

BreakBread Magazine

**VOLUME 3, ISSUE 5
WINTER 2023**



FICTION • POETRY • ART • NONFICTION

BreakBread Magazine

Volume 3, Issue 5

Winter 2023

a home for young creatives

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A Special Thank You to The Poetry Foundation who generously offered the 2022 Renewal and Recovery Grants which built upon previous COVID-19 pandemic relief grants from the Poetry Foundation that were awarded in 2020 and 2021 to 128 US-based nonprofit organizations. Seventy-nine organizations were chosen for the grant aid and we were fortunate enough to be chosen as one of the recipients. We want to thank The Poetry Foundation for their \$10,000 grant, their help, and their support to the artistic world.

A Special Thank You to the Villena-Aldama Foundation for providing a generous gift to *BreakBread Magazine*, which offered the opportunity to present the first Villena-Aldama Art & Writing Contest. The contest offered a \$250 prize to winners in each genre the magazine publishes: fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and art/hybrid forms. Winners were announced in June 2022 with their work featured in this issue of the magazine.

We Would Also Like to Thank:
Myra Kamal, Kaili Oto, Sophie Szew, Gabrielle Backman, Julian Perez

Cover photo by Bernice Zhu, "The American Immigrant's Dream"

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EDITOR'S NOTE

W. David Hall, Editor-in-Chief

I: Reflection

Welcome to the Winter 2023 issue of *BreakBread Magazine*.

Imagine that. 2023.

I am writing this note in late 2022, in that time/space between Thanksgiving and Christmas, where cups of good cheer are infused with hints of sadness for What Came Before and garnished with sprigs of hope for What Is To Come. For us here at BreakBread, we celebrate entering our fourth year of existence. Not too bad, considering the rather cutthroat world of indie publishing, social activism, shoestring budgets, and physical separation. We started this as a measure of faith in the crazy idea that young creatives needed to be seen and heard, and we continue unwaveringly in that faith. Normally, I would highlight one or two pieces that stand out, draw focus on a line or image that has resonated with me personally. This time around, I ask you to seek out those pieces on your own. Thoroughly read each offering in a genre you might otherwise skim. Sit with the beautifully unnerving art. Each page holds a seed of hope for What Is To Come, for both the magazine and for the world.

Such is the mission of BreakBread.

Having said all of that, changes, *significant* changes, are part of What Is To Come. We are giving a panel discussion at the 2023 AWP conference entitled "Decolonizing Your Organization: BreakBread Literacy Project Model," featuring the founders of BreakBread, along with others who help mold and shape our energy and passion into what you see before you and beyond. So what does it mean to decolonize an entity like BreakBread? For starters, it means having some hard conversations about who we are as individuals and as an organization. Hard conversations about hierarchy (which we profess not to have but kinda do) and the definition of power and its distribution within the organization. Hard conversations about the role of old people guiding a youth centered organization. These kinds of conversations tend to shake things a bit, like separating wheat from chaff.

Some things stay; others go. But what is built in the aftermath is often better and stronger.

One of the first things we can do to decolonize is to reach out to you, dear reader, for input. Whether you are reading this hot off the press or weeks/months/years afterwards, whether you are a contributor (or hope to be), a friend of the family, an educator, or just a casual observer, please make your way to one of our social media sites and tell us what you think. One of the biggest pitfalls in serving any community is assuming that you are doing the work of actually serving that community when you aren't. Now is the time for any course corrections.

II: Celebration

A BreakBread First: The winners of the first Villena-Aldama Writing & Art Contest are published here! They are:

- *The Myth of Sisyphus* by Sachi Parikh (Art)
- *Go Back to The Shedd* by Ileana Bo (Nonfiction)
- *Loose Parts* by Alexandra Dauchess (Fiction)
- *a left-handed red* by Noor Ali (Poetry)

Along with publication, each winner received \$250 through a generous gift from the Villena-Aldama Foundation. Huzzah!

Special thanks to our esteemed judges (Hanif Abdurraqib (nonfiction), Kate Norris (fiction), Phil Taggart (poetry), and Zach Orsborn (art)) for their time in making the final selections for the contest, a task that seems impossible, given the avalanche of wonderful, thoughtful, and exceptional pieces that were submitted.

III: Dedication

On November 5, 2022, my mother-in-law, Delores Jean Davis, passed away. I can't say that she understood every word or image in our print editions, but I will say that she read the magazine with enthusiasm and supported us completely because young people were important to her. I dedicate this issue to her memory.

W. David Hall

November 28, 2022



A LEFT-HANDED RED

Noor Ali - Poetry Winner

night in pakistan is deafening
we walk behind lines and lines of men
in tiny plastic chairs
each with a cigarette in one hand and a lighter in the other
and their booming conversations

the sky glows red
lit behind clouds of petroleum and cigarette smoke
as if it is littered with the blood of all the women whose voices
were burned by the lighters in the left hands of men
and silenced in the night that was never theirs.

the sky grows blacker
and our day begins

american days are suffocating
we fold into the spaces they leave behind
falling behind squared shoulders
and beer cans held by thick and burly fingers

our mountaintops are red
underneath the sharp brown of grass
as if they are built upon the bones of all the women whose throats
were wrapped by the left-handed fingers of men
and silenced in the day that was never theirs.

MY DEAD GRANDFATHER READS ME MY HOROSCOPE DURING MY WEEKLY INFUSION

Oliver J Brooks

Great things lie in store, he tells me,
as long as I clip coupons and
practice qigong. It would be wise
to try out cryotherapy or experiment with new hobbies.
I tell him that shooting marbles does not count
as a hobby anymore—the nurses yell at me if I try.
(This must be because I am an angry Aries, too long
accustomed to defending myself with flashing teeth.)
The horoscope's advice? Use this time to accept
the song of the heart. (I bite
back a remark about the heart faltering.)
My lucky color is sallow and my lucky number
is forgetting to call the pharmacy before I fall asleep.
Finished, he folds the newspaper into a hat, or maybe a sailboat,
and rests it on my blanketed legs.
The ghost of his genetics keeps me company
during my treatments, which, one moon from now,
shall be complete. As if attuned to my thoughts, he instructs
that at that time, we shall commune no more.
I nod. He nods. We dip as if bobbing for apples
a dozen Halloweens ago. The heart
is about the size of an apple, he remarks wryly.
Avoid letting larvae into the core. (That's his add-on,
not the paper's poor attempts at proverbial wisdom.)
He admits he knows nothing of astrology
but a little about the heartstrings,
those cherished filaments. I try to tell him
my heart is not the thing in me that is rotting
but he is no longer there.

WALKS

Emma Chan

The world breathing in syrup. Your hand a crackle
of promise in my palm. How last week's cold rain smooths itself into a plane
of wanting below the bridge, widens its limbs into what it is meant
to be without shame. Here, a girl pointing to the burning
sky. Here, our feet and tar-caked concrete and light
-sharp wings. How there is sun and more sun just like I have love
and more love for you. Look: the wind
-song rakes itself through the remnants of our youth.
Listen: even the shells of spring are looking
for a place to plant their roots. We are flirting
with the idea of being buried for these sins, or at least passing
together through the slick film of memory, because the body is only as beautiful
as what it passes through, because the trees are softening into
memory, because the shadow of your legs in the crook of autumn's arms
are a new kind of myth that I'm already beginning to write.

MOTHER, YOU FRIGHTEN ME

Stephanie Fuentes

Light filters through the window like the roll of a monsoon,
the kitchen brimmed white and slowly able to erase
the blood on the floor.

It's about fingers twined, the slant of
your legs like an eyebrow, your tongue
split into three sections, serrated just enough so
that you are all the more
serpentine and sunken lips.
The afternoon teeth salt.

Tread *lightly*, mother. I am scooping melon into a glass bowl. My
nightgown
pills around my ankles and I am suddenly ravenous
not for this fruit but for the pulls of your heartstrings: to tie myself a noose
inside of you until my cheeks are gorged in
blue and your underwater. We have already died together,

many times. You and I: the pulverization of this
love; we fought through the walls like
ravaged wolves. We choked on the silt
of each other's hands. We cycled past the beaches that hid our remembrance.
So many times I believed
we could still be sleepless, warm and milk-mouthed.

I would like to imagine myself as smooth inside my own shadow as when I
slipped
into men in the glow of this microwave light.
The sunlight does not quite reach this corner of the kitchen.
There is flour in the sink, grapevines curled.
Mother, your body, too, basted
onto the cold tiles like a fallen marionette. You are colored from the
rind of a lychee, and I see how the rest of my body, the part that is not holding a blade,
inches towards you and muzzles your
skin in the folds of my arms, my plea for our parting,
for the splitting *see this is the real death, your final death*
to happen over and over and over and over again
till I am sure it is you and not me that is
dying; till I am sure I am able to breathe in and you don't
and finally, *finally* it is not
water which seals my lungs.

SPECIAL AIR QUALITY STATEMENT

June Lin

The smoke, projector film across the horizon.
The sun, devil-eyed and brooding.
The day before yesterday I went for a walk
and felt the breaths scrape and rattle
down the vending machine column of my throat
with every step.
Still, we walk out the door every morning. Still,
we hope for a day where we can see a yellow sun.
It's luck. It's the shitty luck combined with the infinite hope
in shitty prospects instead of our tiny bodies
shriveling under the smoke-smeared sky.
I used to wake up and know,
in my bones, that I would be okay.
Not anymore. But what can you do about it?
Pray to someone who isn't listening? Sit and wait for the hiss
of the telephone to slither out of your other ear?
I'd rather go for the walk, rather cough every hundred meters
and argue with you about whether a bee
would sting a log if one fell on it. I think it would,
futile aggression in every direction, but you seem to think
that bees are a lot smarter than they actually are,
stubborn in your faith that the world will deal us
better cards than it has in store. Despite everything,
you are always on the best side, and I'm going to pack that up
in a takeout container and bring it with me
once our house crumbles into ashes.
As the fire coughs its phlegm at us from Timmins,
my horrific little dream in the heat of the morning,
I just want to lean on your shoulder as the sky melts
from the edges, flame licking at paper
licking at hand.

GOOD BOY

Rigel Portales

I saw the prayer / hide
in the dog / I saw the dog
hide / how he lived /
Good boy / now give.

TRENCHES

Saheed Sunday

i.
i showed mother the scar on my membrane
& she bursts out light like glyphs
she says to sweat the gust of glitches down my
sebaceous glands, to culture a body is to drown it
into a brook of drowsing pleas.
 dear Lord, find my eyebrows some sunshine
 it has worn too much night for long

ii.
i wonder how to etch notes of birdsongs
on my chest, like an itching hand savoring oily
trails, parch lines like sesame, salty blades of
fingernails. A single crack in my chest means
i'm becoming a figment of my mother's imagina-
tion & a wave of my father's echoes.
 dear Lord, plant my heart a grain of breath
 it has worn too much infertility like cape

iii.
i stretch my hand to collect the nomenclature
that limps on my lips, into a punnet of amniotic fluids:
how do I clarify what my palms ambush without
breaking into a stench of buried leaves? & that
the name of god I carry on my tongue is getting
soiled into a ring of spittle, vanishing with the
smoke my father puffs into the god's red eyes
I might have as well-found solace in
wrapping my hands around cigars than
burying them into a sequence of rosaries.

iv.
 imagery: a boy is gathering his faith
 into the holes of a basketball net

& every time devotion knocks to bury me into a pit
of its clench —this is how I reverse the burial:
I puff light through my chest, & swear I hold no water.

CANCER

Ziyi Yan

something blackens inside.
maybe it is stomach acid, after blanching my tongue
in bitter chocolate. i am scared something will shatter
if I smack my lips.

mom clings to the landline phone, ripped from the stand.
the screen pulses orange. somewhere across the world there are hands
who worship this same heartbeat—
there are fingers that must hold a face, but
i can only picture limbs
splayed like arteries, singed, sewn shut.

i cling to my sister and her limbs are crushable.
maybe this is as good as love gets—
it doesn't eat organ after organ and punch through the flesh
like that other thing.

my sister squirms and tells me to get off.
my dad makes another wire transfer, says it's the way of the world.
i carry my own body instead, slip upstairs. i know
the goddamn world, i
lie on the floor
and make friends with my toenail clippings,
snap them in half like all the words I didn't write—
callus, branches, hold—

i stare at the hospital-white ceiling
and it might be the last thing I see
too.

someone told me you can't write well about anything
until it's dead to you.
and i can't decide if i've written this well enough.

GO BACK TO THE SHEDD

Ileana Bo - Nonfiction Winner

I leave her in the aquarium. She waits in there—at the Shedd, in Chicago.
Her little mozzarella stick fingers clutch the bulky keys to the room with the
wrap-around tank so that she can get in just as the summer sun rises, watching
from behind the glass as the light trickles through wavy lines of blue water like
honey through hot tea. She is alone, except for Coca Cola (her stuffed monkey
whom she brings on all of her adventures), the fish in the wrap-around tank,
and the sharks who hold her safely in their silver circle shark eyes. They swim
in wavy lines as the skylights above them paint their skin in glitter and light
gray and white patterns.

As the sun rises she stands there, small and surrounded by fish but no
people. It's nice this way, without people. No rough, unwashed hands leaving
dirt crumbs wherever they touch or yellow tongues and teeth or nail polish
smelling breath. Just a friendly, soft monkey and friendly, smooth fish
watching over her.

She is safe here—here, where I've left her, in the morning as the sun is
rising and the fish are sparkling and the people are still sleeping. She visits the
stingrays on the other side of the room and, occasionally, she departs to find
the octopodes who hide in the walls of water. She does not leave the Shedd,
though. She is safe in the Shedd, where soft blues and sunlight babyproof the
sharp edges of reality.

I only have forty-five minute sessions with Emma because my schedule only
allows fifty-five minutes between my two afternoon classes. The child waits
in the aquarium for me, knowing that when my clean fingers curl around
her wrist it's time to go. She knows when Emma whispers, "Is she ready to
come out?" that the pink hand of my brain will reach back to the safer places
of my mind, attempting to peacefully interlace its fingers with her reluctant
mozzarella stick ones before pulling her wrist along until her stubborn body
grows tired and gives in.

Today's too cold to walk, so Vic drops me off, tucking a too big flower from
Beno's Flowers behind my ear as we pull up to Emma's office. We're talking

about what we should watch tonight on my projector.

"I'm just saying, I think it's about time you watch *Ponyo*! I don't know why you've been putting it off so goddamn long," I say as she finishes securing the flower. She rolls her eyes at me and wrinkles her nose, like the movie has a putrid smell.

"You recommend the same thing every night! We'll watch it someday when the time is right. Tonight I say we watch *Attack on Titan*, there are so many episodes you still haven't seen!"

"You recommend *AOT* every night too! You're such a hypocrite!" She facepalms and groans at me, and I laugh at her drama and rub her back through her feather-filled jacket for reassurance. "It's okay, we'll figure it out tonight—it'll be good either way." She nods enthusiastically (probably very aware of the fact that I will give in to *Attack on Titan*) and wishes me a good session, promises she'll be back in forty-five minutes to take me to class.

Before I leave the car, she fixes the flower in my hair one more time and kisses me on the cheek, once again tells me to have a good session and say hi to Emma for her, then waves goodbye and I leave her car, exiting into the harsh white air of winter.

Emma is waiting for me in her office when I arrive, legs crossed under her velvet green dress. "Oh hello! Welcome!" she says, her smile warming the air from fresh green to citrus orange. I greet her and sit down on the couch across from her.

"Vic says hi," I say, nervous for some reason even though I've known Emma for years now.

"Aw, sweet! Are things good with her right now?" I remove the flower from my hair to fiddle with the petals.

"Yeah, things are pretty good. Still keepin' it PG but she's super understanding." Emma nods and tells me she's glad to hear that. "How are you?" I ask quickly, wanting to beat her to it because once she asks how I am that's when the session starts, and small talk is over. She tells me that she's doing well, that she's tired but probably just because the sky is so gray. I tell her that the gray sky makes me feel tired, too, and that it's far too cold. She agrees before asking me how I am and I tell her I'm okay.

"What would you like to focus on today? I know you're going to Seattle this weekend—do you want to talk about that?" I take a deep breath and nod. "Okay, how would you like to do this? Should we start where we left off?" I nod again, telling her that sounds good. Emma smiles, then asks, almost apologetically, "Is she ready to come out?"

The child gives in a little more easily each time, stubborn body tired from

standing at the shark tank for so long. She's touching her nose to the glass when my hand arrives, and she sighs before falling into the pink mush of my brain's palm so I can sit her atop my frontal lobe in the viewing area. *I just don't feel like it today*, she pouts, her raspberry lips licked and extra red and her big brown eyes watchful of the pink hand.

She sits on the cushion of my brain and looks through the window I created in my mind for her a few sessions ago. She peeks out into the therapy room, both arms wrapped tightly around Coca Cola's large monkey-stomach, and grumbles about how she'd rather be near the water and near the sharks. I tell her to hush, wait for her frustration to fade and her grumblings to quiet. When she's finished and quiets into submission, I say to Emma, "she's ready."

"Okay. Is there anything she would like to say to start?" *I wanna go back to the Shedd.*

"No, I don't think so."

"How's your body feeling right now?" *Bubbly.*

"Anxious."

"And where do you feel that in your body?"

"My stomach and my chest."

"Is there anything that you can think of that would help your body right now?" *Sharks.*

"I think just some deep breathing, really quick," I say. Emma nods and closes her eyes. I follow her lead and close mine. I take deep breaths. I think to the child, "you will be back with the sharks in a bit. I just would like to listen to you. I'm here to listen. I love you—I do. Please allow me to listen." She is quiet—understanding, I think. This is only our third session together, and I've learned that the best way to her is through love and compassion. She is the victim here, in need of a gentle, pink hand to hold. If she does not feel safe, she will not speak, and without her voice I have nothing. All I have is her fear, chewing away at my brain like bubblegum.

I open my eyes to see that Emma has already opened hers. "Ok, I'm ready."

"Ok, let's start with this: when I mention your brother, what's her response?" *I don't know. Not good.*

"It makes her nervous." *Nuh uh, not nervous. Afraidness.* "Or maybe nervous is the wrong word. I'm not sure. Maybe she's afraid, I think?" My face is warm and I sound flustered—like I'm lying. And, quite honestly, I do often question both the child's and my own authenticity. I wonder if Emma does, too.

"And what does she think of when she thinks of your brother?" *Mean. Hands on my throat.*

"Hands. Like, on her throat." Emma takes a moment to write this down on

the yellow pages of her notepad. I watch my fingers fiddle with the flower.

“Is there a specific memory that comes to her mind?”

“Well, yes. I mean, he used to choke her all the time.” *Until my face was burning and my eyes were popping.*

“Is there a specific time she can think of?” *By the pantry, in the mudroom.*

“In my parent’s house in the mudroom. He put his hands around her throat and pushed her against the wood of the pantry so hard that it cracked a bit. It was still cracked, last I checked. My mom sold the pantry last year, though. She was actually there when it happened that time, I think. I don’t remember why he did it. He did it often, though.” *He did it for fun. Because he hates me.* No, not for fun. He doesn’t hate you. He didn’t just do it for fun. *How do you know?*

“How’s your body feeling?”

“Floaty, kinda.”

“Would you like to do some more breathing or any grounding exercises?”

“No, that’s okay. I just want to continue.”

“Okay.”

There’s a pause while Emma writes more things in her yellow pages, and I pick at petals while the child thinks about the Shedd again, flashing me pictures of water with honey sunlight dripping through it and schools of silver fish chasing their tails in circles like puppies. I send her a message—tell her I wish I was there, too. She seems to appreciate this because she flashes an image of us together, holding hands in front of the sharks.

“So, your brother was a very threatening presence in your life.”

“In *her* life, yes. Not mine.” Emma furrows her brows seriously and nods, thankfully not questioning the correction.

“So let’s discuss the now, considering you’ll be seeing him for his wedding. Is he threatening to you now?”

“Well, he’s better. I mean, he met his girlfriend. He’s a lot gentler. I don’t see or talk to him very much, so there’s not much to compare; but he’s very polite now—very gentle. I remember when he came back from college—I was going into my freshman year of high school—and he was different. Like leaving the house meant leaving everything—all of us—behind. Like he flipped a switch when he left us and met her.”

“Which is of course why it’s so hard to face that violence of your childhood,” Emma notes, leaning in a bit so that I can see the green specks in her eyes. I nod.

“There’s no person to be confronted, it feels like. It feels like this kid’s brother is gone—dead, almost.” She twists her lips to the left and touches her

fingers to her chin for a moment before responding.

“Let me tum back to—” she pauses, searching the room for the right words before she begins again. “Let’s tum back to this child—our small guest.” She gives me a soft smile before continuing. “What else can she remember about your brother?”

I let the child reach her nimble fingers into the folds of my brain and feel for memories. *Hands on my head, holding me underwater until I’m swallowing chlorine and punching him in the soft goo of his belly. Legs straddled over my back as he presses my face into the cement floor of Mamas studio while she pounds clay at the table on the opposite side of the room. Hiding in the dryer of my house so he can’t find me, breathing quietly so theres no chance of the echo of my body-sounds reaching him. Big fingers that smell like old food yanking at my body all over. Hands grabbing me as I’m retrieving orange juice from the refrigerator. Hands grabbing at me touching me pinching me twisting me grabbing m—*

“She remembers his hands,” I say before she can continue. “His hands touching and groping and grabbing and stuff just, like, all over my body. *Her* body, I mean. She remembers those—those hands.” My face is red. I’m stumbling again and I fear that she’s lying to me or that Emma will think I’m lying even though I can remember the smell of his fingers and I can feel the tremors from the child’s terrified body vibrating through me.

“Okay. And what about you? Do you fear his hands?” When was the last time I saw his hands? Rolling a joint in my parent’s bathroom—but are those his hands I’m remembering? They look like so many others. I can picture so many other large, rough hands. Hands dry enough to perfectly roll marijuana into thin papers; hands big enough to cover the entirety of my chest; hands big enough to wrap around my throat like a noose. I choke back her tears.

“Sorry,” I say through an uncomfortable laugh, picking the last pink petal from the flower and moving on to deconstructing the stem, peeling pieces back like string cheese. Emma waves away the apology and quietly waits for me to speak. I clear my throat. “I’m not sure. Maybe. I don’t think so—I really don’t know if I fear them.” I pause to catch my breath and think if there’s anything else to say. “I don’t know. I fear a lot of things.”

“That’s okay, that’s okay. Would you like to take a minute?”

There are whimpers washing over my mind like mud. I close my eyes and see the child sitting on my brain with the mud browning her hair and shoulders and her eyes are wide with twitching eyelids. I put a pond with big fish in my head in an attempt to clear away some of the mud and give her a piece of the Shedd to soothe her. She sits with bubbling chaos beneath her skin, pinching bits of Coca Cola’s fur between her fingers while she observes the new koi

pond atop my brain-wrinkles—yellow and white and orange and black fish and I throw in a rainbow one because *Rainbow Fish* was our favorite book and I just want to calm the chaos because it's bubbling and bubbling and spilling over like champagne in a shot glass so that I can feel the bubbles the vibrations all over my body. She watches the fish swim, eyes darting frantically between them, and digs her chin into Coca Cola's head. Her arms are tight around the stuffed monkey and her lips spill out small words that swirl in my head like tiny tornados, picking up and splattering mud all over everywhere. I open my eyes and my whole body is sweaty and shaking.

"I don't know. I can't, like, calm her down."

"Okay. Let's check in for a second; how is *your* body feeling?" I let out a small hum of nervousness.

"Not great." My eyes are glued to the stringy green bits of leftover flower.

"Let's take some deep breaths again." I can sense her eyes closing and so I slam mine back shut to depart from my tortured flower. I place myself atop my own brain, sitting next to the child so that neither one of us is alone. We sit together in silence for a moment, knees bobbing and eyes darting between fish until my eyes slip and land on her. Her small body's trembling and her chest moves quickly as the air rushes in and out of her and her knuckles are white against Coca Cola's brown fur—and I begin to feel ashamed. I feel ashamed that I, the adult, am so trapped in this trauma—her trauma—that I can't see how unsafe she is right now, always vulnerable to his hands at any given time and never truly protected outside of the Shedd. I feed myself deep breaths, reminding myself I have an escape—Vic will be here after my session to pick me up, I'll go to class, we'll go to my house and watch a movie—it'll be okay. I watch the rainbow fish until its fluid movements blend with my breaths and the air flows in and out naturally again. I put my hand on the kid's. I put my other hand on her knee and position myself so that I'm facing her. When she turns to me, her eyes moistening and lips trembling, I pull her face to my chest and hold her head there before I can see the tears fall or hear the cries escape. I steady my body so that hers has something to hold tight to. I take more deep breaths, breathing her flower scent into my lungs and then back out. I whisper *I love you's* into her muddied golden hair until the tears quiet and her trembling body dilutes in my stillness, and then she's mumbling against my chest how she wants to go back, she wants to go back, she wants to go back. I pull away to look at her. "Please," I beg. I'm ashamed to ask. "Please, can you help me? Just a little bit longer? I need you here with me. I can't do this without you. I want to remember." I know it's selfish. I know it's careless. I know. But I also know we will be at our brother's wedding soon, giving toasts

and surrounded by family, and I can't have these memories resurfacing when I'm unprepared. And we've come so far, I don't want to stop. I can't stop now. Her eyes are big and her bottom lip folds under her front teeth. *Okay*, she whimpers. I squeeze her tight to me once more before opening my eyes. Emma is looking at me, a small, sympathetic smile warming her lips.

"A bit better?" I nod, wiping tears away with my sleeve and squishing the deconstructed flower in my hand until my palm is wet with flower fluids.

"We only have a little time left—we could continue for a while longer, or talk about something else, or regroup and do some grounding exercises. We can use this time however you'd like. What do you want to do?"

"I think I would like to keep going, if that's alright."

"That's alright, of course. How's she feeling, is she okay to continue?"

"Yes." I close my eyes and see her before we continue. I tell her in thought-bubbles that it will be okay, and that she'll be back at the Shedd soon enough. *Soon*, she echoes. I open my eyes again, nodding to assure Emma that I'm ready.

"So why don't we start again by discussing what emotions are evoked, right now, from thinking about your brother?" *Afraidness*.

"She feels afraidness."

"Mhm, what about you?"

"I feel...instability, I think."

"Tell me more about that, where do you feel the instability?"

"Well, he's such a different guy now. All the weird past memories of him just destabilize the image of him that I have now. She's still afraid—she's telling me she's afraid—but I'm just unsure, I guess. Confused. It's unstable."

"That makes sense to me. Because he was a completely different person when he was younger."

"Yeah."

"And he had violent and cruel parts of himself that abused you." I nod. "But now his gentle, kind parts are stronger, and it's better." Nod. "But she hasn't seen that change yet—no one really saw it until it had already happened, because he left for college and came back kind—is that correct?"

"Yes. And now I don't consciously feel afraid anymore. I just feel anxious. My body just feels—not okay a lot of the time."

"Do you want to talk a bit more about that?"

"Well—it's hard to explain."

"Do you want to try?" My eyes go back to the dead flower and I can feel my throat starting to close up.

"I guess." I clear my throat. "I guess I just have a lot of anxiety, like, all the time. When I'm around men, when I'm by a stranger and they touch me—even if it's by accident—and...well, I mean I can't have sex. Sex is disgusting to me, which we've talked about before, of course." *Disgusting, disgusting.* I think about the last time Vic and I tried and how empty my body felt. I don't even remember all of it, I just remember her stopping and asking if I was ok after I guess I'd been quiet and still for a while. My face heats at the memory. She told me she thought that I just wasn't attracted to her. I remember cursing myself for being so broken, and that's when I told Emma that I wanted to start meeting regularly with the tucked away child at the Shedd. I just wanted to understand it all and move on.

The child takes a shaky breath and I'm pulled back to her, away from Vic. I clear my throat again. "My brother used to tell me all the time that he had sex all over the house. He said he had sex in my room. I found out later that he didn't even have sex for the first time until he went to college, with his girlfriend he's now marrying—he was lying. But I still remember that disgusting look on his face when he told me that he'd had sex in my bed. That disgusting look he'd give me all the time. He gave me that look when he chased me and pinned me to the ground. And when he grabbed me and choked me and it was the most disgusting look in the world." I try to replicate the face for Emma but I'm stopped by the shivers rippling through both my body and the child's.

Sometimes I wished he was dead, my brother. I remember more now: the noises on the roof every night when he would sneak into my bedroom through the door that connected our rooms, climb out the window and lay on the roof, quiet until little bangs and thumps could be heard through the thin roof and I knew he was shooting and killing the squirrels but sometimes I wished one of the thumps was the sound of his body hitting the ground—not the squirrel's. I remember when I'd hear him throwing things in the kitchen, breaking plates and glass, his barely 15 year old body in an angry drunken fit after our mom caught him with her vodka filled water bottle from the fridge. I'd forgotten about the vodka filled water bottles.

I think about saying this out loud—voicing my quiet longing for my brother's demise, my remembrance of the vodka water bottles—but then I see Emma's eyes move, just for a fraction of a second, to the clock. And she tries to pretend we have all the time in the world but my eyes are followers and so they peek at the time and we've gone five minutes over so I quickly say, "I should get going—I didn't realize what time it was I'm sorry. I have a class across town that's about to start."

"Yes, I suppose we went a little bit over, but that happens! Should we take some time to regroup before class and put our guest back in the aquarium?"

"I really gotta run; I can't be late for class, and Vic's probably waiting." I smile—a shallow and uncomfortable feeling in my cheeks—and grab my bag and wave goodbye as I open the door.

"Are you sure you don't want to take a second to do this? So that you can get through class and we can bring her back okay next time? I don't know if it's best for you to just leave and—"

"I'll do it, it's okay. Thanks Emma, have a good day!" I say, even though I don't know much about Emma's days, bad or good, and even though I don't intend to send her back just yet, not when I can finally remember—not when the memories are so fragile, so easily stolen and tucked away into brain folds by the child's fingers, much nimbler than mine.

When I leave the office, the white air of the hallway before the red "exit" sign is harder to breathe and prickly in my mouth and throat. I wait outside for Vic, prickly harsh air against my body and I miss the color of trees because it's winter right now and all there is in winter is prickly air and snow-tsunamis. I can remember how he used to put snow in my shoes and mouth and eyes and laugh like a villain. I can remember it. *You said you'd take me back to the sharks.* She's angry with me and my body's shaking despite my parka's excellent insulation and I grab my hat from my bag and put it on so that it covers half my eyes and I can only look down at the cemented sidewalk. Indented polka dots on my face, like freckles, I remember. My armpits are sweating and so are my hands and head. I can remember the hands on my head holding me underwater, tangled in my hair. I can't breathe and then I punch him and his hands fall away, tearing a collection of hair from my chlorinated scalp so that there's a little triangle of baldness to be covered up by hair folded over in this and that direction. After I throw up in the pool a mother lifts her child from the germ-infested water and looks at me sadly before I rush to the bathroom to look at my scalp and rinse my mouth and he comes in and he asks me if I'm okay because—he's sorry? He doesn't sound sorry he sounds angry but the words come out of his mouth. My mother opens the door further and soaks him in her shadow. *Mom?*

I remember. I remember it all. I remember her shadow over him everywhere he went, the way she'd lock him in his room and the way he'd lock me in his room and the way she'd throw things at his head and the way he'd throw my head at the ground and the way her fists pound clay and the water bottles filled with vodka and her drunken rage and I remember it all I remember him and my mother I remember the villainous laugh with bubbling vodka in her mouth

and I can't believe it was her too it was her hand in a brother puppet her hands around him.

The child cries and screams for the Shedd and the sharks but I close my eyes and can't find them because it's winter and the sun doesn't rise till seven—sometimes eight. It sets around 4:30 and the sky is getting dark in preparation for night and I can't remember what sunlight in the Shedd looks like and the child is afraid and the child is crying and screaming and there's mud and water from the pond everywhere but the fish are gone they've disappeared from my mind with the sharks. And I have no way to protect her and bring her to safety because what does the Shedd Aquarium even look like in the morning in the summer before anyone's awake and the doors haven't opened yet? What does that feel like? What does safety feel like? I've forgotten what safety feels like. My fingers are grasping at the air around me, searching for Coca Cola's soft and rotund body but coming up empty. I can't remember the last time I felt his soft fur—I can't remember the last time I felt safe except in my imagination and even those images are too small like scattered glitter throughout my mind.

She's climbing angrily into my brain, screaming as she pulls out memory after memory getting closer and closer to the center of my mind. *I remember the disgusting scent of his breath.* Me too. *The feeling of his grime-coated hands? Yes. The yellow of his teeth? The orange of his tongue? The white of his lips? Black of his pores? Oil of his hair?* Yes yes yes but I change my mind I don't want to remember anymore not now it's bigger than just him and I can't breathe and it feels like someone's hands are on my neck and my eyes are popping and my face burning and she's reaching the center and I remember *falling to the ground and I lay there until Mom comes over and strokes my face and she asks what happened and I smell nail polish on her breath and I see the black of her pores and I tell her that its okay but its not okay and my throat will bruise in the coming days and where have you been this whole time and I'll buy my first turtleneck that erases my neck from my body and makes me look more mature than I am but I try not to wear it much after my neck has healed even though I like it because it seems the older I get the more the estrogen pubertizing my body feels like poison and—*

The child's hands hit something solid in my pink memory and she freezes. She can feel it at her fingertips, a rough but gentle something reaching out from the center and it spreads strong fingers across the child's wrist and she lets out a horrified scream. The child tries to pull away but the hand grows into an arm which grows into a body and the long body stretches and grows and it presses against pink walls and then there he is, a wreckage from the depths, covered in pink gum and brain fluid. *My brother.*

His expression is searching, unsure of what he's doing here or how he stumbled into such a scene, but when his eyes meet hers bewilderment melts into empathy. The child's screams turn to confused whimpers and she falls lifelessly upon the gooey ground and looks up at him towering over her. His hair is long in perfect pink waves tumbling over his shoulders and his pink beard stretches past his neck like a wizard's. He moves his hands to cup her face and she can smell the soap. His hold is strong and protective, like a mother's would be, and his face is so soft and still as it begins to cry. *Stop, you're not real,* she whispers through tears of her own, trying to grab at the ground for safety but coming up with handfuls of loose pinkage. He crouches so he's face to face with her and she can see the tears spill and his thick brows furrow over eyes holding her distorted reflection and the brain around the two of them starts to blur and collapse, squiggly lines turning to thick loose wavy ones as the pink begins to cave in and his lips move, releasing citrus scented breath: "I'm real, can you feel this?" *You're not real, this can't be real.* His tears overflow his face, washing away the sticky brain fluid and revealing rosy cheeks and two familiar dimples in his sorrowful smile.

Hands cupping my cheeks. "You're safe, I'm here, I'm real. Open your eyes. It's okay." His lips move again and the citrus swirls out, "open your eyes." *Open my eyes? They're not closed. I can see you.* She lifts one trembling sticky hand to slowly bring it to his where it lies on her face, feeling the smooth clean skin. *You don't belong here. Why are you here?* It's all melting blurring pink behind and around him now, covering his feet and creeping up his legs. My brother doesn't answer in words, just brings his sad smile to her forehead and kisses it ever so gently as the pink spreads, consuming his knees and waist and chest and she grips tightly to his clean hand, willing him secretly to stay for just a little bit longer. As the pink makes its way up his neck he pulls away, and she watches as his eyes leak their last tears before he's swallowed back into my brain and she's left alone, again.

Hot breath on my face and a voice so soft and familiar. "You're okay, I'm here, I'm going to get you home. Open your eyes, please." *Home?* "Home, baby. You gotta open your eyes, though." *Baby.* The hands move from my cheeks to thumbs gently placed over both my eyes so I can feel my eyelid skin coating my vision. I open them slowly, cautiously. "See?" I do. I see. I see the sky above me—a blackening sky with blue undertones like the sea at night, and I don't really remember sitting down but here I am sitting on the bumpy cement, leaned up against the wall of a building that's black and cold. My brother's hands are gone, replaced by Vic's warm ones as she tucks wandering hairs into my hat. I see Vic's black curls and her parted plum lips and my eyes

land on the small lavender bouquet tucked under her arm. She holds me and presses her lips to my forehead and all I can smell is lavender, like the scent of my shampoo and the scent of the lavender joints she rolls before we go to sleep and I'm so afraid even her lavender can't save me. "See? It's okay. I'm gonna take you home. C'mon." She tries to interlace her fingers with mine, but my hands are sweaty and slimy and muddy and limp and my skin feels sick. She grabs my wrist and my arm and pulls me up. I can see scattered glitter from my mind in clumps in the air around me—my brother's eyes and hands in static against the blue-black sky. "Let's go home." She pulls my arm around her shoulders to stabilize me, and I can taste the tangerine flavor on her breath and feel the heat of her body on mine.

"Can you take me to the aquarium?" The request drips out in a pathetic whimper.

"There's no aquarium around here, babe."

"Ok."

"Do you want me to find an aquarium?"

"I don't know." She checks her watch before looking down at me for a long moment. "I'll take you to the exotic fish store, and then let's watch *Ponyo* tonight; does that sound good?" She pulls me along with her through the freshly black, street-lampless night, holding my body close to her while my feet lag behind.

"Ok. Thank you," I say. *Thank you. Thank you.* The child's voice rings through me from inside my brain as she holds her sticky hand over where my brother's had been, her other hand wrapped around herself in a protective embrace and her eyes brimming with fresh tears. *Thank you thank you thank you I'm sorry thank you.* Vic's face is glowing in the shallow light of the moon. She's warm and her body carries me like a child. It's not too long before my shivering begins to subside, diluting in her warmth. I close my eyes. I allow her to take care of me. The memories retreat slowly from my body and the child slides out of my brain and along with them back into a far away place. I tell myself, Vic's with me and we're safe. The child will wait, tucked away in a dark and numb corner of my mind, until I can build up the Shedd again in my head and she can reunite with the sharks.

The trauma quiets. It shrinks into pink goo and sinks back into my brain until all that's left of it now in my body is the small movements of my own raspberry lips—thank you thank you thank you—and the soothing sounds of Vic's whispering voice, hushing and kissing my afraidness away.

I'M A TERRIBLE FEMINIST

Celina Naheed

I haven't given up taking a razor to my underarms shaving the stubble breaking through my skin like flowers who can't take a hint in the dead of winter & I guess I'm giving into the male gaze or patriarchy but it's not easy to boycott razors when your mom didn't even fight you when you asked to shave placing a razor into your hands at twelve & showed you how easy it was to be pretty & it's even easier for me to drop twenty bucks on thirteen pairs of earrings made in factories overseas leaking metallic chemicals into the Earth that will turn my skin into the color of decaying pennies & I lie about where I got them so I sound like I care about the environment & *I do* but I give sighs of relief when my earrings take everyone's eyes away from my milky legs a bare garden growing absolutely nothing but my jangling ears almost seem to erase the hours I wasted weeding my skin when I could've been writing a letter to my senator about how I'm so tired of my school banning books by people just like me & when a friend who is blonde & never shaves asked me where my unibrow went I answered my eyes still damp from leaning back stretching my skin while an old woman threaded the hair from my face & snapped at me for crying that "*beauty is pain*," & I wish she would have driven her womanly fingers into my nose so warm blood dripped so that everyone could see my tongue stick out from my lips tasting what it's like to have mouthful of rusted razors the words leaving it sharp & threatening & when someone squinted at my pulsing nose the blood turning brown I'd lie & say it was a battle scar from a protest for a cause I care about but didn't go to because I wanted to see a new rom-com with a friend & turn off my phone so I could laugh a little in the dark, the glow of the screen reflecting off my stubbled calves & when the credits roll I wonder "*why is it so bad to be a bystander to the apocalypse*" thinking that Roxane Gay said "I would rather be a bad feminist than no feminist at all," but then if I'm a dollar store feminist who am I helping other than my own conscious & as women we are constantly forced to consider who are we helping as it is assumed that women are supposed to care about other women & the world that houses their fellow women & be strong enough to carry everything & all its hair on our

shoulders growing soft fuzz unreachable by a razor (I've tried) & I should be doing things like waving protest signs scrawled in faded sharpie & boycotts of fast fashion earrings & all I can think about is dropping the blade of my razor in the trash so I don't have to look at the scraps of hair lodged between metal that is lined with my blood because I haven't figured out how to glide over the contour of my knee & the other day while I painted shaving cream over my legs my mom called me because I was far away from home & she was crying but not really for herself it was for her daughter & her daughter's daughters & through her tears she told me she was numb & tired of feeling like she had to do something & "*why is it always up to us to do something*" & I know I should leave that razor head alone because I finally have let it go, but I take it out to stare at it & I remember when I had to care about nothing because I had no hair on my legs so there was no need to contemplate whether I was making a statement when I shaved & the truth is to just stay little & oblivious to what the world wants/needs of young *women* & whenever I wash my hair down the drain I think about the first time I put in a tampon with a cardboard applicator feeling my insides sting & I thought "*holy shit, I'm a woman now*" because we're used to the accidental microcuts we give ourselves whether that be inside or out & begin to use all the moments we bled & hurt as a timeline & you think that would be feminist enough & but it's not & the world keeps throwing things at us to fix & undoing what we thought was finally enough & so I repost petitions that cost nothing to sign resting my phone on the ledge of my bath tub & continue to shave.

DONNA

Juheon Rhee

Donna thinks books are the greatest creation of humanity and when I quote Occam's razor she laughs and tells me my obsession with logic is funny. We are walking up what we tell ourselves to be the penultimate hill as the flurry of wind claws at our nude face and mutes our voices into echos. We pass the sign that informs us that we've only got five kilometers till the shelter: "Milford Sound Track" in boxed letters, and underneath "5 Kilometers", alongside a silhouette drawing of a walking man. I tell her that during my peak, I was able to run that in under twenty-two minutes. She reminds me that we've managed to walk a little over three kilometers in the past two hours.

We exchange stories like tokens of the lost sea. Donna doesn't believe in mermaids, but statistically, there is too little we know about the ocean to make that claim. When I tell her that intelligent beings with fins and humanoid torsos could totally exist, she frowns at me and tells me they wouldn't be mermaids. Donna tells me of the bookstore she used to frequent back in her early thirties, hidden behind a large commercial supermarket in northern London. She tells me books smelled more genuine and had more verisimilitude back then, and I tell her it's probably just nostalgia tricking her senses because the production of books has remained rather stagnant over the past twenty years. Technicalities, she whispers. I tell her about the best bookstore in the world, and she's shaking her head quite profoundly this time. The pools of rain beneath our feet begin to resemble effervescence as the storm crescendos and while I don't know how much of my story she is able to hear, Donna is nodding the whole time, as if she understands me completely.

Twenty years after my grandparents demolished the wretched, cramped bookstore, I can still imagine my thirty-year-old self leaning uncomfortably by the counter behind the history section.

It was only a tiny corner bookstore by the withered grapevine wall in the outskirts of *Jingyo*. When we visited the area four days before my fourteenth birthday, I almost threw up from the abrasion that is the unmistakable gust of manure that manages to bleed into my clothes. The bookstore has been

demolished for four years. It doesn't smell anything like barley tea, masked in petrichor, with hints of cinnamon from the molten toffee packets I've hidden and forgotten about behind Sherlock Holmes on the fifth shelf—the highest I could reach back then. Sometimes, I wonder if it ever did.

My cousin and I are nine and six when we enter the bookstore completely soaked from the torrential rain. The bookstore has an open design, with the books completely vulnerable to the rain that crashes with its bullet-bodies and becomes one with the decaying covers halfway-rotten. In retrospect, it's terrible ergonomics, especially since it's been raining on all fourteen days of my stay. We crouch behind the romance section, and my cousin reaches up to get the one of only two children's books in the bookstore. It's on the seventh shelf, from when she placed it there two days ago so I couldn't reach up to get it myself. Despite it being relatively safe from the rain-assault, the book is rather flimsy, with the thin lamination peeling from all four corners.

My cousin pulls me up onto the counter by the sole desk in the bookstore, where my mom used to help out after school with my grandmother. It's slippery, and the tiny doodles in pencil melt into my palm and worm down into my white sleeves. I roll onto the counter and position myself next to my cousin. Like this, with our stout legs dangling, we read the same book about the pink adventurous princess again and again.

I don't remember a single sentence from that book anymore, although I must have been able to quote the entire book word for word before. Sometimes, I hate this impermanence of memory, although on other days, I am extremely grateful for it.

Donna's fairy-white hair is completely drenched by the time we reach the shelter. My black hair, for its length and porosity, even more so. We're the last ones that arrive, and half the hikers have already begun eating dinner. My jacket and my bag, despite its supposed water-repellent capabilities, are completely drenched, and I only realize how much I have been shivering once I am standing under the downpour of hot water in the shower. It hasn't been raining for the last two hours, and outside the sky has already cleared up to reveal the spectacular stars that seem to dot the entire canvas of the night sky.

We're sitting on the couch before the huge window now, our faces golden caricatures on its reflection. Donna tells me she hates that she'll never know whether she is staring at a satellite or a real star. I personally don't think it matters.

MYTH OF SISYPHUS

Sachi Parikh - Art Winner



JOYS OF MOTHERHOOD

Shitta Faruq Adémólá



POSITIVE PHOTOTAXIS

Dana Blatte



REFLECTION OF HUMANITY

Jacqueline Wu



LOOSE PARTS

Alexandra Dauchess - Fiction Winner

Matty found the gum-wrapper on the far-end of the metro platform, caught in a crack between a pillar and the floor. He couldn't believe his luck. It was perfect. The material was sturdy but still malleable—more like cloth than paper—and its red and blue stripes had yet to fade into the creamy-white background. It was just what he needed for his project. And the best part: it was small enough to slip into the pocket on the inside of his new school blazer, away from the eyes of his mother, who disapproved of scavenging.

"I'll buy you art supplies, dear," she would say. "Just no more scavenging. It's unsanitary."

She didn't understand. Every other kid in the sixth grade at Clearwater Middle School was going to have shiny, clean robots, built from pieces that came straight out of a box bought and assembled by their parents. Matty wanted his project to be unique. Stitched together by dozens of little pieces of the world.

Matty bent down to tie his imaginary laces. It was now or never. His hand shot out. His fingers closed around the wrapper. He balled it in his fist and stood up quickly. He turned around to see if anyone had noticed. The other people on the platform were still absorbed in their newspapers and cellphones. His father was still pacing back and forth, hunched over, his hand pressing the Bluetooth piece in his ear. Matty carefully deposited the wrapper into his jacket pocket. Mission accomplished. Now, all he had to do was contain his excitement until school let out and he could go back to his mother's apartment where he could fashion the wrapper into something useful. A hat for his robot. A pair of shoes. No. A tie. Just like the red and blue one his father was fiddling with as he listened to the voice buzzing in his ear.

Matty's mind started whirring. He knew exactly how he would make it; with a few twists and a loop here and there, it would be perfect. He fingered the wrapper in his pocket. Matty could do it now. He had one of the robots stashed in the hidden compartment of his bag. He could pull it out and loop the tie around its neck and make him look like a proper gentleman—the kind his mother was always reminding him to be.

"Yes, Holland, we're at the station. Yes, he's still doing fine, just like he was when you called five minutes ago," Matty's father hissed. His brow was knit into a deep v, and sweat was glistening in his greying hair.

Matty was dying to pull the robot out and sit on one of the concrete benches, and fiddle with the gum wrapper until he got the tie just right.

"We will get there when we get there. Believe it or not, I don't control the trains."

Matty longed to see it shine under the dim lights of the underground station.

"Well, if you let him stay with me longer, then he wouldn't be traveling so often, and you wouldn't have to worry about him all the time."

To watch it waddle through the crowd of commuters, talking and singing in its automated voice.

"No, I get to see him three times a week. That's what we agreed..."

But he couldn't risk exposing it to the world. There was no telling what could go wrong. He could already see its delicate, motorized body dropping to the floor with a clang, fresh new dents on its smooth exterior.

"Holland, no. I have a right to be part of his life—"

He could see it shuffling off into the endless maze of people and getting jostled by the feet of unobservant commuters.

"The judge will be on my side. He will see that you're being irrational."

He could see it losing its balance and falling onto the electrified tracks and being crushed into a hundred million pieces under the wheels of the oncoming train.

"Holland, this conversation isn't over—Holland!"

No. He couldn't risk it. Too many things could go wrong.

"Matty." His father was staring down at him. "This is us," his father shouted as one of the trains screeched to a stop in front of them. His father had taken out his earpiece, but Matty thought he could still hear a faint chatter emitting from it. His father buried the earpiece deep into the pocket of his dress pants.

Matty, secured his backpack squarely on his shoulders, then followed his father onto the train. It was full of men in neat square suits and young people carrying bags that were about to burst. His father picked their usual two seats by the long row of windows. Matty liked those the best: he could watch the lights of the tunnels zoom by and observe the people on the platform as they got on and off the train. Matty fingered the gum-wrapper. He longed to pull it out and show it to his father. He knew he would understand. His father was like him: a tinker, a builder, someone who could see things others couldn't. Matty had grown up playing with the robots and machines his father had

built out of scrap metal and a few loose wires. Most of them had long been trashed, but there were still a few secret ones still stashed under Matty's bed at his mother's apartment. He liked to bring them out and play with them from time to time, for inspiration. Matty's fist closed around the wrapper. He could picture the excitement on his father's face. But his father was putting his earpiece back in.

"Yes, thank you for returning my call so quickly, sir. Holland and I—we'd like to move the date up if possible. To Friday, if that works..."

Matty let the wrapper fall slowly back into his pocket. He would show his father later. Better yet, he would show him the finished tie. That would impress him; he would marvel at just how creative his little boy was.

The metro car screeched to a stop. Rain pelted gently against the fogged windows. Matty turned to watch the passengers getting on and off at the over-ground station. He fiddled with the wrapper. He had big plans for it. Big plans indeed.

#

The only good thing that came out of dinner with his mother was the dress. And seeing Clover. Clover, his old, grey cat companion, who used to sit on the chair beside him as he worked on his various projects. Every so often, she'd let out a small meow—a sign, Matty imagined, that she approved of the design. But now, between his mother's apartment and his grandfather's house where his father was staying to be closer to work, Matty barely ever got to see Clover anymore. Whenever he came over, she was always asleep or hiding from the men in suits his mother often invited over for meetings and a cup of sour-smelling tea.

They were mid-way through their meal of fish and soggy potato soup when the talk of Norwood Prep began.

"Mrs. Farley said everyone was very impressed with your test scores," his mother told Matty, her eyes fixing on him as she leaned over her plate.

Matty wasn't surprised. People were usually impressed with his test scores. He didn't look like much—with his wire-rimmed spectacles slipping off the bridge of his large nose and his long, gangly legs, tripping him up every couple of steps—but he was smart. He was two grade levels above in math and his reading comprehension was "incredible," according to one of the English teachers at school. Matty didn't think much of it, but his father said it was good to be smart. Smart people got paid to use their imaginations and build things.

"They said they would be happy to open up a spot for us next year. Isn't that exciting?"

Matty's face crinkled up. He had only been to Norwood Prep once to take the admissions test—which was remarkably easy and not at all worth all of that studying his mother had forced him to do—and he had hated it. It was big and hollow, with great echoey classrooms and not quite enough air. And their robots were perfect; he'd peeked into one of the science labs as the group headed up to the testing room, and he'd seen them lined up along a high shelf on the wall. Perfect, shiny robots with immaculate, metal plating and symmetrical buttons. They were horrible. They had no exposed wires or gum-wrapper ties.

"Why can't I just stay at Clearwater?" Matty said through the smallest bite of potato soup he could manage.

"I don't see why you'd want to—I mean, look."

His mother produced a stiff, colorful pamphlet from somewhere under the table and slid it towards him. Happy kids in neat uniforms smiled up at Matty from the front page.

"They have state of the art everything: labs, sports fields, and even a great workshop room for woodshop and design classes." His mother was flipping through the pamphlet, pointing out different pictures on the pages.

Matty tried to look at them, tried to appreciate how nice they were. But the thought of the perfect robots swam in his mind. He shivered.

"I don't like Norwood," Matty said, pushing the pamphlet away.

His mother frowned. "Matthew, Norwood is the best school in D.C. They have accelerated programs that will challenge you and help you... expand your interests."

Matty frowned. What was more interesting than robots?

"Besides, Norwood is closer. You wouldn't have to commute so far every morning. Wouldn't that be nice?"

No, Matty thought. He liked the metro. He liked finding gum-wrappers in cracks on the platform floor and sitting beside his dad watching the world rush by outside the window.

"But won't it be farther when I go to stay with Dad and Grandpa?"

His mother looked down. She started pushing around her potatoes. That meant she was thinking really hard. She never played with her food except when she was thinking really hard.

"Well, Matthew, since your father is... living so far away now, I—we were thinking that for seventh grade, it'd be best for you to stay here with me during the week and then maybe visit your father on weekends—if you get all of your homework done."

"Just for seventh grade?"

There was another pause.

His mother's voice turned firm. "No, darling. All the time."

Matty shook his head. Spending all his time in his mother's stuffy apartment eating fancy food and never getting to scavenge again sounded awful.

"No. I don't want to go. I like Clearwater." Matty took a final bite of his potato soup and pushed his plate away.

His mother raised her eyebrow. "Well, I'm afraid it's not up to you. Your enrollment in Norwood is all set once you get your grade on Friday."

After the science fair, she meant. That was when all the sixth graders would present their projects for a final grade. When Matty would present his robots.

"I trust you're going to take it seriously?"

Matty nodded. There was nothing he took more seriously than robots.

They cleared the table in silence, and Matty put all of the food away into Tupperware containers as quickly as possible. Before he could sprint up the stairs to his bedroom, his mother told him to take the pamphlet.

"Maybe you'll find a use for it," she said, turning back to the dishes.

Eventually, a few hours later, Matty did. After flipping through it a few times to look for any redeeming qualities he might've missed, he turned his attention back to the robots staring at him from their place on his worktable. He was up to two robots now, a larger one with the gum-wrapper tie, and a smaller, sleeker one. Compared to the first one, the new robot looked plain. It needed something special to wear. Matty sifted through the few napkins from the school cafeteria he'd nicked, and the receipts from his mother's grocery bags. They all seemed too ordinary. He wanted something colorful, lively. Bending the ends of the pamphlet as he mulled over possible materials in his mind, it seemed to hit him all at once. He looked down at the pamphlet. It swam with yellow, blue, silver.

Matty launched into a frenzy of folding and cutting. The paper was thick, but it held together well with some coaxing. At first, he wasn't quite sure what he was making. Finally, after almost two hours of folding, Matty stood back to survey his work. The dress was beautiful and festive. It reminded him of the sundress his mother would wear to Sunday services. He set the robots down carefully next to the other one. Now they looked like they belonged together.

Matty took care to cover them gently with a bedsheet before going off to sleep. He would show his parents the robots on Friday, before the big science fair presentation. He wanted them to smile and tell him that they loved his project. He wanted them to hug him like they used to when Matty climbed into their bed after a nightmare. He wanted them to say how proud they

were of him like when he showed them the first A on his report card. He wanted them to all be together like they used to be on Sunday mornings. No phones, no Norwood Prep. Just the three of them happy together for one more moment in time.

#

Matty got the idea for the glasses while watching Grandpa Thomas work. They were sitting in the living room, Matty on one of the worn couches that smelled like moth balls, the coffee table pulled up close to his legs, and his grandfather in the La-Z-Boy recliner he rarely ever left. It was quiet. Matty's father was running errands in the city and wouldn't be back for hours. It was just him and Grandpa Thomas and the tick of the old clock in the corner.

Grandpa Thomas let out a long sigh. He was squinting at some very official looking papers that Matty's father had asked him to look at.

Grandpa Thomas had been sighing for an hour. Every so often, he would rustle the pages or underline a passage and grumble under his breath. But Matty remained deeply focused on the five-thousand-piece puzzle that sat on the coffee table in front of him. Normally, he would work on the puzzles with his father or Grandpa Thomas, all three of them bent over the table studying the details on each piece. But his father was gone, and Grandpa Thomas was busy and Matty was bored. He'd finished his homework a few hours ago, and there wasn't much to do in Grandpa Thomas' house. It was overflowing with trinkets, old religious icons and lots of dusty, old books about law and American politics. The only interesting things were the puzzles—several dozen, with dog-eared pieces and a few missing parts.

"Mmm." Grandpa Thomas shook his head. "Trying to slip things in, thinking no one will notice," Grandpa Thomas said in a loud voice as he underlined a section of text.

Matty looked up. He had to make sure Grandpa Thomas didn't get too worked up. His father told him that Grandpa Thomas had a way of getting too excited and it wasn't good for his heart. Seeing Grandpa Thomas return to his rustling and sighing and mumbling, Matty was about to turn back to his puzzle when something caught his eye. A glint of silver. Matty looked back. Slipped over the important pages was the most glorious paperclip he had ever seen. It was ginormous. The size of his hand—maybe even his head. Matty stared at it for a second, the image of his newest robot swimming in his mind.

Before he'd left his mother's house that morning, Matty had packed his two robots and their accessories into his bag and thrown a pile of extra materials from the school yard in for good measure. He had tinkered with the scraps in the backseat as his mother drove him to Grandpa Thomas' house, and by the

time they'd arrived, he had managed to put together another robot—a small, wiry thing, much smaller and thinner than the other two. He'd wanted to personalize it like the others, but he just didn't know how. But that paperclip: visions of what it could be whirled behind his eyes.

"Grandpa Thomas."

The old man let out a wheeze to let Matty know he was listening.

"Could I have that paperclip?"

"Hmm?"

Matty pointed up at the paperclip. After a few seconds, Grandpa Thomas looked up from the papers, staring over his glasses at Matty. Grandpa Thomas looked at it for a moment, then slid it carefully off the top of the page.

"We have to rearrange the whole damn thing anyway. So, here, have at it." He tossed the paperclip over to Matty.

Matty ran the paperclip through his hands. It was smooth and strong. Perfect for what he had in mind. Matty spent the next hour bent over the coffee table, twisting and re-twisting the paperclip into the shape he wanted. After an hour of twisting, squinting, and poking his fingers full of tiny holes, a pair of miniature glasses sat on the table in front of him. He was immensely proud. They had turned out better than he could've expected. They were smooth and almost perfectly round, and he knew they'd fit just right over the ridges on the side of the little robot's head.

Matty toyed with the glasses for another half-hour before he heard a key turning in the lock. Matty jumped up as his father swung open the door, several plastic bags slung over his strong arms. He shuffled in, bending low to avoid the ceiling as he made his way through the narrow landing. The sound of the bags hitting the counter awoke Grandpa Thomas. He'd fallen asleep midway through Matty's expedition, thoroughly exhausted from several hours of disapproving sighs.

"Did you have time to look at the papers, Dad?"

Grandpa Thomas rubbed his eyes and replaced his large, wire-frame glasses. "We need to talk, Kent."

That was all Grandpa Thomas said, but Matty's father seemed to understand. Matty and his father spent the next few minutes helping Grandpa Thomas out of his recliner and back onto his feet. As Grandpa Thomas dusted himself off, Matty picked up the glasses to show his father.

"Hey, Dad, look what I—"

Grandpa Thomas's hacking cough echoed through the house as he hobbled over towards the family room.

"Wow, yeah, you made some real progress," Matty's father said, glancing quickly at the puzzle before hurrying to help his father into the next room. "We'll be right back here, bud. Would you mind starting on those groceries? Don't want the ice cream to melt."

Matty nodded, and his father smiled before ushering Grandpa Thomas onto a sofa in the family room. Matty started on the groceries, putting away the cold things first, then chasing the loose plastic bags around the room. From the kitchen, he could hear the low grumbling of his father and grandfather.

"On Friday, you have to be sure to fight for yourself. Be aggressive. That's the only way to get an edge over these people."

Friday. The day of the science fair, or as his father called it, "the court date." Matty strained his ears, trying to find a good time to butt in and show his father the glasses. But Grandpa Thomas kept whispering, and Matty's father kept listening, until finally, Matty gave up. He would show him later. He'd show him all the robots together.

Matty retreated to his room and set to work fixing the glasses onto the littlest robot. It took a few minutes to position them just right. Once they were secure, he pulled the other robots from his backpack and positioned them all together on the desk. Matty couldn't help but smile. There they were: a little family of robots. A Dad with his striped, gum-wrapper tie, a Mom with her bright, colorful sundress, and a little boy with a pair of lopsided glasses. They were perfect.

Matty stared at them until his father called him down to dinner. Even though his stomach rumbled unpleasantly, he was reluctant to leave the happy scene. Finally, with the promise of cheesy lasagna, Matty covered his robots carefully with a blanket and headed to the door.

#

On Friday, Matty woke up early in his mother's apartment, ready to carry out his vision: the living room table set up like a little stage, a nice silk sheet over the display to shield it from view. A drumroll while he would lead his parents in with their eyes closed and sit them down on the futon, whipping off the sheet for the big reveal. He had prepared a presentation with his own narrations—some funny robot quips for his father and some interesting factoids for his mother—and he'd rigged the robots to move and speak with the push of a button. His parents would laugh and reassure him that he'd win the science fair later that day, and even if he didn't, they'd still be so proud. He'd make his parents dance with the robots and do a big group hug before they headed off to work. Everything was ready. But his parents were not.

His mother was frantic, running around throwing pillows onto couches and smoothing out blankets.

"How long will your presentation be, honey?" She checked her watch every few minutes.

"Not that long."

"Maybe you could just do it for me now."

No. He was determined to do it just like he imagined.

"I want to wait for Dad."

"I know, Matthew, but I—we still have to get to school to set up your presentation. Some representatives from Norwood are coming and it has to be perfect."

Matty shook his head. "It won't take long."

When his father finally arrived twenty minutes later, Matty thought for certain everything would run smoothly.

"Great. We're all here. Now, Matthew, can we hurry this along, we have to be down at the school in twenty minutes—"

"God, Holland. Let him have his moment."

Matty grabbed his father's arm and pulled him towards the couch. Maybe he'd have to change his vision slightly to accommodate his bickering parents, but that was all right. A few adjustments wouldn't hurt.

"Well, Kent, we have places to be and some important people to meet. We can't just disregard—"

Matty pulled his mother to the other end of the couch. She hovered above the cushions, unwilling to commit to sitting.

"For God's sake, Holland, it's a sixth-grade science fair. Not the Oscars."

After finally coaxing his mother onto the couch, Matty ran around to the other side of the living room table. He had to do it quickly.

"Ladies and Gentlemen—"

"Well, come five thirty, you won't have to worry about how I choose to parent my child—"

"I present to you the most fabulous robots in the history of—"

"Your child. Right. Your child. I had nothing to do with his conception, upbringing, or life in any way—"

"Five years of ignoring us to focus on your ridiculous projects, and now suddenly you want to be an active part of our lives—"

"You're ridiculous, acting like you've been the perfect mother, the perfect wife all this time—"

"I don't care about your opinion, Kent. It doesn't matter because he's going to live with me, he's going to go to Norwood, and he's going to be happy—"

Matty pulled off the sheet. The robots glistened beautifully on the table in front of them. Matty looked up at his father.

"This isn't going to make him happy." His father was motioning around at the fancy furniture and puzzle-less tables. "He hates it here. He hates the food and the manners and all your nagging—"

Matty turned the robots on. They started singing and zipping back and forth, in time with the rhythm of the songs they played. They all worked perfectly. Matty looked over at his mother. Surely, she could hear her favorite song that he had programmed into the robot's little server.

"Oh, I'm sorry that I'm trying to prepare him—make him into a gentleman. He bloody well needs it after hours of building useless puzzles with you and your batty father—"

All of the robots were singing now. The Star Wars theme song, Louis Armstrong's greatest hits, and "True Colors" played over each other in one incoherent symphony.

"I'm going to fight you, Holland. You and your troupe of snooty, good-for-nothing lawyers. I deserve a place in his life, deserve a chance to be rid of your nagging and your stupid rules and your—"

There was a deafening smash. Holland and Kent jumped, whipping around to face the living room table. Matty held a fire poker in his hands. The robots lay in pieces around him.

"Matty!" Holland jumped up.

Matty swung again. More pieces went flying.

"Matty, stop!" Kent rushed towards him.

Another swing. The robots were beyond recognition.

Holland was on the floor, scooping the pieces up and shouting. "Matty, what are you doing? You need these—"

"I don't want a good grade." Matty dropped the fire poker.

"Kent, we have to put this back together. We only have ten minutes until the science fair—" Holland pushed the pieces frantically towards Kent.

"We don't even know what they're supposed to be, Holland. How the hell are we supposed to put them back together?"

"They were a family," Matty said. He had run to the stairs while his mother bent over the lifeless robots. His hand now gripped the banister, small tears brimming in the corner of his eyes.

"Matty—"

"They were really happy." Matty was on the second step.

"Matty, I'm sorry—we're sorry—"

"And they were pretty cool, too." Matty was crying now. His brown eyes bored deeply into his father's.

"What are we going to tell the Norwood reps?" His mother kept picking up the pieces and putting them back down again.

"God, Holland, can't you think of anything else—"

Matty didn't stay to hear the rest of the argument, didn't stay to watch his parents shout at one another or watch his mother frantically try to put the robots back together.

Matty lay on his bed until the sun began to slide behind the houses outside his window. He stared up at the ceiling, over at the window, then at the wall beside his bed. Anything to keep from looking at his work table. Seeing all the extra pieces, remembering all of those long hours he had spent toiling away by the light of a small lamp with Clover curled up on his lap—he couldn't bear it. Couldn't bear to think of his poor robots sitting in pieces on the carpet downstairs. They deserved better. They deserved to be happy with their little robot lives, singing in their robot voices and enjoying each other's robot company.

Matty lay there on the bed for hours. He pretended not to hear Clover scratching at the door, or his mother and father's small whispers as they knocked.

All he could do was imagine his robots. He could almost see them there in the train station together. He could see the littlest robot running through the sea of commuters, like a great explorer conquering troubled waters. He could see the other two robots riding down the escalator arm in arm, laughing together in time with the whirring of the motorized steps. He saw them all standing there together as the train pulled up into the station. He watched them get on and sit in the seats by the row of windows. Matty watched them wave good-bye to him as the doors slid shut and the train sped off into the dark tunnel.

Matty fell asleep to the buzzing of the overhead fan and the feeling of his heart breaking into a million, billion pieces.

THE BIRD IN THE FLUE

Max Hunt

A bird fell into the flue¹ this morning, and now I can't sleep. It keeps flopping around. Thumping the sides of the pipe, its wings whisper *sh-sh-sh* against the steel.

Pawpaw said he would fix it. He said he was gonna climb up on the roof and take off the top of the flue so that the bird could escape upwards. Or maybe move the cardboard that blocked off the stovepipe in the summer so that the bird could fly out the front of the stove, and Pawpaw could shoo it out a window. Or maybe, Pawpaw had muttered to the cold stove, he'd just call animal control?

But Pawpaw didn't do any of that today.

At first, the near-steady beat of wings against the steel was a familiar rhythm—something that made sense, like the deep chime of a grandfather clock in a room of murmuring strangers, or the beep of a heart monitor in a city of strange, tall machines, or the sound of Pawpaw hugging Nana.

I sat in the living room and listened to the bird while I waited for Pawpaw to figure out what he was going to do. But when the bird's movements grew less steady, I didn't want to listen. Something in my stomach felt strange. I wondered if I'd breathed in too much ash when Pawpaw opened the stove door to investigate the noise.

Still, the bird kept flapping. It flapped through the afternoon, and it's flapping now.

I peel myself from the sweat-sticky bedsheets. They make me feel like I'm inside somebody's mouth. But I have to tell Nana tomorrow morning that I think they're nice, or she'll do that huff² thing she does and scoop only the bland, vanilla parts of the Rocky Road ice cream into my bowl. I shut my bedroom door. The air conditioning lays a thick blanket over the bird's thumps and whispers.

1 A flue is a steel tunnel that carries black diseases into the sky. That's what those grey clouds are. Don't ever stand under them.

2 A huff is the wiggling of the loose skin under old people's chins. Nana didn't always huff.

The next morning, Nana comes into the living room holding a glass of orange juice, looks at the woodstove, and says, "Lord knows why you still have that old piece of junk, Elbert. As if the upkeep³ isn't more expensive than just using the damn electric heat. You got folks around here thinking we're poor."

Pawpaw presses the button that makes the recliner vibrate. He grunts and leans back. He says, "People appreciate it."

"I don't," says Nana. "Things fall down in there and make a racket."

"Visitors appreciate it," says Pawpaw. "I appreciate it. It's rustic."

"I don't appreciate it," says Nana.

The bird in the flue says, *sh-sh-sh*.

"Is the bird coming out today?" I ask.

Nana puts the glass of orange juice on the coffee table in front of me. The orange juice tastes better in the plastic cups. I told her that probably four times now, but she never remembers.

"Bird?" she says.

"In the flue."

"We'll get something done about it," she says. "How were those bedsheets I bought you?"

Two days pass. The noise from the flue comes less often. Sometimes I forget it's there until it startles me into spilling milk and soggy Oreo crumbs on my shorts.

Sh-sh-sh.

In the living room, I look to Pawpaw. He's in his recliner again. The sun is coming in bright through the living room window. Nana is cleaning. Every time she passes by, she hums.⁴ Pawpaw must be doing less housework and more reclining these days. "Do you think it's hungry?" I ask him.

Pawpaw-in-the-recliner raises his eyebrows—two bristly bundles, the individual hairs so long I wonder if he wears goggles to keep the birds from

3 Upkeep is a liquid people squirt on things to make them catch fire easier. If someone were to unscrew the top of the bottle and drink the upkeep directly, they would either die of spontaneous combustion or fire cancer. The first option is better. Fire cancer destroys more than your body.

4 Humming is a disapproving sound Nana makes. She makes these sounds when she cleans alone. She makes other sounds, too. She used to play a game called "how quiet can I talk." Nana only played this game when she talked about me and my parents. She doesn't really play that game now. She makes louder sounds. I don't know what game this one is, but there are lots of questions. I catch a few phrases, like "*She's left the girl here for a month. How long does that woman need?*" and "*She realizes we have more of a right to grieve him as his damn parents, don't she?*" and "*I ain't complaining, I'll feed her fine, but don't you think that little girl eats just as much as her father did?*"

stealing strands for their nests when he mows the lawn—without opening his eyes. “Hm?”

“The bird. In the flue.”

“We’ll get something done about it,” he says.

Later, when Nana and Pawpaw aren’t looking, I open the living room window and the woodstove’s darkened, glass door. Particles of cold, cremated wood flurry out at me. I sneeze. Then I circle around to the back of the stove and try to yank out the piece of cardboard that cuts the flue off from the stove’s belly. The cardboard won’t budge.

Standing on my tiptoes, I lean forward over the top of the stove and wrap my arms all the way around the flue. The chill of the steel cuts into my cheek. I hold my breath and jerk up, tugging at the slab of cardboard again.

It stays put. I come away with soot⁵ all over me.

Later in the week, it’s a little colder at night. I dream that I’m trapped inside the flue—arms pinned to my sides, elbows crunching my ribcage into my liver,⁶ and in the little bit of empty space left: an impossible number of wings. They strike my legs, my arms, my face, over and over and over, and the beating of wings against steel sounds less like a whisper and more like I’m inside a thundercloud made of metal and crumbling cinders. I wake up with my sheets twisted around my body, swaddling me like a mummy all the way up to the lower half of my face.

That day, the bird is quiet.

I can still hear the thunder, though the skies are clear, and the sun is high. Pawpaw is in his recliner, and Nana is in the kitchen. The journey to drag Pawpaw’s ladder from the shed to the side of the house is long and sweaty. I chase the spiderwebs away with a stick, and then I set up: pulling the ladder out all the way, securing the latches, jamming the rubber soles of my shoes against the rubber feet of the ladder, pulling as hard as I can. The ladder goes up. The top of it smacks against brick, and the whole ladder shivers. I’m getting close. I’m finally doing something. The bird will be okay now.

I climb. Where the roof slants, I get on my hands and feet to crawl towards

⁵ Soot is a powdery fungus made of dead things. It grows in places where fires used to be. It also does not come out of clothes very well.

⁶ The liver is the part of the human body that collects all the dust and ash and smoke that people breathe in. If someone breathes in too much of that stuff, the liver starts leaking. Your eyelashes will start sweating ink. The creases in your palms and the ones behind your knees will turn grey. Black liquid will pool underneath your fingernails and toenails. If you press it, you can move it around. It reminded me of a melted icepack.

the place where the flue juts out from the shingles. The steel sears my fingers the first time I try to grab it. I tug the bottom of my shirt forward to use it as a barrier from the heat.

Far beneath me, the front door opens and shuts. Nana’s voice. “Where is she—? Oh, good lord.”

I tug. The top of the flue comes off with a screech and a cloud of ash.

I lean over the flue and call down to the bird, “You can come out now!”

Nana yells up. I can’t see her face well from here, but something in her voice is shaky. “You stay right there, child! Don’t you move!”

I look over my shoulder, wave down at her. “It’s okay! I’m getting the bird out.”

But the bird hasn’t flown up yet, so I poke my head down inside the flue just a little bit. “Hey! You can come out now!”

“Get your head out of there!” Nana yells. Her yelling moves to the side of the house. “You—you gonna get yourself—! Elbert! Elbert! She’s done gone up on the roof!”

Pawpaw yells from inside the house—I can hear his voice coming up weird and echoey through the flue—“What?”

“I said, she’s done gone—”

A large crash from inside makes the flue shudder. Did Pawpaw just knock over his recliner? A few moments later, Pawpaw runs out the front door, holding his knee and calling to Nana, “She *what?*”

We’re all yelling now: Pawpaw at Nana, Nana at me, and me at the bird.⁷ The roof is hot and everything is loud. I don’t like being up here very much. A strange smell wafts from the flue. I recognize it. It smells like a leaking liver.

Please, I think. I can fix this.

I wish the bird would hurry up—come up and fly out. But my hands are stained with soot, and still, the flue stays silent.⁸

⁷ A bird is a thing that will come up soon. It will come up soon. It will come up.

⁸ *Sh-sh-sh.*

ELEVATOR OPERATOR

LJ Katch

“Number four, please.”

Miami pressed number 256783275, because no one ever actually meant floor four.

Confined between the walls of the pulsing elevator, there was only enough room for the woman to stand a foot or two away from Miami, who appeared as a handsome Dqi man.

“My husband gave me tickets to the spa,” the woman explained.

“Oh?” Miami asked.

“It sounds like a strange concept, a spa.” The woman said the word like she was trying it out in her mouth: zzss-PA. “He told me they heat you up ‘til you sweat, and then they charge you for the expenses.”

Miami nodded. “That’s called a sauna, ma’am.”

“Oh, so you know about spas, too?”

“I know everything, ma’am.”

The woman peered at Miami, confused. “Oh, but you’re just an elevator operator.”

“Of course, ma’am.”

The woman looked away, clutching her purse to her chest. Miami wasn’t surprised. The woman wore seven rings: one for each finger except for the eighth and ninth, which lay bare for humility. It was a sign of high class among the Dqi. Miami wore none.

Ding! The door opened.

“This is your floor, ma’am,” Miami said.

“Are you sure this is floor four?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“It’s just if I’m late, I’ll—”

“Yes, ma’am.”

The woman coughed, holding four of her rings against her blue lips as her eyes twitched. She made a small *hmpf* and marched out of the elevator.

What kind of idiot asked for floor four? With infinite universes branching off of each other every blink of an eye, what sort of narcissist asked for an original?

Floor two was a lava pit, floor five was run by dogs, and floor one was the most disappointing (life had failed to start there in the first place). And floor four? Floor four was a nuclear wasteland, where the air tasted like sulfur and the ground was made of skulls. The Dqi woman wouldn’t have survived there.

Miami had seen the doors open on floor four before. The sky, burning, threatened to eat the very fabric of the universe. Still, she had wanted desperately to run out into that vast, decrepit valley, but leaving the elevator was not part of the job.

“Going up?”

A man approached the edge of 256783275, interrupting Miami’s thoughts. No doubt he found her pretty; Miami was an attractive young human in her 20s. Of course, he looked in his 50s, but Miami figured that didn’t bother him much.

“A human who knows of the elevator?” Miami asked. “This is rare.”

“Rare indeed.” His teeth reeked of molding broccoli, but his pockets sang the sweet song of a tip. He checked his watch. “I’m supposed to meet my kids in a couple. You got room in there for me?”

By the entrance, Miami checked the gold-crested arrows above her head. The down arrow glowed; on the side of the elevator doorway, Miami could see a call from 78682. She ignored it.

“Yes.”

The man stepped in and pressed 431987432. Fucking tourist.

“That’s my job, you know.”

“I figured I’d help you out a little,” the man said, smiling and looking her up and down.

A shudder went down Miami’s spine. She smiled, pushing her chest out and batting her eyes. She’d done this long enough to know that with a little harassment—seduction, her customers would call it—came a little something in return.

“Thank you,” Miami said. “It’s hard work, you know.”

“I can imagine,” the man said, looking around the elevator. He knocked on the wall as if to make sure it was really there, then placed his hand on it before turning back to Miami.

“Does a little lady like you ever get a break?” he asked.

“Yeah, sometimes.” Miami turned toward him, sliding her shoulders onto the wall opposite him. She slouched, jutting her hip out and hooking her thumb in her pocket. “Sometimes I go to the beach.”

She watched his eyes travel down her chest to the stripe of skin that showed beneath her shirt. “Where? Do I know it?”

“Miami.”

She was only partially lying. She didn't just go to Miami on breaks; she went every time she closed her eyes. Her first customer had been from there—she'd been a wreck that day, regretting her decision to take the job, and had asked the customer to describe their hometown. *It's where time stands still*, they'd said. She'd imagined it, the obnoxious yellow sand and the screaming sky. The beach stretching farther than God, the waves so loud even He had to shut his ears. At the time, it sounded as far from the wooden walls of the elevator as one could get, so she chose it for her name in place of the one she gave away.

"So, you like my home?" the man asked, still staring below her eyes.

"You live in Miami?"

"I live in Utah, but same universe."

"Well, you live in one of the millions of universes that have a Miami. There's a universe where Earth spins backwards, one where bees make up the highest class and you humans are subject to their rule, one where all of Florida is underwater—" Miami stopped. He was now looking at her eyes. "But, you know, same planet. Close enough."

The man nodded and smirked. "And what's with the black ceiling?" The man gestured upwards without looking. His eyes had wandered once more below her waistline.

"That's not a ceiling," Miami said. "It's a window." She gazed at the expanse above. Through the glass, she could see the top of the elevator shaft: a void sky.

The doors opened on floor 431987432. A universe had inverted in on itself in a freak quantum tunneling accident that had killed millions. Now, it was filled with tourists dying for a look.

"Oh, I almost forgot." The man stopped, stepping just outside the elevator. He reached into his pocket.

Miami moved towards the elevator entrance, trying not to look too eager (they never give it to you if you look too eager). She imagined that small contact, the side of his fist warming her palm before lifting to pour her reward, his smile wider from the touch, her hands full.

But when the man removed his hand from his pocket, all that was there was a twenty-dollar bill.

"I know it's not much," the man said sheepishly. "But hey, I gotta save my extra minutes for time off with the kids."

He dropped the paper in Miami's hand, not even grazing her fingers. It wasn't that Miami wanted him to come onto her in this way; it was only that she hadn't been touched at all in a very long time.

"Of course," Miami said, biting her tongue. She looked down, trying to hide her face. It was burning. "Thank you."

The man smiled and walked away, looking her up and down once more.

Miami folded the bill in her hand. It was heatless. Useless, fucking worthless waste of her time.

Miami looked at the downward arrow once more. Caught up in talking to the human, they had forgotten the customer waiting downstairs.

Ding! A lizard stood at the doors of the elevator and smiled at the familiar face—as the doors had opened, Miami and the elevator had changed: Miami a lizard and the elevator lizard-sized.

"B, please."

B. This was someone who knew what they were talking about.

"It's okay," the lizard said. "You can ask. B is no joke. Trust me, I know."

Miami leaned towards the lizard.

"Well then, I will ask. What'd you do to get on floor B?"

The lizard let loose a small hiss. "What else but hard work and patience?"

They both laughed.

"No, really though," Miami said.

"I started an oil reserve."

"Where?"

"Floor 76518632143876."

"You used the entire floor?"

The lizard smiled. "Yes. Is that bad?"

Miami shrugged. "I liked that floor."

"Did you?"

Miami shook her head, smiling more playfully than her regular, hospitable smile.

"No, too many bugs."

They laughed again.

"So, what are you doing on floor B? If you can tell me."

The lizard grinned. "Well, I can't tell you everything, but we're discussing infrastructure for third-world universes."

"A fair topic."

"And universal literacy in Basic Universal Script."

"A fundamental right for children."

"And actually, we're also talking about creating some regulations on for-profit transuniversal hotels."

Miami's smile faltered. "You mean my work?"

"Not you, the people in charge." The lizard's hand moved around haphazardly, as if she was going to pat Miami's shoulder, but it never made it.

"What's wrong with my work?" Miami asked.

"You have to admit, the conditions of this workplace are..." the lizard gestured

to the elevator walls, “uncomfortable.”

“I don’t see what you mean.”

“To not be allowed to leave your workplace, even for food or sleep... well, that just seems like there’s some serious maltreatment of employees going on in the company.”

“I don’t need food or sleep,” Miami said, “I don’t have a—”

“Physical form,” the lizard said. “And for a company to require its workers to sell their bodies is yet another issue.”

“I chose to do this,” Miami said.

“Ahhh,” the lizard hissed. “Not to mention the incident with the last elevator operator—”

“That case is closed.”

“A hotel employee, just before you got hired, completely disappeared from their post. Your company only noticed that they were gone when the elevator stopped working.”

“Like I said, the case is closed.” Miami was standing straight now.

“It is my personal belief,” the lizard pushed, “that the use of time as a currency is unethical and ropes workers into jobs they believe they can never get out of.”

“What, you want me to get paid with paper?”

“I’m suggesting something a little more reasonable. Not paper, but maybe gold, food, luxuries.”

“It’s all worthless to me. What use is there in having something to hold if I’m no longer here to hold it?”

“See? Time traps you here, in this elevator. Why do you think none of your coworkers have ever officially retired?”

“Anyone can retire.”

“This company has brainwashed you.”

“We’re not a company,” Miami said. “Only one man’s in charge of this hotel.”

The lizard’s eyes flitted to the glass ceiling, then back down.

“Having a boss who thinks he is a god is dangerous enough.”

Miami looked at the lizard. “He is God.”

“He can pay you well, but he isn’t God.”

“Then he might as well be,” Miami said. “For me. For what I want.”

“What do you want?”

“Vacation time.”

The lizard wrung her hands. “That’s not within my jurisdiction.”

The doors opened. Unlike the numbered floors, which expanded to entire universes, floor B consisted only of a conference room, where several figures—from human-sized bugs to geometric shapes—sat around a long table awaiting the lizard.

Nodding softly to Miami, the lizard stepped off to join the other governors. No longer did she seem large in the elevator, but a mere tiny reptile; the man with three arms seated next to her could surely squash her with a finger.

Miami watched the lizard check the clock on the wall, then look frantically at the governors around her. She was late, and all the gold, food, and luxuries in the world couldn’t change that.

As the doors closed, nobody looked Miami in the eye. The one closest to the elevator barely stood up, reaching into its pocket and pouring something with the consistency of honey into Miami’s still-lizard hand. It filled their hand for a moment before seeping into their atoms: a week or so.

Miami saw several requests—324, 89797239749812749379417, 13144329808—but the elevator did not go to any of them, even as they pressed the buttons.

Instead, it took Miami down to the basement. They rolled their eyes. Another wrong step on a ship too tight. They imagined the strip of sand, bossa nova blasting so loud they couldn’t hear any of their thoughts, the waves, louder still. *Miami, Miami, Miami.*

Ding! The basement was cluttered: a lost and found filled with the toys and trinkets customers left behind. In front of the door stood GGabri, the keeper and Miami’s mentor. Met with a non-customer, Miami’s form did not change. GGabri also retained the form of their last customer: an oversized spider, apparently. They crawled into the elevator.

“What the fuck was that?”

“What was what?” Miami said, smiling and tilting their lizard head sideways.

“You ignored the arrows. They’re there for a reason. You don’t just get to go up and down whenever you want.”

“A nice man asked me to help him get to his floor.”

GGabri scoffed. “Don’t play dumb with me. What, did he give you a good tip?”

Miami sighed, their smile dropping. “Not even. He gave me money.”

GGabri laughed. “That’s what you get for wasting time on a human. Who’d you leave waiting?”

“No one of importance.”

Miami paused. “She was going to floor B.”

“God damn it, Miami. What was she doing on floor B?”

“Planning a new way to get us fired,” Miami said.

GGabri rolled their eyes and shook their head. “And I’m sure she’s got all the time in the world.”

Miami nodded. They had the same salary now, Miami and GGabri, six days a cycle. Just enough to live indefinitely, as long as they kept the job. But the betting was in the tips: if they built up enough, they could retire, live out their time in

peace. At least that was what the advertisements said.

“Look, I’m sorry,” Miami said. “It’s been a busy day. I promise I’ll follow the arrows.”

They looked at GGabri. They’d always had a mutual understanding. When Miami first showed up, GGabri had defended them when they chose their name. Everyone had made fun of Miami. Later, GGabri would tell Miami of their own pain of losing their first name; GGabri had been named after their grandmother. In the early days of the job, they’d whisper together of the worker who disappeared. Did they secretly retire? Live out their days on a mountain, or by the beach, another Miami in another universe? It was like a sweet bedtime story to Miami—the worker who collected enough time to live out their days.

Over the years, Miami and GGabri grew suspicious. Perhaps he got terminated, or ill. Decided to go back to society, ran off on a floor and never looked back. Maybe he angered God. How could someone get a taste of time and stop seeking it? For Miami, every hour they soaked in was another opportunity to take more customers, collect more time. It felt like they would never retire. Miami and GGabri would watch the starless night from the elevator, through that ceiling to nowhere—the only view they’d seen outside the hotel. They would gossip, wonder if the only way out was *out*.

Now, both years older, both robbed of their original forms, they shifted with the tides, taking the next customer and smiling, adding a mechanical car to the pile.

One of GGabri’s eight legs was tapping the ground. “I don’t want to report you.”

Miami rolled their eyes, crossing their arms. “I know you—”

“You don’t understand,” GGabri said. “I don’t want to, but I will.”

Miami took a step away from GGabri, frowning.

“Oh.”

“There’s a new bonus for displaying good management,” GGabri said, looking down. “Twenty weeks. One of the only ways to get it is to report employees who are slacking off.”

“Really?” Miami asked. “For what? Twenty more weeks to work here?”

“No. Twenty weeks to add to my retirement fund,” GGabri said.

“You sound just like that lizard. Are you going to integrate healthily back into society like that operator who disappeared? Just go back living with your old name, your old body?”

GGabri sighed. “Maybe he really did retire, Miami. I mean, if we’re never going to retire, what’s the point of this?”

Miami scowled. “Yeah. What’s the point?”

The elevator had stretched out, mistaking GGabri for a customer and responding to their unease.

Miami looked at GGabri, miles away. They sighed. “It’s okay. I understand.”

GGabri smiled. “Thank you.”

The elevator shrunk to its square floor once more. Miami shivered. The presence of their friend now felt like a chill they couldn’t shake.

“I need to get back to work.”

“Yes,” GGabri said. “Yes, you do.”

GGabri crawled out of the elevator. Miami watched them leave, remembering when they’d first stepped in. GGabri had introduced them to the complex, trillion-floor interface of buttons, trained them to read the universes. The elevator had felt to Miami like the height of style: golden walls that shone their reflection back at them, the arrow atop the front doors that twinkled with excitement upwards to their first customer, the mysteriousness of the dark, glass ceiling. They had loved seeing themselves change with the customers like outfits; each time the doors closed, they would touch their face, getting reacquainted with their new look.

Now, those days felt like a cruel joke. Their reflections looked foreign, and with each person who stepped out of the elevator, free to do what Miami couldn’t, they felt less like a dignified service of luxury and more like a prisoner with a life-sentence. Sometimes, the feeling of time soaking into their atoms was enough to ignore it for a few more cycles, a lofty tip, the paycheck; others, Miami envied the previous operator.

GGabri still held out dreams of retirement, but Miami was tired. In the world of the elevator, the only constant was the ceiling.

Ding! The elevator shot up to floor 896. A stick. Then Ding! All the way up to 1847138270431280438129. A family of gnocchi. Ding! Ding! Ding! The elevator rang with the impatience of a child on a road trip. With each *ding!* came a new customer, a new story, a new tip. Some came for work (they had little time to spare), and others for vacation (they had all the time in the world and none of the will to share it). Every time the doors opened, the universes taunted Miami, allowing them glimpses of yet another world they could only see through a single frame. Every customer, no matter how wealthy, had places to be and so little time to go.

Ding! On the way up to floor 780980931843, Miami searched around the elevator walls. They wanted to punch through those wooden panels, if only to break the wires that triggered that terrible dinging. As the doors opened, however, they found themselves unable to transform into their customer’s familiar.

“Floor 2110982,” the Jigani woman said.

Miami, in a panic, had chosen the first form they could think of: a human man from earlier that cycle. He pressed the button with his bulky, human hand, watching the woman’s tentacle tap at her side. He nearly cried at the sight of it.

Miami forced himself to smile. The tapping—it was the same motion his mother

had made when he'd explained the job opening at the hotel.

"What brings you to 2110982?" Miami asked.

"Cancat," the woman explained. "I have to go home for it or my mother will kill me. It's this holiday about the birth of the Jigani race, but really the family just gathers around a fire and throws in leaves. We sit with our backs turned to the fire to celebrate the passing of winter."

"And then they sing to welcome spring," Miami whispered. The air around Miami felt hot and sticky and scant. He felt like condensation, stuck to the walls of the very elevator. He closed his eyes, doing what he did whenever he felt trapped.

Miami Miami Miami. Where he'd retire, where time stands still. *Miami Miami Miami.*

"It's a dumb holiday," the woman said. "It's so commercial."

Miami glanced at her. "But at least it brings everyone home. We should start the seasons off with family."

"Yes!" The woman's face lit up with delight. "How do you know so much about the Jigani?"

Miami tried to keep his face still. "Sorry. It's just, you reminded me of my family." The words hung on his tongue. "I was from Jigan."

The woman gasped. "You don't look Jigani."

"It comes with the job. I have to look as appealing as I can to the customer. I usually change into the customer's species."

"Well, why didn't you change into a Jigani for me?"

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"I sold my body for this job. I can't have it back until I retire."

The woman swallowed. She took a breath and nodded.

"And what's your name?" she asked.

"I sold that, too."

"How could you do that?"

Miami sighed. "I spent all my time looking for an answer," he explained. "Aren't we all just looking for an answer in our own ways? Looking for those pockets in the universe where time stands still? I mean, what happens when time runs out? Don't you wonder?"

The woman nodded.

"The people here, we all got here the same way," Miami continued. "We all went searching for the answer, and we found the man who said He had it."

Miami shook his head. "But instead of showing us where to go, He told us that maybe one day, we'd be able to buy it ourselves, if we worked for Him long enough. We'd find salvation."

The woman's eyebrows furrowed. "But you can't buy forever."

Miami turned to face the woman. "Then how could I retire?"

The woman looked at the ceiling of the elevator and shuddered. Miami looked up, too. He almost laughed. God was smart, he realized. A businessman. The elevator was designed intentionally—the window a constant reminder of why the hotel existed, what it kept out.

"Can I hold your hand?" the woman asked, looking once more at Miami.

Miami kept his face turned upwards. "It's not really there."

"Can I try?"

Miami nodded.

The woman's tentacle curled around Miami's bulky, human hand. Together, her purple flesh nearly swallowed it.

Miami looked down. It must have been an illusion, for in truth, he was scattered across the elevator—particles bouncing off the walls like marbles, only solid enough to take a tip. He thought back to his childhood. Somewhere deep in his memory, moments like this: tentacle around tentacle, a warm fire on a very cold day. Those were the days you couldn't just buy back. And though he had given up physical sensation when he got the job, Miami decided it felt real enough.

The doors opened.

"This is me," the woman said, releasing his hand.

A muffled noise came from Miami.

"Would you like to come?" the woman asked.

"I can't."

"Can't you?"

Yes, yes he could. He could live out the rest of his life with this woman, visit his city, visit home. And then time would run out.

"I can't," Miami said. "I'd have to quit, go into retirement."

The woman, apparently out of other things to say, took out her wallet. The temptation of a tip tugged at Miami's fingertips. He clenched his fist, now clammy with a cold, human sweat.

"Please don't."

The woman took a long time to put her wallet away.

"Well, if you ever decide you want to quit," she said, looking into Miami's eyes.

"Maybe."

The doors closed.

Miami stared at that damned arrow above their head. That glowing death sentence was pointing down, down to floor one: the first universe, and the loneliest. Miami assumed it was a tourist, a rich one; they could probably get a year out of it,

maybe two. But the thought of another second in their palm made Miami want to throw up. Instead, they went up.

Ding! The doors opened to the roof. The sound of the elevator disappeared into the open air. Miami had only visited the penthouse floor once—one floor beneath the roof—on the day they got the job. They had shaken hands with a man with no face. But the whole time, Miami had peeked at what lay outside the window past the hotel. Finally, standing above it all, even above the penthouse floor, Miami got the real view.

It was so much better in person. From the ceiling of the elevator, the world outside the hotel had always looked black, empty. But now, in its three-dimensional glory, Miami could see it was so much more: it was everything. It expanded past the tunnel of the elevator shaft, past the frame of the penthouse floor window. Every speck of light in existence, every color, every thought, every dream—everything existed everywhere at all times.

Miami took a step, then two, out of the elevator. The floor rippled beneath their feet, a silvery expanse pouring out and over into the void. There were footprints in front of Miami. They grinned. The disappearing operator.

The sane thing to do would be to run back to the elevator. They could go back to work, tell GGabri it was a mistake, or retire instantly, follow the Jigani woman. But neither would make them free.

Miami followed the footprints—indentations impressed upon the fabric of the universes themselves.

On the penthouse floor, God had told Miami that all that laid outside the hotel was emptiness. But emptiness, Miami now recognized, was a matter of perspective. Looking down over the edge where the roof spilled over, they saw at once the end and the beginning, like two stars melting into each other. It was the answer they had spent their life looking for. In that burning madness was the very thing they'd been taught to fear.

Miami looked back. The elevator doors were open, waiting for them to come home. The promise of return gleamed: that of salvation, the endless retirement. Miami closed their eyes. *Miami Miami Miami.*

But as Miami peered over the edge, they could, for the first time since they'd taken the job, feel something. It was a breeze coming from below. Their mouth—a tongue was nearly there—tasted of salt water. In those exploding stars below was everything: a little spot for Miami on a thin stretch of beach. Following the sound of the seagulls, Miami chose to fall forever.

JACKSON AND AGATHA AGAINST THE WIND

Ashley Brie Myers

Every Saturday, Jackson takes a long drive with Agatha. He usually rides on until his little grey car is at half a tank, stops at a gas station for snacks and fuel, and heads back to his dorm on a different route to spice it up.

Agatha is the ideal travel companion. She doesn't complain when his playlist jumps from Broadway to Bob Seger to B.O.B. She listens intently to all Jackson has to say, as if she were just as invested in the history of Rome. And when he's in the mood for silence, she leaves him to his thoughts.

Jackson's dad got him Agatha a year ago, as a "Congrats, you're going to college!" gift. She's a handsome turtle with a slanted beak and beady eyes. She holds a cerebral—and, at times, devious—expression. The fiery color of her stubby legs makes her look like she climbed into a bag of Cheetos. Jackson named her after Agatha Christie; murder mysteries, like driving, settle him whenever his mind is whirling.

"Agatha, where should we venture off to today?" Jackson asks, buckling up. "Maine?"

Agatha stirs beside him in her container.

"Maybe up to York?" Jackson continues.

Jackson's roommate is from York. He's nice enough. They get dinner once a week. Jackson doesn't think Aidan wants to be more than once-a-week friends. Aidan's on the tennis team and in a poetry club. Jackson could join the club—Aidan mentioned it—but he finds poetry esoteric and smug, and he would rather have garlic salt thrown in his eyes before picking up a sport.

"York it is," Jackson decides. He could drive along the coast real close, look out for lighthouses. Lighthouses have always intrigued him, their very nature paradoxical: both a guide and a warning, a signal of safety and shipwrecked doom.

"Should I see if Aidan wants a taste of home or something? Or would that be weird? Would he think I'm hitting on him?" Jackson pulls out of the student lot. The gravel crunches underneath his tires. "I'll think about it."

Despite Aidan's opposite interests, Jackson thinks he would make a better friend than the ones he has now. They tease him about Agatha, asking if he'll marry her, making inane jokes about what the wedding night would look like. It's the

end of his first semester, and lately, Jackson has been feeling like it's too late, like he missed the cut-off point for finding new friends. It's funny how that happens, how you either locate friends in college that click into place or you get stuck with dissimilar people who don't really know anything about you and don't try to but happen to be on the same floor and tangentially connected to a sibling (the leader of Jackson's cohort, for instance, is dating his older sister's best friend).

Jackson merges onto Storrow Drive. To his left, the frozen Charles River winds through the city like an ice serpent.

"I wonder how many people have been swallowed up by the river." He taps the steering wheel. "Too big a risk if you ask me. What's fun about walking out onto fragile ice?"

Jackson satiates his minor, thrill-seeking impulse by ascending the Scoville scale, spooning hot sauce into his mouth in rounds until his lips burn and his throat feels like a toxic waste dump. He's made it to ghost pepper so far: one of his major life accomplishments.

"I guess I can understand it," he amends, once the Charles is out of view. "It must be exhilarating to toe the line between life and death."

He looks over at Agatha's container. "I wonder what you'd do, if you were human." He laughs sadly. "Maybe you wouldn't even be friends with me."

Jackson's phone rings through the Bluetooth of his car. He smiles. It's Jasmine. His sister calls him every Saturday, knowing he will be on the road.

"Hey, Jas."

"Where are you headed today?" she asks.

Jackson can hear chatting in the background, the muffled sounds of normal young adults getting together on weekends instead of going on road trips with their pets. Sometimes, he wonders if Jasmine actually wants to call him or feels obligated to, out of pity and siblinghood.

"York." Jackson stares at the bumper in front of him without blinking. "If you're busy, we can talk later."

"You have to go to the Wiggly Bridge!" Jasmine says.

Jackson squints. "The what?"

"The Wiggly Bridge!" she squeals. "It's this super short suspension bridge. I went with Maisy two summers ago. It was so cute."

"I don't know. I don't like to stop for too long."

Jasmine sighs. "Jackson, you go to all these cool places, but you never explore them. You could at least walk around, maybe start a travel blog, like 'On the Road with Jackson and Agatha,' or 'A Turtle-ly awesome—'"

"I'm not a pun guy."

"Apparently not a fun guy, either," Jasmine mumbles.

"I like seeing everything through my windows." Jackson makes a grand flourish with his arm. "It's more... romantic that way."

"Why does it need to be romantic?"

"Things can be disappointing when you see them up close."

"That's bleak. Give some place a chance to prove you wrong."

"I'll consider it," Jackson says.

"Sure you will."

Jackson grins to himself. "What are your plans for today?"

"Studying for Chem, skating on the Frog Pond, maybe going out later, but I might skip and rewatch *Sex Education*. I'm obsessed with Eric—"

"Don't fall in." Jackson tightens his grip on the wheel.

"What?"

"The Frog Pond."

Jasmine clicks her tongue. "How does that skinny body of yours carry all that worry?"

"You should watch *Ragnarok*."

"Still a no from me. I'm not into all that mythology stuff like you."

Jackson hears someone whine on the other end. "Everything okay?"

"I've gotta go. Maisy says if we don't get her coffee soon, she'll die, and I'll be responsible."

"Well, go on. I don't want to be an accomplice."

Jasmine laughs. "Wiggly Bridge!" she shouts. "Love you."

"Love you, too. Bye."

The car is too quiet without the pitch of Jasmine's voice, so Jackson turns his music back on. "Against the Wind" starts. Jackson loses himself to it.

#

Jackson makes it to Portsmouth before having to stop for a bathroom break, though his tank is still over half full. He chooses the familiar Cumberland Farms. The lime-green trim and blue lettering have always felt oddly comforting to him.

Pulling the blanket off Agatha's container, Jackson thinks back to Jasmine's suggestion and smiles. "If we did have a blog, maybe it could be 'Jackson and Agatha Against the Wind.' What do you think?"

Agatha looks up at him, waiting. She's smart and knows when it's time to eat, or at least Jackson likes to think she does.

Jackson looks away, sighing. "All right. Some lunch for you." He grabs a tin of grasshoppers and drops some by Agatha's beak, adding a few blueberries to the mix. "Enjoy!"

The wind lashes against his cheeks as he power-walks to the entrance, hands deep in his pockets seeking shelter in the fleece. A woman with the longest braid

he's ever seen exits the building, the door jangling behind her. Jackson decides to smile, parting his lips and lifting his cheeks (a grueling mental process, gauging whether strangers will reciprocate the courtesy).

She doesn't smile back, but the little boy trailing her does.

And now, should Jackson greet the cashier on his way to the restroom or brisk by?

The cashier looks up. He has more wrinkles than Jackson thinks he should. Maybe stress. A hard life. Or maybe he earned the wrinkles by raising six annoying but lovable kids who are grown now, don't visit him often, send him updates on postcards.

"Hello," Jackson says quickly, nodding.

The cashier nods back.

He should've complimented the cashier's baseball cap.

He passes racks of flavored chips, chocolate bars, and jerky (for which Jackson has an inexplicable fondness) before pushing into the restroom.

By the stalls, wet sheets of paper towel stick to the floor tiles. The trash needs to be emptied, but the space smells all right.

When finished peeing, Jackson checks his teeth in the mirror and washes his hands, the water scalding the chill from his fingers.

On his way out, he buys a pack of teriyaki jerky.

The cashier tells him to have a nice day, and even though Jackson knows the parting phrase is not reserved for him, it lifts his head higher.

#

"We're here." Jackson parks on the side of the road opposite the Wiggly Bridge.

"Proof for Jasmine." He holds up Agatha's container for a photo, but only the treeline through the car window is visible in the background.

It would be foolish not to check it out; he's practically on top of the thing. He resituates Agatha on the front seat and leaves the car running to keep it warm for her. "Wish me luck."

Jackson jogs across the road and ducks under the gate. A causeway lined with rocks cuts through York Harbor, ending at the comically short, green bridge. It is cute, he admits to himself, as fun-sized things usually are, save for insects and porcelain dolls.

"Hello," a gray-haired woman says to Jackson as she strolls near with a Yorkie. She has on a glorious, colorful winter coat, vines and petals winding up the sleeves. Her dog stops at Jackson's feet, wagging its tail excessively.

"Hi," Jackson says, bending down to scratch behind the dog's ears.

The woman waits patiently, tightening the leash when the dog yips and hops. "Sorry."

"I don't mind." Dogs are the second-best animal. "A Yorkie in York, what a thing!"

The woman gives a short chuckle. Less than he'd anticipated, Jackson adds, "What's her name?"

"Lucy."

"Hi, Lucy." Jackson bends down to look into its eyes.

Lucy licks his fingers.

"She likes you," the woman says, extending Lucy's lead a bit.

"The feeling's mutual." Jackson smiles at Lucy, still crouched. Every time a dog takes to him, Jackson is reassured that he has a good soul. Dogs sniff out evil.

"I have a pet, too, actually. A turtle. She's in the car right now."

"Oh? Whatever for?"

Jackson's cheeks get hot. "I take her on drives."

The woman laughs, louder now. "Want to swap? I bet your turtle doesn't do a lot of barking."

Jackson, taken aback by the woman's friendly teasing, continues to stare at Lucy.

"What brings you here?" the woman asks.

"My sister. She insisted I see the Wiggly Bridge." He gestures past them to the small green attraction. "It's so cute," he says, imitating Jasmine's tone.

The woman gives it a long look. "It is." She nods, peering back down at Jackson. "Living here, I forget to really see it. Thank you for the reminder." She tugs on Lucy's leash. "Say hi to your turtle for me."

"You too, I mean, thank you, I mean, will do, have a nice day." Jackson stands, watching the tail of the woman's coat pass by. His knees crack. Continuing down the causeway, he smiles to himself. To his surprise, he decides that the encounter went well. It's lovely how pets entwine together the lives of strangers, if even for a moment. Maybe he *should* start a blog.

The air, briny, enlivens Jackson's senses: the tightening of the cold through his nostrils, the bite of it on his skin. It raises his face as he walks. When he steps onto the bridge, its planks wobble beneath him. He giggles. Leave it to something named the Wiggly Bridge to return him to his youth.

He snaps a selfie and sends it to Jasmine. "Not disappointed," he types.

The vast calm of the harbor echoes in his chest, untangling and muting his strings of thought. He curls his hands over the railing and inhales deeply. If Agatha weren't in the car, he thinks he'd stay.

CONTRIBUTOR BIOS

Shitta Faruq Adémólá, Frontier XIV, is a 2021 SpringNG Writing Workshop alumni, a young Muslim poet, digital artist and fiction writer from Nigeria. He is the author of a microchap “All I Know Is I Am Going To Be Beautiful One Day” (Ghost City Press, 2021), and Night Club With Dogs (INKspired) 2022. He is a member of The Frontier Collective and tweets @shittafaruqade1.

Noor Ali (she/her) is a poet and student at Albuquerque Academy in Albuquerque, New Mexico. She is passionate about the intersection between social justice and storytelling. In her free time, Noor can be found sorting through bookshelves, watching sunsets, or cooking noodles.

Dana Blatte is a first-year at Hamilton College studying cultural anthropology and creative writing. Her work appears in The Adroit Journal, Fractured Lit, The Shore, and more, and has been recognized by The Adroit Journal, the Pulitzer Center, YoungArts, and the American Jewish Historical Society, among others. She loves fairytales, unnecessarily long walks, and honey almond butter.

Ileana Bo is currently a student at the University of Iowa, majoring in English and creative writing and minoring in sustainability and studio art. They love the color green, reading gay princess novels or anything by Ocean Vuong, painting, gardening, and going to the aquarium.

Oliver Brooks is a student at Florida State University and the poetry editor for The Kudzu Review. His work has appeared in Cantilevers: Journal of the Arts, The Kudzu Review, and is forthcoming in Antithesis Journal. When not writing, he likes to knit or make terrible noises with a ukulele.

Emma Chan is a writer and college freshman from the East Coast. Her work appears or is forthcoming in Half Mystic, Diode, and Up the Staircase Quarterly. When not reading, she loves searching for good restaurants, saving cute cat pictures, and playing video games.

Alexandra Dauchess is a DC based writer and filmmaker with a passion for telling stories about mental health and the human experience. This is her second publication and she's excited about the prospect of sharing her work with more people.

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LJ Katch is a young writer from New York City, caught in between the mess of surrealism and quantum physics. Aspiring towards a graduate degree, they hope to change the world through science and change minds through art.

June Lin is a poet from Canada. She loves practical fruits, like clementines and bananas. Her debut chapbook, how to construct a breakup poem, is out now from fifth wheel press. She tweets sometimes at @junelinwrites.

Ashley Brie Myers is a Boston-based writer most interested in the luminous and muddy emotions faced by humans (and magical creatures). She received a BA in Fiction Writing from Connecticut College. You can find her articles in Berkshire Magazine.

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Originally from San Jose, California, Sachi Parikh started out as a woodworker where she designed and built 1:12 scale Victorian dollhouses and furniture. Her interests led her to producing artwork at a minuscule level with mediums such as metal and ceramics. She currently is a student at New York University studying politics, philosophy and computer science.

Rigel Portales is a 19-year-old, self-taught Filipino poet afraid of disappearing. Fortunately, his works have appeared/are soon to appear on Palette Poetry, Frontier Poetry, and Cha with a poetry chapbook, DEAD BOYS MAKE THE BEST MEN, forthcoming from Flowersong Press in the US.

Juheon Rhee is a 17-year-old writer residing in Manila. Her work has been published or is forthcoming in Indolent Books, 580 Split, Lunch Ticket, and Cleaver Magazine among others. She has also received nominations for her works, such as the Best of the Net Nomination.

Saheed Sunday, NGP V, author of Rewrite The Stars, is a Nigerian poet and essayist who has been published in Shrapnel Magazine, The Temz Review, Rough Cut Press, Brittle Paper and others.

Jacqueline Wu is an emerging artist from Long Island, New York who views art as the mirror through which should reflect society, one that emphasizes what is important at that moment in time. Her work has been showcased in national galleries like the SAS Virtual Art Gallery and the International Hexagon Project Exhibit. She has been nationally recognized through the Scholastic Art and Writing Competition/Celebrating Art Competition and was published or is forthcoming in *Blue Marble Review*, *Bridge: The Bluffton University Literary Journal*, *Body Without Organs*, and *Teen Ink Magazine*, among others. Wu serves as the Vice President of *Cinnabar*, an award-winning art/literary magazine and the President of her National Art Honor Society chapter.

Ziyi Yan (闫梓祎) is a young Chinese writer living in Connecticut. She is an alumnus of the Iowa Young Writers' Studio and the Adroit Journal Summer Mentorship. Her writing has been recognized by the Scholastic Art and Writing Awards on a national level. She was a poetry finalist for the BreakBread Literacy Project, and the winner of the Piedmont Institution Communications Contest. She is also the editor-in-chief of *The Dawn Review*. In addition to writing, she loves watching old One Direction interviews, blasting karaoke in the middle of the night, and annoying her younger sister.

Bernice Zhu's destination in this vast world, a place where all survival can be forgiven. Born in America, but not always seen as American, even in the supposed welcoming arms of a country dedicated to freedom and social mobility. Within its arms, its promises are fleetingly light, yet unendurably heavy.

An abstract painting featuring a close-up of a human face in profile, rendered in shades of grey and blue. Overlaid on the face is a golden-brown skull, also in profile, facing the same direction. The background is a mix of warm orange and yellow tones. In the bottom right corner, there are white stars on a blue background, reminiscent of the American flag.

BreakBread Magazine

**VOLUME 3, ISSUE 5
WINTER 2023**

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