beside you, a swirl of Marlboro, Heineken, and bottled up anger mixing with your fake Tiffany and Co. perfume.

You mention something about wanting the P.E. teacher fired.

"M'am, please, could you — "

You continue yelling into the void.

"Also, we discovered your son is not doing his homework..."

You yell so loud, I swear the whole school can hear. I cringe a bit

from embarrassment.

And yet, you, barely half the ugly principal's height, were engaging in a duel of words you knew could not be won. In that room, I imagine myself small again, a child pressed between the weight of two adult worlds. Back then, I didn't know your fury acted almost like a type of faith — you furiously prayed for the cold, vast, dark world outside to hear me.

Afterwards, I drew you with my Prismacolor pencils like a female dragon of light accompanying the male dragon in my head. You, a green jade dragon of light coming alive, eclipsing the gym teacher, the principal, and the class bullies in strength. A creation made alive from the French Canson papers to the Brooklyn school office.

\*\*

I am standing in a Blick Art Materials store. Ahead, father is staring at the endless rows of materials, ranging from colored pencils to canvases to paintbrushes.

I like how the sun shines through the windows and warms my face. It carves the floor smoothly into different shadows and lights. Somewhere, someone or something is playing soft music. I suddenly feel incredibly out of place in my \$12 Hollister pants listening to classical music.

I am preparing to go to the counter to check out a Stonehenge sketchbook, the only thing I can afford, when I spot father there. Marlboro, Heineken, and slightly less anger today.

"Sir, would you like a bag?" The man behind the counter adjusts his glasses, then looks at me.

"Is that your son?"

Father only nods quietly as he hands me a bag filled with art materials, not even glancing at me once. My chest rises a bit, but nothing comes out. My hands tighten hard and become half-white, half-pink. It is a set of Prismacolor pencils, but not just a regular set. It's the set with 132 pencils.

Later, we get into father's broken Infiniti.

That night at around 10:30 P.M., I padded softly towards your room, silent as a panther. I made sure to stop a few feet away, hidden by

the wall. Father was talking about the Blick store manager and how he had shown pictures of my art to the manager.

The manager, said father, said that your son's art was incredible.

That night, when I went back to bed, I looked out at the sky, awash with all kinds of indigo blue and black. I smiled a bit sadly, then slipped under grandmother's covers.

\*\*

I am twelve. My first drawings were accepted into a city-wide exhibition at an office building, the name of which I don't recall, somewhere in Manhattan. ArtsConnection, a nonprofit, sponsors it.

By the age of twelve, I am no longer repeating as many words and don't need to be spoonfed by you. I am getting along well with my two friends, Canson and Prismacolor.

When the event organizer asks me to speak about my inspiration and my two friends, I hesitate.

However, you encourage me to. I reluctantly speak to her and her group of friends. Even father seems to look at me, a glint of hope in his otherwise dark, solemn eyes. My heart sounds like the drums I imagine playing in some sort of Broadway play.

"So, you keep mentioning your two friends... My favorite thing is... uh... well..." My back gets hot. I stumble backwards. Five pairs of artists' eyes bear into my soul. The organizer looks at me weirdly, like why did I just repeat what she said?

"My, sorry, I have to use the bathroom —"

I rush and grab my backpack. I walk rapidly past father with his bitter Heineken scent, past your depressing, fake Tiffany and Co. perfume, and past the cold darkness of the world. The janitor yells at me about a slippery floor I couldn't care less about. I imagine him slipping and breaking his spine.

I lock myself in the bathroom, tear open my Nike backpack, and pull out the tiny piece of blanket I cut from home (when I did this, my grandmother from my mother's side was irate, which is a word you taught me that meant someone was furious).

Then, I turn on the faucet and let it run. I visualize the world becoming scorched earth, and I am the only one left, billions of corpses begging for a drop of water.

Lastly, I imagine God sitting on his Jade Emperor throne, watching me on my scorched earth planet, his legs crossed, and his grin mysterious. I want to ask him to take me back to negative zero years old, back to his celestial court. I want to ask why he would create such a great, deformed beast.

I imagine myself as a great, deformed beast mutating into a twelve-year-old stuttering and repeating. Even the great blade the jade female dragon summons cannot slay it.

In that bathroom, I wasn't just hiding; I was teaching myself how to make my voice obey me. The bathroom became one of the first places I would slowly rehearse the words I had learned out loud, imagining them drowning out the angry, dark voices outside like static. To this day, I still spend a long time in the bathroom, staring at my reflection, thinking of the past.

As I hide in the bathroom, I dry off my wet, warm face with my sleeves before I clutch at the piece of blanket. The dragon in my mind seethes at the door.

Your voice.

Your fake Tiffany and Co., calm, sad, and a little bit irate voice yelling how I've been in the bathroom for an hour. I could feel the doubt and disappointment through the air, even through the door that separated us.

For the tenth time this month, I let the dragon seethe at you.

\*\*

I am thirteen. A speech therapist helps me after school, and you hope my remaining repetition can turn into rhythm.

I remember the therapist's room. It is all-white: the floors, the walls, the tables, and the chairs. Even her face is bone white. She must have done it with some Korean skincare product.

"Here, for each syllable, tap your finger." She pauses, looks at

a passing car, then puts on her listen-to-me-I'm-a-professional-voice. "Count with the word, then with the color you choose, and finally with the lines on the paper you draw."

You stare at the therapist, and I swear your eyes falter just briefly before you motion at me to draw.

However, as I draw various shades, the paper becomes vibrant with colors.

Over the years, this habit rewired something within my neurological structure, as the doctor would say.

"You have taken your gift for drawing and used it to help you rewire your speech," She says one morning as I draw blocks on my Canson paper.

\*\*

For my fifteenth birthday, you gift me a \$150 set of Faber-Castell Polychromos pencils you hand out like a cheap medicine bottle. Faber-Castell pencils are world-renowned oil colored pencils from Germany. They are also lightfast, meaning my drawings won't fade like my uncle's receding hairline when exposed to UV rays. You had researched them, their permanence under light, their promise not to fade even in hundreds of years.

I draw a landscape that night, imagining the details, shadows, highlights, and each blade of tiny life... I am God of my own creation, I say to myself. Each life is in my hands.

In my realm, everything is a utopia. I do not question the Jade Emperor about the deformed beast, nor why the dragon no longer seethes.

\*\*

I am sixteen, turning seventeen, in my mixed-media art class, when my favorite high school art teacher pulls me over to a silent room after class. She informs me that my Manhattan skyline illustration has been accepted into the Manhattan Borough Arts Festival.

"And w-where is it being exhibited?" I ask, hands on my

watercolor brush.

“At *MoMA*,” she says, flashing her brilliant teeth, probably done with whitening strips. “At the MoMA Cullman Research Building,” she adds. “I’m excited for you!” She hugs me. I stand like a statue, chills running down my legs, questioning my existence on the Jade Emperor’s green earth.

\*\*

I am freshly seventeen, and today is the most important day of my artistic career: my exhibition at the MoMA Cullman Research Building.

After we get out of the Uber Black, costing an arm and a leg, and go past the glass revolving doors, I start sniffing the lily and lavender scent off the walls, which makes you quite irate as you comment on why I still haven’t stopped this strange behavior.

I walk with long strides past dense crowds, arriving at my artwork. Warm golden lights shine down on the glass protecting the nine-by-twelve illustration behind it.

For the first time in months, I see the corners of my father’s mouth widen as he begins chattering with you about how I have massively improved my speech under the special education curriculum and your teaching. According to my own research and a self-diagnosis, I am now a “high-functioning” autistic individual, meaning that I function on the higher end of the spectrum than most people.

“And the art. Our son’s an incredible artist,” you add between sips of sparkling water. “I mean, it looks so real. My father said it looks like a photo.”

“I still think it’s because he’s different from other people. There are kids like him who are geniuses at math and —”

“Could it have been a good thing?”

“What do you mean?”

“You know, when we sent him back.”

The clinking of glasses. A chorus of laughter erupts from a crowd nearby.

“Every day I just keep wondering...”



“I don’t think he needs to be in ICT class anymore.”

I tug at the piece of blanket in my size M dress pants as I excuse myself from the small crowd taking pictures of my artwork, my phone exploding with notifications.

“Hey, let’s take a family ph —”

But by then, I am already gone, lying to you and father about going to the bathroom, even though I am really walking to the Fifth Avenue subway station.

I feel like a canned sardine pushing past greater crowds of people flooding into the room. I wish for my guardian dragon to eat the heads off of these people. I imagine headless corpses walking and slowly dying, even though I know these are good people coming to admire the subject matter with which I devoted my life.

*Did he bump his head? Did he roll off the stairs? Why did you let him eat paint off the walls?*

Your questions fade in and out like indelible ghosts in my mind.

I walk past the blurs of people’s faces, the grays, and the whites. I am trying to find the Fifth Avenue/Fifty-Third Street subway station. Even though it is two minutes from MoMA, I feel lost in an ocean of people. I feel my phone vibrate again, but I do not answer it.

The air smells of car exhaust and French fries. I dislike the night lights of the NYC stores. Someone shoves rudely past me, and I wish her an early death.

Fifth Avenue / Fifty-Third Street seemed as lost as a ghost ship in the vast sea. I could feel my face getting hot and slightly wet.

“Hey, is that you? I tried calling you on WeChat!”

A hand pats my shoulder, and I look up to see the face of the person whom I invited to view my art exhibition. His cheekbones protrude sharply, and his square-like glasses sit on his sharp nose. It is my first time seeing him in many years. Another figure carrying mandarin oranges emerges from the subway station, which I now realize is behind me. She looks shorter than when I last saw her. Father says every time he goes to see her, she has become shorter and shorter.

“Are you okay?” I remember them asking. They hand me a tissue. They give me a moment, and I lie to them, saying it is my seasonal allergy.

“Have you eaten? You look awfully skinny,” they say as they invite me out to eat, even though they know my art exhibition is ongoing. A bittersweetness sinks into my stomach, followed by a flash of indignation, then an even more intense bittersweetness. Bitter and odd-tasting like the oranges they hand me. This strange feeling is bitter as young and old grief, yet warm as the piece of blanket I tug at in my pocket. Even my guardian dragon has not come alive in front of my vision.

“You’ve grown so much!”

“How are your classes?”

It is so annoying, I want them to shut up, but I crave each sentence.

“Don’t stay up too late!”

“Why don’t we all go to MoMA?” I say, managing a smile in front of my grandparents from my father’s side.

\*\*

I am twenty, and a junior at Rice University. I think I’m here mostly because of my artistic abilities. My skills were born from eating paint and rolling down stairs in Fuzhou, China.

I think of my life over half a lifetime ago. That day, it was 12:37 A.M. That night, I was four, couldn’t speak properly, and couldn’t solve two plus two.

Nowadays, the dragon appears less often. When it does, it flickers and then disappears.

I have my blanket wrapped around me as I revise this piece. It’s 12:14 A.M. The blankets are soft with black patterns. Patterns much like grandmother’s blankets. Today is one of those nights where I still hug my blanket and count my heartbeats.

I still draw. I still remember the lists of words and sentences I had to practice. I retreat into bathrooms when the world becomes chaotic.

However, as I trace the irregular folds, my mind wanders back to green and red apples.

Thank you, Mother, for teaching me how to solve two plus two.  
I am still learning what it amounts to.

\*\*

# Decontaminated

*EJ Rambau*



# Whiteout

*Abigail Dukes*

God exhales:  
the Earth freezes.  
Wintry oppression has its way again  
in the wake of a boiling solstice.  
We don't know if we'll survive this storm, you & I—  
But we make breakfast & write in the meantime.  
I eat blackberries while you read aloud an essay of sorrow & suffering  
& outside, the world is leaning under a thousand wreaths of Light.  
We make tea in the meantime.

Welcome to Earth,  
where our world ends daily,  
& our little systems go on.  
A warm glow exhales from our house.  
Outside the world is lurching towards the end.

# To be Found and Displayed

*Catherine Zhou*

## *Loose Strings*

A cat's cradle of ifs, wins, and two buttered pecan muffins  
dropped into a pair of plastic baggies, sealed, and  
shoved into the right side pocket of my light grey puffer  
entangled by washing dishes and tindering my expectations  
with bright, burning, blurry lines  
suddenly shadowed by the screaming pull of Gate D34.  
It... this... us...  
knots and nags until my hands are covered in wax dust and a shield  
of "I'll see you in eight months."

## *Freckles*

My mom anchors her middle  
then pointer finger, like two legs of my fifth grade geometry compass,  
on the soft raise of my cheekbone—the highest  
point that sits right below the outer corner of my right eye—  
and on the space between my right nostril and top lip.  
"They say this is why you cry so much  
and yell to the beat of a novice snare drummer.  
This is why you see colors and shapes that I  
can't imagine  
and why your smile shines the brightest,  
even more than your father's gap-toothed grin."  
Two dots are positioned like reaching tea leaves  
that settle on opposite curves of a cup  
steeped in a colostrum, packed densely with vitamins, sharp chins,  
wavy black hair, a giving laugh, and antioxidants.

### *The Last Lingering Note of Happy Birthday*

“Yoooooooouuuuuu” hums and vibrates,  
sustained by stacked notes, spanning lines and lips from different faces  
the coda enters with a long inhale and squeezed, interfaced eyelashes  
and the exhale crescendos into a fanning breath,  
followed by bright opening eyes onto a crowd of accompanied smiles  
and concludes with a roar of cheers and cheers among the dissipating  
smoke.

### *An Blank Sheet of Stickers*

New Year’s resolutions rarely stick  
but this is where adhesive steps up.  
A shining gold sticker leaves the sheet, waving with five hands goodbye to  
its neighbors  
and moves in to a new paper that’s hung on the wall as a reward  
for my healthy and well-rested behaviors.  
As seen in criminal court, pharmaceutical development, and subscription  
plans,  
all great discoveries come in trials.  
The glimmery little shapes first left the launch pad and entered  
exit velocity in the dining room  
targeted to the left cheek of five of my sixteen housemates.  
Shining cheek to cheek, we cheered to the new year  
with glassware filled with ice cream and sprinkles  
and I was warm, sparkling, and in bed by 12 am.

*Thank you for reading.*

*We appreciate your support for the literary arts  
at a time when storytelling and empathy  
hold incredible, world-shaping power.*



