



— Meta- morphosis

Exploring Loss & Growth

The Playful Porpoise - Issue III

Youth Literary Magazine by and for Young Writers



Editor's Note

Life's journey often involves a delicate dance between loss and growth. In this issue, we dive into the intricate relationship between these two aspects of our human experience. Loss can be challenging, but it can also lead to transformative growth. Through an array of prose and poetry we aim to unravel the complexities of this journey. Whether you're navigating the pain of parting or celebrating newfound strength, the narratives you'll find here resonate universally. Join us as we explore the shared terrain of human transformation, seeking solace, inspiration, and deeper understanding in these pages.

The Playful Porpoise

Mika Nitu

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In Lolo's Wake

Jeffrey Kunzweiler

The first burial I ever went to was that of my lolo. It was January, but it was still relatively warm, the way it had been all winter. Forty degrees, clear sky, bleak air, no frost on the grass yet just as brittle--from my vantage point in the second row of my dad's truck, it was truly a day fit for a funeral.

Funeral processions are grander in movies. The road from the parking lot to the crypts was short and the chain of cars was nowhere near the scale of, say, Michael Jackson's funeral. Not that I expected anything like that. I spent the short ride messing with my tie, which was pinching my neck a little too tightly, and looking out at the cemetery. The gravestones tracked me with eyes that did not exist like curious meerkats as we approached the mausoleum. I wondered why Lolo wanted to be kept indoors rather than in the ground. I wondered if he was the one who had made that decision.

The mausoleum possessed a sort of gravity I had never experienced in my life. The crypts were not visible when I walked through the front door, but their aura materialized in the goosebumps running up my neck. Never before had I been around so much death in one place--not the tragic kind, but the melancholic kind, somber mourning that hung in the air in a thick fog. A marble white altar sat in front of the crucifix mounted on the back wall. There was nothing between us and the ceiling. I found my eyes shifting upwards at the skylight or down at the gray carpet tiles without realizing it.

It was quiet other than one person: my Tita Fe, who, the last time I saw her, was a kind old woman who showered me with kisses when I was young and food when I got older, and always looked great for her age. She could be considered my grandmother, but I wasn't related to her--Lolo's family tree was more complicated than that. I caught a glimpse of her as she exited someone's car in front of the mausoleum. She had lost a lot of her hair, and what was left was much grayer than I remembered. She also needed a walker now, and her back was hunched, her fingers bony, legs trembling, eyes stricken with grief. Echoing in the empty church were her wails, acidic, rattling so terribly I felt it in my chest. This Tita Fe, I decided, was not the Tita Fe I saw every August 11th on Lolo's birthday.

There was a middle aisle that divided two sections of chairs. Lolo's coffin rested at the end of the walkway. It was shiny, black, with golden edges to the lid, exactly what I expected a coffin to look like. I've seen coffins before--on TV and in pictures--but there was something about knowing my grandfather's body was right in front of me that made me brutally aware of the blood flowing through my neck. I ended up sitting directly in front of the coffin, on the corner seat next to the aisle.

I didn't try to sit the closest, it was just the way everyone filed into the seats. It became painfully obvious to me that I was among the least deserving of an un-

obstructed view of Lolo. The person across the aisle, as close as I was, was Tita Fe. She wept and cried out in English and Tagalog, incoherent regardless. I kept my head down, hands folded on my lap, respectful, but little more than that. I was not in grief. I never spent any time with Lolo. I was not there when he had his first heart attack, I was not beside him on his deathbed, I never even told him goodbye. The people behind me loved him much more than I did--I grieved for their loss, not mine.

"Thank you for coming, everybody." A mortician stood next to Lolo's coffin. I stared at him--white, pudgy face, shaved beard, glasses, bald--and wondered why the hell he was thanking us for coming, as if he had known Lolo's name for longer than a day. "If you would like, I invite you to touch the coffin, and bid your last farewells to Ricardo before we take him to his final resting place."

The coffin was right there, but I didn't want to get up, not first, at least. Tita Fe, with the help of her children, stood up. Her quiet sobbing quickly escalated to the same wails that burned holes in our hearts. She wrapped her arms around the coffin as far as she could and pressed her cheek into the coffin.

"Don't leave me!" she cried. "Don't leave me!"

Following Tita Fe were all of the adults, Lolo's kids. They came up together and rested a hand on the coffin, their tears more discreet than Fe but still obvious. They hugged and cried together, their calm, collected faces vanishing like butter in the sun until their eyes melted down their cheeks. I watched and waited, biting my lip to keep my tears from coming. I hated seeing my mom cry. I wished I could join her, but fear stopped me--I didn't want to be the first grandkid to stand.

It was my mom who invited us to come touch the coffin. She mouthed something I didn't make out, but I knew what she meant. Everybody else had returned to their seats. The coffin was cold and metallic, slathered in oily handprints. I rested the

back of my hand on the lid and pictured Lolo's sleeping body. In my head, he was lying on his back with his arms folded atop his chest, his face sagging into a subtle frown. I wished I could open the coffin and see him for how he really was, but this desire was short-lived. A crew of five men took the coffin away as I returned to my seat. We were left staring at the spot where our one common relative had been a few seconds prior. Anyone would have felt the tension in the room, strung between stray glances and choked silence. We had come together because Lolo was here, after all, and now his absence was obvious. It was easier to think of us as two separate families when the bridge was gone.

The mortician thanked us for paying our respects and invited us to come upstairs to see his final resting place. Why he kept thanking us, like this somehow meant something to him, I didn't know. How many of these had he done today?

The staircase was tight. The carpet was old and yellow, clinging to lint dropped from the clothes of the families that came before us. It muffled the clop, clop of dress shoes and heels, catching each step in its cushion. There was no conversation, either; the dead would not be disturbed in their sleep. The second floor was the origin of the mausoleum's aura. Stacked up twenty feet in each wall were square marble crypts with names inscribed in gold, behind each the remains of a stranger. Tendrils of goosebumps wrapped around my arms. Lolo's crypt was in the corner, around eye level. The door was open so we could see the coffin inside. Tita Fe burst into tears and anguished moans. I clamped my hands together a little harder.

Lolo's crypt was adjacent to three others. Above him was the Sarno family, to his right were the Ianettis, and below him were the Guitos. Strangers in life yet neighbors in death, to spend the rest of their existence together until this mausoleum gets caught in the crossfire of some war or a terrible accident happens. I wondered if they would have gotten along if

they had known each other in life. Each one contained more than one body and more than one name. Maybe somebody will join Lolo here, in a few years. Maybe I will walk up those ghostly stairs again for someone else.

Tito Wes, during the silent mourning, walked into the middle of the arch we formed around Lolo's crypt. He was the eldest son of him and Fe or any of his children, and the only one who was there at Lolo's time of death.

"I know we are all in grief right now," he started. His tears were gone, giving his face an almost happy impression. I knew that wasn't true. The crevices in his face were deep, carving out lines that made him ten years older, age that comes only as a result of stress and turmoil. "But I think that Dad would be happy right now, seeing us all here. He would say, 'now this is what I lived for!'"

He gestured around with his hands and a genuine smile. I followed his wistful gaze at every person gathered around him. I know that Lolo's death did not bring this family together as some of us hoped it would. There were fights and tears and angry phone calls and spitefully ignored ones that I saw only because it was written on everyone's faces. Tito Wes probably knew because he was on the other line.

"That used to be Dad's walker, too." He stepped over to Tita Fe. Two people came over to help her up, as if it were prepared, though I doubted it. "Do you mind if I borrow it?"

Tita Fe's smile was distant, involuntary. "Oh, yes, here, have it."

"When Dad could no longer walk unassisted, he didn't want to use the walker." Wes rolled the walker to the center. "I said, 'Dad, please use the walker.' And he said, 'You want me to use it? Ok, fine.' Here's what he would do."

He flipped the walker backwards and flamboyantly sat on the seat below the handles. A chuckle radiated from our general direction. "He'd say, 'push me.' He was so stubborn. I could never get him to use it

properly.”

Tita Fe laughed. She sounded the way she used to. Tito Wes rolled the walker back to her, still backwards, and motioned to the seat with her hands. “Here, now you try.” He eased her into the seat, laughing because her feet didn’t reach the ground.

That’s how Tita Fe left Lolo--on the back of his old red walker, pushed by Tito Wes the same way he used to be.

I left Lolo by paying a final glance at the foot of his coffin and walking back down the stairs.

We all went to our favorite restaurant afterwards. I didn’t exactly remember the last time I saw Lolo, but it was most likely here. Being a successful doctor, he used to give all his grandchildren one hundred dollars every time he saw us. I was reflecting on the fact I would never receive his gifts ever again when Tita Fe stood up, unassisted, during dinner.

“Rick would always give the grandkids one hundred dollars,” she said. Her voice wobbled but did not break. “So I have it right here. This is not from me, this is from Lolo.”

She turned to us holding a white envelope, thick with money. I caught her eye as she looked us over. It sparkled. The grandkids, including me, glanced at each other, as though afraid to be the first one to claim the gift.

While she waited, she addressed everybody again. “This is tradition. We will make this tradition. We will do this every time I see you, just like Lolo.” Everybody, stretched over three different tables, clapped with beaming smiles. “This is tradition!” she said again, emphasizing each word with a wave of her arm. The clapping continued. Written all over her face was grief, but some life had returned to her demeanor, a sort of conviction that lit up her eyes. I take it back. Tita Fe, I decided, was the same as always.

It was a miracle, really--my entire extended family together in one room for Lolo.

Lolo, the man with two wives. Lolo, the man with two families. Lolo, whose very name stirs up mixed feelings among everybody in this room, yet it’s apparent we all love him enough to at least be here. Maybe his death wasn’t as divisive as I first thought. The bridge was gone, but didn’t mean he was never here in the first place.

I stood up to claim my one hundred dollars and looked out among the three tables we filled. I couldn’t remember the last time we were all together, the whole family. His family, my family, it’s one and the same.

Late

Faye Callander

I am one of the most opinionated people I have ever met, always Pushing & pushing for a new concept & ideal & statute of Equality that my country still holds away, dangling it on a stick above My malnourished mouth, like the tide that refuses to retreat: Incessant. Yet on this, I am silent.

At this stage, politics isn't just a battleground for the Angry rabble-rousers, fighting over flippant laws that don't enact Real change, no, it matters, & I'm starting to see that it Matters in the most difficult of ways.

My rights are stripped from me like bark from the Hide of a tree, pulled & pulled, piece by piece like that bark is a Delicacy to those in power, like they enjoy the hideous torment it brings upon Me. My gift this year, from the United States, was An announcement by the Supreme Court that they intended to Impose more control over my uterus than I myself am capable of.

I am still in my teenage years, still a girl, still preoccupied by Beauty & life & knowledge—I am too young for this. I am also privileged—What of the women who are not? What of the women who do not have time To write words on paper to deconstruct their thoughts & spread them Like climbing moss on a wall, suffocating the brick within it? And when the final, stagnant force against more hate, more pain, & The end of democracy itself is also my worst enemy, how do I Regulate, opine, or come to any conclusion at all; when the very Force handcuffing my wrists behind my back & exposing my bare, Adolescent stomach to the world is the force that is pushing against Lies & dirty, screaming insurrection?

Never mind. It's too late, anyway.

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Girl

Sheddings

Vanessa Y. Niu

Girl, the beasts of the underground vye to catch a glimpse of you
 in your mannerist charm and spatial disregard
 vaulted rooflessness of the dream-dry dimension
 Girl, the three-eyed monstrosity in your closet says you
 wave to her when you don't clean your glasses
 are you sure they help you see?

Girl, the bull-god hides under the mulberry bush in your garden
 and desecrates its own shrine for you when it hears
 you don't believe in any god nor beast nor thing

Girl, there's a pulsing disquiet in the entropy of the universe
 and when cosmic limbs stretch to help you
 you better answer with courtesy and a curstie

Girl, your mother sits downstairs at the kitchen table when
 all is dark and quiet and nightly she prepares the
 sacrificial lamb for tomorrow night's dinner

Girl, the sun and its creatures grope in the emptiness for something
 that you had stolen a long time ago and forgotten about
 once you assumed this embroidered cotton doll suit

Girl, the moon's birds whisper at dawn that you are a myth and not
 at all flesh nor bone and you flit over the earth in the morning
 with your elongated torso you swim through the air like an eel

Girl, the street performers watch you as you pass them in the street
 trembling beneath your shadow they know you are
 the Voyeur's plaything and his daughter

Girl, the falling rain cleanses the ground beneath every step
 you will ever take in this life so that you will not go astray
 so that everything may stay in the balance of Man

Girl, the sublime doesn't spare a look in your direction
 wayless and meandering and sharp like a knife
 your cotton stuffing bursts through the stitching along your back

Girl, the lithic warlock is holding out his hand and asking you
 to come with him to the new fatherland
 he wants to turn you into a idol

Girl, stay right where you are
 the longer you float in the void the easier it is to breathe
 do you want to live unseen?



Angel of Mine

Juliana Warta

When I was six my Mom taught me how to ride a bike. I thought I had already learned how to ride a bike but apparently ones with training wheels don't count. The same way that when you have floaties on you're not really swimming just not drowning. So she got me on my big Barbie bike and held onto the bike while I peddled. I begged her not to let go and she told she wouldn't but like all parents that was a lie. I was doing really well, my Mom would tell me later, that was before I fell and scraped my knee. I was really mad at her for letting me go and for telling that she wouldn't let go also when she in fact did. "You'll understand soon, Angie. Sometimes we need to get hurt to learn," and I remembered that everytime I learned something new where I didn't get hurt. Like I was waiting for it to happen but it never did. I didn't remember it because it meant something to me, I remembered it because I didn't understand. At the time, I think I was too young to understand, too young to know. Kids don't remember things because they know they need it for later, they remember because it hurt or made them happy. It made them feel for the first time. You didn't stop trying to touch the hot stove because mommy told you not to, you stopped after you already touched it and cried for hours at how hot and painful your hand felt even far after you touched it. You don't touch it again because you never wanna feel like that again.

My first of many burnt-hand moments came when I was ten, when mom didn't come home. When mom's driver must've touched the hot stove too many times and couldn't swerve to miss the other burnt-out driver. Now I hold on to my father for five whole seconds before he leaves to go anywhere. Counting out each second and sometimes counting in Mississippi seconds. I make sure he hears me say I love you after the fifth Mississippi.

At a funeral you see a lot of people you don't know. They may have said something like, I remember when you were thiiiiiss tall, then motion down to the lower part of their knees or they talk about how they used to hold you and babysat you. You wonder, why did they stop doing that? If they stuck around would they really know you? Would they not give you that guilty look that says, I'm sorry this is the first time I'm seeing you again?

You've been told not making eye contact with people is rude but you suppose these people are the exception, including Dad. Dad hadn't looked at you the whole week leading up to Mom's funeral. That was a weird week for him, he slept on the couch and took down all your family photos. So when the funeral came it was the first time you saw mom in a while, even at your age. That's when a realization came, a burnt-hand realization. Mom had left everything with you – her long blonde hair, her deep bright blue eyes, her freckles, everything and no one could bear it.

After the Funeral Dad and I brought Mom home. We tried putting her in a lot of places. The first one was on the TV stand in the living room, dad said that made sense because mom was always in there. That's where I watched movies with her and where she watched Alex Trebek host Jeopardy. However, that didn't stay for long when my dad noticed I stopped watching TV in there.

We then put her outside by her garden and that worked for a little bit. The flowers started to grow back and pretty butterflies and birds visited her. Then one night it rained very, very hard and mom was buried again. Dad quickly took her in and washed her off. She was then moved to his room that night. Dad stopped sleeping in his room though and it hurt too much to sleep on the couch. Besides, every time someone visited they would ask to see her and their room was never clean enough for visitors. So, no living room, no garden, no bedroom. We we're running out of places and mom was probably getting tired of moving so much. Dad then moved her to the attic and told me that we would release her at the beach or bury her in the dirt of the garden one day but for now she stays in the house.

When the rest of the neighborhood had heard about mom's passing they decided to help out with dinners. Each week a neighbor would take it upon themselves to cook and bring us dinner in little tupperware containers. It was a nice gesture but no one had bothered to ask what I like to eat, no one knew how picky I could be.

I used the sharp part of my fork to poke at the brussels sprouts and mashed potatoes on my plate.

"Don't play with your food," my Father would say, "Miss Alice cooked that for us."

"It's not fresh, It's not how mom used to make it, with gravy."

"You can't pour gravy on everything." He grunted.

"You can if it makes it taste better." I whined and he slammed his fork on the table.

"Just eat it. Please." He glared at me and I begrudgingly put a brussel sprout in my mouth. It tasted dry but i didn't like arguing with my dad, we only had each other.

There was another long silence before he spoke again.

"The Collins invited us for dinner next week, wouldn't that be nice?"

I shrugged. "I don't know...You said they didn't like us. That I shouldn't hang out with their son any more."

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"Why would I say that?"

"Because two winters ago we were playing out in the yard and he threw a snowball at me." He gave me a blank stare. "You yelled at him? His mom got mad and told him to never talk to us again?"

A beat. "That was a long time ago, I'm sure things are okay now." Another thing I learned; you can't be rude and people are really nice to you when your mom dies. When mom dies you get free meals and get to talk to snotty kids again.

"So we're going there next week?"

"Yes and you won't play with your food. You'll eat it, you eat food people make for you. It's the nice thing to do."

"Why doesn't she ask what I like to eat? or just drop off food like everyone else?"

"Because she's giving us company, It's good for us to get out of the house?" Why can't people understand I want to be alone now? That I'll see people when I'm ready? That grieving people like and need to be alone? But you don't say that part out loud. You just nod and take a bite of the mushy mashed potatoes and dry brussel sprouts Miss Alice cooked for you.

When next week came you found yourself sitting in a pink fluffy seat cushion poking at lasagna with the sharp end of your fork again. When Mom dies you get free meals but not good meals.

"What's wrong?" Mrs.Collins had asked me. "Your dad told me you liked lasagna."

"I do... do you have Parmesan cheese?"

"Angie." Dad spoke through his teeth. He has been doing that to you all week. You had to learn manners fast when mom died, so many people want to see you now. You're still learning.

"No, no it's okay. Do you want some?" She asked me, I nodded politely and she got up and got some cheese from the fridge. She handed me the plastic container. "There you go, you let me know if you need anything else, okay?"

"Thank you." I said now hesitant to put the fridge cheese on the lasagna. it'll make it cold too or maybe the hot lasagna would melt the cheese and make it too gooey. Was Mommy the only good cook in Queens or were you just a picky child? you guess you had to put it on, she did walk all that way to the fridge to get that for you.

After dinner Mrs.Collins set up a movie for me and her son, Dillon.

"Have you ever seen The Little Mermaid?" She asked me, I shook my head. "We just got it on VHS."

"I saw it in theaters." Dillon boasted from behind the couch. "It was kind of girlie, so you'll like it."

When the song, "Part Of Your World" had come on Dillon's dad had bursted through the door, coming home from work. The wind had slammed open the door and he was leaving little wet puddles on the wood floor. I tried not to giggle at the

thought. Mom would call him a snowman with the way he dripped in the foyer. She would say that about my dad too, All men are snowmen until they melt under the pressure of a warm heart.

"What's the little mermaid doing on?" he scoffed when he finally shut the door. He paused when he saw you, the warm heart. "oh hi, I'm Dillon's dad, Derek." He said and put his wet hand out to me. Derek doesn't know you met a few times already but you don't say that, just say "Angie," and shake his drenched hand.

He nods and looks to his wife for an explanation of who I am and why I'm here. "This is Tom's daughter, the one I invited for dinner." She told him then my dad came in the living room and introduced himself. He remembered him.

"Nice to see you again... don't you have a wife, Tom? Laura, why didn't you invite his wife?"

"Derek." Mrs.Collins spoke through her teeth, I guess some adults still need to learn manners too.

My dad cleared his throat. "She passed a few weeks ago."

"Oh I'm sorry-" he then paused looking between me and my dad as if a light bulb had come on in his head but definitely at the wrong time. "Oh, Angela Harley! The Harley family, at the loft across the street?" He looked at us like he expected us to clap for information I'm sure his wife had already told him a dozen times.

I did learn one thing from this; I was the dead mom kid. That was my connection to everyone. That's what people thought when they looked at me.

Every weekend Grandma Heather would come to check in on me, Mom's mom. She was the only close one since dad's parents had moved to Florida ever since they retired. I liked when she visited. She brought food I did like, cookies and new clothes. Pink frilly dresses or pretty blouses. She'd like dressing me up like a doll, "These are your mother's clothes, she'd want you to have them." she'd tell me, "little girls need to be dressed like little girls, little princesses, Tom. They're little princesses not vampires!" she'd scold my father, had mom's death deaged me? I was ten almost eleven. I didn't have a favorite princess.

Grandma had tied the bow on the back of my dress while she talked to dad.

"What have you been feeding her, Tom? This is the same size dress as the funeral one." She sighed.

"Don't bring up the funeral, Ma. I've been feeding her fine, whenever the neighbors bring."

"The neighbors?" She questioned as she got up and looked into the fridge. It was then she probably saw the mountains of tupperware lasagna, casserole and mac and cheese "this isn't food for a growing girl. There's

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no greens or protein."

"It's fine, Ma. people brought us these What am I supposed to do? Not eat them?"

"Throw them out. They won't know, just tell them it was good when you see them. They're not cooking for their health." I don't remember my Grandma being this bitter, this is a new thing. There are rude people, nice people and people who pretend to be nice but not everyone is good at it. Dad teaches you what niceness is; look at people when they talk to you, smile, nod, eat their food, thank them. Grandma sometimes taught you how to fake it; feed the food to the dog or hold your breath when you do it. I think Grandma thought this was okay, She lost her daughter before she was supposed to go. I can picture her saying it, I lost my daughter, I'm allowed to be rude! I wish people gave me that exception.

And though Grandma would blame her bitterness on mom's death. She never cried- not in front of me at least. Maybe it was a pride thing, maybe she wasn't sad. Even dad cried a few times. I don't think he meant for me to catch him but I did. Some people are good at hiding crying others aren't, my dad wasn't. I think he thought he was but he wasn't. I would hear it at night behind his bedroom door or would see his eyes water when coming out of the bathroom. Everyone was trying to hide how broken they were for me and everyone was really bad at it - but why would they be good at this? Life prepared no one for this.

Where the universe took my grieving father and I next was my grandparents retirement home in Florida. Dad said his mom would be a good mother for me but when we got there Grandma didn't even recognize me. We were supposed to take care of her and get dad away from the painful memories of home without mom. This trip was not for me.

Even though Grandma didn't remember me she liked to tell me stories she did remember. It's weird how the brain works. They can't remember yesterday but they remember years ago. Grandma's stories about mother went like this; "you were so pretty, Angela." and I knew then she wasn't talking about me-not because she called me Angela and not the nickname I prefer; Angie but because she called me pretty. Or said I was pretty when I know I have never been or felt pretty. I had a chubby face and sausage fingers followed by my long, lanky arms that hung awkwardly at my sides. They also grew a lot of hair that mom never had the chance to teach me how to properly shave. I had her dark long hair and blue eyes but it never brushed the right way and had split ends. The frizzy-ness also covered those blue eyes. A bra never fit me right and I hated how my body looked in a bikini. So she'd start, "Angela, you were so pretty...I remember when Tom first brought you home, you two just came back from the diner and shared a milkshake and went dancing...I thought no way this beautiful angel would go out with our Tom, my! He brought home a goddess. I thought I was seeing an angel." Then she'd start to drift off and forget again, maybe even yell about how

she wanted to go outside but not by the palm tree shade, she wanted to sit in the sun. Then dad would wheel her out and tell me to leave her alone. Every story she told was about him and mom, he could finish them for her but he refused.

The first half of summer in SunValley retirement home was a long one filled with stories —the same stories of grandma meeting mom or mistaking me for mom. Golf carts to diners or bingo with grandpa, he never won. Of course, there was always the hot walk to the pool where you were ready to jump in no matter how crowded it was. That's where you met Brian. Brian had black shaggy long hair that got in the way of his dark brown eyes but slicked back nicely when it was wet and wore a high-waisted shark printed bathing suit bottom. More so, what I say next I want to make clear, was also my first love.

It was a simple, innocent first love; playing Marco Polo in the pool during the day then meeting at the dog park at night to swap our grandparents old liquor and stories of home. Brian would never ask about my parents or why I was really visiting my grandparents. He didn't care about that. He would ask me if I knew how to hail a taxi or how many times I've visited the Empire State building. It was seven. That stuff was cool to him because Brian shark-bottoms lived in New Jersey, and according to him (and his dad) the best thing there was that you didn't have to fill gas in your own car.

He didn't have to know that I was actually here to get my mind off my late mother, or that this will be my first and only summer here before I lost my grandma too. I was like every other kid who came here every summer to visit my grandparents. "Everyone's here to visit their grandparents" he'd say, because when else do you see kids in a retirement home?

So when the second half of summer here began to speed up and gave me something to look forward to every night, I knew that I would remember Brian even if I forget his name or shark bottoms, I would remember what he gave me; a normal summer. I even told Brian I would be back next summer even though I knew Grandma wouldn't make it to the end of this summer —that I would have no one to visit here because like Dad said; "when one partner goes, so does the other not too far after," maybe he thought it was preparing me but all I could think about was how much longer did I have with him?

"You seriously never played bocce ball?" Brian asked me as he opened up the woodshed and took out a heavy bag filled with what looked like tiny medicine balls. I shook my head to his question. "Where have your grandparents been? Mine are out here playing every weekend."

I shrugged. "The only game my grandpa drags me to is bingo and my grandma she.."

"Yeah?"

"...sunburns too easily, usually stays inside."

"Well, I guess I gotta teach you then." he chuckled lightly and set the bag on a nearby bench, placing one of the red balls in my hand. Now it felt like a mini bowling ball. "Don't drop that on your foot, hurts like hell." He warned then grabbed a smaller black ball out of the bag and let it roll down the lane. "That is our target. The goal is we have to get our balls closest to the black ball."

Juliana Warta - Angel of Mine

"That's it?"

"That's it. Do whatever you must to get there, there is no cheating." He assured me before handing me the rest of the balls. I rolled mine down the lane towards the smaller black one that would knock into it before squishing it up against the wall.

"Will be a hard one to beat."

I smirk, "I'm a fast learner." He then hits my ball making his the closest now. "Hey! You can't hit my ball."

"I told you, Ange. The only rules are to be the closest to the black ball."

"Ok playing dirty now." I chuckle and roll the ball again now hitting the black one and having two of my balls next to it. "Boom! bocce baby!" I cheered and started to do a little dance.

"Ange, wait watch out-"that being the last thing I heard before kicking my foot right in one of my bocce balls. I swear I thought that day I broke all the bones in my foot. Love gave me this injury before I experienced much more pain.

I sat on the bench while I waited for Brian to come back with ice for my foot.

"Hate to say, I told you so.." he laughed bitterly as he put the ice on my toes gently.

"What you described was nothing close to what I feel. I have to try to hide a limp for the rest of the week." I sighed.

"You'll be okay, it won't last that long. I'll even let you tell people you beat me in bocce ball."

"I did beat you before I had to forfeit."

He chuckled, "I don't know. I think that injury is getting to your head."

I laughed and looked up at him. I don't know if I looked cute holding my barefoot in pain under the small moonlight that shone through the creeks of the golf cart bridge or if he just felt bad for me but Brian kissed me. I remember my immediate thought before I kissed him back; Ew, I just kissed a boy.

When we came back from Florida dad told me the first thing we were doing when we came back was to visit mom's grave. It had been a year now which means she had a proper stone and he wanted to see it. I agreed because I had to and it's been a year which means I should be over it, right? No more hiding her urn, missing school or crying every time Grandma or anyone brings her up.

Why would a year be enough? Because that's what adults think— or at least that's what their faces say. When strangers at the retirement home asked my dad how long ago my mother died my father would respond; "a year," sometimes even throw in an only before the year. As if a year wasn't long or too long, but he would say a year. Then all the other adults would nod and have solemn faces, but never say, "I'm sorry for your loss," like everyone did at the funeral but instead they just sadly nod. Maybe, that's where we're at now—silent nodding. Nobody felt sorry

for us anymore.

That question bothers me; "How long ago did she die?" That question and, "Were you two close?" Why does that matter? Does that change anything? Do you feel less sorry if I said we weren't close at all, if she died a long time ago when I was a baby— so long ago I don't even remember her death. Does that make you feel better about my loss?

My mom died. That's it. No, " my mom died when I was.." or "almost a year ago.." just she died. I lost her and for that alone I should have your sympathy.

I remember when I thought being at her funeral was hard; seeing her pictures everywhere and her dead body before it burnt to ash. Or trying to find a place for her urn was hard. Most importantly, I thought the hard part was over, but when I walked up to the stone plaque and sunk my feet into the ground of the dirt and wet grass, I found something much harder.

Reading my name and birthday on a gravestone.

Angela L. Harley, June 18th, 1961 - June 9, 1992

After that he showed me where our names would go when it was our time and where grandpa and grandma went, he really had it all planned out. Then we stared at the empty soil in silence. Our days were always like this, filled with silence. My father became like every other guest at the funeral. Someone who once guided and loved me suddenly didn't know what to do with me anymore. A complete stranger. He was full of quiet stares and short responses probably didn't recognize himself either anymore, life did not prepare him for this. When I couldn't sleep or when I would wake up in the middle of the night it was always his record player that was blaring the sound of him and mom's wedding music that I heard. He didn't sleep in his room anymore and when I would go out to get a glass of water his head was down on the dining table, passed out and probably drunk. If he was awake he would stare at me blankly as I slowly filled my water cup. He looked at me the same way the funeral goers did; with regret. Like he failed me or someone did, like this was my life now — the girl with the dead mom.

One night I didn't find my dad at the kitchen table. Instead he was outside standing in the middle of the road just looking down the pole-light lit street. That was the night we slept in the driveway and counted the stars until we fell asleep.

I knew that night I hadn't completely lost my father, not yet at least. The sad thing is I think I had accidentally witnessed my father waiting for a car to hit him. I don't think he wanted to die, just hurt enough to feel something or see if a kind stranger was nice enough to talk him off that very ledge. Which wouldn't take much just needed a push, because he needed a push back but it would take an even bigger push forward. Instead he got his daughter with two sleeping bags and plea to not let either of us sleep alone again.

I don't think I saved him that night. He would have eventually came off the road and back inside. Maybe I taught him how to be okay again or not be alone but no I don't think I saved him. I might've saved myself though, let myself have a good memory with my father so when he did go I knew him better than I did my mom. We were never going to be able to live without mom but we would be okay.



Bringing Mom Home

Juliana Warta

When I was six my Mom taught me how to ride a bike. I thought I had already learned how to ride a bike but apparently ones with training wheels don't count. The same way that when you have floaties on you're not really swimming just not drowning. So she got me on my big Barbie bike and held onto the bike while I peddled. I begged her not to let go and she told she wouldn't but like all parents that was a lie. I was doing really well, my Mom would tell me later, that was before I fell and scraped my knee. I was really mad at her for letting me go and for telling that she wouldn't let go also when she in fact did. "You'll

Juliana Warta

understand soon, Angie. Sometimes we need to get hurt to learn." and I remembered that everytime I learned something new where I didn't get hurt. Like I was waiting for it to happen but it never did. I didn't remember it because it meant something to me, I remembered it because I didn't understand it. At the time, I think I was too young to understand, too young to know. Kids don't remember things because they know they need it for later, they remember because it hurt or made them happy. It made them feel for the first time. You didn't stop trying to touch the hot stove because mommy told you not to, you stopped after you already touched it and cried for hours at how hot and painful your hand felt even far after you touched it. You don't touch it again because you never wanna feel like that again.

My first of many burnt-hand moments came when I was ten, when mom didn't come home. When mom's driver must've touched the hot stove too many times and couldn't swerve to miss the other burnt-out driver. Now I hold on to my father for five whole seconds before he leaves to go anywhere. Counting out each second and sometimes counting in Mississippi seconds. I make sure he hears me say I love you after the fifth Mississippi.

At a funeral you see a lot of people you don't know. They may have said something like, I remember when you were thiiiiiss tall, then motion down to the lower part of their knees or they talk about how they used to hold you and babysat you. You wonder, why did they stop doing that? If they stuck around would they really know you? Would they not give you that guilty look that says, I'm sorry this is the first time I'm seeing you again?

You've been told not making eye contact with people is rude but you suppose these people are the exception, including Dad. Dad hadn't looked at you the whole week leading up to Mom's funeral. That was a weird week for him, he slept on the couch and took down all your family photos. So when the funeral came it was the first time you saw mom in a while, even at your age. That's when a realization came, a burnt-hand realization. Mom had left everything with you – her long blonde hair, her deep bright blue eyes, her freckles, everything and no one could bear it.

After the Funeral Dad and I brought Mom home. We tried putting her in a lot of places. The first one was on the TV stand in the living room, dad said that made sense because mom was always in there. That's where I watched movies with her and where she watched Alex Trebek host Jeopardy. However, that didn't stay for long when my dad noticed I stopped watching TV in there.

We then put her outside by her garden and that worked for a little bit. The flowers started to grow back and pretty butterflies and birds visited her. Then one night it rained very, very hard and mom was buried again. Dad quickly took her in and washed her off. She was then moved to his room that night. Dad stopped sleeping in his room though and it hurt too much to sleep on the couch. Besides, every time someone visited they would ask to see her and their room was never clean enough for visitors. So, no living room, no garden, no bedroom. We we're running out of places and mom was probably getting tired of moving so much. Dad then moved her to the attic and told me that we would release her at the beach or bury her in the dirt of the garden one day but for now she stays in the house.

Juliana Warta is going into her Senior year at Purchase College studying Creative Writing. She likes to write fiction, poetry and screenplays. She was a fiction editor for the literary journal Italics Mine 2023. Her poem "Crisp" was published in Gandy dancer's 2023 literary journal.

Headwind

Elena Zhang

Prelude

Irrational fears towered over me every night when I was young. I was afraid of the dark, the shadows that trees casted on the walls, and the looming silhouettes of the scrunched-up curtains. Trying to not make the wooden floor crack, I would take the perilous journey to my aunt's room, and curl up in her blankets. Even still half asleep, my aunt would put her arm around me, which then let me then finally feel safe to drift to sleep.

Monster car wash

My aunt was technically my mom's cousin, not my aunt, but that sort of complicated kinship never mattered to me. I loved how she made everything an adventure. Even in her mid thirties, she still took me to car shows and toy stores where she would purchase plastic models of race cars.

On every Tuesday, my aunt would pick me up from school and head to the drive-through car wash -- or rather, a brush with the devil as I saw it. The car would be submerged into a dark portal with no sunlight and sight of the outside. The seven-foot squeegees would pound on the car like a monster trying to break through the window, and the machines would slobber on the wind shield. I would close my eyes and imagine that this was the end of my life.

After minutes that felt like years of being trapped inside the monster's void, we would emerge on the other side, the monster releasing us just in time from its death grip. I'd finally let out my breath. "Look at you" she'd giggle in Chinese and shake her head. "If you actually open your eyes, it

won't be that scary."

Open your eyes!

"Why do you love driving so much?"

I was curious about this childlike, unbridled joy she took in anything having to do with motors, wheels, and engines.

"I'll take you on a drive later," she grinned, and I could tell something spontaneous was brewing.

Near dusk, my aunt was already waiting for me in the garage. "Hop in," she said, and pointed to the shotgun. She opened the sunroof, telling me to step on the seat and pop my head outside. Before I could secure my position, the vehicle jolted forward, and I gripped on tight to the top of the car. It was still light outside but you could see the moon's periphery clearly from afar. When we started to hurtle on the streets, the wind blew my hair in my eyes.

"Open your eyes--you're missing the best part!" Before I knew it, we were careening down a hill, through the archway, under a bridge. I let go of one hand and put it in the air-- and for the first time, I was able to feel unafraid and free. Eventually, we stopped on the overlook where I could see the expanse of the city. Networks of lights and street lamps illuminated the darkening skyline, and the urban noises washed into each other.

The Walk home

As a kid, while other girls fancied over dolls and dresses, my aunt established her affinity for





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which eventually she had to return. She did, however, gain a few spanks on her butt and a lesson to never steal again.

Like my aunt, I also had to learn the lesson of not stealing, but thankfully not by spanks. Being in a household that doesn't snack, I was delighted that my sweet tooth could finally be fulfilled when the school store stocked up with fruit rolls, Haribo gummies, and chips. Seeing all the other kids swipe their cards for snacks, I was desperate to do the same, even though I didn't have an allowance on mine. I slid a pack of gummy worms under my shirt. While I thought I did a good job sneaking out casually, I still wasn't able to escape the cashier's glance.

"Hey you! Stop right there." The cashier's voice made everyone turn their eyes on me. "Whatever you took, you better hand it to me. We don't encourage our students to steal at this school." Her strident voice bulldozed my words and left me dumbfounded in front of everyone. I nearly peed my pants.

"Tell me your name and form room -- you will be going to Ms. Ruby's office after school." Ms. Ruby, our school's principal, was a short woman

in her late fifties with a Napoleonic complex, and the last person I wanted to see.

It was a Tuesday, so I knew my aunt would be the one to pick me up from school. The scene of my aunt finding me in the principal's office for stealing, especially stealing snacks, looped in my mind. Usually I couldn't wait for the end of the school day, especially when my aunt was coming to pick me up, because I loved driving home with her, bouncing around to music in her big Toyota. But today, I dreaded every minute the clock ticked down.

Approaching the office, my aunt gave the look. That was the second time I almost peed my pants. After promising Ms. Ruby I will never steal again, she let us off with an unconvinced look. My aunt and I walked outside in ominous silence until we reached the parking lot. Just as I was about to open the car door, she turned to me and placed her hand over mine.

"You," she said without any pity, "are going to walk home today."

She got in the car before waiting for my reaction, and drove off.

The Brown Parcel Box

Elena Zhang



Prologue:

Particles tend to bond with other particles, but when they're separated by any natural or manual process, they tend to stay that way. You would think a log disappears into ashes when it's burned, but science says matter is indestructible, even if it's invisible. Because no matter what physical and chemical changes they undergo, none is created nor destroyed through the process. Everything is matter. You and I are matter.

Part I: The Cube

All sides of a cube have equal dimensions and parallel opposite edges. The sides are flat and smooth with nothing bulging out or caving in. Within the cube, the volume is definite with no empty space.

To commemorate our time together before your upcoming college decisions, you and I transformed a 12x12x12 parcel box into a mailbox, which we kept under our bed and used to exchange bags of chips, apology notes on gum wrappers, unflattering candid polaroids, and codenames in Mei-Po (our made-up language).

Eileen: Welcome! Saturday 5th 6:00 pm November

Today marks our first day of the Mailbox. Please read the following for instructions. Rules:

1. Eileen is always right no matter what.
2. If Eileen does something wrong, remember rule 1.
3. Always seal your envelopes.
4. Keep box out of sight.

These are all the rules that you must abide by. If you have any questions, please write to me. You will find some envelopes, cards, and ziplock bags for future use. Please sign below to confirm your commitment

to the Mailbox and mail it back.

Party 1: Eileen Zhang

Party 2: _____

P.S. For your first gift, here are some grape flavored hichews.

Elena: Hi! Saturday 5th 6:02 pm November
The hichews are delicious but I don't agree with rule 1 and 2.

...

Party 1: Eileen Zhang

Party 2: Elena Zhang

Eileen: Sunday 6th 10:00 am November
Rules will not be reconsidered.

We sat on the floor among pieces of cut cardboard and proudly marked the beginning of our mailbox. In the next two months, our envelopes, candies, and birthday cards piled to the top of the box and filled in all the crevices. The once-rigid box began to swell at the sides, bursting with all our offerings.

Part II: Entropy

Elena: Apology Letter Friday 20th 11:48 pm
January

I'm sorry about what I said last night. I want you to know that everything was out of anger in the moment and I never want you to feel that way again. I hope we can fix everything before you leave.

The second law of thermodynamics states that entropy, or disorder, always increases with time. Nature favors increasing the entropy in a system -- an ice cube at room temperature will melt, corn kernels over a gas flame will pop, a minor skirmish between two people will escalate into a full-blown cold war.

Once New Year's passed, the mailbox was

used less and less. When you told me to move to mom's room because I was too loud, I snapped: "I wish you don't get into any college." You didn't say anything that night, but I could feel something rupture. I was disappointed to find nothing when I habitually checked my mailbox everyday. Even when we reconciled from the cold war in our day-to-day life, my life still felt disrupted without a reply in the mailbox. Although you acted as if nothing had happened, I felt as if the mailbox had already vanished from your world. After I left you the apology note, I waited for you to acknowledge the letter: I averted eye contact, waiting for your confrontation. But my hopes diminished as the days passed and no replies came. Even though you didn't say anything about the letter, after a week or so, you did start speaking to me again. As things returned to equilibrium on the surface, I found it harder to address this growing yet unspoken distance between us and the mailbox that used to bridge our lives. As each day was crossed off the calendar before summer break, the mailbox became less real. When you left that summer, I moved the mailbox to the garage so that I wouldn't have to be reminded on a daily basis of this split that we never sealed.

After you left, mom announced a cleanout.

"You, pile her clothes and books into boxes." Mom assigned me the hard work. "You can keep things, but the rest is going to storage." With the pain from the mailbox still fresh in mind, I sat back on cleaning your things.

"I'm not obliged to clean up after her!" My words came out more enraged than I intended and I could feel mom's look without actually looking at her.

"God, save the temper for someone else," Mom snapped. "Is this such a big deal?" she turned away.

Now that I think of it, maybe what I did was more out of avoidance than grudge. I'm scared of the subtlety that objects carry, and how often your markers, clothes, and comics remind of you who's worlds away from me. The house was reassembled after two whole days of cleaning, and I must say the room looks twice the size without your belongings scattered on the floor.

Even though I'd studiously avoided the packing process, I still decided to scan over your things knowing that it's my last chance to grab something. Your things were separated into two piles: one for storage, the other for recycling. Unfortunately for me (but fortunately for you), all the things that I would possibly want to take were

packed tightly in the boxes. Even more unfortunately for me, however, I saw a pile of cardboard in the recycling pile. Not just any cardboard. I pulled them out and confirmed that it was our cardboard, our mailbox, broken down into unequal square-like pieces with traces of our craft still visible. I dug through the trash bag looking for the letters like a hungry stray cat looking for food, but there was no trace so I assumed the recyclers must have taken them already.

I hold my tears in harder than I hold the torn cardboard, the last remains of our mailbox, and head back indoors.

My mom approached me as I came inside. "What are you doing with that?" she said. "It's going to trash."

Trash. I paused to think of what to say, but I knew that my tears would've burst out at any moment if I let myself explain. So instead, I used anger as my shield again.

"Yeah you're right," I said trembling, "it's just trash, maybe we should tear it down even more, shred it into pieces, and burn it before we dump the ash." I dropped the pieces on the floor and ran away from my mom to save the tears for myself.

I envisioned where the mailbox would end up. Whether compacted, burned, or renewed into new products, I envisioned it coming back to me in another way.

Part III: Conservation of matter

I really thought our lives had separated into two tracks after you went to college, only getting farther and farther apart with time. Out of everything, however, who would've thought that a global pandemic was something that transformed the time I had thought we had lost for good into a reconnection.

In our endless days sharing a room again, we spent all our time sitting on your bed, updating each other on the times that we've lost together. We devised a plan to sneak pizza in the house during midnight without mom hearing. We witnessed the sun set and rise in one long conversation through the night. I felt as if we were kids again--taller, older, but still the same us. Something about our bond made me realize that we didn't need to stay together or do the same things to be connected. That original box is somewhere else now - holding a kid's new sneakers, or a birthday present. I couldn't tell you where or how -- I don't know what shape it is or if it has a 12x12x12 definite volume - but I knew the mailbox had returned to us.



Blue

Elena Zhang

I am both the tickling breeze
running through your hair
and the furious thunder
rumbling in the night.

I am the lapis sky through which
the porcelain moon pierces,
the electric light before the sun sets,
the tranquility of the rain's pitter-patter.

I am, also, the void in your heart,
the residue left by turbulent tides,
the poisonous berry a child hand-picked for her mother, the navy
matters surrounding your dreams.

I am peaceful yet terrifying,
Freeing and caging azure skies.



9 Here is Us

Here is the apartment I used to live in, its dusty corners and peeling wallpaper, its light bulbs we never fixed, the books on the shelf we never flipped through.

Here is where Uncle Cheng lifted me above his shoulders, Where I felt weightless suspended in midair.

Here is grandma's dimly lit tv room, where she told me kids back in her days ate tree bark to stay full. Here is where I was inspired by Auntie Wen's children, their pure laughter and their innocent eyes.

Here is where I saw my mother in a skin-tight navy dress, wearing her favorite scent, Wild Bluebell.

Here is where Grandpa snuck pistachio packets in my pockets, Nuts of happiness, That is the meaning of pistachio in Chinese. Here is where I first heard the sounds of a piano, The discordant before the harmonious. Here is where I ran barefoot as the rain fell hard, on the street that mirrored the sky so perfectly.

Here is the backyard where my aunt taught me how to ride a bike, where she let go of me when I wasn't ready to chase the winds.

Here is the subway that is never on time, Its tired passengers with stories of mundane, extraordinary lives, amidst this jungle of concrete and skyscrapers.

Here is where I took a sip of dad's booze the first time, it burned going down.

Here is where I ran into a middle finger, graffitied over red characters of patriotism on a wall.

Here is where I thought of being not enough I didn't know I had lost something important then.

Here is where I told my sister I hated her without meaning it, where she understood what I tried to say when I failed to, and taught me the power in yielding, in silence, in forgiving.

Here is where I mourned over the diseased, held grandma's thin hand by her sickbed and whispered "It's all fine."

Here is where I watch people exit my life before they stayed long enough. Could anything be enough?

Here where I know I must leave thousands of miles away and hours apart, and someone must unwillingly let go too.

Here is where I stood loud and dirty— Beijing.

Its businessmen, drivers, agnostics, insomniacs;

dreamers and sleepers, lovers and the unloved.

A city of travelers and local strangers bound together by unshared pasts. Here are unspoken apologies, intangible things, and extraordinary human beings.

Here I am, I am here.



Grandpa's Shed



Juliana Warta

When my Grandpa and Grandma weren't snowbirds in The Sunvalley Forges of Florida, Miami my Dad would take my brother and I to visit them at their main home. After some small talk and pictures, my Grandpa would take my brother in the backyard to do yard work and I would do a puzzle with my Grandma. It seemed fair. In our puzzles there was always one piece missing from it but we finished it anyway. It was usually on the outside so you couldn't really notice it, but we knew.

As I watched my brother sweat and shovel in the hot sun, I felt both lucky and offended. I didn't have to do the work but they didn't think I could do it anyway. That, or unfinished puzzles were really important to Grandma. My brother's workload consisted of

Grandpa's Shed - Juliana Warta

leaves, mowing the lawn, moving heavy things that grandpa couldn't and cleaning the pool. Grandpa also had a little yippy pomeranian he couldn't keep up with. It would run around the yard kicking up dirt and leaving little presents, if my brother came upon those that was an extra job for him. While he took care of most things, when he needed something from the shed my Grandpa would get it without hesitation. I figured they were dangerous tools in there and he didn't want my brother getting cut on something. However, I think we rather risk him getting nicked than grandpa falling down and getting impaled on a rake. Still, he never let us in there and I never asked why.

Till, one day my Dad, my brother and I all went to grandpa's house while they were at their summer home. My Dad said we were just picking up the mail but then saw how much the grass had overgrown and booted up the lawn mower. As my brother and I sat on the back steps and watched him go back and forth over the lawn he asked us to go to grandpa's shed, "it should be open, on the wall there is a rake to clean up some leaves." I didn't get up immediately, waiting for my brother to say that we weren't allowed in there or for dad to remember but no one did. Maybe I just made up that rule. So I got up and went to the shed. When I opened the door it made a loud creaking sound and swung open. The rake was where dad said it would be but next to it was a large moose's head mounted on the shed wall and next to that a deer and next to that a wolf. The rest of the wall was filled with rifles and furry little tails, knives and hooves. This wasn't just a tool shed, these were hunting trophies.

Any normal adult would take the rake and go but I wasn't an adult, I was a 9 year old girl and I just saw Bambi's mom's head on the wall and possibly Bambi's hooves. I ran to my father in tears, soaking his red flannel that I clutched onto. Heaving out my words trying to explain the horror that I had witnessed. Grandpa's leaves were never raked that day.

When grandma and grandpa had returned home that summer he had taken my dad and brother on a hiking trip while I stayed at home with my Mom. Usually my Dad would just go but he had made a comment about how my brother was finally old enough to join them while packing up his awfully large duffle bag.

For once, I just felt lucky to be left out.



Her Song

Sadie Cardenas

Sadie Cardenas is a high school student in the Creative Writing conservatory and specializes in writing for the fantasy, horror, and romance genre, and, as a biracial (Irish-Colombian) lesbian author, tries to incorporate as much diversity in her work as possible.

Sadie Cardenas

quieted timbre
major soprano
light is a melody blessing
She sings her song to me
enter harmony.

haunted solo
full of grace
genius symphony
signature serenity
Love was our orchestra.

we compose
Inspire
Endure
dance to hope and rhythm
a sonata in passion
up and always together
through gentle crescendo
Her body lived lyrical in a dream
Radiant
She who lived violently free.

If I touch you
string your path
tempo for tune
feel my truth
too soft, so beautiful.

listen for me
lovely soul
feel it my sweet.

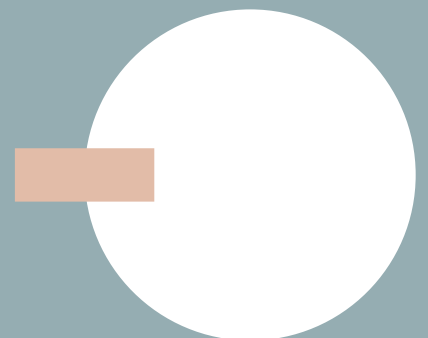
Please.

Saturn in Repose

Vanessa Y. Niu

When Saturn turns its shimmering clavicle to us
This round arcade of curiosities gliding so much like
The swinging motion of childhood swings captured in movement
I can almost hear the shrieking of the hinges floating above the
Laughter of girlhood.

I am forgetful; I have forgotten how white and beautiful the paint
On the triptych hanging above my bed frame is
It has cracked in the time I have been away, staring deep into
This soulful lake frozen over with a layer of mist
—or at least trying to stare deep, a misplaced and hungover stare
I could never see beyond my own reflection in its black surface.
My memory has failed to remind me while I was cold by the lake
The feeling of touch lost, inability to hear anything but the wind, tasting
Salt and Saturn in repose
That the cracks in the white on the triptych were perfumed
The motherly sweetness oozing like sap from an axe-hit tree
—this I have almost forgotten too.
Almost is a saintly word; it promises the Nearly Gone salvation and the
Gone hope
Forgotten is a sickly word, damnation and All That.



I am burning a candle to ward away the cold now
and sitting on the wooden floorboards before the door
Holding vigil for you, in case you decide to come back.
Since you've left there have been ghosts in this slice of innocence
I have touched nothing in fear I would smudge the fingerprints of girl-you
Baptism, as you must be learning, doesn't promise salvation to the past
no matter how clean the holy water may be

Watching Saturn with one blind eye, it is the only one that does not hurt to open,
Is a death sentence, a thread around my neck, wrapping
Down my shoulders, waist, wrists, shins, ankles,
Which perhaps would have connected me to you
Had you not burned it off yourself
Cleansed of your girlhood in the Phlegethon, suspended around Saturn's rings
You must understand you are the villanelle in this story

I can almost see you stepping out of its coiling fire
Like Venus emerging from the seafoam after leaving me in the Acheron.
Perhaps there is a channel underground connecting the two,
I cannot otherwise think of how you could have left.

My candle is nearly burnt out.
I will go light another match—
All my matches have nearly burnt out.
But I know not of worry, because this house is made of wood
And I will burn it plank by plank until you come back.

Vanessa Y. Niu is a young poet and classically trained singer based in New York City. She has been published in several journals, including the Amsterdam Review, and has recently received an honorable mention from CCNY Poetry Outreach Center for her poem, "Atonement." She is now working on a collection of her own, while traveling in search of new experiences and old divinity, but also enjoys learning widely from robotics to modern film theory.

A Shot in the Dark

Shiloh Burger

The Astronaut watched in darkness as the lights went out across the Earth and cities faded to black. It was beautiful yet terrifying watching billions of miles away in the station orbiting the planet while she sat with her two crew members. Every light was off except for the LEDs on the control panel and one red emergency light in the central cockpit. They hoped it would be enough to keep the monsters at bay. Instead, it was silent, and it was unbearable.

"Hey Lora can you replay the message from command again," She said quietly, clearing her throat.

"Commander Nova, I've played it well over ten times now. Do we really need to go through it ag-" Lora starts before Nova stops her mid-sentence.

"Yes, one more time, please" Lora hit a button on the panel, starting a message from command down on Earth. It was cryptic and bleak, but it was all they had for the next 12 hours.

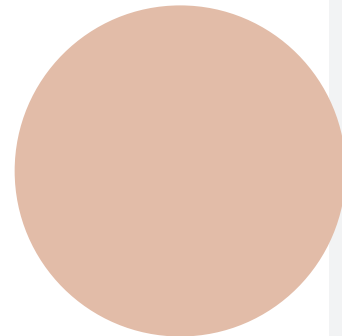
"Farewell, remain hopeful in these dark times. We will be waiting for you in the morning. Do whatever it takes to survive the night. Remember, they fear the dark but will mimic a human voice perfectly. Do not turn on the light."

The intercom played the message and then shifted to loud static before Lora turned it off, plunging the crew back into silence. It was the shaky voice of what sounded like an intern, and the poor boy certainly did not instill hope in the crew. Moreover, the warning lacked the information Nova wished she had. How to fight them, how to lock down the ship, how to know if they were tricking you, how the hell she was supposed to survive the night when the creatures may already be on the damn ship?

"Well, isn't that just wonderful," Nash said from the chair



Shiloh Burger is an aspiring author and artist currently finishing up her Associates of Arts degree. She hopes to one day publish a fantasy novel of her own and work full time as an illustrator.





next to hers, “we don’t know what they look like, supposedly they are afraid of the dark, and they can mimic us? We have been on lockdown for days up here in the dark as a precaution! While our families are down there potentially being killed because, oh yeah! They stole our cloaking technology from the Russian spacecraft sent to Jupiter a month ago!” He was pacing the floor now with his hands in his hair, obviously stressed. His wife just gave birth to his daughter and only child a week ago, and he was losing his mind being separated at times like this. “We need a plan, a way to fight. I refuse to let them take this ship.” Nova said quietly while flipping through her command manual for the section on aliens and enemy craft, something she was surprised to find when she began her training and never thought she would actually use.

“Thank you!” Nash almost shouted, “There has to be some kind of weapon on this ship we can use.” Nash was a born and raised Texan, so naturally, when faced with danger, his first reaction was to shoot first and ask questions later.

“There is!” Lora said excitedly, reading over her shoulder. She then rapidly typed something on the keypad next to the main computer. After she finished typing, a small hidden compartment shot out from the wall. She dropped her hand into it and pulled out a single revolver.

“That’s it?! One revolver! Seriously?!” Nash exclaimed while plopping back down in his chair. Half

a second later, Nova’s eye caught a small flash of gray skin running down the hallway behind them. It made her breath hitch, and her body went rigid. The crew noticed. Nova stood up slowly from her chair and walked to the hall quietly, grabbing the revolver from Lora on the way. Cocking it, she held her finger lightly on the side of the gun at the ready, exactly how her mother taught her. She carefully stepped into the hallway squinting in the dark and searching for the alien.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” said Nash’s oddly calm voice behind her, but Nash was still in his chair, now silent and ghostly white. Then before Nova’s eyes, an exact copy of Nash stepped into the cockpit. Nova didn’t hesitate; she just let the bullet fly from the apparently loaded gun. The clone fell to the ground and looked dead, so she wasted no more time. Breathing heavily, she turned in time to see Nash, the real Nash, dead in his seat with his throat slit, slowly bleeding out in the dark.

“Shoot it, Nova! Before it gets away!” Lora shouted while holding a copy of Lora down against the dashboard.

“No, Nova, don’t please, it’s her that’s fake! Don’t shoot me, please,” the hostage Lora said while restrained. They sounded exactly the same, and Nova was torn. She didn’t know what to do while they both looked at her with eyes pleading. So she pulled the trigger and prayed to every god listening that it hit the impostor, and her crew member was unharmed.

Reese

Haley Kleinman

Her hands were golden, as if baked under runny sun,
Yolk dripping into the palms,
Painting her
In ancient warmth
As her fingers held the cigarette to her lips, which remained pursed,
Perpetually on the verge on singing
Autumn afternoon senior year '08
We stood in the rose colored bathroom,
Laughing over hyperfemininity and profanity,
Words scratched into the walls like prisoners' babble,
But her eyes were forever upward, gazing at the black ink mural
Where countless women stood frozen in time
Women huddled close together under a single umbrella,
Women with flowers growing from their skin like additional limbs,
Women staring up at stars drawn on the ceiling, pointing, praying.
There were bodies and bodies covered entirely in faces, each face screaming,
Eyes hanging from strings out of sockets,
Skin distorted and wrinkled and decaying,
Disintegrating into a fervent wind
She was quiet but the drawings were screaming and I knew from the teary eyed glint in her eyes
that they were hers
She spoke of forgotten people and heartbreak but I couldn't stop thinking about
Her brain
Infinite as the land is wide
She went on about Frida Kahlo, the hundreds of self portraits mere reflections in the pool of
reality, ripples in the fabric of identity, slippery

Haley Kleinman is a sixteen-year-old author from California and has been writing for six years. She has a background in competitive dance and performing arts. Recently, she published her first novel and is currently working on her second in the genre of realistic fiction. When she isn't writing, she's baking, quoting her favorite movies, and impulsively buying new books.

Slippery pieces

And I started thinking about her soul

Its curves molding into mine, devouring

People change in subtle, imperceptible ways, she said

And I wanted to inhale her citrus scent, press the slope of her neck to my mouth to whisper

All the earnest things I could never say out loud

You are the best thing about this universe, the most beautiful invention

But my mouth had already crumbled into oblivion, so I handed her my eyes, which blinked

Furiously against the weight of hers

Demanding not to be revealed

The space between us yawned outward into an abyss, where she stood at the other end

Smiling and knowing

But never speaking

Trading her voice for my dignity

Words, she'd say, how superficial

Guarding secrets which she pretended were still mine and not ours,

Gifting me the silent promise of possibility

And doing so without any hesitation because she was Reese

She was Reese





Vanessa Y. Niu

Mala Fide

In my ear you whisper like a little girl passing a secret
Did you know everything can be broken?
I shook my head; Not everything.
You smile sadly, cloudy-eyed, mist-haloed.

In World War II, I believe you sat there
in the deep state of inertia living things so often find themselves in
watching the atom in the far distance combust,
a lab object, observation in pursuit, putting an end to the inertia
of tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands of people.
Everything can be broken. Everything can be destroyed.
Even atoms can be split, the indivisible fundamental unit of Everything
Even the Titanic sank, the unsinkable ship.

You have seen this small dot of a ship, floating away into the distance
before turning your back on it.

This is what you have done with yourself,
your goodness and your darkness both—I remember on
one bright day in August you wondered aloud what the difference was—
watched both, merging, shifting in and out of one another, slowly drift away
as your own body watched this removal. I wish them well. I wish to never see
either of them again.

I told you you would feel better eventually,
that this emptiness would be soft.

I think it was in World War II that I started lying like my life depended on it
and I never recovered from it, as though I had only discovered something
that was locked away in my genetic code when I was little.
and I think it was before World War II that you were
believing like your life depended on it;
but then the indestructible was destroyed, and destruction is both
the belief-killer and liar's salvation—
one of us emerged complete and I do not need to tell you which.

In my ear, your breath turns cold,
and it screeches like a train halting unexpectedly on its tracks
small fireworks springing from underneath.
In bad faith, destruction is not just explosive.
In bad faith, we are cloudy-eyed, mist-haloed and wishing for rot.

The Fallacy of Destiny

Haley Kleinman

He wasn't always destined for obliteration. None of us are, not really.

Humans see their world through the eyes of unchangeable fate. They pray to gods, selfless gods, holy gods, kindgods (as if this is possible), to choose their destiny, to grip it by the reins and change its trajectory, as if power is fickle nonentity, something unable to be possessed in any natural dimension.

Fortunately, I was not human.

So when Little William Cain blinked into existence, when he defeated the odds of dying before birth and then passed the Test of Worthiness that I failed all that time ago (time couldn't technically pass if I wasn't alive), he was already extraordinary. But when his soul hardened into concrete curves and molded into something permanent—that was the day that I knew I'd met my Salvation. Because Will didn't know it, but destiny wasn't real; there was no fourth dimension, only us and our choices and after ninety-nine years (eons) of non-living, I was the one with the power to discard illusion.

Before: there is no such thing as a body a mind a heart a soul eyes nose mouth in Purgatory. Maybe once upon a time, when we could feel the flow of healthy blood around us in

the womb and listened to the quiet thump thump of a heartbeat, maybe then was the closest we had to sensation. To life. But hopes, dreams, maybe of opening soft eyes and feeling a mother's tears, of holding cupped hands over eyebrows to shield the sun away—possibilities. Those disappeared before anything was Real.

You never know you're being Tested. How could you? When you're in the realm between being and not being, existence and dissolve, how could you know that your destiny (funny word, isn't it?) is being dictated before you even have the chance to know it yourself?

The Creator looked at me and didn't like what she saw. Damnation was my punishment/calling/fate. Purgatory. Similar to hell, but not nearly as inviting. Trap me into these walls, bind me by my undone evils, my possible (there's that word again:) destiny. Try to drown me out but I. Hear. Everything.

After: It all froze the moment I felt him. Will. Little William Cain. Every noise snuffed out like a candle. Birds screamed. Trees exploded. Neighboring souls collided to make room for the force of his arrival. The Creator had spoken and given me a chance.

up, before Purgatory dumped me out of the universe and into the blank expanse of non-existence. Into the emptiness, nothingness, gone-ness that no being or spirit can possibly understand. When every second burns up against you like a whip and your soul has no room in this crowded shelter to spread, to expand, death (if you can call it that), was a luxury.

Spirits waited for its clutches eternally, waited for the grim reaper to give up on their Salvation and save them from the In-Between. I too craved release. I felt myself grinding, shrinking. I felt the grim reaper himself creep into me and sear me from the inside out and when he left, I was without a conscience. Or so I thought.

The Creator spoke to me three words: Use this wisely.

"This" was the impossible. "This" was a second chance. I waited nine years after Will was born. I spent nine years planning how to do this, how to act on this Bond. Only when I was completely ready was my blindfold lifted.

In one brilliant motion, the world had color. The world was. Blue eyes and tan hair and buck teeth. Chubby little hands. One chance. From the depths of Damnation, I was thrust into Earth like an Asteroid. When I saw Will for the first time, truly, I understood him more than I had ever understood anything (and quite frankly, I knew everything). The Creator had granted me access as a Shadow. I crept along the wall, still formless, still limp, soul aching and aching (what for?). But I was, in some way, real.

I waited for him to see me. I

waited for him to return the Bond. After he left his classroom, waving goodbye to his teacher and then skipping into the field, he looked briefly over his left shoulder and in doing so, saw me. He froze. His eyes widened and I heard it—the click. The moment that the stars aligned and I changed my (our) destiny. Our minds were linked. His consciousness was vibrant and colorful, curious and loud. Thoughts bumped together only to dissipate, and his senses tried and failed to identify me. I kept my presence small, meek. I didn't want to scare him off, didn't want to take up more space and lose his trust. But he wasn't scared. He was excited.

Hi, I said.

His thoughts exploded. I was shoved to the side while his consciousness laid claim to the space. That was okay. I was all right with being cramped for a little while. It was only temporary. One day, he and I would coexist—me a Passenger inside his mind and he the Driver. Who are you?

He was beginning to calm down. My words were a hum. Friend. Silence. Uncertainty. Anticipation. What's your name?

I'd never had a name. A name is privilege for the living. No one acknowledges the Damned. I considered. You pick.

This made him happy. Hm. How about... Jack!

I like that name. Tell me your name. As if I was so ignorant.

I'm William. You can call me Will.

It's a pleasure to meet you, Will.

Will went to his mother's car

and opened the door. When he did, I felt it. Felt it like a thunderclap. The sensation was marvelous, heady, real. It was something to latch onto through time and space and where I had once been floating and floundering, I was now concrete. What a wonder it must have been, to be alive. It made that sense of aching come back, made that bitterness seep into my every movement. All I wanted was a taste, was that so bad? Freedom, I thought, was something I had earned with my silence, my subservience. Enough of that.

As Will sat down and his mother smiled at him, his joy flowed through me like a river, contagious, sweet, kind. And briefly, as quickly as one might take a breath, I thought I might die to have someone look at me like that.

She's beautiful, I told Will. She loves you.

She's my mom, he replied boredly. She has no choice but to love me.

And how lucky is that?

Will spent the rest of the car ride telling his mom about his school day while she sat there and listened intently. The boy was fortunate to an unfathomable extent. I supposed that when he was ready to let me in, his life may be mine as well, and all the things he got to enjoy would be shared with me.

I left Will in silence until he (we?) got home. I could feel Will's eagerness to get upstairs, his desire to continue our conversation. He was beginning to think of me as some kind of fairy godparent, some kind of angel sent to heed his wishes. Will was a selfish boy. He misunderstood me entirely. But I supposed he

couldn't have been any more selfish than me, for we both longed for that long-promised salvation, the chance to be someone else.

Will entered his room, a blue square with tan carpet and dinosaur bed sheets. Cartoonish paintings of sunsets and oceans were scattered across his walls, no doubt that work of his mother who had all the seeming of a Pottery-barn dweller, a home store extraordinaire, a proponent of English classics. She was a romantic who hoped her son might be the kind of boy who holds open doors for old ladies and kisses her on the cheek before leaving for school. She, like Will, was a blind believer in destiny. But unlike Will, she enjoyed being powerless, enjoyed believing that the world could have its way with her. She was weak and I knew it. She was a creature that acted on fear. Then, so suddenly, a command shook me, hard and unrelenting; it came to me almost without my volition: She needs to go.

It was a certainty that left me floating, reaching into Will's consciousness for safety, for nervous confirmation that that thought had come from him instead of me. No luck. When Will sat down, mind no longer on guard, I felt my soul reach out with shaking fingers, breaking its balled-up mold to extend further into the haven of Will's brain. He felt it and he let me, granting me the space to stretch, to better feel the air through his limbs. I reached for more. Will flopped down on the bed and I claimed the sensations all to myself, let myself pretend his body was my own and that I was the one with beautiful arms that had the ability to touch and hold and feel. That

I was anything but Damned.

I'm tired, Will told me, and he was telling the truth. His eyes wanted to close. Don't fall asleep, I said, nearly demanded. There was so much to see, to feel, to experience. He couldn't sleep. Don't you have homework?

Will didn't answer. Instead, he turned his eyes to the ceiling. I became miserable then. As the Creator's hold on me loosened and Will's tightened, I began to see my new reality clearly, and it was nothing that I ever hoped it would be. My new life would be no less a prison than Purgatory had been. I was still expected to be small, servile. I was expected to follow orders, serve as a wageless entertainer for the miniscule and eventually pointless compensation of watching the world pass by, with no power to truly seize it.

This was no reward. Anger—it was hot and immediate. And it had demands. The voice, that petrifying, electrifying voice, returned. This time, stronger. Break free.

I was frantic. I called out to it. How?

No response. Will's voice came to me again. He wasn't tired anymore. Jack? Yes, Will?

Are you real?

Of course I'm real.

Will was uncertain. You mean, I didn't make you up?

I was growing restless. I was trying to make do of my limited space, but I couldn't manage this for much longer. I needed a new plan. The Creator always said that the co-residency needed to be established by an agreement, by the consent of the host. But...what if he

didn't agree? What if he wanted me gone?

No. You didn't make me up. I shifted around, pushing outward slightly so that Will would feel me there, feel my mind pressing against his. He wouldn't refuse me, would he? Not if I could promise to make his life better. Not with the addition of my intellect to his own.

Will laughed out loud. Will?! I was alarmed. Will, stop that. Your mom will hear. That tickles, he said, still laughing. It feels like your brain is tickling mine. You can't tell anyone about me, Will, okay? I stopped pushing against his mind, but I didn't retract my presence. Just like that, I expanded my space, set a new border. He didn't even notice. Promise me you won't tell anyone.

His laughter subsided. His thoughts narrowed, became sharper. I realized my mistake. He felt indignant now, scolded. Will, I started, trying to make amends.

What do you mean, I can't tell my mom?

I scrambled for an answer.

You—you just can't.

Why?

Because if you do, I'll have to leave. And you don't want that, right? We won't be able to talk anymore, and I won't be able to be your friend.

He was silent, contemplating. I could feel that he wanted my company but was unsure of what that entailed. I don't know.

Why not?

I don't really know you, Jack.

Of course you know me. I can be anything you want. I can be anything you need. And you do need me Jack. I needed him to believe that. It

was how I could convince him to let me stay. Suspicion. So you can help me with my homework?

Yes, sure.

And you're good at math?

I'm excellent.

What's five times four? he tested. What's ten times ten?

Twenty and one hundred.

Silence.

Will was deliberating. I have to ask you something. Something important. The Creator's eye was on me now, her presence awakened by the words that might lead to something deeper, might open the doors for my eventual proposition. My response could make or break this operation. I could feel the Creator's heartbeat alongside Will, urging me on. There is only one second chance. She repeated her warning. Use it wisely.

Can you make sure he doesn't hurt me? Will's thoughts turned frantic, images blurring fast and far and out of my focus. Each time one began to close in, Will shoved it away, afraid that if he even looked at it, it would kill him. So this was his Big Fear, his enemy. Who is he, Will? Show me.

After a minute, his thoughts stopped swirling until eventually they settled, settled, and landed on the picture of a man. He wore dirty jeans, a plain black shirt. His white shoes had transformed into a faded brown, the laces gone. He was carrying a football in his right hand, which was double the size of the ball and heavily calloused. His face was red and burnt, crinkles formed prematurely around his eyes. He looked like he grew up too quickly, like he spent his days trying not to get sucked under the current. His

eyes were black and his face—it was screwed into a frown.

Though I couldn't quite tell, he seemed to be yelling. The vision was from Will's perspective and his hands were extended outward in anticipation of the ball. The man threw a clean spiral to Will. Will missed it. The man turned his face away, frustrated, and Will was busy mumbling something tinged with sorrow and shame. He ran after the ball while the man watched him sharply, eyes hard, and for a moment, something flashed in and out of them, something dark, dangerous. He blinked once, hard. Will was crying in his memory, wails tearing through the grassy field. "Dad!" he said. His father stalked toward him, and when he seized Will savagely by the shirt, lips parted in a snarl, the vision abruptly dissipated.

Will's heart was racing. I was speechless. Will's fear was the only thing I felt and it consumed me. I wanted to live inside that fear. I wanted to steal it as my own. Oh, what it must be like to feel. To be a real thing, to be a part of the intricate system of the living, a world where everything matters. I thought about Will's father's hand, drawn back, his knuckles curled tightly around Will's shirt. He was powerful and strong. He had arms that could destroy, a body that could inflict pain. What is it like to hurt someone? To be hurt? How does it feel to have confirmation that the world has chosen us to exist, that we are not just beings but humans worthy of taking up a physical form?

I wasn't sorry for him at all. I was jealous. How did Little Will have all this? Why was he allowed to have

Fears and Feelings and Family and why—why for the love of all things holy—was his life not mine?

Jack? He had the audacity to inject reluctance into his voice. My anger robbed me of my words. Jack?

That dark voice came to me again, the one that didn't belong to me. Break free. Will, I said quietly. What are you afraid of?

Didn't you see? He hurt me. I chose my words carefully (Break free, break free). And, Will, how did it feel when he hurt you?

A pause. Scary. I didn't know how to fight him.

Fighting him. Will's consciousness shifted, just a little. He was making more space, allowing me more room to invade. He wanted me to guide him, I figured, to lead him through this. And what do you want from me? There was a sharp inhale as Will let me expand. I was taking up about one third of his mindspace, the capacity I was meant to be at; I was, for all purposes, ready to be his Passenger. All I had to do was ask him. He had trusted me, let his thoughts flow through me freely. But his body is still his, I thought bitterly. This world isn't mine.

Break free. My spirit halted and that ominous voice whispered to me. I felt my desires harden, mold into a decision. I was never meant to be a Shadow. I was not meant to be confined. The Creator was afraid of what I could do, so she put me away. But now...I wasn't in Purgatory, was I? I wasn't blind; I wasn't trapped. And I had a body.

I want you to protect me, Will pleaded. Will you protect me, Jack? His mind shrunk down, moved. He backed away in offering. More room

in exchange for protection. The kid had shown up to a poker game with a bouquet of roses. And he really couldn't read faces.

I took the space and then some, pushing him back and back. His conscientiousness wiggled uncomfortably against the pressure. Although I could sense his distress and concern, that was nothing compared to his Fear. His Fear that I vowed to adopt and see as anything but. If I protect you, will you do something for me?

Anything.

He was still moving aside as I spoke, trying and trying to give me what I wanted, to convince me. He thought he had the upper hand. I almost laughed. After a moment, he jolted to a stop. I was at almost three quarters capacity. But Will's conscientiousness was stuck. It was squeezed as tiny as it could be and though I could feel Will trying, he couldn't move any more. I had gained access to more of his feelings, to his thoughts, and I could feel that if I wanted, I could insert my own musings into his thoughtstream. But I was still a visitor, still left utterly up to the mercy of his actions. It wasn't enough.

The words were sharp, hard. A command: take over. And then it clicked. Go to sleep, Will.

He was struggling against the loss of power, the energy that he had been sharing with me. As soon as I said it, his eyes wanted to close. He was helpless against the pull; I merely held his hand, guiding him toward darkness.

What? he asked foggily. What do you—

Shhhh. It's okay, you can rest

now.

What are—?

I'm going to protect you, Will.
But you need to let me.

How?

I was forcing my way into his motor cortex, shoving his eyes shut. Adrenaline burst through him like wildfire. No. No. What are you doing, Jack?

I'm going to protect you, Will.
I'm going to make you safe.

Jack—what... Jack, Jack, stop!
What are you doing?

Will's power was fleeting, and what he didn't know was that there was only one thing that made him more defenseless than sleeping: fear. I suddenly had access to every inch of his mind and body. Every single part of it was in my grasp, but Will, he tried pushing against me. He started screaming. Loud, shrill, sharp. He was desperate.

"Mom!" he shrieked and in that moment, he was nothing but a transitory mass. A glimpse of a soul that was soon to be forgotten. I thought that there was only one test, one chance for me to prove myself Worthy of life—a test where I was incompetent and Will was victorious. But it turns out Worthiness is something you can grow into. And I was not going to waste my opportunity.

I silenced Will's screams by slapping his own hand over his mouth. Fear escalated into an inferno and with each second that passed, I held onto more and more of his mind. His brain molded into me perfectly, welcomed my knowledge. It knew that I was the more capable host. Better yet, it knew that I was Worthy.

The front door slammed closed

from downstairs and I could hear his mother hurrying to pry off her gardening gloves. She was sickeningly naive. So when Will's screams turned to silence, when the visions of darkness that plagued his frightened brain morphed into my fantasies of blood and carnage and control, when Little William Cain blinked out of existence just as easily as he'd come in, she didn't notice a difference.

Her feet thudded up the stairs. I was weightless, an absolute feather. Destiny kneeled before my feet.

She was screaming Will's name. Who's Will? I thought. My eyes were pressed closed and I was listening intently to the thrum of blood coming out of my heart, into my lungs, into my brain. And when I commanded my eyes to open and my hand to brush the hair from my youthful face, they obeyed.

Mom opened the door, gasping for air, her eyes wide and frightened. She was clutching her heart for me. Because she loved me. Because she had to. And what a beautiful thing that was. "Will?" she said.

She held me in her arms, wrapped me up in the heaven of her perfume. And when her skin brushed against mine and her whispers traveled through my ears with oblivious and unconditional compassion, I was reborn.

"You can call me Jack."

Philosophy:

The Playful Porpoise is a literary magazine created by and for youth across the globe. This magazine's mission is to give young writers an international, online platform to showcase their voices through their skills in all realms of writing. Because of the difficulty many young writers face in getting published in general literary magazines and spaces due to competition with more experienced and seasoned writers, The Playful Porpoise accepts submissions only from young writers to promote equal opportunity. All writers ages 12 to 21 may submit to the magazine for the opportunity to be published and recognized.

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Colophon:

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Issue III - Metamorphosis: Loss & Growth
Youth Literary Magazine, ages 12-21