

xylem



xylem

2019-2020

Xylem Literary Magazine is a publication of the Undergraduate English Association at the University of Michigan.



PRINTED BY
University Lithoprinters

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Xylem, n. Collective term for the cells, vessels, and fibres forming the harder portion of the fibrovascular tissue; the wood, as a tissue of the plant-body.

—OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY

Xylem is a literary arts magazine that annually publishes the original creative work of University of Michigan undergraduate students. All aspects of the journal's publicity, production, and publication are student-run.



Dear reader,

I want to start this brief letter by saying thank you for picking up a copy of our magazine.

The purpose of *Xylem Literary Magazine* has always been to create a space for University of Michigan undergraduates to communicate what is meaningful to them. Since the 1990s, the magazine has given artists the opportunity to share their creative works with the greater Ann Arbor community. Year after year, we are humbled by the countless submissions we receive. These small gifts from our contributors remind us that the literary arts are still very much alive.

During the process of curating this year's magazine, the staff was given only one fixed requirement: to select pieces that surprised them. Surprise, it turns out, comes in several forms. In this issue, you will find poetry on love and identity; stories on childhood, growing up, and death; art that speaks to the beauty of the natural world; and much more. Perhaps, in the pages of this magazine, you will find surprise too.

Xylem Literary Magazine serves as a conduit for sharing creativity. But more importantly, the magazine aims to encourage creativity – because we can never have enough poetry, enough prose, enough art. The staff and I hope that this magazine serves as a gentle reminder to keep creating.

Sincerely,
Simran Malik
Editor-in-Chief
Xylem Literary Magazine

contributors

Jaynab Akhtar (pronounced Zaynab) is a current LSA sophomore and hails from Hamtramck, Michigan. Outside of school, she enjoys watching soccer, hanging out with her family, and reading classics and world fiction. When she isn't writing, Jaynab can be found trying to be productive in the Fishbowl or at any of the bubble tea places on campus.

Hayla Alawi is a senior studying creative writing and Asian studies. She's also the music director for DJs A Cappella and narrates audiobooks in her spare time. When Hayla's not studying or working, you can probably find her playing board games with her friends or drinking hot chocolate and critiquing YouTube singing compilations with her roommates.

Carson Bell is a Computer Scientist and Poet at the University of Michigan. He has lived in Brasil and China, loves drinking too much tea, and is always infatuated with something.

Kristen Bolster is a sophomore and her intended major is Public Policy. She enjoys writing slam poetry, realistic fiction, and prose. She's currently part of the University of Michigan Slam Poetry Team, she is a Comprehensive Studies Program Mentor and Ambassador, and she is also part of Model United Nations at the University of Michigan. In her free time, she enjoys watching and winning her Fantasy Bachelor League.

Lia Borntrager is a writer and photographer from Michigan. They enjoy being outside in any capacity and a lot of their work tries to reflect the spaces in which they exist or have existed in. They hope to continue writing for a long while and are majoring in Secondary English Education with the hopes of inspiring students through literature and self-expression.

Hiba Dagher is a sophomore pursuing studies in English

and Political Science. She has been previously published in the Inside Out Anthology and Cafe Shapiro's 22nd Anthology. She is also the recipient of two undergraduate Hopwood awards. When not staring wistfully out of all sorts of windows, she can be found crying about Jane Austen protagonists or writing articles for Michigan in Color. You can find more of her ramblings @ mtnsdaughter on Twitter.

Olivia Evans is a freshman at the University of Michigan, currently studying creative writing and Russian. In her free time, she likes to journal, collage, and watch movies.

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Kennedi Killips is a junior majoring in Creative Writing & Literature and minoring in History. When she's not writing for *The University Record*, she can be found painting, avoiding her email, cooking, or hanging around her co-op.

Aelita Klausmeier is a freshman studying math and computer science at the University of Michigan. She writes mostly poetry, and is a big fan of finding the fascinating in the mundane. Oh, and she's always on the hunt for cool new music to listen to!

Rachel McKimmy is an undergraduate in LSA double-majoring in Environment and International Studies and minoring in Creative Writing (Fiction) and Earth Sciences. She has also studied abroad in Japan and at Oxford University in the U.K. Raised in rural northern California in an off-the-grid home in the mountains within sight of the Pacific, she enjoys drinking tea, getting lost in a good story, and cuddling with her dog and cats.

Parker Kehrig is a sophomore majoring in Sociology and Women's Studies, from Harper Woods, Michigan. When they are not shouting, reading, or making bad art, you might find them folding tiny origami figures and leaving them around for people to find. They are very funny on Twitter if you can manage to find their handle. Someday they hope to become a social worker, or otherwise work to help make the world a more accessible and loving place some other way.

Yuheng Li is a senior at the University of Michigan. He is the obligatory Chinese international student who shows up in all of your classes and has you and the professor wondering, "Why is this guy here, shouldn't he be doing engineering or something?"

Ekaterina Makhnina is a sophomore in LSA studying Linguistics and Cognitive Science. She loves to read, write and draw, and has a particular interest in character-focused art. Her favorite artists include Alphonse Mucha, Edgar Degas, and Artemisia Gentileschi.

Nina Molina is a junior transfer student from the suburbs of Chicago. Her writing days began in her first grade diaries, also commencing her frightful relationship with spelling. Nina is studying English and Political Science, with hopes of pursuing a career in journalism. In her free time, she enjoys reading literature and nicknaming people she has just met.

Sarah O'Donnell is an English major and Digital Studies minor. She can usually be found doing at least one of the following three things: laying under a soft blanket, drinking bubble tea, or dancing.

Syafawani Abdul Rahim is a freshman majoring in Economics. She is from Malaysia, so Michigan's winter makes her miss the tropical heat of home. In her free time, she enjoys spending hours in secondhand book shops, binge-watching Buzzfeed videos, and playing around with film cameras.

Marlon Rajan is a student in the Residential College studying Creative Writing. They are also involved with and write for The RC Review. They believe writing to be a lot like dreaming, for it functions as a way to interpret reality and explore memories. Sometimes it can also just be fun. Whatever the case, they love to write and hope others love to read what they produce.

Elly Salah is a junior at the University of Michigan, studying Creative Writing and Sociology. In her free time, she loves to play with animals and be with friends. She hopes to continue working on poetry in the future.

Lydia Stevens is a freshman hoping to get an Environment major through Program in the Environment. In her free time, she enjoys drinking too much coffee and starting more pieces of writing than she finishes.

Matt Tarry is a 20-year-old Computer Engineering student at the University of Michigan who has recently begun writing fiction. He enjoys strong coffee, long-distance running, and browsing the shelves of dusty old bookstores.

Alexander Wagner is a junior studying Creative Writing & Literature through the Residential College at LSA. He writes mostly poetry and screenplays, and he hopes to become a showrunner at Cartoon Network after graduating.

Julian Wray is a freshman who hopes to one day pick a major. He is from Grosse Pointe, Michigan, and grew up a few blocks from the house in *Middlesex* by Jeffrey Eugenides. He likes to read and take photos.

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to you, who were once a child

Do you remember?

grass growing through sidewalk cracks
the kiss of concrete on a bare knee
as you bend to watch the ant ascend

there are eyes, popping
on the bottom of pasta pots
pondering you as you wonder back

the first worm crushed between
feet and concrete, grey-pink mush
emotions you couldn't name

trying to untangle curling vines
from weathered steps,
pulling at leathery veined leaves

orange seeds crushed between
thumb and forefinger,
wet tissue stuck under a dirty nail

sweet smell of a thunderstorm
soaked socks in tennis shoes
your shirt sticking to your back
here, in the middle of a rain-slicked street
the silent roar of everything
surrounding you,
for a time,
for forever.

lydia stevens

i don't believe in god,

and neither does the woman
that put apples in her salad, mixed
with ranch and sunflower seeds.

She gardened, taking her time
to perfectly lay the mulch around
each orange zinnia under the weeping

tree with the sagging branches. She took
care of wild baby bunnies until their last
breath and she made a feral cat fat and

spoiled. This was a woman who wore a plum down
coat with faux fur trim around the hood that wisps
of auburn hair peeked out from. At the lake house

she had a plump ceramic chicken that we wrote
silly messages on in chalk. She took me to see
Riverdance for the first time, where shamrock

dancers stepped to intricate melodies. I was alone
in a Dublin theatre this year, watching my second
Riverdance show, when I felt her angel next to me.

Suddenly I couldn't stop crying over her love
of loons and statues and red wine and
I still don't believe in God, but I wish I did.

sarah o'donnell

blessed are those who mourn

Last Sunday I was hit on at church.

After the Gloria and before the offering, the fifty-year-old man in the pew in front of me turned around and asked for my name. I am not religious. I do not come to this place whose furnace is constantly broken, to kneel in front of a man stapled to a cross because I think he'll be able to hear me up there. Quite frankly, I'm tired of kneeling in front of men who do not listen to me.

I go to church for my Nano. An eighty-nine-year-old man who just lost the best thing to ever happen to him last December. Her name was Bernadette, and sometimes I don't feel right inside sitting in the spot on the pew that she claimed for so many years. I don't believe in heaven, but I sometimes want to for my Nano, who now lives alone in that small house in the subdivision that I've come to love as my second home. The house that seemed so small when there were only two of them, but is now barren without her. The house no longer smells like basil or tomato sauce -- my Nano never did learn how to cook. To fill her silence, he plays the radio. He plays it loud. And maybe that's because his hearing is going and he refuses to use his aid, but I think he doesn't really listen to it anyway.

The kitchen table is so much bigger. And I find that I sit in her chair more and more often than I do my own. I don't know if it's for my Nano or for me, but neither of us can bear to leave the space empty. I held my Nano around that kitchen table. The morning after she left him, when I had woken up on the hard mattress in the guest bedroom where my mother had slept for so many years, I came downstairs to find him drinking coffee at the empty kitchen table. He told me he hadn't really slept. I told him that was okay. I sat in her chair. And I watched a man who just lost the person who he loved for the last fifty years of his life realize that she was really gone. So I held him as he cried, and I cried, and the coffee got cold.

I am not my Nana. I am not warm hugs, or fuzzy slippers, or white pants. I wear gold hoop earrings for her, but they don't look the same on me. I think of myself first, I don't apologize when I should, I don't say thank you often enough,

sacraments

and I never really learned how to cook either, despite watching her do it so many times. When I wrote her eulogy, lying on my back in her tiny living room surrounded by poster boards full of pictures of her, it poured out of me. It gutted me. It was everything I thought she was and everything I knew I would miss for the rest of my life. It was my Nana in five minutes, but how could that do her life any justice?

When I'm supposed to be praying, I often imagine myself behind that church podium like I had been the last day I saw her body. I was scared to be in this space without her. I was scared that I would not be able to tell everyone who she was. After she died, I promised her I would take care of my Nano. And although I will never fill her spot on the pew, I sit in it every Sunday that I can, because it is what she would have wanted, and what my Nano needs. This is why I go to church.

So, after I accidentally told the man my real name, and after he told me I look interesting, and after he said he'd like to take me out for a good time, and after he gave me his number on a piece of paper, I said thank you. Because I don't say thank you often enough. And this is not what god had intended to happen in his house, but this was also not the first time I had been scared in church either. After the Our Father, when we shook hands, I told him peace be with you, and acted like I didn't notice when he held on too long. I knew he could smell my hand sanitizer as I put it on kneeling behind him. After I stuffed the slip of paper he gave me into the spine of a hymn book, and after we had cleansed ourselves by receiving holy communion, and after the final prayer, he told me to call him, and then called me by my real name. When we left the church, my Nano asked me what the man had said to me, because his hearing is going and he refuses to use his aid. I told him that he didn't say anything really, and I took my Nano's arm in mine because I know he misses having an arm to hold, and we walked back to the car.

kristen bolster

I. This summer at Lake Michigan, the water levels are higher than I have ever seen them. The shoreline wanes as the hungry beast of the water waxes, and I know this means the snowfall must have been heavy. The mouth of the river rises to graze the bridges above it, lapping at the feet of those crossing like a dog eager for scraps.

II. In the fifth grade, my old church undergoes renovations. They rip up the green carpet and linoleum floors in exchange for a mosaic of stonework. They discard the brittle wooden chairs for the ease of a long, polished pew. The only things that remain from the church I knew are the deep blue of the stained glass windows and the baptismal font, perched like a birdbath next to the altar.

III. This summer, my mother takes her late brother's wooden swing from under the tarp in the garage and paints it white. She hangs it from our porch roof all by herself and asks my brothers and I to test how much weight it can carry. We sit side by side like we used to in our dad's old car. I am cramped in the middle, hands clasped together in my lap like a prayer. The swing creaks and heaves as it struggles to hold us, but the burden is not too heavy. All summer we sit on the wooden beams and the swing does not break.

IV. Reconciliation is the third Sacrament I receive. When I am nine, my classmates and I kneel contritely and wait to be called back to the confession chamber. I am nervous and forget the prayer I have spent three Sundays trying to memorize, but the priest who I have known my whole life smiles and hands me a laminated card with the words written down. I make up sins because I am too afraid to tell him that I have stolen my neighbor's toy turtle. In my mind, this means I am beyond redemption; I am utterly convinced this must be the worst sin he has ever had to hear, so I glaze over it and instead tell him how I lied to my mother about cleaning my room, and he assigns me three Hail Marys and a week of chores as penance.

V. Some mornings my mother and I sit together on her brother's swing and do not speak. Normally, we are always talking and we love this about each other; we chew up silence

with the frenzy of our graying dog at her food bowl, but on summer mornings, the porch swing is the only one of us who gets a word in. My mother breathes to the tune of its swaying; in and out, like one wave rising to catch the next.

VI. I have forgotten the memory of grief. When I was four, we buried so many family members in one year that I had a black ensemble I called my “funeral dress.” One of those deaths was my mother’s brother. Still, I do not recall what it feels like to grieve because then I was little and unaware of life. Now my mother has hung up the porch swing that my uncle’s widow could not bear to; now she calls her sister-in-law once a week and prays for her before every dinner. I watch her stand on her tip-toes to reach the box with my baptismal candle and it has gathered dust. I think her peace comes from the rhythm of it all; always back and forth, stepping closer to the hurt and then jumping away again.

VII. The first sacrament that I give up on is Reconciliation. I am afraid of the chamber and the prayer and the waiting, so instead of confessing to the priest all the sins I am not truly sorry for, I tell my mother. First, I reveal the truth about the toy turtle that I cannot even play with because I am so racked with guilt. After that, I push another host of wrongdoings into the light with my babbling. There is the dog, whose tail I pulled while I was chasing her, and my brother who I yelled at again for reasons neither of us can discern. I wait for absolution or penance, but my mother does not concern herself with misdeeds the way she cares about faith. She nods her head and purses her lips, and somehow I am full of hope.

VIII. My religion teacher says that a sacrament is a visible sign of an invisible reality; this lesson is one I do not forget. I steal Petoskey stones from the lake every year even though I know it is not good for the shoreline. The beach is eroding and here I am, hurrying the process along because I am altogether too concerned with rituals and symbols. The fossils find homes anywhere I can put them; most end up in my coat pockets, for me to hold in my fist when I am afraid. I like to remember that 350 million years ago, these were creatures as alive as I am. I like to

turn them over and think of all the waters they have weathered.

IX. My mother goes to Mass every Sunday and prays the Rosary on bumpy airplane rides. I don’t take Communion anymore, but I always make the sign of the cross when I pray. I like tradition enough to cling to what pieces of it I can. Faith has become a shadow on my bedroom wall. I have to know it is there even in the dark, says my mother. I have to believe with my eyes squeezed shut and my palms facing up.

X. I do not have a priest to interpret my life for me anymore so I do it myself. A rabbit crosses my path for the third time in a week and I know this means good luck. The otters that swim up the river on their backs remind me to look skyward every now and then.

XI. This summer I become a storm-watcher. One night, I try to sleep out on the porch and wake to the swing’s creaking song as the wind presses on it. I waste too many moments searching the dark and my blankets grow heavy with rainwater; the thunder laughs and I know it is past time to return home.

XII. Here is the hope I have learned from watching: if I stare at the sky long enough, I will always find a star that I did not see at first. If I look close enough into any darkness, I will always find a dim light.

XIII. I know God has many names and most of them are in man’s image, but the lake feels like faith in the way my mother means it.

XIV. Last night I waded into the pitch-black water and the lightning spread its arms across the sky and I forgot the name of my fear. Last night we drove through the woods until we stumbled upon the crying sky again, and we pulled the car over and danced in the rain. I was baptized in a pool as fresh as this; and here is the aqueous prayer I hold in the silence of my heart. This is the hope that will not leave me.

olivia evans

misconceptions of a loon

- I.
The low cry
of a wolf
cutting downward
into silent moonlight.
- II.
The kind of rounding whoop
you wouldn't hear
in the jungle, but
might expect to hear in the jungle
if you'd never been there.
- III.
The throat
of a flute
testing itself
in the early morning
fog.
- IV.
The manic laugh
of a fallen king
fluttering against the
veil, pattering into
the used-to-be.
- V.
Not so much the rainforest
as Rainforest Café,
the wildness you would attribute
to the idea of the wild,
a shadow cast through plastic
and celluloid.
- VI.
A bow bouncing
- VII.
lazily against the strings,
sending clouds of resin
into the disorder.

alexander wagner

sunflowers

trendsetters of floral attire
bright to a fault – graceful
and stubborn in appearance
and nature –seemingly awkward
winner of paper-plate: “most loved”
temperate and tropical, ability
to flourish anywhere with light –
adored for a moment and cut
at the stem for a picture or two
because her passive brilliance
makes things brighter and thank
the sunflower for this moment
of taken protection while
twirling grass in ringed fingers
gabbing and smiling in fresh air –
please take her home and thank her
for the day that ended the movie
she is not mentioned in rolling credits
so put her in a vase and water her
buy some liquid chlorophyll and
thank her every day until she cripples
from lack of dirt beneath her and
then dig a hole in the grass in your
untouched backyard and bury her.

elly salah

to his silk flower in my desk drawer

I try trading you for the honeyed jasmine that
tumbles over our yard fence in summer, yet you
press your needy face into my dusty desk corner,
refusing to leave, you silly thing.
Your milky plastic petals perform as
lenses to my histories,
rewinding memories like film reels,
downloaded stories,
shift-command-z.

A pimpled, mirth-eyed boy
plucked you from a bouquet of plastic stems
in a high school cafeteria line,
smirking at the lunch lady’s frown, while
falling into a deep,
gallant bow to push a small
silk flower into my palm,
reducing me to pliable joy in his hands.

I try trading you for my brother’s fifth grade sandstone,
ground down by guzzling water and beating air,
summer sun over
damp leaves over
snowbanks over
moonlight,
of climate and earth,
born of soil,
something real and steady to depend on.

I try trading you for a snowy Ferris wheel ride,
soaring slowly across a starred skyline,
or a friend smiling in a bedsheets ghost costume,
or a boy browsing Salinger on the L train,
anything to shun your white plastic,
synthetic cloth tapered edges that bite
down with the sharpest incisors,
gnawing the hollow wood of my skin,

the upstate house

chopping me away, chip by chip,
till you reach the stump of my heart.

I try trading you for the January deep freeze,
August floods, mosquito bites in May,
viscous hot marshmallow hissing on October nights.
I tied you to his eager hand,
his simmering eyes, gleaming grin,
the short curls pinned atop his head.
I twisted your petals' pleasing seams,
plucked and pruned just for me.
I turned my calculus book to page 219,
while, under my desk,
sanding your essence into my palm,
searing his scent into mine.

I try trading places, little flower,
you for me, so I stick my fingers,
slide my palms against the desk drawer's wooden plains,
my warm flesh to replace silky,
cold-hearted,
manufactured you,
to dethrone him,
to throw you,
at last,
into the trash bin.

nina molina

My brother never went to college, though he was just as interested in books as me. He never told anyone about his passions or his interests outside of construction, though we all considered that to be a stepping stone in his eventual career story. I only heard him say what his dreams were once, at our uncle's country house upstate. Whenever we were there, he'd let me stay up late with him without telling mom. It was a much bigger deal for me than it was for him: I still had a bedtime, though it wasn't strongly enforced, but he was at the age where he was trusted to choose how much sleep he got on his own. We would stay together in the room with two twin mattresses upstairs. The house had no air-conditioning so we left the windows open, spitting cherry pits out into the yard. We kept the lights off so as to not attract the moths.

"Do cherries come from trees?" I asked. A forest stood in the distance, but the area around the house was mostly trimmed grass and wildflowers. Wooden planks covered the hole in the ground for the pool he was helping our uncle build. We sat on a chest beneath the window, a bag of cherries still wet from rinsing in between us.

"Yeah. People have to use big ladders to get them down," he said. I wondered how people collected cherries before they made ladders, and how hard it might be to climb a cherry tree with their skinny trunks and thin branches.

"If I spit all of these seeds out, I can probably make all this grass into cherry trees." It wasn't a question of if I could, but if I had the will to do it and when. He nodded. He was looking far out into the distance, resting an elbow on the windowsill. Sometimes he didn't reply to me, but I didn't mind. I spent my time trying to tear a cherry in two with my fingernails, entertained by how bright red the juice was even in the dark.

"I want to be a filmmaker," he said. The juice from my fingers dripped down onto my bare foot, cross-legged in my lap. Once I tore it in half, I put it in my mouth.

"I bet I can spit my pit further than you can," I said. To prove my point, I spat out the pit with as much force as I could, the seed making a solid thup sound as it shot from my pursed lips.

the challenger

"We should have a competition tomorrow and have mamá and Uncle tío try it too." I nodded my head at his suggestion. Growing up we always heard the same man being referred to as both 'uncle' and 'tío', so that was what we called him. What I still sometimes call him, as a sad joke to recall a happy past.

"I want to work with actors and tell them to move here and there," he said after a moment. "Maybe Uncle tío would even let me film here if I was careful. There could be a big scene, of tons of families picnicking." He spat out a final cherry pit. I tried to imagine more than just our family having a picnic outside. I tried to think of as many families as I could, going through every kid in my class and what I thought their parents might look like if I hadn't seen them before at parent-teacher conferences. I wondered what the kids in my class thought my parents looked like. I zoomed out on my mental picture to include the house, then out again to include the town a few miles away. I felt my eyes begin to close. My brother took my sticky hand and guided me to the bathroom, where he helped me wash my hands and feet.

"I want it to be a huge shot. Hundreds of different families having a picnic on this hill, but no roads or cars to show how they all got there. And they're not talking to the other families either, they're just talking to each other." He made sure I got to the bed okay before he went to his on the other end of the room. He lay on top of the blankets, hands folded behind his head looking up at the ceiling. I looked up too, but all I could see was blackness. If I stared too hard into the dark, I would start seeing faint white dots like faraway stars, hurling towards me at dizzyingly high speeds. I shut my eyes and pulled the heavy quilt up over my legs, kicking off the thin sheet that I regularly woke up tangled in. The pillow was crisp and cool on my hot face.

"I don't know why I want to make a movie like that. I don't know if there would be a purpose or anything - I just think it would be beautiful." He might have said more after that, but I soon fell asleep to the scent of summer and whisper of the wind.

marlon rajan

Carson was jiggling his knee with one finger thrust into his mouth, scraping at the bit of Laffy Taffy stuck in his molars that Ms. Davidson passed him with his homework, very good was written on the sheet with a smiley-face. Ms. Davidson had leaned over his desk when she handed the paper. He felt the warm breath on the nape of his neck when she said, "I'm impressed, Carson. Keep up the good work." Carson thought of the word impressed. I-M-P-R-E-S-S-E-D.

The class had moved to sit on the rug, criss-cross applesauce. "It's a very special day," Ms. Davidson had told them, days before. She was saying the same thing again, but Carson wasn't paying attention. He was trying to spell out BUTTHEAD, a word he hears his older brother, Sam, say, on the shaggy rug. When he'd slide his hand up or down, the rug would change color. A lighter blue. Or dark. Light. Dark. Light. Carson made it to the second 'T' when he heard his name called.

"Carson, I hope I'm not distracting you." Ms. Davidson said this in a pleasant voice. Carson stopped and wiped the rug down.

Today was a special day because it would be the first time a teacher goes to space. All the classes, even Sam's in the 6th grade, are taking a break to play it on TV. Sharon Christa McAuliffe.

Ms. Davidson was having trouble getting it on TV. They want to watch the whole event live. "It should be on Channel 5," Ms. Davidson said. She pressed the buttons on the side until there was a weak signal. It was The Simpsons. The other kids in the class laughed. One kid, Robert, a boy Carson didn't like because he caught him cheating on the PACER test and sticking his boogers on Rivka's polka-dotted dress, looked to the ceiling with his palms pressed and cried out in a mocking voice, "God? God? Is that you? Is this a sign?" Carson wished another kid would tell him to shut up, but everyone just laughed harder.

Ms. Davidson clapped. Clap. Clap. Clapclapclap.

The class repeated after. Clap. Clap. Clapclapclap.

"Mr. Hansen is going to pop in super-fast and try to fix it. Everyone, it's a special moment." She pointed to the white sheet taped to the wall in front of the class. "Respect. Our first point. Remember, class. It's the guidelines you made for the class to

numb

abide by. Not me. You."

Mr. Hansen rushed into class. He had messy orange hair and a red face. He stared at the TV for a while then took the remote from Ms. Davidson's proffered hand. "Hm, sometimes the reception is a little strange. Different models." Carson stopped paying attention and started to draw figure 8's on the rug. He thought he heard a distant "Ah-ha."

The picture quality was grainy. Carson stopped drawing figure-8'd on the rug and leaned back, entrapped. The rest of the class was quiet too. Ms. Davidson turned the volume up from the side, "...Liftoff of the 25th space shuttle mission..." Carson thought some of the words were garbled. He tongued the residual Laffy Taffy. Sweet. He wondered if the crew flew high enough to touch the face of God.

The shuttle exploded.

Carson didn't understand. He looked at Ms. Davidson. Her mouth was open in a perfect little oval. He wanted to ask, but the rest of the class was quiet. He thought of the teacher -- Christa -- with her wavy, brown hair, smiling with her hand cupping a toy space-ship.

When he first saw the picture, Carson thought that she looked a little like Ms. Davidson.

sarah salman

I cut the fern's overgrowth
with flimsy wrist and oxidized shears.
I blow out the candle and lay in the sheets
before slipping into a matted sleep. loose tea
leaves at the bottom of a mug, I tried
to meditate last Sunday, cross-legged and upright,
spine poking up like a prairie dog. tooth and floss
I watch the neighbor tow the blue bins
down the driveway toward the mutilated curb.
I've been home four days with strangers
trudging through the somber halls
of my late mother's home, asking me
about funeral hymns and flower arrangements,
leaving casserole dishes. the funeral comes
on Wednesday without warning, a stream
of faceless aunts and unfamiliar cousins.
in their outstretched embrace I stand
with limp arms. someone chose
an open casket and peony pink lipstick
my mother would have never worn.
that night at visitation, while an infant wails
from the vestibule, I pause near the coffin
& I rest my hand on hers.

kennedi killips

root-rot

if we were planted or uprooted
depends on who you ask
is it leaving if there is no one anymore
 no one left
to stop you from eating overripe fruit
or to water your plants when you're not home
 the story changes now
depends on who you ask
why plant seeds in rotting earth
why wilt when you can grow?
strange soil is still soil, still earth
maybe one day we will come back
 after the funeral to see
 how our bones have changed
the earth

hiba dagher

growth

Pits in my stomach and seeds
 tar and oil
 sludge sludge sludge
add some worms and hornets
 and you get me.

The seeds sprout.

Germinated in stomach acid
 roots in the lining
crept their way up my esophagus
 crawled out my mouth
 and sing in open air.

carson bell

gorde

Samson loves visiting Metal Compass, his town's specialty game shop. He likes to think Metal Compass's deep purple walls, so much richer than simple black, are the color the universe would be if he could look at the planets while drifting through outer space. He dreams of seeing Earth beneath him, as an outsider, since he already feels like one, anyway. In Metal Compass, though, Samson's no outsider. He belongs in Metal Compass. The store's new and used games intrigue him; the paintings of castles and dragons and spaceships inspire his imagination. But after he's done perusing the store's new arrivals, he always gravitates to the glass display case in the back. Next to the case hang miniature figurines designed for role-playing games. Samson's allowance, scrupulously saved in a black drawstring dice bag from hours of chores and favors for his mother, always goes straight into purchasing those figurines.

Sibella sits on a stool behind the glass display case, reading a thick book held open by its own weight. She and her brother, Aksel, own Metal Compass, and each day they switch off who runs the cash register at the front while the other oversees the back of the store. Samson prefers when Sibella's behind the display case. They have better conversations.

Samson hooks his thumbs under the straps of his backpack and approaches the wall of figurines. Sibella watches him through circular glasses and a fringe of blonde bangs, her chin resting on her palms, and Samson waves, his reflection smiling back at him from an ornately-framed mirror hanging behind Sibella. His face is angular, with a pointy chin and narrow nose, and his brown eyes peer through girlish eyelashes above permanent under-eye circles. The pale skin of his nose and cheeks is pink from the cold winds delivering the rain outside, and there's a smattering of freckles across the bridge of his nose. He's twelve, but his gangly figure looks nine. Samson looks away from his reflection and examines the rows of plastic packages.

"Just got some new miniatures in yesterday. Top right corner," Sibella says. She dog-ears her page and closes the book, revealing Neil Gaiman's name printed in block letters before sliding the book away from her and focusing her attention on

Samson.

Samson spots the new figurines, miniature characters the size of his thumb and made of premium plastic, instantly recognizable by the cherry-red NEW! stickers embellishing their plastic packaging. He reaches on tip-toes and wriggles two of the new figurines off their hooks. They're both female. One, draped in a flowing robe typical of wizards and sorcerers, raises an arm, frozen in the perpetual casting of a spell. The other, her tight braid whipping through the air, crouches with a nocked longbow drawn taut in her hands. Samson considers both figures, chewing on his lower lip, then sets the packages on the case in front of Sibella.

"Ah, the wizard and the ranger," she says, lifting one package in each hand and peering down her nose at the figurines. Samson's here so often that she's grown used to his indecisiveness. "The wizard's boring. Such a cliché pose. But the ranger..." She tosses the wizard away – it totters dangerously close to the glass case's edge – and leans in to Samson's eye level. "Just look at that motion. You can practically see her twisting to aim at her target." Samson nods knowingly as Sibella taps the plastic with a black fingernail. "She's definitely the way to go."

"I think I have too many magic users, anyway," Samson says. He still speaks in the octave above Sibella's voice.

"How's the game going? You looking for people to join yet, or are these miniatures enough for you right now?"

"Yeah...I don't know. I just like painting the figures." Samson likes painting his figurines alone. He doesn't know how it compares to using them in a game with friends, but he's afraid admitting that to Sibella would sound weird. Like he doesn't have friends. He doesn't. Well, there's Hari. Still just one friend, so he'd rather not say that to her.

Sibella's gray eyes soften. "Middle school's hard, I know. Nobody wants to seem...odd."

"It's okay," Samson says quickly.

"No, believe me," Sibella continues, standing from the stool and rummaging in a stack of drawers behind the display case, emerging with a price gun. She fiddles with the gun's dial as

she speaks. "I was just a little older than you when I got into Dungeons and Dragons, and the only person who'd play with me was my kid brother." She jerks her head toward Aksel at the front of the store. "Maybe it's because I'm a girl, but you'd think that'd help." The price sticker peels off the ranger package with a deft flick of Sibella's fingernail. "Being a geek didn't exactly do me any favors, but what's it matter if we're having fun, right?"

Samson isn't sure being geeky is worth the trouble, but he nods as Sibella uses the price gun to tape a cheaper price on the package. She looks around conspiratorially and hands the ranger package to Samson. "Anyway, keep me updated on your game. And don't tell Aksel I did that."

Samson beams and grasps the package. "Thanks, Sibella!" he says breathlessly. When he places the figurine before the cash register at the front of the store and empties his savings from the drawstring pouch, Samson thinks maybe he sees a flash of recognition in Aksel's stony face, but the burly man rings up the package's edited price without question. Only after Samson crams the figurine into his backpack and hurries out of Metal Compass, the store's namesake compass above the door a final farewell from the store, does Aksel crack the slightest of smiles.

Samson's mother's waiting in the car, scribbling numbers into a sudoku puzzle book. She removes her reading glasses when Samson climbs in, revealing dark undereye circles identical to her son's. "What'd you get, honey?" she asks, pointing at his backpack with her glasses.

He shows her the figurine, pointing at the bow and explaining that she's twisting to aim at her target. Samson's mother turns the key in the ignition and smiles. "What's that called, again? You just said it. A shooter? Something like that?"

"A ranger," Samson says.

"A ranger. Oh, like a park ranger?"

Samson returns the figurine to his backpack as the car rumbles to life and his mother maneuvers into traffic. "No, Mom," he sighs, settling into his seat. She chuckles as the rain blurs the city buildings into gray masses outside the windows.

The shelf above the rack of clothes in Samson's cramped

closet is home to his collection of figurines and painting supplies. The delicate miniatures, once packaged in plastic just like the new ranger, breathe with new life after painstaking applications of enamel paint color their exquisitely carved clothes, hair, and faces. A precarious stack of old workbooks from elementary school serves as a makeshift stool for Samson to balance on as he fishes around the shelf for his paints and brushes. He's careful to avoid knocking over the dozen or so figurines posed atop the shelf. Soon, the female ranger will join their ranks, all of whom serve as the main characters populating Samson's imaginary world of magic and adventure. He grabs the paints and is about to step off the stack of workbooks when he hesitates and turns back to retrieve the centerpiece of his collection. Now he's ready.

The ranger's already unwrapped and is separated from Samson's pockmarked wooden desk by only a few sheets of newspaper. Aside from his bed, the desk's the only piece of furniture in Samson's tiny room. The walls are painted the shade of a robin's egg and are bare save for a Mario Bros. poster next to the light switch and a painting of the solar system taped above his bed. Behind the ranger is a black desk lamp, a few framed photographs of Samson with his mother, and some Halloween pictures with school friends. The photograph of his father is hidden in the bottom desk drawer.

Crossing from closet to desk, Samson arranges the tubs of paint in rainbow order next to the ranger. Each tub is the size of one of his mother's thimbles. Made of orange synthetic hairs, the paintbrushes are delicate, some broad and flat and others sporting points so fine they're scarcely visible. Behind the ranger, just off the edge of the newspaper, Samson positions his leading man, the biggest of the figurines and the first in his collection.

His name is Gorte. With a hulking figure and bulging muscles, Gorte intimidates even the most seasoned warriors and boasts a voice like boulders grinding against one another. His figurine bears a spike-studded leather sash crossing over a bare torso, fur-lined boots, and a horned helmet; with both hands he wields a huge double-headed axe. Physically, Gorte's everything Samson isn't, but Samson likes to think the silent 'e' in Gorte's

name, though an unnecessary addition in terms of practicality, represents a hidden vestige of Gorte's intelligence. Intelligence, after all, isn't something most barbarians possess, so their hidden potentials are something Samson and Gorte can share.

Samson uncaps the paints. The longbow must be brown, of course, as it's made of wood, and Samson determines he'll give the ranger blonde hair and, if he can manage small enough spots, gray eyes. Samson thinks Gorte might see the newcomer as the older sister he never had. The new character will be an elf, Samson decides; she looks enough like one, with her slender build and ears that taper to delicate points. Samson dubs her Felosial.

Years ago, when Samson was in elementary school, his father first taught him how to play Dungeons and Dragons. He introduced Samson to the rules, the occupational classes, the magic system, all the intricate details of the Dungeons and Dragons world. They were going to play a campaign together: Samson's father as the game master and Samson and his friends as the players. The prospect was exciting, but after teaching him the rules, Samson's father spent more and more of his time after work sleeping. Samson's mother explained to him that his father slept when he felt sad, and that his medicine was supposed to help, but sometimes it wasn't enough. Disappointing. Samson hadn't worried too much about his father, though. Instead, he pored over the manuals, always preparing for the epic adventure with his father. He created Gorte, spending hours developing the barbarian's background and skills. Since his father was no longer able to play with him, Gorte became Samson's newest companion, someone born in his imagination whose identity Samson could assume at will.

Scowling, Samson drops the brush he'd been hovering above the row of paints. Sometimes Samson wonders why he bothers to continue painting these silly little figurines. After all, his father's gone, and without him, Samson won't play Dungeons and Dragons with anyone, not even Hari. It'd feel like a betrayal to begin without his father. But he can't let go of Gorte.

Gorte leads the party. He's a robust brawler backed mainly

by magic users: a powerful wizard, a bard companion, and a druid healer, among others. A rogue with a troublesome history of thievery joined the group several months ago, along with a fighter skilled in all sorts of weapons, who supplements Gorte's sheer brute force. Together, the members compose a powerful, if eclectic, bunch.

On this particular evening, Gorte's group rests in a forest clearing after a long day of travel, somewhere between the last town and the next. Gorte serves as a kind of group patriarch. He chops down a nearby tree for firewood, splitting it into usable logs with ease, grunting with each strike of his axe. Once Gorte finishes and Ningel, the bard, can build a fire for cooking, Gorte stabs his axe into the ground – thunk – and settles on the fresh tree stump. He wipes a trickle of sweat from a bump in his nose, formed after he broke it in a bar fight. Gorte will likely never tire of the muscle power he holds in this world.

Gorte watches over his makeshift clan, idly tracing the handle of his scarred axe, when a stranger emerges from the trees to his left. Unannounced, undetected. Her hair's woven into a severe blonde braid, and even from this distance, he can see her gray eyes flash. As he clammers to his feet, axe once again firmly gripped in both hands, Gorte imagines a pair of round spectacles might suit the stranger's face.

The rest of the group's chatter dies down and hands fly to weapons as they notice the stranger. Gorte steps forward to greet the woman, willing to engage in amicable discussion but prepared to attack at a moment's notice. He guesses her ability to meld seemingly straight out of the trees, combined with the longbow strapped to her back, identify her as a ranger.

"Hello," Gorte says, his voice rumbling from deep in his chest. "I'm Gorte. I speak for these people. What brings you to this place?"

"I'm Felosial. I was just on my way to the village to the east when I spotted your party." The woman shuffles her feet before continuing. "I lost my brother recently, and these days, it's dangerous to travel alone." She peers around Gorte's broad shoulders at the motley collection of people gathered behind

him. "Perhaps I can be of use to you. I can use magic, but I'm also skilled in tracking and hunting."

"Are you, by chance, a ranger?" Gorte asks.

"In fact, I am."

"Wonderful! You can join us at once," he says, dropping the axe to his side and extending a meaty arm toward the ranger. He grins at her and his friends behind him relax. Felosial grasps Gorte's hand.

"Don't worry," she says. Her gray eyes twinkle. "I'm definitely the way to go."

Every morning, Samson's mother drops him off at school with a kiss and an "I love you, Sammy. Have a good day," before going to work at her seamstress shop. Then Samson walks through the front doors to his second greeting of the day, no matter how late or early or on time he arrives.

"Morning, faggot," Byron says. Byron is Samson's dedicated bully. Every morning, Byron leans against the wall just inside the school entrance, sandy hair hanging in his narrow blue eyes, arms crossed over a generous belly, left foot propped over the right in tattered Adidas. The entrance is one of those places teachers never go in the morning, and Byron knows such places make the perfect spots for him to stalk his prey. Samson says nothing, but his footsteps falter, and Byron pounces.

"I said, Good morning, faggot," Byron snarls. Samson ducks his head and speeds up, but Byron is faster. In seconds, the bigger boy grips Samson's arm and wrenches it behind his back. When Byron leans in close to hiss in Samson's ear, his breath stinks so heavily of rotten eggs that it distracts Samson from the sharp pain shooting up his arm. Byron's breath might be potent enough to inflict psychic damage, or maybe even poison damage. Samson leans as far away as possible, just in case.

"We gotta do this every damn day? If someone says Morning, what do you say? Huh?" Byron twists Samson's arm further, eliciting an involuntary cry from Samson.

"Let me go," Samson gasps, struggling not to retch from the stench. "What's the matter with you? That dead dad of yours never taught you any manners?" Samson stills. The white

floor tiles beneath his feet sharpen into focus, each fleck of dirt intimately detailed, before his eyes involuntarily water. The dirt blurs back into the tiles and he's left swimming in a sea of blurry shapes.

"What, are you gonna cry about it?" Byron coos into Samson's ear, yanking so hard on his arm that Samson fears his shoulder might rip out of its socket.

The bell rings. Byron curses and releases Samson, and the smaller boy cradles his arm against his chest. "You're lucky I'm about to get detention from tardies in Buckley's class, freak," Byron growls, flashing his middle finger as he scuttles away. Samson sprints into the nearest bathroom, massaging his shoulder, and dry-heaves above a toilet. He stares at the detached curse words scrawled in sharpie on the stall as his stomach settles. SHIT. FUCK. FAGGOT. The thoughts swirling around his mind never still, though. They're relentless.

The pain's not what bothers Samson the most, though his arm aches. It's the misery. His eyes sting with the humiliation. Samson's tired of dealing with the same treatment every single morning for the last two years. He doesn't know why, but Byron clearly despises Samson's skinny frame, his choppy haircut, and, more than anything else, Samson's nerdiness. He supposes his fascination with Dungeons and Dragons follows him like an unrelenting scent, attracting jeers from those who only find joy by exerting their power over others. But his father, though he taught Samson the game, never deserved to be dragged into this trauma. And Samson wishes Byron would quit calling him a faggot. He wishes everybody'd stop saying the word "faggot."

Samson's father used to tell Samson that, instead of hating them, he should feel bad for the bullies. His father explained to Samson that nobody cares about the bullies the way Samson's cared for. Samson can't help but think that, if people care for him so much, someone ought to step in and stand up for him against Byron. "When I was younger, I used to get bullied a lot, too," Samson's father would say. "Heck, sometimes even now I get bullied!" He'd chuckle, but more and more, his laughter hollowed. His father's eyes, the same warm brown as Samson's,

set above a tall nose that'd been broken a couple times, never crinkled the way they used to. From his mother, Samson knew that his father was also bullied when he was younger, but the taunts tormenting him came from his father's own mind. They never stopped.

Now there's no one to urge Samson to feel bad for the bullies, and though his mental capacity's high enough to surpass Gorte's, Samson's unable to play the better person. His pity for Byron will never outweigh his hatred. He wonders now if this is how his father felt at himself, suffering under the relentless attacks of his mind. Whatever that could mean.

Samson uses the cuff of his jacket to wipe hot tears from his cheeks. He's got to fake a brave face, or he'll just become a bigger target. All Samson needs to do is survive until the end of the day, when he can go home to Gorte and the rest of the figurines.

The new figurine's still drying on the newspaper next to Gorte when Samson returns home. The paint job's clean; Felosial turned out quite pretty, and Samson plans to apply a layer of his mother's clear nail polish to Felosial's hair to add shine. The paper beneath the figurines is rumpled and decorated in streaks of paint. Samson rests his arms and chin on the desk, staring at the ranger and, behind her, the barbarian.

"What happened to your brother?" Gorte asks Felosial. At first, the ranger doesn't reply. The two of them lead the group through the dense forest - she because of her supreme awareness in the natural world, he because he's their leader. The forest's quiet without being unnaturally silent, and sunlight sifting through the canopy dapples the mossy ground.

Finally, "We were ambushed by ogres. My brother told me to run. He was strong, so I believed he would be right behind me, even if the ogres managed to attack him. By the time I checked to see if he was following me, it was too late." Felosial's voice remains impassive, but her brow furrows. There's a pause as she concentrates on her footsteps. "For months, I kept trying to convince him we should settle down in a town somewhere. I suggested we open a shop for adventurers like us. I guess I failed."

Gorte's opens his mouth to speak, but nothing comes out. The others are chattering among themselves, so they can't help him. After several paces he pats Felosial's armored shoulder awkwardly. She stumbles from the unintended force of his hand.

Righting herself, Felosial asks, "And what about you?"

"My father died when I was younger. I'm out to avenge him."

"Ey, Gorte," a scratchy, high-pitched voice calls from the rear of the group. Ningel. "It's been hours! If we're not there yet, can we stop for lunch?"

Gorte considers. As long as there's meat, he figures a meal wouldn't hurt. Stopping in his tracks, he announces a break to eat, and they locate an open clearing. Birds chatter in the trees. Gorte hoists his axe from its sling while the others settle down and prepares to chop wood for a cooking fire. Felosial follows him as he selects a tree. It's thick with distinct orange bark; he knows it will be more arduous to topple than the trees he usually chooses, but the bark will make for a hearty fire and add a smoky flavor to their lunch.

"About your father," Felosial says. "How are you getting revenge? I mean, who are you looking for?"

Gorte sizes up the tree. "That's a tough question to answer," he replies, executing a couple of practice swings.

"How do you mean? You don't know who killed him?"

"My father killed himself. Hanged himself in the laundry room in our home last year." Gorte sinks his axe into the tree's peeling bark a foot up from its base. The axe blade splits the brittle outer layer of bark and stops an inch deep, but Gorte doesn't see it.

He found his father with his feet dangling above a knocked-over chair from their dining table, still dressed in his work clothes, black slacks and a crisp white shirt that his mother ironed. How strange. He'd never seen a person hanging like that before. Rotating ever so slowly, body upright but completely limp. Then he noticed the stench of urine, and his eyes traveled slowly up to the rope digging into his father's flesh. Blue lips, gray skin. Unseeing eyes, even when his son endlessly screamed, and then his wife screamed behind his son, both frozen in fright.

Gorte draws back for another swing. "Oh," Felosial says, her

voice small. The axe sails back into the tree inches above the first cut. Gorte curses at the inaccuracy.

"You see, when he was a boy, my father's life was a living hell," he continues. "Couldn't control his own mind. It taunted him day in and day out." Gorte swings again. Chips of bark spray from the vicious blow. "That kind of thing wears a person down, you know," Gorte grunts, wrenching the axe back out. Felosial steps back.

"It's okay, Gorte," she says softly, reaching toward the barbarian's huge bicep, but she recoils as he whirrs on her.

"It's not," Gorte snaps. He turns back toward the tree and whips the axe through the air with even greater force. The members of Gorte's makeshift clan take notice of his raised voice. The deep reverberations are impossible to ignore. The wizard lifts her head from a spellbook, the druid lays aside the knife he'd been using to chop turnips, the rogue clenches his fist around his gambling dice. Gorte's voice and the blows of his axe fill the clearing.

"What's that like? Is it like Byron making me want to punch him, kick him, gouge his eyes out, anything to make it stop? Except to your own brain? Was my dad's brain like that stupid faggot Byron?" Beads of sweat trickle down Gorte's forehead. He launches the axe into the orange tree with unusual savagery. "Dad didn't deserve that. And now look. He's gone." Gorte has only managed to chop halfway through the trunk. Maybe he's underestimated the ordeal required just for that orange bark. "Don't you see why I need my revenge? Don't you see? Don't – you – see?"

Gorte doesn't wait for a response from the ranger. He ignores how Felosial's jaw hangs slightly agape, how his friends stand in alarm over his display. A fire of rage burns in the pit of his stomach. He swings with greater and greater fervor at the tree, and as he does, a vertical crack appears in the wood at Gorte's waist level. Gorte imagines the tree is Byron standing before him, immobile, helpless, screaming while Gorte hacks into his thick trunk. A bleeding smile splits Gorte's face as the crack in the tree widens and travels up its length. The ranger grabs for the crook

of Gorte's elbows to slow his accelerating swings, but he shakes her off. Fear chokes the group gathered in the clearing. He can't stop until the tree is felled. With a final resounding crack, the trunk splits at the base and crashes to the forest floor. The tree's fall shakes the clearing.

Samson feels a tiny snap in his hand. Looking down, he unfurls his fist, clenched so tight that the knuckles are a stark white. Horror washes over him as he sees the ranger figurine broken into two pieces, her bow arm no longer attached to her crouched torso. He hadn't even realized he'd picked up Felosial. Tears spill from Samson's eyes and he tightens his fist back around the figurine. He wrenches open the bottom desk drawer with so much force it flies out of the desk, and he scrambles after it, reaching for that photograph left facedown inside. Samson grasps the frame and flips it over. His father smiles up at him as he cradles a baby Samson in his arms just as Samson grips the pieces of Felosial in his fingers. He shudders with anguish, rage rattling in his chest and pain fiery in his gut.

hayla alawi

sympathy flowers

There's a note still stuck to the coffee table: a bright orange post-it, with a message scribbled on in black marker. MORNING WEATHER SAID THUNDERSTORMS TODAY. It sticks out against the mess of white papers. Wesley tries to ignore it, but his eyes keep drifting back.

"I called the home this morning, the one on Sixth and Pine." The voice is coming from his left - another reason to turn away that his sluggish mind and body choose to ignore. At this rate, he may very well go cross-eyed from staring. His limbs may sink into the couch. "The same place we held Pete's mother's funeral two years ago- you were there, weren't you?"

It takes Wesley a few seconds to realize the question is directed at him. "Yeah," he tells the note. When he realizes it's true, he finally snaps his head up. His body follows it into perfectly straight sitting posture. "I was there, yeah. Nice place."

Miriam doesn't seem to notice the delay, too busy digging in her purse to register eye contact.

Three more notes dot the books and picture frames on the shelf above her. we should put a family photo in here for when my mom comes, one of them teases him.

He slouches back down.

"They have availability tomorrow, so we'll be acting on short notice. Most of the family has sent their condolences already, so there shouldn't be any issues with bringing them in...I'm afraid there's no time for paper invitations, though. What a shame. Emails just feel so impersonal." With a click of her tongue, she scribbles something in one of the three notebooks she's produced since turning up at his door five minutes ago. Wesley doesn't often see her without an ear-to-ear smile and an air of hospitality. She's concentrated. He can't help but feel she's pointing it in the wrong direction.

"The guest list is a bit long, so feel free to look it over tonight and tell me if you have any thoughts," Miriam says, holding a laminated list out like a gift.

As he opens his mouth to thank her, Wesley feels a yawn coming on. He ignores the urge, forms the shape of the words and prepares to speak - but it escapes, long and loud as if seeking

retaliation.

Her hands freeze. "I really hope I didn't wake you."

"No, no worries, I was up," Wesley says, and it's a lie, but it's the kind of lie that's easier to say and easier to hear. The morning rasp in his voice is undeniable. The clock on the wall reads 3:17.

For a split second, a look somewhere between analytical and pitying flashes in her eyes. Lips pursed, she lifts the eyeglasses hanging around her neck to the bridge of her nose - as soon as they make contact, she breaks out into a well-rehearsed motherly smile. "Onto the reception, then."

Wearily, Wesley turns his attention back to the coffee table. In front of his knees lies a pile of printouts that he knows were meant for him; he knows they're highlighted in three different pastel shades to make them easier to parse, but the text floats around, far too distorted to read. It seems like the only words he can read are on the notes, the thick black scrawl of Victor's handwriting.

Thunderstorms. It didn't even rain yesterday. That note has nothing left to give.

"I got a call from the mortician this morning and she seems to be having some trouble with the reconstruction. At this point, she's suggesting a closed casket, but if I can help it, I really do think open is the way to go..."

Wesley watches Miriam's mouth move, but doesn't hear a word. He studies her face, the smooth complexion - would any other mother find it in her to put on a full face of makeup on a day like this? There's not a single wrinkle in her clothes. The brown leather of her portfolio matches her shoes. She speaks with a detached sort of meticulousness; she smiles ever so slightly as her hands flick through the stack, as if she's happier letting the planning act as a moat between her and grief.

Wesley glances down at his own boxers and mismatched socks, and feels a little bit worse.

"...in that case, I've been tossing around ideas for the burial outfit. I was thinking that suit he wore to the banquet last year. It'd look excellent with some nice loafers."

That reels him back in. Confused, he frowns. "Victor never

wore loafers."

"Yes, well, I bought him a pair thinking he might start. I'll just dig them out of the closet." She dismisses it with a wave of her hand.

"But if he never wanted to wear them, why now?"

Miriam smile goes tight-lipped. "It's a matter of appearances."

Never does Wesley feel as much like a child in trouble as he does around her, not even with his own mother. He doesn't understand how Victor opposed her so easily. "I don't think that's going to be the most important thing tomorrow," he mumbles.

"It would be nice if the world worked that way, wouldn't it," she laughs, her expression hard and unchanging.

Even after all these years, Wesley has spent so little time alone with Miriam. Wesley can't help but wonder what brought her here. Of course, he's happy she thought to ask for his opinions, but it feels like she's already made up her mind. Besides, even though he's never been to a funeral before, he can't imagine it's expected that the plans will be run by the boyfriend of the deceased, the boyfriend of the deceased...

"As for catering, I really wasn't planning on anything special, but the Italian bakery downtown does short-notice orders, so I figured we might as well see what they can do. He always liked those cannolis with the crushed pistachios..."

Miriam sent them home from Thanksgiving with a box of those last year. Victor took one bite of one, lost in a conversation happening between the fridge and the kitchen table, before spitting it into the trash. Who made it legal to put ricotta in desserts, he'd said, or I've already had enough of these to last me the rest of my life. The memory squirms in his mind.

"...does that sound good to you?"

"Uh, great, yeah." Wesley runs his hands through his hair, and a glimpse of orange catches his eye - another note, this one stuck to the remote. WE'RE OUT OF AA BATTERIES. The idea of touching the remote again makes Wesley's hand recoil; knowing that his role in all of this has ended, that he's no longer a part of Victor's family isn't even the hardest part. The hardest part was that he had to hear it from the news. Local firefighter

Victor Hayes dies a hero, ringing across the living room as he did the dishes. So impersonal that his first reaction was to check his phone for some sort of final contact. Anything would have sufficed - a goodbye, a don't forget me, an I loved you so much. Maybe even an I'm okay.

Of course, there was none. The fact that Vic's last text to him had been if you put vegetables in the pizza sauce tonight I'll spit it back in your face didn't help.

"That takes care of the reception, then. Let's see..."

Miriam's voice and the planning and the papers fade away as the clock spins back twelve hours, to when Wesley sat in the same place last night, eyes glued forward. The memories are hazy - he's not sure how he got from the kitchen to the couch, or how he remembered to turn off the stove, or how many hours he spent sitting there, looping the few minutes of news coverage over and over until it sounded like static. The timeline is blurred. Tragedy tends to do that. What he does recall, in scathing detail, are the images. A charming wood-frame two-story, now a horror scene with flames licking up its walls. The family, escaping one-by-one from the smoke, shaken but safe with the firemen guiding them towards the truck. A reporter, declaring that no lives are in danger, stops mid-sentence when the mother shrieks - my son, where's my son, he's still inside. When the squad came by the apartment later that night they said they could've sworn on their own graves that Victor would make it out okay. That he always seemed so in control, nobody doubted it for a second when he told them not to worry, that he'd be right behind them, just taking a quick look upstairs, he'll be out in ten seconds. But in the footage, Victor never comes out. What returns from the fire minutes later is a child carried by a sack of char and smoke, coughing and hacking like there's no air left inside of him. He falls before the camera can even catch a shot of his face, a corpse without proof of an identity.

And as if it's an honor worth his life, the anchor calls him a hero. Somewhere around his fortieth time hearing it, Wesley turned off the TV.

"Wesley?"

His head snaps around. "Huh?"

"If you'd like your space, I can take care of the rest, really," Miriam says, hands perched over a pile of papers. Wesley blinks. For a second, he swears he sees Victor sitting there. She looks so much like her son.

His eyes start to burn. He squeezes them shut and shakes his head. "No, you've already done so much, I better... you know, uh...what were you saying?"

"The flowers," she adds, after a pause. Her tone is cautious - not very convincing, is he. "My standard funeral spread is all white roses and lilies and Queen Anne's lace - the staples. All about purity and innocence and the soul being wiped clean..."

The thought of a neat white funeral makes his shoulders tense up. Wesley can convince himself catering and suits and shoes don't matter, just barely, but if he'll be surrounded tomorrow by the suggestion that Victor should be remembered as pure and innocent and unable to speak out against it. Miriam looks up from her notes, and the second their eyes meet, his begin to well.

She softens. "But that doesn't sound very much like Victor, now, does it."

Wesley shakes his head. His voice comes out hoarse. "No."

"Then I'll whip up something new." Her portfolio closes with a conclusive click. "There are plenty of options back at the shop, it won't be any trouble. For now, I want you to try and relax. You look like you could stand to get your mind off things for a while."

He winces. "Is it that bad?"

Standing up from the chair, Miriam looks down at him with sympathy. "It hasn't even been a day, Wesley. You're allowed to be hurting," she says, assuring and assessing at the same time.

He rubs at his puffy eyes and mumbles out a thanks. Without a word, Miriam makes her way to the door. She slides on her shoes, pulls a cardigan off the coatrack and drapes it over

her arm. "See you tomorrow," she says, and then he's all alone.

For a while, Wesley doesn't know what to do. If Miriam hadn't come, he would still be in bed right now, not asleep but not awake and certainly not answering any of the calls that jolt him awake every ten minutes. He doesn't have it in him to think about how much worry he must be causing them. He doesn't have it in him to think at all. What could be minutes or hours pass, and Wesley doesn't move, doesn't speak. Eventually, his eyes drift back to the remote on the now-empty coffee table.

Wesley stares at the note on the back until he finally gives in and turns on the TV.

maya simonte

death house

the bushes speak to us, rest your head
sweet baby, you, meet us here
they grow wildly, endlessly,
out of great ashes,
around gutters, on the side of the house,
in through cracks in the paneling
it's quiet where we are,

they grow into the lungs, of the house,
tan and rotting,
breathing their scent into rooms,
killing green potted pathos,
we are always watching

it reeks, of catalog perfume,
in the room where Jeremy fell over
onto piss-covered blue carpet,
the bushes sing lullabies,
ashes, ashes
dead pimento beetles in every corner

catch us who try to run
tangled in banana spider webs,
the house sings, too,
through broken breaths,
like it has been running into all of us
we can't help, but climb rotting
blue steps, and cry into ashes in the yard

lia borntrager



a la playa
julian wray



gate

syafawani abdul rahim



dull edge
yuheng li



yum
parker kehrig

42



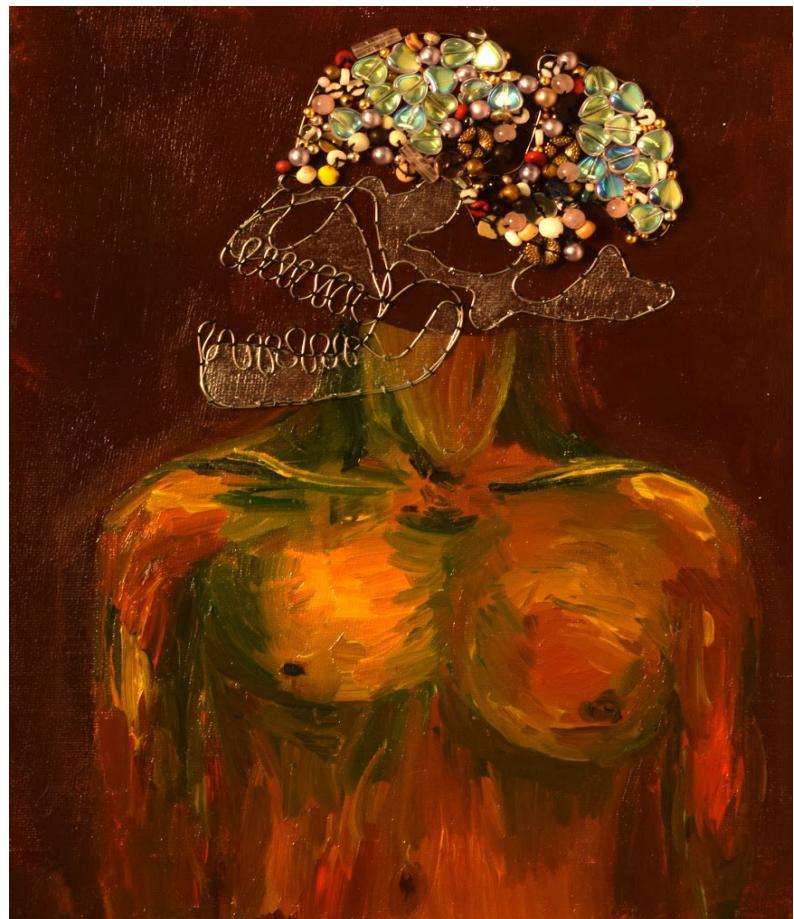
myocardial combustion
parker kehrig

43



waiting
ekaterina makhnina

44

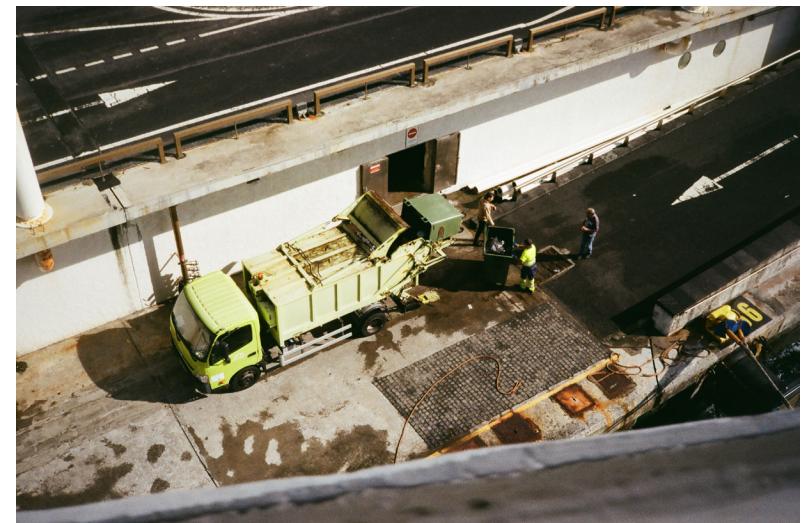


self portrait
parker kehrig

45



cave
syafawani abdul rahim



from where i am standing
lia borntrager



a moment of rest
lia borntrager

montmartre in winter

It's beautiful because it
isn't Paris, because
the buildings in France
look old –
not because they look old, but
because they are –
and Montmartre has
a different oldness,
not ancient or
perfect, but like
it never felt the need to be
anywhere else but
here,

comfortable, the cobblestones melt
on your feet, the sun
takes its time setting
through the narrow blocks of streets,
like it's an old friend
rediscovering this golden place,
like there isn't an inch of the city
it wants to leave
just yet.

alexander wagner

offering to the ones i left behind

what i am saying to you, i am saying in english
defying my tongue twisting in different shapes
familiar and yet i have to
silence it, until i hate the taste of the words sizzling in my throat
i have tried to say mother in english and somehow the sound
slips out but it doesn't make any sense because
mother doesn't understand what mother means
my mother called her mother *mami*
i have tried to say home in english and it gets stuck in my throat
because home is not here
home is across the atlantic and at home we call home *shtëpi*
and i had never imagined i would need to learn to live in a house
without a home but politics and economics
were never in our favor
so we packed our bags and checked them too many times with
the feeling that we
were leaving something behind and maybe
it was our heart

xhulia guri

expatriate

feel the earth beneath your worn-out sneakers and count on that.
get Beirut out of your head. just look. step away from the frame.
there's beauty in the ordinary things. the group of boys swinging
on the monkey bars, who sneak onto the school playground to
escape from recycled air and mama's list of chores. the 3ammos
who roll prayer beads in their hands, smelling of frankincense
and tuhamma's garlic sauce, sitting outside the ladies' hair salon.
do you see that? the rows of hookah lounges and barber shops,
our own citadel. no - the figs won't be the same here, no cherry
tomato rubies pressed into your palms. yes, fast-food wrappers
and plastic straws collect in the gutters. better than bullet casings.
better than ghosts. look, look - the two teenagers embracing
behind the grocery store, pulling away every few seconds to see if
anyone is watching. even the fruit flies, you see, they're swirling
around the flickering neon signs? they've made their home here
too now.

just

like

you.

hiba dagher

tamr

When I pick my daughter from school today, she tell me she want to walk.

I say, "Why?" and I look at her clothes: boy shorts and her father's old T-shirt. I keep telling her if she wear boy clothes she will be boy, but she no listen. She wants to look like the American girls in school. "Habibti, it too cold." I make 'tsk' noise and wave my hand for her to come in car. "Next time, when weather is better."

She not talk to me inside car. Just sit there, looking outside window. I remember when she is small, always ask questions—so chatty. Mama, she says, why does Jafar's pee place look different from me? Or she say, cat and dogs marry? Questions all the time. I don't know what to say. Because he boy and you girl, I say. No, I say. They are animals.

Back in Kuwait, I am music teacher for children in the first grade. I never have time in the morning to do Arwa's hair. She have such beautiful hair, thick and curly. It's so long it touches her butt. All my friends so jealous. They say, Oh, Wafaa, your daughter's hair so pretty. They say, eh, eh, isn't it like Myriam Fares? My husband try and do her hair, but he so bad! When I pick Arwa from madrasa, her teacher fix it and make two braids. I use to have so many friends in Kuwait! For Eid, there is too many invitations. Maybe I'll stop at Ibtisam's for twenty minutes for lunch or maybe I go to Farida's and just bring halawa. Each house is so full. All the children play outside and I bring my daughter laham and dijaj.

I tell her, eat, eat so you can be tall and beautiful, like a princess.

In America, it's hard to make friends. Whenever I try and chat with other moms here, they look at me like I am stupid. I make joke and they no understand. How is this hard? I speak two languages, and I am stupid one? Just because I don't speak English the same way.

When she in bad mood after madrasa back home, I take her to al medina. I buy tamr for her while it is still green and I stop at the butchers and get lamb or goat. If I have extra time, I stop at a neighborhood store and she runs inside and gets juice for

just one rubiya.

I ask her if she want to go buy ice cream today but she still not look at me. Such bad behave but I don't yell at her. I think I understand now. She straightens her pretty hair until it smell like popcorn and she wear loose clothes and tell me to stop talking to her in Arabic. I don't tell her I know she feel shame.

I stop the car and tell her to get out and walk the rest of the way home.

sarah salman

water pressure

Stevie wanted to be just like the other kids at school. Especially the ones in his neighborhood. After the bus dropped them off, he'd follow Jim and Nick and Sophie on their after-school adventures. They didn't mind him tagging along—they laughed a lot with him around. They made him dance and eat ants and throw eggs at signposts. Stevie liked making them laugh; it made his belly warm. Sometimes, though, when they'd talk, he didn't know what they were saying. He'd make out bits and pieces and just stand there grinning.

It was May, the trees were blooming, and the sweet Michigan air was now quite warm. The big clunky school bus came to a halt at Davidson and Alberton Street, and with a cough and a squeal, a gray plume spat out from the exhaust.

"Bye Miss Nancy!" was hollered as four children scampered down the steps onto the asphalt.

Stevie was the last to get off, and once he did, he skipped over to the huddle on the curb where Jim, Nick, and Sophie were making plans for the afternoon.

"Aye, what you guys doing?" asked Stevie, grinning.

"We're going to the lake. You can't swim, Stevie, go home," said Jim.

"Can too! Momma taught me, watch—" Stevie started clawing at the air.

"Jim, he'll follow us anyway. Let's go," said Nick.

The cluster started for the lakefront a couple streets down. Stevie was still freestyleing in the air until Jim told him to quit it. On Wilson street, they came upon the open stretch of grass which presented the small beach on the other side. A gravel path snaked through the field, upon which Jim, Nick, and Sophie broke into a sprint.

By the time the others swam to the raft, Stevie had just made it to the lakefront. For a moment he stood and watched them play on the floating platform while his heart fluttered with excitement. After taking off his shoes, Stevie edged towards the water, curling in his toes to keep them safe from the chilly nibbles of the tide. The sloshing and undulating waves and the expanse of water between himself and the raft made him shrivel

inward.

"I thought you could swim?" called Jim from the raft, waving his arms wildly in mockery. The others laughed.

"Swim to the raft, Stevie, come see the fish!" Sophie cheered. With Sophie's encouragement, a newfound courage took root in Stevie. Taking a few steps back, he readied himself for a running dive. With his Spiderman shirt still on, he made a short sprint and leapt into the shallows on his belly. Clawing vigorously, he moved ever so slightly towards the raft.

Finally near and panting heavily, Stevie heaved himself up the ladder and stood, grinning wildly while his clothes leaked buckets of water.

"Yay, you made it!" said Sophie with a beaming smile. Stevie's heart skipped a beat and he couldn't help but do a little jump of excitement.

"Come jump off with us," said Jim. He glanced at Nick and Sophie with a wry grin.

"Yeah, we'll all go off together," said Nick with his toes against the edge of the platform. The others joined him on the ledge and all looked towards Stevie sauntering over with a smirk playing at the edges of his mouth. At the end of the row, the dewy-eyed little boy looked down into the blue green depths and shivered.

"Ready? Jump on three," Jim said. Stevie nodded wearily.

"One, two, three!" they shouted, and off went Stevie. Midair he was flailing his arms and looking around—he was all alone. Underwater, his toes nudged a forest of seaweed and panic lurched in his gut. He floundered desperately for the surface, and when he emerged, he looked up to see his friends looking down on him, laughing hysterically. He didn't know what was so funny about him jumping in alone, but nevertheless he joined in their laughter. He climbed back onto the raft still giggling.

"What you don't jump for?"

"It was a joke. Remember what we told you about jokes? You do something silly and then we laugh. It's fun."

"Oh," Stevie beamed; he liked to make his friends happy. "There's something down at the bottom. It had fingers touching my toes so I swam away."

"They were probably the evil lobsters. They like to walk around on the bottom," Nick turned toward the others, grinning. Stevie's smile turned into a grimace when Nick began pretending his hands were lobster claws and pinched Stevie's arm.

"Yeah, with big sharp pinchers. You're lucky you didn't get pinched by one," Sophie said, holding in a chuckle with her palm.

"I'm gonna get one to play with," said Jim.

Stevie started inching toward the corner of the raft like a corralled sheep. He sat down cross-legged and said, "I don't want to play with them. They're not nice."

Suddenly, Jim made a running dive. The others watched his silhouette underwater, upside down and scurrying about. Then he burst from the surface; "I got one!" he yelled in triumph, his hands cupped and his feet treading. Jim kicked to the ladder and hid his treasure in one hand behind his back.

"Here, Stevie, come look. It won't bite. I've got its pinchers held together."

Stevie's eyes bulged wide in their sockets and he craned his head to see around Jim's back.

"Do you wanna see?" asked Jim.

Stevie nodded. Jim inched toward him and suddenly flung his arm out from behind his back. A clump of tangled green hair vomited across Stevie's chest. Stevie looked down and felt sick. The children burst into laughter. Holding back pangs of disgust, he tried smiling but only managed a half-grimace.

He lifted the clump off his Spiderman t-shirt. "What's that?" he asked.

"Seaweed," said Sophie, giggling. "There's a whole bunch at the bottom."

"Why don't you try to get some?" asked Jim.

Stevie shook his head. Seaweed was bad, it was dark and mysterious and wanted to tie his legs up in a knot. Plus, he didn't like going underwater much because he couldn't see anything. He liked the warm friendly sunshine on the raft and he only wanted to be amongst his friends.

"We'll take turns. Whoever brings back the most seaweed wins—I'll go first," said Nick. He dove in and the others watched

bubbles percolate toward the surface for a long moment until he broke through with a gasp. He heaved up a pile as big as a baseball onto the raft. Stevie looked regretfully at the heap of soggy green hair.

"Could've got more but I dropped some on the way back up," Nick said in confession.

"I'll go next," said Jim, gazing into the depths. He made a spectacular dive and was but a hazy image at the bottom until he torpedoed himself up to the surface. He held his arms tight to his chest like he was holding a baby. A football sized clump of green was launched up from the water.

"Beat that," Jim said, "Ready, Stevie? Your turn."

Stevie stood, frozen, looking to each of their faces. They stared as if they were expecting something great; the possibility of disappointing them made Stevie's heart drop to his stomach. Inchng toward the edge of the raft, he peered into the murky blue, where there was no sign of the green they'd been drudging up. He turned around anxiously and saw their waiting, expecting eyes. Deeply he sucked air in through his mouth and while clenching every muscle in his body, launched forward. His arms flailed through the air and when he hit the water, he heard I can't swim bark in his head.

Minutes passed. An immense cloud moved to cover the sun. The others, watching the dark churning waves, felt a strange itch somewhere in the back of their heads.

The water was still. Far off, a large bird wailed.

matt tarry

the legend of lake angikuni

(excerpt)

Northern Canada; March, 1930

In late winter, the temperature lay well below freezing at night, and the sun loomed low between the peaks of two craggy mountains, the dark clouds overhead dulling the endless white of the monochrome landscape to a lambent gray. Tundra stretched out in the other direction, so far the eye couldn't see the end of it. The landscape's only inhabitants – shrubs, sedges and grasses, mosses and lichens – dozed under a blanket of ice. Joe Labelle drew his fur-edged hood closer to his face with fingers that felt numb even wrapped in thick leather gloves, and trudged Forward.

Nunavut was a region northwest of the Hudson Bay, including its Northwestern Passages and those islands directly north of it. He'd followed the Kazan River west, a crack on the surface of this barren landscape, to arrive here at Lake Angikuni. He would rest at the Inuit village tonight before continuing on his way, alone.

You couldn't survive in this place if you didn't know how to be alone.

Several more miles to the village, Joe thought. He needed to get there before nightfall, when his grizzled beard, already clumped with ice, would start to freeze solid, before he was forced to use the last of the batteries for his flashlight. For now, the little light the sky provided reflected off the whiteness of the tundra, giving his surroundings an eerie glow. He wouldn't freeze to death at night, at least, even if he were stranded out here. His face was covered, protected from the cold, biting wind and the risk of frostbite. His clothes were heavy and warm enough to keep him alive, and unless he suddenly became soaking wet or lost a few layers of clothing, he wouldn't get hypothermia. It was mostly thanks to the creature that had nearly killed him that he did not fear freezing to death. Its heavy hide was draped over his shoulders, a thick shield against the elements that had saved his life many times over.

Several years previously, during late autumn, Joe had been trapping near Wager Bay. Wager Bay and the area surrounding it, which he'd heard referred to as Ukkusiksalingmiut for the

soap-stone that could be found there, was as hauntingly beautiful a wilderness as any in northern Canada, with its low tundra and patches of taiga forest in its river valleys. The region was populated with a great many animals, including arctic wolves, polars, and grizzlies, and there was a booming fur trade there. A post on the outermost edge of the bay had been his home at the time.

He'd been in one of those river valleys on that late autumn morning, checking the hare and fox traps he'd laid the night before, when he'd heard the sound, a snuffling noise, and turned.

A grizzly bear cub, big enough to have been born the year before, stood between two trees not far away, looking directly at him with inquisitive brown eyes and rounded ears perked. His heart lurched in his chest, for fear not of the cub but what the cub meant. He was reaching for the rifle on his back when the mother bear plowed into him without warning, knocking him to the ground. The breath left his lungs. The weight of her large paws on his back crushed him. She pounded him several times with her paws, as one might pound a man on the ground with his fists, but these blows were far stronger and had her full weight—something over three hundred pounds—behind them. Her long, sharp claws shredded through layers of his clothing.

His head rang, his adrenaline pounded.

There was nothing he could do as the mother beat him with her paws, pounding her weight into his back. The rifle slammed into his back as her weight pressed it into him. Then he felt her breath hot on the back of his neck and her teeth—

Her teeth scraping at the nape of his neck. Grazing the back of his skull. He closed his eyes, his face pressed to the dirt. He imagined he heard his skull give a groan beneath the pressure of her jaws.

In a flash, he saw a face full of freckles, ringlets of strawberry hair, sparkling sea-green eyes above a soft smile—

She took the back of his jacket in her mouth, and tossed him like a rag doll. He landed hard on the ground, on his back this time, and lifted his hands, bracing himself -- but she was on top of him again, and he had no power to fight her as she chomped

down on his left hand. The bones in his hand splintered. Blood splattered onto the snow, dark red on pure white. Her teeth crunched into him as she shook his hand, like a dog shaking a chew toy. Just as quickly, she released it and mauled his arm, tossed him again, crushed him with her paws again. Every part of his arm down from the elbow screamed, as if each cell were crying out in pain. His throat was raw. When did I start screaming? he wondered, feeling as if his mind was watching him die from a few paces away, emotionless, while his body suffered each moment in an agony that seemed to last for hours.

A knife in his pocket. A rifle on his back. They were nothing compared to her claws and teeth and enormous strength. She was going to kill him for coming near her cub and he was powerless to fight back.

He lay still. Couldn't move. On his stomach again. She sniffed at him. Stood on his back again, and shook him once more, drawing a soundless whimper out of him, before he heard her footsteps lumber away. A knife in his pocket. A rifle on his back.

She might come back.

His entire body cried out as he moved, grabbing onto something—a boulder, a tree, a log, he wasn't sure—for support, pulling himself up. Desperation to live, not strength of spirit, though perhaps they were the same thing—that was what drove him to reach for his rifle. His Mosin-Nagant was hanging from his right arm, somehow unbroken. He couldn't remember the strap sliding off his shoulder.

It was loaded. He brought it up near his shoulder to shoot, desperation making the pain of using his wounded arm somehow bearable—she was about twenty feet away with the cub. He hesitated. A trickle of sweat, or perhaps blood, ran into his eye.

She turned back, as if sensing the danger, and then she was charging toward him. She closed the distance faster than he thought possible—ten feet in only a second, it seemed—When he pulled the trigger.

The bullet lodged between her eyes, killing her before she could reach him — she was only a couple feet away when she dropped to the ground, body spasming in death. He stared at

her body. He'd seen dead animals before. Every day he harvested their pelts, ate their meat. It was what he did for a living. But this was somehow different. He set traps for the animals he killed. They couldn't fight back like this.

He'd wanted to live. She'd only been protecting her cub.

The pain bore down on him. He coughed up the contents of his stomach before blacking out from shock. When he woke, the cub was nosing at its mother's body.

He managed to stumble to his feet, his entire body throbbing with pain. Blood gushed from a gash in his upper thigh, and from another in his arm. His mangled left hand was the worst of it. His ribs ached; every breath hurt. Sinking onto a log nearby, he was able to retrieve his medical kit from his pack. With his trembling good hand, he peeled off his top layers and examined the wounds on his torso. Smaller scrapes and cuts oozed blood, and bruises that would soon blossom black and purple covered his upper body.

The danger wasn't over yet. The gashes and deeper gore marks on his arm were leaking blood, but hadn't nicked any arteries, at least. Cleaning and stitching the wounds was the best he could do, and he did so one-handed.

His left hand, though...Several bones were broken, though he couldn't tell much more about the state of it through the mess of blood. The only thing he could do for now was wash it in the nearby stream, wrap it tightly with bandages, and hope that he could do enough for it when he got back that he wouldn't have to amputate.

But he couldn't leave a good bear hide behind.

Even as he struggled to skin the carcass mostly one-handed, the cub lingered nearby, staying near its mother's body but never coming closer than ten feet from him. He couldn't bring himself to kill it. It would have been a mercy: the cub likely wouldn't survive without its mother. He would make some money off its pelt. But he could not do it.

He limped the couple miles back to the trading post, exhausted and still trembling with the aftereffects of adrenaline and the still-present pain of his injuries, but he couldn't let

himself stop moving for even a second. If he stopped to rest for a moment, he thought he might never move again. And despite all he'd been through, despite his pain and aching loneliness, there was a part of him that wasn't done searching yet.

Though searching for what, he never knew.

rachel mckimmy

read the full story online at xylemmag.wordpress.com

athena lemnia

after rainer maria rilke

we cannot know what bounties she held
in her hands, yet they still reach
out towards us. our goddess gives
as much as she takes. would
she have shared her treasures

with us too? in her home here,
amongst the refugees. they all know
her divine games too intimately,
closer than jugular. how to make
shelter from ash. how to
remove shrapnel from your
child's bedroom walls. how
to keep blue-black seawater
from your lungs, turning them
to teacups.

maybe then this stone, this dirty marble
does not belong. the missing spear still
points towards us. that gaze, oozing pitch
from the socket of each eye, locked on
the curve of her missing helmet;

waiting, from every scrawled border,
the rumble below earth. she is nowhere
and will find you anyways. shout back.
I don't know how to die yet. I will live.

hiba dagher

i will never pretend to like football

the terror of loving a girl is honey-thick and molasses sweet.
it's quicksand when you dip your feet in, easy to wade in, not
because you're naive enough to think you'll escape but because
it promises to keep you under. it's low bass, it's humid air,
tender in its suffocation it is insomnia, it's tinnitus pulsing
with your heartbeat, light that spans every shade of orange and
yellow - today it is canary, hard on the eyes but like lemonade
on the tongue and when you taste it you wonder what there
could possibly be to fear about it in the first place-

the terror of loving a man is a thing with claws and teeth it is
violent and visceral and cold it will never wrap your scars and
it will never stop writhing around in the corners of your mind
eldritch and slimy the idea of succumbing yourself to it leaves
your heart revolting because it is not an action possible to the
version of yourself that you know not a performance you have
ever accepted a role in it is the thought of a man planting his
mouth on your bare neck except the giggle that bubbles out of
your lips is unfamiliar the voice that teases him oh stop it you
belongs to a stranger and her fingernails look more like talons
by the day you already feel yourself turning so you plunge your
head into the gold-tinted water and forget how to come up for
air

maya simonte

the lie-teller

Once upon a time, the storyteller discovered the art of lying: her husband whispered he would come back, and she believed him, but he never did, and she murmured soothing consolations to her children, that everything would be alright when it was not; and because of this she learned to whisper the most fanciful tales in the most lovely words to utter strangers, and they dropped coins into her palms to hear her tell them; but they were ever hungry, and what she feared most was running out of words, that the well from which she drew them inside her heart and soul would turn dry and dusty, and there would be no more of them to sell; so she taught you her secret, and you learned to lie and spin words like thread as she did; but the words consumed you as they bewitched others, each one the subtle drip of poison into a well that seemed to overflow with power; the storyteller warned you to stop, to use your words only for the benefit of others, but you lied to everyone, and of course they believed you -- they burned her as a witch while her children cried and you found you could not lie to them about what you had done; when they came to burn you, you fled into one of your stories, but it offered no true shelter -- it was as deep as your power in which you had so much faith; in this place, a path unwound like a pulled piece of thread, coming undone and twisting itself through the sepia-toned shadows, shadows by which you found yourself enclosed, running and running, because you could never stop for fear of what was behind you.

rachel mckimmy

birdsong on a silent reservoir

Behold the body of water
left breathless:
watch the fabric boil
beneath dancing insects,
beads of an oar
hovering there,
singing as they knead
the charcoal.

Listen:
somewhere beneath the sun,
the windless chime
of the blue jays
a pinpoint
in the unchanging air.

alexander wagner

waiting game

after "living in sin" by adrienne rich

You lounge lavishly,
so languidly,
in the decaying living room.
Your last argument lingers
like dust motes in the light.
It echoes between the crumbling walls
but you don't hear a sound.

You shower all the love
he could never give on the dying plants
on the windowsills,
plants that yearn for a sun
they never got to see.
You search for the days
I keep telling you you'll never find. Not here.

You,
of this broken, barren house,
how many more nights will you lie awake
waiting for the door to open
and the rain to stop?
Does the ceiling give you answers,
or does it hide them in the cracks
and chipped paint?
Does the furniture tell you to leave
when you dare to touch
the dirt and dust on the velvet?

I know you will wait.
Wait to hear to his wandering
wayward footsteps
on the creaking stairs
like clockwork
turning slowly
in an ancient, weary universe.

jaynab akhtar

recharge

see the rained-on road, more soil
than pavement,
shoots of growth.

see the road which stretches and stretches
and loses itself in powder-blue
the longer you look at the horizon.

raincloud-smell lingers in
damp air.
hot dust and summer pollen
soon rise and the sun bakes
new cracks into the ground and
somewhere, a windmill creaks under
the burden
of its years.

the smell of grass is heavy
and sweet. it makes the boy want
to

fall
into feverish slumber.

there isn't much to do and
so the summer seems to
 stretch
for longer even than the road.
pale moths flutter among the cabbage;
manure sloshes
together with wet mud.

somewhere, bare and calloused feet
step through the fields. the sun beats
down on an old golden-straw hat.

the paraffin clouds float past and
the boy no longer hears his father's calls
or
the drunken buzzing
of the flies.

aelita klausmeier

find me here

can you find me here; where
 blue green rolls over bare shore
quiet with fall, littered with summer
 with sea glass and wishing stones
yellow plastic rings from sand pails
 under gray bellied seagulls
at the end of the waterline
 down by the catfish filled canal

the gray sky meets gray horizon
 meets gray sand at dusk
you can find me laying with
 my back against the ground, shivering,
content and smiling into the sun
 eyes closed, hands above my head
fingers tucked into the Earth
 digging dirt under my nails

lonely in front of empty houses
 for summer families gone for the cold
find me here; quiet, longing
 to fold you into the landscape
fill your eyes with lake huron
 to look towards safety whenever I can
I'm drawn into you as I was a kid
 again, in the sand, in the sun's grasp

lia borntrager

tell them i said hello

I know I lingered in the doorway
and I wouldn't look you in the face,
a face that was almost mine,
a face that couldn't find a place to belong.

There was a storm in your silence.
Because how many times could paper be torn,
glass thrown and shattered
before neither could be put back together?

And how many times could someone scream
into the darkness
before realizing that everyone else
did not hear them?

And how many times will you tell people
that this is not your name,
before you make yourself small
to fit what little they give to you?

And how many times will they laugh and point
at your reds and greens and gold
because they know you
do not understand?

And how many times will you want
to walk and smile like they do
before you say, "I have tried.
Isn't that enough?"

I thought all of this.
I thought all of this and yet
I could say nothing to you.
Our gazes were the only things that met each other.

And I hoped this was enough.

editorial board

Goodbye was the only word
that sounded the same
on both our tongues.

jaynab akhtar

Simran Malik is a junior studying Comparative Literature and Computer Science. She loves playing piano, writing, reading, and listening to movie scores. Her favorite book is Jesus' Son by Denis Johnson. She hopes to one day publish a collection of short stories on the extraordinary ordinaries of life.

Maya Simonte is an RC sophomore majoring in Creative Writing. She has a vendetta against John Green for the havoc he wreaked on the Young Adult genre as a whole from 2012 to 2016, and spends her free time rereading Wendy Mass novels that she first read in middle school (spoiler: they're still incredible). Apart from Xylem, Maya is also the prose editor of the Residential College's literary magazine, the RC Review, and a tutor at the Sweetland Peer Writing Center.

Juhui Oh is a sophomore double majoring in International Studies and Psychology. She hopes to work in international nonprofits or NGOs after college. She is passionate about helping others and one day, she hopes to found a non-profit which empowers marginalized youth to bring their full potential and talents to our society. In her free time, Juhui loves socializing with people, reading, drawing and volunteering for animals. Her favorite animal is chipmunk and she believes that she chose the right university. Just see how many squirrels we have here!

Tahani Almujahid is a sophomore studying English with a minor in history. She enjoys storytelling through literature and film, and enjoys how both can be used as ways of healing. When she isn't delving into worlds outside of her own, she is most likely in her own head, trying to get it all on paper!

Clare Godfryd is a junior studying Philosophy, Politics, and Economics with a minor in Business Administration. She has been passionate about reading and writing since childhood and joined Xylem to find a community of like-minded people at Michigan. She is excited to attend law school in the future,

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