The Editors would like to extend our deepest gratitude:

To Diane Seuss for her continued support of this magazine. Her wisdom, support, and encouragement have continually allowed us, as students, to produce a wonderful anthology of student voices. She has been at the heart of our literary community on campus and also at the heart of *The Cauldron*. While she will be missed dearly, *The Cauldron* will always carry traces of her magic.

To our Divine Crow Judge, Bruce Lack for reading and selecting our Divine Crow Award recipients.

To the Director of Publications, Lisa Darling and her team, Lynnette Pryor and Craig Simpson at the Office of College Communication. Thank you for designing this incredible book, which allows students to see their names and works in print.

To Brian Deitz and the Office of Student Involvement for their generous support of this magazine. Thank you for seeing the value in *The Cauldron*.

To the Department of English at Kalamazoo College for their continued support of this special and essential publication.

To Dianne and Robert Vibbert for their continued support of *The Cauldron* and for allowing us to honor their daughter with the Stephanie Vibbert Award.

To our Submissions Editor, Rachel Williams, and all of our staff.

To those who submitted their works to this collection.

And finally, to you, the reader.
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The Divine Crow awards are given each year to three exceptional pieces in The Cauldron. A writer from the extended Kalamazoo community judges the pieces blindly. This year’s judge is Bruce Lack.

The recipients of this year’s Divine Crow Awards are

im always running myself over trying to murder my transness by Caro Peterson, Mid-Autumn by Serena Bonarski, Siren by Na Young Kim.

The Stephanie Vibbert Award is given to one work which exemplifies the intersection between creative writing and community engagement. This award honors Stephanie Vibbert, a senior English/Psychology double major who died in a car accident returning from a peace march in Washington D.C. Stephanie’s life was passionately devoted to both creativity and to community service. This award was created to encourage Kalamazoo College writers to use their creativity to reflect upon and explore issues of poverty, human rights, sexual orientation, race, class, gender and cultural diversity.

The recipient of this year’s Stephanie Vibbert Award is Rumsha Sajid for My Pledge.

Welcome to the 2016-2017 edition of The Cauldron. As we collected these works, we noticed a strong desire to confront, evaluate, and to simply look. We are at a point in history where there is much uncertainty surrounding our future and our present. This uncertainty bleeds into all things social, political, and emotional. And as you can see here, it bleeds into our art.

In certain ways, we have found ourselves in a world where “…no one looks past the leaves to the stem, the roots, to the full extent…” much like the plant in Jamie Mishevich’s “Mimosa Pudica: A plant that plays dead when touched”, the first piece in the collection. Mimosa Pudica longs to live in a world where her name will be remembered. We feel the works submitted to this year’s edition hear that call, and are fighting for a world where all names, identities, and stories will not just be heard, but embraced.

Annah Freudenburg’s “Crux Hands” is a visual depiction of this embracing. We would like to think of this as both a metaphorical and literal reaching out–to our pasts, presents, futures, and to one another. We can see this concept being enacted in works such as Serena Bonarski’s “Mid-Autumn” where myth is the vehicle used to reach out and in Rumsha’s Sajid’s “My Pledge” where reaching out to others becomes an active form of justice.

Our cover art “Stained” is a photograph of a single pane containing smaller, individual pieces of stained glass. In many ways, we felt this to be indicative of the work we desired this edition of The Cauldron to do. We are all able to contribute to this story – to pull from our own lived experiences and narratives. Within the pane, there is division where one shade of stained glass meets another; however, there is unity in the fact that together, they make a complete window.

Our final piece, “Nabagashk” embodies this idea through its use of the “we”. The speaker of this poem urges us to remember that we have survived before and we will again. All of the pieces within this book are grappling with dense, complicated and sometimes even apocalyptic questions. The very nature of The Cauldron ensures they do not have to do this work alone. We hope that this book will serve as soil. We want this book to be a place where we can put our roots down and, together, begin to “[take] out the arsenic”.

– The Editors
Her leaves curl into her body when she is touched. She is often called The Sensitive Plant, though her real name is *Mimosa Pudica*. She gravitates toward the imaginary, but the world in her head is no more real to her than the world where anyone could be a predator. The real world disregards her flower to poke at her delicate leaves. I remember a field trip when I was young where she was held up in front of the class and pretended to be the object of everyone’s attention in the real world. No one looks past the leaves to the scene; he runs to the full extent of her existence. As she considers the problem it occurs to her that perhaps she is incapable of being touched without shutting down. Perhaps she is the only one that could touch her, and the rest could happen in her head, where her name could be remembered.
The dog took her 
bra again, 
so she goes without. 
She wears her blue 
paisley pashmina over 
her chest, draped like a god.

There are no men here. 
Only babes and bitches 
and my mother.

There are no men anywhere.

Do pearls feel at ease on the string, 
draped over her collarbone like 
silk on a mannequin, or are they 
tormented by the surrounding 
reflections of identical countenance, 
shining in precise unison? Do they 
wait, anticipate, the breaking of 
their chains? 
I think it must be so, for oh 
how they scatter.
REFRIGERATOR VANITY
Carmen Torrado Gonzalez

IM ALWAYS RUNNING MYSELF OVER
TRYING TO MURDER MY TRANSNESS
Caro Peterson

man on motorcycle
not really a man—a half man, dead man already dead, man—
maybe me, already castrated with nothing in the beginning
to castrate
me as a me always with another me
torn away—
man on motorcycle with truck rolling over him
skull crushed with first tire
each other tire pressing him further into his no-longer-there—
driver says i never saw him there, there
he never was, his never-there-in-the-first-place, there
never was the me
i feel protruding from its never-happened amputation
phantom limb on phantom body
weak with phantomness
driver closing his eyes, me
closing my eyes while living
in the me that was never mine, crushed
against the asphalt—

driver & dead man looking at me as if to say you’re doing this to yourself
Last winter, the fox
below our kitchen floorboards
yipped and snarled
at my fingers. It had broken
its right hind leg and crawled
into the dark safety between
the dirt and the wood,
sheltered from snow.
For fifteen days
I left bowls of milk –
mice caught in the house traps –
scraps from my plate –
under the third doorstep,
as I had read in a library book
one might do to win
the favor of a spirit.
On the night of the sixteenth day,
I dreamt that the fox had crept
into my bedroom,
shadow prowling the purple walls,
paws gliding noiselessly,
flicking its once-again bushy tail
in triumph.
In the morning, my father wrinkled his nose
at the reek enveloping the front door.
He unearthed from under the third doorstep
a bowl of curdled milk.

When I drink water from the pump
in the back room
it tastes like metal, a little
like dirt, maybe rust.
It's always cold,
right out of the well
we sunk behind the barn.
When I pull the lever
there's a pause, before
it jets out, destined for a bucket,
though I sometimes take my fill
as it dribsles down my chin,
darkens my shirt and gloves,
cooling as it spreads.
I imagine:

the hands of my Abuela Norma diving into the boiling pot, 
grabbing the pasteles in threes and calling them siblings.
Her hands are not burn-boiled (mythic), but they are reddish
with a brown hue that deepens the flesh, wrinkles the skin,
rests them heavy on my mind.
She is the closest I will come to the banks of Fajardo, she who dwells
on a dimly lit street in New Jersey, the address as dusty in my memory
as the dirt floor of the bohios, banished with a broom (boom).
She is the bank
my ancestral feet have wandered looking for banana leaves,
only to find the heads of their ancestral mothers buried in the sand.
I enter her home with my imagination,
only to realize: this is not her home. This is something colder.
She smiles as she feeds me, not knowing I imagine her Taino but,
knowing I am hungry (to be).
If you were Adonai, I would have knelt. -Michael Patrick Collins

The night I knew I was never going to sleep with Rob Lowe, never breathe the same air as Charlemagne or Julius Caesar, sing with the Vienna boys, be called Khaleesi, I realized you’re a philosophized Kantbreather, but Immanuel is a word I never understood because my mother taught me not to religionize, and maybe if I’d gone to church your saved side would have felt something for me, I’m sorry I lied about Isaiah 44:22, actually I’m sorry you saw through it, but in hellschool high school you were the only one smart enough and corduroy enough for my bookquiet side, if you were an atheist Adonai, I would have followed you like the Argonauts followed Jason, blindly and into the sea where we’d be swallowed by a whale named Levi, a thin humpback trying to gain weight and you’d say we’re always killing things to make the universe and that’s when he’d spit me out into the frigidarium of a Roman bath and I’d watch my breath materialize my sighs knowing you’re still waiting in the belly of a beast I’ll kill to make lunch.

SECULAR
Emma Peters
A CORRECTION TO MARK 11:23
Danielle Gin

Christ stopped at the city’s threshold—my shoots distracted him. He searched me—forced my foliage aside and cursed me out when he found no fruit—he’s not the season I produce in. In his absence my branches grew outward—proudly sprouted many seasons’ worth of figs—meant for none except myself—I spread my smell engulfed him. He frowned at my fruit molding freely and pungent—spread this lesson—God ruined this tree for it disobeyed me when he found no fruit—he’s not the season and cursed me out when he found no fruit—he’s not the season
I’ve seen some of the greatest minds of my generation
numbed by sheer apathy,
sensation of electrified current in the brain howling white void of data, image, video, article, blog, meme, post, tweet, share
burnt— turned off
to the seeming echo of nothing but the vague sensation of knowing you should care but no longer know how.

Oversensitization, Desensitization they call it.
Changing your Facebook profile pic for three days in solidarity they call it.
Having a 5 minute convo before going to the gym they call it.

Body, blood dried and unpened, caked with the dust of the dead, the bone tint of the living on the
face of a young boy who sits in an ambulance staring from one end of endless to the other.
Body, disguised in cartoon kid clothing, lying face-down on the beach of the Sea of Migration, the Sea of the Disappeared,
the Sea of Don't Bother We Will Just Send You Back.
Bodies, black and brown, gunned to the ground like limp animals to be hung for slaughter by Uniforms
by this this thing we call
Law and Order.
Airport shootings, club shootings, elementary school shootings—
shooting shooting shooting shooting
until the world lays down bleeds out veins dry with nothing left to give. Every ounce of fresh heated empathetic outcry
spilled on the floor, stale, sans donor, sans sensation, sans sense.

Wondering why they stopped caring, stopped crying, stopped feeling surprised.
Wondering when the light of anger, passion, love, resistance, sadness sizzled to the hardened
impenetrable coal of distant nothingness.

II

The day Trump was elected president she got her period.
Looking down into the mockingly pristine white of the porcelain bowl,
she saw the stark crimson ribbon of defeat seeping from her body, leaking from her wounds.
Deeply wounded, hope organs ruptured like the sudden burst of the appendix, but really like the secret mutation of a tumor,
her body had only one choice—to bleed.
Spilling every atom of belief in the ultimate resilience of things,
she let go and emptied herself to it all.

III

At first, there was the muted sensation of panic as if drowning underwater,
the notion that this wasn’t right, that I couldn’t yet have hit the emotional ambivalence they call Adulthood.
There must be that youthful adolescent glow of protest somewhere, that burning angst, that desire for change,
that paralyzing cry at the raw ripping of injustice—
Right?! Right? Right…?

We’ve ridden the ride of outrage so many times
the Tilt-A-Whirl of media-vomited exposure, the Millennium Force of internet-filled whiplash
the genocide death terrorism racism sexism religion war of Modernity Century 21.

We’ve forgotten how to feel, or worse—
we haven’t forgotten at all
and just don’t know how to bear how to sort
how to gulp the choking tsunami flood of emotion that just maybe
requires we do something
that gives us the uncomfortable itch, the unceasing twinge, the unyielding bruise pulse
that we might actually have to do something.
Robot prince: a pretty image—
the kind that would fill
the cover of a children's
book; the kind that would
inspire a nice ballad.

House on the moon:
a funny scenario—
the kind that would
make a great sitcom
with a loud laugh track.

Open book: a useful analogy—
the kind that would describe
a healthy human; the kind
that would tell a full
story with two words.

Loving family: the best
there could be—
the kind that would
make a great set
of playmates; the kind
that would be so kind.
The egg sat cold in my hand; the condensation left a shiny dampness over the wrinkles on my palm that I wiped onto my grass-stained overalls after I threw it. The other boys from school hurled the rest of the dozen, their faces contorting in laughter as the delicate pale-brown shells burst against the house’s paneling. Yolk crawled down the side of the house, a viscous mess on the walkway. Howling cackles and bared teeth, un-brushed, their noses scrunched up like hyenas. I laughed, did I sound like they did? A light flicked on in one of the upstairs windows and we took off, whooping and hollering down the street. At roll call the next morning our teacher’s eyes were puffy, the skin beneath them sagging in yellow purple bags. I saw her pour something into her coffee when she thought no one was looking.
Kalamazoo’s Vine neighborhood flourishes in the summer. It covers one square mile, fanning out from Vine street, which runs through its center like a vein runs down the center of a leaf. There’s a house down the street from mine with a red porch that is covered with vines of ivy. They creep up the sides from the bottom and sweep across the section of roof that juts out over the porch, bright green leaves in contrast with the red paint. The ivy-covered facade doesn’t look out of place; most of the towering, Victorian homes in the Vine have little green front lawns and trees in the front yards. Some street corners are dotted with colorful perennials in tiny gardens. Neighbors having a drink or a smoke on their porches wave hello to passersby. Children ride bikes and play on the sidewalks. People of all ages throw frisbees and play with their dogs in the field overlooked by Western Michigan University’s historic East Hall. On the first Friday of every month, the cluster of businesses on the corner of Vine Street and busy Westnedge Avenue hold an extension of the city wide Art Hop, and the storefronts open their doors to feature art by local artists and food and drink from local vendors. The neighborhood regularly hosts music events and family-friendly bike rides.

As summer comes to a close, when the air begins to cool and the leaves fall dead from their vines, the atmosphere changes, too. In the fall, the section of the neighborhood closest to Western and Kalamazoo College is notorious for porches packed with rambunctious day-drinkers as cheering blares from the football stadium just a mile away. Students walk from house to house drinking alcoholic concoctions out of open containers as if they were on Bourbon Street, not Davis Street. On hot weekend nights in September when I choose whether or not to open my window, the choice is really between being kept awake by the heat or by the drunken shouting of my peers. I’ve walked around on an early Sunday morning and smelled the lingering scents of stale beer and marijuana still emanating from the houses even after the sun has risen; overturned tables, empty party cups, and shattered glass bottles litter the yards.

These are the two faces of Vine, a neighborhood known to some as “home” and to others simply as “the student ghetto.” This neighborhood, warts and all, is the pride of many who call it home, but perhaps of no one more than Vine Neighborhood Association (VNA) Executive Director Steve Walsh. When Walsh is out walking around in the neighborhood, he’s greeted by a chorus of “Hey Steve!” from everyone who knows him, which is almost everyone he sees. His mother is proud of this fact. His gray-blue eyes are framed by black glasses, matching his slightly graying hair and even grayer beard. Walsh and his family have lived in Vine for 15 years, although he’s only been VNA director for the past 10. When he and his wife first moved here, they lived on Locust Court, which is less a court and more a dirt road packed with houses.

“On a sunny day it was a lane, and on a rainy day it was an alley,” said Walsh, smiling.

The court is crammed in where one would expect there to be backyards for the houses on the paved roads. Vine has about 30 of these courts, and that’s because streetcars, which were used in Kalamazoo beginning in the 1880s, couldn’t get up the hill just northwest of the neighborhood. It didn’t make sense to build houses where the streetcars couldn’t get to them, so more and more houses were packed into Vine to make up for the inability to expand out of the area. At the turn of the 20th century, streetcars became able to climb higher than ever before, and those who could afford it began to climb up with them, moving into neighborhoods like Hillcrest and West Main Hill. To this day, those neighborhoods remain wealthier than Vine.

I had never lived in a house in a city before I moved into the Lovell Shack, the affectionate title my housemates and I gave our rental for its location on West Lovell Street. When I pulled into its driveway for the first time on a sticky morning in August, I was struck by its size. The 3,485 square foot, 6-bedroom house is situated on the corner of Lovell and Davis streets, and being able to see it in full from two angles makes it look even larger than it is. Upon entering, I was struck by its age; our musty Michigan basement has a now-plugged hole the size of a car tire in the side wall that we imagine was once a coal chute. The inside door frames suggest that it was built in the Victorian era. The inside walls are covered in white paint, layers on layers of it—so many layers that I often wonder if the square footage of the house used to be much larger. The exterior of the Lovell Shack is painted a soft gray and sports dark red trim, especially noticeable on its partial wrap-around porch, which is home to a slew of mismatched chairs and, occasionally, a slew of empty beer cans. One panel of the bay window on the front side of the house is shattered; the other windows of the house display tapestries, curtains, a “Bernie 2016” sign, and a pride flag. It’s not unlike many of the other houses in Vine.
THE VOICE OF VINE  continued

If you pay attention to the news, the city of Kalamazoo, Michigan has probably pinged on your radar a few times in the past year. It’s becoming a part of American culture to wake up each day and digest the news about a tragedy in some part of the country with our morning coffee. One night in February, an Uber driver shot passersby from the window of his Chevy Equinox in three separate locations across Kalamazoo, killing six and wounding two. The incident made the morning news in Oaxaca, Mexico, where I was at the time. Four months later, a reckless driver drove directly into a pack of cyclists just north of the city, killing five and wounding four. The following weekend at a high school graduation party in my hometown, two hours east of Kalamazoo, my best friend’s cyclist father told me not to ride my bike in the city. This is how people who have never been here know us.

* * *

It’s a sweltering day in the dead of a hotter-than-average summer in Kalamazoo, and I’m at the VNA to talk to Walsh about bike safety in Vine. He suggests we move to Fourth Coast Cafe to chat instead. His office is small, only large enough for the two of us and maybe one other person to sit comfortably and talk; the walls are white, and on one wall hangs a detailed map of Vine neighborhood boundaries and properties that Walsh rescued from the garbage after Kalamazoo Neighborhood Housing Services moved out of the building on the corner of Vine and Westnedge. I imagine sitting in this room all day could get boring, so I oblige him the change of scenery.

Fourth Coast is the epicenter of Vine social life for many. It’s located right in the heart of the neighborhood, close to the corner of Vine street and busy Westnedge Avenue; it’s not much more than a ten minute walk from any point in Vine. Open 24 hours a day, Fourth Coast sells coffee, kombucha, and fresh bread to the night owls and college students of Kalamazoo. They don’t carry decaf. The baby blue walls of the cafe are host to a rotating display of for-sale artwork by local artists, as well as gig posters and kitschy, funny-shaped chalkboards with drink prices written on them. The boards don’t offer descriptions of the drinks, which boast names like “sinking ship” and “bowbreaker,” as if you’re supposed to already know. The top half of the walls are painted a calming green, which contrasts with the black trim and turquoise tiled ceiling. There’s always music playing loudly over the speaker system. It’s often hardcore punk or one of the many subgenres under the punk umbrella. On the day Prince died, they played only Prince for a little while, and then went back to the punk. Fourth Coast is downstairs from the Crow’s Nest diner, for which it supplies the bread and coffee. You can order a meal upstairs and have it delivered to you downstairs. More often than not the baristas already know the first name and general life situation of the people ordering coffee, asking their customers how school is going or if they’re grabbing a coffee before work. Sometimes they even know the customer’s order. If they don’t already know the customer, their friendliness masks the unfamiliarity.

Walsh brings his mug with him as we walk the few steps across the parking lot from the VNA to Fourth Coast, and when we arrive, he asks that the green-haired barista fill it with ginger ale and ice. I order an iced tea, and while the barista whips it up I casually ask her what brand of hair dye she uses. I’ve dyed my hair almost every color of the rainbow since I was a tween, and I like to exchange trade secrets with other hair color rebels whenever possible. Walsh adds that he was wondering too, but was too afraid to ask because he didn’t want to make the barista uncomfortable. He reveals that his 11-year-old daughter is thinking about dyeing her hair, but they don’t know anything about products or the process. He says this without a twinge of disapproval, which I find surprising given that my first streak of magenta at age 14 was met with more than a twinge of disapproval from my mother.

Walsh is 44, technically old enough to be my dad, but he’s incredibly in touch with my generation. He makes it a point not to say disparaging things about the students in the neighborhood, despite their bad reputation in Vine. When describing the northwest quadrant of the neighborhood, the student-heavy area known across Kalamazoo for its loud parties and its crime, he says that he loves it because of its activity and energy without a hint of sarcasm. He thinks it’s important that things like groceries, pubs, and coffee shops be within walking distance of the neighborhood because so many millennials don’t drive or don’t want to. One difference he notes between his generation and mine is that we haven’t inherited our parents’ baggage, and he calls that a silver lining.

“My dad was a psychiatric nurse at Lafayette Clinic and my mother was the head of the adoption agency at Catholic Social Services on Grand River for 35 years,” said Walsh, who grew up a baseballs throw away from the city of Detroit in the wealthy suburb of Grosse Pointe Park. Their baggage accumulated from working closely with people who were hurting in a city nationally known for how badly it was hurting. As an adult, Walsh chose not to repeat his parents’ decision to raise a family in the suburbs, opting instead to settle down in one of Kalamazoo’s urban neighborhoods.

“For years, nobody wanted to live in the city,” he said. “We wanted to live in the city because we wanted our children to see the world as it
exists, not as we hoped it would be or as it is behind some sort of gated community.” He attributes the recent influx of families to Vine to young parents who share this attitude, one in stark contrast to that of their own parents. He thinks millennials will follow this trend, and I agree.

One day in late April, I asked Walsh exactly what it is he does as director of the VNA. He laughed.

“Today is bring your kid to work day, and I’m seeing all these friends’ Facebook posts,” he tells me. “And I have an 11-year-old daughter, and I’ve been here for ten years, and she still says ‘but what do you do?’”

He describes himself as a resource for people in the neighborhood or people looking to move there, a conduit between the neighborhood and the city government, and most importantly, an advocate for the neighborhood. For him, that means tweaking existing negative public perception of the neighborhood and getting people to see the neighborhood’s true potential. His daughter doesn’t think that sounds very interesting; she’d rather go to work with a forensic scientist.

The work has paid off. In the past 10 years since Walsh has directed the VNA, there has been a noticeable drop in crime and an increase in community-building events. According to Kalamazoo Public Safety, there was a 34 percent decrease in serious crime in Vine between 2010 and 2014. On Oak Street where a vacant, condemned market once stood, there is now a community garden. On Halloween five years ago, Walsh’s kids were two among just a few trick-or-treaters; last year, by his estimation, there were upwards of 40.

One of the most visible ways Walsh acts as an advocate for Vine residents is in his support of local artists. In fact, three of the facades of the VNA building are covered with art by local artists. Walsh insisted that artists with ties to Vine create the works, saying that he wanted neighbors to not only enjoy the art, but to be inspired by it, to think could I do that? In 2012, former Fourth Coast barista and Vine resident Beverly Fitzpatrick painted “Secret Holiday,” a massive mural on the VNA’s west facade. Its background is deep blue, and in the forefront are three kneeling rams on floating, leaf-shaped pads in various shades of green. Around them are more floating pads and wooden chairs with multicolored seats, some decorated to look like scales. Across the top hang strands of circles, which resemble Christmas lights. Fitzpatrick was asked to paint something that she felt fit the “spirit of Vine,” and this is what she came up with. I think it’s fitting. It’s a little offbeat, a little weird; it’s also thought-provoking, vibrant, and beautiful. It’s now peeling away in certain places, revealing the gray brick underneath.

Popular local artist Patrick Hershberger, who goes by the name Bonus Saves, painted a piece on the building’s south facade next to the entrance of the VNA. That painting is a take on American Gothic, but features Bonus Saves’ signature cartoon rabbits with skull faces instead of human beings. The one on the left is mint green in color and sports parted, chestnut-colored hair and a collared dress; the one on the right is sky blue and holds a pitchfork, which matches his gray tufts of hair in color. They’re standing in front of a towering Victorian home, and next to the house is a community garden. There are skull-faced rabbit children playing catch. In the far back, on the other side of the garden’s fence, a skull-faced cartoon rabbit walks their dog; another one rides a bike. It truly looks just like a scene from the real life Vine, except that the people who live here are human beings.

On the inside, the VNA building is a large, carpeted room flanked on one side by two small offices and the other by an open room that could be used for conferences. To the back there’s a narrow hallway leading to bathrooms. The walls are home to various bulletin boards, and most flat surfaces are coated with pamphlets and other informational documents about various topics relating to the neighborhood. I certainly wouldn’t have thought to use this space as a performance venue, but due to a disappointing shortage of all ages performance spaces in Vine and in Kalamazoo in general, Walsh sometimes offers it up as one. He once offered it to an employee at Rx Optical while he was shopping for glasses. That offer turned into an event called Vine Voices, a showcase of music, poetry, spoken word, art, and even interpretive dance held to benefit the Kalamazoo Gospel Mission. Vine Voices was planned mostly by Patric “Kabane” Germay, the optician slash rapper who helped Walsh with his glasses that day, with support from the VNA. I showed up to Vine Voices on a muggy summer evening, sweating with a garbage bag full of old clothes to donate in tow. There were way more chairs than people, and I came to learn that most of the people occupying the chairs when I arrived were performers. The seats eventually filled with loved ones of performers and curious neighbors who saw the event on Facebook. The entrance to the hallway temporarily became a stage filled with amps, mics, and other equipment, with two fake, plastic vines draped across them. The conference room was converted into a small art gallery, showcasing visual art by local artist Alyssa Hollingsworth. Kabane served as emcee as well as performer, thanking Walsh and the VNA for hosting the showcase a few times throughout the night. We were treated to raw, insightful poems, skillful guitar licks, and an extremely intense interpretive dance routine throughout the evening. For most of the night, Walsh stood in the doorway to his office, leaning against the side, watching the performers like the rest of us.
it’s past midnight and the aching shadows have carved tattoos into your skin; it’s the age of jesus and mcdonalds; a pulsing neon street sign matches your skittering heartbeat, thrumming bubblegum pink and oozing liquid green; you smell her fingerprints on the inside of your wrist; you pour pastel paint into the bags under your eyes; the ghost on the ceiling rolls over in its sleep and yawns, revealing teeth like a housecat; you look out onto the dry road with streetlamp eyes; you dream of friends with armor and lizard teeth; it’s the center of an era and everything is changing and everything is staying the same; it’s tomorrow and our spaceship drifts backwards at two-thirds the speed of light; it’s yesterday and time has no meaning once the sun goes down; you scratch half-minded at the backs of your scaly hands and blood gets under your fingernails; girls in a-line skirts glare from beneath black eyelids; jawlines and cheekbones loom out of the future; today we write about la-z-boys and moldy pizza parlors and graph paper notebooks and salted goldfish and phantom braids and the absence of profundity and six glasses of water and 1380 calories and paperclip imprints and thin streamers and binoculars that are just two suns held together with a leather band.
I found America speeding down a freeway at 4 o'clock in the morning; I ripped through the slumber town, streetlamps yellow with age, regret striping the road after the clumsy feet of fanatic escape.

I found America resting in the nozzle of a Wesco, neon lights blazing green and blue crying hands slipping you can do anything plunging into pockets and keyholes and the sanctity of fresh flesh.

I found America hurrying down cigarette side streets collapsing in concrete crevices snatches lost in epitome sex Reds and coffee; folk truth squandered in heroin and infidelity, strings snapped in the crack pipes of Kalamazoo undergrounds, smothered in sheets swells and rat shit.

I found America wailing, sirens just off the coast of Lake Michigan singing Come back, join us, the truth is just underwater; blurring the waves in the wind's exhale, missed connection. Turn left or right, it's no matter, you'll find the same eyes behind pseudo-ceramic counters; (Junk for Sale!)

I found America mourning fallen farmyards in fluorescent light, fields sick with rot and cankers, cows lane. It's all around you mouth and in the soil spread beneath your feet, supporting, aching, following in vain the dispair, lice rolling green with age; goodbye, goodby, goodby.

I found America rolling cages down aisles of packaged rainbow confections and shrink-wrapped apples, here comes the ride of corporate grocery store anxiety. Mom and Pop moved out with no pay, but who truly cares if the Family Fared well anyway? Walt and Allen walked away.

I found America singing knives eternal, drones invisible; our good children are not seen, not heard. Mushrooms cloud your vision now, apocalypse sunshine, magnetic red buttons are more romantic than triggers, demolition derby international style.

I found America hiding between the parking lot and the Church, Puritans sprawled out on the sidewalk and Universalists fucking in fields, joy, Hell slinking through the soil and manifesting in the dandelions, multiplying through the socks and seeds stuck to the pants of a tripping toddler.

I found America downriver dreamers. Roll wise and roll well, Perlaki. Snake eyes means you stay. We can't all leave this place. Scratch. Run. Don't bother rolling, there is more to life than luck here, darling.
Hardly a whirring
Elise Houcek
I found America preying shadows lurking behind headlines and three-pronged media outlets
legislative execution standing in pieces and Justice for all with a pink cock and balls indivisible,
the individual; politics is personal.
I found America crying new truths from spinning plastic, looms shift from wool to wire as we wrap
around microchips and memory cards, hypocrite artists jerk off CEOs oh, darling! Please believe
me, I’d never do you no harm. My power came from a cord, too.
I found America bleeding precarious, bedposts cracking in one last fantastic spring, big and bold
bombastic; collecting around fire rings and sand shores and other exit points; we’ve been great and
now we are through, it’s time to take a rest.
I found America huddled on a white couch on a screen porch warm blankets and gray weed,
I’m on fire inside and out, crouched over obscene boundaries and borderlines I found you! I found
you in your laws and your votes and this little ember bowl, I found you!
I feel the corners and edges of your drive-thru ash town fingertips,
I feel your interstate spine rumbling over rivers,
And I feel, I violently feel the weight of your ivory gaze; porcelain eyes glaze over angry crowds
and laugh. We are all the same, no?

I found America breathing lonely, shaken at the end of the dock, silent majority white fears lost--
The lake is the line, and we cannot cross until the summertime.
I'm waiting for destruction to come soft as blue cotton, sure as shambles,  
with coral-colored clouds streaking the sky and men in pawn shops across America,  
weeping openly. Weren't you thinking of me when the world ended? It ended  
in pale pink feathers, runny noses, you and I at the edge  
of a rolling hill we thought was a cliff, scraping our names into a tree,  
feigning immortality. Weren't you thinking of my shoulder against yours?

I'm waiting for life to come, born from the red clay, wild as the rampant ferns,  
with destruction a footnote on this splendid book of everything. The cemetery bones will  
shift as the world turns. Gravity will rumble and quiver and shatter. I thought of you  
in your orange bedroom as life exploded onto my porch, splashed my face,  
got stuck beneath my fingernails. The tree outgrew our names, but I thought of you still.
HOW FRIENDSHIP ENDS
Rachel Williams

It ends in a car.

It’s the last day of high school, which means your backpack is crammed with returned finals, shabby folders, and the play that you’re stealing from your English class. The backpack is weighing down on your lap, digging into your thighs. You’re in the passenger seat; she’s behind the wheel. Her bag is tossed in the back somewhere, or else she never brought one. It’s hard to know. You haven’t had a class together in years.

She drives you home after school because she always drives you home. She lives five houses down the street. Your mother always tells you how lucky you are to have a friend nearby. How lucky it is that you two found each other. When you were younger, you believed this. She was at your house almost every day. You had inside jokes and matching t-shirts. In first grade, the two of you were so close that your teacher would confuse your names. You even had those matching friendship bracelets.

Today, she’s impatient. You pick at your nails while she taps hers on the steering wheel. She waits for you to get out of the car. You know that she has plans. Your classmates want to celebrate graduating. Kids are heading out to lunch, gossiping about what parties will happen that night. She keeps glancing at the clock, like she has somewhere else to be. You know she does, but she does not invite you to join her.

Seeyoulater she mumble-whispers.

You stay silent. You hoist your backpack over your shoulder. It aches. It feels like the strap is about to give out. Maybe your mother has a point about carrying too much around, but you don’t like to admit it. You shrug, shutting the car door, and head up to the porch. When you turn to wave goodbye, she is not looking. The two of you do not speak again.

It ends in a car.

But maybe it’s a few months before that. You’re stuck in the parking lot after school. No matter how much you push, shove, force yourself through the hallways, you never make it out of the building fast enough. You get caught in the congestion, the pack of students streaming out to their cars. Sometimes, it takes fifteen minutes just to get out of the parking lot, battling the others who are trying to do the same.

You sit with her in silence. You used to try to make conversation, but the fact is, you know the two of you have nothing to talk about. You have history, but history doesn’t mean anything once people grow apart, and a shared past will never equal a shared present. She talks sometimes, about music or what she saw on TV. She stays away from personal conversations. Doesn’t ask how your day went or anything about you at all. She’s content to keep everything at the surface, idle chit-chat as you wait to go home.

Today, though, you see something in her expression change. You see her eyes follow a girl from your last class as she walks past the car. Her hair is platinum blonde and very short. She wears oversized flannel shirts and boots, no makeup. You watch her watching the girl, and you flinch. You know what she’s going to say before she says it.

God, what a dyke. There’s more, after that, but you don’t hear it. You’re too busy staring straight ahead. You count the flecks of dirt in the windshield. There’s a fly mashed into the glass, and something that looks like sap from a tree. It’s dirty, and you wonder how she can drive like that. You think that she needs to learn to take better care of things. And because you don’t know how to say anything other than you’re hurting me, you don’t say anything at all.

It ends in a car.

Maybe it’s earlier than that, though. You’re in eighth grade. Her mother drives the two of you to school every morning, and you sit side-by-side, listening to the radio. You like to make fun of the songs that they play for being too sappy. The girls sing about hearts pounding and cheeks blushing and falling in love at first sight, and you roll your eyes.

She tells you that she thinks the songs are nice. You know she has a crush on the boy whose locker is by yours at school. A lot of the girls do. He has tan skin and the beginnings of a mustache. His eyes are sensitive, she explains. She can tell he has a lot going on in his heart.

She stares at you until you tell her that you agree. You don’t understand why she’s wasting her time. He’s kind of a jerk and besides, he has a C- in math. She smiles though, when you nod. Tells you she’s glad that you are finally coming around. That he’s totally crush-worthy and she can’t wait until she gets to talk to him. She doesn’t notice how you fumble with your seatbelt, your shoelace, your hair. Anything to avoid looking at her.

Still, you let her go on for a while. You don’t need to interject
much, just an occasional yeah or uh-huh. You begin to watch your reflection in the rearview mirror, wondering how she can see so much in him. You don’t think he’s cute or sweet or anything of those things. But you stare at your image, all gangly limbs and freckles, and you don’t think that she could see much in you either. When you get out of the car, you walk in different directions.

It ends in a car.

Or is it even before that? You’re in elementary school. You don’t carpool in the mornings, but her parents both work, so your mother gives her rides in the afternoon. She comes to your house nearly every day. You eat apple slices with peanut butter and she reads the comics in funny voices. There are no silences.

In the car, your mother asks about school and she answers. She’s good at carrying on conversations, even with adults. She’s talkative, fills whatever space she’s given. Sometimes your teacher says that’s a bad thing, like when she doesn’t raise her hand in class. Mostly, though, you’re learning that people like her confidence. She’s outspoken without being pushy. You’re alternately described as too shy and too bossy.

Later, after she’s been dropped off at her house, your mother says she wishes you would make more of effort. The unspoken words rest uneasily in the air. Wish you were more like her. You’re old enough to hear it, but still too young to grasp all it entails. You ignore your mother, think only of her.

You don’t understand and you don’t know how to talk to her. She’s your best friend, but already you’re divided. You can see it already, the life that she’s building towards and the one that you’ll settle into. You see your future, how it’s nothing like the one that she wants. And you know that you’re not the first to think she’s perfect, and that you won’t be the last. You keep your eyes on the road ahead of you. When you’re mother asks what’s wrong, you don’t respond.

It ends in a car.

She says see you soon and you do nothing.
I pledge allegiance
to the woman speaking Arabic on the train and to
my homie’s smile the first time I did his make up and
let him borrow my dress.
To Queens,
to Jackson Heights and the first apartment
by way of Pakistan to Brooklyn.
I pledge allegiance to Lake Michigan and my
dad making omelettes in the kitchen,
to learning how to ride a bike at the age of 20.
I pledge allegiance to the safety pin holding my
mother’s hijab.
Not to the kids who wrote,
Jesus loves you too on my family’s driveway.
Not to TSA,
CPD, or the unreliable CTA.
I pledge allegiance to lower lip against neck
and every first kiss.
I choose a car with the windows down, my sisters’
hands in my hair, and a paycheck
with my name spelled right.
When I was little,
My cousins and I played this game
where we draped a blanket over someone
the others gave them directions, descriptions
pulled on the blanket

Growing up,
my peers were Puerto Rican,
my friends were White.
My parents are Vietnamese.

“Chink, Ching Chong, Chinita.”
They made fun of me
“Go back to where you came from”
across the cafeteria

When I was big,
I played a game by myself
everyone looks like me,
sounds like me,
eats like me.

Years later, I am even bigger
I thought this is it, I can be me here
But I am stuck in between being too Vietnamese to
be American and too American to
be Vietnamese.

I'm still searching

I loved to pretend.
“Blind Dog”
on all fours
Go here, Go there
used the leash.

I was ignorant
I thought I was Puerto Rican,
I thought I was White.
My parents are Vietnamese.

How come I could not see
right in front of me
maybe it was my slanted eyes that inhibited me yelled
maybe it was my laughter that distracted me.

I still pretended
to be what I'm not
I thought it would be fun
it made sense at the time.
I was confused.

now I am in a new place,
I have not yet figured how to be me here
speak English too comfortably
speak Vietnamese brokenly

She laughed at me. She said,
stories? What stories? We didn't have
any stories. We were so normal –
we went to school, we came home,
we played in the courtyard—you know,
ghar-ghar or teacher-teacher. In summer
we went to Pahalgam, or Gulmarg,
we went to our cousins' houses by the
month. We would drink
sheer chai
every evening and do
puza
every
Herath,
eat
dyoonu the next day . We listened
to Doordarshan on the radio, we played
Sholay-Sholay and your uncle was always
Basanti. Her voice spiraled up and up,
her voice spiraled up and up,
up and through, until she was certain
she was certain
I believed her: there were no stories.
There was a before and an after like when
an adult yanks—a hand on the ear of a child,
like a bone, once broken, slips on muscle.
This story is largely concerned with fathers, and from it the reader may discover much of their character and a little of their history. Fathers are born in South Africa (called the Orange Free State at the time of their birth) to bank managers and their wives who originally came from England. Fathers often become intensely interested in language from a young age, learning secret languages that their cousins created and using their background in Latin and Anglo-Saxon to create more. Fathers marry a woman named Edith even though their own fathers forbid them to speak with her since she interferes with their studies. Fathers fight in the First World War after delaying enlistment to complete their schooling. Fathers have four children, three sons and one daughter, and fathers live to be eighty-one years old. Fathers die in 1973.

But this information is nothing but the bones of a biography, which I cannot imagine interests the reader very much, when things like the actions and mannerisms and habits of an everyday life can be much more compelling. Fathers tell stories to their four children at bedtime and make them laugh with a character named Bilbo who defeat nasty trolls and tell riddles to scraggly cave-dwelling creatures. Fathers tell special Christmas stories in which Father Christmas battles goblins and endures pranks by polar bears. An inventive and imaginative breed, fathers spend time in their studies, drawing maps and writing down their bedtime stories, continuing their practice of creating languages. Fathers make up worlds.

Fathers spend time in smoky pubs with dark wood walls, in special rooms in the back reserved for them. They like to light candles and use real ink. Distrusting of cars and the like, fathers ride their bikes to these pubs and everywhere else they go. Fathers tell you to bike everywhere as well. Fathers read Middle English epic poems and recite them to you at the breakfast table as if you’ll absorb their lessons over your toast and jam.

Fathers have friends that meet in a pub called the Eagle and Child to share their writing and inspire each other. Fathers have very good friends who share a love of fantasy and discuss

III.

Children draw domestic pictures, or at least girl children do, or at least I did. Born in a bassinet that every day knifed the sky higher and higher, its concrete structures rising like the teeth of a comb, obsessively I drew two mountains, viridian and brave, and a brook always in between: a weapon held tight between teeth. Now, when I step out of the student center after the fog, find it resting over the grass, the red skin of these buildings encircles me. Panting and growling, angry. Their impotent shadows fall close to their faces – they are not tall, but when they cloud the tender flat land in between their lines, I think a-ha, this is what it is to live in a valley.
CONCERNING FATHERS continued

God and fantasy and writing for hours, who make plans to make their favorite genre accessible to everyone, who argue occasionally about whose turn it is to buy the beer.

With their complicated ideas, only fathers can spend fifteen years writing the same story. Fathers consult their good friends about this story, and these good friends convince fathers to finish it. Because they dislike typewriters, fathers ask you and your sister to type the story while they sit by the fire and tell you all about what their very good friends say. Fathers ask you to check the maps they’ve worked so hard on, thinking you’ll catch inconsistencies, and you always do it. Intelligent beings, fathers realize that sometimes they need a second set of eyes, or a third, if they’ve already asked their good friends.

When you get old enough, fathers invite you to join their friends at the pub, and you feel like they are eagles and you are a child. Fathers tell you that they’re proud of you, that your apples haven’t fallen far from their trees, that they love how you’re taking linguistics courses at Oxford. When you get old enough, fathers ask for your opinion on their stories instead of just telling them to you.

Being so caught up in their work, fathers don’t realize that your constant companionship causes you to miss so many rugby practices that you get kicked off the neighborhood team. Fathers let school formals slip their minds, and you know it’s not that they don’t care, it’s just that they forgot that the reason you’re wearing their old suit is because you were supposed to meet your friends at the school gymnasium. Fathers sit at the breakfast table and try to listen when you talk about the girl you like with the soft curls of dark hair and the pretty line of buttons down the back of her blouse and the smile she gives only when she thinks you aren’t looking, but you can tell by the way fathers’ hands distractedly clench and unclench around their cups of orange juice that they really just want to tell you a new story before you leave for school.

Though they don’t want to, fathers allow you to join the Royal Air Force. You travel to South Africa, the birthplace of fathers, for training and flying courses. Having begun the process of asking your opinion on their stories, fathers find it difficult to stop, and will send you versions of the stories while you serve as a pilot officer and expect long letters in response. Fathers will care about how you’re doing, but they will also ask for feedback on these manuscripts as soon as possible. You will start to realize that fathers may need you as much as their good friends.

When two fathers of fanciful nature are good friends, they have a beautiful friendship filled with long and warm discussions of their different but equally fanciful writing. But sometimes two fathers are like two giant eagles, who have to fight for dominance even though neither of them wants to. Fathers and their good friends don’t always stay good friends. Fathers call you into the room in the back of the pub when their good friend has left, and ask you about God and fantasy and writing because they can no longer ask their very good friend. Fathers will mutter about allegory under their breath and pay only half attention to your notes on their most recent maps.

Be wary of fathers who have lost their very good friends. They are crabby at first, and then sad, and then lost, but all the while they pretend that they never think about the ordeal and have already forgotten the good friend’s name. In this state, fathers need your input on their revisions with a new intensity, thus beginning a phase of life in which they will call you their chief critic and collaborator. You feel pride when they say this, and the pressure won’t sink in for several years.

While you work with them, fathers re-tell you the tales that you used to hear at the breakfast table, and they mean more to you now that you’re involved in the stories that were so influenced by these myths and legends. In the back room at the pub, and the fathers’ studies at home, you discuss Hobbits and Elves and Ents and Rings for hours, drawing detailed maps and illustrations, reviewing plot, always giving that foul thing called allegory a wide birth, since it allows domination for the author and denies freedom for the reader. Fathers look intently at you, meeting your eyes with a wild, fantasy-fueled gaze, but they do not see you — instead, they see the lands they made in their minds, the towers they built, the kings they crowned. When you speak to them, sometimes you think they want to respond in Elvish or Khuzdul. Sometimes you’re charmed by their dedication, and sometimes you feel like they’re living in their world more than they’re living their life with you.

When considering fathers, it is important to consider their relationship with other members of the family. Fathers stay close to mothers and love them for years and years. Fathers grow more distant from the other three children since they don’t listen to their stories anymore like you do, but they care deeply for the other children all the same, and ask you about them frequently. It is also important to consider the way fathers affect you. Fathers can wrap you around their long, inky fingers and keep you there. With round glasses needed only with age, and their once-dark hair sprinkled with silver, they enchant you with the voice that raised you with stories.

Fathers have bad days in which they sit sulkily in their studies...
or at their tables at pubs and snap at you, so lost in their thoughts of lonely mountains and bare Hobbit feet that they don't answer for several minutes when you say something to them. Fathers disagree with your map edits, they scratch out your comments in the margins, they look up at you with piercing, dissatisfied eyes and say You're not writing this, Christopher, I am.

Fathers finally publish stories about lords and rings, but you know that neither of you will leave that world behind. Fathers will want you to continue working with maps, to keep giving opinions, to help sort through the pages and pages of written and re-written notes that they have, stories that didn't make it into the published volumes, whole histories that need to be told. The claws of the fathers hold you tightly, and sometimes it hurts, but sometimes it is the most wonderful feeling to sit beside them and discover more of their beautiful minds. Fathers compile countless sheets of paper with countless drawings and countless words, mixing languages, smearing red ink and black ink in illustrations of mountains and dragons and gateways and forests. Boxed up, these papers are heavy and the weight is literal but the weight is also metaphorical. Fathers create tales from three ages of their hand-made worlds, they create spiritualities, they create other creators, they create angels and demons. None of it existed before fathers did.

The worst and most challenging part about fathers is that they die. They leave you with an evening spent alone at the Eagle and Child, slumped over the table you used to occupy with them, drawing meaningless calligraphy in an attempt to imitate fathers' handwriting, feeling as though if you could at least make it look like they'd written it, it would be the right thing to have written.

They leave you with beer they would have loved but you can't bring yourself to drink, full glasses that mock you with optimism, that you know should be held to different lips than your own. They leave you with smoky back rooms filled with the memories of private meetings, of the times when you read their tales aloud to their friends and the words rolled off your tongue like scripture, of when you were only the messenger.

They leave you with a sister who tells you that your father needed you, that he listened to you more than anyone else, that he trusted your judgement almost as much as he trusted his own. This sister comes to your house and spends an afternoon in your dining room, surveying the table that overflows with paper and ink, buried in Elvish words and maps and runes, some pages from half a century ago, some pages from just last year. Your sister gazes at this jumble and looks at you expectantly, and you look back, daring her to ask you how far you've gotten, how close you are to solving the riddle, how well you've managed to become your particular father.

Your sister listens when you tell her that all these papers and worlds consumed him. Your sister answers by telling you that your father cared deeply. You grab handfuls of pages from the table and brandish them in your sister's face, telling her that's an understatement. Your sister tries to tell you that your father was passionate, yes, but that he still spent time with you, that he made a point to spend time with you, and when your sister says this you run a hand through your hair, now going gray like his. You ask your sister what exactly your father did with all that time that he spent with you, and you answer your own question by telling her that he just told you his stories. It comes out more harshly than you mean it to, but since your father left you with so much weight, you don't care as much as you should about what your sister thinks. Then your sister tells you that you loved your father's stories the most, that you listened after the rest of your siblings grew bored. You tell your sister that you've been listening for fifty years, that it's just fiction. You toss sheets of paper across the table like a skipping stone and they tear through the air and pull worlds and generations off the table with them, and you expect a larger sound when all that weight hits the floor, but it's only flutters.

In the shadow of your father, you realize that all fathers are not the same, that all fathers do not leave all sons with the responsibility of finishing stories that took more than fifteen years to write in the first place, that all fathers do not make the work of all sons meaningful only because of a shared last name. Your father left you with a world-size mess to clean up, and you let your dining room
table start to rot under the pages you try to forget about. Without your father, you start to translate epic poems from Middle English and you make sure to work on the ones that he might not have read. Without your father, you teach as a fellow at New College in Oxford, and between linguistics lessons you sometimes sneak something in about the importance of allegory in literature, ignoring the nagging pit in your stomach and relishing the difference you can create.

Because of your father, a student approaches you and asks if you can sign a copy of your father’s book; the student has heard that you helped with the story. Your father would have signed it with a rune-like script, but you jot down a regular signature and realize that you never mastered his handwriting. Your father fills your thoughts all the way home in your car, and when you get to the dining room table, you sit down and sift through the heavy papers again. Your father’s words build on each other in your mind, the time you spent away from them making them clearer, and your wife brings you a cup of coffee that you finish this time.

Fathers leave beautiful worlds to discover, and you sort and date and order some pages, thinking that you hadn’t been very good at rugby anyway. Sometimes fathers are giant eagles who deserve children that keep their words alive, who finish what needs to be finished, who keep telling their stories. Fathers leave a bicycle against the railing of your porch, which you ride to the pub, where you’ve always been most comfortable being the child.

For a while dad describes our chests as “peas on a board” and my teeth powerline hawk perched are too big to fit inside my smile.

Petoskey bruises appear on our shins in the lake water, and our legs are quilted in Band-Aids, but they could not outrun the baton of time which rams into our pierogi fists.

We never grew fast enough for our freckles to fall from our cheeks like buttons from a shirt mid-Superman-ing apart at center seam, but we did grow tall enough to Wonderland out of little picnic set Alice limbs too hyperbolized to fit under table eave.

We tried to prolong inevitable laid in beds whose edges hugged us close enough to be coffins, put beetles in our hair like barrettes rubbed mud in our eyes and tied promise pinkies together with dental-floss.

But dental floss is door-knob hitched and someone will have open door eventually.

So we put stuffed animals in cardboard tomb, brush dandelions from our hair, steal sweaters from each other’s closets and kiss every freckle left on our shallowing cheeks.
Every now and then,
I would lie my head
on my Papa’s shirtless torso.

It was never explicitly said,
But I knew not to ask
About the burns in his stomach.

When I was six,
I forgot that I was not to ask,
About the wounds of labor that fed me.

He said,
“Burn me whole,
and spread my ashes.

Spread them on the mountain
that overlooks our orange house
Where I worked on my knees.

Let me fertilize the soil.
Don’t let the worms eat me,
not in this country.

Burn me passed the border,
Let my people smell me,
So they know I have returned, and will stay.

Let me swim through
the waters moving downwards
That flood our house en el tiempo de las aguas.

Let me be in waters
you bathe naked in,
And water flowers with.

Let the wind blow me to our kitchen,
And bitter your morning coffee
That one time a year you will visit.

Let me start fires,
Let me burn wholly. Holy.
Let the fire burn completely”.

And so I ask this soil
To catch fires
When the sun rises in the morning.

I ask the wind to not blow
Your ashes to our house
And bitter my morning coffee,

And if it does,
To instead sweeten it
The one time a year I’d be in the orange house.

I ask the waters to leave you there,
And not carry you down in the waters
I’ll bathe naked in, water flowers with, and flood our house.

I ask you make fires of him,
So when I see the sunrise
I see figures of him,

Spreading freely.
Violently.
Lovingly.

Being all that keeps us alive.
In Nainai’s stories, the morning after a thunderstorm always symbolized new growth, or rebirth after hardship, or a world washed clean. But that morning, as Hesper stood over the mess of brown-gold feathers and burgundy stained down, all she felt was the fog. It swallowed the landscape, making the air solid around her, obscuring the faraway trees and their browning leaves. It pressed into her dark, frizzy ponytail, which would only make it harder to brush later, and through the worn, thinned out cable stitches of her sweater. In the rusting metal pail in her hand, bumping against her thigh, the translucent fog filled the gaps between fragrant cedar sawdust and soft woodchips, and Hesper felt its weight.

The other hens, who presumably had the sense to stay inside the coop when the storm had torn the latched cover from the chicken door, voiced their displeasure with plaintive, groaning clucks. Sunday morning busybodies, they fluffed their breasts and gossiped. Fox attack last night, they said. Dreadful business. Foolish girl, venturing out like that.

And in that storm.

Hesper sighed and kicked at the remains of the fox’s meal. Under a pile of soggy down she found a yellow plastic band: 12, dear old Agnes. She pocketed it, frowning. The muddy grass squelched under her feet as she walked towards the coop, her Baba’s old rubber work boots sticking with every step. Her toes curled as she took slow, deliberate steps, trying to keep the heavy boots on her feet. A branch had tangled itself in the chicken wire fence of the coop’s outdoor enclosure, creating a gap at the bottom where a foolhardy hen might slip through. Hesper tugged it free and straightened the fence as best she could before she moved to the coop’s door. She rattled the old lock until it came free, and inside, twenty-eight pairs of beady, resentful eyes glared from every corner.

“Don’t look at me. Baba repaired that door,” she told the judgmental birds. She’d have to put it back on later, but for now she walked over to the metal nesting boxes and set the pail on the ground beside her. She plucked fresh, warm, taupe-shelled eggs from their cubbies and weighed each in her palms before placing them into the waiting sawdust bed.

The night before, lying on her back in the bed of Becca’s truck, Hesper dreamed of flying. The lightning brightened the space behind gauzy indigo clouds. Beside her, Becca traced the cracks in the air left over from the flashing light with one finger, but Hesper’s whole body was among them, between them, deftly shifting her weight, never colliding.

Eggs in hand, Hesper hesitated at the sliding door to the kitchen. Inside, Hesper’s Nainai, a small, stooped woman whose hair was silver white with persistent strands of deep black was standing at the stove with an empty frying pan in hand. The largest burner of the stove was already occupied by a red kettle with the faintest hint of steam escaping. Hesper slid the door open slowly, kicked off her boots and brought the pail to the kitchen sink. Nainai grabbed three eggs and cracked them deftly into the pan.

“Nainai —,” Hesper began.

“Everything outside okay?” asked the old woman, squinting at Hesper’s face in the dim light.

“The chicken door blew off the coop. Nainai, last night —,”

Nainai shook her head. “Such a big storm. The chickens?”

“The fox got one, but I think she must have gotten out of the yard.”

“Ah, the animals are not so smart.” Nainai prodded the egg yolks with her chopsticks, satisfied, she slid each of the eggs into waiting bowls of steaming porridge. “Bring these to the table, Xiao Wen.”

Hesper grabbed a bowl in each hand, leaving one on the counter, singeing her fingertips where they touched the smooth porcelain. She set them onto the waiting placemats on the table and sank into the warm wood of the old dining chair next to the radiator. Nainai’s back shivered slightly as she spooned fragrant tea leaves into their favorite mugs.

“Nainai, what happened last night?” Hesper asked.

“Go get your Baba for breakfast, Xiao Wen.” The kettle began to whistle.

“He has an appointment today, Nainai. He left a while ago.”

Nainai turned to squint at her again, eyebrows furrowed. “Did he? Ah, my son, he never home. Not even on Sunday.” She shuffled to the opposite chair and reached across the table to set Hesper’s mug of tea in front of her. They ate their breakfasts, warm inside and out from hot porridge and tea and the thick insulation of fog pressing at the window panes.

Hesper and Becca had met on the first day of second grade, and remained the oddest inseparable pair in the school district until they
were forced to cede the title to the two goth kids who decided to date in sophomore year. Hesper had dark hair and dark eyes and hunched shoulders. Becca was tall and chubby; not loud, but always present. Reveling in their new senior status, the two would spend 7th hour in the center of the high school's soccer field, Becca's dry-clay colored hair tumbling over Hesper's lap, their vegan Docs and strappy sandals abandoned yards away. Leaning back on one hand, Hesper would mindlessly pluck blades of unkempt grass. Becca would sing lines of whatever song popped into her head, creating bizarre amalgams of ska and Sade.

People told Hesper they just didn't get Becca. Hesper could only shrug. She was hard to sum up. It was why they worked. After school they would dump their backpacks and books into the backseat of Becca's truck, brushing fast food containers onto the floor. With an exaggerated salacious wink, Becca would ask, “My place or yours?”

“Yours,” Hesper would reply, reclining in the passenger's seat with her eyes shut.

Becca's room housed four scratched up flamenco guitars that she’d found in pawn shops. Her twin bed had troll doll sheets and a Lion King comforter. The floor was covered in half-finished doodles and a large latch-hook pentagram rug. There were band posters, movie posters, a flea market Bruce Lee wall hanging with dragons and lightning bolts and airbrushed abs, a One Way street sign hung pointing down, drawings given to her by her baby brother, a Playboy centerfold with a cartoon horse head pasted over the model's face. An aquarium on her dresser housed a corn snake that was named Alizee “because of her sexy wiggle.” An ancient computer tower whirred and clunked beside her desk, trying desperately to keep up with the large flatscreen display atop it.

Hesper's room could be featured in Country Living.

Of all her many stories, Nainai told the story of the Jade Rabbit the most. Hesper had asked once if the rabbit was really made of jade, and if so, why not something more valuable like gold or diamond? Nainai laughed. “Gold and diamond are worth nothing compared to eternal wisdom,” she said.

“But the rabbit is a real rabbit,” insisted Hesper. “The emperor doesn’t change it to jade.”

“Maybe the moon goddess did,” said Nainai. And that was that.

Hesper reclined in Becca's desk chair as Becca rifled through her sock drawer. The dark clouds that filled the sky outside the window had rolled across the sunset on Hesper's walk over.

“My dad was asking me about college again today,” she complained to Becca. “He wants me to apply pretty much everywhere. I mentioned like, once, that I was thinking about pursuing veterinary school and now he won't stop talking about it.”

Becca held up a glass jar with innocuous-looking shriveled mushrooms inside. “To be honest, Hesper, you’re always talking about it too. College this, applications that, GPA, career plans. I’ve already applied to design school and no one asks me about it. Just get it over with.”

“What if,” Hesper started, the words lodging themselves in her chest. “What if I didn't...”

“Didn't what?”

Hesper paused to watch her friend wrestle with the jar's lid. “Didn't apply. Didn't go to college.”

“What, like take a gap year?”

Hesper shrugged, looked away.

Becca stared at her for a beat, then let out a sigh. “Your dad would freak.”

“No kidding,” Hesper said with a snort.

Becca hoisted herself onto her bed. She kicked the box spring rhythmically with her heels and clunked beside her desk, trying desperately to keep up with the large flatscreen display atop it.

“Do you want to be a vet?”

“Guess.”

“Well, have you at least started? It takes a long time.”

“No.” Hesper stared hard at the dark sky outside the window. Becca's heels continued to antagonize the aging box spring. She flipped the jar over and over in her hands. She took a breath, paused, and said hesitantly, “Do you want to be a vet?”

“Yeah… I guess.”

“Would you quit making that noise?”

Becca stilled. Hesper glanced up to see her friend's concerned expression and quickly looked away.

“Are there schools nearby?” Becca said. “Madison is only forty-five minutes away.”

Outside the window, the road stretched across empty fields. Hesper could barely see Becca’s nearest neighbor in the dim light of the evening. “I know,” she said. “But what if, just once, that’s too far?”

They sat together for a while, Becca heaving the occasional sigh, unable to hide any emotion. After a few long minutes, she chuckled and...
held up the jar still in her hand, shaking it like a rattle. “Maybe some other time, yeah?”

“No, let’s do them now.”

“You sure?”

Hesper gave a small smile. “Maybe I’ll be inspired.”

Becca grinned back. “I sure hope I’ll be.” She opened the jar and plucked out a mushroom, wrinkled and sad-looking. Hesper scrunched up her face at the smell.

“So you just… eat it?”

Becca shrugged. “I don’t really know. Didn’t come with a label, Alice.” She tipped her head back, plugged her nose, and dropped her portion into her mouth. Hesper followed, and choked on the bitter earth-dirt taste.

~

Hesper and Nainai cleared the table together after breakfast. The uneaten bowl of porridge was covered and placed in the refrigerator for Baba when he came home; the dishes were washed and dried and placed in their cupboards.

“Ready, Xiao Wen?” asked Nainai, running her fingers through the red-brown mung beans that had been soaking on the counter overnight. Hesper filled their largest pot with water and hefted it onto the stove. A wave of heat hit her arm as it passed over the largest burner. Startled, she checked the dial; it was turned to the highest heat.

“Nainai,” she began, “did you turn off the burner after you made tea?”

“I always turn it off,” replied Nainai, but her face was concerned, unsure.

“Just… make sure you check, okay?”

“Ah, I know, I know.” Nainai muttered Mandarin phrases under her breath as she shuffled away, the ones Hesper had looked up on her own in middle school. The old woman’s house slippers squeaked across the linoleum towards her bedroom, and Hesper’s heart fell.

“Are we still making moon cakes?” she asked.

“Later, Xiao Wen. I’m very tired.”

Hesper watched Nainai’s slow steps until she closed the door, then started the beans simmering. By the time Nainai awoke, she hoped, they would be soft enough to start making paste. She took a deep breath and began preparing for her Sunday chores.

~

Baba moved to the United States from Xi’an when he was twenty-one to get a business degree from Northern Michigan University. Nainai was ecstatic that he would be able to apply for citizenship once he was residing in America with a student visa, and could then sponsor her and his father, Hesper’s Yeye. Yeye disagreed. He thought the business sector in China was the true path to wealth. He mourned the loss of his son to the immoral West. Nainai paid for half of his plane ticket with the money she set aside from painting paper fans, which she sold to overdressed tourists in front of the Terra Cotta Warrior Museum.

While Baba was in school, Nainai wrote him letters as often as she could, asking when she and Yeye could move to America. Three years after he flew out, a letter arrived which Nainai had written in her neatest handwriting. It said, “Your father died of heart failure. Please send for me soon.”

Baba graduated four and a half years after arriving in the United States with a Bachelors in Business. He proposed to his girlfriend, Shannon, a Classics major with a passion for mythology, but refused to marry her until he became a United States citizen a year later. They bought a house in the countryside of Portage, Wisconsin, along with two acres of land. He got his CPA license, she got her teaching certificate. Shannon raised chickens and planted apples and tomatoes. Baba did taxes and accounts for the farmers.

~

The first odd thing Hesper noticed was Bruce Lee. She blinked several times, trying to clear the colors and emotions from her mind, but that only seemed to make it worse. She softly asked Becca to take the poster down.

“He’s angry at me,” she said.

“So it’s hitting you?” asked Becca.

“Please, he’s so upset.”

The sky was already flaring white outside. Hesper tried counting the seconds until the thunder, but the numbers began running away and she heard nothing. Bruce Lee furrowed his eyebrows and howled silently, his moment of rage frozen forever. His fists clenched around dragons and the jagged edges of lightning. His palms split open, and rage flowed out in hot, viscous floods, a bright red anger.

She felt Becca’s hand on the back of her neck. Hesper had, at some point, curled into a ball on Becca’s bed, fingernails carving a series of crescents into her forehead, Bruce Lee visible from between her fingers.

“Hey,” murmured Becca, “You’re alright. It’s okay.”

Hesper closed her eyes and focused on bringing her hands to rest on the bed. Both girls were silent as Hesper breathed slowly. She heard Becca get up, then a faint rustling.

“I took him down. You can open your eyes.”

The details of the room came slowly into focus, and Hesper’s eyes were immediately drawn to the blank patch of wall behind Becca’s pajama-clad form. Through the open window, the sound of thunder
finally reverberated across the fields. The soft tremble finally allowed Hesper’s tense shoulders to relax. She forgot she had been waiting for it. “Come on, let’s go outside,” said Becca. “I want to see this storm for real.”

On the night of a full moon, four animals, determined to enrich their lives, vowed to use whatever skills they possessed to do good in the world. An old man walked by, begging for food. The monkey, who could climb trees faster than any other animal, collected all the fruit he could find. The otter, who could swim the river faster than any other animal, caught fish for the old man to cook. The jackal, more cunning than any other animal, stole a pot of milk-curd from a wealthy household. Yet the rabbit, who could run faster than any other animal, could only gather grass for sustenance. He knew the old man would not eat his offering, and so, before anyone could stop him, he flung himself into the fire so the man could grow strong from his flesh.

The rabbit did not burn, however. The old man revealed himself to be the great Jade Emperor, and he was so touched by the rabbit’s commitment to his vow that he used the smoke of the fire to paint the rabbit’s image on the moon.

When the rabbit died, his spirit became one with his image, and he lived on the moon with the beautiful moon goddess.

A year after she married Baba, Shannon got pregnant. She loved living in her country home, tending to her tomatoes and her ISA Brown hens just like when she was a girl. She loved Baba.

When Shannon fell in the tool shed at 16 weeks after a month of dizzy spells, Baba made plans to bring Nainai to Wisconsin. While Nainai reminded Baba at every opportunity of the years she spent relying on the charity of her brothers, she doted on Shannon. Each morning when she woke up, she brought her daughter-in-law prenatal vitamins with a cup of bitter herb tea to strengthen her immune system. In hesitant English, Nainai shared with Shannon her wish for a grandson, fat and smart, to spoil rotten. Shannon confided in Nainai her desire for a daughter, kind and stubborn, who she could teach to garden. Her evening star, her little love. They swapped stories, Ancient Greek and dynastic Chinese folk tales, and did Tai Chi on the front porch to keep up their strength.

At 35 weeks, Shannon gave birth in the bathtub, with only Nainai to deliver the baby. Nainai didn’t know, yet, how to use the phone. She also didn’t know how to stop Shannon’s bleeding. With the newborn wrapped in a dry towel and clutched to her chest, she ran the quarter mile to the next house and sobbed in Mandarin until the neighbors called the hospital and Baba at his office. By the time the emergency responders arrived, all they could do was take the tiny, wailing baby to the hospital for care.

In the whirlwind, no one had told Nainai the baby’s sex. She hadn’t thought to check. Baba found, in the notebook in which Shannon and Nainai kept records of their English lessons, a note, circled and starred, which read “Boy: Alexander; Girl: Hesper.”

A woodcutter decided one day that he had had enough of a life of tedium. He left behind his family and business to seek out the sage that had discovered immortality and learn what he knew. He climbed a tall mountain to reach the shack in which the sage lived, and the sage, impressed with the woodcutter’s strength and tenacity, agreed to take him as his pupil. For three days, the sage taught the woodcutter how to use herbs to make medicines which heal the body, but by the end of the third day, the woodcutter was tired of this lesson. He demanded the sage teach him something less tedious. For three days, the sage taught him strategy and logic by playing chess, but the woodcutter grew tired of this also. For another three days, the sage showed him the secret texts which described his discovery of immortality, but the volume was so long that the woodcutter abandoned this also. Angered at the woodcutter’s impatience, the sage sent him to the palace on the moon, telling him...
that only when he chopped down the large tree at the center of the
courtyard could he return to earth. Though the woodcutter chopped at
the tree endlessly, each cut disappeared as soon as he lifted his axe away.
Because of the magical powers of the tree, the woodcutter was never
able to return to earth.

Hesper got used to the names when she was young. Some, she didn’t
understand until she grew older, old names spoken without a thought.
“The chinks, the gooks down the road.” Some, she understood all too
well. Dog-muncher. Squint-eyes.

Hesper’s eyes were double-lidded, a physical reminder of her
mother. Her hair was frizzy, wavy on good days, and brown-black, not
jet-black like pictures of Baba in college. Her nose was long.

She told herself she understood. In a Midwestern small town, Mr.
Yunioshi and Fu Manchu were more familiar than Peter Chen, their
neighbor. When she went to the store with Nainai, she heard the words
around corners. She pretended not to. Neither Nainai’s English nor her
hearing were good enough to understand.

That’s what Hesper hoped, anyway.

Outside, the air was cold and quiet. Hesper’s eyes struggled to
focus in the alternating darkness and strobe-like flashes of lightning. The
rain had not yet begun to fall, and besides the silent lightning, nothing
moved. Becca walked towards the garage on the side of the house,
in front of which her hand-me-down Dodge Ram was parked. She
clambered into the wide bed and held out her hand to hoist Hesper up.
Hesper’s stomach dropped; gravity had given up its firm grasp on her for
a moment, and when she landed beside Becca, it was as if she had been
transported to a new planet. Her head spun from the lower percentage
of oxygen in the atmosphere, her body settled differently, more slowly,
into the unyielding surface of the truck bed. The sky flashed white-
indigo, over and over. Hesper closed her eyes and imagined galaxies.

She felt her chest grow lighter, then she was floating.

The shutter was firmly bolted to the coop, feed and water filled,
and floor mucked and covered with fresh shavings by the time Hesper
saw Nainai moving around the kitchen again. The inside of the coop
was warm, and Hesper had taken off her sweater and tied it around
her waist. Griffin, her favorite chicken, was tugging at its bottom hem
insistently as she moved towards the entrance room to store the rake
and push broom. She stooped to pick up the bird, who clambered onto
her forearm like an awkward, flightless, obese falcon.

“Griff, you’re smart; what should I do?” she asked. “You’d miss me,
if I left, probably.” Hesper stroked the smooth feathers between the hen’s
wings. “I know I’d miss you.”

Without ceremony, Griffin pooped on her rubber boot.

“Don’t try your luck,” Hesper laughed. She tossed the chicken into
the coop and quickly shut the door. Goosebumps rose on her bare arms
as she ran back to the house.

In their few months together, Nainai and Shannon only had one
large fight. Of course, Nainai always said, there were the little disputes
about living together and about Baba, but they only really disagreed
about the chickens. You see, she’d say, in China there is only chicken –
egg chicken, meat chicken, pet chicken.

But Shannon’s chickens were hens. And they were ISA Brown hens.
And they were not for eating.

One day, Shannon was so sick that she vomited even the glasses of
cool water Nainai constantly refreshed for her. She stayed in bed, pale,
with grey eyelids. She dozed fitfully.

Broth was the obvious answer. Nainai found what she assumed was a
young chicken and carried it to the house, aware of how fresh blood
near the coop could bring trouble. In part, she was right that her plan
would revive Shannon’s energy: the hen’s squawking inside the kitchen
roused her faster than Nainai had ever seen, and the sight of Nainai
squatting over a plastic bucket, chicken under one arm and carving
knife in the other, brought a flush to her cheeks like no food could. The
chicken got free and tore around the house; Shannon and Nainai gave
chase, both shouting things that the other didn’t understand.

They eventually caught it and Shannon brandished it at Nainai
good for eating.”

That chicken, Nainai said with pride, avoided her at all costs until
the day it died of entirely natural causes.

Besides, they were such small things, so stringy. Not chickens, ISA
Brown hens.

“Becca, do you feel sick?” asked Hesper. “I feel sick.”

Becca regarded her seriously, motion blurred raindrops falling past
her face. “This is the best I’ve felt in my entire life,” she said.

Hesper tried to sit up, but the movement made her even more
nauseous. Suddenly, the lightning and the heavy raindrops that had
begun to fall became uncomfortable. Her euphoric mastery of the sky
descended rapidly into a sort of dizzy confusion. She lay still for a
moment and tried to get her bearings, blinking against the rain pelting
her face.
"Why are you going to college?" she asked.
Becca's voice was dreamy when she answered, "Because I see these colors." She waved her hand vaguely at the sky. "I see them, not like now, not all the time, but I want people to see them, yeah? And no design company will hire me without a degree. That's just, like, how our society works." She pushed herself up onto an elbow and jabbed her finger into the truck along with her point.
"Sucks," said Hesper.
"Yeah maybe," said Becca, "but maybe it's good for kids like us to get out, have some freedom, meet more people like us."

Another wave of nausea hit Hesper, and her throat tightened. "Are there more people like me?"
"You're not that special, snowflake," said Becca. "You've always got me, anyway. And your grandma."

Finally satisfied that she was back in Becca's truck, she was able to stumble out of it. "It's cold, Bec. I'm going home. You should go inside."
Becca just smiled at her, and as she walked away from the truck, Hesper suddenly felt very alone.

The great hero who vanquished the suns was rewarded for his deeds with a vial of liquid immortality, with enough for himself and his beloved wife so that he would not spend his eternal life alone. He brought it home in secret, hoping to prevent theft by jealous rivals. He entrusted it to his wife, and told her to keep it safe until he returned from a hunt, at which time they would feast to celebrate his victory, then drink the vial together. But while the hero was out hunting, his apprentice broke into his house and demanded that the hero's wife give him the elixir. The brave and beautiful wife, knowing that the power of immortality could not be allowed to fall into unworthy hands, drank the entire vial. She ascended into the night sky and lived on the moon, doomed to a solitary eternal life.

From her palace on the moon, she watched over the countryside she loved. Every autumn, when she saw her husband and the villagers had harvested a bounty of crops, she warmed the sun to a bright yellow-gold with her joy. Her husband, who missed her very much, held feasts every year in her name, baking a round egg yolk into her favorite red bean cakes to show he watched and loved her also.

The hero passed at the end of his time, and the villagers told the story of the moon goddess and her lover. Ever since, they have made cakes with the golden yolk moon in the center to celebrate the harvest.

Nainai and Hesper's moon cakes were coming together slowly. The red bean paste was too sticky, but just sweet enough. They rolled the yolk and paste and crust into lumpy spheres and lined them up like the terra cotta warriors of Xi'an. Nainai rattled off her old tour guide speeches in the English she memorized phonetically, pausing whenever the words were too far back in time to reach. Hesper just smiled and asked tourist questions like, "Will the current emperor be buried like this?" and "Does the government sell these whenever they need money?"

The moon cakes went into the oven hours later, slightly messy and covered in too-thick egg wash, but each cradled the golden yolk for the moon goddess deep in their sweet centers.

On her way home, in the dark, Hesper's feet constantly slipped into the potholes and deep bumps in the road. A sheet of water leveled out the surface, so that the reflection of the storm made her feel as if she was walking within it. The rain was falling heavily now, obscuring her already compromised view past five feet. The walk was less than three quarters of a mile, but no details changed enough for Hesper to gauge the distance she had already traveled. Her stomach jolted and mind raced so that when she saw the dark figure in the middle of the road, the shock of variation alone nearly caused her to trip. Where it stood, there seemed to be a black hole, a complete absence of light, and Hesper almost cried out. It didn't move, so she approached cautiously. The lightning flashed once, twice, and Hesper saw drenched silver and black hair and a frightened, wrinkled face.
"Nainai?"
"Xiao Wen?"

Hesper embraced her in relief, but they were both so cold. Nainai's tiny, thin hands were shaking. "Nainai," she said, "what are you doing out here?"

They walked slowly in the direction of the house, clinging to one another. Nainai was whispering softly, the same phrase over and over, and through the thunder and the rain, Hesper couldn't hear her voice. She knew the words in her spirit, though. She felt them too.
"Wo bu zhi dao, bu zhi dao. I don't know. I don't know."

When Baba returned home from work, the moon cakes were already cooling on their racks. The sky was getting dark earlier each day. Nainai was napping again, with satellite Chinese language television playing softly in the next room. Hesper hoped Baba wouldn't make too much noise when he came in. The front door creaked, and he clattered around downstairs for a while before making his way up to her door.
"Come in," she called after she heard his soft taps on the door frame. She turned her chair away from her desk and her statistics...
homework to face him.  
"Were those feathers I saw in the front yard?" he asked by way of greeting.

Hesper grabbed Agnes's yellow plastic band from her desk and fidgeted with it. "Agnes, tag number 12, got out last night. Shutter blew off, a fox probably got her."

"The winds were pretty rough."

They were both silent for a minute, listening to Nainai's snores rising from the floorboards.

"You and Nainai made moon cakes," he said.

Hesper smiled. "All ready for Moon Festival."

"Just in time. Listen, Hesper," Baba said, attempting to lean casually against the door frame, "I heard you come in pretty late last night. Where were you?"

"At Becca's house," Hesper answered.

"How did you get home?"

"Walked."

"In the rain?"

Hesper shrugged. They fell silent again. Nainai snorted herself awake, and after a faint "ai ya!" lapsed back into sleep.

"I'm just worried about you, Xiao Wen," said Baba.

"I know," said Hesper.

"Have you started planning for next year?" he asked.

Hesper swiveled her chair back to her homework.

"Hesper, you can't keep putting this off. You need to start applying."

She hunched her shoulders and fought the tremble in her voice.

"Nainai's getting worse, Baba. She can't remember things. She wanders off."

Baba sighed, suddenly sounding as exhausted as she felt. He moved behind her chair and squeezed her shoulders. "Your Nainai is getting old, Xiao Wen. I know it's painful—"

"Do you?" snapped Hesper. "You're never here."

"Hesper, you shouldn't have to live for anyone but yourself at this age," Baba said, his voice gaining an edge. "It wasn't right, my leaving her in China. But I needed to live for myself. That's all I want for you."

Hesper stared out her window at the coop down the hill. "If I leave, you can't take care of all this and her by yourself."

"We'll move. Somewhere smaller, closer to the hospital."

Hesper wrenched her shoulders out from under his hands and stood to face him. She planted her feet into the creaky floorboards to steady herself. "Don't you understand?" she asked. "Everyone else has left her already. Don't make me do it. This is the only place she's ever belonged, and I belong with her."

As she grew taller in her rage, Baba seemed to shrink. It was his turn to look out the window.

His eyes were sad and far away when he said, "It is the only place I belong, too."

The words lay in a pile between them, like wet down.

He began to leave, and as he reached the doorway Hesper called, "There's porridge in the fridge. You can have the first cake, if they're cool enough."

Baba turned and smiled slightly at her, Nainai's wrinkles appearing at the corners of his eyes. He walked down the stairs, leaving Hesper standing in front of her window and an autumn sunset.

Baba told stories too, sometimes. Mostly about Shannon. He always called her "your mother," but Hesper liked her better as just Shannon, like in Nainai's stories. The Shannon in Baba's stories named each chick she received, cradling it in her hands and cooing softly. She planted and staked each apple tree from neighbors' cuttings. She took Baba's "Oriental" name for her own, even when her father said it was a "damn fool thing to do." She loved her home with all her heart. She brought them together – Baba, Nainai and Hesper – and that was love too.

Later that night, when the sunset had almost disappeared and Venus had appeared as a bright star in its wake, Hesper and Nainai sat on the couch together, nibbling their cakes. Through the thin sheet of clouds, the light of the full moon shone on Baba at the dining room table, glinting off the white on his head as he bent over paperwork and his calculator.

"Nainai," Baba said, "will you tell me the story of the Jade Rabbit?"

"You've heard that story many times, Xiao Wen. You could tell it to me."

But still, Nainai cleared her throat and began.
mullocked oysters open to black pearls [ :: ] man opens legs

fractal fern closes in swirl [ :: ] womb oragamis a child

caged falcons revolt flying out of the throat [ :: ] mirrors induce vomit, throat learns to grow

proverbs squabble out of a pen [ :: ] a rumble of thunder grows from a soft bolt

a redwood grows from my collarbone's soft center pit [ :: ] a voice-box erects a thicker shaft

redwood roots itself in soil's collarbone [ :: ] falcons dive from branch to sloping branch

Adam withheld his apple [ :: ] Lilith wedged a pomegranate between two harp cords

she offers deepness [ :: ] I swallow, I swallow, I swallow.
Your figure is politics. Is the red soil of the Meru hillside. Every pair of jeans too small in the hips but too large in the waist. Tree trunk thighs. Baggy sweatshirts. Running from your roots, hiding from a history of strong women whose large lips and wide hips drove out the colonist, with his white lies and oppression masked as religion.

Is yogurt for lunch and the satisfying grumble of an empty stomach. Withholding sustenance. Stares from strangers Learning to love yourself like you learn to ride a bike. Repetition. Saying words over and over and over again. Hoping someday you actually believe. That you are magic. That there is power in the temple of your being.
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Malavika Rao

IMPACT
Carmen Torrado Gonzalez
POEM AFTER GUSTAV KLIMT'S THE KISS

Lucy Merrill

I.
The feminine face betrays no recoil, no rapture, draped in gold-en robes and flesh like silk gliding along the bedsheets. Coil and embrace, he is wrapped around her form—aching, desperation carved into the hollow of his cheek. They kneel in supplication, reverence, her jaw cupped in his calloused hands. Her own right arm draped around his neck, numb and loose and lifeless in love. She is liquid gold, spilling, slipping from the edge of the bed, and he, the pillar of unbroken stone.

II.
You know that ethereal post-fuck glow radiating from spent bodies that smells suspiciously like sweat and unwashed sheets? You know that headglow floating-body feeling that lingers in post-orgasm stasis? I want a bottle of that. I want to cork that up and only let it out at three in the morning while I talk to the ghosts of streetlights on the walls. And only when I really need it.

III.
Klimt, if you never paint a self-portrait, how will the others know how ugly you think you are, how beauty never translates, how something is always lost in the mediums?

IV.
Kiss me right there.

V.
This window has been smashed open for weeks. I draw the curtains closed again but the gauze is whipped away by the wind. I carve the scene before me into the creases of my cerebral cortex. I can see footprints in the ivory sand; they fade away in the receding waves. The sun is a point of brighter grey in an already colorless sky. On the sill, steam rises from my mug of tea. Large hands rest on my hips from behind but when I turn into the embrace I find only the coldness in the kitchen.

VI.
A tragic, starving artist did not paint this in his blood. He painted in gold.
I never used to wear my hair natural like I do now. Every Saturday my mama and I went to the salon and had our hair pressed to our heads as white as we possibly could. We pressed our hair until steam would roll from our heads like smoke rolling out of the barrel of a gun. That was before I moved to California, and before King died. Right before he died, Jay had convinced me to join the fight. Jay was a smooth talker and easy on the eyes. It was too bad that he was married. We met when I started working at one of the clubs in the city for a few extra bucks. I moved out here to try and make it big singing, but it wasn't working out exactly like I had planned. I didn't have any money for studio time, and that meant I didn't have any samples to send to anyone. That's how I started working at the club. Jay tipped me well, and he complimented my caramel colored skin whenever he came in. Not in an annoying way, but more of a way of saying he was on my side. Most white men gawk over a dark skinned woman, but not Jay. He'd say things like, "Black is a beautiful color, baby. Embrace it." When he said things like that, I couldn't help but get hot and red-faced. Jay had a way of making me feel that way. He made my chest feel heavy, and my cheeks constantly glowed a crimson hue when he spoke to me.

We started going together quietly, but I knew that we wouldn't get far with him being married. Our intoxicating romance ended when his wife started questioning him. A bill came through in the mail, and she discovered that he had been paying rent in a second apartment near the club. I guess that could spark suspicion in any woman. There was no room for me to be mad about him leaving, I knew what I had gotten myself into. And even though Jay and I weren't together anymore, I still kept a lot of what he taught me in the back of my brain. He and I were involved with the Black Liberation Movement for a while when we were living together. Now that Jay is gone I've had more time on my hands and have been going to these Black Panther meetings.

On the first day, I entered what appeared to be an old storage warehouse. The building itself was large, it stood about four floors in height. Only one of the floors seemed usable. The cement walls that held the place together wore brown stains and cracks that ran along their great lengths. The multi-panel windows on the upper levels were missing sections of glass. Holes from rocks being thrown through them were bandaged by old rotted pieces of wood. Hanging over the large front door of the building there was a sign made out of an old piece of wood that was painted white with big, red, painted letters that read "Black Panther Headquarters." The unattractiveness of the building forced my hand to stop as I reached for the cool steel handle of the front door. By the time my brain told my hand to grab the handle, a man swung the door open so fast my fingertips had barely brushed the metal before the door was replaced by a tall well-dressed man.

"What's your name?" he asked me. His hair was natural, and his voice seemed confident. He looked familiar to me, like I had seen him on T.V. or I had heard about him before. This has to be Huey Newton, I thought to myself. He carried himself very tall for only standing about five feet eleven inches, he seemed well over six feet. His jawline was sharp and defined. His jawbones pulsed as he pressed his bottom and top rows of teeth together every so often, and his dark brown eyes more closely resembled black holes to me. The tone of his voice was low, but his vast vocabulary and professional attire kept making my eyes scan him up and down. He wore a button up shirt with a collar that resembled the wings of an airplane, everyone wore shirts like that it seemed. His brown, corduroy pants hugged his skinny thighs, making his legs appear longer than what they actually were.


When we walked further into the room, there were large tables with office chairs surrounding them. The dimly-lit, cement-blocked, room combined with the office chairs and desks to create an entirely grim atmosphere. However, the people inside did not. To my surprise the amount of women in the room was about even with the amount of men. I had never seen so many dark skinned people in one place. There was something comfortable about being in a room full of people wearing their hair natural and picked out. I took out the notepad that I kept snug in the back pocket of my bell-bottom pants, and took diligent notes on the behaviors in the room. Taking notes in my pocket notebook was a way for me to notice things, and not make a big deal out of them.
While in my note-taking trance, a woman sitting down gestured over to me, waving her hand quickly in a “come here” motion. I noticed the chair next to her and sat down, stuffing my small notebook into my jacket pocket. “You gotta pay attention when Huey’s about to talk, girl,” she said to me. “The man’ll make a fool of you if he catches you ignorin’ him.”

The woman’s curls seemed slightly tighter than mine, and other women around her. She seemed fairly young, early twenties. Her dark lipstick distracted me as she talked about Huey. “He’s taken us so far; we wouldn’t be anything without him!” she said with great assurance backing up her voice. The devotion she threw at Huey involuntarily caused my eyes to roll with disgust.

I started coming to meetings every day. I’d jot down notes about the things Huey said to the group and things he said to me in our one on one discussions. We both began staying after the meetings a while and talking. He talked to me about Karl Marx, and Malcolm X. These men seemed like the only thing he knew how to talk about. Huey would say, “We have to take up arms to survive! How else can we dismantle capitalism? Malcolm X wants us to use force to get what we want.”

Sometimes I found myself troubled by the militant rants Huey would go on. His face would get flushed, and light beads of sweat would appear at the edge of his hairline whenever he started one of his rants. Usually, I would just smile and nod in agreement and take out my note pad and scribble little bits about how funny his rants were to me. I wanted him to know I was on his side. I believed in his cause, I didn’t believe in the things he did.

His militant attitude wasn’t limited to talking about politics. He oftentimes lashed out at the women in the group whenever they spoke out against his ideas, which wasn’t very often. Once, the same woman that I sat next to during my first meeting told him that the violent riots weren’t the route we should be taking, but rather the peaceful protests that Dr. King preached. Huey was so infuriated that he slapped his coffee mug off of the desk in front of him in one clean swipe.

During our daily post-meeting talks, Huey would oftentimes ask me to join him at dinner. A part of me, the part of me that spoke loudest in my notebook, thought it’d be a bad idea. But, there was something about those dark eyes. They gazed at me admiringly, like the way an artist admires their finally-finished painting. When I spoke, he listened. He wasn’t the same power-hungry Huey that I saw in meetings. He reminded me of a large dog that people feared, but in reality the dog is only scared so they bark to defend themselves. Huey wanted the same thing we all wanted, equality. He felt so passionate about it that he would fight for what he loved. I respected him for that.

So, eventually I agreed to go out with him after one of his countless attempts to persuade me. We went out to a burger joint in the city. A greasy little place, with those red chairs that look comfortable but leave your rear-end sore after sitting on them for an hour.

We sat in the restaurant for a while, asking the classic “so where are you from?” questions that fill silence.

“I came here to pursue my career in music,” I said to him in between bites of fries.

“You sing?” he asked.

“Yeah. Only in clubs and things like that though.”

“What if I said I could get you some time in a recording studio?”

“Th-that would be wonderful,” I said.

I couldn’t help but blush. This wonderful, smart man barely even knew me but was willing to pay for studio time. I started working in the club that I met Jay in just so I could save some money for studio time. That money quickly was spent on living expenses. Rent was high if you weren’t white. All of the money I worked for disappeared at the hands of my landlord, along with my dreams of recording one of my songs. Now here I sat, in some slimy burger joint with a powerful black man that could buy me studio time.

“Do you write your own stuff?” he asked.

“Yeah I do!” I was overly excited that someone was interested in my music. I damn near sent my french fries flying into Huey’s lap with my response.

“Well, if you could write something that has to do with supporting the Panthers, I could buy you some time in the studio. I know a guy.” Huey always talked so cool, so smooth. His tranquil state was only broken during militant Panther rants and riots.

It all seemed surreal and eventually I recorded a song to help support the Panthers like Huey asked me to do. The song I recorded seemed to please the women of the party. I caught one, Regina, singing it to herself as she walked into a meeting one day. Her eyes turned into saucers when she rounded the corner of the entrance and ran into me.

“Oh- oh my god,” she said. “You’re the sista that wrote the song for the party! I didn’t realize you were a part of the Oakland party.” She grabbed my right hand in both of hers and shook it wildly about. I couldn’t help but flash a half smile at her excitement.

Regina was one of the few that enjoyed the song I recorded,
DON'T HURT YOURSELF  
(LOVE, GOD HERSELF) continued

she said that the melody was smooth and the words cut deep in a non-dramatic way. I liked her description of it. Huey, on the other hand, was less than impressed with it. Not so much the song itself, because he was in the studio with me when I recorded it. He clapped his hands and smiled his cool smile at me through the glass. But the fact that it didn't sell dissolved all support he once had for my singing career. My song didn't benefit the party like it was supposed to. Huey told me the words weren't revolutionary, and I nodded in agreement, but in my notebook I called him a “distasteful, ignorant, asshole.”  
Whatever Huey said was right, Huey's way was the only way. I did everything he asked me to do. Clean his guns, go to rallies, even let him live out his sexual fantasies with me. He was like all men in the Panther party – hard headed intellectuals who were good with their words. Those men knew how to get what they wanted, especially from us women. We ladies often talked about what would happen to one of us if we stepped on Huey's toes. I eventually found that out the hard way.

I had been working for the Panther party for a few months, doing Huey's monotonous chores and fulfilling his sexual desires on our down time. The men of the party were in charge of the militant endeavors that I had a hard time of supporting, but I wanted to do something just as important to the group. Recording a song wasn't enough, according to Huey. He thought the only way I would be of service to the party was if I was cleaning his guns. The thoughts I had on this were scratched wildly about the margins of my notebook. I had ideas. So one night, I sat down in the apartment that Huey and I shared and went through my jottings from weeks ago. I was careful not to let him see my notebook as he sat on the recliner on the other side of the room, watching the news. The news flashed brightly in the dimly lit room. They were airing a story about a local black child found dead on the outskirts of the projects. What the hell else is new, I thought to myself. My stomach churned at that thought. Children were being killed, and dying on the streets. Blacks were being denied jobs, and so kids were fending for themselves.

I thought back to when I was a child, and my mother faked being white to get jobs. I was her only child, and my father wasn't around so my mother did what she had to do to provide for us. Both of us were light enough in complexion that when we pressed our hair, and dressed right, we looked as white as can be. Landlords didn't scam us on rent, and my mother always had a job. My mom even got a job working at a bank once because she put on her “white lady” voice during her interview and put on extra powder every day. I wished that every child had the luxuries that I had growing up. I

never told Huey, or any in the party about this. I knew that if they found out, they would kick me out.

The day after going through my notebook and overhearing the news, I decided to pitch an idea at the Panther meeting.

“What if we go and cook breakfast for inner city school children?” I asked. “Most of the families living in the projects can’t afford it.”

“I can dig it,” one of the men sitting next to Huey said.

“Yeah that’d be boss,” Regina said.

The group thought this idea was great, but when I looked across the room and saw Huey I could tell I had messed up. He sat there, arms crossed like a toddler about to throw a temper tantrum. I knew that once everyone was gone I was going to have to hear about it, and boy did I.

He was silent the entire ride back to our place. As soon as we entered the house that ended though.

“Who in the hell do you think you are?” he shouted.

“What are you so mad about?” I asked.

“You never asked if it was ‘coo to pitch an idea today.”

“I never knew I had to do that.”

I guess telling him this made him madder because he kicked through the glass of our entertainment center. The glass imploded into tiny shards, and he exploded into a woman-hating fit.

“Just like a ho to think she can sneak ‘round behind her man’s back like that!” he screamed as he positioned his face centimeters from mine.

His hot breath burned the pores on my nose. The screaming didn’t let up until we went to bed that night. Huey must have called me every woman-hating name in the book, and I let him. On the inside, my blood boiled and I was ready to spit fire his way, but I thought back to my idea. My plan was going to make a difference, and it didn't matter what Huey thought of it or that his pride was hurt. Instead of screaming back at him, I screamed into a pillow. Eventually I let my pen scream into my notebook after he was passed out, drunk and snoring.

As the next few days passed, Huey and I became increasingly distant. I could feel the tension between us all the way down to my bones. Once my plan was up and running, I started taking on different responsibilities within the group. They started letting me head rallies, and protests. I stopped cleaning guns and was given one to use instead. Of course, I never used it. At times, I admired the shiny metal of the equalizer. The way the steel chilled the palm of my hand never made me feel more powerful. I still didn’t believe in all of
the violent ways of the group, but it was the fact that they gave me a
gun that mattered. The women of the group envied me and my
newly discovered power. Regina let me know how the rest of the
women felt.

“You know, Elaine,” Regina said. “The rest of the ladies can’t
help but think that your idea only got across because you been goin’
with Huey.”

“Huey didn’t even know about my idea,” I said. “Didn’t you see
his face when y’all supported my idea? He wasn’t happy with me.”

“Well, I don’t know. The rest of the sistas don’t think it’s right.
We never get a chance to voice our ideas. Those men think they
are the only ones with a say because they throw around bullets and
words like they the same damn things,” she said.

My throat began to constrict, and I was fighting back surfacing
tears. I’m not the voice of these women, I can’t be the voice of these
women. Who was I to step up and speak my mind in front of the
whole party? I am the voice of myself. I am the voice of a woman
within the Black Panther Party, not the voice of all of the women
within the party. Guilt ripped my brain apart, sending signals
triggering different emotions and bodily reactions. I couldn’t shake
the feeling. Regina must have read the guilt on my face.

“Not all of ‘em think that, though,” she said. “I’m just warning
you that a fair few do. They wish they had as much power as you do.
It’s all plain and simple jealousy, girl.”

“I wish they didn’t though,” I said.

“How could they want to be like me? I thought to myself as I pretended
to listen to another one of Huey’s speeches. This one seemed more
aggressive than others in the past. His cool tone had been absent for
days. Now, he wielded his fist around, and the sweat that usually
lightly glittered his forehead was dripping down his sideburns. My
racing thoughts made it impossible to actually hear what Huey was
saying. His lips were moving in sharp combative ways, but my ears
could not process the formation of those words into sounds. My head
began to pound at the sound of his roaring, and all I could think to
do was to pull out my notebook and note the words he was saying
without having any meaning attached to them.

Suddenly, my ears gave meaning to the words he was saying.

“Elaine!” he shouted. The piercing glare he gave me let me know that I should have been at least pretending to hang on to his
every word.

“Why don’t you escort you and your sistas out of the meeting?
Men only tonight,” he demanded.

His eyes were daggers stabbing right through mine.
filth clean.

How could these women still want to be me? They didn't want to come home to a man with a wounded ego every night. As my power grew, I could feel Huey becoming more and more resentful of me. Spitting water at me was the most intimate encounter we had for weeks. Sometimes, we would have sex but even that felt distant. When we did have sex, he never looked at me. Instead, he would focus on something in the background, or close his eyes. And once we would finish, he would light his cigarette, slip on his underwear and walk into the living room where he would sleep on the couch.

I often thought of Jay when Huey started acting this way. Jay never let his pride get in the way. He just let his marriage get in the way instead. I never seemed to have an easy time with men. It didn't matter if they were white or black, they were all the same. Their pride and egos were too much for me to bear. But even though I felt that way, Huey was in charge of the party. I had no say in how the men acted, and even when I eventually took charge of the Panthers they ignored me. What did a woman know about a political movement anyways?

I eventually left Huey, but not until after he dismantled my power position with the Panthers. Huey was still in power of the party, but I was voted in as chairwoman while he was being charged for manslaughter after a rally gone wrong. I always told him that his anger would eventually get the best of him. He fled to Cuba to hide from the authorities, so I was put in charge.

It wasn't long after I started a liberation school in Oakland that Huey and his goons ended my time with the Panthers. I had Regina from the party teaching a few classes, but Huey was less than thrilled about my new accomplishment. I don't know why, and I don't know how it happened, but I do know that Huey and some of men decided she was unfit for the job. I was at the Oakland school myself the day that she was beaten damn near to death. Aaliyah, a fellow Panther, told me about the boys' endeavors.

"Regina is in the hospital," she told me.

"How could that be? I hadn't heard anything about her being attacked. Was it one of those white radical students?" I asked. I had heard of white radicals getting extra violent with us, because of our reputation of violence. At times they would interrupt classes and scream racial slurs and the occasional cat-call.

"No... You didn't hear about it because it was Huey."

"What?" I asked.

As startling as the news was, I was strangely not surprised to hear this. My legs went frail at the thought of Huey and his goons beating up a defenseless woman. A twinge of pain surged through my head and an uneasiness settled in my stomach at the thought of going home to Huey. I hadn't left Huey yet, because I didn't have anywhere else to go. There was still work to be taken care of with the party, but I needed somewhere to live.

I should have seen this coming, I thought to myself. Earlier that day, before I headed to the liberation school, I received a letter from Huey. I almost didn't read it, but I reluctantly opened it.

Elaine,

It's Friday night, and I'm getting packed up and ready to leave for the airport in the morning. I'll be back in Oakland on Sunday morning. I've been in Cuba for a while now hiding from the feds. As you already know, they issued a warrant for my arrest after I shot an officer during a riot. Stupid, I'll admit, but damn was it liberating. Sticking it to the white man, letting him know that he doesn't own us. There's no better feeling. When I come back, I'm going to try and stay under the radar for a while. We need to continue to take action, but we'll have to do it in quieter, less attention-drawing, ways.

There's something else I want to say, and that's that I'm so sorry for the way I left things with us. You have contributed so much to both the party and to me, and I'm forever grateful for you. I'm hoping that you'll be able to forgive me, and go back to the way things were before. The two of us are better, stronger, together than apart. I need your support to succeed. Please consider taking me back.

Love you baby girl,

HPN

When I first read the letter, I thought about what the two of us could do together leading the party. I thought of less violent rallies, and the two of us standing hand in hand at a podium, throwing up an exultant black fist in front of a sea of fellow black men and women. This seemed like a dream come true, Huey coming back home.

In reality, Huey would come home for a week. A week that would be entirely spent listening to his long, violent rants about the authorities. I would respond in agreement, but remind him that he had killed a man during that riot, and in reality he deserved to spend time in jail. He'd ignore me, and eventually the police would find him and take him to jail for manslaughter charges, and me to jail for hiding him from the authorities. These thoughts sent chills down into my toes. I couldn't live that life. Instead of responding, I crumpled up the letter and tossed it into the waste basket on my way out the door. As I thought about having to go home to my shared apartment with Huey, I headed to the nearby payphone and inserted a quarter. The
phone rang two or three times before someone picked up. It sounded like a woman.

"Hello?" she said.

"Yes, is Mr. Kennedy there?" I asked. She quickly went and got him.

"Hello, this is Jay," the man said.

"Jay, it's me. It's Lainey."

"Elaine Brown. I never thought I'd hear from you again. Heard you been doin' alright for yourself. Saw one of your rallies. You sounded amazing. The most powerful woman I know."

"Thank you, Jay." I wished he could see me blushing on the other end of the phone. He always thought it was cute when I would blush.

"You need something, honey?" he asked.

"I-I… Uh… I need you to come pick me up. I'm in Oakland. I'm quitting the party. I'm leaving Huey for good this time."

"Did something happen?"

"I'll tell you about it in the car."

"I'll be there in twenty, Lainey. Sit tight."

When we hung up, I couldn't help but feel a weight lift off of my shoulders. I lit a cigarette and sat on a bench while I waited for Jay. I could always count on Jay, but I really wish I could've counted on Huey the way my people did. He gave young black men hope, but he wouldn't be able to do those things without the support system he found in the Panthers. Maybe I was better off without him, but I wasn't sure I was better off without the Panthers. I knew I'd feel better with Jay. I wanted to write all of my thoughts and feelings down in Huey the way my people did. He gave young black men hope, but he wouldn't be able to do those things without the support system he found in the Panthers. Maybe I was better off without him, but I wasn't sure I was better off without the Panthers. I knew I'd feel better with Jay. I wanted to write all of my thoughts and feelings down in my notebook, but when I reached back into my pocket it was gone. A wave of panic swept over me as I checked my jacket pockets to find them empty as well. It was gone.

As I continued to pat my whole body frantically, the little hope I had of recovering the little pocket notebook drifted away. Not only did my hope vanish, but the words I had meticulously thrown onto the pages were gone, too. Yes, of course they were in my head. But, what good are words if they're left inside your head? The churning in my stomach continued as I thought about the last thing I had written down; it was about Huey.

_Huey wrote me a letter from Cuba, I just got it today. He's coming back. I can't believe that he's actually coming back. What's he going to do without me? The man is smart, I'll never deny that, but not as smart as he thinks he is. His ego and pride will most definitely be his downfall. He's high on power, but how the hell did he get the power anyway? I can't help but feel that the only reason he feels powerful is because of the women in the party. None of the sistas question him, or his ideas. The change that I saw in these women as I started pitching my ideas out of this notebook was an evolution to say the least. The evolution of these wonderful, black women, has been revolutionary. Yes, we all have a long way to come, but the movement is there. It is hard to remain a good role model for them though. They look up to me and praise me for my work, for my confidence. If only they knew. My confidence was tested every day that I was with Huey, and my confidence was derived from none other than a white man. Who am I to be the face of black women's rights? I'm not all that, but I have to keep pretending. I have to do all I can to show men like Huey that we are capable, we are smart, and we are more than our curves and our hair. _

_The more I thought about my last entry, the more I wanted to cry. Losing my notebook, felt like my vocal chords had been cut and all that remained were their detached and frayed ends. I sat down on the edge of the curve and laced my fingers together and pressed them up against my forehead. My boney hands were trembling, and I began to feel like all that I had worked for was for nothing. Jay was on the way to pick me up and all I could think about was how he could help me. I pulled out another cigarette from the carton and pressed the soft end to my lips. _

_Taking a long drag, I couldn't help but think, am I really going to let this white man save me again? I held my cigarette in between my fingers and used my other hand to massage my temples. Truthfully, I thought I was saving myself. I thought I could help the black women of the future find a voice as powerful as an ocean current. But maybe I was wrong._

_I put out my cigarette, and flicked it into onto the sidewalk. The embers scattered across the concrete and eventually settled themselves into the concrete and burnt out. I walked into the nearby bathroom and stood in front of the dirt speckled mirror. Rummaging through my purse, I came across my hair pick. A few metal, at least I think that's what they're made of, prongs held together by a pink plastic handle. The handle fit in my hand perfectly. I ran the prongs through my hair, yanking upwards, pulling all of my curls loose towards the ceiling. The curls were tighter than I remembered. They were wrapped tight like the strings on the tuning pieces of a guitar that were one turn away from snapping. It had been a while since my hair had been relieved of pressure. I let the prongs guide them to liberation and thought about the beauty of my caramel colored skin. Once Jay was here, he would remind me of its beauty every day, whereas Huey would never even mention it. I never knew any other man like that._

_I walked outside and was greeted by the red glare of Jay's shiny new Mustang. He stood up against the vehicle dressed in a casual suit_
with one leg crossed over the other. Typical, I thought as I let out a small laugh.

"Hey, baby!" Jay said.

"Hey," I responded. Suddenly, I didn't know what to say to him. I wasn't sure what having him pick me up was going to solve.

"Lemme take you out, Lainey. Get you somethin' to eat, maybe take you shopping," he said. "Get in."

As he opened up the car door, I found myself still in the same spot and unable to move my body. My feet grew roots in the pavement, I was paralyzed.

"I- I don't think I can come with you, Jay," I said. My voice quivered a bit as I choked out my response. His eyes filled with confusion the instant I responded.

"What, Lainey? Don't be crazy," he said.

"I need to call someone, anyone else," I responded.

I turned my back on the candy apple red mustang and on the man I'd be leaving behind. Instead, I headed back towards the payphone. When I got to the payphone, I punched in Aaliyah's number. I figured she'd be home by now. She answered the phone, surprised to hear from me.

"Do you know what hospital Regina is in?" I asked her.

"Well, yeah. You wanna come with me?" she asked.

"Yeah, girl."

The phone call ended quickly. It was more like a business call, but it was business I needed to tend to. I had just enough change in my pocket to buy a new pocket-sized notebook, and even a new pen. The Panthers had a meeting later that day, but I wouldn't go. Instead, I sat quietly by Regina's side, making sure she had everything she needed. Plus, I needed a place to sleep for the night. I prayed God would help me find a place to call my own. She has a plan for me and my people.
I was almost born in a Big Boy.
But the floor was covered in crushed crayons and straw wrappers,
and the waitress had black dirt under her fingernails,
and my mother,
she said,
*God forbid our firstborn take her first breath here.*

They sliced her open because they thought I was going to be big –
10 pounds, *at least*, the doctor claimed.
I was a tiny babe –
a week early.
Forced out.
They didn’t let me come natural.

We don’t ask to be born,
but we do have some say in when,
and how,
we slide on through the birth canal, out of the vagina, into this fantastic
chaos.
That is what we get,
unless we are torn from the womb.

I often wonder –
Why did the doctor think cesarean was the best option?
Why did he want to cut my mother?
Why did my mother agree to the cutting?
And did the stars pay any mind,
or was this all their doing?

My birth chart says that my Sun is in Cancer,
and that my Moon is in Cancer.
The Moon is “at home” in the sign of Cancer
because the Moon is the natural ruler of the sign, Cancer.
All this to say, I am

moody,
and tender,
and protective,
and snappy,
and I wonder –
was I astrologically predetermined?
Was I extracted so the universe could keep expanding,
on schedule,
as planned –
nothing to see here but a shrieking infant just
as she should be.

I am habitual,
and clairvoyant,
and a victim
of the overly coincidental.

I should have known
my birth time was an omen.
11:09 PM – Grandma’s birthday.
Born under the sign of the disease that killed her.

I should have known
that same disease would kill Grandpa
and kill Gina
and compel my mother to cut herself open again.
Out of the laceration came life and the organs that birthed it –
organs that would have killed her, too.
I call myself a Cancer because that is what the stars say I am, and on
dark days,
I wonder if I am the other one, too.

I should have known
that my first steps would be sideways –
and that my first job would be bussing tables
at the Big Boy’s I was almost born in.
CABRONA, CHICANA
Cynthia Valentin
Cabrona
Back when I used to be ghetto
18th street raised me on the finer things in vida. Scorched summer's cracked & sizzled chicharones. I lick my palms stained with Tajin as hot chips taint the tips of my dedos. "Cabrona," me dijeron but quizas me gustaba. Perhaps I liked the way cabrona soaked my taste buds in carbon y licor, carne asada y tortillas. Motorola phones y cigarros quemaban wooden floors painted that same cafecito con lechita which coats my grandmother's piel. Bruises and scars polish the tender doors that seal our ghetto estate.

Chicana
Back when I used to be ghetto
South Side adopted the unwanted café. Unsought browns from segregated tribes brewing every tres leches cake & green like that has ever eddies. Back eddies in cage park de conving parrillen. Blacks, browns & golds sundry lines de roa while white y pinks linger on streets where they shouldn't. Bruises & scars support deafening goodbyes as I was left abandonada. No longer la chiquita cafecita as I confessed "fuck you" to the amiss, colonialist, ignorant-stricken asses & manifest Chicana.

Once Upon A Time devoured me. Midnight tock, midnight tick, I swallowed a wolf and it swallowed my cells back. I kept to my books, and they kept to my lungs, the only cancer I've ever prayed for. Daily, words became lines & tore through my bloodstream without rest. Soon, the only red left in me was my grandmother's hood. I set out for justice in the pine forests (where the witches lived). Instead of magic, found poets in their tombs. I read and repeated their sins: avaritia, ira, fabula. Awaiting After, perched on their crosses.

I had to move on. I had to fall in love. All the crows said time was up, that the crosses on my back were only growing thicker & more pronounced, that my step mother and her curse were going to win if I didn't pucker my lips. I found a Prince Charming. He read me my Miranda rights. We had dinner dates in castles, counting the constellations, Cancer, Leo, Orion. Warriors in stars that held more in their lines than the ability to wait and to pine for True Love's Kiss. I'm ill-suited for rings. I have never been true, or in love, or ready to rest.

He kissed me, no curse broke. My wounds were scales now. I placed my tiara on its rest & reached for the cauldron and the mirror. Like my stepmother before me, I slashed crosses like dragon talons over princess lips. The only power is curses: red apples & pricks of (pine) needles, glass shards. Antagonist. In the dark, I counted silhouettes, waiting for my Odette and her purity. It was Odile's turn to devour. Our only pas de deux would be in the Tropic of Cancer, all gale & no girl. But Odette kissed me and repeated the story lines my stepmother hadn't read.

She tasted sweeter than candy houses & breadcrumbs. But still we poured over the lines, read them again and again, searching for a word in Once Upon A Time that was truer than the rest.

FABULA MINOR
Isabela Agosa
Once Upon A Time devoured me. Midnight tock, midnight tick, I swallowed a wolf and it swallowed my cells back. I kept to my books, and they kept to my lungs, the only cancer I've ever prayed for. Daily, words became lines & tore through my bloodstream without rest. Soon, the only red left in me was my grandmother's hood. I set out for justice in the pine forests (where the witches lived). Instead of magic, found poets in their tombs. I read and repeated their sins: avaritia, ira, fabula. Awaiting After, perched on their crosses.

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I coughed up Red, White, & Cinderella. Odette still called me Odile. I was in love, but the cancer wasn’t in remission. A witch is a witch is a witch. No matter what lines the princess crosses out. My light & grace, maiden fair, I slit her throat. I refused to exist made of her shadows and dreams. I was of stronger things: red shawls (no hoods), the black tip of a pen, the smell of pine.

The red was in my blood again. But I had used up all the archetypes and was left lost in the pine, without compass, aching to find a story where I could be more than the witch, the dead, the read. Tales that I could braid into my hair instead of ones that tied, in strips, along my throat. Fairy and I couldn’t exist together. Not like this. In the woods (a suicide) I tried to lay the storybook to rest. The grave I dug grew into a library, line by line, until it was me entombed. No amount of crosses could exorcise me of that ink, that thick blot stain of far far away, that terrible blooming cancer.

My only choice was genesis. To bare a baby girl in the fires of July, under the realm of Cancer, and name her Creation. I would read her the tales, she would write me her own, and all the pine of poets past could never damper the scent of her lavender. She would be where witch crosses princess: what I dreamt before princes. She would be all stories (likes spells) I marked ‘to read’. For her, all the crows would bow, and the dragon’s claw would be her mother’s embrace. Rest assured, she would draw this weak & rusty (s)word imprisoned in my heart by tales of red and white, and use it to slay me of my cancer. I would end painted in gold, ready to be read among the pine trees, among the constellations’ reflections in riverstreams, and the rest of the true dark places Woman crosses when writing Happily Ever After’s lingering and
Gold has no second name – if it does, there are troves full – not names, no, but hundreds of glittering epithets – the sun, the way the light of the sun shatters off the water, some sought-after reward, a totem of envy tossed into the midst of a wedding by the hand of the goddess of discord. Sifting through a pan, squatting over a river, an eye which has not spent enough time in contemplation of gold's precise effectiveness in reflecting light beams may mistake gold for her more brilliant sister pyrite, walk down to the exchange depot, come home with a subscription to Mason's Monthly instead of the bone of an Elk's jaw. Often, like gold, silence is stolen, either by an untoward suitor or some gaudy altercation with God – Amun Re melted it down at one time, used it to build monuments in Egypt.

Kanchana wrings the last of her daughterhood from her long black hair. Her father's advice and her mother's recipes swirl around in the shower drain. The strong scent of shikakai is buried by the smell of her grief and funeral pyre. Carelessly, she tries to wash the ashes of the center of her universe from her eyes, but they mix with the dried up tears, and stain her cheeks with soot and dust. She hides her hair with her anger under a towel, and carries her baby. The baby holds her face in its tiny hands, and Kanchana smiles. The minute her smile touches her hair, her dark curls start to burn. The flames encompass her body, and the baby giggles in her arms. When the fire begins to die out, she glows, and her hair is kanchana, golden, like the sunlight.
For three whole days God worked in binaries—
  Let there be Night for Day,
  Sea for Sky,
    Flora for Gaia. But then he paused
  He fleshed
    out the Universe.
  Then he stopped.

Let light form in stars and moons—

For the Sea fell in love with Gaia—
  didn’t ask for God’s permission, but bore the fish, birds,
  and all manners of creatures.
  God felt foolish.

And the Sky wept at the beauty of their union—
  and the animals drank her tears and were sustained.

Let them create—He said—
  And let me be silent.
RAPE
Izzie Kerivan

Why can’t I ever say the word
when I’m sober,
especially when talking about me—

Especially when talking about him and me
And that should-have-been spring night,
And those sticky summer afternoons,
And that warm winter eve.

The memories blur,
Until they don’t, drag the sharpness
Filter to the right
Make it too clear,
So clear its ugly.

Why can’t I ever say the word
When I’m talking about him
With my friends who know the truth,
But let me live in some
Fantasy anyway of
“after what he did to me.”

Why can’t I ever say the word
To my parents or a therapist
Or even a fucking doctor—
Someone who could do something.

What happened? Nothing
Did he hurt you? Not really
Were you safe? Usually

So walk around in lingerie,
With still not asking for it
branded on chest.

And carry mattresses around campus,
March the night away and tell stories,
Scream the words I can’t from the rooftops
And into news channel microphones

I will sit here still at 1:47 am
Scribbling the word onto sticky notes
And lighting them on fire.

Rape.
Rape.
You raped me.
I’ve been raped.
Forgiveness, as in surrendering to the pillow of white moth wings, dusted with the sedative you crave and I possess. You used to say my name like a threat, like your throat would close without the hope or reopening.

You know how sometimes if the moon light strikes you right in one direction your shadow is a closed fern, and the other a towering magnolia thick with rich bloom? I am sorry how, if at night, you thought my closed flowers were closed fists.

Forgive me if my bluntness muddled your truth. At the river I sit beside you now, like I always have. While you paddle us under the moon, I lean against your legs and dream of our home, in that expanse where moths flutter from pillows to sweet fig trees, somewhere, where we breathe.
This, small. This, easy.
This st-st-stumbled out of your mouth, this drowned in Midwestern accent.
A dance teacher leaned down, asked me my name again and
I answered with lurching whisper,
No effortless pirouettes, no polished grand pliés,
No, only me choking on my own saliva,
tripping over my own feet.
This, I tucked away,
This, I bent,
This, I smashed,
This, I diced small enough to fit in your mouth.
This, I carved smooth enough to slide down your throat.
This, small. This, easy.
If you cut out a person’s tongue, they eventually forget how to speak
even their own name.

Here, astounding. Here, arresting.
Here, I breathe my name like fire.
Here, its velvet seduction
distracts you from
the sting,
the singe,
the scorch of
Its severity
Its sovereignty
Here, I correct you.
Here, I command you.
Here, I am almost full alphabet.
Here, you utter me in almost every breath.
Here, my sounds take up room in the back of your throat.
Here, I make your tongue dance, make it waltz proper, make it wax poetic.
If you cut out a person’s tongue, they are going to bite your hand clean off.
now, now boys, let’s be calm, mature adults about this—
i am not what you call a murderer, though i possess its definition—
see, if you take the label & divorce it from its meaning, you get
me, wine bottle in one hand & repurposed bloody screwdriver in the other,
head after head beautifully punctured for bending against me, my will.
i don’t understand, really, how you’ve come to break into me with your righteousness—
could it be that you believe my execution falsifies all other executions?
that my absence will bring back the absences i’ve sowed, those i’ve delivered
away from us?
funny—
—violent, violent being, me—
see how deliciously preserved i’ve kept his head,
a neat, if not a bit avant-garde, fixture upon my dresser?
& if you had cared enough to care
you’d have found the hair & fingers of the mangy doglady who stole my weed
bundled & tucked safely in my underwear drawer.
i see now your disgust at you own lack of scrutiny—
but do you understand now that my actions live on without me?
you take out your hate on the perpetrator, feeling for a moment you’ve undone it,
but i’m gone & you’re left with the empty & the empty again
& i join the absence to which i brought, ceremoniously, each of my transgressors
—violent, violent being, me—
you need only look once before turning away,
& you bring me to god’s doorstep,
feeling for a moment universal morality will have its way,
but i killed him too, your morality, your god,
an absence to define all absence,
that ever present non-being you know to be there, always, unreachable,
derrida’s trace—the fucker of disruption you try to grasp,
grasping nothing but the grasping itself,
your body losing & losing its definition
until you no longer know
where you end
and the rest of the world
begins.
“A miracle,” Mr. Kurtz said as he climbed the maintenance stairs that lead to the tank’s surface. “Really, it’s a miracle you have one. I thought they all died off after the Gulf disaster.”

Reflected light danced off the water, across the ceiling and the aquarium’s darkened amphitheater, across Kurtz’s hollow, shadow-filled cheeks. So did we, I wanted to say. So did the World Wildlife Fund, Oceana, the American Cetacean Society. Hell, even the EPA, which had held out for a full five years before they too declared that Homosicuta siren had gone extinct, strangled in the smoldering oil slick that had once been the Gulf of Mexico. It wasn’t until a month ago, when the Department of Fish and Wildlife spotted what at first appeared to be a small child thrashing, pale and weak, in the mucky waves of Mobile Bay that anyone dared to think, to hope, that H. siren might not be lost forever.

I knew better, though. While every marine conservation group with access to American waterways was busy combing the Gulf for survivors, I had looked at the fading, half-starved creature in the aquarium’s largest display and known their search was hopeless. Even now, as Kurtz and I made our way up the side of the tank, I could see it floating in a far corner, head slumped, the tail gray and flaccid. If it had been possible (and I strongly doubted it was) the poor thing looked sicker than when we had acquired it from Fish and Wildlife. Those government morons couldn’t keep a betta alive for more than a week, much less an animal this fragile.

I didn’t tell Kurtz this, however, even once we were close enough to the tank for the mingled reek of chlorine, salt, and rotten fish to burn our nostrils. Maybe it’s because I didn’t trust him; the banker had a swagger in his step, a gloating, crotch-forward kind of movement that made walking in front of him unnerving. Don’t get me wrong, I had my preferences, but anyone who moved their hips like that, man or woman, was out for more than a simple roll in the hay. It was a walk I associated with my father, a big-shot Miami lawyer, who had a similar way of moseying up to the jury box whenever he knew the verdict would be in the favor of a guilty client. It was a victor’s walk, a devil’s walk. Smug didn’t even begin to describe it, although cocky, I suppose, came close.
The steel handrail grew slick beneath my palm.

“Almost there,” I told him. I tried not to think about the roll of crisp, hundred dollar bills tucked safely into my back pocket, how accepting that “donation” from Kurtz might have changed my walk. But who turns down a little extra wallet padding, especially when it’s coming from someone in a $60,000 Armani suit? Besides, the aquarium gave private viewings to interested patrons all the time—birthday parties, the occasional wedding. Sure, most people went the official route and called the Public Outreach office instead of slipping cash into the hand of an animal caretaker who just happened to be working the closing shift, but the world will always make exceptions for the very rich and the rich, for their part, are happy to encourage this.

“You know, I’ve never seen a live one before,” Kurtz said, flushed from the climb and speaking quickly. “Heard all about them, of course. Hard not to, even when there was still a sizable wild population. And then last year I took my wife and kids to Weeki Wachee to see the fake ones—my god! There’s nothing like that on land. Not on two-legs, anyway. And I don’t suppose they’re the type of thing you’d keep in zoos.”

“Oh no,” I said, and chuckled. “No, the aquarium tried doing that about twenty years back. The kids loved it, but it made the adults uneasy. Said it was ‘disturbing.’ Most places have laws against it these days.”

“But let me guess, they’re okay with it now?” “Are you kidding!” I cried, loud enough that the empty amphitheater caught my voice and flung it back at me. “The state practically threw this one at us. They don’t have the resources to care for an animal this size. And as for patrons—we’ve had this display up for two weeks and we’ve already doubled our profit margin for the year. This place is packed from opening to closing. My boss even had to hire extra security to keep the crowd moving, make sure people see the other exhibits.”

We reached the top and I stood aside to let him pass. It struck me again how thin he was—emaciated, almost. You usually think of bankers as being fat, piggish men, but the only thing piggish about this one was a sense of appetite, a hunger that baked off him like a fever, visible only in a dart of the eye, a ruby flash of tongue across his bottom lip.

Without waiting for an invitation, Kurtz stepped out onto the feeding platform—a small, docklike structure connected to the walkway that circled the tank—went to the far end, and knelt. He bent his head low over the water, as if in prayer, but with eyes open, trawling the chemically-blued depths.

I don’t know who saw who first, whether it was Kurtz who drew the creature to him or the creature who, in its own eerie way, called Kurtz to the water’s edge. In the end, I guess it doesn’t really matter. Kurtz leaned out over the ledge, the tip of his nose almost grazing the surface of the water as the creature rose up to meet him, gauzy, tattered fins and bleached hair swirling behind it like a storm of wedding veils, or funeral shrouds.

I heard Kurtz’s breath catch in his throat.

“She’s stunning,” he whispered, and I had to wonder if we were looking at the same thing. Stunning—the mermaids of my youth had been that, certainly: plump, vivacious things with hair the dark green, almost black, color of fresh seaweed and scales as bright as coral. To these, the pale thing in the tank seemed only a distant cousin. A sad afterimage.

Once, as a teenager, I had gone joyriding on my father’s motorboat far out on the blue waves just to catch a glimpse of one that lay sunning itself on a sandbar. I had seen the mirrored glint of scales from the shore and when I laid anchor in the shallows a few yards away, I wasn’t disappointed. He was dozing on a small outcropping of rock, his man half well-fed but sleek, his deep ruby fins trailing with lazy opulence into the water, where they fluttered, weightless, on the current. Standing on the prow of my father’s boat, my skin sun-burned and licked raw by salt-spray, I noted that his face was like mine, but more carefully constructed—the features small and delicate, the bridge of his nose thin, almost elfin. Something stirred in me, a primal recognition: we could have been brothers.

Except for the tail, of course, and that was non-negotiable.

The eyes opened, met mine—a gaze as cynical and unblashed as a cat’s. He threw his head back and slapped the water with his tail, raising huge, glittering wings of spray into the air. I looked down, embarrassed; I could have sworn he was laughing at me.

It wasn’t until I took a vertebrate biology course in college that I learned just how different we were—the mutations, reproductive isolation, and divergent structures which had led to an increased lung capacity, a shrunken pre-frontal cortex, and a fusion of the creature’s two hind legs into a single, ichthyoid appendage. Any vestigial resemblance between Homo sapien and Homosicatae siren was a matter of aesthetics; they were a highly developed breed of sea-ape, nothing more.

The thing in the tank circled the feeding platform, its movements slow and labored.

“She’s the last one, isn’t she?” Kurtz asked. His eyes never left the water.
“Yes,” I said, and my heart gave an unwilling throb. The tail flicked up, breaking the tank’s surface like a restless ghost. “It was one thing to accept that they were gone, but this…? God, it almost makes me wish they were.”

Kurtz nodded, pursed his lips in sympathy, maybe I had been too quick to judge him. He was obviously an animal lover, and that was a hard thing for a man to be these days. After all, he must have seen them too, the corpses that had littered the beaches for months after the spill, some still fresh and painfully beautiful, while others lay bloated and stinking or burst open from the heat.

In the summer of 2050, Hurricane Samael, the largest tropical storm ever recorded, howled into the Gulf of Mexico like an avenging angel, swallowing twelve of the Gulf’s largest oil rigs in a single, catastrophic gulp. During the week that followed, the ocean floor hemorrhaged oil into the rolling waves while 300 mile per hour winds tore beachfront homes from their foundations and kept repair ships from capping the ruptured wells. What resulted was an oil spill so severe it made the fallout from Deepwater Horizon look like a glorified puddle. It took almost a year to close the wells and by that time Homocicata siren, a species which was already severely endangered from overhunting, stood little chance of survival. A few had starved, unable to hunt in the black water, but most had simply suffocated, their lungs clogged with oil from the broken rigs.

I know it may be hard to believe, but for many of us, when it came, the news of extinction was almost a relief. If nothing else, it promised an end to the more immediate horrors: the gore-slick beaches, the sickly-sweet smell that wafted in from the coast and choked the streets of Orlando, Miami, Panama City, until the cities stank like slaughterhouse dumpsters left out in the sun. Even now, ten years after the spill, fish and birds still washed up regularly, their scales black and slick, their matted feathers leaving dark stains that seeped permanently into the sand, but their deaths were sad and ubiquitous, and somehow expected, like roadkill. They seemed the inevitable cost of human civilization, and we could bear it the same way we could bear the loss of several species of mollusk and plankton that had died off in the spill. But the mermaids were different; before press access to the coast was cut off, there were videos of them everywhere, entire beaches of them, flailing in the sand and clawing at their throats as if to fend off an attacker while others lay still, their lips parted slightly, accusingly, in death.

Kurtz stroked the edge of the platform, caressing it, while his eyes tracked the mermaid’s roiling wake. “It’s kind of funny,” he said. “You remember the other last one? The dead male they dragged out of that New Orleans storm sewer?”

Of course, it was all over the news, I wanted to say, but I nodded instead, afraid that he would stop talking if I interrupted. Something about his voice, the cadence of it, the way one word flowed so perfectly after the next like water, like a river rushing seaward, it felt so unbearably right, the way two instruments sound when they play the same note, their voices resonating, rebounding, melding into a third, truer, more powerful voice. Listening to him, I could believe that Kurtz, alone, with his money, his voice, and his will, could set this broken world turning again. All I had to do was stand aside and let him.

It was humid at the top of the tank. I rolled up my sleeves and armed sweat from my forehead. Kurtz took off his suit jacket, folding it crisply along the seams. The fabric made a ripping sound under his bony fingers.

“It broke my heart,” he went on. “I couldn’t sleep, I couldn’t eat. I couldn’t even get out of bed. It was as if a part of me had died, as if I had lost a child. More, because I felt responsible somehow, like I had killed my child, like I was Abraham pulling the knife on Isaac. I kept rewatching that video, you remember, the one that went viral, where they bring the body up in the rescue sling? Even dead, he was beautiful, the way a jewel is still beautiful if you put it in a dimly lit room. It doesn’t dazzle you so much to look at them that way, and then I could finally see him for what he was; a thing. A precious thing, but like all things, possessable. I realized that he could have been mine and that now he never would. So when I heard about this one, I thought; here it is. Here’s my chance to see the last of them.” Kurtz peered at me sideways, a kind of hopeful, half-desperate look.

When he spoke again, his voice was low, conspiratorial. I noticed that he had taken out his checkbook and was fiddling with the black leather cover, flipping it up and down, up and down. “I could take her off your hands, you know,” he whispered. “I’ll write you a blank check, let you choose your price. Enough to pay for a shiny new Ferrari, a diamond ring for your girl—you look like the kind of man who can appreciate the thrills of ownership. Anything you want, anything at all—get her for me and it’s yours.”

“Er, I’m not sure I can do that,” I said. A rebuke, but a gentle one. That compelling voice of his had me wearing kid gloves. And, I know this is going to sound awful, but that diamond ring—not for a girl, but there was a certain boy I had been saving my paychecks for…

Kurtz tapped the checkbook impatiently against his thigh.

“I don’t know,” I said, rubbing the back of my neck. Choose your
There was a small ripple in the water to my left, a liquid exhale. Kurtz would be a source of comfort to it in its last months? It might crave a benevolent master, a familiar feeding hand. Perhaps could say the mermaid itself didn't want to be owned? Like a dog, could afford it, probably better than the aquarium could, and who yes, Kurtz would take good care of the mermaid wouldn't he? He

“Texas just placed a permanent burn ban within ten miles of the shoreline because a few sparks could make the whole Gulf go up, and the federal government wants to end the moratorium on new oil rigs. Anything that still happens to be alive in that cesspit won’t be much longer.”

“Well, there you have it,” Kurtz said. He grinned bitterly. “I manage the investment portfolios for Exxon and Halliburton, both want new rigs in the Gulf and trust me, they’ll get them. It’s really just a matter of sooner or later, just like the next oil spill, the next ecological crisis, the next major metropolitan area lost to rising sea-levels. What was that liberal meme? #Pray for Manhattan? This planet wasn’t meant to last, and neither were we, so why not get what we can while the getting’s good? If anyone does drag up another mermaid, I’ll come for that one, too, but right now I want this one and one way or another I’ll get her.”

A cool trickle of sweat ran down my spine, but it was something in Kurtz’s tone that made me shiver. Something which, if I hadn’t known better, sounded almost like a threat. I laughed uncomfortably.

“Hey man, listen, why don’t we check out a few of the other exhibits? We’ve got a whole wing on oil spills and ecological devastation that I think you’ll really enjoy. It’s interactive!”

But Kurtz was done listening; with luxurious slowness, he laid his folded jacket on the ground and on top of it his real silk tie, and I thought what a shame it was because I could already see the damp concrete staining the jacket’s fine exterior and knew it would be ruined. It seemed so stupid, there was no need, I would have held it for him if he had asked. But then again, his wastefulness was also demonstrative. It betrayed another jacket somewhere or another thousand, each with its attendant army of designers, tailors, sweatshops, and seamstresses, all of whom were interchangeable and therefore infinitely disposable. In short: he could afford it. Turning away from his ruined jacket, Kurtz peered over his shoulder at the mermaid. As if in recognition of some common nature, the mermaid looked back at him, its tail churning up ripples and thin trails of bubbles. Its hair floated along the surface like a drowned thing, white and eerily still. Waiting.

My stomach churned; I wanted to vomit.

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“A little bit, yeah.” I didn’t mean to say it, but it slipped out. Kurtz laughed. It was a spare, ugly sound.

“That’s fine,” he said, nodding. “That’s just fine. When I’m done here, I’ll be ruined. It seemed so stupid, there was no need, I would have held it for him if he had asked. But then again, his wastefulness was also demonstrative. It betrayed another jacket somewhere or another thousand, each with its attendant army of designers, tailors, sweatshops, and seamstresses, all of whom were interchangeable and therefore infinitely disposable. In short: he could afford it. Turning away from his ruined jacket, Kurtz peered over his shoulder at the mermaid. As if in recognition of some common nature, the mermaid looked back at him, its tail churning up ripples and thin trails of bubbles. Its hair floated along the surface like a drowned thing, white and eerily still. Waiting.

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“That’s fine,” he said, nodding. “That’s just fine. When I’m done here, that will probably be my byline, anyway.”

He stripped down to his undershirt, revealing the dive knife strapped to his scrawny bicep, and then I finally saw it, I had let a wolf into the hen house, and now I was the only thing standing between him and his prey. But all I could think to do was grope
stupidly at the money in my back pocket and hold it out to him, in the naïve hope that he would take it back and leave.

Kurtz gave the money in my hand a passing glance and I realized that it was nothing to him, pocket change, bait for a hook. So I lunged for him instead, my hand closing briefly on his arm before he wriggled out of my grip and dove head-first into the tank. Cursing, I ran to the platform’s edge. The bastard could swim, his body slicing through the blue water with surprising strength. He kicked out of his shoes and trousers as he went, arrowing straight for the waiting mermaid.

Options, I thought. What are my options?

There was an emergency scuba set at the top of the stairs, but I didn’t have time to wrestle with a wetsuit and this wasn’t my regular exhibit so who knew if the damn thing would even fit me. Dive in after him, anyway? But the man was crazy, armed, and, from the look of things, every bit as good as I was in the water. Diving into the tank fully-clothed could get me killed. I would have to work from a distance then, and fast. My eyes seized upon an abandoned pool skimmer at the edge of the tank and, throwing every ounce of conventional pool wisdom aside, I sprinted for it.

Bad choice. Halfway across the feeding platform, I slipped on a wet spot and came down wrong on my ankle. Reeling with adrenaline, I heard the bone snap before I felt it.

A commotion in the tank: Kurtz came up, his mouth wide and greedy for air, but he was only above water for a moment before a pale arm shot up and dragged him back under. Water flew overhead like a javelin.

I grasped for the pool skimmer at my side, aimed, and threw it. The skimmer plunged harmlessly into the water a yard to Kurtz’s left. He ignored it, kept swimming. I looked around for something else to throw, found nothing, then sat helplessly, watching Kurtz’s slow progress through the water.

Behind him, a shadow flickered in the depths. It struck me that I could no longer see the mermaid’s body. Kurtz’s hand found the edge of the feeding platform, but he made no move to pull himself out. Instead, he floated on his back, breathing hard from the exertion. Up close, his face was pale and drawn. Already, his smile had begun to fade as some new craving made itself known to him and the old fever was reignited.

I crawled, hands and knees scrapping against the concrete as I tried desperately to reach the skimmer rack on the far side of the platform, but my progress was agonizingly slow, and by the time I had the skimmer within my grasp, I was out of throwing distance.

They surfaced again, and this time Kurtz’s legs were wrapped around the mermaid’s scaly hips, clinging, holding her close even as she fought to slip away. He had her from behind, her white hair caught, tangled, in his fist as he drew her head back to reveal the slender, pulsing throat. But still the knife remained sheathed on his arm. What the hell was he doing?

The mermaid’s narrow face contorted. There was rage in her eyes and pain, but both were giving way to a look of awful comprehension as Kurtz’s lips pressed against the curve in her neck. She tried to buck him. Her tail slapped the water, raised a rabid, frothing wake, but Kurtz held fast. Just then, my ankle gave a sick throb and I had to look away.

A woman’s scream drifted up from the water. It snagged and pulled tight, caught like a fishhook in my stomach. That sound was mine, I knew, bought and paid for with Kurtz’s money.

When I turned back, Kurtz was returning his knife to its sheath, as a cut on his cheek bled sluggishly. The mermaid floated a few feet away, her navy blood forming a dark bruise in the water.

“There,” he said quietly. “Mine.”

“You’re a fucking psycho, you know that? You’ll pay for this. Once the police get a hold of you—” I was shaking, but Kurtz looked perfectly serene. He could have been a monk, floating there in the still water, his eyes half-lidded with contentment and dissipating pleasure. Anger rose in my throat, choked me with its acid-heat. I’m not a violent man but for the first and only time in my life, I wanted to kill.

Kurtz began a labored backstroke toward the platform. During the fight, the mermaid had dragged him to the center of the massive tank, an area the aquarium staff called “open ocean,” but what to the mermaid must have seemed just another part of her tiny prison. It wasn’t far to the platform, but the banker, who had moved so powerfully while submerged, struggled to keep himself afloat. A thin stream of crimson trailed behind him in the water.

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According to legend, sirens are creatures of music, women with the wings and voices of songbirds who lured ancient mariners to their deaths on rocky, Grecian shores. But real sirens are not particularly known for their music; although they can sing beautifully, their voices are no different from those of human women and their songs...
hold no secrets that the sea itself does not already know. But there is a little bit of truth in those stories, like a spider's leg held, suspended and distorted, in a bead of amber, and it makes me think that sirens are more honestly human than Homer ever gave them credit for. Like us, they are omnivores, living mostly on a diet of seagrasses, crabs, and small fish, but they have been known to eat larger animals, like manatees, when they become too numerous, overpopulate their habitat. Nature has no concept of justice, retribution, or cruelty, and it is for precisely this reason that nature understands self-regulation, executing it often to an unthinkable nicety.

Kurtz closed his eyes, breathed deeply, and sank a little, while a dorsal fin, pale as a shark's tooth, cut silently through the water.

FIN
This is the thriving Midwest forest. It is early July, and the full leaves of the beech trees are murmuring among themselves in the warm wind. Their smooth bark is distinct from the rough bark of the oaks and maples. The trees stand proud and strong, immovable against the wind. Only the uppermost branches sway, thin arms bending far above my head. I wander barefoot under the rustling canopy, wincing with every step that places me on top of a stick or rock that digs into my feet. A kaleidoscope of greens play across the worn dirt trails. Every once in a while a wooden post with a blue arrow points me in the direction of the path. Between the posts, I am able to forget that I am following a predetermined route, and not just wandering through a sacred grove.

The trees around me, predominantly beech, are draped across the land, following its ridges and dips. They remind me of the hairs that rise from skin, erect, following the soothing caress of a hand along a lower back. The land here falls up and down like waves, hilly unlike much of the geography of Southwest Michigan. As I walk, I reach the top of one of these many slopes. I am standing on an esker, an ancient remnant from when glaciers dragged across these lands and carved out the flat expanses into rolling ridges. As I walk on, the swelling and dropping of the land makes me think of waves, as if the grasses themselves once crested upon these trees and are only frozen in time.

These trees are young. Though they tower above me and are elderly compared to my own age, they have not seen much of the world. This is a second growth forest, meaning it has recently recovered from a disturbance event, an event that no longer has left visible scars. The forest is recovering from damage and suffering. Nearly all of the trunks are the same height. There is little staggering of growth, as these trees are relatively young and have spent their whole lives in an initial recovery phase. But this forest looks healthy, feels healthy, green and growing despite previous harm. It looks as if nothing has ever abused it. It looks as if nothing could, or will. How amazing that on first glance wounds can look fully healed, and the scars are only noticed when a scrutinizing eye takes a closer look.
With the restless shuffling of leaves and the occasional scattering of a chipmunk under the brush, this is a natural world, taken from the hands of man and returned to its healthy state. I see no litter, besides a lone, empty can of beer, the first piece of trash I’ve seen here. I pick it up and crush it in my hand as I step up onto a bench. The trail is less marked here. It branches off from the main one, allowing for someone to take a break and lose themselves in the trees. I listen to the songbirds in the twigs.

Recovery. Everything is trying to recover here, trying to come back and flourish. It feels a little bit like healing. The wounds are gone and the scars are subsiding. After the trauma, there is growth. Trees, shrubs, bark, skin, hair, nails; we heal, slowly and deliberately. Just as the forest will come back to itself, so do all living things. We need to allow for time and space, to let the roots sink deep again, to let the reservoir refill. The body recovers. The forest reestablishes.

A forest doesn’t grow in a day. Destruction can be quick, wiping the board clean in minutes or days. But mending is slow. It takes months and years and decades, an age will pass before a forest can be even a ghost of what it was, and it won’t be the same. The same can be said for me.

I can’t grow back in a day. My hair won’t grow back in a month, now that it’s been shaved. My skin took days to heal after a few cuts, but the scars won’t fade for a long time. New skin will grow over it, over the wrinkles and dips dug into epidermis. I can feel, along my bicep, my own eskers, where a cold glacier of steel once carved out its own ridges, by my own hands. Months later, and the scars remain. They might always remain, my own second-growth, my own proof of a disturbance event. But hair grows back, skin grows back. Before trauma, during trauma, following trauma, there is growth, and it does not stop.

We grow back. Not the same as we once were, not composed of the same parts. This forest will never be exactly what it was before it was disturbed, but it can grow into something new, perhaps something better adapted or stronger. With enough time and protection, partial recovery is possible. The white oak, American beech, and red maple around here are fighting for their space and competing for resources. The ghosts of their predecessors linger in the young wood as the trees grow.

And I will grow back. I will sink my roots deep, find my supports so that even when the winds blow, I won’t shake. Like these trees I will stand tall, proud, not unharmed and clean but rugged and dirty. I will be scarred but whole.

The wind keeps playing up there, above me. The leaves still murmur, whispering among themselves and rattling against each other. From where I stand, on the bench, the forest spreads all around me, the only thing I can see. It is all I need to see for now, the healthy green foliage calming in a way I could never fully comprehend.

I turn around, jump off the bench, and follow the trail again. I jog downhill, unable to fight the force of gravity pushing me along. My feet land on rocks and roots. Despite the pain, I keep going. I take a break from the trail to walk on the grass, to dip my feet in the waves cresting upon the trunks. I leave the trees behind, thinking of their youth and what they might have seen. I think of the trees before them, the victims of whatever tore this wood down. Everything can grow back.
at every loud noon i stretch the tendrils of my heart across the hill,
my knees bent loud as noontime tides with yours at the brim of the lake who tells
me: i am ready to love again, and i believe her. i take
her word for it. i take her word, bury it at the contrail between
water and redemption, where we echo our apologies like birds.
from here, her big blue lung is aching and hollow and hungry for truth
when she tells me your secrets like she thinks she’s god and i believe her.
big lake, i’m calling back. big lake, we yawn at the clasping vestige where
a thousand mended jaws float in the waves. we were born here: two anchors
who grew into answers calling back across the straits—and forgiveness spilling
between our shoulders, ready to love again. ready to love
again, yes, i believe the big lake and all her blue accordances
for she tells me i am ready to love again and i believe her.
we cannot describe the water. it is not breaking, falling, cuts

it is the first indivisible. the center of our “we”

we can only name the lakeshore home.

we stand and do not bow. we watch over crests and creation.
	side by side, always together the water, the water, the tales
clear, the lack of salt. we count blessings.

we hold the land firmly still.
we gather up the nutrients.

hold them tight, let them go.
when needed, we say “let’s hold the soil, closer still, let’s get taller.”

let us teach you how to hold on. child who tries to move the lake
that's not the gift it wants from you.
we know you to be like us, you hear

water's kisses
in love poems.

there are days when even we
want to leave. start out fresh

somewhere far from poisoned waters.
we received smallpox blankets too, we

are the worst
clairvoyants.

but oh, we are good at living
here. those who can survive

have a duty to survive. Zaaga'igan:
the center we cannot leave behind.

we understand
you are lonely.

your world of the west
feels so much like death,

and you are scared of dying out.
remember: you are the same as us.

placing hands
into the soil,

taking out the arsenic.