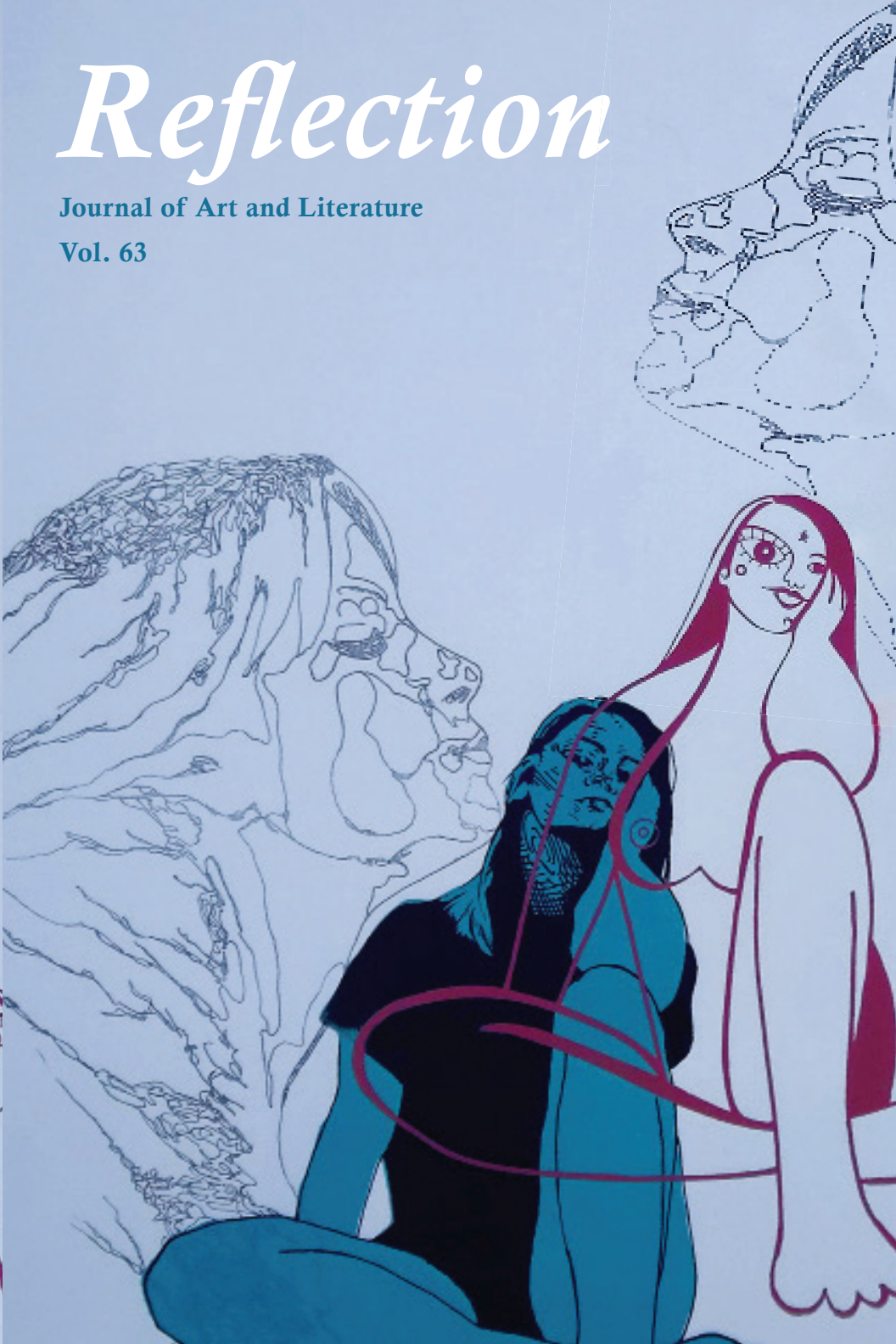


Reflection

Journal of Art and Literature

Vol. 63



REFLECTION

VOL. 63

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REFLECTION

VOL. 63

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Some pieces in this journal have been identified as containing material that may be upsetting to some audiences. These pieces contain sexual content and themes of mental health distress.

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THEME STATEMENT

...

Onward! This word, the theme of this year's volume of Reflection, seems to exist in tension with the journal it belongs to. To be reflective is to be concerned with the past, while to look onward is to be concerned with the future. This year's journal is all about existing in that uncomfortable space in-between. We have sought to craft a journal that acknowledges and pays tribute to the past, and everything that comes with it, but also celebrates the possibilities and opportunities of the future.

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

...

Dear Reader,

It would be somewhat reductive to say that this year has been a challenging one, and yet, understanding the challenges of the past twenty-four months (give or take) is the only way to fully appreciate the time and energy that went into each and every one of the pieces in this year's volume of *Reflection*. It's sometimes difficult to understand how people find the time to make art amidst all the business of everyday life, let alone during a pandemic. But that is my favorite thing about this journal. It is a celebration of the art that is created in all the moments in between life. It is art that is made between classes and at dining hall tables. It is made on curbs waiting for the bus, or at 10 AM while the coffee is brewing, or under the lamplight guidance of a stucco-walled dorm room. Making art isn't always pretty, it isn't always luxurious. And it isn't always the romantic notion of creation that we dream it will be. More often than not, art is just a thing that is done because you have to do it, because you would feel incomplete otherwise.

It has been a hard year. And I know that artists have an inordinately high propensity towards perfectionism, which can make publishing a challenging notion (and a brave accomplishment). So, if there's anything I hope to achieve in this brief introduction, it's to relieve pressure.

To all those who have contributed their work, who—throughout this already difficult year—have split hairs trying to find the right words, rest easy knowing that your work is done. Know that, in this volume, there are no right or wrong words. There's no such thing. And to you, reader, I cannot thank you enough for your time, for your patience, for your willingness to bear witness to our art, to hold it close and know it to be true. Though it is impossible for me to speak on behalf of every artist inside this volume, I know how much care and attention went into their work, and I know how invaluable your readership is.

Thank you.

-Garrick Bateman, Editor in Chief

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

...

Producing a journal is no easy job. And our team of editors could not have seen it through without the irreplaceable contributions of Joanne Shiosaki, Jeffrey Dodd, and Morgan Scheerer. Additional thanks goes to the readers of the Gurian Committee, especially Tod Marshall. For her contributions to the cover art for this year's volume, we extend our gratitude to Brianna Covert. Our team would also like to thank Russel Davis and all the staff at Gray Dog Press for their continued support of Gonzaga Student Media. This is only a short list of the innumerable individuals who came together to help produce this journal. To you all, we thank you.

POETRY



From *Places Visited, Most Cherished*
by Nicole Mo

JACKSON

Mackenzie Atkins

It's our nightly routine that I pause before I wish
him sweet dreams. Some nights he rushes to me,
roaring in the gray area between hug and dinosaur attack,
effortlessly transcending the calmly cutthroat
competition of boasts hosted by the women who live
like dead leaves in the breeze—skittering in circles,
scrambling to the top of the tumble. Their rapturously proud
smiles wilt with a clumsy hush when they glance my way

and remember Jackson. Some nights he negotiates.
As eight-year-old mayor of his sprawling civilization,
he parks a dump truck beside a plush whale
swimming in an upside-down frisbee
and appeals for ten more minutes. Some nights

he recounts basketball club in a commentator's breathlessness
or recites his lines for next month's play with careful cadence
or describes the nest outside his classroom window
and the gaping beaks that recognize their mother.
His attempts to evade the imminent goodnight are poorly disguised,
but I like to let him stall, trying to make me forget. Some nights

he asks me why I'm crying. Some nights
the tears are his, and I comfort him like I thought I would
when once upon a time I imagined motherhood. Some nights

he flails then abruptly falls limp in his crib,
clawing at the mattress, elbows locked in hard casts,
gurgles and grunts untranslated by my imagination,
legs as atrophied as my hope in miracles, because some nights
I am too old for make-believe.

MY ROOTS

Melissa Barcroft

My roots are plywood and duct tape repairing holes in the floor,
bookshelves filled with VHS tapes, hay in my hair,
coyotes yipping in the dark, skunk raiding the chicken coop.
Coming out of the closet and going right back into it.

My roots are laughter and cuddles, “I’ll give you something to cry
about,” and slammed doors. Hamburger Helper, iceberg lettuce
with ranch dressing. A big, dry turkey and Jello cheesecake
at Christmas. Escaping to magical kingdoms between the covers
of a book, flashlight under the blankets at night.

My roots are trading cleaning stalls for horseback riding lessons,
hand-me-down boots, borrowed saddles, kind teachers, and coaches
who believed in me. Dual enrollment in high school and community
college, captain of the team, “School is your ticket out of this town.”

My roots are volcanic Rodighieros in prison, teetotaller Ruether
farmers on the boat from Germany, and boozehound Catholic
Barcrofts choosing between jail and the Army.

THE REZ

Lake Etsitty

it was either
silence and wet sagebrush
or drunken father
screaming mother, the sunset hush

pregnant dogs and bone bare mustangs
like strokes of paint that softly scrape along
with car-dust cushions and gasoline
through sharp huffs of a blue-cold dawn

playing guns and funny uncles
outhouse walks with the nightly spirits
and her old hands guiding a wooden handle
the bluish spine of the knife we knew
quiet goes the flesh of a lamb

though we suffer in chambers
with crowds of tumbleweed and billowed skies
may you walk in beauty
may you die in beauty
that is all I can wish, for you,
Rez child.

MOM'S BOWLS (FOR KATHY JO)

Michele Pointel

The grapes and leaves,
they were like clouds
swirled around the bowl
into infinity,
Drawing me close
to the memory
Of when she came
to visit you

REFLECTIONS

Meagan Graves

On the salt flats of Salar de Uyuni,
Rain beats down and rehydrates
Prehistoric waters.
The salty husk of the earth awakens
With long forgotten lithium sea-brine,
And drags the heavens back down
So we may walk through the sky.
The cracking salt beds cut
Like interlocked hexagonal cells,
Smooth into a dead-water reflection,
An illusion of days now since passed.
People once walked there, the lake
As much a part of life as it was
A way of one. It decanted drinking water,
Endowing a new homeland to them:
A place to plunge with gleeful screams and
Float on their backs, cradled in waves,
Gazes cast upwards as they swam amid stars.
History repeats itself in the ripples of a lake
Reflecting infinity.

A WAVE IN PASSING

Hanna Rasmussen

The moment of clarity,
A wave builds,
Just before cresting,
It allows a calm, serene view
Of the world beneath.
A second, and it's gone.
I could watch all day,
Reverently speculate and admire
At the complexities and dynamics,
simple and intricate,
Which engulf us in each impermanent moment—
Only to transpire once more.

MY BREATH

Hanna Rasmussen

Standing on the rocky river bank,
I sigh with the wind,
Watching it dance on the water's surface.
As the gust presses on,
I bend but not break;
My heart is supple,
My mind enduring.
I let the wind lift me up until it settles.
I breathe life and relax
As the wind touches me,
Becomes me,
And leaves me.

The breeze fills the branches of my life,
Rustling the leaves of my soul,
Nuzzling the flower of my heart,
Until the next gust.

AN ANGEL IS PULLED CLOSER TO EARTH

Jim Hanlen

NY Times sports headline Jan 11, 2007

We should keep all four feet on the ground.
That's what my dog would say. I don't believe
in the Rapture, the unloosening of gravity's ties,
in tune with an expanding theory of the universe
Do you believe we'll be willed, will be whisked
off the Wyoming plain. I do believe
we are in the last days of Rock and Roll.
Like a large boat being swamped,
God seems to be throwing it all overboard.
One man found a meteor with angel hair
in his yard. Priests say angels are your anchor.
Today God seems to be alone.

BOOGIE BOARDING

Tara Hollander

The curious thing
Was the overlapping emotion
Like sounds of sea,
A crescendo on the shore.

A surge of tingling rage
as I watched the salt from your eyes
join the depth below,
as I watched the people who love you most
let you toss and tumble,
sink instead of swim.

I said it in my mind
before I had one to decide,
before I knew right from wrong.

I said
I'll take your hand
and we will try again

Amidst the strangers,
who could tell sunburn from shame?

I said
my words will be a soft ripple
and that's where we will start,
on small swells
that bear no breaking.

I said I will wait
until the light returns to your eyes
and the tide recedes.

I said I will feel
the scrape of sand
on my belly,
the fine granules
tilling up my bottoms.

I knew, until the end of time,
I would surf the smallest waves
just to see the sunshine from your smile
and feel the return of rhythmic peace,
the cool water brings.

LAUGHTER

Tara Hollander

I remember thinking
“I can’t wait to get better.”
Like happiness is a season
In purgatory winter
Just biding its time.

“One real laugh.”
That was all I wanted.
Such a pious request.

And what a rich man I am now.

UNTITLED SELF-PORTRAIT

Lauren Adkisson



ANADROMOUS

Meagan Graves

*2022 MICHAEL AND GAIL GURIAN WRITING AWARDS RECIPIENT
POETRY, 1ST PLACE*

My father is a marine biologist
So we grew up with legends of fish, their silvery bodies
Swimming sleek through water like parted glass.
He studies salmon, so we made the yearly pilgrimage
To Bonneville, where sturgeon rest like silent giants in their pool
And where salmon fight in concrete beds
and struggle through ladders.
That is how I remember them: fiery red and
thrashing in a manmade lake,
Competing for food pellets flung from a six year old's chubby fist.

It was only later that I found out how they die:
Their lives in the ocean, breathing in salt
Abruptly close
As they journey back down their natal streams
into their childhood rivers.
To dig holes in the riverbed for their redds,
To spawn perfect eggs,
To die upon the nursery's door
So that they may nurture the earth they owe fealty to.

No one knows how they know their way, what
Biological instinct guides them back to their roots
As bodies wither and food is abandoned.
I drive along the winding gorge to my childhood home
And wonder what it must be like
To wake with the knowledge of one's grave – to taste it in one's teeth.

When salmon swim home do they hear execution drums
Or the roar of flickering lifeblood,
Competing with the rush of the water?
Do they know they are about to die?
Their bones sinking into the smooth rocks
Amongst their pearlescent young,
Or do they only know the familiar weight inside them,
That soaring right-wrongness
Of returning to a place you can only remember?

On the highway, the rain pours its cacophony
along the cement stream.
I only have an hour left to go
Until the cityscape swells and I walk
through that once familiar door,
And maybe it feels like this.

HOMECOMING

JJ Van der Put

ephemera from my past sticks in the jagged steel jaws of my mind.
songs and verses and dresses and dances
and thirteen sanitized passages memorized at age seven
for convenient proselytizing.
some days i see my hands and cannot remember that they are mine,
but even then i can name seventeen latter-day prophets
in perfect order.

knowledge learned in desperation, in penitence,
sticks like mirror shards in my knuckles.
back at home, former mentors whisper
i've forgotten where i came from,
that i've lost my way,
a sheep far from pasture.
they cannot comprehend my countless nights
of pleading, *begging* on my knees.
they do not understand the bruising, cracked-ribs feeling of a
covenant broken by the infallible person on the other end.

almost losing myself in a mission that never would have born fruit
has left craters of lifeless soil permeating my mind.
someone promised he loved me,
that if i did everything right, he would think me worth his blessing.
as if love is worth
self-correcting involuntary thoughts, repenting for
them with the gravity of a penitentmurderer,
sitting, sixteen, trapped in a meeting with a man of authority
demanding to know "how far" i'd
gone with my first girlfriend,
knowing nothing but that i am nothing.

at the same time that my mind ground itself like sharp cheese,
the metal teeth of the grater was a constant,
tangible thing to scrape against.
when i ran to tear myself against it like usual, and found it gone—

finally free of my congregation,
no longer needing to grit my teeth through sunday morning—
i fell into empty space.
(outer darkness.)

the world is so bright and beautiful. it is wise and wonderful.
the brilliance of the midday sun could not change that
my wounds were smarting, bleeding everywhere i went.

crimson blood marked my path
like the invading travelers i was raised to revere.
the only bandages i knew of were scriptures or songs
or a desperate, silent prayer
so commonly racing through my mind that i had the script down pat.
i spent nights in a chapel of a faithopposite of mine in most ways,

staring at icons of a dying man and trying to figure out
how the hell i was supposed to leave
my home behind when every path charted to me led right back to it.
the desolate, empty, echoing night offered no answers to me.

still.

when i go picking through my labyrinthine
memories of those times,
crammed full with things i will never need to know,
i search for salvage parts i can use for future foundations.
On one such path, wracked with loneliness and a raw,
salt-crusted feeling I will learn to *call grief*,
i remember age twelve, crying from the holy spirit in my heart,
hugging my closest friend and knowing where i belonged.
i wish i could feel such a homecoming again.

OMG YOU REMIND ME OF AMY SCHUMER

G.H.

My reflection is Megan Fox
eating a four pack of boys
and the audience gets to see all
The guts in her teeth.

My period is Amy Schumer
explaining how much
dick they've sucked
and the audience vomits out cheers

My laugh is the disgust
of my father when he talks
about Lena Dunhams's hbo show
and how grossed out he was when
Hannah was having sex with her boyfriend
on screen without pixelating her body.

My mother in the corner
looks at my dad's reaction
cries into her stretch marks
and pillow skin
which were created by me
and my sister.
She agrees with my father
and starts eating pistachios
instead of lunch.

I can feel my breasts when I bend over
They hang like a suicide.
I can feel the audience gasping
turning their noses up when they see me
fully nude,
hunched to the floor,
covered in wounds,
smiling.

THE BIRTH OF VENUS

Emma Accardi

What they don't tell you about the birth of Venus
is that she crawled out of the sea
Sputtering,
Heaving,
Using the strength of this genesis to drag herself
from the darkness.

She groveled on the shore,
skin caked with sand,
pierced with the shards of shells,
gagging on the pearls in her throat.
She had shed blood before she had spoken.

When she expelled the pearls and seawater from her lungs
She collapsed onto the sand,
took her first breath of salty air,
And stared at the stars,
Proclaiming,
"I exist."

FUNERALS ARE FOR THE DEAD

Amara Gamache

I watched him lean down into the
casket his face sagging down like an old
dog.

I imagine the cold of her skin fighting
to take the warmth of his own.

empty lips part,
 “You’re cold Ma,”

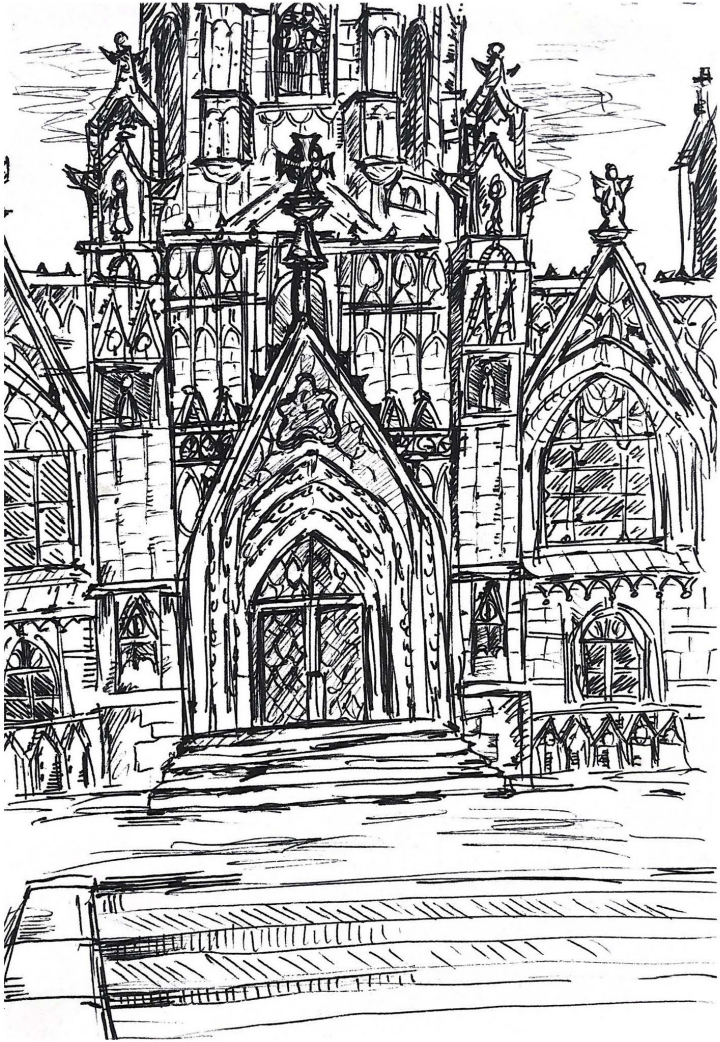
She doesn’t listen,
never liked it when he muttered.

The music stops,
the pianist changes her paper.
In silence the sounds of sadness
are always amplified

and from just behind the doors,
a sound like watching dust in the light,
I could hear the altar boy giggling.

PLACES VISITED

Nicole Moe



TRAVERSING THE NOBLE PATH

Fisher Ng

From his home a sojourner leaves on a frigid midnight walk.
Uncertain is he of where to go, so he stands, a frozen rock.
One step he takes and of a sudden, there appears a shrouded trail.
With another pace his blindness lifts like the removing of a veil.
Onwards he goes, from step to stride to strut to swagger,
'Til he glances swift cunning shadows that make him stagger.
His reflection shatters and in its shards he writhes and shrieks,
He lurches to the cliff away from his self,
and again come the shadows.
Racing over verdant hills, then perched
on boulders black wolves howl.
Ringed by snarling beasts, the now-unsullied wayfarer then cries foul.
The esurient wolves obstruct the rightly guided nomad from the Path,
Yet in tears the sojourner patiently resists the corrupting canine wrath.
The wolves howl with glee, having trapped him on the cliff's edge.
With gnashing teeth, they dare him to surrender his noble pledge.
Into the breeze, the despondent drifter shouts in dismay and woe,
for the afflictions that oppress him have dealt his heart a fatal blow.
The wind replies, and to the path of ascent the seeker casts a glance.
A heart of straw to one of steel, and he takes
the reins of circumstance.
To the road he finds his way, and through the evil wolves he limps.
The wolves evanesce as billows of black
dust leaving his clouded mind.
In the moonless, starless night he looks at the sunrise on the horizon.
To the Sun of Truth, the sincere seeker pursues,
yearning the golden sands of the Ocean of Knowledge.
Back on the journey of the sage,
The tested traveler is prepared to establish the Golden Age.

TINFOIL JUDGEMENT

Emma Bishop

I feel as if my judgement day has finally come,
My hands will not stop shaking,
Each breath stays frozen in my lungs,
I swear the sword of Damocles sits on my head

It was prophesied the world would end in ice or fire
Few even warned of disease
None could have predicted the true apocalypse,
It was not commanded by invading horsemen,
It was invited and welcomed in, like a cruel hitchhiker

As fire shot across the sky one night
I met a band of travelers, who seemed unphased
As if we did not share the same daily toil
Spread across their exposed faces was glee
—an emotion that has long since been foreign to me

Born from their pleasure was laughter
It traveled from them to me
As if I was a tomcat, curiosity struck his fatal blow
I asked for their source of bliss

Their leader pressed a tin foil covered candy into my palm,
Then he gave his sage reply:
“Chocolate still tastes good.”

I, A PRINCE

Elio Dacanay

dirty box-fists whistle around enemy ears
miss
the shrieking wolf call of a moonless rite
Bruises like blush spread all across a skintight canvas
stretched to Wrong in my mind's mirror, a chipped tooth
where I am told not to bite
god save us kings — us, scepter-bearers
on little flammable thrones, with prince-soft cheeks
splashed with our bloodlines
as mangoes and green leaves and firemen fuck each other
blind blind blind to our already-darkness
small boys have to hit faster
two names to one life lifting barbells
made of buckets
full of girl tears.
To the sun-kissers set aflame
by blood
sweat
house
homeland in the name of less than their whole.
lungs become lily pads
frog-sidewalks
flat decoration on a body of water and salt that cascades
down a parched man's throat
Peter/Piper picked a fight, and blood waters the tulip garden
an angel trapped in an empty corn field with a mirror
eat lady fingers, strawberry ice cream,
half-moon spectacle of a child taptapping
till mirror is called to the snare line-short life.
short hair. short boy.
a man's foot in a boy's mouth
reading books bought with quick glances around the library
scream to your uncle
and the men like your uncle
show my balls to a mirror that I did not ask for

warming the firemen or catching the smoke
of my burning throne and scepter
some young kings wear the rising sun as a crown
it's dawn and the swing set still swings
and the queen calls it dangerous
"It's too dark to play with you"
the wolves howl that night. It's dark at home too
and I still love my swing set
short hair, short boy, short temper,
I only read when it's dark
under your thumb, I am a thorn,
petty adrenaline spike that is always protecting the blossoms
I wear the rising sun as a crown

FOR MY YOUNGER SELF AND ALL CHILDREN OF IMMIGRANTS

Tia Moua

Grandma called, “los pab kuv,” “come help”
Sun beating down on us on that bright day
The heat of their words will make you yelp
Being a brown daughter is what keeps me at bay

Pulling weeds, dandelions, for hours on end
They're nasty, dirty, yellow things
That's what they say about us now, my friend
We pulled them 'till sweat dripped down the swings

My dad called, “Why aren't you in school?”
“Grandma asked me to pull weeds”
I lost my language through imperial rule
“Pulling you from your Hmong roots is what you need”

I meet my kindergarten teacher's warm smile
Feel the judgment from my peers, “you're late”
It's the last day of school for a while
The yellow stains on my hands carry a weight

My fingernails still packed with dirt
Staring down at my yellow and brown stains
My hands are sore and they hurt
A thousand cuts of racial slurs are *my* growing pains

“Chink!” “Dog-eater!” “Chinese girl!”
These are the things people will say
Too many insults that they will hurl
I wish to go back in time so I could play

They'll blame us for a virus
A virus that does not discriminate
6 women in Atlanta shot dead who look like us
Are dead people not enough to show there's hate?

My teacher asks, "Would you like a snack?"
I'm ashamed of my brown hands

There is so much I'll have to unpack
So for now, how about let's just dance?

Now I'm at the sink and begin to scrub
The yellow and brown stains off my hands
I want to wash my hands white to get into the club
Maybe then I'd have a chance

I thought, if only my hands were clean
I'd be more desirable and beautiful
This brown skin is why they demean
They can't see why we need a life more colorful

Exhausted. Heated. Sweaty. Anxious.
My blood will be boiling from the heat outside
Smothered by racist remarks. Eyes curious
Like I'm a strange, foreign object with no pride

"Where are you from?" they ask
"You speak English so well," they say
As if it is not a slap on the mask
I'll just keep on smiling anyway

You must have thick skin
Things people say will make you groan
Learn to embrace the body you're in
Just know, you're not in this fight alone

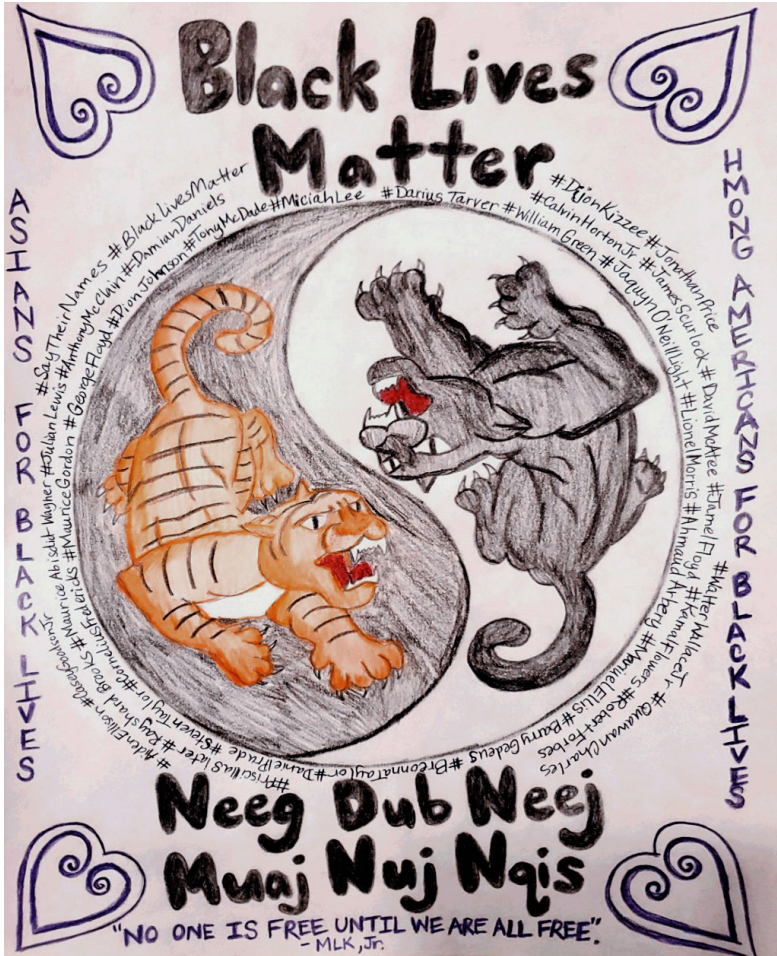
PEOPLE LIKE ME

Lily Warne

This world is not made for people like me, it's tattered and broke, can't you see? We live in a society built on backs of the enslaved, generations have shaped structures within the USA. They speak about equality, but do they really mean it? Are they marching for freedom, or just when it's convenient? We all want to feel safe, but who can feel safe when all they see is race? Culture isn't just iced tea and white supremacy it's livin' next door to the enemy. We respond to these systems and the people within 'em, because maybe this world isn't made for people like you, or people like me, but I believe we should all be free.

ASIANS FOR BLM

Tia Moua



PROSE



From *Places Visited, Most Cherished*
by Nicole Mo

BRUISED FRUIT

Red Kwenda

When he came into my office, he called himself a tangerine. I don't remember what he really was, so seared in my mind was that final image of him after I had finished my work.

The Tangerine asked for a simple procedure.

"I would like to be made pure again," he said. I questioned him on how he would like to become pure, as there are many methods of purifying the body.

"You are an expert of fruits and vegetables," he said. "When fruit becomes bruised, you cut away the skin. I would like you to cut away my bruised skin."

"And where is the bruise?"

He looked at me questioningly. "Didn't you ask yourself what business I would have coming into a place of agriculture? Didn't you see the mother grasp her child tight and pull him close when I walked past? My skin is bruised, dark and evil, and because of this no one can see the rich pure fruit beneath."

I didn't tell him that this bruise was genetic, that he would be cursed with it forever. But then I looked at him again. Was he really willing to shed the skin of his parents, of his ancestors, to cut himself off from them?

"We are a barrel of bad fruits," he said when I expressed my doubts. "We were bruised by waves, by ropes, and by shackles. Everyone else was afraid to do what needed to be done, but not me. I would like to be absolved of my bruises."

I nodded and told him to lie down on my desk. The Tangerine stripped himself down to his feet, on which he left his socks. "I get cold feet," he explained.

I picked up my favorite paring knife, the Adolf-Washington, a knife so sharp that fruits and vegetables wouldn't even know they were being peeled. But the Tangerine stopped me, handing me his own blade, a dull dirty butterknife.

"Use this. I got it from a dinner I once attended. I was forced to confront my bruises, and I took some silverware when I realized what I needed to do."

I washed my hands, asking him how he became aware of his condition.

"This was a welcoming dinner for bruised fruits and vegetables, though I suppose any fruits would have been welcome there." He smiled, though I didn't get the joke. "The dinner was supposed to make us feel better about being as bruised as we were, to let us know that our bruises are not our fault. Of course, I know this to be

false.”

I nodded at the fact.

“I had arrived before everyone else, so I had to wait a bit for them to come. But when they did, I noticed a pattern: as they filed in, none of the other fruits and vegetables sat next to me. It wasn’t as if they hadn’t seen my table, because I caught many of their eyes, those big, bulging eyes and sneering, twisted mouths, and I saw them sit at tables with the less bruised. At first, I was angry, thinking I was experiencing some sort of discrimination. But then I realized that their response was only natural. I was bruised, and like the proverbial bad apple I exist only to spoil the bunch.

“When I knew what I had to do, I began to peel the bruises away, so determined was I to prove my worth.” He showed me the back of his hand, pulpy flesh exposed and drying. “But I realized I needed a professional. You’ve been peeling fruit for years, and when I read your advertisement in the newspaper, I knew you were the man for the job.”

I told him I had never peeled a fruit like him before.

“I am just like any fruit,” he said. “Purify me, as you would them.”

And so I did.

I began at his thighs, marveling at the structure and power of their physicality. So in awe was I that I was unable to penetrate the skin for several minutes, for I had underestimated both the thickness of his skin and the dullness of his blade. For a moment, I considered using a tenderizing method such as boiling to help remove the rind, knowing that that helps loosen the skin of fruits from their flesh. Nevertheless, I was able to pierce the bruised rind, and on doing so I was sprayed with a gentle red mist, a sweet smell not unlike sea salt on a scourge filling the air.

I made more long cuts along the body of the Tangerine, cuts that would enable me to remove his skin in one piece. That was my specialty, removing the skin of a fruit in one piece. On my wall I had displayed various skins and rinds I had peeled over the years, but none of them compared to this. If I was successful, the Tangerine’s skin would be displayed over my desk.

Because of the difficulty posed by the rind and the blade, I feared that I was applying too much pressure with every penetration I made. Fortunately, I was able to make each incision without penetrating the flesh, as that would have caused irreparable bruising. I wanted this to be as painless as possible, both for me the peeler and the Tangerine.

That is not to say he felt no pain. He screamed incessantly from the first incision, and eventually I had to tie him down to prevent

him from moving and making me tear his skin in two. The juice of his flesh ran red down the desk and puddled on the floor. And still that smell persisted, like sweat rolling off a cotton gin.

Also, I removed his socks early on. Once I had started, I wasn't going to stop, not when I was so close to receiving my prize. Too bad if he had cold feet.

I didn't blame him for screaming; I was ripping apart every nerve between his skin and his flesh, after all. But I could sense he wasn't just screaming from the pain. There was sadness there, yes, but also anger, a Black rage against the world, and as he screamed, I heard more of the pain that led to this bruising, a vicious cycle fear and injury. I heard of elevators, and of the pure, unbruised women who feared he would defile and violate them there, and how they would dash out without saying a word. I heard of the men who broke every bone in his body before calling him lazy for not being able to walk. I heard of how everything he touched became bruised, such as his car, and all the times he feared being pulled over and executed for driving a bruised car. And through it all and over it all was that sweet, sweet smell, red and hot like a bullet killing a Dream.

The last place from which I removed the bruises was his head. Fortunately, he had lost consciousness, so I was able to remove most of the skin of his face without difficulty. It was only by a lucky miracle that I removed his scalp, however, as by then he awoke and resumed screaming and thrashing. With one final slice, I removed the last of the bruises and that rotten, kinky, nappy hair.

After many hours, I had finally finished my work. Before me was no longer a bruised fruit but a man with the purest of flesh, and even I was jealous of the beauty of his physique. Like Isayama's *Berutoruto*, here was a man without bruised skin, the fruit of his flesh visible to all. When I held a mirror in front of his face, he grinned. He feared his bruises, so he escaped the disgrace of living in the cage of his skin. He was finally able to present himself as he truly was.

I didn't tell him that he now had days to live before hypothermia and infection set in, if exsanguination didn't get to him first.

While he got dressed, I nailed the bruised skin above my desk, and as I did, the last of the juice flowed down along the wall, carrying with it the smell of tears on shackles, shackles that the man had finally been freed from.

He allowed me to keep the knife, telling me I had wielded it better than he ever could. When he left, I hung the butterknife in the rind's mouth, a grim reminder to all of the Earth's price for being bruised.

THE RIGHT PATH

Brianna Covert

I hadn't actually been crying because of the pain, but it was somewhere around one in the morning and I didn't feel like correcting the ER doctor. Instead, I laid quietly on the hospital bed with an IV in my left arm and a blood pressure monitor on my right, tightening around my bicep and exhaling so loudly it made me jump, my eyes watering under the pressure. I listened as the doctor asked me questions and my aunt, sitting in the corner of the room with a half-knitted blanket on her lap, answered instead. I didn't have the energy to correct her either.

The ER visit marked six weeks since I had first started feeling ill, my life halted with unexplained, overwhelming stomach pains—first so gradual I blamed it on something I ate, but it turned out it didn't matter what I had eaten or if I did. It simply became a matter of time before I was crumpled over in the bathroom with my cheek pressed to the toilet seat. I frequently spent nights shaking on the bathroom floor begging for the pain and nausea to end from a God I had stopped believing in months before any of this began.

The worst of the pain usually caught me at night, waking me up and throwing me into a dizzy and frantic frenzy. I had started sleeping upright, pilling pillows behind my back, and balling a blanket between my head and the corner of the wall my bed pressed up against. I hoped to keep the acid reflux away sleeping like this, but it seemed the midnight pains were inevitable. Clutching the blanket on my lap, I felt I had three additional sets of hands clutching the blanket as well. Three additional bodies—and all of us were in uncontrollable pain, each succumbing to this panic sinking in our stomachs. I imagined this is how it felt taking a psychedelic drug, thinking back to movies I had watched of men and women getting high in clubs, their bodies fading in the strobing lights, as my bodies and I tumbled in this space, shooting in and out of the shadows from my alarm clock. I was seeing and feeling each of these bodies individually and simultaneously. The only difference? There was no telling how long these episodes lasted or when they would reoccur.

In those moments I was forced to turn on the overhead lights, proving to myself there was in fact, just one body after all. Sometimes, I'd sit there for hours with the light on, forcing my eyes open until I was again settled in reality and the sickness had buried itself within me. But until then, I sat awake and alone, chewing chalky tablets and sipping three-day-old water. Nights like this, whether spent in my bed or on the bathroom floor, often left me

too exhausted to work the next morning.

I didn't have a consistent ride to work as long as I continued to avoid public transportation because of coronavirus. I didn't own a car, my family worked, and my dad's truck was in the shop, so I had begun biking the three miles to work and back. While I had first enjoyed the bike rides, I couldn't keep up with the physical demand once my health began to decline. The rides had become painful, and I was exhausted before my shift ever began. I arrived lightheaded, my stomach becoming a tightly wound coil while I chewed my medicines in the bathroom, dabbing a wet paper towel to the line on my forehead from my bike helmet. Sometimes my colleagues asked if I was okay, but I don't think most of them noticed.

I missed a lot of work over the summer because I couldn't muster the energy to get myself there, and I became anxious about paying for school. I still had two years of college ahead of me, and I had hardly been able to pay the bills last year. Now I was soon to be juggling rent, and my callouts were beginning to add up. My doctor asked if there was any new stress in my life which could be causing my symptoms. "Does this count?" I asked and pointed to my stomach.

The days I did make it work were challenging too. I was moving slowly and without deliberation, often leaving unfinished tasks at the end of the day. Three girls had just been let go recently because of their poor work ethic and accumulating callouts.

"Hey BB can I talk to you?"

My manager, BB, was shuffling children's clothes on a rack, when she twisted her body to look at me. Today she wore pink eyeliner, and her cheeks were dusted with gold that reflected the fluorescent lights of the store. There were three gems pasted along the crease of her eyes and her hair was pulled back into a tight ponytail.

"I wanted to apologize for having to call out of work so often." I explained my situation and she bobbed her head at my story, her eyebrows dramatically knitted together.

"Yeah," she sighed, "I hurt my back really badly and I'm still at work. It's tough."

Later on, locked in the employee bathroom, I gripped the edges of the sink, gulping for air. My throat burned. My eyes stung.

My bodies returned the night I went to the ER. I was beginning to fall asleep when I felt the unsteady shift behind my eyes. I rushed forward to flip on the light at the foot of my bed.

Routine. Bathed in a yellow glow, I swung my bedroom door open, fluttering the pictures along my walls. Since my chances of sleeping had been ruined, I decided to settle my fears in the light

of the television instead. Wrapping a pink blanket around my shoulders, I stepped into the kitchen, turning on the stove to heat a kettle of water. I felt my bodies mist around me as I grabbed a mug for my peppermint tea. I hear my aunt huff on the couch, “What’s your problem?”

We had never had a strong relationship, but this summer was certainly testing our limits.

I made it clear this was my last summer living at home and I think she resented me for it—resented me for not wanting to be here anymore, accusing me of only being home for necessity, telling me I had stopped acting like part of the family. But these accusations were not new to me. I had been living with my aunt and uncle for eleven years, moving in after my dad lost his job during the economic recession, my mom out of the picture because of drug addiction. While my aunt didn’t treat me harshly at first, our relationship deteriorated as I grew older. I reminded her too much of her youngest brother—my dad—a feud, which, if I had been asked, would not have wanted to get into the middle of. Her dislike of him, became her dislike of me.

For many of those eleven years, we did find peace with one another through church, putting our differences aside for a few sweet hours on Sunday mornings. When I finally aged out of the youth group, we even shared the same space, sitting next to each other in the sanctuary, the brown-beige walls watching as we passed tin bowls of communion to the families beside us. I traced my name along the cover of my bible, engraved and colored in gold, while the band sang, and the pastor prayed. It was a space I felt comfortable in, knowing my aunt was pleasant in the sight of others, especially those of her Christian friends, but I knew a miscommunication would send us into a yelling match later. It always did.

I had stopped going to church in college, stopped finding solace in God. There was no particular reason for this, just a relationship which finally dissipated with distance. But this distance increased the separation between me and my aunt. I had been making excuses to not attend church Sunday mornings—sleeping in, scheduling myself at work, staying in my room to do homework for summer classes. I went out with friends to avoid the confrontation which, admittedly, only darkened the situation. I didn’t know how to tell her I didn’t want to share this decade-long space anymore.

“I’m just not feeling well,” I said, sinking into the chair with my mug in my lap. The television droned as I sipped my tea, the images flashing brightly in the dim room. She rolled her eyes, but her company was better than those of the bodies waiting for me

back in my room. For nearly two hours I sat through waves of nausea and intense stretches of pain, grasping the handle of my mug as I tried to breathe through each episode. The pain was finally starting to become manageable as the time between each flareup gradually lengthened. I hoped to be asleep soon, but I wasn't quite ready to leave the safety of the light.

My aunt began to interrogate me.

"What's wrong?"

"It hurts."

"What hurts?"

"My stomach."

"Describe it."

She was getting frustrated with me.

"I can't," I sighed. My voice was small and tight. I was defensive and defenseless, tired of having this conversation again. My aunt had her own gastrointestinal problems from medications treating her heart disease the year before, and she was eager to give me advice, writing lists of foods I should and shouldn't eat, suggesting medications which helped her, but our problems weren't the same, and when I didn't begin feeling any better, she blamed me for it.

"What's wrong, baby girl?" She was mocking me now, her voice whinny and shrill.

I looked up at the ceiling, studying a smear where a fly had been killed, willing myself not to cry. Balling my fists around my blanket, I pulled it tighter around my shoulders, my eyes brimming. I felt a single tear roll down my cheek. It was one of those hot tears and it scarred my skin as it gathered itself under my chin. I held my breath but the spot on the ceiling blurred in my vision. I began to silently cry—so many hot tears. I traced them in my mind as they streaked across my face and hung from my nose. I was just overwhelmed.

Tired.

Tired of feeling so sick and of not knowing what was wrong. Tired of the games my aunt and I continued to play. Tired of school, tired of work—tired of not being able to make it to work.

Tired of feeling stuck—stuck here in my childhood bedroom, stuck in this entire situation. Stuck with medicines that didn't work or made it worse. I was angry at myself for being so childish, helpless, so out of control.

"You need to go to the ER," she said. I shook my head. "You need to go the ER if it's that bad." I wanted to fight her on it, but I gave into the hot tears instead, just tired. I crawled into the front seat of her car where I let my head slouch against the window in defeat. The pain subsided to the point where I could have gone back to bed,

to sleep even, but I didn't say anything. My aunt backed out of the garage, the golden lei on her rearview mirror swishing as she pulled into the street. Security lights flashed on some of the houses as we passed, but everything else stayed still and silent.

"You have to make a choice," my aunt said, coming to a stop at the end of the street. She turns her head toward me, her hands resting lightly on the steering wheel, "Do you want to you go to the ER down the street or to St. Jude's?" I stared at the stop sign. If we go right, I'll be at a hospital in a manner of minutes—that much closer to this night being over, but I only knew horror stories about United General. My uncle had been released from the hospital with a misdiagnosis which caused him his health, told he had a mild concussion but later found out there was actually bleeding in the brain. We considered the accident an isolated incident until my aunt had been incorrectly prescribed a medication which cancelled her open-heart surgery, elongating her fight with heart disease. Instead of spending the next year in recovery, she spent it with trips to the hospital in the back of ambulances for emergency stint operations. It was St. Jude which saved her life on multiple occasions.

But St. Jude was thirty minutes North, to the left. I told myself I couldn't be in a car so long, not with how I was feeling anyhow, but I knew it was untrue. Something about being treated frightened me.

"It's up to you. I'm really okay with whatever decision you make," she said softly.

Sometimes, I thought God was punishing me. I figured this is what I deserved for abandoning my faith. It wasn't enough I resented myself, but God had to too—and it was only fair, I had guessed. I broke some rule, so I had to live with my consequences. This only proved to me what I had known all along: I am undeserving. Going left meant I would have had to let someone care for me, but I was undeserving of care. *And*, I thought, *I may never be*. It was only right I lived through my punishment.

"Let's just go to this one," I said pointing right.

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah."

BOYS WILL BE BOYS

Brainna Covert

I was in the third grade the first time a boy said he loved me. His name was Logan. He proposed to me at recess under a set of monkey bars, which I had quickly climbed atop to scream in agony, the playground a nauseous mess as I was overcome with the disgust of a boy liking me. I looked down at him as he flipped his red, stringy hair away from his eyes. He tugged at the sleeves of his shirt, the edges of the wrists caked in snot, tattered from being chewed on, and yanked at his baggy jeans, beaming up at my frown. If hadn't already been sent home once for punching another kid in the stomach, I would have given it to him in the face.

Logan was the kind of kid who always had a cold, fighting the wet winter battles in the foothills of Northwest Washington a little harder than everyone else. He coughed into the air, sneezed into his lap, held a limp wrist up to his nose to drag his arm from knuckles to elbow across his upper lip every few minutes. I once even heard a teacher tell him he needed to wash his hands because eating boogers was gross and inappropriate. As a girl who licked chairs and tables on dares, and held loosely to the five-second rule, even I knew to stay far away from him. But Logan flocked to me.

On the playground, Logan chased me. Between short bursts of running and coughing fits, he called to me,

“Honey Bunches! Sweetheart! Sweetie!”

His stupid smile remained on his face even hunched over as another laugh turned into a phlegmy cough. I'd rather he'd call me dirty or mean names. Or that he stayed doubled over and leave me alone. Better yet, he got sick enough to stay at home from school—or moved schools entirely. It turns out I almost got my wish. At the end of the third grade, I moved to a new town into my aunt and uncle's house, starting a new school in a new district. That was the end of Logan.

Mrs. Campbell, our homeroom teacher, regularly called the class to join her at the front of the room while she read to us. We gathered onto a bristly rug bordered by bookcases filled with *Junie B. Jones* and *Magic Treehouse* novels. Kids shot towards a beanbag in the corner, the stitching on the blue, plastic cover fraying, revealing its white insides. Gathered at her feet, I squirmed at the touch of Logan's knees as they brushed against my back, his heavy breathing pushing my hair against my neck. As I inched forward along the carpet, Logan did too. His giggle was raspy, and I heard him choke on his snot. I whipped my head around towards him and in a low, even voice said,

“You *spit* when you *talk*.” Mrs. Campbell looked up from her book and locked eyes with me as I turned back around. I thought about the note on my last report card: *blurts, talkative*. She kindly asked me to leave the circle and sit at a desk. Logan began his gargling again.

“Knock it off,” Mrs. Campbell ordered. If Logan’s repulsiveness wasn’t already enough for me to dislike him, I certainly did now that he had gotten me in trouble.

Logan, despite his fallbacks, had one redeeming moment: he promised to *never* give me the Cheese Touch. (If you don’t know what the Cheese Touch is, it started in *The Diary of a Wimpy Kid* books—a shirt I’m sure Logan sported at one time. The Cheese Touch is like a never-ending game of tag: someone has The Touch and safety is only guaranteed through crossed fingers. This led to many yelling matches at recess and during lunch, “MY FINGERS WERE CROSSED IN MY POCKETS!” “MY TOES ARE CROSSED!” and of course, the inevitable, “NUH-UH! NUH-UH! TEACHER!!” Sometimes, tears even ensured, and we were warned on many occasions by many adults: the game had to stop.)

My fists were balled at my sides when Logan approached me with his offer. I softened as I considered the benefits of an additional Cheese Touch ally as these types of alliances were imperative to elementary school survival.

“Sweetie Pie?”

I hardened in all of seconds again and thought about maybe punching him after all. Later in the week, in the bus lines after school, Logan walked by and tapped my shoulder,

“Cheeeese Touuuch!” he smirked, drawing out the syllable as he and his friend each held up a hand with a crossed index and middle finger. I pulled my hands out of my pockets,

“Nuh-uh! That’s no fair! My fingers were crossed!” The two of them snickered as they continued to walk away.

I told my dad about Logan, and he laughed,

“Sounds like a boy to me!” (This was his response as well when I came home from school one day crying because the boys wouldn’t stop saying “penis.”) I was furious—Logan was annoying, and I wanted him to understand how much he bothered me. It wasn’t until towards the end of the third grade, during our school’s 1st-5th grade choir performance, my dad finally got upset about Logan’s behaviors. Logan and I were placed next to each other on the risers, three up from the floor, all the way onto the left side. The entire performance he poked me, bumped me, and quietly laughed while he inched closer and closer. After the concert, my dad and I ran into Logan and his mother in the hallway. She was a ginger like

Logan, but tall and thin and pretty. A smile played along Logan's mouth until he looked over at my dad, fear flashing across his eyes instead as he first registered the black combat boots, then the grease-covered jeans, tattooed arms, and thick bearded face. Dad told me he wore a lot of black because it was easier to cover stains from work, but I also think he liked the intimidation—at least I did now, because it was my turn to smirk.

In the truck on our way home, Dad explained to me what he saw at the concert.

"He was pushing you! I saw how mad you were getting," he shook his head, "You know what I always say: two warnings and they're out! Should have pushed him off the steps!" He laughed at himself, and I laughed with him. "But ya know what, the mom was pretty good looking. Wooh-Wee! What I'd do to play on that swing set." He laughed again, but this time I stayed silent.

My dad made jokes like this pretty often, whistling under his breath as young women walked past in the grocery store. He's retold the same stories about the same crazy women he dated in the past,

"I always get the psycho ones," and about the few famous women he hooked up with too. (In terms of famous exes, he talks most often about Crystal Gayle, a country singer whose career peaked between the late 1970's to the late 80's, even winning a Grammy for Best Female Country Artist in 1978.) But dad dated very little in my lifetime because of our "No Datin', No Matin'" rule, but I think he was just protective of who he brought into my life. I also figured the collective failures of his past relationships warranted caution moving forward—something I took to be a lesson for myself as well.

Dad's protectiveness fed into a passion for teaching me to defend myself, to retaliate. I've always been taught how to respond. He'd flex his bicep at me and then tell me punch him in the arm, "as hard as you can, now come on!" I'd squeal and tell him no and we'd laugh together, but sometimes he got really serious, correcting my wind-up, and reshaping my fist.

"If you hold your thumb like that, you're going to break it with the first punch you throw." Dad told me a lot about the fights he got into after school when he was a kid and the fights at bars when he was older and the fights with cops too. He always, *always* came out a winner.

"Come on Brianna, you're a Covert. Now someone tries to hit you like this," he slowly moves a fist towards my stomach, an uppercut with his right arm, "what do you do now?" I swat his hand away, giggling again.

During our self-defense sessions, Dad reminded me, "boys will be boys," and if that's true, it made sense that he reverted to being

physical. After all, I didn't have a consistent motherly figure in my life to tell or show me otherwise. My own mom was off somewhere on the other side of the state doing "psycho" things like drugs or having sex with strangers. All I knew was I didn't want to be like her—so dad became my model instead. Not only did Dad engage me in his boyish practices by teaching me how to fight, but I was engrossed in the behavior, steeped in Harley Biker culture. I ran the front desk at his mechanic shop (mainly just interrupting my drawing with treks to the back of the shop to tell Dad there was a customer at the door) and interacted daily with majority middle-aged white men.

I was close with many of the regulars, gifted bicycles their children had outgrown or asked to draw pictures for them to hang on their fridge. Many of them even donated to my cuss bucket (a tradition my dad and I started as a fun-fund: "Do as I say, not as I do." As long as I didn't swear and my dad still did, I'd get his leftover change and when the bucket was full, we'd cash it in and play arcade games in Truck Town or make a trip to the toy store. Whether by guilt or example, my dad's friends followed along).

I admired many of them, so when they told me things like, "you can do anything you set your heart to," I believed them. And when they said, "A woman could never be President because she'd be too hormonal on her period," I believed them then too. When they pointed to the Harley Davidson magazines my dad kept around his displays, filled with nude or nearly nude women, I listened when they talked about their bodies. *Sexy. Desirable.* I'd look at the models later, all thin and big breasted, their backs arched as they perched over a bike, their bottoms round and large. I remember then feeling my stomach jutted out too far, my chest too flat at eight years old. I listened too as they patted me on the back, "You be careful now. Boys don't know when to stop." They'd laugh and look at my dad, "You gotta be careful with this one, she's gonna be a handful," and they'd all laugh again while I shrank underneath the man's hand.

Eight years later, during my sophomore year of high school, I ran into the same problem. Another boy, just like Logan, who was taught to pursue a woman until she said yes. I want to say it started at homecoming, when he leaned in to kiss me at the dance and I refused, turning my head away while trying to spin out of his grip, tightening around my waist, but it started much earlier than that. It started with an "I love you." During the time I sat in an engineering class, playing with online modules simulating power circuits, Dalton sat in another class across campus. We sent emails during this period to combat our boredom, and it was during one of these

exchanges he asked me to homecoming and told me he loved me. We had known each other for about a year and I thought it was appropriate to tell him *I love you* back. Something I regret doing now, regret thinking I could tell a friend I loved him.

It was always so simple to me: I loved those I cared for. So, I was confused when Dalton approached me with misunderstanding. Had I not reciprocated the same feelings of friendship? There was a look of betrayal, disappointment even, after I pushed away from him at the dance. When had he begun to take my warmth as a romantic invitation? I had never shown him any sign of interest. We were always, simply, friends. Looking back at our interactions together, I couldn't figure out where I had gone wrong.

During homecoming, no one had had their driver's licenses yet, so a group of us were dropped off at the dance by a friend's mom and picked up by our own parents later. In the car ride home after the dance, I confessed to my aunt that Dalton had tried to kiss me.

"Well, I told you. Boys only have one thing on their mind, and you let him." *It's your fault.* I carried this with me for years. It was my fault he tried to kiss me. It was my fault he followed me at lunch. It was my fault he walked me to classes and to the bus lanes even though I was uncomfortable. It was my fault he showed up to my choir concerts and volunteer events when I didn't ask him too. All of it—my fault.

For the next eight months, I endured Dalton's pursuits. He showed up to events I attended, both school and non-school related, followed me in the hallways and during the lunch hour, asked me out and asked me out and asked me out. He offered me rides home and I made up excuses to refuse.

"No, sorry, it's a rule, I have to take the bus home," but he pestered me daily after school. Exasperated, I shouted,

"If it's such a problem, why don't you ask my aunt and uncle, then?" That week he pulled his truck into the driveway of my house as I got off the schoolbus, flashing a smile at me and asking to talk to my aunt and uncle. He settled his baseball cap over the top of his dark curls and shoved his hands into the pockets of his jeans. His sunglasses were folded into the collar of his white shirt, and he had placed his phone into the chest pocket of his flannel. I stormed into my house through the garage and asked my uncle to come talk to Dalton,

"Whatever he asks," I said through my teeth, "just say no."

I was relieved when my uncle did in fact tell him he couldn't drive me home from school. But it wasn't enough for Dalton as he continued to ask me out. He looked proud the next day at school, his chest puffed out when he met with me in the halls.

“You didn’t think I’d do it, did ya?” I kept my jaw set and lengthened my strides. *This was my fault.*

“Nope.”

It took eight months of “you need to stop” and “no, leave me alone,” for him to finally do so. But not before presenting me with a letter affirming his love for me and asking if we can stay in touch over the summer. He suggested letters, but I never wrote. Suggested coffee, but I never called. The end of the school year had brought me so much relief, and by the next fall, he never did anything more than say hello in the halls. I confessed to friends I was upset he acknowledged me at all. I had made my wishes clear: Do not talk to me. But some just shrugged and reminded me it could be worse. And it could be, he a girlfriend at least now, so I felt safe from his greedy stares. Still, I shuddered learning her name. *Bri.*

It took perhaps a year before I was finally able to identify Dalton’s possessive behavior as sexual harassment, but it took even longer before I was finally able to overcome my guilt. I had truly believed—even after understanding the situation—it was my fault. I felt awful saying no to him and I felt awful not saying no to him. I was overcome with shame. *This is my fault.* It was a punishment I thought I deserved. I started this, so it was only right I had to endure it.

Even now I worry about how I interact with men, always so nervous, so bitter as I navigate my college campus with pepper spray, flicking the lid so it clacks in my hand, flexing my fist over my brass knuckles. I dip my head and try to walk past the group of men asking me if I’m warm enough, nodding while I try to scurry around them as they spread out in front of me.

But what if I’m overreacting? They’re not really trying to hurt you. You’re overreacting. My stomach sinks.

I block the contact of a guy who said he was looking for a friend. His messages too personal too quickly. His questions too probing. *He hasn’t done anything wrong.* I close my eyes against the all too familiar guilt. *I should just be nice to him.* But I have instinct now, experience. The boys at work tease me about it, asking me why I would give my contact away in the first place. The girls scowl at them,

“We’re never taught to trust our guts.”

I call campus security for rides to my apartment. Thanking them in the back of their SUV, I tell them I hate walking alone in the dark. I’m met with “smart girl” and think to myself, *am I really?* I recall the men who got out of their car to grab at me while riding my bike the previous summer. They way they slowly drove past me as I desperately peddled to put myself out of reach, never bothering to look at the license plate number or make and model of the car

despite the bright afternoon sun illuminating the scene. I thought riding along busy streets in the daylight was enough to keep me safe, but when describing the situation later at home, my aunt gestured to my shorts.

“I mean, you’re a cute girl. Maybe wear pants next time.” My head spins. How did we get here in the first place?

And then I think about Logan.

I wouldn’t jump to say Logan sexually harassed me, but his actions are all too similar to those I’ve faced in and outside of high school: the unwanted attention, the pursuals, the subjugation of my sex. While Logan’s intentions may have been harmless at the time, the lack of consequence may develop into harmful intent later on, but this type of behavior goes beyond consequence—it starts earlier: with how we teach boys to treat girls.

Women are expected to learn how to protect themselves, blamed when they can’t do so. Blamed because they were walking alone, because it was dark, because “where was your mace?” Because their clothes are too tight, their clothes are too short. “Well, have you taken a self-defense course?” Blamed when they’re attacked in a group, when it is broad daylight, when they used their pepper spray, when their clothes are baggy, their winter coat long and thick. Why are you still asking women if they are prepared?

I wonder where I’d be if all the boys in my life had just been taught to respect “no,” if they had not thought of my body as an invitation. If they had seen my discomfort and stopped. If they had simply learned respect, boundaries. A few simple guidelines to remedy a culture which instinctively blames women. I wonder where I would be, where the women around me would be, if we stopped thinking it was our faults.

I’ve been imbued with an incurable anxiety—one common among women. I’ve been taught to survive, but never guaranteed survival. I am cautious in relationships and on the streets. With family members, with friends, with strangers. And yet, I am filled with a heavy self-doubt. *Not every man is like him. They’re not all same.* But it is my fear which keeps me alive, my questioning: because what if every man is the same after all?

FUCK! A GUIDE TO FEMININE PROFANITY

Mary Claire Clark

2022 MICHAEL AND GAIL GURIAN WRITING AWARDS RECIPIENT
CREATIVE NONFICTION, 1ST PLACE

Fuck is the greatest word in the English language. It's incredibly versatile: it can be any form of speech, one of the most foul expressions English permits, and it even works as an effective painkiller. Knowing when it's appropriate to sprinkle in an F-bomb here and there is an incomparable linguistic skill. When you get it right on the first try, it floods you with relief and indescribable pride. It's a neon sign above your head flashing "She's fucking cool!"

However, learning to curse with finesse is like mastering parallel parking. No matter how good you get, occasionally you hit the curb. For example, when you worked at that daycare, and an eight-year-old broke the news they'd pissed their pants, "are you fucking joking?" was not an appropriate response¹. Mastering Fuck takes practice and subtlety.

In order to do this, it's crucial to understand the ways Fuck should be used.

#1. Making good things better, or "He's fucking dreamy"

The first way Fuck should be used is as description of intensity. Being "happy" humbles in comparison to the magnitude of being "fucking happy."

"Happy" is the open parking spot right in front of your apartment when you're unloading groceries.

"Fucking happy," is the spring night in your hometown when the Boy You've Loved Since You Were Twelve takes you to see the stars. You're both twenty now. He buys you tea and you talk for hours. Your hands inch closer as you watch stars fall from the sky. Tonight, he is one of those stars. A celestial body sent to wrap you in starlight, to keep you safe from the uncertainty of night.

"Fucking happy" is the following day when he asks to see you again to say you're like a song stuck in his head. And that no matter what the future holds, he just fucking wants you in his life. Fuck is so powerful; it has the capacity to start something completely new.

That's how the Boy You've Loved Since You Were Twelve becomes your Long-DistanceBoyfriend. In this way, Fuck makes good things

1. This is, of course, a hypothetical scenario.

exponentially better.

A second example is the lascivious summer your Long-Distance Boyfriend comes to visit. One morning, you cook him breakfast and comment, “It’s like playing house.” He smiles, wrapping his arms around your waist to clarify, “I’m not playing anything.” In that moment, all you can think is *I’m fucking crazy about him*.

It’s all consuming.

You fall in love with the fluttering he stirs in your stomach. You don’t recognize it as the first beat of butterfly wings that portend a hurricane of heartbreak.

Because the way he kisses the back of your neck stops time. You would give anything to stay suspended in that embrace forever.

So, it makes logical sense that the next significant use of Fuck is:

#2. Fuck as sex, or “You guys fucked, right?”

The sexual connotations of Fuck are some of the most obvious. Regardless of part of speech, the primary definition reflects “to copulate,” “to engage in coitus with,” “an act of copulation.”² Fuck is an intimate placeholder for the countless sexually active people who are grossed out by words like sex, vagina, penis, moist, panties, and so on. In a generation that desperately relies on euphemism³, Fuck is the classic, transparent moniker for sexual relations.

Not to mention Fuck seems to be a big inevitability when your Long-Distance Boyfriend comes to visit, and all your housemates are out of town. Fuck is everything fun and simple. You’re both figuring things out. Fuck is great because it doesn’t turn sex into the Big Thing everyone made it out to be.

Additionally, when you’re expecting Fuck, anything more than that feels magical. When he asks how you’re feeling. When he tells you how you feel...

And then, he holds you. His fingers graze down your spine and up your ribs until you fall asleep. You wake up, and he’s there beside you.

Fuck is also supremely helpful the week after he leaves and your housemates return, because it’s the least awkward way for them to ask: “did you guys fuck on the couch?”

2. Merriam-Webster, s.v. “Fuck”

3. E.g., dick-appointment, throwing neck, bricked up, down bad, ghosting, simp, clapping cheeks, bone-man, dummythicc, giving the bomb, bagging bitches, washed up rag, bossman, beating off, baddie with the wagon, tombstone, etc.

#3. The expletive, or “I fucked up.”

Perhaps the most common use of Fuck is the general expletive. It acknowledges you weren't thinking, and somehow, you fucked up.

Nothing quite matches the catharsis of “Fuck!” when you crack your laptop screen by leaving a thumbtack on the keyboard. Or when shards of glass slice into the meat of your palm “Fuck!” is the perfect punctuation—not only for the pain, but the disappointment of breaking your favorite pint glass.

Only Fuck expresses the dread of broken obligations, unexpected pain, or a shameful lack of forethought. The immediate anguish of guilt is something uniquely human: a shared pit of anxiety written into our DNA keeping us alive.⁴ It stipulates that though people fall short of their commitments, they aren't evil for it. Fuck is remorseful. Fuck says: sure, everyone fucks up sometimes, but everyone wishes they didn't.

For example, picture the summer your Long-Distance Boyfriend comes to visit for nine days after spending two months apart. One morning, you're called into work. He has to stay at your apartment all day because he doesn't have a car here and doesn't know the city. Before you leave, he asks, “is there anything I can do for you while you're gone?” and you say “please, run the dishwasher.”

After a taxing shift at your minimum wage job during the hottest summer on record, you trudge the two flights of stairs up to your bedroom, passing a mountain of dirty dishes on the way. But you ignore them because he's upstairs, and for the past two months, he's been 1,432 miles away, and right now, he's upstairs. Not to mention he's only yours for nine days.

When you enter your room, he's at your desk. He's video-chatting with his friends from home, deeply enthralled by some video game—both of which, unlike you—he's had access to the past two months. When he turns to greet you, he doesn't say “hi!” or “I missed you” or “you look beautiful.” He says, “I forgot about the dishwasher,” and “you smell like bleach,” and “let me just finish this next game.”

You like to think that when he heard you walking up the stairs, his stomach dropped too. That he was sitting at your desk thinking Fuck. Because it would mean he felt something. It would mean he regretted forgetting. That maybe if he felt liability that night, he felt it later too.

4. It's difficult to imagine humanity without anxiety. People would fall off cliffs, get mauled by wild animals, or struck by lightning. Imagine the world-ending chaos if Gen-Z could schedule doctor's appointments on the phone without crippling self-doubt. Gah! The horror!

But then again, if he was thinking Fuck, maybe he would have gotten up to run the dish washer.

#4. When everything feels too big for words, or “Fuck!”

When your mind swarms with rejections and hypotheticals, when you're inundated with abstract thoughts and indescribable feelings, Fuck breaks everything down into digestible chunks.

It's the perfect word for that summer night, because after the conversation about the dishes, you lay bored in your full-sized bed waiting for him to finish his game. All you can cling to is “what the fuck?” like a mantra in your head. Because in this moment, even though he's five feet away, it feels further than 1,432 miles. So now, when you're too tired to articulate “I'm upset you didn't do the dishes and now you won't come over here and fuck me,” a simple “Fuck!” will do.

That's part of the joy of Fuck. It's truly a chameleon. It's the most reliable way to express emotion when your brain is too stuck for real words. It's the perfect word for your loudest need at that exact moment; it's the only thing you want as you fall asleep, waiting for him to say goodnight to his friends. In fact, maybe the reason you're so desperate for Fuck right now is that it's easier to come by than the other four-letter-word he never ended up giving you. That night, he didn't offer either one.

#5. Making bad things worse, or “Fuck him.”

Similar to making good things better, Fuck is equally adept at making bad things a *lot* worse. For example, there is an obvious difference in severity between “cold” and “fucking cold.”

“Cold” is a bowl of soup sitting on the counter for too long.

“Fucking Cold” is a few weeks later when your Long-Distance Boyfriend becomes your Long-Distance Ex-Boyfriend, and he says it doesn't bother him. He's not sad, because the ending was inevitable.

Critics of profanity might suggest “very” does the same trick, but the degree of intensity is significant. Observe the tangible distinction between “very alone” and “fucking alone.”

The former is the discomfort of the first day of a new class without any familiar faces.

The latter is all-consuming. It's the kind of visceral loneliness that prevents you from feeling anything else. “Fucking alone” is laying in your full-sized bed, straddling the groggy oblivion between awake and asleep. It's when you realize the empty space next to you wasn't always that way, and maybe if you position your body just right, you can still feel him there beside you. It's a suspension of time and space and thoughts so all that remains is a

raw, desperate need to be wanted. To wrap yourself in the familiar blanket of starlight you'd grown accustomed to.

Furthermore, just as Fuck is an effective way to start things, it is equally proficient at ending things. However, once the process starts it's very hard to stop. For example, "Fuck that" is the lump swelling in the back of your throat when hours after he returns home, he asks if he can start talking to his ex-girlfriend again because she's there with him and you're still 1,432 miles away.

"Fuck you" is when he convinced you he could wait and even if it was hard, you were worth it. It's how he pushed and pushed you into The Long-Distance Thing and then a few months later, after you empty yourself into it, he decides he just isn't cut out for The Long-Distance Thing.

"Fuck off" is when you ask him "are you worth my time?" and he says, "I don't know," because he doesn't want to make the call.

"Fuck him" is when your friend from home asks you "what happened?" because she sees him on a date with someone new a week after things end.

Fuck marks the bookends of a relationship, not from first kiss to last, but the much longer distance between the first and last time you cried over him.

#6. Fuck as a woman, or "Fuck the Patriarchy"

Finally, the best use of Fuck is using it despite those who try to censor you. Cursing is the most effective when it's unexpected. This is particularly true from the feminine perspective. The words of women are policed far greater than those of men in the same environments.⁵ There is a myriad of examples where women in political positions were shamed and invalidated for using profane language.⁶

However, Fuck is the most beautiful and has the most impact when it's said by a woman. When a woman says Fuck, the room flinches and the word sparkles.

Fuck has been so long held captive by the male voice. Although

5. In an opinion piece by New Zealand author, Martin van Beynan, he argues women shouldn't curse. He says that swearing isn't becoming of women, but that "It's part of male culture and therefore less grating if used [by men]." His argument is a contradictory double standard and exemplifies one of the main reasons feminine profanity is so desirable.

6. Women like Senators Kiersten Gillibrand and Rashida Tlaib have been called "unhinged" and deplorable" for using the word Fuck. Whereas 2004 Vice President Dick Cheney was lauded for telling a senator to go fuck himself. Former president Donald Trump can hardly be referenced without acknowledging his profane and tasteless diction. More examples can be found on Ashley Austrew's "Why Can't Women Swear?"

the linguistic origins of the word are difficult to pin down, its predecessors all mean to strike, push, beat, and other such phallic expressions of violence⁷. According to this etymology, Fuck is an action a man does. These parallels akin the male sexual experience to acts of violence. When a man says Fuck, it lacks intrigue because he's doing what's expected, he perpetrates that violence. When a woman⁸ says Fuck, she performs a raucous ode of feminine defiance.

Can you picture that day in your college writing class? You bring in a short story you wrote about a girl who lives alone in a lighthouse? That lighthouse is her only connection with the outside world, the only thing that doesn't make her feel completely fucking alone. Maybe it was a metaphor for your failed relationship. At the end of the story, when she discovers the light house destroyed, she yells "FUCK!"

And that one guy in your class says he's "not one for expletives in writing." He says it "seems unrealistic she talks like this," even though you wrote the story because she's you and you talk like this.

Culturally, men are not policed for this same behavior. A male-dominated culture is rife with systems that venerate power and masculinity. When a woman says Fuck, she rejects these systems. She reclaims the beauty of the word and bathes in its power.

It's liberating to reclaim the word in this way. It belongs to you as you drive around the town in which your Long-Distance Ex-Boyfriend failed to love you. It belongs to you as you're scream-singing "Fuck the patriarchy"⁹—because yes, even Taylor Swift says Fuck now.

And even though all of that is gone—the dishes clean and the glass shards thrown away—you've learned to love yourself better than he ever could. Because no matter how much of yourself you gave him, the word belongs to you, and it's fucking great.

7. Etymology described on Dictionary.com, Etym online, and Oxford Languages.

8. Or non-man.

9. In the aftermath of this song's release, this feels an almost unnecessary footnote, but this is one of the greatest lyrics in one of the most quintessential good-for-her songs: "All Too Well (10 Minute Version) (Taylor's Version)(From the Vault)" from the 2021 re-release of Taylor Swift's *Red*

DESCENDING

Patrick Gillaspie

They found her frozen in the lake, as the ice began to thaw in early April, her eyes glazed over, staring at the morning sky. “To Heaven,” as her mother would say. Her name was Caroline Stevens, or Carol, as she was fondly called by those she loved. The beauty queen, dead at the tender age of 17. Though, there was nothing beautiful about her, at least not anymore. When they fished her body out of those waters, Caroline’s skin looked bruised, covered with splotches of yellow and purple. And her eyes, those eyes of pale green, were now eggshells and foam milk. In truth, while she died, Caroline was unable to differentiate whether Heaven was above or beneath all those layers of icy water. But nothing was more chilling than her smile. Her lipless grimace, enough to make a grown man shudder. At least, that’s what Sheriff Gimbley told Ruth Schneider over coffee, but he always craved the attention of others necessitated by wearing a golden badge. Still, the news of Caroline Stevens’ death sent shockwaves across that small Minnesotan town. It was all anyone could talk about, for nothing like that ever happened at Crescent Lake.

Each member of the town took the loss very personally in their own way. Many sent the Stevens family letters of condolence and bouquets of lilies. Others kept them in their prayers. Most did not know what to do or say, for they knew that flowers and letters and prayers would never bring a daughter back. But at least they tried, and that was enough for Mr. and Mrs. Stevens. However, a few simply did nothing. They read the obituary with shock and disbelief, filling their minds with the frequent, “how could she do such a thing?” adding the occasional, “this would never happen to us,” and sometimes ending with, “it must be the parenting.” To them, Caroline was an inconvenience rather than a loss. They thought of everything and nothing. They feared for their town, as death would hardly look appealing for summer tourism, and then they thought of themselves, of their businesses. It was all too much for them, so they sat on their leather chairs and turned the cover page, where they found comfort from articles of sport, leisure, and finance. There they filled their minds with meaninglessness, and in a minute or two, Caroline was forgotten.

Before he moved to Crescent Lake, Matthew Colmonson grew up on the outskirts of Des Moines, Iowa. He was quiet as a child, more inclined to books rather than baseball or football, much to the dismay of his father, a proud Hawkeyes graduate. Although he was shy, Matthew was by no means antisocial. He enjoyed all the things

kids do at that age, like playing tag, hide-n-seek, and building Lego fortresses and spaceships with school friends and cousins. Unlike his twin sister Noel, he wasn't particularly gifted at anything, and that destroyed him. While he tried and tried, Noel excelled. So, he spent his childhood looking for a superpower, something that would make him feel special. Aside from this jaded outlook on life, Matthew had a loving family with a comfortable income. His house soared above acres of fields, although they owned none of the land. Still, in Matt's eyes, it was his paradise and safe haven. A piece of the world that seemed to belong to him.

Despite Noel's countless talents, no trace of jealousy or rivalry existed between the two of them. In fact, when he was not in search of his own abilities, Matt spent most of his time with his sister. As children, the two spent most of their time in the sunroom, reading Jack and Annie books, playing board games together, and watching movies on VHS. The sunroom was their special place, situated near the rear of the house. One day, as the sunlight soaked through the blinds, Matthew started to draw. It began as a passing thought, a genuine curiosity. He watched the light shimmy through the blinds and saw the shadows dance across the floorboards. When he finished, he was disappointed. So, he struggled and tried again. He moved locations and swapped pencils, sharpened and dull, until he finally created something he liked. With his sister's encouragement, Matthew continued to draw and grew more proficient with time. Through trial and error, he learned to capture the light that bounced off the acres of cornfields around his house and the shadows which swayed from telephone lines. When he succeeded, he sat astonished at all that he had accomplished. In his eyes, he finally found his superpower. Grateful that he had finally found something to do, his mother seized on his newest hobby and enrolled him in lessons. It was there where he thrived.

Yet, as time would have it, they could not be children forever. The age of innocence died as the twins overheard frequent conversations of finance and job insecurity. It was no secret that their 19th century, brick-laden house could hardly support itself, let alone Matthew's family. Floorboards groaned in agony as footsteps pressed upon the floor during the winter months, and brass hinges sighed when hands pulled doors open and shut. Although they loved their home, it seemed as though their home had grown tired of them. With costs of repair and bills stacking higher and higher, it was the house that gently nudged the family to move on. So, when it was announced that they were moving to Minnesota, the siblings were hardly surprised. Although Noel was excited about the move, Matthew was disappointed. Nothing ever happened in the

Northwoods.

Lake Crescent was like any other northern Minnesotan town in the summer, full of wide-eyed tourists, rubescent geraniums, and hardly a trace of plaid in sight. There was one main road that cut through downtown. It was there that one could find, among other things, the essentials: a confectionery, overpriced boutiques, some selling genuine moccasins, and restaurants that boasted family recipes originating from Germany and Scandinavia. It was charming, without a doubt. Although cabin-based resorts were always popular with tourists, the Lake Crescent Hotel, or the Ridgewood as it was formally called, boasted a breathtaking view of the lake, complete with an outdoor restaurant which overlooked the gentle lapping waves. Due to its smaller population, Lake Crescent shared a sizable high school, Joseph “Steinway” High, named after the county’s founding father, with three other neighboring towns equidistant with one another. Altogether, the three towns and Lake Crescent were known as the Quad, each with its own lake and fascinating residents.

The Colmonson twins did well in school, and in truth, nothing happened. Their first two years were as average as any other. Friendships were made and promises were broken, gossip was spread and tears were shed, dances were held and first kisses occurred. Although the twins were close, they resided in different social circles. Noel, talented as ever, enjoyed the popularity and attention of lustful boys and jealous girls, who secretly wondered whether they wanted to become her or simply be with her. Meanwhile, Matthew spent his time in the art studio, alongside the wallflowers. All of whom shared the same interests, dreaming of that same, sweet escape into the city of lights. And so was life at Steinway High, until the fourth Monday of October 2007. The day it was announced over the intercom that the Stevens girl disappeared.

The residents of Lake Crescent were full of opinions. So, when word traveled that the darling Caroline Stevens had disappeared, the townsfolk came up with all sorts of reasons to rationalize such a behavior. Some blamed it on the irresponsibility of teenage folly, while others blamed social pressures like drinking and sex. Still, they believed that she would return home within a couple of days into the arms of her parents with a reasonable explanation for her momentary departure. In the meantime, like a needle and thread, parents took the liberty of weaving stories about Caroline, mixing facts with fiction until her life eventually transformed into a narrative aimed to discipline erroneous behaviors in children. It was only natural for a small town to be so invested in the loss of one of its members, although they had never really paid much

attention to her beforehand. And so, they pieced together stories, waiting for her to come back home.

But she hadn't ever left.

Caroline spent most of her time practicing cheer routines. It was her passion. Her ideal afternoon, after school, consisted of perfecting tumbles, high-vs and T-motions, and half and full twists. It was August 31st of her junior year and she had been eyeing the recently vacant spot of co-cheer captain, alongside her best friend Anna Walters, for months now. This was her moment, her time to make a name for herself and leave a legacy at Steinway. She was more than just a homecoming princess or the girlfriend of Mark Lewis, the quarterback. Deep down inside, she knew she had this tryout in the bag, as she was capable of far more complicated stunts performed at club competitions. However, she was careful to keep her humility in check so as to be prepared for anything. So, when the results came back, pinned to the bulletin board that Friday afternoon, those pale green eyes widened to find her name alongside Noel Colmonson under the position of "Assistant Captains."

"Congratulations."

"Thank you, I'm looking forward to a great season working with you and Anna," Noel said, "go Steins!"

"Go Steins," she mumbled.

The weeks passed on, and the two grew closer, eventually overcoming whatever personal differences they had held for the good of the team. Soon, however, they discovered that they shared many interests. They talked about music bands, worked on homework together, went to the local cinema, ate dinner at each other's homes, and eventually looked into summer camps to work together. By the beginning of October, Caroline was grateful that the position had necessitated a pair. Through their friendship, Caroline had gained not one, but two friendships, as Matthew often joined them in their adventures. The three became inseparable.

It was about this time, roughly around October, when Caroline first received phone calls. They started out as nothing, a guy asking to speak to random people, a woman named Miranda Simpson or Allison Parkway. At first, Caroline thought it was funny. She assumed it was one of Mark's friends pulling a prank on her to get back at her after their breakup. But the calls didn't stop. They were incessant and always seemed to occur when she was alone. She tried to block the calls, but the numbers always changed.

It was a Friday night in October, the clouds dispersed, and the moon danced across the waters. Her parents had left about thirty minutes ago to get dinner with Mr. and Mrs. Thompson at the

Walleye, a lakeside restaurant across her home. Earlier that day, she thought about inviting Matt and Noel over, but when she asked Noel about her plans, Noel looked at her and away, fidgeting her hands. She said she was going on a date.

“Oh my God! Good luck! What’s his name? What does he loo-” The bell rang, signaling the end of the passing period.

“Oh, um, I’ll tell you about him later. I have to go to class.” Carol watched as Noel slammed the locker shut and hurried down the hall.

After school, Carol climbed the stairs until she reached the art room. She was determined to see Matt and invite him over tonight. The two talked of everything and nothing, dancing around the real reason she had stopped by.

“Got any plans tonight?” She asked, her eyes glued on Matt’s.

“Not really, I might go to Dan’s house party with Claire tonight,” his brow raised. “You?”

“Oh. No, I- I’m going to just stay home I think,” she smiled, not knowing whether or not to invite herself or wait to be invited.

“Well, I’d definitely rather be home. Then I could work on this damn art project.” Matt watched Carol chuckle. Even when he was with Claire, he couldn’t help but think of Carol. He wanted to tell her.

“Is this it? It’s beautiful.” Her eyes examined the rose-and-tangerine hues of the painted sunset.

“Yeah. It needs so much work. It’s nothing like an Iowan sunset,” he paused, their eyes meeting again, “but, thank you.”

“You’re talented, Matt. When you get famous and move on to New York or Paris, don’t forget about me.” They laughed and waited together for a long time, alone in the art studio. The silence flooded the room, but Matt didn’t care. He opened his mouth to tell her something, anything to keep her there with him. But she beat him to it. “Oh jeez, it’s almost 4. I should go,” she said, smiling.

Matt watched as she started to walk away.

“I’ll see you Tuesday, at Schneider’s? To study for American Gov?” Matt called, his eyes searching for hers.

“Yes! Can’t wait!”

The loons of Lake Crescent sighed, echoing across the lake waters. Caroline thought of Matt and wondered if he was at Dan’s now. She went to her room, searching through her desk drawer until she grabbed her journal and a pencil. She carried them both downstairs, opened the living room window, and rested on the leather couch. She felt alone, comforted only by the sighs of the loons and the noise of the TV. Still, neither could fill the silence. After about an hour, the phone rang, startling her from the abyss

of her thoughts. She raced to the kitchen receiver, hoping to hear Matt's voice inviting her to Dan's.

"Hello?" She asked, smiling.

"Hello, is this Sarah Cline?" The voice asked calmly.

"No," she paused, "who's this?"

"A friend. Tell me, where can I reach her?"

"I'm sorry, I don't know who that is. I think you have the wrong person. Goodbye."

"Wait—I remember where she is."

"Great," she paused, "bye."

She placed the phone on the receiver and glanced at the stove clock. Its green-lit numbers read 9:47 p.m. If only the football game had been tonight instead of yesterday, she thought, then she would have been on the sideline with Noel and Anna, in the comfort of friends. She would be watching Matt in the stands, alongside Claire. Carol walked over to the living room, closed the window, and climbed into the sofa, wondering aloud why she had thought about that. The phone rang again. She hesitated before answering and went to lock the front and back door.

"Hello?"

"Underground," the voice cooed.

"I'm sorry? What- who's calling?"

"Sarah is underground. I put her there myself," he waited, "she cried as I did it."

Caroline ran to the receiver and hung up the phone. Again, she looked at the clock and thought of Noel and Anna. An idea crossed her mind. She ran to her family's computer and typed in those names which he had mentioned earlier. Something like Miranda or Mary... After a few searches, she found Miranda Simpson, 19, of Bemidji, Minnesota, and Allison Parkway, 16, of Fargo, North Dakota. Both disappearance cases were currently active. She looked up the name Sarah Cline and was greeted by a page of pictures and a personal website dedicated in her name. Her mouth went dry. She reached for the phone and dialed Noel's number.

"Noel? God, please answer me," she said, whispering into the spurts of call-progress tones.

"Hi! You've reached the voicemail box—"

"Damn it!" She was probably on that date.

The phone rang again. She looked at it for a while, in the palm of her hand, her fingers pressing into the ridges of the phone. She breathed in. This time, she held out the hope that it was Mark, being an asshole.

"Whatever you want, please leave me alone. You've won. Please, just leave me alone. Mark? This isn't funny anymore."

“Mark? Who’s Mark? I only want you.”

She screamed this time, stifling her mouth with a sleeve, her green eyes welling up with tears. She stood there with the face of Sarah freshly imprinted in her mind.

“Please, no you don’t. I’m– I’m with my parents and we’re going to the police right now. And we’ll turn in this number. And you’ll be behind bars for harassment.”

“Oh,” he chuckled, “I’ll be behind bars for more than that. Why are you crying? Those pretty green eyes shouldn’t be so sad.”

“Wh–what?” The words barely escaped her throat.

“From the moment I saw you, I’ve been thinking about those eyes. Why don’t you open the door and let me in? So I can take a closer look.”

She hung up the phone and sprinted toward the living room, ducking out of view from the windows. Holding the phone, she motioned to dial 9-1-1 and watched as the power went out. She began to cry, despite her best efforts to remain calm. For a while, all was silent. She could hear the faint lapping of waves and the soft bellows of loons. She knew it was a trick of the mind, a welcome tactic to push off the fear that was absorbing her surroundings. But she could have stayed in that calm forever.

As sudden as it had begun, Caroline heard the kitchen window shake viciously, jarring her back into reality. She stifled more sobs with her sleeve. She reached for anything, her hand finding the fireplace poker. Although she was overcome with anxiety, she knew she had the advantage. Caroline slowly crept from one end of the living room to the other, feeling her way around familiar objects to the back door adjacent to the dining room and kitchen.

“Hello?” The voice asked. “Where are you?”

She could not move, could not think. Her eyes darted back and forth, trying to see. Slowly, they adjusted to the moonlight. She watched as the shadow ran across the room toward the office. She hid behind the dining room cabinet, and all was quiet.

“Psst, Caroline Stevens. I see you.”

She jumped as the whisper came from behind, though at a distance that she did not feel that she was discovered. Again, she reached for something, anything, to throw him off her tracks. Her fingers shook violently as they found a wine glass hanging from the cabinet rafter. She breathed in and chucked it away from the room, hearing it shatter in the kitchen. The sound pierced through the shroud of silence, and she felt the wind whip her face as he ran by in pursuit of the red herring. This was her time.

She ran toward the back door, directly across the room and reached for the lock. Gently turning the lock, she heard the click

and opened the door, sliding through the opening. She was safe. She made a break for it to the docks, hoping that someone would be on duty. As she ran toward the docks, she heard the noise of her bare feet slamming onto the timber paneling. Her eyes darted this way and that, toward anyone that might help her. But everything was dark, so dark. And then she felt it, the unbearable dread catching up to her and, without turning around, knew she was dead.

He watched as her body descended into the water.

In April, the children listened, behind closed doors, to their parents as they discussed the details of Caroline's disappearance and death. With morbid curiosity, the children soaked up every word like a kitchen sponge until their brains were wracked with images and words too complicated for most adults to understand. And so, those children of that sleepy town became acquainted with death, in its cruelest form. Some moved on. But most delved on it, letting those ideas seep into the recesses of their minds. They locked their doors and said their prayers. But when darkness descended and their eyes felt heavy, the children were greeted by those eggshell eyes, pulling them away from the brink of blissful rest. There they sat in the luminescence of artificial sunshine, thinking about the girl trapped in ice.

It took a while to catch Caroline's killer, much to the dismay of the Stevens family. Nothing like this happened at Lake Crescent, and Sheriff Gimbley did not want to blow his big moment. So, he and his deputies visited Steinway High regularly, throughout April and May, interviewing Caroline's friends, classmates, and peers. Mark Lewis was arrested and brought into questioning, but he was later released on account of his alibi. He was with Noel that night, in her bed. Matthew was subsequently arrested and held under suspicion but was later released. Steinway High's security footage recorded him working in the art studio that night. When the autopsy report was made public and when the pictures of Carol were released, Matthew began to draw, attempting to rid his mind of those pictures. He wanted to remember Carol as she had been, with those beautiful eyes of mint ice cream. Those eyes that pierced through the hearts of those who saw her. He drew and sketched, and with each canvas, he thought he could bring her back to life. Or, at the very least, bring back the glimmer of her eyes. He showed a portrait to Noel, who then brought it to their principal. Soon enough, the community set up a memorial for Carol at Steinway High School and at the Ridgewood Hotel. With the help of Matthew's sketches and paintings, he established her memory and legacy.

But all things have their cost, for Matthew could not bear to look

at Lake Crescent anymore without the memory of Carol in accompaniment. Her laugh, her smile...everything. Gone.

Eventually, late in May while the Gimbley family were on vacation in Florida, a deputy found a stash of little knickknacks in a shack deep in the woods. Locks of hair hanging from the ceiling, a card table, pressed against the wall, with pictures and notes strewn across the surface, a charm bracelet with a silver cross resting in a small container, and a jar with two fingers, enveloped in formalin, sitting on a shelf. And lying beneath the card table, on wooden planks, was a picture of Caroline “Carol” Stevens, in her cheer uniform, along with a love note. Thinking fast, the deputy retrieved a fingerprint from the door handle on the inside of the shack and contacted the station. Upon hearing news about the shack, the sheriff and his family returned home. Gimbley’s mind raced in anticipation. His moment had come.

As the family of five turned the corner of the street, approaching their home, they were greeted by flashes of red and blue and the screams of sirens. Gimbley heard the stern voices of his father’s colleagues, but he could not understand what they said over all the noise. It did not matter, though. He imagined this moment, for some time now. At one point, he wondered if it would ever happen. He watched as his mother collapsed onto the pavement. Her sobs reminded him of Caroline. He craned his neck over his shoulder, peering through the gridlocked window of the police car until he could not find those eyes of his father, which stared blankly at him as the police issued the Miranda warning. Danny Gimbley, the sheriff’s son, was arrested for the murders of Miranda Simpson, Allison Parkway, Sarah Cline, and Caroline Stevens. So began the community’s journey to peace.

SNAKE HOUSE

Caitlin Relvas

The moving truck was already parked in the driveway when we arrived, but it was wide enough for our blue minivan to squeeze in beside with enough room for Dad to comfortably open the driver's side door and exit. Often, he would park too close on one side or the other, and we'd have to open the door a crack, wiggle out, and extract ourselves, trying not to scratch the paint off the car barricading us with our rearview mirror.

Not that we really needed a minivan for three kids, but it was helpful for carpools and to space us out when we were "unruly." Would we be carpooling in this new place, to school, soccer practice, taekwondo?

Mom and Sophie stretched out of the car, tired after a six-hour drive. Dad was already talking to the movers, letting them in the new house and starting to direct his grand move-in show. Sometimes I had trouble guessing what he was going to be neurotic about and what he couldn't give less of a shit about.

"Oliver," Mom said, "Would you please get Paul out of his car seat?" "Baby" Paul was too old for a car seat, but I suppose that often happens with the youngest, especially when there's a bit of an age gap between siblings. I was seventeen, almost eighteen, Sophie was fifteen, and Paul was a new seven, only six a few weeks ago. He could certainly be in at least a booster now or undo his own straps, but he was small for his age, constantly mistaken for being four or five, and babied by Mom probably more because of his size. He was asleep, so I unbuckled the top and bottom straps, and pulled him into my arms. That kid could sleep through anything.

Sophie turned and stuck her tongue out at me. I had to babysit, but I didn't have to help unload the car with our suitcases and extra boxes, clearly the worse job. As Mom and Sophie began to open the trunk, I took a step back with Paul still asleep to view our new lives for the first time.

The house was larger than our old one, with two stories full of windows. It was white with navy-blue trim and a door, and the roof over the sizable front porch and rest of the space was a stronger black. The front yard even had a white-picket fence surrounding emerald green lawns on either side of the driveway, and the windows in the front and above for the bedroom all had white lace curtains.

I stepped past the grass and over to the side of the house, where a slightly ajar white wooden door led into the backyard. Paul hadn't moved at all, like a rock that quickly gained weight in my arms. I

had high hopes for the backyard, longing for space to practice drills in and beauty to paint and draw.

A snake crawled out in front of my foot, and Paul awoke and started crying, disoriented and scared.

“Hey there, it’s okay, buddy, you’re okay,” I said, bouncing him and stroking his auburn curls. “We’re at our new house now, isn’t that exciting?” He just cried harder and started to beat his little fists against me. I had been taking care of him for seven years and still didn’t know what I was doing. “Alright, alright, let’s go back to Mom, Dad, and Sophie,” I said, turning back around.

After a quick glance back to that white wooden door, a chill raced through my body, and I hurried away with my baby brother. The snake was gone.

...

“Hey, pass the butter, Oliver,” Sophie said. We had been living in our new home for a week, enjoying our first family meal on our table with everything finally unpacked. Funny how exciting using real forks and knives can be.

“Pass the butter, please,” Mom corrected. Sophie could barely keep from rolling her eyes, but added the obligatory magic word, and I complied. She was going to be a sophomore in the fall, and was already starting to practice her freshman bullying, which meant no one was as cool as her.

We were eating the family favorite, spaghetti and meatballs, but Mom accidentally got regular bread instead of garlic bread, thus the need for butter. The red sauce with hunks of meat reminded me too much of the mutilated bodies of mice we had been finding around the house, and everyone seemed a little queasy but Sophie, who was already on thirds while the rest of us were poking at our noodles, and Paul, who had fallen sound asleep directly into his pasta, in his highchair.

Other than the blood and guts, we had found nothing else strange about our new house in the frenzy of unpacking. Some of us were worried that would no longer be the case.

“Doesn’t the water taste weird?” I asked, holding up my glass. We were a tap-water family, as Dad didn’t think filters were necessary. “It’s like...more earthy?” Mom nodded in agreement, and Sophie said she noticed that too. Dad wasn’t listening.

Dad gazed around the round table at each one of us. His eyes were shining.

“I am so grateful to finally be here with you all, enjoying our first real family meal, cooked by your lovely mother,” he said, as my

parents beamed at each other. They were trying to increase morale. “I know this move hasn’t been easy for you all,” he said, looking at me, “but I am incredibly grateful for your flexibility and trust. Moving across the country may not seem like the best opportunity for the family, but I promise you this new job and community here are.”

He paused for a beat, assessing the lack of change his words caused, but allowing us to all distinctly hear a *tap! tap! tap!* from directly above us. No one else should have been in the house.

“Oliver, isn’t that your room above us?” Sophie said, still shoveling fuel into her mouth.

“Maybe one of his paintbrushes fell,” Dad said, trying to ease us.

“My paint brushes are all in a case,” I said. “And it didn’t sound like anything falling.” Again, we heard a *tap! tap! tap!* above.

“Should we check it out?”

The trifold tap occurred again, but this time it had moved, more to the left now, closer to my bedroom door. Paul woke up in his sauce and noodle mess and started to bawl. Mom went to comfort him, but the *tap! tap! tap!* grew louder and more insistent, shifting out of my room, into the hallway, and now down the stairs. I stood up, slowly creeping to the end of the stairs, waiting for the intruder to move to the landing in the center of the stairs, where the direction transferred, so I could surprise the culprit.

The sound kept moving down, faster and faster. I was about to jump out in full view of the staircase when Dad yanked me back—

There were at least a dozen snakes slithering down the stairs, green with rounded heads, and I was more disturbed to see the cause of the thumps than to be in ignorance.

“They’re just garter snakes,” Dad said. “Not poisonous.” He went to the kitchen to grab a knife, then proceeded to kill each one right there in view of the dining room.

I will never forget the sound of snakes dying or their blood splattering the hardwood floor.

...

From then on, we heard the same tapping often, moving around the house, and we’d hear slithering in the walls. I imagined a giant serpent hiding in our house, the pet of a wizard who died in our house. But we were only the second owners, and the couple who lived here previously were not involved with the supernatural. We were simply unlucky and had bought a house built on top of a snake den.

Dad was wrong. There were not just garter snakes. Pythons,

cobras, vipers, kingsnakes, mambas, boas, rattlers...scaly browns, tans, blacks, greens, reds, whites, yellows in repeating patterns, sometimes like stripes or more like polka dots. We lived in perpetual fear of hissing, and I often was not sure if in the middle of night, if I dreamt the sound or not.

Besides that initial Biblical plague dinner interruption, we'd only see the snakes every once in a while, and only one at a time. Dad had stopped up the hole in my bedroom that allowed them in, but sometimes I thought I still heard them trying to break in. Thump. Thump. Thump.

Sophie would find them hiding in the tall grass of the backyard, hearing the hissing as she juggled the soccer ball with her body, trying to beat her records. She'd freeze with the ball in her hands, afraid to move because she couldn't determine where it was. Dad would joke that she shouldn't listen if the snakes told her to eat any apples, but she did not smile. Eventually she left the backyard alone, giving the creatures their domain. Sophie rarely left the house.

Dad would go to work during the day, and in the evenings after dinner, would work on renovating the garage into his "man cave." He painted the walls a dark green, purchased dumbbells and an exercise bike, hooked his hammers and screwdrivers on the wall, and set up a large plasma TV. He would come inside to wash his hands in the kitchen sink of snake guts, or to grab a cold beer from the fridge. Eventually he had his own fridge, and we saw him inside the house or sober less and less.

Mom would laugh at first when she found them in the pantry, slithering among the canned tomatoes and chicken noodle soups. But it wasn't funny when she found a couple hiding in the sinks or near the toilets. She imagined them sliding out of the facets and would only drink bottled water, a habit we all adopted out of necessity. Except for stubborn Dad, who bragged about the health benefits of snake-infused water. Eventually Mom's trips to the grocery store or walks around the neighborhood became longer and longer.

Paul was different. He alone seemed fearless, careening around the house with a toy rocketship or racecar, pressing the buttons that allowed loud noises and flashing lights to accompany his stomps and chortles. I neglected my painting to nervously chase after him, which Dad would mock me for, while watching the little boy from the corner of his eye. But Paul seemed to scare all the snakes away.

The few moments I had to myself I spent researching our new reality. If others have experienced something like this (just the usual rats, wasp hives, termites, ants, racoons), the types of snakes

we had seen and their behaviors (rattlesnakes, copperheads, short-tailed boas, black mambas), how to deal with the venomous ones (stay calm, don't confront.) I could soon identify most of the snakes we encountered and would paint the most familiar ones. The eastern green mamba was a favorite of mine, slender, bright green on top with a yellow-green belly, shy and quite venomous. I struggled to get the red quite right on the copperheads with their hourglass pattern, and to try to infuse the aggressiveness of their high bite frequency into my art. But I dreamt of the king cobra, one of the most dangerous snakes. No one had seen one, but I would often paint their olive-green scales and black and white bands and flickering forked tongue. My fear became fascinating to examine.

The lights were left on in the night, to ease Mom to sleep. She would frequently prowl around the house, checking for any unusual sights. Her prodding often woke me up, and Sophie never sleeps well anyways. Her room was next to mine, and she'd bang her feet or knees against the wall as she readjusted her position. I was terrified by this at first, particularly with the thumps from the snakes. Mom would check in on everybody, and I'd hear her and Sophie conversing. I'd pretend to be asleep when she came in. Paul would either be exhausted from his adventurous playing, or wide awake with curiosity. Dad always was softly snoring, drunk in bed next to his frightened partner.

But one night, Mom screamed when she opened Paul's door. I ran down the hall, meeting Sophie as we paused to take in the sight. The light from the hallway didn't quite meet his crib, but we still could make out in the nightmarish darkness what appeared to be a giggling Paul, bashing the heads of two snakes together. Mom had sunk to the floor, head in hands, mouth open and noiseless. I stepped past her to flip up the light switch. They were rattlesnakes. Northern Pacific rattlesnakes, medium-sized with a flat triangular head, greenish brown with dark brown blotches. They were limp, and their dead eyes reflected the glare of the fluorescent light.

Dad stumbled to the doorway, rubbing his eyes. He patted a motionless Sophie on the shoulder, tried to smooth his bedhead, and mumbled a good morning. He peered into the room, shrugged, and lurched down the stairs. We could hear him banging and muttering in the kitchen, trying to toast a bagel. It was three in the morning.

I gently unwound the creatures from my brother's hands and joined my father downstairs to place them in the trash can under the sink. I told him to go back to bed, and he resisted, but then went back upstairs. I followed him and returned to the scene by the doorway. I took my mother's hand, told her it was going to be okay, and led her to her bedroom. She slid under the covers next to my

snoring father, who could not manage the same. I went back to my sister and had her sit against the dresser. She did not want to be left alone. I lifted my crying brother out of his crib, and he wrapped his arms tightly around me. I bounced him, walking around the room, as I sang alullaby our parents used to sing to us.

“Hush little baby, don’t you cry...”

Both of my siblings drifted off to dreamland, but I stayed awake.

...

Mom and Dad had an explosive fight downstairs in the kitchen when it was light out. It woke me up. I sat up in Paul’s room, confused why the three of us went to sleep on the floor. The events of the hours before flooded my mind as I stared at the stuffed rattlesnake in the crib. Was that a nightmare or some sort of trance?

“We need to leave this house right now!” Mom yelled. Sophie opened her eyes and stretched like a starfish. Paul started to rustle in my arms.

“No we don’t!” Dad said. He slammed his hand for emphasis.

“Yes we do!” Mom said. I wondered vaguely if I should intervene, but decided I was comfortable where I was. I think I had done enough parenting.

“This is our family home!” Dad said. There was a silence. I almost didn’t catch Mom’s deadly whisper.

“No, it is their home,” she said. “It is a miracle none of us have been bitten.” I shivered and glanced around me.

I heard Mom stomp up the stairs, then come closer to Paul’s room. She hesitated before entering.

“Come on, kids, pack up your things,” she said. “We’re leaving.”

“What about Dad?” Sophie asked.

Mom sniffed. “I don’t know,” she said. “Paul, you can pack on your own.”

I went to my room and brought down the two suitcases I owned from the shelf in my closet and began to mechanically set clothes inside. I heard the thump from the blocked snake hole I had become accustomed to, continuing my process. But then it came again, this time sounding slightly off. Like there was a cracking. The hairs on my arms stood straight as I turned to the hole. Just as I did, a king cobra with fangs bared and hood flared burst through, heading straight to me. *This snake is the longest venomous snake in the world.*

I was frozen. *Its venom contains an enormous amount of paralysis-inducing neurotoxins.*

I just watched as it slithered closer and closer to me, a shirt intended for the suitcase still in hand. *The king cobra can kill an*

elephant in a few hours with its bite.

I didn't know what to do. *50% to 60% of untreated human cases end in death.*

I didn't want to die. I wanted to scream, make a ruckus, but if I did, the creature would be more likely to attack. Its path was straight to me, its eyes unwavering on its prey. Perhaps I could not escape my fate. Once the end of its tail exited the hole, I thought I could make out some white blobs. A nest.

With slow steps backwards, my back was soon pressed up against the door. I was trapped. Perhaps this is meant to be. I closed my eyes as I saw the snake strike towards my ankle, and I lost consciousness.

...

That was several years ago. I emerged relatively unscathed from the bite, with just a two-dotted scar. Sometimes when I touch it I can vaguely feel the pain again, like a haunting ghost, or when I stroke my own king cobras. I went to school to become an ophiologist, now with my own snake menagerie. My assistants and I work to learn more about these creatures. Sometimes I am invited on expeditions to the Amazon or the Everglades or Queensland, researching their behaviors in the wild and occasionally uncovering new species. They are all beautiful, and my home and labs are covered in serpent paintings.

My family is not very close to me, upset that my life revolves around the creatures that nearly destroyed our lives. Mom and Dad do not live together, Sophie struggled to reenter the world, and Paul grew up. I miss them occasionally.

Sometimes I return to our house, to stare at the fading white paint and weathered wooden fences. The house has remained empty since our departure, but at times I still hear it hissing.

THE GOLDEN PEARL

Fisher Ng

The wind sighed in Jin Hai City when the first rays of the dawn woke the sleeping day.

The bamboo forests on the hillside rustled, the echoes of which flowed down the hill to the small oceanside village. A cobblestone street on the high stone seawall overlooking the golden beaches curved along the crescent bay, buttressed at the base of the hills by two-story buildings of white concrete. As blue butterflies flitted about above the street, villagers opened the wooden shutters on the second stories to hang their laundry, while shop owners on the street front opened the gates to their stores, setting out fruits and fish.

Whump! Whump! Whump! came the thundering of footsteps down a flight of wooden stairs to the street. There appeared a young boy with black hair, a red sarong tied around his waist, standing in the street.

“Good morning! Be Leh,” called an old man as he set a basket of rambutan at the entrance of his shop. Be Leh turned to face the old man and smiled,

“Good morning, Mr. Han.”

Be Leh walked towards Mr. Han. Together, they entered the shop. The single aisle was cramped, so Be Leh allowed Mr. Han to go in first to stand behind the counter, which Be Leh then leaned against as Mr. Han organized his cabinets. His shelves housed a rock collection. On the bottom shelves were smooth grey stones, skipping stones. Then there were those clear, hexagonal quartz crystals, and those glossy blue stones, but Be Leh looked to the top shelves—his favorite place to look—which was lined with small silver pearls on ornate pedestals carved from drift wood.

As Mr. Han cleaned the cabinets with a rag, his back turned, Be Leh asked, “Tell me, Mr. Han, how did you come by those beautiful pearls?” Mr. Han set down his rag and turned to Be Leh with a smile,

“Many people come to mystore. They love what I have, and they often pay with those beautiful pearls.”

Just then, a wayfarer dressed in blue robes stopped in the shop. Be Leh wandered about as the wayfarer talked with Mr. Han and pointed to a silver pearl. Be Leh watched as the wayfarer produced a sack of white stones. Mr. Han fixed his eyes on the sack, nodding as the wayfarer spoke. He took the stones and swapped them for a silver pearl, which he tossed to the wayfarer. The wayfarer took the pearl and left.

“It is a beautiful day for a walk,” Mr. Han said. Be Leh nodded, said goodbye, and went to the street. Alone he walked, the shops to his left and the ocean to his right. The soft murmur of the waves brought him into a trance. He watched the blue butterflies dance around each other, kissing the white, potted orchids that sat in apartment windows.

A dark shape lunged at Be Leh. He yelped and tumbled backwards, skittering across the concrete on his elbows, feet pedaling wildly. His vision cleared. Straining against its chain in the wall, a black rottweiler snarled and barred its jagged teeth at Be Leh, snapping its jaws. Be Leh stood, rubbed his elbows, and skirted around the dog as he continued walking, heart pounding.

He walked until he calmed. As he neared the city center, he passed more villagers. They went about their business, setting up shop, scaling fish on wooden stumps with giant cleavers, frying vegetables in woks. A mother gave beautiful red pebbles to her child as they walked the beach; two women exchanged black rocks with each other; and an old man tried to find the stones he had dropped.

Be Leh looked in his satchel. It was empty. He saw a gray skipping stone on the ground. That would not do. He kicked it aside and kept walking. In a garden bed he saw a purple stone.

He paused to look at it. He kept walking. His shoulders slumped and he let out a sigh. Soon, BeLeh reached the plaza at the heart of the city.

Across the intersection, he saw a man in a fine black suit sitting on a bench, with his head down, alone. Be Leh crossed the street and approached the man. As he drew closer, he could see the man wore a golden tie, and his suit was made of glossy silk. A silver watch adorned his wrist. His hair was combed in fine waves and he wore round, wire-rimmed glasses. Beside him was an open, black leather briefcase. In it were black, jagged rocks. The man was turning over jagged rocks in his hand. When Be Leh’s shadow cast itself over the briefcase, the man whipped his head up at Be Leh.

“What do you want?” the man snapped.

Be Leh recoiled, but he started, “I saw that you were alone. I came to sit with you.”

The man narrowed his eyes. He set the jagged rocks he held down on the bench, keeping his gaze fixed on Be Leh. He swiftly bent down and snapped his briefcase shut before snatching the rocks on the bench. With a placating hand, Be Leh stepped closer.

“What do you want?” the man snarled, his teeth barred. He became furious. His fists clenched tightly around the jagged black rocks as he clutched them close to his chest. Ribbons of blood gushed through his fingers. The man stood and backed away from

Be Leh, leaping behind the bench, bug-eyed, spitting abuse. His eyes darted everywhere, but never towards Be Leh,

“Stay away from me. Don’t take my stones. They are mine! Mine!”

Be Leh backed away, turned, and sprinted back across the plaza, tears streaming from his face. He stopped, panting, sobbing. After a few heaves, he recomposed himself. His heart sat in his chest. He wished it could float like a feather.

He stood straight and looked. When his mind cleared, he saw again that the city of gray bordered an ocean of light. A long boardwalk supported by tall wooden pilons stretched from the street at which Be Leh stood far out into the ocean towards which he was drawn, like a magnet.

Be Leh plodded down the boardwalk, the wooden planks thudding underfoot as he left the morning mist that shrouded the town. The shimmering yellow sand disappeared into a calm blue, and seagulls circled overhead, squawking. Looking up, Be Leh saw that there, at the end of the boardwalk, stood a woman in a yellow shawl gazing into the water. He trod silently. When he reached the end, he glanced over. The woman’s face was a frozen lake, serene and wistful. In her open palms rested polished, flat, white stones—worn smooth by eons of rhythmic erosion under the blue waves, so smooth that the morning’s light danced off their surfaces.

Be Leh glanced back at the woman’s face and tilted his head, in rapt silence. He stepped up on the rungs of the railing and glanced down to see what the woman saw in the water.

When he saw it, his eyebrows shot up, his eyes widened, and his jaw dropped. There, dazzling at the ocean floor sat a pile of brilliant large golden pearls. Without another thought, he shrugged off his satchel, kicked off his flipflops and dove from the railing into the ocean. With one kick he found himself at the ocean floor, and with one hand he grabbed a globe-sized golden pearl. He surfaced, gasping, and swam to the ladder leading to the boardwalk. He clutched the golden pearl close to his chest with one hand, and with the other he climbed the ladder.

Sopping wet, Be Leh stood, transfixed by the golden pearl he held. A grin stretched from ear to ear and his eyes glowed. His heart welled up and spilt over, and a river of light pulsed through his veins. With the golden pearl sitting in his palms, he approached the woman,

“Excuse me.” The woman’s frozen complexion melted when she turned and saw the golden pearl. “Would you like this pearl?” Be Leh asked innocently.

“Me?” the woman asked. She looked at the pearl and back at the smooth white stones she was holding. She stammered, “Oh. I

don't know. That pearl is beautiful, but these white stones, I have had them my whole life. I don't know what to do with them. They are beautiful, but they are not what I am looking for. My mother gave me these stones the day I was born, and she got them from my grandmother when she was born. They have been in the family forever."

Be Leh stood, confused, "But you are not happy. The stones you have are not the ones that make you content." He paused, and then urged her, "Take this golden pearl. It will make you happy. Leave those stones behind."

"I don't know," she said, bringing her hand to her lips as she shook her head, "Why would I take that golden pearl. I don't even deserve it. It is too beautiful for me to have."

"But it is just sitting there on the bottom of the ocean for anybody to have. These pearls are for everyone," Be Leh declared, "Sometimes you don't have to earn something beautiful. It is there for all of us."

"Let me think about it more," said the woman, and she returned to looking out towards the ocean and the white stones in her hand. Tears streaked down her face as she glanced back at the pearls on the ocean floor.

Be Leh left her to think, and he walked back toward the city, the golden pearl glimmering in his hands. Now that he had something, all he wanted to do was to give it to someone else.

At the other end of the boardwalk, Be Leh encountered the wayfarer in the blue robes, who was sitting on the wooden planks, cross-legged. Beside him was a brown chest. Be Leh approached him, "I saw you earlier in the shop."

"Yes. I was collecting this silver pearl," said the wayfarer, holding up the silver pearl. He opened the chest, placed it inside, and shut the lid. Before the lid closed, Be Leh could see diamonds, sapphires, golden rings, among many other trinkets.

"Why do you collect these precious stones?"

"Because I find them beautiful. They bring me joy. When I look at them and appreciate their luster, I become enlightened," replied the wayfarer.

"I have found something beautiful, would you like to have it?" asked Be Leh. Before the wayfarer could answer, he handed him the golden pearl. For a moment, the wayfarer was taken aback.

"Why is it that you give me this priceless treasure so freely?" asked the wayfarer, astounded.

"I found it where anyone could have found it. It is for everybody," said Be Leh.

"Thank you. I will appreciate it myself," said the wayfarer. He

took the golden pearl and placed it in his brown chest.

“If you have such beautiful gems, why is it that you hide them away for yourself?”

A dark cloud formed on the wayfarer’s brow, “They enlighten me. What does it matter whether others see the light? Don’t you see how they all walk around with their dull and jagged rocks? They are not ready for the light.”

Be Leh became flustered, “How do you know they are not ready? Everyone can see the light, but maybe they aren’t ready to have it. We can at least show it, can’t we? Maybe then people will want it. If you appreciate the light, why would you hide it in darkness, away from the world?”

The wayfarer grumbled and looked away. Be Leh turned and left. He shook his head, chiding himself. He ran back to the edge of the boardwalk, dove into the ocean, and retrieved

another golden pearl. This time, he ran past the wayfarer, across the street and through the plaza, and to the man at the bench.

“You again? Have you come to take my rocks again?” the man spat.

“No.” Be Leh said firmly, “I have come to give you something better.”

Be Leh showed him the golden pearl he carried. Its dazzling light danced in the man’s eyes. The light ignited into a burning rage, “I know what you are up to. You are trying to give me that golden pearl to take my rocks.” The man threw a fit, whirling his hands about, in which sat those jagged black rocks.

“Leave me alone,” the man screamed.

Be Leh sighed and left. As he walked by the people in the village, he glanced at his shining golden pearl and the dull rocks everyone else had. The people even passed him by as if they could not see him. He walked along the cobblestone street until he reached Mr. Han’s shop. Mr. Han stood at his counter, receiving an ash-colored stone from a customer for a box of lychee.

“Mr. Han,” Be Leh called, “look what I found!”

Mr. Han looked at the golden pearl, “That is very beautiful.”

“It is a gift for you,” Be Leh said, handing him the golden pearl.

Mr. Han nodded. He placed the golden pearl on the shelf below the silver ones. A moment later, another customer entered. She paid for a bag of pomegranates with a sack of yellow stones and asked for change. Mr. Han took the golden pearl and gave it to her. She left the store with the pomegranates and the golden pearl.

“What was that!” Be Leh shouted.

“What?”

“How could you bargain away such a precious gift, the most

precious thing you have ever received for a mere pile of yellow stones?" Be Leh balked, flicking at the yellow stones on the counter.

"To me, all rocks are rocks and are worth the same," Mr. Han said.

"But Mr. Han, you say that and yet you put your silver pearls on such a high place. I am not mad that you gave my gift away, because it made someone else brighter," said Be Leh, pointing to the door, "But why is it that you would overlook the value of something so unique?"

"I suppose you are right," Mr. Han replied, stroking his chin, "It seems I do favor my silver pearls. Perhaps it is because I always found silver pearls to be the most unique thing I have ever found that I never thought anything else could ever have more value than them."

"Earlier today though, you even bargained away a silver pearl for a mere sack of stones," Be Leh wondered.

"My dear boy, when it comes to business, I have to keep my customers happy."

"So you would give up all of your silver pearls just to please your customers?"

"Never."

"But you give up some of them whenever it is convenient, whenever it will encourage people to do business with you?"

"I guess I do," Mr. Han said, looking down. He too leaned against the table, his palm supporting his chin.

"Why?" asked Be Leh.

"Maybe because I have too many silver pearls from which to choose. Each of them is so beautiful, and yet they never feel complete together. Just now, when you gave me that golden pearl, I felt complete, but I didn't feel that I earned it. It just came to me. I wasn't ready for it," Mr. Han admitted, lowering his head.

"Oh, Mr. Han," Be Leh responded, "Now I understand. I came into the world with nothing. I searched for something, and I was drawn to the golden pearl. That is all I have known. That is all I have had. I never even thought that although people may want the golden pearl they may be attached to what rocks they already have."

Mr. Han nodded. He looked at Be Leh in the eyes and smiled, his own eyes welling up with tears, "thank you."

"No. Thank you," Be Leh said, "Now I know what to do."

With a joyful grin, he ran out of the shop. He skipped along the cobblestone street, around the rottweiler, turned onto the boardwalk, and dashed to the end. There, he removed his satchel and dove into the sea. At the ocean floor, he retrieved another golden pearl and climbed the ladder. He again approached the woman. She

was still standing, paralyzed, with the smooth white stones in her open palms.

Again, Be Leh offered the golden pearl.

She turned and looked at him, shook her head, and said, "I still don't think I am ready."

Be Leh looked down at the boards, and then back at her, "Those stones you have *are* beautiful. Look how pure and brilliant they are, how smooth they are, just like this golden pearl. And yet, no matter how much you cherish your stones, you will never stop longing for the golden pearl. Let me ask you this: why is it that your grandmother came to have those stones you now carry?"

The woman thought. "I don't know. Well, perhaps because she thought they were the most beautiful thing she had ever seen."

"Right," Be Leh affirmed, "She treasured those stones because they were the most beautiful thing that she had ever seen. But had she ever seen a golden pearl before?"

"No," the woman muttered.

"If she had, she would have kept the golden pearl, or told you of it," Be Leh guessed. He went on, "Yet, she never had the opportunity to see it. And now you have that opportunity. Do you carry those stones because *you* think they are beautiful, or because you feel you need to honor your grandmother by keeping the stones *she* found beautiful?"

"I suppose I keep them because she found them beautiful," the woman replied.

"Do you think your grandmother, who found the stones you now have because she loved to find beautiful things, would want you to accept what she found beautiful? Or, would she want you to find what is beautiful to you?" Be Leh asked.

"She would want me to search for what I find beautiful."

"So, if you were to leave behind those stones for something *you* found beautiful, you would not be dishonoring your grandmother. Perhaps you even honor her," Be Leh remarked.

The woman let her hands drop to her sides. The white stones clattered to the boardwalk.

She turned to Be Leh and accepted the golden pearl. As soon as she held the golden pearl, a cackle wafted through the air, and her face shone like a radiant star. Be Leh smiled.

The woman looked at Be Leh, "How can I ever thank you for helping me? I am Enwar by the way."

"It is nice to meet you. I am Be Leh," he replied. He then continued, "As I walked in the town earlier, I saw so many people with dull rocks. I wish they too could know the joy of having a golden pearl. Do you think we can show them its beauty?"

“I would like nothing better than to do just that,” Enwar replied.

Before she could say anything more, Be Leh dove once more into the ocean, retrieving golden pearl after golden pearl, which, each time after having climbed the ladder, he would give to Enwar to place in his satchel.

Side by side, Enwar and Be Leh walked down the boardwalk towards the city. At its end, they stopped by the wayfarer in the blue robes. There he had remained the entire day, sitting silently beside his chest with closed eyes. As Be Leh and Enwar approached him, he cracked his eyes open.

“I can see that your eyes are open,” Be Leh said. The wayfarer remained still.

“Why do you pretend you are content in your own world when you are always watching the world around you?” Be Leh demanded.

The wayfarer said nothing.

Enwar stepped forward, “Have you ever wondered that when you close your eyes to the world, you imagine you will find light, but all you see is darkness?”

The wayfarer’s eyes snapped open, “What is the meaning of this? Let me be in peace.”

“What is peace?” Be Leh mused.

The man leapt to his feet, “Peace is when I can sit by myself and think.”

“And what is it you think about?” Enwar asked.

“I think about the gems in my chest,” said the wayfarer, gesturing to the chest by his feet.

“If you have the gems in your possession, why is it you need to imagine them?” Enwar wondered.

“Because I imagine the perfect gem,” the wayfarer said.

“And what is that perfect gem? Who decides whether a gem is perfect?” Be Leh added.

“It is a gem of pure light. It is a gem so smooth that you cannot find where it starts and ends,” the wayfarer said, holding his chin high.

“Is not the golden pearl I have given you what you imagine?” Be Leh wondered.

“Why no, it cannot be,” replied the wayfarer.

“And why not?” Enwar asked.

“Because...” and the gentle winds carried the wayfarer’s thoughts away.

“What is the value of imagining something that can never be when you see something so beautiful as the golden pearl *in* the world? What use is there in deciding what standards we use by which to judge the perfection of something when the golden pearl

you have in that treasure chest is so perfect?" Be Leh inquired.

A jolt of lightning shot through the wayfarer's limbs. He looked and saw Enwar and Be Leh, "Suppose I do accept beauty of the golden pearl." Then, as if answering his own question which had yet to be voiced, he picked up his chest, set it on the wooden railing of the boardwalk, and opened it. The golden pearl inside dazzled in the late-morning sun.

The wayfarer's eyes twinkled and he let out a laugh, "Now I understand what you said to me earlier about hiding these pearls and gems away in darkness." He shook his head side to side, chuckling, "In my mind, I always imagined that the perfect gem would give only light. And yet, all of the radiant gems I possess, I have put them away in darkness and they have ceased to give light. The beauty of the golden pearl is not the pearl itself. The beauty is how the golden pearl reflects the light. All of these gems give light. They all look different, and the amount of light they reflect differs, but they all give light." Enwar and Be Leh smiled.

The wayfarer looked at them, "Darkness is hiding from the world. Light is being open to the world. We must bring this light to the world."

As they walked to the city plaza, each bearing aloft their golden pearls, the wayfarer introduced himself as Lah Kpaw. Within the plaza, they reached a garden of white orchids, red tulips, and apple trees. A crowd had gathered, sitting around a bamboo stage. On the stage stood a man holding a round boulder high over his head. As Lah Kpaw, Enwar, and Be Leh skirted the crowd, they saw that the masses sat empty-handed.

"This is our boulder," shouted the man.

"This is our boulder," chanted the people.

"It is enough for all of us to have," shouted the man. "It is enough for all of us to have," came the reply.

"This is a weight I willingly bear for you," shouted the man. "This is a weight you willingly bear for us," came the reply.

"The boulder is big. The boulder is round. The boulder is hard," shouted the man. "The boulder is big. The boulder is round. The boulder is hard," came the reply.

As Lah Kpaw, Enwar, and Be Leh walked around the crowd with their golden pearls, suddenly the man saw them. As he looked at them, the crowd collectively turned to look at the three of them. They froze. Their golden pearls shone brightly, dancing in the eyes of the crowd. The leader looked at the crowd and dropped the boulder on the stage.

With a shaking finger, he pointed at the three statues, "They, they... their pearls are not big. Their pearls are not round."

Half of the crowd responded, "Their pearls are not big. Their pearls are not round." "Their pearls are not rocks," the leader shrieked again.

"Their pearls are not rocks," said the crowd.

"Their pearls are not the boulder," the leader barked.

"Their pearls are not the boulder," the crowd responded. "Their pearls should be destroyed," the leader roared.

"Their pearls should be destroyed," came the crowd as they rose at once and started towards Enwar, Lah Kpaw, and Be Leh. The statues melted and sprinted from the garden. The horde ran after them. With wind whooshing past their ears, Be Leh, Enwar, and Lah Kpaw bolted. Be Leh fell behind, weighed down by the pearls in his satchel. Outstretched hands clawed at his shirt and tore it off. He lost his right flipflop, his bare foot smacking against the cobblestone street. Be Leh reached into his satchel and tossed the golden pearls out one by one, his heart seizing each time.

Lah Kpaw, who was far ahead, looked back to see the horde descending on pearl after pearl. One villager, bearing an axe, hacked a golden pearl to pieces. Others, carrying the boulder from the stage, dropped it on another, causing it to shatter. Other villagers ringed around a golden pearl, throwing fish guts and horse manure at it. Yet, one was picked up, held close to the chest, and taken away. Another was slipped into a satchel. And another held high in the crowd.

Be Leh ran and ran, evading the crowd, but there were no more golden pearls in his satchel. The crowd fanned out around them as they approached a bench on the other side of the street. Enwar, Be Leh, and Lah Kpaw stopped at the bench, panting. The crowd ringed around them, standing perfectly still.

"Stay away from my rocks," came a whimper. The man in the black suit was under the bench, cowering with his briefcase of black, jagged rocks.

"What is a man like you doing under a bench?" Enwar asked, stooping to look at him,

"You are a high mountain that has become a low valley. For when you look at the world, you see earth instead of sky, and sky instead of earth. What is a valley but an upside-down mountain of air surrounded by a sky of clay? Such a valley is empty of substance and under the weight of the world."

The man crawled out from under the bench and looked at Enwar, "You say that everything is not as it seems? You say you will not take my rocks but you want to take my rocks then?"

"We say we do not want your rocks because they are of no value to us, but we say we want your rocks because taking them from you

will free you,” Lah Kpaw said, pointing to the man’s bleeding hands.

“And I say ‘Stay away from my rocks’, but maybe what I mean is that you should stay away from my rocks,” he said, looking at his hands, “Or, that I should stay away.”

The man calmed. He looked at Enwar, Lah Kpaw, and Be Leh, and then he saw the crowd encroaching. He glanced at the golden pearls and at the empty-handed, ever-nearing crowd. He opened his briefcase, revealing the black, jagged rocks.

“If everything is not what it seems, maybe the darkness I see in the world is true light,” he breathed, closing his eyes.

The horde moved, descending on the four figures, charging head-long at the bench, shouting, brandishing bamboo sticks and steel cleavers. The four figures closed their eyes, ready for the hurricane.

Then came silence.

Be Leh wondered if he was gone. But no.

He opened his eyes.

Everything was luminous, so luminous there were no shadows in the world. By his side stood Enwar, Lah Kpaw, and the man in the suit. The attackers had stopped in their tracks, no longer brandishing weapons. Instead, they stood, hands at their sides, heads bowed. Be Leh looked for the source of the light. He covered his eyes with his arm, but the image burned in his mind: a mountain of golden pearls sat inside the open briefcase.

The mountain of pearls bubbled like a fountain and flowed like a wave into the crowd. The light dispersed, and Be Leh watched everyone pick up a golden pearl, faces beaming with joy. It was a day never to be followed by night.

Be Leh found one golden pearl and walked through the crowd, down the cobblestone avenue toward Mr. Han’s shop. As he drew nearer, a black shape lunged at Be Leh. The rottweiler snarled. Be Leh stopped to look at it and continued to Mr. Han’s shop. Inside, he placed the golden pearl on the counter. Mr. Han smiled and took the golden pearl, placing it on the highest shelf.

“Maybe not every rock is deserved or earned. Maybe they are given. We decide how to receive them.”

Be Leh nodded, bought a porkchop, and left the shop.

He walked down the street to the rottweiler. It lunged and lunged, barking. Be Leh approached it, into the reach of its chain. When it lunged, he embraced it. The rottweiler stood over Be Leh and licked his face. Be Leh giggled, sat up, and placed the porkchop on the ground.

“And you, I will call you by the thing you want most,” Be Leh said, “Porkchop.”

Be Leh sat against the wall. Porkchop settled beside him, nuzzling into Be Leh's armpit with closed eyes. Then, as Be Leh watched the last rays of the day sail into the sea, Porkchop turned to the meal awaiting him and dug in.

BEAUTY: A COLLECTION OF THOUGHTS

Patrick Gillaspie

2022 MICHAEL AND GAIL GURIAN WRITING AWARDS RECIPIENT
FICTION, 1ST PLACE

He thinks to himself, “If my hair falls out, I will never be beautiful.”

He stares into the bathroom mirror again. Since the age of fourteen, he has always seen his body as flawed. His eyes dart from each area of concern until his gaze lands upon his scalp. His hands begin to comb clumps of wet hair from side to side until he realizes he cannot hide reality. So, he stares back into the mirror of his imperfections and attempts to bear the weight of society’s distaste.

“Show me some pictures of yourself,” says a faceless profile.

The boy stares at the screen of his phone. It’s an early Wednesday morning half past one. He should be sleeping, yet he lies in his bed scrolling through crude comments. He only sends the best pictures of himself, careful not to show any trace of fat under his chin or around his waist. Satisfied, the profile double taps the picture which shows the outline of the boy’s rib cage. When they meet, he looks at the man. His hair is full and curly—an envy is born. They meet in the man’s bedroom, where posters of No Doubt and Pink Floyd hang upon the lonesome walls, bands of decades past. They lie together upon a double-sized bed and foreign hands travel upward from thighs to face, mapping the road to Heaven.

“You’re sexy,” the profile says, “if you were more muscular, you would be beautiful.” They converge and the boy walks home.

Sunlight claws its way between the blinds of his apartment window and the boy soaks in the ecstasy of being desired. With all his might, he attempts to reimagine the encounter, but like a distant memory, reality merges with fiction. His arms slither through the sleeves of his robe and he turns the knob of his door, where he must leave his ecstasy behind. The boy walks toward the shower, turning away from the mirror, careful not to disrupt his fantasy. But the temptation overpowers him. He turns toward the mirror hoping to find himself beautiful, as if this time would be different. Like a child, he blatantly stares at the white patches poking through his hair and the undefined muscles in his arms.

“Ugly,” the boy thinks. The fantasy dissipates.

...

For the boy, being gay is synonymous with his ugliness. Each sexual encounter pares away a piece of his pride. The boy is not ashamed of his sexuality, but he finds it difficult to recognize his inner beauty within the context of a community that objectifies him. The moments of intimacy with strangers make him feel desired and, in some cases, momentarily beautiful.

That is enough for him.

Around a month later, the boy picks up the phone and makes a call to the health center.

While sexual liberation is a means of expression, testing appointments are as urgent as a Catholic's need to seek forgiveness from God. Negative test results act as enablers, pushing him to continue seeking praise in a community of men who prey upon his youth. The same men, who like the boy, hope to be beautiful again. The boy would give anything to be beautiful, that is to say, to be happy, even at the expense of his health. So, he goes out each night searching for compliments in meaningless encounters.

He sits on a chair in one of the many patient rooms. His eyes greet the empty vials which will soon store his blood, from which his mortality will be determined. The doctor's eyes look down at the boy. He hesitates but asks the next question to complete the examination.

"Do you know if your partner has been tested?"

For some reason, that question is always hard for the boy. Within the cinderblock walls of the patient room, he looks toward the floor and shakes his head.

"I see," the doctor says.

...

The boy sits on a chair with a large cup of iced caramel coffee resting on the table. He's sitting next to someone, but he cannot hear a word the man says. Droplets of condescension slide down the cup, heading toward destruction. The man with brown hair and green eyes talks of platonic love, philosophy, and the college experience. He wonders why the man keeps trying. A droplet hits the wooden table, and he understands the futility of this friendship.

"I took a picture of you the other day and sent it to my friend," the man says. "He said you were cute."

The man looks at him, waiting for something. Something to get him to smile or laugh or reply, but he cannot break through to him. He watches as the boy looks toward him with downcast eyes and turns his head, raising his eyes toward the window out into the expanse of darkness. The boy wishes he could escape. Somewhere,

in the depths of his soul, the boy searches for the right things to say, but then again, it's easier to fly away. They sigh, in unison, each wishing to be someplace else.

He thinks about the first time he met the man, arms and legs entangled as one. How could a sexual encounter slowly transform the man into one who cares, but does not care enough to love? If the man could feel the boy's emotions, could he understand? The boy thinks about the man's words and the truth behind them. Love isn't cute, it's beautiful. As hard as the boy loves the man, he knows it will never be enough for the man to develop romantic love for him. Those beautiful emerald eyes will always associate him as cute. In this way, they are disconnected. The boy's eyes drift away from the skyline and find those green eyes staring back at him and, for a moment, the boy thinks he understands the intention behind them.

"If only you knew," the boy's eyes whispered.

He takes a sip of his coffee. There's a ring of water where his cup used to be. The brunette looks into the eyes of the boy, into a sea of cerulean. Eyes that give away everything and nothing, treasures that yearn to be found. In this case, the pupils expand—he knows how the boy feels for him. How much and to what extent? He does not know. Buried somewhere far beneath the surface, the boy knows that the man knows, but decides that vocalizing it would injure the friendship. With those feelings, it's easier to live a beautiful lie.

"I'll let you go," the green eyes say.

...

The hands of the boy's watch move to half past eleven. He walks alone along the pavement. His eyes gradually ascend toward the night sky. The moon peeks through the clouds and greets the boy with as much light as she can reflect. However, the light is not enough to warm him. She illuminates the dark waters of the lake in front of him, and the soft, lapping ripples calm his nerves. The sound of water is beautiful, bringing back memories of lake days with family. The boy desires to return to innocence—a thought beautiful to think about but impossible to recreate. However, under the surface, the lake reminds him of something far less beautiful. He thinks of the times during the dead of winter when he considered wading in, when things seemed impossible, and nothing was beautiful.

"But, that isn't true," the boy says aloud.

There's a beauty in survival. Making it this far, sometimes relying upon the strength and courage in his soul, the boy is grateful for his

will to live and for the stillness of his mind.

Always knowing that he has friends to fall back on and family who love him for who he is, there's something special about that.

One by one, faces formulate in his mind. He sees the face of his best friend, his sister, who doesn't believe in the word impossible and always knows the right things to tell him. He smells the lavender sachet in his pocket and understands his grandmother's unconditional love for her family. His coat feels like the embrace of his friends, who pair their joys, fears, hardships, and secrets with hugs of love. He tastes the salt of his tears, but does not cry.

The geese hack at each other, and he cannot help but laugh at their conversation. He thinks of all the times he laughed in the past year, despite the pain and the disappointment. To live, to age, to laugh in the face of danger, and to be here writing about it, that's beautiful.

CONTRIBUTORS

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