

RAINY DAY

RAINY DAY



VOLUME XLV, No. 1 / Spring 2016

Volume XLV, No. 1 / Spring 2016

Dear Rainy Day Reader,

If you're picking up an issue of Rainy Day for the first time: welcome! If you're a Rainy Day veteran: hello again! Before I let you scamper off I think I should say a few words my own experience watching the all the moving parts come together to create the piece of print (or PDF) you see here.

It's been a wild ride, to say the least. We are a small publication, held together by an ever-shifting undergraduate editorial body. In between academic pressures, extracurricular obligations, and calls for professional development, the discipline and rigor with which the staff has been able to publish this magazine with such regularity over the course of my four years on staff is nothing short of staggering. To the passion, patience, and enthusiasm of the Rainy Day student editors and general staff, I owe much.

Each new semester sees hundreds of submissions from universities nationwide, and each submission, devoid of name and school for the purposes of the selection process, demands close consideration. We read. We discuss. We vote. Though slow and painstaking, we hope this process reflects the high standard of quality and passion shown by the writers we have the privilege of displaying from semester to semester.

As I write this, it seems unreal that this is the last time I speak with you as a member of the editorial board, Dear Reader. After coming to this publication for the first time in fall 2012 as a general staff member, I feel confident that Rainy Day has kept doggedly to its promise of presenting compelling and engrossing student work, and am humbled by the dedication and virtuosity displayed by the writers contained within this latest issue. With this final message, I leave you to the pleasure of meeting these fine authors for yourself.

Yours,
Mark Kasvin

RAINY DAY

an independent student publication

Volume XLV, Issue No. 1

Spring 2016

Letter from the Editor 1

fiction

RACHEL SPALDING '17 (*Washington University in St. Louis*)
Numbers..... 4

JARRED THOMPSON '17 (*Alabama State University*)
When the Chickens Come Home to Roost..... 22

SUSAN TU '16 (*Cornell University*)
Black Box Equinox..... 47

LINDSEY OWEN '17 (*Brown University*)
Foxglove..... 54

JOSHUA AMBRE '18 (*University of Arizona*)
Song of the Surgeon..... 63

poetry

RACHEL SPALDING '17 (*Washington University in St. Louis*)
Stories from the Dollhouse..... 10

ANGELA ACOSTA '17 (*Smith College*)
Genealogical Activity..... 12

JULIA MARTINS '17 (*Stanford University* '17)
Virgin..... 13
Secrets..... 15
When you can't cry anymore..... 16

AMIRA SAMIY '18 (*Cornell University*)
Taupe Sunrays..... 17

ALEXANDER NGO '18 and ARROGANT AMBASSADOR (Washington University in St. Louis) <i>The Snake and the Sparrow</i>	18
ANDRIA OZIMEK '17 (UCLA) <i>A Very "Mature" Crush on David</i>	19
CARLY JO OLSZEWSKI '17 (Stanford University) <i>Runner's High</i>	20
DARIANA D. GUERRERO '17 (Smith College) <i>Untitled</i>	36
<i>Untitled</i>	38
ERIC HORMUTH '16 (University of Southern Indiana) <i>Edmonton</i>	39
MICHELLE XU '18 (Barnard College) <i>Self-Portrait Chinese American</i>	41
<i>Still-Life with Cold Buffet</i>	42
IAN GOLDSMITH '19 (Cornell University) <i>Big Sur</i>	43
KAITLIN WALKER '17 (Truman State University) <i>Ode to Burnt Matches</i>	44
PRITHA BHATTACHARYYA '16 (Cornell University) <i>An Art (I)</i>	45
<i>At Night (II)</i>	46
MELISSA GORDON '16 (Stanford University) <i>Asken Observation</i>	53
JOSHUA AMBRE '18 (University of Arizona) <i>Desert Tortoise</i>	61
Contributor Notes.....	65

NUMBERS

Rachel Spalding

2697815320.

I dialed it one day in late October, waiting for her to answer, the croaky “Hello” crackling through the receiver after a few dial tones.

“The funeral was yesterday,” I said. “I played my flute during the service and Brendan turned my pages and it sounded good but I messed up a couple times. You should have seen the flowers! Lots of lavender sprigs and that white stuff that grows out by the old farmhouse...I think it’s called baby’s breath? We had meatballs at Schuler’s after and Mom and Aunt Anne didn’t fight and even though it rained all day I saw a beautiful rainbow on the drive home. You would have loved it, Gram.”

There was no response; there never would be. I was talking to an answering machine that would soon be disconnected in a musty apartment that would soon belong to someone else, maybe a young couple or another old woman.

I hung up the phone when my mother heard me crying and entered the kitchen to find me dabbing my eyes furiously with a paper towel.

“Dad called from the office,” I told her.

“It’s okay to be sad,” she said.

2.

There is a photo on my dresser at home in a modest black frame. The color is faded and the glass of the frame is cracked in one corner. A chubby toddler with an alarming shock of bright ginger hair, the result of an incredibly recessive gene, grins widely from inside a red pop-up tent; bubbles of laughter surely emanate from her lips. If you look closely, the child’s face is speckled, a result of the black mesh tent screen that impedes the camera’s shot. The toddler sits on the lap of an old woman, her tawny face weathered behind the horn-rimmed glasses that she’s worn since the late 1970s. Her lips, painted a vivid pink, are pursed mid-coo. Seemingly transfixed by the toddler, she isn’t looking at the camera. Her papery hands wrap lovingly around the child’s stomach, her head bent close to the peach-fuzzed cheek.

Psychologists say that humans can’t remember much before the age of two. I have no recollection of this picture being taken; I can’t recall the warmth of her hands on my stomach or the self-indulgent excitement I might have felt as a child posing for a photograph. I can imagine the way she smelled, a mixture of the Trident bubblegum that she carried in the bottom of her handbag and the gardenia perfume she spritzed on her neck each morning. I can envision my father grinning goofily from behind the camera lens, still sporting a thick black mustache, which he would

later be forced to shave off after an unfortunate incident when I tugged on it too hard with my infantile fingers.

“Barb, look at the camera,” he may have prompted, waiting to capture a flawless photo for the family album.

“Isn’t that precious,” my mother might have said as she watched the union of the two people she loved most, preserved indefinitely and imperfectly with the *click* of a camera shutter.

6.

Like many older people, my grandmother was a packrat. Her apartment was cluttered with *stuff*: potted plants, a birdcage once inhabited by her beloved cockatiel, Cleo, dog-eared mystery novels, old lamps that had ceased to work properly sometime during the 1980s, a television with two crooked antennae that got horrible reception, but which she refused to replace.

It was any responsible adult’s worst nightmare. For me, it was a wonderland, a trove of dusty, forgotten treasures waiting to be uncovered. As a child, I would sit cross-legged in front of my favorite artifact: a glass-windowed cabinet that housed her extensive collection of VHS tapes and innumerable knick-knacks, including the slightly terrifying Troll figurines and a dashing blue-eyed Ken doll, who was naked except for a pair of sequined shorts. I would pluck the items delicately from the cabinet, occasionally generating a puff of dust that stung my eyes and made me sneeze.

My goal was to find the most bizarre tchotchkes, strangely wonderful trinkets that would make my hunt worthwhile. The same objects mesmerized me every time, one in particular being this rectangular block of wood upon which six painted figurines were glued, each depicting a squat little man adorned with a unique hat and outfit. As soon as I found it, I would bring the trinket to my grandmother, rubbing the wood between my fingers in eager anticipation of what was to come.

“This again,” she would chuckle, pulling me onto her lap in her favorite rocking chair. I would watch in fascination as she tapped the men on the head one-by-one, proclaiming a name each time, always in the same order: “Tom, Dick, Harry, John, George, Paul.” Together we would inspect their round little faces; all of them were Caucasian with dimpled smiles and rosy cheeks, except for Paul, who had an Eastern slant to his eyes and wore a purple shawl that resembled a kimono. We would sit in the rocking chair and make up stories for them—all six were brothers and Dick was the oldest because he had white hair; John was a fisherman because he wore blue like the sea. The one called Harry was my favorite because Gram said she named him after her brother, Harry Lee, and he looked the happiest.

There came a time when she could no longer remember the names and I had to recite them for her. Soon after, I lost interest in the six little men, allowing them to gather dust in the cabinet while I graduated to explore more exotic areas of

the apartment, such as the closet.

Years later, my mother and her two siblings gathered to sort through my beloved treasures.

“Save something for me,” I begged.

I do not know what became of Tom, Dick, Harry, John, George, and Paul. My mother returned with the Ken doll, still sporting his sparkly bloomers and toothy grin, unashamed of his nakedness.

97.

It is in my blood to hate hot weather. We come from Michigan, land of cross-country skiing and snow tires and people who judge you if you complain about your car not starting in the morning. I grew up knowing how to pack the perfect snowball and that even though the bus may come crunching down our driveway close to an hour late, school would never be canceled.

“Heat makes people crazy,” my mother complained when my father announced one evening that he had taken a job in Tennessee and that we would be moving after I finished second grade.

Although she never said anything, Gram was equally displeased about the news of our move. The day we left, she waved to us from the parking lot of her apartment complex, her pink and blue windbreaker pulled tight around her hunched shoulders. I blew kisses out the window as my parents hollered promises to book a train ticket for her to come visit as soon as we got settled.

She decided to come to Tennessee for a week in August. The day before she arrived, the high temperature for the week was forecasted as 97 degrees.

“This weather will be nothing like what you’re used to,” my mother coached her during our daily phone calls, which were made each afternoon when I returned home from school.

I ran to her as soon as I heard the front door open, flinging my arms around her torso in excitement after two months of separation, the longest we had ever been apart.

“Crapdoodle, it’s hot,” she sighed, taking a step back to fan her face, which was beading with condensation. She felt bonier between my arms, but her lips, feathered at the corners with the streaky remnants of pink lipstick, felt the same when she pressed them to my cheek.

The week went smoothly, as we kept Gram out of the heat and took her to our favorite restaurants and on scenic drives to view the late-summer Southern greenery. My mother introduced her to her new friends; I read aloud to her from my book of dinosaur facts; my father shared his Miller Lite with her in the evenings. She always had a taste for beer.

Three days before her scheduled departure, the air-conditioning broke in our car. My mother and I took her to a Japanese restaurant for dinner and the backs

of our thighs stuck to the hot leather seats. On the drive home, my mother's cell phone rang with a call from my grandfather. She was the only sibling who spoke to him; I was the only grandchild who received his Christmas presents. Though it had been over thirty years since the divorce, a messy, volatile affair, Gram still sent him letters full of spite and scorn and reminders that his transgressions would never be forgotten. The latest correspondence had been particularly nasty.

"I can't believe you still do this!" my mother said after hanging up the phone. We had rolled down all the windows; I was captivated by the wind tunnel that had formed in the backseat, whipping my hair and cooling my cheeks. The voices emanating from the front seat escalated, but all I could hear was the whoosh in my eardrums.

As we pulled into the driveway, the final words that would be shared between mother and daughter for the next two months were spoken, punctuated by slamming car doors:

"Your father is full of as much shit as a Christmas turkey."

"You're leaving tomorrow."

8.

On May 8th, 2013, after the last of the spring snow had melted and the crocuses had begun to bloom, she flew away from us.

Each of the siblings drove down to her hometown in Ft. Wayne, Indiana: my mother with my father and me, Anne and the man to whom she has been engaged for the past fifteen years, Ken and my cousin Brendan. We congregated at the Holiday Inn with a few of her nieces and her younger brother, Harry Lee. I couldn't recall ever meeting my great-uncle, but there was something easy and familiar about his gap-toothed Polish grin.

Guided by Harry Lee's directions, delivered with the offhanded precision of someone who has lived in a place his entire life, we drove in separate cars out to the railroad tracks. The tracks are tucked deep within the family's old farmland, which is now bordered on most sides by a highway. They were abandoned years ago, the iron now rusted and shrouded with foliage. A narrow pedestrian bridge arches over the tracks, constructed with sun-bleached wood that has rotted dark in some places.

"We came out here every day as kids," Harry Lee recalled, evoking a time when the world was a child's playground.

The braver ones among us stood on the bridge, gingerly stepping single-file onto the planks. My mother held the metal urn. When we reached the center of the bridge, she pried open the lid and thrust her hand inside, pulling out a handful of ash, burnt flesh and bone and wisps of hair that I tried not to think about. Each of us took a handful: Anne, Ken, Brendan, Harry Lee, and me. We held our hands out over the edge and opened our fists, letting the gray flakes catch the breeze and fly.

Moments later, my cousin began to sputter, disturbing our poetic moment. "I think I swallowed some of them," he explained when we all turned in alarm.

I wanted to be able to laugh, but my throat felt too tight. I coughed instead.

15.

We moved four times during my childhood, always ensuring that our spiral-bound telephone address book was taken with us to keep track of those who we were leaving behind. Our most frequently dialed number wasn't recorded; it didn't need to be. With the exception of those two months after our first move, my mother called her every day, tucking the phone between her shoulder and chin as she stirred pasta sauce over the stove or holding her cell phone with one hand as she drove me to horseback riding lessons. When she was finished, it was my turn; she always handed me the phone and whispered "It's Gram" as if I hadn't possibly known whom she had been talking to for the past hour.

Our conversations usually lasted fifteen minutes. When she greeted me, her voice turned upward, pronouncing my name with the hint of a smile. We talked about everything; we talked about nothing. As I grew older, I bored her with the details of the Homecoming Dance or my anxiety over an upcoming race or an idea I had for a short story. When my mother and I fought, which increased in frequency after my twelfth birthday, I would often call her for reinforcement, whining about her daughter's parental misdemeanors. She listened the way that I needed her to as an insecure teenager, with love and without judgment.

Hanging up was always difficult, as neither of us could ever seem to decide who would end the call first.

"All right, I guess I'll let you go."

"Okeydokey. I love you, Rachael Lynn."

"I love you too, Gram."

"Alrighty."

"I'm going to hang up now."

"Okay, I will too."

"Okay. I love you."

"I love you, too."

"Bye."

3.

My grandmother was a single parent to three children. She fell in love and married young with a wealthy, entitled businessman who was easily disenchanted by the notion of commitment. The divorce happened early, when all three siblings were still in elementary school. She worked at the Campbell's soup factory and hung the tomato soup can ornaments that the company gave her for Christmas each year

on their tree. They kept a variety of pets: always at least two cats, often something exotic like a ferret, and once a turkey named Gilligan. When we visit my mother's hometown, a small town in Michigan, we always drive by her childhood house, a two-story Victorian with a wraparound porch. She says it hasn't changed much since when they lived there in the '70s, except for the peeling paint and overgrown bushes which Gram never would have allowed. She points out where Gilligan's pen was in the backyard and the front bay window in which their Christmas tree shone. That house has always fascinated me: the thought of the three siblings revolving through the rooms, growing taller and moving faster, my grandmother fixed at the center.

20.

She was the first of my three grandparents to die and the one I had loved the best. Somehow I never forgave the other two for outliving her, an ugliness that haunts me when I count how few tears I shed at their funerals.

On my twentieth birthday, I realized how I've collaged parts of her to myself over the years.

I have a stack of letters stuffed in a drawer at home. Written in fits of anger, they will remain unsent.

I eat far too much Campbell's tomato soup.

I sometimes use made-up words in place of curses, such as "crapdoodle" or "fudgebuckets."

I have had to explain too many times why there is a half-naked Ken doll sitting on my desk at college.

I have difficulty walking by the cats that are up for adoption at the local pet store and know that the time will come when I have my own houseful of animals.

I wear the ring she wore on her deathbed, a simple turquoise stone on a silver band. It is too big for my finger, yet I never take it off for fear of losing her all over again.

2697815320.

Sometimes I want to dial it when I think of that May day when I uncurled my fingers and let her go. I think of what I would do if she answered, how I would express all that has changed in the past five years.

Mostly, I would realize, things are the same.

STORIES FROM THE DOLLHOUSE

Rachel Spalding

Paint peels from the cupboards,
Falling in flakes like
sunburned skin,
Summer's snow.
Your chapped lips
always grinning

Even when I told you
I'm a mess,
My eyes were weeping
red,
Hair yanked out in
clumps of yarn.

It scared you:
This slow unraveling of the
string that held you up.
You squeezed tighter,
Snapped my bones.

Made duct tape bandages
to patch the holes.
Adhesive rubbed me raw,
Stripped the sheen from my skin.

You loved me anyway,
Your ragdoll twin.
Fixed me a bed of
Toothpicks and tissue;
Under a Kleenex quilt
I could not sleep.

Cracked soles on the
linoleum, your hand
flat on the counter,
Blindly seeking mine.

The space between us
now the smallest
it will ever
be.

GENEALOGICAL ACTIVITY

Angela Acosta

An ancestral tree shot up from the roots,
 My well-kept relic.
 Hand me a rake to sweep
 Fallen branches, unidentifiable leaves
 And the acidic taste of determination
 Catching on every limb.

Miles decimate even personal pedometers,
 Racked up from fight, flight,
 Enough time for ancestral tides to wash away tracks
 Of what they thought they'd never leave behind.

I am tugging my unbroken line,
 Taut history calls after me
 Explaining the genetic convergence
 In this country full of hopes obscured
 By the seas crossed for a future genetic tree trunk.

Fibrous, my trunk is a multicolored ringed explosion
 Linked to islands and battles
 And today my story becomes Pangaea,
 Warm to the touch with tectonic activity,
 All of these shifts just so a tree
 Could sprout a leaf to christen me.

VIRGIN

Julia Martins

We're talkin bout Mary
and some angels.
In this painting they look
like teenagers. Naked.
But the teacher says that's rare.

We're talkin bout the Bible.
And a painting. And the Bible
in a painting, on Mary's lap.
Mary's mom's readin it to her, 'cept
it's a scroll, written in Hebrew.
The teacher says that's rare, too.
She asks us if we can read it and we laugh,
right on cue.

We're talkin bout art.
Well, we're listening as some teacher
talks to us about art.
Christian art.
Women in Christian art.
Mary
and her importance
as a woman
in Christian art.

Well, we're tryin to listen and not
fall asleep in our chairs.
It helps that they're hard and straight.
Like prayer chairs. Like Mary.
But even so your eyes flutter
like butterflies
or angels wings.
Is Gabriel telling ya something, too?
Something scandalous, I'm sure.
Since he can't tell ya you're a virgin.
(Sorry bout that.)

We're talkin bout art.
 And it's pretty, sure,
 it's pretty all right.
 But you can't see it with
 your eyes all closed, eyelashes brushin
 against the freckles on your cheeks.

I wanna kiss each one
 and show Mary
 what she's missin.

SECRETS

Julia Martins

I want to whisper secrets
until they're written all over your skin
and my hands come away
sticky with their truth.

I want to kiss my way
down your spine and discover
words I'd thought were lost forever.
I ate the apple you were saving.
I don't know if I've ever loved
someone like this. I'm sick.

The words taste like salt against my lips

WHEN YOU CAN'T CRY ANYMORE

Julia Martins

stand up

see if your legs can support you
don't be surprised when they can't

you will have to stumble to the sink
splash water on your face

if you forgot to close
your eyes they will burn

let them
do it again – keep your eyes open

this time on purpose.

TAUPE SUNRAYS

Amira Samiy

A tranquil cacophony initiates the ritual,
rattling composure.

The stationary block of blue follows,
a reassurance.

White peach sprawled alongside the wall,
enmeshed in navy,

a limb falling pacifically from above: eyes
guided to a void

Below — awareness emerges as the dew lifts,
although nothing stirs.

Only in the mind do thoughts flutter.
But there is still time.

THE SNAKE AND THE SPARROW

Alexander Ngo and Arrogant Ambassador

Asked "What're you doing here?"

She said "I'm not."

Asked "What're you doing here?"

She said "I'm not."

Lonely spring Sparrow

On a winter housetop

Told her "Take off your mask"

She asked "What mask?"

Told her "Take off your mask"

She asked "What mask?"

Blue-grey garter Snake

Gliding in green-grey grass

Little Bird on a chimney

Little Snake in the grass

Bird on a chimney

Snake in the grass

For Snake to look up

Is an impossible task

A VERY “MATURE” CRUSH ON DAVID

Andria Ozimek

Michelangelo gave me you,
A man of mystery and immortality.
You are just what all the Italian girls want,
A warrior; chiseled and ageless.

In the love of art, my infatuation began
With your confidence and silence.
There is nothing sexier than a man
Who knows how to shut up.

So proud, so quiet, so observant;
I bet you can keep a secret.
I can trust you to never leave,
And to only look one way;
My way.

So strong, so rough around the edges.
David, don't be shy.
I don't care if Donatello thinks you're gay,
You're Contrapposto is to die for.

David, fuck Goliath!
Stay firm, get violent; for me.
Let's get to know each other later;
I'll talk, you can just listen.

RUNNER'S HIGH

Carly Jo Olszewski

It is not me
but the ground
that aches
early in the morning
as my loosely tied tennis shoes
remind it
that I am only here
for a moment.

And as my shoes carry me onward
through layered memories
of early morning smog
I am no longer able to hear them
as they leave their prints
on the pebbles
of the crumbling street.

I cannot hear them
as they crush old cigarette butts
and briefly grab hold to last night's
once sticky gum.

I cannot hear the bum on 6th Street
as he hums to himself
and jingles the pennies
in his once full Coca-Cola can.

I cannot hear the dull mumbles
and senseless chatter
that is beginning to seep
from the once nearby café.

And soon enough
all is quiet.

I cannot even hear
my breath
as it escapes from my lips
and dissolves
into the soon crowded air.

WHEN THE CHICKENS COME HOME TO ROOST

Jarred Thompson

Tshepo woke up to the darkness, his kerosene lamp burning resiliently in the room. Against the thin, corrugated walls he heard the wind whistling in the cold morning air. Another Monday morning, he thought, yet another long trek to school. He got up, wrapped his fleece blanket around himself and walked outside to the communal tap with his feet dragging along in the sand. Filling the bucket from the rusty faucet, he took a moment to take in his surroundings. He noticed the chickens were up and skulking about, pecking at barren ground. He looked at the other shacks around his, the various bits and pieces of corrugated iron, cardboard, wire, political posters and general riff raff meshed so desperately together. His very own shack stood out to him, with its wooden door which had an elaborate pattern carved into it. It always reminded him of the ocean or what he imagined the ocean would look like. His father, previously a construction worker and now a miner, had acquired it at a worksite in Houghton. One night his dad rushed home all excited, calling his four brothers to drop their school work and help him install their new “Houghton Door” as a grand entrance to this...their very own shit hole.

“Hey *wena!* You wasting water!” Shouted Lungi, his old and grouchy neighbor. The man was half blind with a limp that made him walk like an aged chimpanzee. “*Askies Malume*, I was not paying attention.” Tshepo picked up the bucket and slipped away to his shack once more. The dazed eyes of Lungi watching him cynically.

The rest of his morning was pure routine. He lightly washed his body in a zinc bath with the cold water from the tap, brushed his teeth with a smidgen of toothpaste and put on his school clothes meticulously. He picked up his homework, noticing that it had been scribbled on and ruined.

“Sipho! What the fuck did you do to my homework!” He went into the room where his brothers slept. Sipho had just gotten up and was rubbing the sleep out of his eyes.

“Ima fuck you up bad one day boy. “ He said slapping his younger brother on the back of his head. His brother let out a violent yelp calling for his mother.

“What is going on in here?” She rushed into the room. “Tshepo are you bothering your brother again?”

“Ma, he ruined my homework! And this isn’t the first goddamn time!”

“Watch your language boy! Sipho is young, he will learn in time. “

“So in the meantime I must just allow my homework to be ruined?”

“Maybe you should put your work away when you’re done. I keep telling you to do that. I’ll give Sipho a good whipping later. Now both of you get done for school. I wanna hear nothing more about this okay? I must go to work, Tshepo make breakfast

and the money for transport is on the table.”

“Okay Ma. Bye Ma” They both said in unison.

Tshepo got his younger brother ready for school, packed their lunch, wrapped in thin cellophane paper, into their respective bags and waited for Sizwe to wake up.

“Sizwe! We gonna be late because of you...again!” Tshepo shouted, making sure his voice reverberated in the room where his brother was sleeping.

“I’m up...I’m up, Nkosi yam... I was just resting my eyes.”

Sizwe slouched out of bed and began to get ready.

“Hurry up will you! We gonna be late!”

The boys hurried out of their shack and into the blistering cold air. They had missed the first taxi that would take them directly to the corner of their school and now they would have to take two taxi’s and walk three blocks.

“Just fucking brilliant! You made us late again, you idiot. We missed Sibong’s taxi! Wena Sizwe!” Tshepo pointed his finger straight into his brother’s face. “Now we gotta walk further in this shit weather. ”

“Shut up man. It’s just school, no one cares if you miss the first period.”

They huddled together in the taxi line. Slowly, the taxi rank began to fill with more people as exhaust fumes gradually fumigated the air. All this signaled the beginning of a new but bleak morning. People from all walks of life, domestic and construction workers, students, the odd hobo or two, everyone in the area seemed to come to this taxi rank. The smell was one of rot; from the garbage that lay in the muddy ditches near the fence, to the sweaty musty smell of people waiting in the line. Tshepo took it all in. As he always did each morning. There was a gross energy that brewed here every day, a smelly, decaying but alive larger body that was growing beneath the surface of it all. It all seemed so very frightful, especially when the bakkie filled with cow corpses drove by and stopped at the nearest corner. The dismembered bodies lay, bloodied and jumbled together as one by one they would be cut into raw blocks of meat and sold throughout the day. At least it was cold today, he thought, it should keep the meat fresher for longer. Tshepo was used to all of this. He wondered what else in the world there could be.

They arrived late to school and as per usual the gates were locked. “Do we have to do this every time. They know how far we stay from here.” Said Sizwe.

“Well if you just woke up early like the rest of us...”

“I don’t wanna hear it.”

Tshepo put his arm around Siphso, who was shivering profusely. The school guard walked up to the gate, a big burly black man with huge puff adder cheeks and cherry lips that stood out amidst the darkness of his skin.

“Late again boys...what are we going to do with you guys.” He said.

They stood in silence watching each other for what seemed like eternity in the biting cold air. Eventually, having satisfied his masochism, the guard let out a small

sigh and unlocked the school gate.

“*Ngijabonga*” said Siphon through his chattering teeth. They went into the school yard and went their separate ways to their prospective classes. Tshepo dropped Siphon off at his class, making sure the little one was alright. Having finally gotten into his first class for the day, English, he slouched into his chair at the back of the classroom and discreetly placed his head on the desk.

“So when Shylock says ‘If you prick me do I not bleed? If you tickle me do I not laugh? The villainy you teach me I will execute but I will better the instruction.’ What is he really saying?” Miss Du Bois in her usual high pitched voice. Her icy blue eyes peered over her square-framed glasses and scanned the room.

“Tshepo would you like to explain to the class what Shylock means?” Tshepo jolted upwards in surprise. His tongue clung to the roof of his mouth as he tried to clear his throat and give some sort of answer, any answer that would please her.

“Uuummm, What passage are you referring to Miss?”

“Tshepo, if you’re going to be late every day then at least be diligent enough to do your homework reading that I assigned.”

“Yes mam,” he said sheepishly, noticing the girls in the corner, Rebecca and Chantel, give each other an amused look.

“Now...” she paused, pursing her lips in her characteristic fashion, “... the line is ‘If you prick me do I not bleed? If you tickle me do I not laugh? The villainy you teach me I will execute but I will better the instruction.’ What is Shylock saying Tshepo?”

He felt an army of eyes digging into his skull. His eyes rapidly shooting from wall to wall, trying to find some object to focus on and produce some semblance of an answer.

“I think Shylock is saying he’s a person just like them,” he paused and thought of the shacks, of Lungi and his crooked chimp-like walk, “...he’s saying that the world is a shitty place and to survive you gotta hustle your ass off.”

The class let out a collective snigger as Miss Du Bois walked stoically up to him. Peering over her said, “That kind of language is not tolerated in this class. I want a proper answer.”

“That is a proper answer miss, what else do you want me to say?”

“Diction Tshepo. I want you to use the proper diction. Formal analysis, that’s what I want from you. You will get zero for that answer in my exam.”

He rolled his eyes, desperately wanting the period to end. “Are you giving me attitude Tshepo?” she asked.

“No ma’am ...” he paused and looked directly into her icy blue eyes. Something was billowing up from his gut, a fire, he felt it spreading like hot lava and he knew his feeble tongue couldn’t contain what was erupting. Miss Du Bois walked away from him and carried on teaching.

“You wanted my opinion and that is my opinion. I personally don’t care

what you or your exam thinks. Shylock wouldn't give a fuck either," Said Tshepo, in a cool, measured and clearly audible manner.

Miss Du Bois paused and stood statuesque. With her back facing him, she adjusted her square-framed glasses and delicately replied, "Tshepo, meet me after class." And continued with the lesson.

The bell finally rang, signaling the end of a long and numbing day. Tshepo walked up the winding stairs toward the classroom which usually held the afternoon detention. Outside the classroom stood Thabang, sporting a half tucked in shirt, a pencil in his hair and black leather Converse sneakers.

"Tshepo my man," Thabang's eyes caught Tshepo's as he turned to face him, blocking his pathway and visibly sizing him up. "...nice job with Miss Du Bois this morning, she's a real bitch nuh?"

Tshepo gave a tentative nod, "Ja, she is." He said, trying to divert around Thabang.

"Where you off to in such a hurry?"

"I got afternoon detention."

Thabang nodded, "Becoming a bad boy now?"

Tshepo didn't reply, but just made a move to carry on walking.

"Want a loose?" Thabang shoved a long, white object into Tshepo's face. He looked at the tobacco, all yellow and stuffed inside the tight white roll of paper. Thabang didn't give him time enough to respond before he took out a black lighter and lit it. His black lips rolled onto the other end of it, pulling strongly. Tshepo watched as the stuffed tobacco caught light, hearing the faint crisp smoldering and seeing the tobacco come alive. It was hypnotic watching it burn the white paper surrounding it. For brief moments, the paper burnt with a bright animation but then, in the same instant, it died down to black and receded into ash. Tshepo wanted to taste it, to feel its power.

"Give it to me." He said. Thabang smiled, revealing a chipped tooth.

"What happened to your tooth?" asked Tshepo as he gripped the cigarette. It was more flimsy than he had imagined with Thabang's saliva on the end of it making the paper more soppy.

"Got in a fight. This nigga was trying to take my girl, so, of course I had to fuck him up."

"Looks like you got fucked up too." Tshepo held it between his index and thumb and pulled hard, sucking in his cheeks.

"You smoking like its *dagga*, relax," Thabang laughed, "...oh and the other guy looks worse, trust me."

Tshepo coughed a few times, feeling the smoke clog his throat and close his nasal passages. He felt as if the walls of his heart were pushing against his chest, trying desperately to escape as he drew in another puff of smoke.

"You wanna ditch this stupid detention thing?" asked Thabang, leaning

lazily on the face-brick wall behind him, looking at Tshepo from head to toe with his black, beady eyes.

They went to the changing rooms of the sports field which no one used except for smoking and the occasional sexual encounter. Now and again one would find Choice condom wrappers laying around on the floor, amongst a variety of filth and garbage. The toilet bowls were filled with murky, dingy water and the white walls developed a weird growing water stain all across them. There, Tshepo and Thabang smoked two more cigarettes, the two of them sitting mostly in silence listening to music on Thabang's cellphone. At certain moments a conversation would be started by one or the other, but just as soon as it did, it would die out with a blunt response. Yet, despite the silence, they both were comfortable just sitting there, smoking and listening to music.

"I have to go before it gets too late." Said Tshepo

"Where do you stay?"

"Thokoza Park."

"Oh really? I stay down the road."

"Down the road where?"

"In a flat above Miriam's Spaza shop."

They said their goodbyes and all the way home Tshepo thought of his smoking encounter. He wondered why everyone was so afraid of Thabang. He had a reputation as a bad guy that liked to fight, but he really wasn't that intimidating.

He was the only one left in the taxi now, it was around nine in the evening. His mother must have heard from his brothers already about his detention, them having left school right after it ended. The taxi driver stopped 3 blocks away from where he usually stopped.

"Hey *wena*, get out." The driver said.

"What? Why?"

"I have somewhere to be. I know you stay just down there. Get out and walk you lazy shit."

Tshepo couldn't believe it. "You fucking with me right?"

"Get the fuck out my taxi!"

He didn't argue and leapt out. The streetlights had come on, giving the pavement a rusty orange glow. There was barely anyone in the street at this time save for a few beggars. He walked briskly, making no eye contact with anyone. He passed a collection of electric fenced off houses with their dogs and alarm systems and walked further down into the road where his squatter camp was situated. Above the entrance stood a cardboard placard which read "Thokoza Park" in a squiggly letter writing that resembled that of a five year old. Above his head buzzed the shoddy electric connections which were put up by the camp's illegitimate electrician, Bongani. As he walked into the squatter camp he heard a growling, sniffing noise. Looking behind him, there out of the pitch blackness emerged the shimmer of mucous-covered canines. The eyes of the skinny

hound were fixed squarely on Tshepo as its face crunched up into a ball of fiery fury. There they stood, the hound barely a couple meters from him. He was afraid to make any sudden movements. He attempted to keep his hands up as if to show he was unarmed in an effort to subdue the dog.

"There, there...ssshhhh" He knew his shack was not that far away from where he was but he doubted whether he could outrun this beast.

The dog just stood, its eyes filled with a delirious hatred with a mouth foaming furiously as he growled louder and made a dash for Tshepo's leg. At that instant a rock went flying through the air straight past Tshepo's face. The whoosh of air caused him to lose his balance in the mud and topple over. The hound rushed all the more urgently towards him. Another rock. Inaudible shouting. "Hamba! Hamba!" One of the rocks struck the hound on the nose causing it to scattered and squeal away like a slaughtered pig. Above Tshepo appeared a crooked figure.

"Lungi, thank God." Tshepo sighed.

"You must be careful *wena*. These dogs out here have rabies. They not right in the head you know." Lungi pointed with his pinkie towards his head, revealing his elongated nail. He took the same nail and withdrew from his pocket a mound of snuff. Sniffing it profusely, Lungi helped Tshepo up.

"Thank you Lungi." Tshepo looked into the eyes of the old man. One appeared to be made out of glass and the other seemed almost completely covered by a flap of skin that hung over his eyelid. In the moonlight he appeared more antiquated, like an old Baobab tree. Lungi took Tshepo directly to his front door and left him there. Tshepo watched as the old chimp-like man huddled over to a seat by a dying fire in a metal drum. Lungi just sat there and watched the fire, its light casting a myriad of shadows on his figure making it seem as if he were an amalgamation of many creatures and many peoples simultaneously.

Tshepo knocked on the Houghton door. His mother answered with a blank look on her face.

"Get inside you. It's late. Your dinner is there on the table." She said, leaving the door open for him and retiring to her bedroom. Tshepo watched his mother's figure, visibly drained and haggard, disappear behind the thin cardboard door. His dinner was cold, beans on toast, with lukewarm water that had a used Rooibos teabag draining in it. He stayed up after dinner, his head against the single kerosene lamp in what was their make-shift dining room. The shadows of the night danced upon the corrugated iron like rippling ghosts, taunting and haunting, as late into the night he worked until he fell asleep at the table.

The next day after school Tshepo decided to hang out with Thabang again in the dingy changing rooms.

"Want another one?" Thabang stretched out his hand revealing the

brilliantly white cigarette. Why not, Tshepo thought, taking it and sliding the end delicately between his pink lips.

“You gamble much?”

“Never really tried it,” said Tshepo. He turned to look at Thabang, there was a glint in his eye that reflected the dilapidated surroundings of the changing room. Thabang smiled, impulsive and magnetically creating a deep sense of inevitability in the air. Tshepo felt his magnetism or was it just the shitty smell of the toilets he thought? He wasn’t so sure about much anymore.

The following day, during break time, Thabang took Tshepo to a secluded spot behind some bushes at the back of the school grounds. There, Tshepo discovered, was where some of the boys from his grade would gamble their lunch money away. Tshepo watched as the dice toppled forward across the sandy earth. The sun travelled through the wide oak trees above and filtered down, splashing around the crowd of boys in their hats, Converse and Cavellars. There was whistling and jeering and clicking of fingers as each dice was thrown. Tshepo was in the middle of it all, sucking it all in. He had always watched them from afar, wondering what it would be like to be one of them. To be the jeering and shouting loud bad boys who gambled and smoked. Now, was he one of them?

“Come on Tshepo, your turn.” Mlungisi looked at him, giving him the dice.

Tshepo took the small cube in his palm. It was mesmerizing to watch the random dots run across the floor, spinning in wild chaotic fashion and then, as if it was always destined to be, falling peacefully upon a number. He took the money out his pocket, his throat constricting at the thought of losing his it.

“Hey! Nice one!” I won, I actually won, he thought; scraping in the jackpot in the middle of the group. He felt invincible. He felt like a real man.

“Wait!” said a boy with a green beanie pulled down to just above his eyes. “Double or nothing?”

The boys all stared at him. Across sat Thabang with an unlit matchstick in his mouth. He swirled it from side to side, twirling it around, slowly between his lips. His face had that daring expression on and once again Tshepo felt pulled by it. Tshepo shook the dice in his fist, looking up at the filtered sunlight and feeling the rolling randomness that knocked against the inside of his palm.

“Hahaha, aaww too bad my friend, better luck next time!” said the boy with the beanie, his eyes reflecting the jackpot that now no longer belonged to Tshepo. The group left as the bell for the next class rang. Tshepo sat quietly with Thabang, who still swirled the matchstick from side to side.

“Wanna bunk class for today? I’m bored anyway.” Said, Thabang, totally oblivious to Tshepo’s distressed expression on his face.

“I just lost my transport money Thabang.”

“Oh don’t worry about that, I’ll get it back for you.”

“How?” his eyes widened, still looking at Thabang swirling his matchstick.

They skipped the next class together. Tshepo followed Thabang to the dilapidated changing rooms, wondering how Thabang would get his transport money back. Once there, Thabang produced a water bottle from his school bag. The potent smell emanating from the bottle caused Tshepo to cover his mouth and nose. “Here just take this to the girl’s toilets and someone should be in there. I’ll give you half.”

Tshepo took the water bottle from Thabang. The pungent and earthy smell permeated through his nostrils. He placed it in his book bag and went over to the toilets that Thabang had indicated. He knocked. Three times. Then again,

“Yes? “A shrill voice came from the window of the toilets.

“It’s Tshepo, Thabang sent me.” He whispered inconspicuously.

The door opened revealing a petite girl with a blonde weave that hung all the way down to her skirt, which was hiked up inches above her fleshy knees.

“Rebecca...” he said

“Hey Tshepo... you got it?” Her eyes wandered down and for a moment he thought that she was staring at his crotch. “The bottle?” she said annoyingly. He jolted, and produced it from his book bag. “Thanks sweetie, you a doll.” Her hand fluttered across his cheek. She handed him a roll of money and closed the door.

Thabang’s fingers moved with a swift precision as he sorted through the bank notes, green ones and orange ones.

“Looks a lot like monopoly money, don’t you think T?” said Thabang. Tshepo gazed at the wad of cash before him. His mouth parting ever so slightly. He couldn’t help but notice Madiba’s smiling face being manhandled between the callous fingers of his new friend.

“This, my friend, is the South African dream.” Said Thabang, holding out a couple of notes to Tshepo.

“And what dream is that?”

“Well, it’s a hustler’s dream. A dream of, instinct. A dream those too weak can never capture.” Again he placed an unlit matchstick in his mouth.

“Why do you do that?”

“What? This? Have you never watched those Westerns with the cowboy that twirls a matchstick in his mouth? Damn man you uncultured. Well anyhow, I like to think of myself as just that. A rebel cowboy out in this deserted land, raiding the Earth for all I can get it for.”

“You’re talking a whole lot of shit you know that.” said Tshepo, making his friend laugh.

“I like that about you T. You never afraid to tell people shit. But for what’s it worth, people like you and me, we can’t afford to labor in schoolbooks and talk about

faggot-old dead white guys in English. No, the world moves on money! So people like us are born to chase it down, in every alley, every corner, we are hunters my friend.”

Later that evening Thabang had convinced his new friend to accompany him to a brothel. Tshepo was hesitant at first, as always, but he wanted to be more like Thabang, more daring, more manly, more able to survive in the world. Sitting on the edge of a bed in a dimly lit room, Tshepo washed down his fears with a shot of tequila and three long draws from a cigarette that Thabang had given him. Before he knew what was happening, he had some stranger's face between his crotch. He closed his eyes and opened himself up to a pleasure he never knew existed. A few hours later, Tshepo found himself wandering down an alleyway, the corroded streetlights gazing down upon him as the world slid into and out of consciousness. The floor felt slippery, his feet wobbled and throbbed. His throat burnt, scraped raw by alcohol and smoke. He coughed as he placed his hand against the wall of the alleyway. He looked up at the graffiti on the wall, “Know Your Status” it said. He peeled back the top of his pants to look down at his penis, it was wet and crusty. Tshepo wandered through the scattered light, desperate to make it home.

Making it to the entrance of the squatter camp he hears a hissing sound. Looking around, he sees sparks emanating from a shoddy electrical connection. No doubt one put up by Bongani, he thinks. He watches the black electric wires spark like a group of electric eels wriggling and writhing in electrical orgasm. As he watches, he spies a drunkard hobbling home, completely disorientated and heading straight for the group of wires. His head feels heavy. His feet, light as whipped cream. Tshepo just stands there and watches, waiting to see if his vocal chords will react to produce a sound. But they never do. In the deep twilight, Tshepo watches the eels grab hold of the man, wrapping their black taut bodies around him swiftly, and rubbing their skins, almost lovingly against his. There are screams, whimpers, slight twitches, then nothing but a black charred mass. He doesn't move throughout. Maybe now they will put up proper electric connections for us, maybe now they will do something, maybe a drunkard or two must be sacrificed for the rest he thinks to himself.

“Tshepo! Where have you been?” His mother drags him by the ear and sits him down. “Eina Mal!” he shouts.

“Are you drunk?” His mother slaps him a few times. Tshepo can barely mouth comprehensible syllables before he passes out, slamming his head into the makeshift table of Black Label crates before him.

Later that night, Tshepo's mom gripped her cellphone steadily as she lay awake staring at the ceiling. “I'm worried about your son, Blessing. He wanders in late at night drunker than a hobo. He never comes home with his brothers from school anymore. His brothers say he is friends with some thug at the school. His teachers

say he is never in class. I think he bunks school. What can we do?" Catherine's hands tremble almost dropping her cellphone. A deep raspy voice is heard on the other side.

"You're his mother, you supposed to take care of him. Discipline the boy. You know if I could I'd be there with you. But I can only get leave in four months. There're strikes going on and the mine bosses won't give us what we deserve. I need to be here with my comrades."

"Just be careful love, I hear stories of the police with their rubber bullets. Don't get caught up in the violence, you have a family here that needs you."

"I know that, there's just a lot of politics going on now. I may not send money back this month too, the strike'll cut down our wages."

"Love..." she stops herself, bites her bottom lip as her hands tremble with a renewed ferocity. She gets up out of bed and checks to see if her three boys are sleeping soundly. Catherine listens to the walls vibrate and throb from the howling wind banging up against the shack.

"I have to go," he says, "...there's a rally happening tomorrow."

"Okay, please try and come back from Marikana soon. I miss you."

"You know I miss you too." The call ends. She crawls back into bed and rubs camphor cream on her chapped knees. Silently, she draws a tiny pillow up to her chest and buries her face into it.

Tshepo holds his little brother against the cold as they stand outside the locked school gates on another Wednesday morning. He feels his brother's heart pulsing against his abdomen.

"Tshepo..."

"Just shut up Siphos." says Tshepo. The guard comes once more. Tshepo watches his brothers head into the school.

"Aren't you coming?" Siphos asks, licking his dry, cracked lips.

"No." He bluntly replies, turning around and walking away. He takes out a cigarette and lights it. His brothers watch the slouched figure get smaller and smaller as puffs of smoke circle above their brother, obscuring him in the distance.

"What's wrong with him?" Siphos asks.

"I wish I knew." replies Sizwe.

Thabang and Tshepo had a plan that day to get as high as they possibly could. Everything was planned down to the letter. Thabang said that they could smoke at his place. His parents were gone away to another province to attend a funeral of some relative that had died.

"I have a surprise for you my man," said Thabang, as Tshepo entered his flat for the first time. It was small with old, wooden furniture and the floors creaked when you walked on them. Thabang lead Tshepo into his room, which was filled with an odd collection of things from dumbbells to porno magazines, to books about Egypt.

On top of his window sill was a display of miniature sphinxes and pharaohs.

"I never knew you liked ancient Egypt so much." Said Tshepo.

"What? Oh yeah man, That shit is cool." Tshepo laughed, totally surprised by his friend that seemed more cultured than he originally thought.

"So...what's my surprise?"

"Rebecca and Chantel are coming to smoke with us. We may get lucky today." Said Thabang, with that same glint in his eye that Tshepo felt he couldn't say no to.

Tshepo thought about his first time with a woman. How amazing it had felt. The release. The slow climb to the top of a cliff and the powerful and inevitable fall into nothingness. He wanted nothing more. But he wanted to capture that moment too. Forever.

"Thabang I want you to do something for me."

"Yes?"

"If anything happens with the girls. I want you to record it."

Thabang looked at him with a blank stare and for a moment Tshepo thought he may say no to his request. But then his lips parted and his teeth shone out, confirming that Thabang had understood Tshepo's desire.

They had been smoking for an hour with Rebecca and Chantel and all of them were higher than the most distant, cold star in the galaxy. A heavy silence befell all of them before Thabang blurted out. "I don't think there are good or bad people anymore. I think shit just happens, and we all try our best to deal..." Thabang placed a third joint delicately in Tshepo's mouth as the latter laid sprawled on dull yellow bed sheets. The giggling of girls could be heard faintly as Tshepo pulled on the joint, feeling the slow release and activation of what he called "peace" in his body. He stared up at the pattern on the ceiling and followed it meticulously, along every swirl and dip, twirl and spiral. Gradually he became absorbed by it, forgetting himself. He witnessed his body open up to the pattern, got locked inside of it, was pierced by it through every orifice and pore. A wad of blond weave rises from below his waist and enters his field of vision.

"Are you okay Mr.?" Rebecca asks, shifting her body onto his.

"I'm amazing" he replies. He looks up and sees Thabang recording all three of them on his cellphone. He is shining the phone's light at the two girls who are kissing each other. Tshepo lays back down as Rebecca disappears from his field of vision again. He experiences a tickling below his waist.

Tshepo got home late that night and tried as best he could to get into his bed next to his brothers without waking them.

"Tshepo, why haven't you been to school this whole week." Sizwe's voice breaks the silence in the dark room. "Ma will find out soon enough what you are doing."

“You think Ma doesn’t know what I do? She knows. She isn’t stupid.” Tshepo shifts in the bed that they share and faces Sizwe directly. “Do you want us to starve? I bring back what’s needed for us. Thabang and I have a profitable thing going here. You don’t need to worry what I’m doing.”

Sizwe places his hand over Tshepo’s mouth, “Shut up, you will wake Sipho.”

Tshepo pauses, then whispers, “I don’t have time for school bullshit. Go to sleep.”

“I wish Neo was here, he would know what to do.” Sizwe turns around and clutches his pillow.

“Neo is gone! Pa hasn’t called for a month now. Ma doesn’t even know where he is. Both of them, weak and stupid if you ask me. But me...I’m different you see.”

“How?”

“I survive.”

“You can’t do it all on your own Tshepo. You’re becoming nothing but a common thug. Everyone sees it. What would Pa say if he knew what you get up to? Please man, just go to school like the rest of us. You remember what Pa always use to tell us before school every day?

“Make Madiba proud.” Tshepo whispers.

“Make Madiba proud.” repeats Sizwe.

There is a long silence. Outside in the distance is heard the sound of a car screeching out of control, a couple fighting, a dog barking raucously, trains chugging laboriously until finally the silence in the diminished room is broken.

“Madiba is dead. Now go to bed stupid.”

A sigh is heard and then nothing.

A week had passed with Tshepo and Thabang growing closer, bunking classes more often and selling weed to the kids at school. They had established a profitable business for themselves. It was Thabang’s idea to spread the video through the school. He said that it would make them legends, and be good advertising for their business. Tshepo was weary to go ahead with Thabang’s suggestion. There were times when he knew exactly what his friend was thinking and where those thoughts originated from. But then there were also times when he felt he barely knew Thabang.

“Come on man. Trust me.” Said Thabang. And Tshepo did.

It wasn’t long before Mr Kusak, the math teacher, caught a boy watching the video in his class right in the middle of his quadratic equation explanation. Mr. Kusak recognized the faces in the video and with a disgusted face, he turned the video over to the principle by the end of the class period.

Tshepo was called out from P.E class, the one class he actually attended,, to the principal’s office.

He walked down the school corridor towards the principal’s office. There

were times when he knew exactly what his friend was thinking and where those thoughts originated from. But then there were also times when he felt he barely knew Thabang.

“Come on man. Trust me.” Said Thabang. And Tshepo did.

It wasn't long before Mr Kusak, the math teacher, caught a boy watching the video in his class right in the middle of his quadratic equation explanation. Mr. Kusak recognized the faces in the video and with a disgusted face, he turned the video over to the principle by the end of the class period.

Tshepo was called out from P.E class, the one class he actually attended,, to the principal's office.

He walked down the school corridor towards the principal's office. There were murmurings in the classrooms as curious eyes followed his movements. No doubt the rest of the school heard his name being called on the intercom. A giggle is heard, a finger is pointed, and shards of jagged stares cut into him, yet still he walks upright, looking straight ahead. He met Thabang in the principal's office with his iconic matchstick still twisting between his lips.

“Ready?” Thabang asks. Tshepo smiles back.

“Whatever.”

The principal is a stocky woman with thick black legs encased in stockings that seem too tight.

“So boys, you two know why you are here. Do you have anything to say?”

“No.” is the resounding reply.

“Well...I am disgusted by the actions of you two. Absolutely revolted that you two would make something like that and distribute it all through the school. You have disgraced this institution and I will personally see to it that you are expelled in the disciplinary hearing.”

They both keep quiet. Thabang's fingers slowly crawl across his lap and touches Tshepo's thigh. Tshepo looks down for an instant, curious at this sign of tenderness from his bombastic partner in crime. Something stirs within Tshepo as he observes the fluid skin and tiny hairs on the back of Thabang's hand. His fingers hesitantly make their way to meet Thabang's as they sit in solidarity while the booming principle fires rants above their defiant heads.

After eventually surviving their rancorous principle, the two boys take a walk together after school. There is heavy silence between them, but their hands linger close to each other, brushing past one another intermittently. Soon they come to a bridge that looks over the busy N1 highway.

They stand together in the afternoon sun, looking down and watching the traffic zoom by. The roaring sounds drowning out all thought.

“The world is so big, don't you think?” says Tshepo.

“Yeah man, too big for us to worry about anything.” The cars' exhaust fumes filter up towards the bridge making Tshepo cough violently. He tries to subdue

it but he cannot help but cough louder and more violently.

“Shit man, are you okay?” Thabang pats him on the back. Still, Tshepo coughs and coughs unable to subside it. His eyes begin to water as finally he manages to control himself.

“Thabang... all I want is for my family to survive.” Tshepo says. “Do you know your status T?”

“Status?”

“Yeah...you know HIV?”

“Oh... no I don’t.”

“Neo never knew his...” he stops for a moment and remembers his brother leaving late in the night, when the kerosene lamp had gone out and Neo was supposed to go get more gas for it. Somehow he knew, by the look in Neo’s bloodshot eyes and the boniness of his frame against their only family photograph in the bedroom, that his brother had succumbed in a most dire way to the weakness in all Man’s flesh.

“Who’s Ne..?”

“...Lets go get tested, together?” asks Tshepo.

“Together?”

“Yeah.”

“If that will make you feel better, sure.”

“It’s not about feeling better. It’s about knowing.”

Tshepo looks at Thabang with a strange bright look in his eyes. He places his hand in his friend’s pocket, takes out a matchstick and puts it in his mouth. He bites down on the brittle wood, twirling it sweetly between his lips, letting his saliva cover it completely. He watches a Mercedes Benz come around the corner and make its way towards the bridge. Like a sharpshooter he takes the box of matches from Thabang’s pocket, aims it at the car with one eye closed and throws it as if he were throwing a javelin. They both watch as the box spins in the rushing air, getting tossed wildly in all directions by the cold, dusty air. It misses the Mercedes and lands on a Bakkie full of chickens. They squirm and flap monstrously in their cages pulling their white and black feathers out of their own skins. Like dead fairies the feathers settle on the searing tar, getting crushed continually and anonymously car after car after car. Eventually the commotion subsides and the traffic goes on as it always does, this way and that way.

“You are one crazy fucker, you know that?” Thabang says.

They laugh, to the point of tears, hunched over and leaning hopelessly on each other as their abdomens clench in joyful pain. Soon after, they walk off the bridge together in silence as music emanates from Thabang’s pocket.

UNTITLED

Dariana D. Guerrero

He told me
 my body
 wasn't his
 preference.

Said it was:
 too big
 too loud
 too feminist
 and I could feel the slice of his tongue open up
 trenches in my flesh,
 and skim
 over fault lines where past meets fat.

I tried to change for him. Meet this preference.

Shave my parts,
 Straighten my half-Dominican locks,
 Part lips,
 Keep a curve.

He didn't understand what kind of warrior I was.
 Stretch marks like battle scars
 mark the skin, crosshatching
 a crossroads as the borders
 drip like dulce de leche
 reminding me of the island
 I saw once in a dream
 and touched twice with
 extended palm.
 My flesh was conceived
 by dualism.

My body will not apologize
 for carrying the weight of
 a mother, a father, a brother

a lineage
dependent on flesh, bone
membrane and arteries.
Mestiza consciousness.

Borders I cannot cross, flesh that cannot be merged,
a lingering multiplication; oppressor/oppressed.
I perfect my Standard English
while hips oscillate to the sound
of bachata y merengue
trying to dance its way
into my college education.

It is never ending.
It is always tired.
It is ready for battle.

He didn't know what kind of story I was trying to tell with my
Body

UNTITLED

Dariana D. Guerrero

The touch
of experienced hands reaching
and colliding with my flesh
searching for an answer
buried in a pit.

I thought I would remember my mother and brother
avoiding eye contact like disease was contractible
call the CDC
Hazmat
blood
mi sangre
all the same
it's the same
flows the same.
can't change genetics
can't splice chromosomes
can't put masking tape on scars.
Papi wouldn't have cried for me.

Allá y aquí
llorando y pensando.
The island is more than bachata and a subtle rejection.
The trick is to keep calm,
in times of danger. The answers will come.
Papi will call.

I only needed a shot of radiation.

Six days in a hospital bed
country code lights up on cell phone screens;
inducing remission.

EDMONTON

Eric Hormuth

As I chug along the highway
On my morning commute

My subconscious plays
The license plate game

Native plaques line the lanes
JMP233, NUH688, USI792

“Indiana” printed in bold on each one,
Proudly crowning metal slate

To my left and right, predictably,
Smokestacks brim on the roadside

And gluttonous eateries
Clog congested side streets

Until my motorized monotony
Is intruded by alien registration

“Alberta”

Which begs a vaguely curious,
If not existential nerve: “Why are you here?”

Twenty-nine hours by car (I googled it)
In a fuel guzzling SUV

Through the cornfields of South Dakota,
Where the Corn Palace beckons tourists

Passed Iowa, home of a slab of concrete
Molded into a giant horned heifer named Albert

Yet here they are, in a midsize mid-western city;
No international appeal to speak of.

My mind races to place a Hallmark explanation
As I ponder the spectacle.

I eventually settle on
“Every place is some place”

And I take my exit
To some place else.

SELF-PORTRAIT CHINESE AMERICAN

Michelle Xu

From the high plains of heaven rises the mighty Heaven Shining,
The stretch of her cheeks come ten red suns,
and yet the three-legged crow – a mutation, an erection,

and yet Robin Hood before bed – a white warrior,
and yet bibles on bedsides mute the generations.

I stuff the blush back in my belly.

The plump of her fingers weds rice ears to List of Things to Love,
and yet the stumps swell like tumors. My knife,
my tongue I sharpen, for Fingerlings, for the grill.

The wires of her hair bear billowing reeds,
and yet the butter-yellow curls celebrate. The ground frees
harvests to the hymn of the American National Anthem.

I wear a hot helmet twice a year for two hours.

Nine suns falling one-by-one. Rice glowing in buckets.
Black strands streaming in lines. Bible in a box. Exit blush.

STILL-LIFE WITH COLD BUFFET

Michelle Xu

With a spoon, you scrape the fat off yesterday's soup.
The papaya slips off the counter: black seeds
against white tiles, tadpole-slick.

Cold liver a small hill. Thousand-year-old eggs
in congee, yolks bitter. Black foods sing
of death. They sit like sores. Wide-hipped

and clogging the kitchen with their tireless mouths.
You are wearing those pants again: quiet,
corduroy, rimmed, rotten.

Dark deepening.
Olives rolling.
Dinner is served.

BIG SUR

Ian Goldsmith

cloud fog follows the slope of the red brown mountain,
a massive avalanche of grey non-force against
the deep green sap sticky needles of the evergreens
on the left of the road down the rocky hill contour
the ocean rolls cold and jarring on the land,
white peaks fading in and out, undulating
here the world dictates the road
and not otherwise

ODE TO BURNT MATCHES

Kaitlin Walker

His This
 spinal one
 column generic
 hollow, match
 era cupped
 equally in
 oblivious my
 to palm
 lipsticked had
 women been
 who struck
 sculpt lit
 themselves emitting
 into noxious
 Woolfes smoke
 and for
 Plaths a
 and man's
 claw cigarettes
 into for
 their two
 reserves decades.
 of The
 insanity funny
 like thing,
 arctic she
 wolves always
 savor preferred
 small it
 white cold
 rabbits. afterward.

AN ART (I)

Pritha Bhattacharyya

My first art teacher was my uncle
who was a boy. He, at fourteen,
took my seven-year-old drawings
of long-haired mermaids and flowers
and handed me the backside of
one of his exam papers, with
red ink splattered on the surface.
He then centered a chair in the
room – which I sketched – my brown pencil
shading over the blood-like stains.
There was art, in eating *bhel puri*
from a *shal patha*, the dried leaf
folded into a cone or box.
Lunch on his birthday was placed on
a banana leaf, a *kola*
patha, its face larger than mine.
Our fingers would wipe the slate clean
of our meal – of each drop of *jhol*.
At noon, our handmade kites would get
caught into clotheslines on the roof,
on petticoats and sheets dripping
water onto the cement floor.
I saw art when I saw my mother's
prize books lining the dusty shelves
of the *almari* in the bedroom,
kept intact with newsprint covers,
so I didn't know the titles
until I leafed through the pages.
Now I see recycling cans in
classrooms, paper signs promoting
green living. I imagine piles
of trash, and the burning of wood –
the residue ash that my
uncle would use to whiten his
teeth every morning.

AT NIGHT (II)

Pritha Bhattacharyya

We went to an amusement park
in downtown Calcutta, with
fire-breathing macho men and
an artist who wrote my name on
a single grain of uncooked rice.
There was a water slide with mats
made of golfing turf, and no
soft landing to break the fall.
My uncle, the boy, had told me
weeks ago of a tightrope line
I'd have to walk across to exit
the park. No harness and no net –
he'd told me, as we sat in a
locked room in my grandparents' house,
shouting Bengali expletives
to strangers on the street, hiding
behind the shutters if they looked our
way. One man waited until we
snuck a peek and scared us shitless.
My face – must have exhibited
the same expression that night as
we walked to the ride, my uncle
mischievously grinning at me.
The ropes were strung up high and taut
and carried...compartments. Sturdy,
stable enclosures that traveled
the lines along the vicinity.
As we glided through the air,
I thought to yell at my companion,
but it was dark and we were high,
so I just glanced over the edge.
Mosquitos danced. Light bulbs flickered.
He put a hand on my shoulder.

BLACK BOX EQUINOX

Susan Tu

As the lights dim and the curtains open, my heart beats its own symphony. I realize I am trapped. The only two open seats left when we arrived were in the middle of a row, so not only would I have to clamber over the laps of those innocent bystanders to leave, but there is also the problem that Ellie is the one who drove here and Ellie is the one who holds the car keys. And on top of that, we're hundreds of miles away from home and millions of miles out of my comfort zone. I've been wiping my hands on my jeans ever since we got off the interstate.

I look to my right. In the darkness, the red EXIT sign glows, the last beacon of hope.

But this time I don't flee. This time I stay, sweaty palms and heart palpitations in all.

The story began in a bathroom. In my mind, I remember the moment in third person, detached from my actual self, because that was how it felt. Surreal, false, and impossible.

A girl sat alone on the cold tiled floor. She stared, wide-eyed.

It didn't even take two minutes.

By raw determination and a small miracle, I got through it alone. My friends were concerned when I stopped hanging out with them, but no one pushed the matter. (I didn't have friends like Ellie back then.) My parents weren't even the slightest bit suspicious when I said I would be away all winter for some exclusive ballet camp that definitely did not exist. The world was too trusting and I was too good at lying. Secrets were easy to hide under woolen scarves and parkas.

I had never told anyone until I told Ellie. She listened intently and then reached out to grasp my hand tightly.

"Do you still want her back?" she asked.

"I don't know." A pause. "Yeah."

Seven years have passed and I still saw her everywhere. Standing on street corners, jumping in rain puddles, waiting for the bus. Every time I would stare, wide-eyed, until it was clear it was the wrong person, a trick of the light or a trick of the mind. It's like I thought if I just looked hard enough, every day, she would simply reappear right in front of me.

Before, I never cried. I was immune to blockbuster tear-jerkers and guys were stupid anyway. My old ballet teacher Madam Anaïs taught us that pain was part of art and sadness was as precious as happiness. Never waste it on petty tears.

After, I cried like it was one of my favorite pastimes. I would be in the kitchen halfway through preparing dinner when a lyric from the radio or a derailed train of thought would trigger something inside of me and suddenly, I'd be sitting on the cold tiled floor, sobbing out a masterpiece.

"I was chopping onions," I'd say.

The orchestra tunes and plays the opening bars of the overture. Soon, the entire ensemble comes twirling in under the bright lights.

"Which one is her?" Ellie asks in a hushed voice, alternating between squinting down at the program in her lap and scanning the rows of ballerinas on stage.

It's difficult to tell anyone apart in the mass of top buns and white tights, but I know the moment the dancer leaps in from stage left. Second row, center. More beautiful than ever.

Ellie was the kind of person who came into your life like a reverse hurricane, obtrusive and intrusive but leaving you in better condition than when she found you.

She had been the first to respond to my ad for a new roommate. Fresh out of grad school, Ellie was suburbia thrown into the city with too much spring in her step and too much energy in the mornings. She could not be contained. Her enthusiasm seeped into your pores. After a certain point, her antics stopped being annoying and started becoming endearing.

"What?" Ellie had asked once, after she stopped for the third time to give a homeless man a few dollars, prompting me to pop my hip and give her an incredulous look.

I shook my head. "You care too much."

"Isn't that a good thing?"

"You're still young. It means the world hasn't broken you yet."

We walked in silence for a few blocks more before Ellie suddenly stopped and turned to me, looking right into my soul.

"So what broke you, Dem?"

It was my choice. I was too young with an entire future as a dance prodigy ahead of me and a detailed ten-year plan that was not subject to change. My destiny was mapped out for me and all I had to do was stay on the path. I couldn't stray or go about things out of order. That would be blasphemy. At night, I confessed my sins to the sky.

It was my choice. But nine months was a long time to wait. In the end, it still felt like abduction.

Another nine months later, it was still winter. I quit dance and pursued something else, anything else that didn't require passion or emotion or heart because I discovered I had nothing left to give. An all-consuming void grew inside me that tasted like regret. I went back to the agency but the receptionist told me it was too late. She was already gone.

Once, when I was twelve, Madam Anaïs told me I needed to put more love in my grand jeté. I didn't understand how a jump could convey emotion. I didn't understand how Madam Anaïs expected a twelve-year-old to know what love even was.

But now I understand. I had never loved anyone until I loved her. And I don't dance anymore, but if I did, I would perform a grand jeté that could make Madam Anaïs weep.

The drive took three hours and I fretted the entire way. How Ellie found the Johnsons or how Ellie compelled the Johnsons to invite two twenty-something strangers to their home would remain a mystery to me. Sheer persistence with an accompaniment of uncanny luck, probably.

Mrs. Johnson opened the front door before we could knock. She smiled kindly at me. "You must be Demetria."

She showed us inside and we sat down on the living room couch. I tried to sit upright but the soft cushions pulled me into an upholstered embrace. I caught sight of the family portraits on the wall, but I quickly averted my eyes to look at the patterns on the rug instead. It was too much to take in. She lived here. Her presence lingered between these walls, heavy and tangible, making it hard to breathe.

Mrs. Johnson told us her husband was picking their daughter up from ballet rehearsal but they would be returning soon.

I immediately looked up. "She does ballet too?"

Warmth spread inside me, like drinking hot tea in January.

The tiny dancer has a small solo in the end of the first act. As everyone else clears the stage, she performs a series of fouettés and pirouettes, captivating the entire audience.

"Amazing!" The parents around us say. "A prodigy!"

The word cuts me like a blade in the best possible way.

Ultimately, it was still too much for me to bear. Mrs. Johnson's stories. The pictures on the wall. The longer I stayed in that house, the more I missed her. I was suffocating. I needed air.

I abruptly stood up in the middle of Mrs. Johnson's sentence. "Sorry. I have to go."

"But they're not back yet," Mrs. Johnson said with a confused look on her

face.

I kept backing away towards the front door. "I'm sorry."

"Well, at least will you come to the show next Saturday?" Mrs. Johnson called out.

I didn't respond, only made a mad dash to the car. Sobs wracked my body and I crossed my arms, trying to hold myself together. Ellie must have accepted the tickets from Mrs. Johnson because when she got back in the driver's seat, she shoved them in my direction. I leaned away, as if the paper would burn right through my skin.

"I'm not going," I whispered.

"I thought this was what you wanted." Ellie looked at me with sad eyes.

Sure, this was what I wanted. But it had been seven years. I had long since left home, quit ballet, and shed an entire past life to wallow in eternal winter. I had spent so long searching for spring, I had become terrified of the sun.

"I'm just not ready," I replied, sounding as pathetic and afraid as I felt.

"That's not it, Dem! You use self-depravation like a crutch. You're not giving yourself a fair chance."

The car ride home was silent.

Sometimes, I wondered what would have happened if I had met Ellie sooner.

If I had known Ellie back when it happened, would I have confided in her then? Would it not be one girl sitting alone on the cold tiled floor, but the girl and her best friend who made assuring, unfulfillable promises that things would be okay? Would she have talked me out of it?

At the very least, would there have been someone in the hospital waiting room to tell the good news?

When I first started ballet, I was the only one in my class who couldn't do the splits. I used to practice every night against my bedroom wall but never got any closer. Finally, Madam Anaïs came up to me during stretches one day and forcefully pushed me down until my legs were parallel to the polished floor. That was the last time I cried as a child. I was a prodigy ever since.

Now, Ellie morphed into Madam Anaïs in my mind, looming overhead and pressing down on my shoulders. I knew what I had to do but this was still going to hurt like hell.

Saturday morning, I knocked softly on Ellie's bedroom door.

"I'm sorry." A pause. "You were right."

The door whipped open and Ellie already had her coat on with keys in hand, checking the time on her phone.

"We can still make it!" she said with so much enthusiasm, I couldn't help but smile back.

We sped down the interstate going ninety. I got scared and changed my mind fifteen minutes in, but by then Ellie had already put the child lock on. Nervous excitement turned to sheer anxiety as my hands started to feel clammy and my heart began its ascent up my throat.

At precisely one minute before curtain, we made a sharp turn into the parking lot of the performing arts center, screeching and leaving tire marks on the asphalt. We ran towards the entrance and Ellie hurriedly threw the two tickets at the attendant. Above us, the marquee spelled out:

STRAVINSKY'S "PERSEPHONE"
BY CENTRAL YOUTH BALLET TROUPE

The only two open seats left were in the middle of the row.

In the finale, the tiny dancer is back on stage in a trio with two older girls. She looks so happy, that tiny dancer. Happy and healthy and safe and loved. She might grow up to be someone like me. Or better yet, she might grow up to be someone like Ellie.

Even before the orchestra's last note ends, the audience erupts into glorious applause. I leap to my feet, leading the standing ovation. I'm crying, but what else is new. At long last, I have found her, my *undoing*, my undoing. Not as small but just as lovely as the day they took her away.

I got to hold her for just a minute.

"What you're doing is very honorable, honey," the nurse said. "She's going to have a wonderful life."

I got to hold the baby for just a minute.

The baby was so small, like she could fit entirely in the palms of my hands, like she could easily get lost if I looked away for even a second. I didn't dare blink. Then the minute was up and the baby was taken from my arms and the forms were already signed and second thoughts rushed in like tidal waves.

Parents swarm to the lobby after the show to wait for their children. Ellie and I linger by the side. When the door leading backstage opens, a stream of dancers still in their brilliantly-colored costumes pours out into the lobby. My eyes are inexplicably drawn to the tiny dancer who runs right into Mrs. Johnson's arms. Mr. Johnson grins and gives her a bouquet of flowers almost as big as her.

Over the little girl's shoulder, Mrs. Johnson catches sight of us. She waves, beckoning us over. Ellie takes a step in their direction, but I grab her arm to stop her. I politely shake my head at Mrs. Johnson, hoping she understands. I didn't come here for a reunion; I came for resolution.

The tiny dancer turns around, wondering who her mother is waving to. Through the crowd, her eyes lock onto mine and I am paralyzed. But then she smiles and in that moment, I find release. I am a frayed rope hanging by a strand, finally torn in two.

I smile back.

ASKEW OBSERVATION

Melissa Gordon

Back when my mother was younger,
and bronzer, and quieter, she walked down
the freshly swept halls of Grant High School
her heels clicking on the linoleum floor
as her blue bell-bottom pants swayed past her ankles.
She would walk with her yarn and white needles inside
her Calvin Klein purse, bought on credit; and
swaying her lush, deep brown hair (also
bought on credit), she would enter the classroom
and sit down in newly-bought chairs
to needle-point, as her mother had recommended,
to help with her free time, and
to distract the boys from her round Cuban hips
and large bosom, and in dedication,
she made her mother a soft pillow in beige
and ivory—and she began to stitch the hind
of an elephant, but mistakenly used brown yarn,
perhaps trying to fit the color scheme,
the ivory and beige, as you know, and
perhaps distracted by her newly-dried
French manicure, she passively began stitching
a three-toed beagle, seemingly paraplegic,
which is what it is today and forever will be
—a beagle on a lopsided old pillow, his skin
stitched in ricocheting patterns of plaid and zigzag,
with a small stain from my last plate of pesto linguini,
forever staring at us in an askew manner,
as if to ask, “Why do you watch me so closely?”
and never given to my grandmother
for her living room sofa.

FOXGLOVE

Lindsey Owen

Esther watched as her mother poured gin into a martini glass. It was a morbid curiosity that fueled her, a morbid curiosity that pushed her gently on the back, urged her to examine this dark, mechanical dance. She focused hard on the glass bottle perched on the antique bar cart, thinking her mother must enjoy swallowing its secrets. Esther blinked and the liquor became a Tropicana juice carton, her mother's glass now filled with pulpy orange. This was only a minor consolation to the girl. Mostly, she was concerned that she could no longer concentrate on her warped reflection in the glass. Besides, things seemed to change around her all the time. They came unglued from, or perhaps reaffixed to, reality, and flickered there for a while before returning to normal. And as far as Esther could tell, it didn't bother anyone else, so she didn't let it bother her.

"Mommy?" she asked. Her mother was now sprawled languidly across the chaise, drink set on the side table. One hand flipped through *Cosmo* while the other held a long, Audrey Hepburn cigarette holder. Esther hated that thing. She thought it made her mom look like Cruella DeVille.

"Mom?" she tried again. The woman continued to drag slowly on her cigarette. Esther watched as the smoke turned to soap bubbles in midair. "Mommy!"

"*What?*" her mother snapped, ripping her attention from the magazine.

"If I turned into a bug, would you still love me?"

Bubbles continued to float from the woman's cigarette. She snorted. "A bug?"

"Yes. A very small, black bug, and I couldn't talk anymore, but I would try to spell something out in the dirt so you would believe it was me. Would you still love me then?"

Her mother sighed. "Hon, that's a stupid question. People can't turn into bugs. It's impossible."

Esther frowned and took a deep breath of bubble-soap air, shaking her head vigorously. "Nuh-uh, Mommy. No, that's not the question. I mean *if*. I mean *if* it could happen. Would you believe it was really me? Would you still love me?"

Her mother pondered this for a second, absent-mindedly stubbing out her cigarette in a dish of filmy bubble solution. She took a delicate sip of her orange juice and laughed once: a short, decisive sound. "Huh. You know how I hate bugs, Esther. So I'm sorry to say I'd probably step on you before you could spell out your little message." She laughed once more, shaking her head at the thought. "Now go watch your fox movie in the family room. Mommy's trying to relax."

Esther gasped and turned away. She wasn't sure if what she felt was shame for herself, for allowing her fear to be articulated and therefore made real, or shame for her mother and her quick answer.

In the family room, Esther pushed "play" on the VCR, always queued to the same movie, her favorite movie. She watched as Robin Hood fought valiantly for the love of Maid Marian. Her favorite part was when Prince John cried out, "Momm-mmy!!" and sucked his thumb. This, reliably, would make her laugh. Would make her feel like the world was a place where the good guys always win, especially when the good guy was a fox.

Esther loved foxes. She loved them for their cunning and their bravery and their ability to turn danger on its head. Many times, she would flip through her worn copy of *Fantastic Mr. Fox*, even though she was not yet old enough to read all the words. But the librarian at school had read it to her often enough that she could recite whole passages from memory.

She flipped through the pages angrily now as *Robin Hood* played in the background. She traced the illustrations with her finger, wishing with all her heart that her parents could be Mr. and Mrs. Fox, or Robin and Marian. People who would craft her daring escapes and romantic adventures, and keep her from falling through the cracks. She picked up a crayon and clenched it in her fist, the way her teacher always said was the wrong way to hold a pencil, and with bold, black marks, drew herself into the book. "I love you, Esther," she whispered to herself in the librarian's Mr. Fox voice.

Esther heard the rubber cushioned shut of a door and the sweep of feet on the mat that signified her father's return from work.

"I swear, Harry, she gets stranger by the minute. A *bug*, for Christ's sakes!"

"Look, she's just got an active imagination. That's normal kid stuff, right? Look it up in one of those baby books or something."

Esther overheard the tail end of this conversation as she walked down the hallway and enter the room with her parents. But the people, or rather, the things she saw there were not her parents.

Resting on the chaise, Cruella DeVille cigarette holder in hand, was a woman-sized stuffed fox, with beaded glass eyes and tufts of crusted fur sticking out at odd angles. At each joint were rough yarn stitches and cotton stuffing poking out between the threads. Her mother absently picked at the cotton, pulling it from her body and tossing it on the floor as if it were a stray eyelash. Her father, his usual rumpled shirt and loosened tie, was a similar creature, his left glass eye drooping and cocked away from his face. One of his pointed orange ears suddenly fell to the ground, its last threads worn out. He stooped over casually, picked it up, and stuck the appendage in his pocket.

"Esther, what on earth are you staring at?" Her mother's exasperated voice rang in Esther's ears as she clenched her eyes shut.

“Esther, come *on*. Don’t fall behind.”

It was Halloween, and Esther was dressed as Maid Marian. When she told her mother who she wanted to be, she threw her Steiff Bear arms up and said why couldn’t you just be a ghost or a witch. A ghost was easy, she said. A witch we could buy at the supermarket.

Esther didn’t bring it up again after that. Instead, she looked in the back of her mother’s closet and found a pink bridesmaid’s dress. In the back of the linen closet, she found an old purple sheet set that was missing its pillowcase. She cut half of the flat sheet into Marian’s veil and the other half into a purple apron to go around the skirt of her dress. She made a necklace out of some ribbon and painted her face orange and white with old acrylic paints from her box of school supplies. Her nose she blacked out with her mother’s eyeliner.

Marian had a beautiful glowing engagement ring made out of a tiny water lily. Esther didn’t know how to make this, so she went into her yard and looked around for any lone surviving dandelions. She found one: it was damp and starting to close up into an elderly silver wisp, but Esther picked it just in time. She tied it into a loop around her finger. The stem kinked and leaked sticky milk, and she sung to herself.

“Life is brief, but when it’s gone, love goes onnnn and onnnn!” She tried to feel like a princess and kicked the wet fallen leaves under her feet.

Now it was nighttime and they were trick-or-treating and her parents were walking too fast. The yarn holding their limbs to their torsos looked yellower and stiffer in the moonlight. A couple days ago she saw her dad by the bathroom sink in the morning, when he used to shave. Now he took a big thick darning needle and pulled the frayed yarn at his shoulders until the orange fur of his arm was flush with his body.

None of the changes had ever lasted this long before. It was starting to scare her.

Her parents kept skipping houses with long lines of kids. Esther watched as witches and ghosts and Batmans came away from these fun houses giggling, sometimes with full-sized candy bars to put in their pillowcases. “This was a goddamn ridiculous idea in the first place. Isn’t she too old for this Halloween nonsense? I can’t stand this weather, and I saw on the news that some psychos put razor blades in the candies...”

Esther reached out to yank on her mother’s shirt, but thought better of it when she remembered that it wasn’t really her mother. “Razor blades?” she chirped from behind. She tried to run and catch up to them but kept almost tripping on her costume. The pink lace now had mud and sneaker prints around the edges.

“Stop worrying, you’ll scare the girl! She doesn’t need your six-o’-clock news garbage floating around her head...”

They kept arguing, and Esther was getting scared. They were heading towards a part of the neighborhood where none of the other kids were going, where

there were no friendly jack-o'-lanterns and no warm porch lights on. It was one thing to be alone with these things in her house. Another completely to be alone with them outside in the dark.

Esther turned around and started to head back where the nice houses were. The giggling children with cold, flushed cheeks and the nice old women handing out popcorn balls. Maybe she would get a full-sized Milky Way. Maybe she would make a friend.

But the nice houses never seemed to get any closer, no matter how fast she walked. She felt stuck on the same strip of asphalt, under the same moonbeam, glued to a tiny loop of film.

There was a man under a streetlight. A man about her parents' age wearing a yellow barn coat and lighting a cigarette. He had a scraggly beard and dull, puffy eyes. He cupped the flame of the lighter in his hand, and when he exhaled on his first puff the smoke made a strange ghost form under the streetlight. Esther didn't like him. She tried to walk past.

But the friendly houses still didn't get any closer and the man was walking towards her. He stopped and looked down at her, pretended to tip an invisible hat. "M'lady."

Esther frowned. "I'm not a lady. I'm Maid Marian."

The man nodded. "I see." He looked over his shoulder. "Where are your parents?"

Esther looked at her sneakers. "Um...gone. I don't know." She didn't add that they had been gone a couple days.

He raised an eyebrow at her. "You did it, didn't you?"

Her eyes widened. "What?"

"You disappeared them."

"No, I...I didn't mean to—"

The man stopped listening and nodded to the left, where her mother and father were running through the lamplight, their bead-glass eyes illuminated with an un-human fury.

"Esther, you *cannot* run *off* like that!" Her mother kneeled down, and for a second Esther thought she was going to slap her, but instead she gave her a stiff, obligatory hug and yanked Esther's hand up with a crusted orange paw that felt like dry paint. Sharp grey claws bit into Esther's wrist and she went rigid with disgust.

"I'm *so* sorry, Mr. Harris, that you had to deal with this! She just gets into these moods sometimes..."

Her parents kept yelling as they dragged her away, something about no candy and no movies, but Esther was still looking at the man behind her. He gave her a two-fingered salute and leaned up against the lamppost.

Esther's neck remained craned towards him. "Mommy, that man's not Mr. Harris. Mr. Harris is old." Mr. Harris was a man who lived next door and mowed his

lawn very slowly and methodically every Tuesday at five. He had white hair and kind librarian glasses.

“Wh—of course it was! Who else could it possibly be? Jesus...”

Her parents exchanged irritated glances and Esther kept her mouth shut.

There were many women in the kitchen and their too-loud laughs bounced off the linoleum floors and Formica counters. The air was green and hazy with gossip. Esther was playing under the end table in the family room, carefully watching her mother’s Bridge club from a safe distance. She spoke to her Barbies high and clear over the noise, secretly hoping the women might comment: how cute, how sweet.

Her parents were getting worse. They walked like clumps of chicken wire and papier-mâché, almost no articulation in their rheumatic fur limbs. Her mother’s arm had fallen completely off in front of the Bridge ladies, and she had exclaimed, “Oh, my!,” embarrassed, and stood it up in the corner of the room like an umbrella. Now she was playing cards with cotton and Polyester filler beads protruding from an empty socket.

Esther spoke to her Barbies a little louder. ““Oh, Marian, you do look lovely this evening.’ ‘Why, thank you, Melissa!’” She glanced up at the kitchen table. Still no one noticed. They were too busy with their Bloody Marys and canapés. All of them laughed at nothing, at everything, forming one big cloud of voices that heard only themselves.

Esther felt a very strange type of sadness, an internal one, special inside-tears trickling down her throat and into her stomach like the drip of a coffee filter. She got out from under the end table and bravely approached the women in the kitchen. One step. Two steps. “Mommy, I’m going to run away. You don’t love me anymore. Maybe a nice old lady will find me, and she’ll adopt me and love me and be my new mommy. Then you’ll be happy, and I’ll be happy.”

This was her trump card, she was sure of it. This would melt the monster in front of her back into the pretty lady that used to be her mother. And her mom would cry, and fold Esther into her arms, and tell her she was sorry, so sorry, she loved her always and would never leave again.

But her mother was in the middle of a story and didn’t hear her, the raw stitching of her mouth puckering around each syllable. One of the other women turned around and smiled a syrupy fake smile at Esther. “Oh, Sloane, dear, I think your little peanut is trying to tell you something.”

Her mother’s sharp orange ears pricked up and her black marble eyes shot cauterized reflections that made Esther blink. She spoke with great tension and precision, the sort of someone speaking through gritted teeth. But of course, she had no teeth. Instead, Esther watched as the threads holding her jaw together began to snap. “Sweetheart. Why don’t you go play outside.”

Esther’s eyes widened, her lip trembled, but she nodded. She went upstairs

and pulled her pink plastic suitcase out of the closet and brought it down into the kitchen. She made a big show of packing it in front of all the women, tossing in her Barbies, a blanket, three packages of Twinkies. Finally, she delicately placed her copy of *Fantastic Mr. Fox* on top of the pile, and closed the latches with a soft click.

She looked up through the green haze of the kitchen, at the backs of the women's heads or at pairs of eyes cast anywhere but her direction. She put on her corduroy jacket and opened the garage door. "Bye," she said softly.

Once outside, Esther walked until the sidewalk in her neighborhood ended and met the main road. She decided to go left, into nowhere, into the woods between the road and someone's house who she didn't know. She kicked rocks and stomped on wet leaves and cried. She cried and sat down on a bed of dried pine needles, wrapping her blanket around her balled-up body and wiping snot on the sleeve of her corduroy jacket.

Maybe, she thought, maybe the magic hadn't kicked in yet. Maybe the magic wasn't in the suggestion of running away, but in the performance of it. Her parents would be guilty and miserable when they realized she was gone, and they would cry and cry for hours, and when they found her, they would love her again.

She found some pleasure in this thought, in the imagining of her parents' guilt, when she heard a noise somewhere behind her. A step, the crunch and rustle of boots on dead fall leaves. She turned around to see the man in the yellow barn coat from Halloween night.

But he was no longer a man. He was a nightmare fox, same as her parents, dead black eyes, threadbare fur on a grizzled snout. He was still smoking a cigarette, and its flame had lit half of his long, catlike whiskers on fire. They smoldered and fizzed in the slant afternoon sunlight.

"Oh, look, it's Maid Marian," he said in a voice like burning newsprint. He exhaled up into the tops of the trees.

"Stop," said Esther. "I don't like that."

"And why not? You said it yourself. That's who you are, right?"

"No, stop it!" She covered her ears and pressed hard into her temples. "I don't want to be her anymore!"

The man laughed a dry, hollow laugh. He pinched out the flame on one burning whisker between thumb and forefinger. "Fraid you don't have much of a choice, sweetheart. You did this to yourself. You made it this way."

The tears started up again, and they tracked raw, ruddy trails down Esther's face. She glared at him, with all the venom she could muster. "You're a bad man." A grin began to spread across the man's face, but not the frayed, fabric grin of her parents. No, this was something different, something animal and pink and rabid, madness bleeding out from a flesh inside. "Am I?"

Esther was frightened, and for a second she had to close her eyes. But she found that this only half-obscured the monster in front of her, so she opened them

once again and balled her fists, standing to face him. “Yes! You’re a bad man and I don’t like you anymore, so go away!”

She turned away and let her body fold together, head in her knees and arms wrapped into each other. She didn’t care if the scary man heard her cry, so she let sobs run through her body in large, mechanical shudders.

After a minute, she looked over her shoulder. The man was gone, and her parents weren’t coming to find her.

DESERT TORTOISE

Joshua Ambre

When you walk
your head bobs
side to side
like a metronome
as if you
of all creatures
needed help keeping time.

I watch you take a turn
around the garden—
an aristocratic pastime
made common by your
clunky motion.
You're geometrically incongruous
symmetrically unstable
aerodynamically inadvisable
but somehow you survive.

I wonder how you'd manage
in the wild
among the snakes with
thorns for fangs
among the thorns with
snakes for bodies.
What a prophet you'd make
roaming the desert alone
living off flowers
your hard shell chafing you
like a shirt of camel's hair.

You're coming my way again
like you always do
your veiny neck thrust forward—
a coat of arms displaying
your ruling-class descent.

As if I asked to be reminded that
that thing you carry
on your back
was once the earth itself.

I sit and watch you
walk away
only to make your rounds again.
And that's when I can't help
but realize

what a savior you must be
to roam the backyard alone
living off weeds
your hard shell chafing you
like temptation turned to bone.

It seems absurd
but in the end
I think I'm right:
the way your head bobs
side to side
how could you not be
keeping time?

SONG OF THE SURGEON

Joshua Ambre

That leg—we'll have to cut it off, you know. One of these days, we'll just have to do it—do away with it, I mean. It won't be easy. In fact, it'll probably be painful—for the both of us. We'll wince and cringe together while the saw worries its way through the bone—just another problem waiting to be solved, another dilemma begging to be thought through. . . thoroughly. We can't afford to get squeamish.

When all is said and done, we'll be glad we saw it through to the end. I beg your pardon for the pun; that was in poor taste, even I'll admit. What I'm trying to say is we'll both be happy when it's over. You'll go your way, I'll go mine, and we'll never have to see each other again. Well, that's not entirely true. We'll have to see each other every once in a while—for occasional check-ups, you understand. But those, at least, will be quick and relatively painless.

We'll have plenty of time to talk at those appointments, time to talk about anything—about whatever's on your mind. We'll start with the little things, of course, the everyday aggravations: the wooden crutches that leave splinters in your palms; the cracks-turned-chasms in the floorboards; the scratchy tyranny of the tourniquet; the sweaty bed sheets that slurp at your stump. Then we'll move on to larger concerns. We'll talk about the pain of memory and the memory of pain, and how they both keep you up at night. We'll talk about loss and grief, acceptance and denial, and every manner of emotion. But most of all, we'll talk about changing circumstances. That won't be a pleasant conversation, but we'll have to have it nevertheless. But at least it won't be as bad as what came before. No, it won't be nearly as bad as that.

And then, if there's any time to spare, we'll talk about happier things—about your wife at home, perhaps. We'll talk about the day you met her, and how you asked her to dance at the Samville ball, but only after an hour of pacing the garden, where you watched one too many couples whisper white plumes into the raven black of night. We'll talk about the blue lather of her skirts as they brushed across the marble floor, and how, months later, that same floor reflected the terror in your face as you waited outside her father's study, where you were to ask for her hand in marriage. And then, when he said yes, about the way she streamed down the stairs where she'd been listening, her hair thrown headlong over both her shoulders like the fiery tail of a portentous comet. We'll talk about her solar eyes, her lunar grin, the constellations in her teeth. We'll talk about the names you gave them, about the destinies you drew, and we'll wonder why they never came to be.

Unless, of course, you don't feel like talking, in which case we'll cut the session short. That's bound to happen sometimes—always does in cases like yours.

Some days the pain will be muffled, maybe even muted. Others it will blare, red and loud. You'll learn to treat your mind like a minefield, one whose fuses fan out across your body—always one itch away from ignition, one scratch short of self-destruction. There will be some days when you'll sidestep those fuses. But there will be others when you'll lose your footing. And then there will be those days when you feel like the leg is still there, like you could walk on it, if only you could kick the covers off your bed. But you can't. And so you'll lie there, burning, buried alive in your own inert body, until the light of morning cuts through the curtains and the nurse comes in to bring you breakfast. No, not every day will be easy. But every day will be different somehow or another. We'll just have to work with what we've got and hope for the best.

Of course, as soon as I say that, you'll remind me that there isn't such a thing as hope for a helpless amputee. How can there be hope, you'll ask, when the sun is hobbling across the sky, and you can't even hobble with it? When the fair comes to town, like it does every spring, and you start crying instead of laughing when you see the clowns stutter by on stilts? When it's Christmas, and the children are skating on the frozen pond, the blades on their feet incising the ice like so many surgeons' scalpels? You'll try to tell me you've lost something that cannot be replaced—and you'll be right. But that's when I'll remind you that there are all kinds of amputations, and that you're lucky to have the kind that you do—the physical kind, I mean. There are some who aren't so lucky.

We'll talk about your wife, for instance, about the way she wears her hair—bound up in a bun on top of her head. We'll talk about her cloudy stare, her moon-bright smile—suddenly eclipsed—and about the wrinkles telescoping years beyond her age. We'll talk about the clunking of her footsteps as she roams from room to room, bringing you water, fresh dressings, and plates of food you no longer provide. We'll talk about her caresses—once caring, now clinical—and how the fever they once inspired has lost its heat, but retained its chills. We'll talk about her silk skirts, turned to cheesecloth in the closet, and about the passions they'll never feed. We'll talk about it all, my friend, about all the gory details. After all, we can't afford to get squeamish.

Contributor Notes

Rachel Spalding

Rachael Spalding is a third-year undergraduate at Washington University majoring in Psychology and English with interest in a career in clinical geropsychology. In addition to working with older adults and playing with cats, she enjoys running obscene distances, watching John Hughes movies, and rereading Raymond Carver stories.

Angela Acosta

Angela Acosta is a junior majoring in English and Spanish at Smith College. Her passion for poetry arises from her experiences growing up in Gainesville, Florida. Angela also channels her creativity making pottery and cycling.

Julia Martins

Julia Martins is a junior at Stanford, majoring in Creative Writing and trying not to think about her future. In her spare time she enjoys pretending she can dance and good French wine. And, by good French wine, she means the \$8 bottles. Because, you know, a girl's gotta eat.

Amira Samiy

Amira Samiy is a Design and Environmental Analysis major at Cornell University. A novice in creative writing, she likes to find meaning in the mundane. When not in her bed, you can find her at a library or coffee shop. Her main passions in life are discovering new places, cooking, and challenging herself to do things that make her uncomfortable.

Alexander Ngo and Arrogant Ambassador

Alex Ngo is a Communication Design student at Washington University in St. Louis, and Arrogant Ambassador is his internet alter ego. They're going to be one of the greats. They both really hope that everyone else wrote their bios in the third person.

Andria Ozimek

Andria Ozimek has always wanted to be a poet, to have a voice that people will remember. She has had to leave many of her homes throughout her life, having to forget so much of what was important to her. Still, those comical or traumatically shocking poems that Andria has written or read always stay with her.

Carly Jo Olszewski

Carly Olszewski is a junior Biology major and pre-medical student at Stanford University. She is the Director of Recruitment and Volunteer Education at the local Veteran's Hospital, as well as the copy editor for Stanford's fashion and culture magazine, MINT Magazine. She enjoys running, hiking, and attending music concerts in her free time.

Jarred Thompson

Jarred Thompson is a gym rat, nature lover and TV Show addict who is in love with all things wordy and foody. He is currently a senior at Alabama State University, looking to enter into an MFA program in Fiction (hopefully at Cornell University).

Dariana Guerrero

Dariana Guerrero is a junior studying English at Smith College. Dariana hopes to continue

writing poetry in the hopes of someday teaching higher education.

Eric Hormuth

Eric Hormuth is a junior at the University of Southern Indiana where he studies English Education. He lives in Evansville, Indiana with his wife, Jenn. This is his first publication.

Michelle Xu

Michelle Xu is a sophomore studying english at Barnard college with a concentration in creative writing. She likes eggs and is allergic to cockroaches.

Ian Goldsmith

Ian Goldsmith is a freshman at Cornell University who is prospectively majoring in Biology and Society. He enjoys writing poetry, reading good books, listening to music, playing guitar, making balloon animals, and other assorted things. He would like to remind everyone that it is in fact hip to be square.

Kaitlin Walker

Katlin is a Chicago-suburbanite exiled in Kirksville, Missouri, where she studies English and Philosophy. Her infatuation with wordplay comes mostly from childhood (and adulthood) games of Scrabble, and she's quite certain it's here to stay, garnering strength from poets like Mary Ruefle, and 'dirty old men' like Charles Bukowski. She's inspired by travel experiences like her recent stay in Chile's rural islands and the underrated daily lives of average adults.

Pritha Bhattacharyya

Pritha Bhattacharyya is a writer and college student at Cornell University, and is finishing her senior year. She studies Psychology and is minoring in Creative Writing. She writes short stories, poetry, and is starting to try her hand at playwriting. She lives in Northern Virginia with her family.

Susan Tu

Susan is an accounting student by day and writer by night, which means she is a lot of fun at parties. Her work has been published in About Place Journal and Gravel Magazine.

Melissa Gordon

Melissa Gordon is a native of Los Angeles, California who recently graduated from Stanford University with multiple honors and a B.A. in English, Creative Writing, and Education. Throughout her undergraduate career, she worked as an educator for a diverse array of students and researched access and equity in the context of elite colleges. When she is not immersed in creative projects or the world of education, Melissa makes to-do lists and collects comic book memorabilia.

Lindsey Owen

Lindsey Owen is a writer and cartoon enthusiast currently studying Literary Arts at Brown University. She plans to graduate in 2017.

Joshua Ambre

Joshua Ambre is a sophomore majoring in Creative Writing and Classics at the University of Arizona. He enjoys running, swimming, and working as a lifeguard in the summers, which, although infernally hot, are a godsend because they give him more time to write. Besides Rainy Day, he has been published in the University of Arizona's Persona and hopes to continue to publish his work in the future.

Rainy Day is funded by the SAFC
and is free and open to the Cornell community.

Special thanks
to Professor Michael Koch and EPOCH
for their help, advice, and encouragement.

Rainy Day, an independent student organization located at Cornell University, produced and is responsible for the content of this publication. This publication was not reviewed or approved by, nor does it necessarily express or reflect the policies or opinions of, Cornell University or its designated representatives.

Submission Guidelines:

We only accept e-mail submissions. Send all submissions to rainyday@cornell.edu. You must include the submission as an attachment, preferably a “.doc” file. Please make sure all the formatting is correct. The subject in the email must be “RAINY DAY SUBMISSION.” Also include within the document your name and contact information. We accept multiple submissions, as well as submissions from colleges and universities throughout the U.S. Send all inquiries about joining the staff to rainyday@cornell.edu. Further information, as well as back issues, can be found at our website: <http://orgsync.rso.cornell.edu/org/rainyday>.

RAINY DAY STAFF

Editor-in-Chief

Mark Kasvin '16

Managing Editor

Daniel Reinke '16

Fiction Editors

Ally Findley '17

Melvin Li '17

Poetry Editor

Samantha Fischetti '16

Anita Alur '17

Treasurer

Cooper Truman '17

Layout Editor

Cooper Truman '17

Publicity/Advertising

Alexis Ferguson '17

Staff

Moumita Basuroychoudhury '16

Stevie Ferrara '16

Devon Kimball '16

Albert Chu '17

Faculty Advisor

Michael Koch

251 Goldwin Smith

Cornell University

mk46@cornell.edu