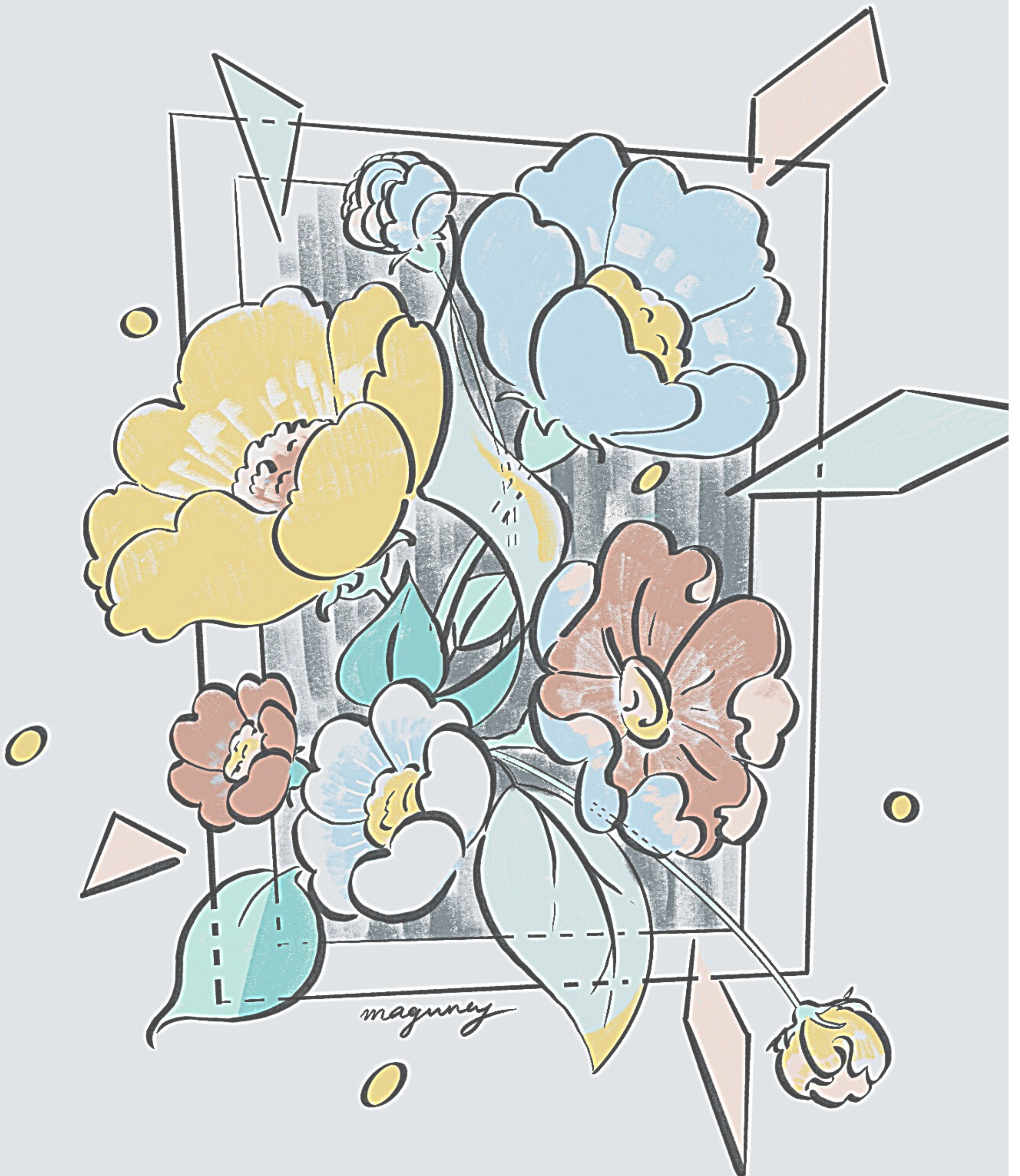


piecework



bentley literary society
2020

piecework

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a word from the editors

It is safe to say that this has been a difficult year for all of us. For the freshmen, their first year of college was cut short, as they lose the important memories and experiences that they will now no longer have. For the sophomores, who have been slowly gaining their footing and becoming good members of the Bentley community, only to lose a portion of such an important year. For the juniors, who now begin to envision their life ahead, while the world around them changes greatly. And for the seniors, who were preparing to leave Bentley with fond memories of once-in-a-lifetime events, only to have them stripped away. For all, a year that ended so suddenly and left so many things behind.

Every year, *Piecework* is published to showcase the creativity and ingenuity of Bentley students. It highlights the identities of the individual authors and the diversity of students' imaginations as a whole. However, this year's *Piecework* is more than that. This year's *Piecework* is special. This year's *Piecework* is not only there to celebrate the creative efforts of the Bentley community, but also stands as a testament to student perseverance and strength. As Bentley Literary Society, we knew that having the year end abruptly could not mean that *Piecework* would not be published. Conversely, this is perhaps the year that it had to be published most. This *Piecework* proves that our traditions and culture at Bentley will not be undermined by the most difficult circumstances.

So please join us in celebrating the students who endure these trying times and continue to create. Celebrate both the artistic endeavors and the individual strength of every student at Bentley.

We would like to thank all of the authors who submitted their works, and the entire student body, for proving how inspiring the Bentley community is. We wish you good health and peace of mind in these times, and best of luck moving forward in this challenging reality.

Yours,

Bentley Literary Society

fiction

a quiet life

brian piotrowski

He adjusted his jacket, still unaccustomed to the lightness of not carrying a pistol under his left armpit. The gun had been the last vestige of his old life that he gave up. After retiring, he had continued to wear it both out of habit and because it made him feel safe. But he knew that it did not make Jeannette feel safe—quite the opposite. To her it was a reminder of the danger he had been in and the danger that they would always be in. He felt bad knowing that it troubled her, so he had stopped wearing it. It was incompatible with his new life. And Jeannette was the only thing that mattered to him now.

So here he was sitting on the cobbled street outside a café in Lyon. He was dressed well, his jacket accentuating his muscular physique. Although he had spent fifty-odd years on this earth, he still looked to be in his mid-thirties—the result of his athletic lifestyle.

He was not waiting to meet another agent, nor was he tailing a foreign diplomat. He was just waiting for his wife to return from the restroom. He should be calm. He tried to be calm. But of course he wasn't. His vigilance, which bordered on paranoia, had saved his life many a time but now it hindered his ability to live that life. He wished that he could hang up his nerves as easily as he had hung up his gun.

“Peter?” Jeannette lightly placed her hand on his forearm as she took her seat. “Are you alright?” Her cheerful blue eyes gazed into Peter's sad green ones and Peter knew that she didn't need an answer; she already understood.

Peter smiled. He could feel his heartbeat slowing. She was here. It was alright. Jeannette's wavy brown hair was being picked up by a light breeze. Peter hadn't noticed it, but he had become quite warm and the breeze refreshed him, bringing with it the smell of coffee with a hint of cigarettes. Jeannette's hand now rested on top of his own. He let out a long breath as he gradually returned to the calm, pleasant plane of existence that Jeannette inhabited.

Peter could see Todd approaching from the other side of the road. They were expecting Todd and he was right on time, but Peter wished that he would have been late. Todd was the welcoming committee, a friendly Canadian expat that Jeannette had met at one of the French classes she was taking. Jeannette hoped the he would give them a foothold into some semblance of a social life in their new city. He was around Jeanette's age—mid-thirties—he was beginning to bald and had a jovial air about him.

Through their conversation, Peter learned that Todd's profession consisted of doing something uninteresting with computers and his hobbies consisted of doing something uninteresting with sports cards. From what Peter could tell, Todd led a remarkably uninteresting life. The kind of quiet life that Peter hoped to attain for himself.

"How did you two meet?" Todd asked after some time.

"Online" Responded Peter with a wry smile towards Jeannette. Jeanette met this with a look of mild disapproval. This was her least favorite of their many fake meeting stories. She preferred the version where they met on a cruise, but she often changed the details of that story. For all her many virtues, Jeannette had never mastered the art of lying. So today, Peter chose the simplest of all their alibies. No boat names or ports to remember. Just a simple, pedestrian meeting story.

Lying, of course, was second nature to Peter and elaborating on the story put Peter at ease. The lie had the opposite effect on Jeanette. She had gotten better at hiding her discomfort with their many lies, but it was still an active effort for her. Peter began telling Todd about himself and about Jeanette.

Peter liked being Peter Edgewood, the architect from the Connecticut suburbs whose passion for Mansard roofs had brought him to France to write a book on the subject. He had borrowed so many personas throughout the years, but this was the first time in thirty-two years that he had his own. Of course, Peter was not the name given to him by his mother. One could say that it was not his "real name", but to him it was the most real name that he had ever had since it was the name by which Jeannette knew him.

"What's your name?" Peter asked once they were back in their apartment that evening.

"Peter, I'm not that bad" Jeannette protested with a roll of her eyes.

"What's your name? Peter repeated.

"Jeannette Edgewood"

“And your maiden name?”

“Clement”

“Why are you in France, Mrs. Edgewood?”

She moved closer and touched his arm playfully, “Because I fell in love with the dashing Peter Edgewood and I can’t bear to be apart from him.”

Peter suppressed a smile. He was enjoying her exaggerated playfulness, but he needed her to be serious.

“And how old are you?”

“That’s no question to ask a lady!” she started playfully, but when she saw Peter frown she dropped her act. “Thirty-two”

“And if I remember correctly, your younger sister is thirty-four. Isn’t that right?”

Jeannette’s lips moved to form an answer but then stopped before opening. “I’m sorry Peter. I told Todd she was thirty-four, didn’t I?” She looked down, realizing the mistake she had made.

Seeing Jeannette come to this realization made Peter himself feel embarrassed. Why had he felt it was necessary to make his wife feel bad about such a trivial detail? But of course, it was important, every detail was important. His cheeks blushed ever so slightly and he looked out the window to hide it. The apartment, which they had rented for two weeks, looked out into a small cobblestone plaza where street vendors were packing up their wares for the day. They had the skill that Jeannette needed, Peter was sure that they regularly told lies about the quality and authenticity of their products. But, he thought to himself, he should not fault his wife for her hesitance to lie. In any other situation it would be a virtue.

Peter exhaled. He didn’t have anything more to say to Jeannette, he had made his point. He started towards the kitchen to begin cooking dinner, he was planning to make a ragu sauce, when he was struck by a sharp question from Jeannette.

“What’s your name?” Her tone was confrontational.

“Peter Edgewood.” He responded with a small smile. He knew his alibi.

“But that’s not your real name.”

“It is now.” Peter said matter-of-factly, continuing towards the kitchen.

But Jeannette wasn’t finished, “So what was your name before that?”

“I’ve had many names; I don’t see why they matter.”

“Peter, please, it matters to me. What did your mother call you?”

“Looks like we’re out of pasta.” Peter remarked as he opened a cabinet, acting as if Jeannette’s question didn’t exist. Jeannette just glared at him, letting her question hang heavy in the air. “I’ll go buy some more. Be back in a half hour.”

Jeannette awoke to find Peter’s side of the bed empty. Instead of seeing her husband, she saw a neatly arranged pillow with the sheets pulled over it in Peter’s attempt at making the bed with her still in it. This was usual, as he was an early riser. She rolled over to get back to sleep, but the mid-morning sun shining through the window made sleep impossible.

She could smell food cooking in the kitchen: eggs and fresh basil. This meant that Peter had returned from the gym. Jeannette had talked to him about this before. Although she appreciated his commitment to exercise—the results of which were self-evident—she wished she could wake up to her husband some mornings instead of having him sneak out at dawn. She had won his presence for Mondays and Fridays, but today was a Sunday so she woke up alone.

One consolation to Peter’s early morning excursions was that he purchased fresh bread and food every morning. Very French of him. He did not keep perishable food in the house; he claimed it was for the quality of the ingredients, although Jeannette wondered if he did it out of fear of the food being poisoned while he was out of the house. Jeannette wished that she didn’t have to guess at his motives like that, but she knew it was the reality of their life. He didn’t want her to worry so he kept things from her. It usually just made her worry more.

Jeannette tossed off her sheets and left them there. She was not in the habit of making the bed, something that irked Peter endlessly. It was not because Jeannette was spoiled—although one who was familiar with her wealthy upbringing could reasonably come to that conclusion—it Piotrowski 6 was just not something that Jeannette felt was important. She never understood why it bothered Peter so much. She put on her bathrobe and went to the kitchen.

“Bonjour ma chère” Peter said affectionately as he kissed her on the forehead and pulled her close. He was dressed in a sky-blue Chambray shirt and chinos. She smiled as she felt the coarse linen of the shirt against her face. She had picked it out for him; his style had been so drab and serious before she started helping him dress.

“You’ll have to excuse me, Jeannette,” Peter began with his usually politeness, pulling away slightly to look at his wife’s face, “but I’ve scheduled a house-viewing at ten-thirty and I’ll need to leave in a moment. Breakfast is on the table and I’ll meet you for lunch at twelve-thirty.” Peter began walking to the bedroom, “Le Petite Buchon, I want to try the bolognaise that Todd mentioned. Sound good?”

“Are you looking at the cabin?” Jeannette called after him.

“Yup.”

“It’s not really a house then, is it?” quipped Jeannette.

“I suppose not.” Peter returned from the bedroom and left.

So it was the cabin after all, Jeannette thought to herself. Not Nice where her aunt lived, not Lyon where her new friends were but a shack in the woods.

Peter’s long stride took him up the steep, forested hill and to the doorway of the small cabin. The realtor was winded from the hike and had told Peter to go on without him. Peter took a moment to appreciate the view: trees stretched out in every direction, colliding with snow-capped mountains in every direction except for to the west, where he could make out Lyon in the distance. Peter knocked three times and waited with his hands behind his back. When no answer was forthcoming, he grasped the knob and pushed aside the heavy door. The cabin looked to have been empty for a while. The beams of light that shown through the rafters picked up bits of dust in the air.

There was an old book sitting on the shelf, covered in dust. At first Peter didn’t think much of it until he recognized the title which, surprisingly, was in English. Peter took the book in his left hand, holding it away from his face to avoid the dust that fell off it, *Where the Wild Things Are*. He smiled, and put it back on the shelf, facedown. He had fond memories of his mother reading that book to him. Peter settled himself on a wooden rocking chair, feeling comfortable exerted from the hike.

Peter ran his fingers over the carvings on the arms of the chair. His fingers skidded in and out of the grooves. He wished Jeannette would stop focusing on the past—his past—and would look to the future. This cabin would be their future, although he knew Jeanette would hate it at first. She had insisted on living in the city; she was a social creature and needed people around. Peter understood that a cabin in the woods was a big change from Jeanette’s former life as a British socialite, but it was necessary for their security. Peter closed his eyes and brought up the memory.

“But won’t your government protect you? Isn’t there some type of witness protection program?” Jeannette had protested as they strolled through the gardens of her family estate in England.

“Protect me? They don’t care about me, they care about what I know. They’ll protect their secrets which, unfortunately, are stuck inside my brain. The easiest way for them to get them out is with a bullet.”

“You worked for the Americans, they wouldn’t do that! Anyways, how can I help if you won’t even tell me about what you did for them?”

“Why do you need to know these things? Knowledge is danger and I will not put you in danger just to satisfy your curiosity.”

He opened his eyes and glanced at his watch. Half-past eleven. Jeanette would be expecting him soon. He rose from his chair and brushed the dust off his pants. He glanced at the book one last time, placed the chair back in its original position, and then exited through the cabin’s only door, making sure to close it firmly so that the latch clicked.

Jeannette was not there when he got to the restaurant. Peter waited in the lobby assuming that she was running late, which would not have been atypical of her. He gave a description of Jeanette to the maître-d’, “172cm tall, brunette, blue eyes, mid-thirties, speaks French with a British accent?” But he had not seen anyone like her. After a half-hour, he returned to the apartment, walking quickly on his way back. She’s probably just feeling sick, he told himself.

“Jeanette?” he called on entering the apartment. The silence persisted. His right hand instinctually padded his left armpit, but found nothing there. The apartment was calm and quiet, but Peter’s heartrate was elevated and his nerves were tense as he crept to the bedroom.

When he got there, all three of Jeannette’s large designer suitcases were gone and there was a note on the perfectly made bed. She had gone to Nice. He was not to follow her. She needed some time alone to think through how their life together would work. She needed to step back from the lies and the tension. She reassured him that she loved him and that this was not goodbye, just a break. She would write to him at their PO Box in Lyon. Next to the letter was a postcard from Nice that her aunt had sent her a month before. She had shown it to Peter when they argued about where to live.

In the days that followed, Peter ate less and drank more. His athletic physique slimmed as he often forgot to cook. He was never much of a drinker but decided that this was as good a time as any to start. During the days, he wandered the streets of Lyon not knowing what he was meant to do. Without Jeannette to distract him he noticed more. When he drove, there was a license plate number that he saw far too often. When he ran by the river, he saw the same two faces more often than chance would have it. He was not alone. He placed a hair inside his keyhole in the morning and found it missing when he returned in the evening. He was not free.

After two months, he bought the cottage in the woods on the hill. He cleaned it up and cut trees to build an addition. It reminded him of the cabin his family had in Vermont when he was a kid. His dad would take him up there where they would chop wood and build fires. The physical work was good for him; it gave him a purpose. He began to cook again and to eat his usual amount. His muscles slowly returned. He grew a small beard.

He thought often of Jeannette and of the life that he had envisioned for the two of them. He kept the Wild Things book in a corner of the desk. He imagined himself reading it aloud to his child by the fire with Jeannette. He remembered that Jeannette was not much of a fan of fires, but maybe she'd come around to the idea.

He also liked the quiet of being alone. Jeannette had always wanted to go on adventures but since Peter's entire life had been an adventure, he enjoyed the peace and stability of his quiet life.

He went into the city every Tuesday to check the PO Box. He kept this habit through the fall and even trudged through the snow when it came in the winter. It was one of these snowy winter days when he arrived at the post office, bundled in a red plaid scarf, and found a single letter in his box.

Jeannette was ready to come back. She understood why he had kept secrets. She understood that there would always be secrets and loved him anyways. She would be at the café in the cobbled street, the one where they had met Todd, next Sunday at 2pm. Meet her there. She found a place for them to live in Nice. She still loved him.

It was perfect. All too perfect. He opened his coat and put the letter under the many layers. He spoke to the clerk and closed out the PO Box, he would no longer need it. The PO Box in the name "Peter Edgewood" was the last proof of that man's existence. This was the first time that he felt sad about abandoning an identity. Jean-Paul pulled his scarf tightly around his neck and returned to his cabin in the woods.

chai

sneha durairaj

I could smell my mother's chai brewing in the kitchen. When a cup of chai is just right, the cloud of spices settles heavily over you, enfolding you in their comforting warmth and softly lulling you into a deep slumber. Tinged with supple cardamom, hand-ground cinnamon, and fragrant star anise, my mother's chai wrapped its intoxicating flavor around me with every sip. Humming to herself like a witch out of lore as she stirred the pot simmering on the stove, one cup of her flavorful tea could always turn long evenings around and transform my family's weary faces into those ready for a laugh and another mug.

The pungent, woody flavor of cardamom reminded me of her years in a foreign country painfully separated from everything she knew, all for the sake of the future of her children. The intensely heady and enduring aroma of cinnamon evoked the traditional bonds she left behind in the sunny Indian village that raised her, a distantly hazy memory in the Pacific Northwest she brightens now. And finally, the luxuriant star anise is what brought the enchantment together — the uninhibited, unconditional love that she folded carefully into every single cup of chai that she expertly crafted.

She handed me the tea with a smile as I said goodbye.

halcyon

sneha durairaj

The rows of weathered wooden shelves weighed down the quaint little bookstore. With each step of hers, the graying carpet muffled the softly creaking floorboards as the muted pitter-patter of the constant Seattle rain outside supplemented thoughts with an eternal background hum. She ran her fingers along the worn, gilded spines of the antique books, and snagged one that looked promisingly ancient. Turning open the cover, she glanced at the date of publication: 1804. The year Haiti secured its independence in a slave revolt. The year Aaron Burr shot Alexander Hamilton dead in a duel. The year France formally proclaimed Napoleon Bonaparte its emperor.

Formerly taut in concentration, her lips relaxed into a slight smile. She flipped through the pages extremely carefully. One hasty movement, and she knew that they'd tear out of the book with the ease of a winged bird taking flight. Her eyelids fell shut. She breathed in steadily. The scents of deteriorating paper, heady musk, and a note reminiscent of sweet vanilla drenched her soul as she contemplated all the years of history that she bore gently in her hands. All the owners of this book throughout the centuries had held it just as she does now, although perhaps a bit less gingerly.

In a distant time, her own bookshelf had been replete with these little snippets of halcyon times past. Each had told a completely captivating story not just in the slightly smearing ink on its pages but in the frayed wear on its cover, the crinkled, yellowing paper, and the slowly fading sheen on the edges. People were preserved in these old books, in a different, more tangible way than traditional interpretations of history. Each book is a living, breathing creature, capturing the essences of all who have held it and binding them together in paper and cloth.

Some days when the relentless rain had pounded insistently against her window, she had dipped into these books with the lightness of spring dew, cautiously examining not only the printed words but the ripped corners, wondering what year of the hundreds spanning that book's existence someone had been impetuous enough to cause them.

Her bookshelf had represented her own personal haven of nostalgic history isolated in an external world of technology and cold concrete. It had carried a mysterious kind of secret enchantment, the kind that you didn't notice gradually settling over you until it enveloped you entirely and stole you away. Time preserved so carefully that it breathed sparkling life into the inanimate; it had been utterly spellbinding.

She closed the book and opened her eyes, drawn out of her momentary trance and back into her sharply biting reality. The hands that gently cradled that printed piece of magic were wizened and haggard from years of wear and misfortune, having lost their innocently youthful softness long ago. Subdued, she deliberately slipped the book into her bag and disappeared into the raging downpour and caustic wind, allowing the familiar rain to mingle with her tears.

season's poet

seth wise

Part I

Nick ran across the street as horns blared, barely escaping a 12 passenger van. He slipped into the woods on the other side of the street just as the sun sunk below horizon. He made his great escape into the woods. Into the dark.

He wandered farther into the dark forest walking comfortably on the paths he knew like the back of his hand. He had never been here when it had been this dark but he didn't need light to avoid the roots sticking out of the ground or the low-hanging branches. As he walked he began to sing an old song his friend Tom had written when they were kids.

Sing song

Song song song

Songs scare away the scared

Not scared

Sing sing sing

Sing song

It was an awful song. He hated it but it got stuck in his head sometimes. As he got close to a large clearing he stopped singing. He heard a rustle in the trees. He turned and looked to see bird, a canary fly across the light of the moon and then the moonlight disappeared.

Part II

Nick woke up in the middle of the clearing with the sun beating down on his face. He looked around and couldn't see his body. He had been buried in the dirt up to his neck. His head didn't hurt but he didn't remember anything. His right arm was loose and he began digging his way out. As he examined the dirt he realized it had set and grass had begun growing. Either he had been put in the dirt for several months or there was magic dirt in this forest.

It took him most the day to get the his body dug out. Finally free, he ran out of the woods a different way. He didn't sing this time. When he got out he turned back and looked at the woods that he once thought to be so familiar and, for the first time in a long time, noticed the "No Trespassing after Dark" sign posted on a tall spruce at the edge of the woods.

Part III

Uncertainty overtook him when he only found burnt remains at his home. His anxiety grew as he ran down the street and knocked on Tom's door. Tom's brother Joe answered the door and yelled at him to get lost and chased him away. Nick thought this was odd but he and Joe had never gotten along so he didn't think too much of it.

Hoping for familiarity and some clarity, Nick decided to head to The Bay, a hideout that he, Tom, and several friends shared. When he arrived no one was around so he made his way to the kitchen. They couldn't keep much there but he found just enough to make a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. He was just starting to eat when Matt entered. Seeing Matt, Nick yelled in excitement and relief. He began spewing out the details of his day sprinkled with questions.

Matt only listened with his back to Nick as he cleaned up the sandwich makings. He distractedly turned and sent a text before addressing Nick.

"Why did you come back?" he asked in a deranged, quietly angry, manner.

Confused, Nick just responded "What do you mean? I was just gone last night."

Matt grabbed the butter knife he had just cleaned and charged at Nick. Nick jumped out of the way of Matt's poorly coordinated attack.

"Are you insane?! What are you doing?" Nick yelled at Matt. Matt turned and yelled at him to get out. Nick ran past Matt knocking the knife out of his hand.

Part IV

Nick returned to where his house had stood just a day earlier and began to explore. It was right on the edge of a large traffic circle with a beautifully designed garden in the middle. His parents had made a half-hearted attempt to block the road from the view of the lawn by planting evergreens around the property. He walked from the traffic circle up the driveway towards the house. The burnt foundation was all that remained. The image haunted him.

As he approached the house he saw a shadow and turned to see Tom entering the driveway. Uncertain because of his interactions with Joe and Matt he hesitantly addressed Tom, "Tom, you're here." It was an observation, not a question. Tom simply nodded, a distant look in his eyes; but he didn't have the deranged or angry looks that had been shared by both Joe and Matt. Tom slowly walked towards Nick and the house turning his gaze to the ground. He glanced at Nick as he passed him and then walked through the area that used to be the garage door and sat on stairs that led to the basement.

Nick joined him on the stairs and waited for Tom to say something. It took a couple minutes but Tom finally asked, "Why did you do it?" it wasn't accusatory but it carried the weight of years of uncertainty.

Confused by depth of emotion expressed in this simple question and unsure of how to respond simply said, "I wish I knew what you were talking about."

"I knew you. What you did..." his voice trailed off. He opened his mouth a couple times without words coming out before he said, "You should have talked to me."

Nick was beginning to wonder whose life he had walked back into. He didn't know what to ask and simply said, "Do my parents know? What did they say?"

Tom looked at him incredulously and snorted in disgust as he said, "They're gone."

"Where did they go?"

“No.” Tom said, his face growing pale and eyes darkened. Looking Nick right in the eyes he articulated every word, “They are gone.” He turned away, paused, and then got up and walked away.

Nick’s head fell as he realized what Tom had meant. He felt his eyes burn as tears slowly fell down his face.

Part V

As the sun was setting, Nick dried his tears and slowly began walking the burnt halls that used to be his home. He paused before entering his old bedroom and looked at the ground where a trapdoor was located. He cautiously opened it, hoping to find answers.

He looked down in the darkness. He felt around until his hands grasped a rope ladder that descended into a cavern of uncertainty. He climbed onto the ladder and slowly made his way down. About 15 feet down he felt solid ground again. There were no lights but he felt a strong urge to wander, and to run. He turned away and started a slow trot into the darkness.

Overwhelmed with confusion, his emotions took over and he began to run faster until he was at an all-out sprint. He stopped as he heard the whistling of a bird. It was a canary, he recognized it as the foreign bird was common in the forest, having been imported in large numbers by a wealthy bird enthusiast. The singing seemed particularly beautiful to him at this moment. He stopped to listen. He began to whistle himself. He whistled Tom’s Song song.

He then heard footsteps and another person whistling. He jumped, wishing he’d hung onto Matt’s butter knife as fear filled his mind. He called out, “Who’s there?”

The whistling slowly stopped as the footsteps drew near. The person was standing nearby when they exclaimed, “Nick! I’ve been waiting for you.” It was calm, expectant, and controlled. “I see you’ve been crying. What’s wrong?” the voice asked compassionately.

Hoping to trust Nick slowly began, "Something is wrong. I was out last night and nothing is the same today."

The voice responded, "You were not out last night. You were out last spring and slept through the summer. Fall will end soon."

"What?" Nick shouted, "What do you mean? What happened? Where is my Family?!" Slowly growing more hysteric with each question. He sat down and began to cry again.

"Nick, I needed you. I didn't want you to suffer, but your suffering was worth it to gain control of those you love."

"Who are you?" Nick asked angrily.

The voice responded coolly, "Among us, we don't normally reveal our names but since you will die down here, there's no harm in my telling you that I am Zabdeel." His voice turning steely, he continued, "By taking your life, I gain my own back."

"Why do you need my life to live?" Asked Nick.

Nick couldn't hear any footsteps but the voice slowly got closer as it said, "Oh, it didn't have to be you. But I chose you. You were strong but scared, so easy to steal life from and build my new self. I was not meant to live. I was hit by a car as a child and in the moments as death neared I was given the choice to live but I had to trade places with someone."

"And you decided to trade places with me?"

"Yes, Nick, I did. I spent years studying you, preparing to trade with you. When you were 12, I prepared to kill you when I discovered how uncertain this promise of life was for me."

"You were planning to kill me 6 years ago." Nick pondered to himself. "Why didn't you?" he asked Zabdeel.

"I realized that a cursed life came by killing those whose life you took. I had waited this long, I could wait longer. The reason, I have not killed you Nick is because I cannot and still live a full life. But you still must die. And the longer you live, the less of a life I get." he said sadly.

Nick charged at the voice, his blood boiling as a violent yell seared from his lips. He felt an icy chill but didn't find the body of the voice. "Show yourself, you animal!" Nick screamed.

"Oh Nick, I hate to see you suffer like this, but it is too late for you. I already control those you love. Well, those that are left of those you love." Zabdeel said as his voice trailed off menacingly.

"What did you do to my parents?" Nick asked in a whispered rage.

"No, Nick the question is what you did to them. After all, the police reported that it was you who burned down the house. They also found Tom's body in the woods where you always claimed you would run away to and build your secret hideout, like 'Robin Hood' you always said. Do you feel like Robin Hood now?" The voice was now mocking and the words cut like knives.

"Tom, Tom's not dead, I just talked to him." Nick said accusingly.

"Did you talk to Tom? Perhaps it was a Ghost. Because Nick, this one thing is true, you kill Tom. I couldn't kill you but I could kill others. What I discovered was a way to not only take your life but to also gain control of all those in your life. I have taken your life and turned it inside out."

"You framed me? That's why Joe chased me. And why Matt attacked me?" he asked more to himself than to Zabdeel.

"You are beginning to understand." Zabdeel responded. "What I discovered when you were twelve, that prevented me from killing you then, was that by taking those things most important to you, and leaving you to die on your own, I gained far more than just your life, I would also be able to control those in it. It was worth the wait to gain this additional life." His voice gained a level of self-magnanimity as he continued, "I spent five and a half years planning this greatest of heists and when you die in this cavern, I will have completed my journey. I will live again."

"You can't!" Nick yelled ridiculously, "I'll - I'll stop you!"

“The only way to stop me is to kill me. You have a month until the winter solstice when the fall ends and winter begins. All will become permanent at that point, and you will die either way.”

“Then I will hunt you down and kill you.”

“Nick, I know your every thought and every desire. You will not find or kill me.” Zabdeel responded, growing impatient. “And besides, I am not going to wait until the winter solstice to live again. You are going to die down here very soon.”

Nick yelled erratically, cursing, gibberish and crying all mixed together but it died in the empty cavern. Zabdeel was gone. As Nick gave up his yelling, he heard the singing of the Canary growing quieter until it weakened and stopped altogether.

Part VI

Nick quietly entered The Bay, brushing snow off of his head and shoulders as he stopped in the doorway. He heard a familiar tune being sung from a side room, it sounded like Matt. He walked past the room and toward the kitchen. A caped figure bolted to the back of the room. Nick called out to him.

As he turned Nick took in the feathered hat he was wearing and a long green cloak. Recognizing the unfamiliar face he said “Zabdeel.”

There was no response only a menacing laugh.

“You conniving rogue.” Nick said calmly as he took a step towards Zabdeel.

Zabdeel turned away and absentmindedly responded, “You are dying.”

“I’m not going to let that happen.” Nick said, his voice rising, as he reached down to grab the butter knife Matt had attacked him with.

“Nick, you are angry and upset.” Zabdeel said before pausing, “but you aren’t a killer.” He finished quietly as he turned to face him again.

“I burned my house down and killed Tom. That’s what you told me.” Nick replied in a somber but calm tone. “That’s who you made me.” He said brandishing the knife in a carefree but threatening manner. He had felt himself growing weaker over the previous month but he knew what he had to do.

Realizing the earnestness of Nick's threats and seeing no escape, Zabdeel began to protest incoherently citing things like love and compassion; things he had abandoned long ago. Nick's eyes grew cold and looking at the knife he said, "Is it really murder, Zabdeel, if you're already dead?" Gathering what remained of his strength he stepped towards Zabdeel.

The singing stopped and everything froze. Zabdeel sucked in one last breath of air and then laughed as a sick smile slowly covered his pale face. Nick stabbed him.

Nick watched as the feathered hat fell to the ground. He was alive. His eyes traveled to his arm and with a shameful satisfaction he watched the blood trickle down his hand and queasily realized it was evaporating. He looked up at the face of his victim and with horror, met the stare of Tom's lifeless green eyes.

cloudy day

alyssa kastner

I put a warm smile on my face as I calmly remind Nelly that I did not, in fact, hand-knit my over-sized, pom-pom-encrusted sweater. Undisturbed, she gazes out the window, focused on the greyness encumbering the sky. The clouds hide her only means to tell time in the isolation of this place she must call home. I watch in silence as confusion riddles her wrinkled face. She frantically searches her brassiere, looking for a watch that she probably kept there years ago. She embarks on this same quest during every one of our visits, stuck in a timeless void.

Confined to the dark walls that surround us, Nelly tries to tell me about her grandchildren. Her eyes sink as she realizes that their names are beyond what her memory allows her to reach. Her mind races, searching for answers. I see a flicker in her eyes as she begins to strengthen her grip on the fleeting thought dancing around her tongue. Before she is able to grasp it, the brief moment is gone. The memories always feel so close, yet they remain unreachable among the fog clouding her consciousness.

She sighs, and I know I have asked one too many questions. I feel guilt spread through my body, knowing that my curiosity has caused her anguish.

The clock strikes 2:00.

I garner the courage to explain that I must go. She stays seated. Time wraps itself around her arms. She smiles, unaware that she will not remember me next time.

goodbye mr. captain

samantha palazzolo

My mother tells me to count sheep jumping over the fence. Yes, that may help me fall asleep eventually, but how is that going to stop the monsters under my bed from grabbing me while I sleep. My parents tell me there is no such thing as the boogie monster living under my bed, but I am certain there is a monster in my room. *Do my parents not care about me? Here I am tossing and turning in my sleep, yet they lay peacefully sleeping in their big fluffy bed.*

The darkness scares me.

I wasn't always scared of the dark. It all began when I slept over my older cousin's house for another one of our sleepovers. My cousins and I had a lot of sleepovers; we are very close. Sometimes I would even forget we were cousins. Since I'm an only child they feel like my brothers at times- always picking on me.

My oldest cousin, Christopher, put on a movie for us to watch before bed time. He told me I would love it, I believed him.

Why couldn't we have watched The Little Mermaid? What didn't my cousins understand? I'm going to be a mermaid one day. I have to prepare for the under the sea world, not watching that dumb movie. But since Christopher wants to watch it we all have to watch it.

I can't exactly remember the name of the movie, but it was about two monsters- one small and green, the other big and blue. All I remember for certain is that the blue monster snuck into the little girl's room. How mean! How scary!

The little girl named Boo had a room just like mine, I think that was her name. We both had little tables in our rooms so we can have tea parties with our dolls and stuffed animals. Chairs with a heart shape hole in the back. Hanging ceiling mobiles filled planets, stars, and flowers. *It made*

me think, what makes her any different than me? A big blue monster could walk into my room and take me into a monster world, and no one would know.

I hated every second of this movie. Christopher, and his brother Michael both told me the movie was fake. They said it was all made up, but how could I trust them? They have turned their back on me before. For example, when they stole my peanut butter and jelly earlier when I went to go get milk from the fridge. They told me they didn't touch it, but I saw them eating it! *How could I trust that Christopher and Michael weren't in cahoots with the monsters? What if after all these years of me begging them to play Barbies with me, they sent the monsters to come get me in my sleep? I knew from this day on, I wouldn't be able to sleep again.*

I remember it being bedtime at my cousin's house that same night. I wasn't going to let them win on their own turf! I was determined to stay up all night with my stuffed animal, Periwinkle- I never traveled anywhere without him. He promised me that he wouldn't let any monsters kidnap me. Periwinkle made me feel safe in Christopher and Michael's LEGO infested room.

The next morning, the sun rose and it was time for me to go back home. I was prepared for the monsters to try to take me in my own kingdom!

I had forgotten about the monsters my cousins cursed me with until a few nights of being home. I woke up in a panic one night to the sound of thunder rumbling my house and rain hitting my window. I looked around my room, something seemed odd. I closed my eyes, and I jolted up again. I scanned my room again; I had to figure out what was causing this feeling.

It was my shoe rack tucked away in my closet. All my shoes lined up perfectly, they looked like a mini army about to attack me. My worn-out white ones stood out, he looked like the captain of the army. I was too scared to leave my bed to investigate. Could you blame me, what if they had planted booby traps all over my floor?

My mother loves my white shoes, I hate them. Never liked them. I remember when we went to the shoe store to get me a new pair of shoes for the start of second grade. My mom made me try them on. As I walked around the store to see if these gross white shoes fit, there was a squeaking noise that came from them. It bothered the heck out of me. But since my mother loved them we got them. I always wore them when I knew I was going to be playing outside. I would make sure to get them nice and dirty to try to annoy my mother!

Periwinkle told me I was safe. I closed my eyes and went back to bed, holding him tight.

I woke up that next morning to Periwinkle tight in between my arms. I remember scanning the room and nothing looked odd or out of place. My white shoes, they still stood on my shoe rack staring at me. *What did they want with me? It must have been all those days at the park I spent getting them dirty. I knew my father would take care of him.*

I opened my door to the scent of homemade bacon and french toast being made. The delicious scent filled my nose as I sprinted down the stairs ready to eat! As I entered the kitchen, my father was finishing the last batch of french toast as my mother was setting the table. I couldn't wait to fill my empty stomach and tell my parents of the monsters Christopher and Michael cursed me with.

I stacked up three pieces of french toast on my plate, poured chocolate chips all over my plate, and then finished my breakfast off with drowning the french toast in warm maple syrup. My hands got sticky as I ate, but I didn't care! After I finished my jumbo stack of french toast, I had some crispy bacon. My tummy was filled, and I was ready to tell my parents about the monsters.

I looked around a few times, took a big breath “Mommy... Daddy”, I said. “Christopher and Michael told the Monsters from that movie we watch to come get me. They tried to get into my room last night and Periwinkle stopped them.”

My parents looked at each other and laughed. I could tell they didn’t believe me.

“Angela sweetie, that is all in your head. There are no monsters, and Christopher and Michael didn’t send the monsters to come get you. There are no such thing as monsters!”, my father told me. I still wasn't convinced.

“Can you at least look around my room and make sure no monsters are hiding?” I asked my father.

He gladly agreed.

It was almost bedtime, and my father still didn’t check for monsters. I went down stairs, to find him snoring. The room was practically shaking! I poked him a few times until he jolted up.

“Daddy, you didn’t check for monsters and it's almost time for me to sleep!” I said worrisome.

He slowly got up from his chair, and threw me over his shoulder as he walked up the stairs like a sack of potatoes. He would always do this to me whenever we walked up the stairs together! We finally hiked up the mountain of stairs; I knew these monsters were toast now. We entered my room and he placed me on my bed, right next to Periwinkle! He examined my room and took all my shoes off the shoe rack.

“See Angela, no monsters! There is nothing to worry about. Get some sleep tonight sweetie”, my father said.

With a sign of relief I nodded my head. He tucked me and Periwinkle into bed. Shut my lights off and wished me good night.

Hisssssss.

Hisssssss.

I woke up suddenly. What was that noise I thought? I knew it couldn't be the monsters. My father searched my room and said there wasn't any, and my father was never wrong. I looked around, and I couldn't believe what I saw.

It was the captain of the shoe army, my white sneakers. My father was wrong.

His dirty laces were shaking, as if they were trying to move, or worse walk.

I looked at Periwinkle, we both knew what had to be done. I put Periwinkle under my right arm and squeezed him tight. I hopped out of bed, slipped in my furry pink slippers. *It took a lot of courage for what I was about to do. But I thought to myself, what would Wonder Woman do? I knew exactly what she would do.*

I took a breath. I walked over to the shoe rack, and grabbed Mr. Captain by the laces. I took an old shoe box and shoved him in there; I then threw him into a closet and closed the door.

Piece of cake! Goodbye monsters and goodbye Mr. Captain.

I opened my eyes to the sun peeking into my room through my window shutters; it was like the sun was playing peek-a-boo with me. This fun game I was playing with the sun almost distracted me from what had occurred last night... the monsters and Mr. Captain!

Once again, I grabbed Periwinkle. I stepped into my pink fluffy slippers with confidence. However, this confidence wore off as I tiptoed to my closet to go see Mr. Captain. I felt as if I was in a scene from my favorite book series the Nancy Drew Mystery Stories. As I was about to open the closet door, I heard my mother yell for me.

“Angela, come downstairs! It’s time for Maria to clean your room.”

I listened to my mom and went down stairs. I hope the monsters and Mr. Captain don’t attack our cleaning lady Maria. I wanted to warn her but I knew my mother would laugh at me.

I will get to the bottom of Mr. Captain.

My mother took me to the park since it was such a nice day. I saw a girl in white shoes and thought of Mr. Captain. *Was he following me? I thought I left him in my closet when I knew him. Then I thought, did this girl have her own monsters that haunt her at night? Was I not alone in this battle?*

It was time to walk home from the park. I decided to tell my mother about Mr. Captain, even though she loves those white shoes. I explained every little tiny detail of the monsters and how they turned my white shoes into one of them. I explained how Christopher and Michael cursed me with those monsters ever since we watched that stupid movie.

She told me all this nonsense is in my head.

I knew my mother wouldn’t believe me. No one ever believes me.

I woke up in the middle of the night in another panic. I had completely forgotten about the monsters, I had been so busy all day. Without thinking I jumped out of bed and ran to my closet. I had left my fellow soldier Periwinkle tucked into bed. I was a lone soldier at war now. I opened my closet ready to attack. But there was no box to be found, no white shoes to be found. *Where was Mr. Captain? Was he hiding to plan his big attack on my kingdom?*

poetry

heroes

nichole kaba

My mom and dad, mama and baba
Are my heroes
They came to a new country with nothing
But knowledge in a language that was no longer of use to them
They built and rebuilt from the ground up
Just as the Syrians in Palmyra
To structure a life for my sisters and I
A life where
Instead of being used in photos to garner sympathy from The West
We are The West
With the privilege
Of not watching the news when it makes us sad
The privilege
Of my dark skin and my dark hair
Paired with perfect English, to tell their story
The privilege
Of going to sleep with nothing but crickets chirping
And waking up to nothing but the sound of my own alarms
The privilege of putting on a warm coat and going to school and going to
work
For the sake of enjoying it
Hamdillah not out of necessity
Syrian people, my family, are a modest people
So I'll say again hamdillah, thank God
For the parents I have
And the life they have blessed me with

love at a distance.

taylor haines

hand holding, gripping, clinging, let go
my feet are able to drag my body away
but my mind remains firmly planted in that moment
goodbyes, pining, missing, misdiagnosing
that's not what you meant
but insecurity reads my texts in the tone she thinks fits best
not knowing, unfolding, i fold my cards
i lost this hand
but i'm addicted to the game and again i go all in
losing, lost, i can't find you
you leave me in the dark with no flashlight
separation, space, distance
566 miles between us
but even when we are together
caring, wanting, loving
you're the first boy i have ever loved
and that's the problem
vacant, void, empty
love should not bring these adjectives
but it can when only one gives it and the other only takes
talking, arguing, agreeing to disagree
why do our commonalities have to be shoved away like a that tee shirt you
once wore every day
but now is just stained, and dirty,
and forgotten
hopes, dreams, fears
we shared all three
but the latter is what consumes me
change, alter, improve
you want to mend the cracked facade

but what about what is underneath
love, thoughts, feelings
is this truly love
or do I just want it to be
sides, personalities, inconsistencies
i'm not sure which will show up at my door
unconditional, fulfilling love
or judgement and negativity
type, dial, ring
you pick up
and i'm quick to interrupt your unsuspecting hello
remember, remember, remember
for once i don't deviate from the script
and my feelings are naked in front of you
staring, silence, nothing
you do not speak, yet your screaming an answer
so I say it for you
"you do not love me in the same way I love you"
and for the first time in a long time we agree on something

a day to remember,

t.c.p

mountains tremble like a freckled body,
ground shakes as if to make them stumble
cries roam streets like a thick fog.

Death enters houses
fills them with debris
buries them underground
,fear dwells in every heart
till ground falls asleep.

women- group poem

c.u.p.s.i. slam poetry
team 2020

L.M.:

I remember when I was in 2nd grade I couldn't wait to finally be old enough to walk to school on my own. The city was so beautiful and exciting in my innocent eyes

Years later It's 12:30 pm I am on my way to my friend's 21st birthday party

And I'm waiting for the train

And a guy about the same age as me asks me for the time then it becomes my Snapchat

My train's here and I gotta go. All of sudden

his fingers grab my butt tight enough to let me know he wanted me to miss my train. Trains are on both sides of the station. Distract my witnesses. And I realize I'm not as strong as I think I push off his hand I push him. Run into the train before the door shuts. A couple days later I buy pepper spray. All of sudden I no longer want to travel alone. Safety seems rare in my hometown. So now I am consistently looking around Paranoid or cautious I can't tell the difference

Listen: my lips speak. Our voices are heard.

T.H.:

rose dusted innocence dripping emerald green sparkle
step back into parents arms step forward with my shadow
opportunity opens doors but discomfort slams them key
turn lock trapped glowing radiance smothered by
blanketed dust dust i inhale along with smells that were
foreign to me then but they invaded as you did wrapping
your words on my hips

forcing my hair to stand with perfect posture i made myself visible
because while it was only noise that seductively slid down my

spine or others filling the air with mirrored mockery i felt safer with
other eyes upon me eyes that weren't asking for anything but for
me to do my job they asked for service and a smile but not in the
way you asked your expectations placed weight on my shoulders
weight that was hard to withstand shoulders like bricks quicksand
at my feet each day the emeralds dripped fear but when my mom
asked why i could not respond

Listen: my lips speak. Our voices are heard.

Y.A.:

My name is Yasmeen.

Exotic he says

She's rare.

As if my stained lip gloss

and light hair

Make me a piece of art

Rather than a piece to be ridiculed

My sister stands there in vain

Her name is Yasmeen. Terrorist he says.

She's feared.

My fare skin bridges immunity

As if I was dripping in liquid gold

So I am not shamed by others

But I wear the weight of

my sister's despair

Heart heavy carrying scars unstitched,

scored by the words you say. You terrorist.

Rings in the back of my head, a church bell broken

My faith

unraveles into floss

A fine strand of guilt it threads through me

Fare skin, fair life?

They say "you don't know what you don't know" but don't you know that
intent and impact are

seeds of ignorance. a slipping slope a side, a sign,

a sick and twisted way to
say that its all okay that tomorrows sun washes sins of
today but days .. fall to .. dawns your oblivion setting ,
settling so I sigh, but I stand.

Wallahee We are the same.

A mirror within a mirror grounded by heart next
to sisters I lay my head down pressed by hands heavy
in my chest,

I pray ash hadu ina allaha illa allah

Listen: my lips speak. Our voices are heard.

T.D.:

Ripped down the middle Awkwardly split Evolving into my
sexuality Was tip top Criss crossed Slashed down to drippy wet
puddle People peered over in rain boots and I wanted so badly for
them to see some resemblance of themselves. Androgonous
clothes on, I felt seen. My mother told me I needed more girly tops.
She almost never addresses my sexuality directly I went out in bodycon
dress Low-cut curves for placing hands on. But sir I get to
choose who's hands. I realized I could not dress water to please.

Splash into me and distortion,

Suddenly, everybody has rain boots on and suddenly,

Nobody appreciates my flow Unless they can dip their toes in it.

Assert their opinion.

A woman who likes women, and men, and them

He cracks a crooked smile. says he likes it better that way.

I freeze.

He tosses snowball me into a basket of

Cannot take me seriously in a relationship. I shatter into snowflakes.

Broken ice when I realize,

People cannot comprehend a frozen lake on fire.

Listen: my lips speak. Our voices are heard.

*c.u.p.s.i.Team Members: LeFaith Massaquoi; Taylor Haines; Yasmeen Alwani; Taylor Donahoe

woodenblocks

neeka asgary

stacks on stacks on stacks

tanned skin collides

bussing so close that breath can barely speak

“winning” only means I won’t

fall first, not that I won’t lose, hold

close until sudden

seconds, pulled away

sea between men and women red, bloody, beautifully tragic

neeka asgary

how far we claim we've come when in reality
we're not much farther than any of those silly men on sailboats
discovering "new" worlds
how many walls we put up for our burgeoning girls in schools, yet shock
bore by walls that form within themselves

we're led to ask why
why do they
not want to share their inner workings with us when
in reality
we never wanted them...
but fuck, prove us wrong
take back every last slag cunt twat snatch
each catcall
single whistle honk holler
or slap
smack
grab

a symony back in our hands

let's get...

neeka asgary

dark black
awake but still
faded, shallow
heartless where there should have been a numbing but
the pain
the pain will come later
once he does, maybe

The Pain gets..

extinguished, goodbye to my fire and a couple
shots of my lovely Four Roses
being carved out of our bed
n i p p y cream
steeeamy spoon
drip.

“lovemaking“ crackling, pulling at your
silk skin partition
what's left of your person
all the while love an iceberg
melted,

softening into liquefaction
unfrozen but stuck

every touch,
light veriglas
bits and bites and continue
frost in black

the heaven's beast

rustam rasulmukhamedov

Upon a dreary night that donned a crescent moon
That feebly lit my lonely and disordered room
I rued the faults of my forlorn past
And feared that they are yet to be surpassed
In this grim state I anxiously await
A brand new day and my uncertain fate
And as I gaze upon the dark blue sky
The shining stars wave me good bye
I plead for them to stay and yet
A new day relentlessly besets
The sleepy sun arises from the East
My eyes resent the heaven's beast
But it cares not for mortal woes
Their silly acts and tragic shows
The tragedies and comedies of man
That millennia ago began
The sun has witnessed many fools
Who bound their lives to selfish rules
Who lived self-centered in their pride
Who thought themselves as dignified
And yet now their worries turn to dust
Their greed, their arrogance, their lust
All men are equal to the sun
Which shines to all but stops for none
And as I thought of my whole life
My woes, my flaws, my inner strife
The sun carelessly marched on
A human life - a mere bygone.

03/20/20

taylor donahoe

its like oblivion settled in softly
Tore through morsel by morsel
Silently and elegantly
It's like whispers of nothings and forevers
Tangled on wisps of wind
Pooled around visions of ocean tomorrows
Big tumultuous oceans of tomorrow
And all oceans are really one
So I guess fate is too?
It's like sky picked itself up
Parted its own clouds
Said seeing feels like sun rays reflection
Whipped and withered
Our emotions march on.
Feather hopes float aimlessly
They needed a live thing to stick to
And the world held its breath too long.
We held our breath too long,
And it's like white noise and wave crash converge
It's the simple sweets that are now thrived on
The rarities of summer sun in spring
We lay out and tan
Golden-hued eyes like
Ambition on fire
Until globe sets
And fire charcoals
We look out at blurred horizon.

self-esteem

lefaith massaquoi

il've let other people create my self-esteem

And it wasn't easy

You see when you've been kicked around by people who you were supposed to "trust"

Other peoples opinion no longer have the ability to choke you

When you realize your hands are free to fight back

It's like your self-esteem is valuable again

I've climbed a mountain

and gotten to where I always wanted to be

I dreamed things that became my reality

Melted my confidence in myself

like butter in a cold environment sold

Yet under very warm or hot temperatures its melt and even disappears

People I loved warmed my heart

Yet melted my self-esteem like butter

They have ignored my cry for help

only cared about their opinions of what they think I should be

Not knowing that their criticism only makes me feel like a failure

I am already my hardest critic

but when I go home I do not need any additional critics

when I go home I need a moment to breathe

When I go home

I need to feel at home

This is because I decided to let my self-esteem be determined by those

who I love because when I love someone

I care about their opinion

more than I care about my own

It happens like this

the main people that you want to be proud of you criticize and critique every single thing that you're proud of
And you notice all of your problems more than ever before
and your self-esteem melts just like butter on a pan but now its clear liquid that dissolves
Then you are no longer proud of it

Why did I give someone that much power over who I am
like who the heck has responsibility over my life at the end of the day
when I do something it was
my decision
my choice
my life
my story
so why in the heck
do I allow
others' opinions of who I am to have that much of an impact on my
Self-esteem

photography

arno river

abigail maderia



metamorphosis and i

ryan lew



break through

camryn mercatanti



chilling, floating

andre adkins



mirrors

andre adkins



sunset in harder kulm

abigail maderia



san pietro in vaticano in a frame

huiyang hu



stroll through philly

camryn mercatanti



the heart of the tree

huiyang hu



where to next?

ryan lew



how bright is your light?

lefaith massaquoi



growth in other places

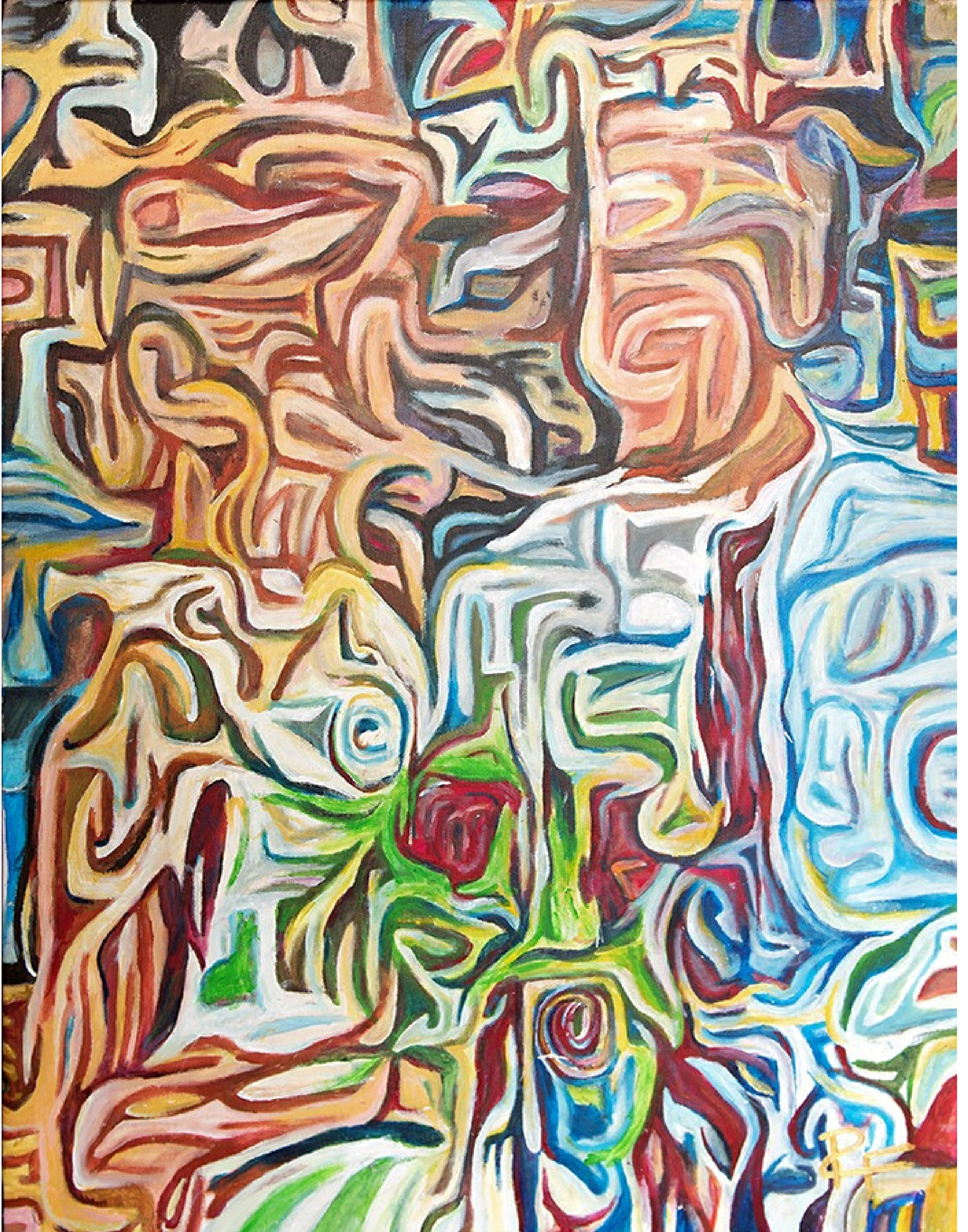
lefaith massaquoi



art

neptials

robert falconer



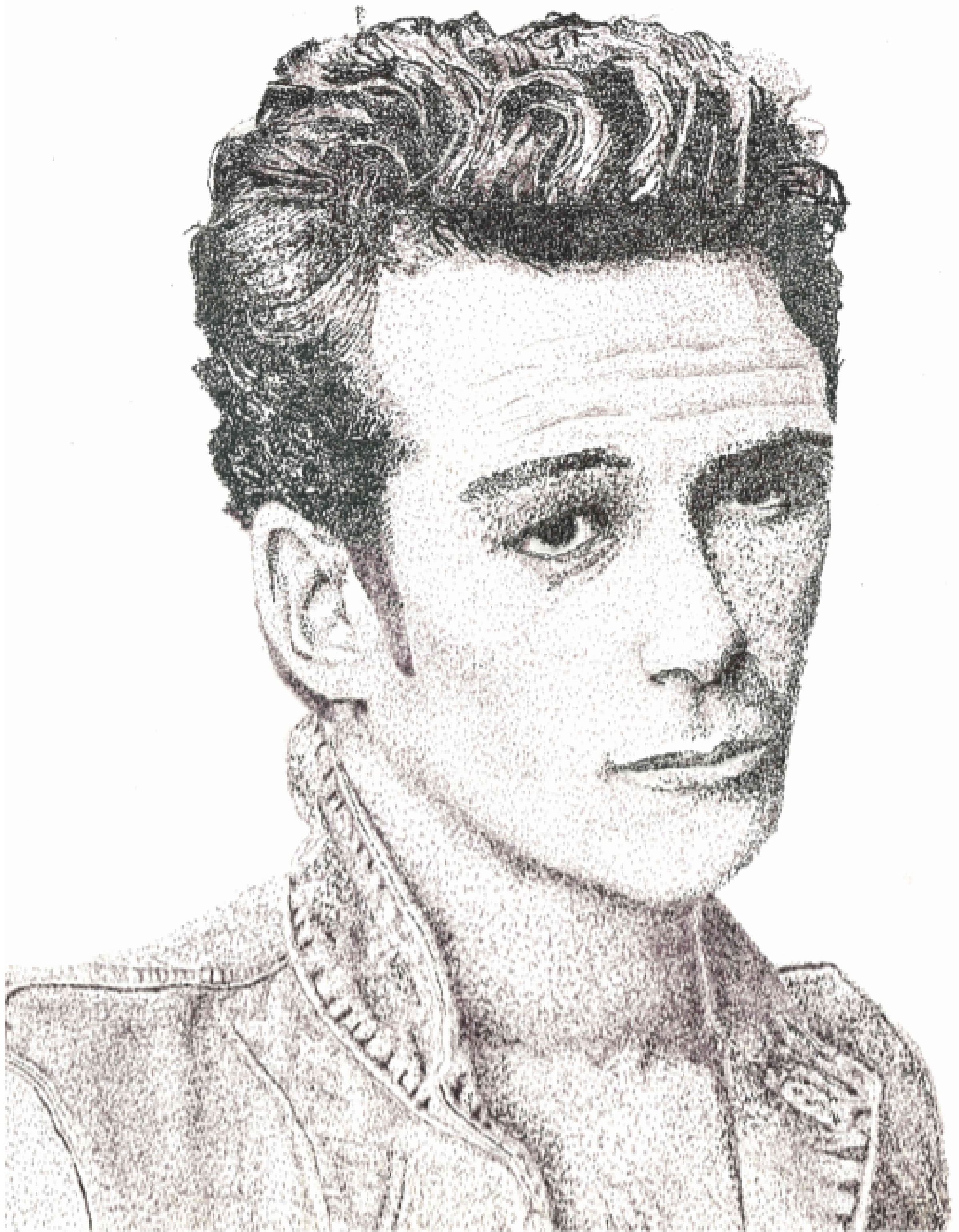
yellow man

robert falconer



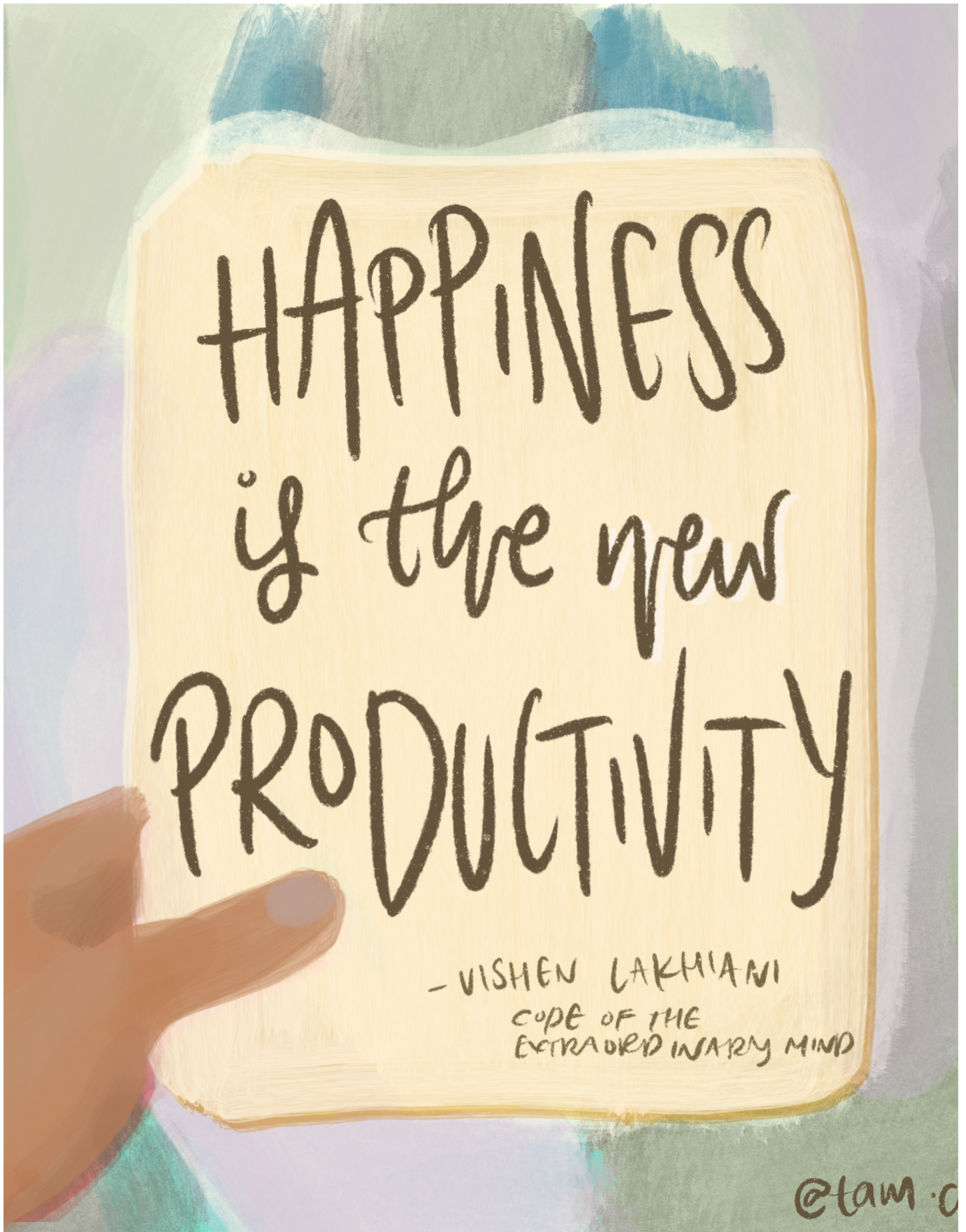
mckay

anonymous



happiness is the new productivity

tamanna khurana



non-fiction

dreaming days and funeral phones

mailya wood

The home phone hardly rings anymore. When it does, it's either bad news or our town supervisor Chad Lupinacci asking us to refrain from using leaf blowers.

The last time the phone rang, we didn't recognize the caller, so my dad let it go to the answering machine. The woman on the phone was the wife of his golfing buddy and coworker, Dan. That morning he was admitted to the hospital, at age 62, with pneumonia.

At the beginning of it all, I felt invincible. There's something satisfying in being young and believing that you can never die or be affected by something that seemingly only impacts the elderly. When my university closed for three weeks, I was thrilled. I had returned from a long spring break and had no time to relax at home. Now, I could.

But only four days later, I got an email saying the rest of our classes would be taken at home. My throat tightened and my eyes prickled wet with tears. I picked up my bright pink fuzzy blanket and wrapped myself in it. I flopped into bed and curled into a ball. My senior year was gone.

I induced sleep to avoid my pain. They say that paraplegics will dream of walking in their sleep. In my quarantine dreams, I dreamt of college. I dreamt of being packed tightly against my friends in my dorm room, the lights shut off. The music blaring. The heat of our bodies rising into the air. The souring stench of tequila and Bacardi and Gatorade. The way we pulled back the curtains to let the AC rush in from my bedroom. I dreamt of my best friend's laughter, my boyfriend's kisses, the secret exchange of smiles with my classmates when my professors would say something outrageous.

There are some pleasures in life so deliciously sweet that the memories can only be formed as we repeat them. And in my dreams, I could live it all again.

The dreams stopped as I slowly adjusted to my new routine. I worked out, went to class, and finished my homework. I started knitting and attempting to learn Vietnamese. My days started to blur together. My dad, brother, mom and I locked ourselves in separate rooms, working from 9 to 5, struggling with technology and being on top of one another.

We were one unit again, watching tv and playing board games together. We looked forward to when my dad would return home (equipped with stories about how scary the world was “out there”) from Trader Joe’s with bags of groceries. We looked forward to my homemade brownies and the dinging of the air fryer when mozzarella sticks were ready. Despite the loss of my final weeks at school, I found renewed joy with my family. I counted my blessings. I had a job waiting for me after graduation. My friends and family were all healthy, school was still interesting, the fridge was always stocked with food, and I never had to change out of my pajama pants.

On April 2nd we celebrated my brother’s 19th birthday. We made a make-shift turtle shaped cake with leftover candles and a carton of melting mint chocolate chip ice cream. On the same day, we found out my great-grandmother was dying. At 100 years old, the news was not surprising. What was surprising, however, was that my extended family wanted to FaceTime her in Vietnam. My mom spent hours on the phone trying to coordinate a call with her sisters. Not everyone had an iPhone so they had to try Viber and then Zoom. They yelled and bickered with one another until they finally got it working. My great-grandmother, on the blurred screen, was withering away. She couldn’t walk or talk or eat. It’s a strange thing to livestream a person’s death to your family. But in quarantine, that’s what we did.

When my great-grandmother passed away, they held a virtual funeral at 4 AM. In Vietnam, at the time, it was fine to gather. My grandmother wanted to host a prayer session. I resisted the whole idea. Online, the intimacy of grieving was suddenly stripped away. It was as if putting a screen between our bodies created more walls. There was no room to cry or to find solidarity in the silence when you were online for a quick thirty minutes. You pray and you get off the call. And then you make dinner or watch TV or play games or do whatever you have to do to slot yourself back into the “new normal.” Praying over a computer just seemed wrong. But my grandmother wanted us to be together during this time and, despite my discomfort, I wanted to be there for her. So at 8 PM, my family and I all squished our bodies onto one couch and stared at my mom’s tiny phone screen as they began to pray.

Four days later, we did not get a phone call, but an email. It was Danielle Cohen, the recruiter who had hired me into my compensation analyst role. Eager to hear if they pushed back my start date, I clicked the email. My face fell. The length of the email was too long to be anything positive. My job offer had been rescinded. I put down my phone and stared into nothing. And then I fell to my knees on the faded white carpet of my bedroom.

I opened my mouth and yelled down the staircase.

“My job offer got rescinded!”

I thought of my future apartment in Quincy, Massachusetts where I was going to live with my best friend’s roommate. I thought of the fifteen minute commute and the two days working from home and the excitement of getting up in the morning with some place to be and somewhere to feel important. And then I covered myself with my pink blanket and cried my eyes out.

An hour later, I picked myself off the floor and flopped onto my bed. I curled up in the fetal position and laid there with my eyes closed. I only opened them again when I heard the stairs creak heavily outside of my bedroom door. It was my dad. He turned the knob to my room and sat on the end of my bed, placing his hand on my back.

“I heard about what happened,” he said. “I’m sorry. It sucks.” My body shook as I tried to hold in the sobs that were bursting out of me. His hand rubbed up and down my back.

“I just need one day to be sad about this,” I said. “One day, and then I’ll start looking for a job again.”

It wasn’t just one day. As time went by, I felt that the days were no longer measured by dates and times, but instead by the increasing number of cases and grim phone calls about someone sick or dying. My mom’s coworkers’ families, my aunt’s brother, my old high school friend. All sick and terrified. The grocery stores were desolate. Even the number of kids playing outside had dwindled to a mere few. I was lost. I laid in bed, staring up at the ceiling, creating days I would never remember. I didn’t want to write anything. By writing my days down, I would call those empty moments into existence. I stopped responding to texts, to FaceTime calls. I was silent at dinner. My mind was elsewhere, thinking of the thousands of people out there who were affected by something that wasn’t their fault. People like me.

The phone rang later that day with some more bad news. My best friend Kristina’s grandmother had just passed away from cancer. She went to hospice for five hours before she died, and Kristina was not able to see her since only one person was let in at a time. She was stripped of her final goodbye. Of her ability to grieve in the arms of aunts and uncles and cousins.

It’s hard to be angry at the coronavirus pandemic because it’s really no one’s fault. Some may argue there are better methods of prevention and protection, but there is no protocol in times like these. I can’t be angry at governments or businesses or universities because they are just as lost as I am.

Those who are supposed to know what to do have no idea how to proceed. We are reacting in the only way we know how.

The entire world has been affected by this pandemic, whether directly or indirectly, whether severely or scarcely. When this all ends, I hope we can find some kind of normalcy. But for some, the trauma experienced will be impossible to forget. They'll be living in the scene of an accident after all the damage has been swept away. Only those who faced the tragedy will remember what was there before.

At the beginning of it all, I was ignorant to how sudden the impact of the virus could be. One week everything was fine and the next, it knocked me over with a quick swipe at the knees. I realized that the things I held so close to my heart could be taken, with one phone call, one email, one text. When I lost my job and Kristina lost her grandmother, I was paralyzed with fear. But it wasn't the fear that got to me. It was the helplessness that was my undoing, that bit at my heels like I had wandered into a swamp of alligators. There was no expiration date for quarantine. There was nothing I could do to make it all stop.

It's hard to believe that only a month ago I was at Tybee Island in Georgia, celebrating with Kristina that I had gotten a job. The two of us had laid there out on the beach, our only concern whether the sun would stay out of the clouds. Now our concerns are different. I'm looking for jobs again and she's planning her grandmother's funeral.

When my cell phone rings every Friday, I know it's Kristina. We plan hangouts to watch movies and laugh and talk about the if onlys and what ifs. If only we still had senior year and her opera and my Spring Day and her Carnival and my banquet and our friends and boyfriends and graduation. If only we could have all that we took for granted and the sweet security of formal plans and a certainty of the times.

If only, we say as we lay back in our beds. If only. And tonight we fall asleep dreaming of parallel universes where everything and nothing is the same.

the time travel machine

scott kamieneski

~ Place: Feeling Lost. 6:30 AM. Today. ~

“Buzz! Buzz!” Oh no, not again. I was just about to meet Ed Sheeran and Bruno Mars; I lost my chance! Now I will never know what it’s like in the moments backstage, before an ocean of fans scream the lyrics and feel the bass punch their rib cages. It’s another day – another dreaded Monday. My dream evaporates into the cloudy memory of my mind, forever irretrievable, and is replaced by my ear-piercing alarm. Inside the suffocating college dorm, I’m urged to fling myself out of bed and toss on my Tide Pod fresh-smelling clothes. But exhaustion zaps my body, and I yawn, my eyelids pinch closed. Or was that a yawn? I didn’t feel my lungs swirl with a refreshing gulp of air, why? I’m losing my mind. I am going to fail college. This is what it feels like. This is the end of me.

“Zoom!” Like a balled piece of paper, another crumpled thought rockets across my mind. It bangs heavily against the inside of my skull, before joining the growing pile of things to do. I don’t know physics, but I do know the force of gravitational stress just quadrupled on my body. I have a test tomorrow, a debate to prepare for, clubs to attend, career events to visit, food to eat, and a paper due. Maybe today is just the best day to not leave this barely-comfortable bed.

Separating me from my 8 AM class on Upper Campus is one immense, heart-hurting staircase. I can already imagine each step tingling with excitement, hoping to electrocute my feet as I march up to class. My calf muscles will be ripped apart as each fiber suddenly burns. My lungs, allergic to oxygen, will cramp as I choke out of breath. I don’t want to leave my bed. I don’t want to face those painful stairs. I squeeze my eyes shut, my forehead wrinkles tightly, and I shove my face into the squishy pit of my elbow. Engulfed in a black void, I can hear no sound, except for my shallow breath. I’m time traveling through a dream.

~ Place: Florida. 4 PM. 9 Months Ago. ~

The yellow sunlight explodes through the patio window, splashing on the khaki-colored floor and on the dull white duvet. I refuse to join my family for a swim as the hotel door claps shut behind them.

I continue to lay in the bed and do my best to avoid drowning as the duvet's prickly feathers submerge my body in an ocean of itches. I snap the TV on with the greasy remote. It's April break, but I still haven't decided which college I'm going to. This upcoming month will determine the next four years of my life. It's a pestering thought that mentally weighs me down. I need to find a movie to help me relax. Twelve different options appear, but my Netflix account recommends *Christopher Robin*. What do I have to lose if I watch this? Nothing. Besides, I like Winnie the Pooh and I still have his Build-A-Bear from when I was a kid. After almost two hours of following Pooh as he reunites with his old friend group, and hearing his simple lessons of happiness, I feel empty-hearted. Am I living right? How could a children's movie make me think so deeply about life, my family, and my ambitions? What's the point of success? Is money my passion? Will I be happy?

I don't know those answers, and I might never know. But I do know that I feel too tired to move and only want to sleep in this hotel bed – yet I can't. Winnie the Pooh's wise words twirl around the room, never fading, like the smell of my mom's rosy perfume. Pooh's soft voice repeats in my mind, "People say nothing is impossible, but I do nothing every day. Doing nothing often leads to the very best of something." That can't be true Pooh! I am always doing something, I don't have time for nothing. If I do nothing, I will never get anywhere in life. I snap my eyes shut twice but this time there's no black void, only a dim light piercing a blue curtain. I'm back home.

~ Place: Home. 6 AM. 5 Years Ago. ~

Suddenly, four tiny jabs hit my belly simultaneously. What did I eat last night to have stomach pains? I know our yogurt is fresh and the cheddar cheese on my turkey barbeque sandwich is sharp. I clench my fist as I feel the pressure slowly crawl from my tummy to my chest. A layer of moist sweat builds on my face. Do I have a fever? Why don't I feel normal? I flinch my eyes open, hoping I'm not sick, maybe it could be a nightmare. No, this isn't a nightmare. It is real. My little brother – my tuxedo cat named Oreo – is face to face with me. His mitten white paws press gently on my chest as he wakes me up. His cute white muzzle and tiny pink nose puff a small cloud of heat onto my face and his mint-green, fire-colored eyes peek softly into mine. "Hmm!" He gives a quick purr good morning and I sprinkle him with loving neck scratches and a gentle high-pitched, "Who's a good little hunter? Yes, you are honey ditty!"

I am doing nothing as I lay in my comfy bed at home. Every second I spend buys me a new memory. I don't have any stress. There's no one forcing me to do something. I'm just a middle school kid who loves hanging with his cat. In one moment, I might be outside, almost tasting the freshly cut grass as he nibbles on it. And then suddenly, I'm back inside, awaking in the morning to his furry little body and tickling purrs.

He overwhelms me with the best happiness from family and love. However, our snuggle doesn't last long because as I slowly wink my eyes awake, the dim blue light changes to a black void. "Vwoomf!" I am gone, time-traveling again. Wait, this room looks familiar. If this is a dream, why is this bed so uncomfortable?

~ Place: Feeling Found. 7:30 AM. Today. ~

The fan roars loudly like a sputtering car engine and a faint white light creeps under the curtain illuminating the silhouettes of a desk and a lamp in my room. What time is it? I slide my pillow over and reach for my phone. The screen flashes on, blinding me and I squint my eyes. Oh, snap! My class starts in 30 minutes. I overslept. Why! For a moment, I'm a superhero. I will spring out of bed in "3, 2, 1!" I fling my warm bed sheets off my legs and chest. "Urhh!" My powers disappear as the cold air conditioning smacks my body. I quickly curl back up under the sheets.

Why can't I be a kid again? Why do I have to grow up and deal with all this stress? I miss my free time during school breaks. I miss my family. I miss my cat. My dreams are alive again in my head, but this time I'm not asleep. My bed transforms into a time travel machine and I can see myself back home. My little Oreo is there, springing onto my tummy as he wakes me up. His little face leans over mine and he squeaks a raspy good morning meow, tingling my nose with the smell of his fishy breath. The only pressure in my life is Oreo's tiny body on my chest. I am happy. Like Pooh quietly hinted, for just a moment, I am simply doing nothing, but laying there and creating something amazing. I'm building my greatest memories from timeless moments. Moments where I feel loved and not worried about life. I need to see my family soon.

For a second, I hold my breath and "Whoosh!" I'm instantly time-traveling again to my Florida family vacation. Finally, I understand the meaning of Winnie the Pooh's simple words:

"What day is it?" asked Pooh.

"It's today," squeaked Piglet.

"My favorite day," said Pooh.

Whispering the same words, I nod my head with a smile. Pooh's wisdom inspires me to make today the best it can ever be. I won't let nothing be impossible. A fuzzy glow of happiness lifts my chest and I can feel the adrenaline start to surge through my veins. Suddenly, I wonder why I am still lying motionless in this bed. Paranoid, I kick the covers off my body and in one swift motion, I spring out from under them. At last, my feet hit the ground and I am off running! I know where I am and where I am going. I will not be late to class!

everything lasts for only a moment

mailya wood

My mom says that tragedy is like smoke. It seeps into the walls. It stains and it lingers. It affects others in ways that we don't always foresee. Once tragedy struck my family, we were changed forever.

Hao Duc Bui was my mom's second youngest brother, born in 1981 in Mineola, dead in 2013, in the middle of the night, from a drunk driving accident. Those are the facts. That is what would appear in a Google search. But that says nothing about the kind of man my uncle was and the everlasting impact that he left behind.

My mother, Huong Bui, was a fourth grade teacher at South Grove Elementary school. She had dark brown eyes, one with an eyelid crease and one without, and a sweet Catholic girl smile. She packed our lunches in the morning, drove to South Grove, worked tirelessly at school, and returned home to cook dinner and clean the house. My mother kept close ties to her brothers and sisters and we visited them often.

My mom practically raised my uncle. They were 12 years apart in age. When he ran away from home, she was always there to find him. She took him to school and to church. She drove him to the doctor and made sure he behaved. When he was throwing rocks at the house, she left her honeymoon to calm him down. My mom loved him like her own son. That's the kind of person she was. She had a ferocious ability to love. My dad said it was what he adored most about her.

My grandmother had taught her and her siblings the same thing: *When you do things, do it fast.* It's the best way to learn. So she lived for doing. She did not know how to relax. She always had to keep her hands busy. She sewed her own curtains, redid the guest room molding, and knitted scarves. She believed that doing was better than feeling. She had little patience for any emotional outburst.

One day after school in seventh grade, I came home crying. A boy had been bullying me in my lunch period and embarrassing me in front of a group of older girls. I ran up to my room and curled up on the floor of the white carpet. I let my tears fall and listened to the saddest Coldplay music I could find, just to wallow in my misery.

When my mother came upstairs to get me for dinner, she asked me, “What are you doing just lying here? Stop crying and help me with dinner.” When I told her why I was upset, she came up with a list of solutions of how I could fix my bullying problem. At the time, I did not want solutions. I only wanted to be heard and comforted. I got up from the floor, eventually, but I remember my bristling irritation as I helped prepare dinner. She seemed so focused on her to-do list that she had no time to comfort me about my struggles.

Both my parents worked, so when I was very young, they left me at my grandmother’s house. Her house was twenty minutes away from where my mother worked. It was a ranch that creaked and groaned, with an expansive garden of Vietnamese vegetables and herbs. The house always smelled of fried food, pork, and fish sauce. The walls were lined with wooden panels, littered with pictures of the family, the pope, and Jesus. In the house lived my grandmother, my grandfather, and my Uncle Hao.

The first thing people noticed about my uncle was his smell. He didn’t really shower, but he smelled of Axe, the cologne that pubescent teenagers sprayed to cover up the stench of their changing bodies. That was like him, in a way. He was caught somewhere between a grown adult and a child. My uncle ate cups of whipped cream in between mischievous giggles. He followed my dad around the house, asking eagerly if he wanted to see his movie collection or borrow a few CDs or watch How It’s Made. He spent hours and hours researching weapons on the computer and printing and printing and printing until all of the paper and ink ran out.

My uncle, like my grandparents, loved everything about the Catholic church. I remember once I caught him on my computer printing out hundreds of pages about the history of the Roman Catholic Church in medieval times. My father was not happy when all the ink ran out. My uncle would disappear for hours to walk to church. He would join the Youth Group meetings and the St. Agnes Council of the Knights of Columbus. Everyone at St. Agnes recognized his name and appreciated his help. He was always happy to greet them. He volunteered at homeless shelters, food banks, and church events.

The majority of my uncle’s achievements were hidden from us. The extent of his giving was confined to what we all knew about him. That he collected rocks, cans, and baseball cards. That he walked everywhere and knew about public transportation. That he wore all black and had crooked teeth. But unbeknownst to us, in his mere thirty-one years, he had more influence than most people achieve in their entire lifetimes.

The night that he died, he was collecting cans. He was wheeling a cart of them back from his brother's restaurant. I never learned too much about the details. I didn't want to ask and my mom didn't want to talk about it. But my uncle was struck from behind by a Jeep. The driver was a 22-year old man who had too many beers. He had a police support sticker on his car, so the police waited four hours before they breathalyzed him. He never got charged for anything.

Sometimes, when we pass Grumman Road, I imagine my uncle turning the corner at 2 am in his dark clothes. I try to imagine what he was thinking and if he felt any pain. And then I feel sick to my stomach.

When we heard the news, my family and I were in a hotel room in Vietnam, returning from breakfast. My mom's phone dinged. "Call home," the message read, "Hao died."

All the blood rushed out of my ears. I could only hear the pounding of my own heart. Even the pitter-patter of rain had faded away. We were all lying there in that small hotel room, frozen. My brother put the bed sheet over his head. No one spoke. My mom inhaled and picked up the phone. We were halfway around the world. None of us knew how to react or what to do. But my mom, forever the do-er, rushed immediately to book us a flight home to make the wake and funeral.

Three days and \$7,000 later, we were able to find a flight home that wasn't cancelled because of the monsoon season. We drove straight to the wake at 7 PM.

The amount of people who were there was astounding. It was standing room only. My uncle had touched the lives of so many people and we did not even know about it. We had never known the full extent of his heart. Of his giving. Of his impact and love that was spread to so many people. Bishops, priests, policemen, the Knights of Columbus, Rockefeller Center employees and volunteers, and the Chief of Police all came to share their sympathies. One particular member of the Knights of Columbus shared how my uncle would attend every one of their meetings, walking in rain or shine, snow or heat. It wasn't the magnitude of his giving, but the clear demonstration of his dedication that touched him the most. My entire family was stunned.

At the time, though, I did not see any of those people. My eyes were too blurry with tears. The sobs crawling up my throat felt like they were choking me. I had to step out of the room just to keep the hysteria locked up inside of me. It felt wrong, almost. Like it was not my grief to have. I was only his niece.

Who was I to cry when his sisters were standing tall and keeping it together? But whether it was mine or not, I could not stop the pain from pouring out of me.

When my mom and I walked to his casket, I forced myself to look. His skin looked pasty and artificial. I imagined his body was cold. He was wearing a blue pressed shirt that he had worn to our family portrait photos the year before. His eyes were closed and his arms were folded peacefully over his chest. There was no smell. I was terrified. He had no bruising or broken bones, but I imagine that this was not the way they found him. My mom reached forward to grab his hand. I don't remember what she said, but her voice was tight with tears. I could not bring myself to touch him. I just kneeled at his casket. I stared and stared and wept.

My mom said sad things happen to make life more beautiful. Every day we sensed the loss, but we carried on. On holidays, we honored him and thanked him for what he had shown us about life. That it is short. That it is not forever. And that every moment is a gift.

My mom learned how to relax and take in each moment. In turn, she taught me how to. The two of us would sit on the deck of our house on Saturday mornings, sipping on warm coffee in our mugs. We watched my backyard flutter and chirp and scurry with life. Watching nature was the most beautiful way to admire what we were blessed with. We stared off into the bushes and imagined that one of the singing birds was my uncle. My mom didn't believe in reincarnation, but she believed that my uncle's spirit was always with us. Watching over us.

"Everything lasts for only a moment," my mom said. "And I'm so grateful for every one of them. How can you be lonely when you have beautiful trees and bright, beautiful colors?"

our family is our wealth

lauren dachowski

As you drive through the countryside of Saint-Hilaire-de-Dorset, the dry dirt roads create a wisp of dirt in the air that lingers far longer than the vehicle that created it. The land is rather bare with life in the form of crops, but houses are scarcely placed amid barns that have been around for centuries. The town has a certain beauty: the beauty of simplicity; the beauty of family; and the beauty of hard work. All these things resonate in my mind when I visit my family's ancestral hometown. As a small town in Quebec, Canada, this community exists with a population just below 100, many of which are my family members. As you look towards the horizon, all that can be seen is a vast amount of grassy countryside with speckles of white farmhouses. As I roll down the window, I am filled with the sweet scent of freshly cut crops, the smell of horses and the dull buzz of the countryside.

Before my family immigrated to the United States, they owned a small dairy farm where my mom and all my aunts and uncles grew up. My grandparents had seven children and one small blue homestead, which sat atop of a great hill, a considerable distance from the road. The house had a white porch with white stairs, made from repurposed lumber, with the old paint chipping off in flakes. The house was old, yet it took care of many generations of kids who perched upon the wooden steps after they walked home from Sunday Mass or from school. The interior of the house was rather simplistic, with limited appliances and the bare necessities. When they first moved in, they did not have electricity or running water. My grandparents raised their children to work hard, value family and never focus on money, which has always been shown to me throughout my childhood.

Most of the people who live here are working class families, who own farms and truly work for their money. They have a kind authenticity and a generous spirit. Due to the size of the town, everyone knows everyone. Every joy and every sadness are shared. In fact, being Mayor is not an honor, but an expected duty the residents all must be willing to take on. Their tight-knit community had an unbreakable bond of trust. There is a mutual understanding that at the end of the day, they take care of each other. I recall a story my grandfather told me one day when I was seven years old and sitting on his leg while he rocked me in the oak rocking chair that he hand crafted.

My grandfather is an extremely private man and seldom speaks about the hard times in his life or his struggles, so when he starts talking, you listen. While I was just sitting there on his lap, in his broken half-English and half-French, he started speaking about the winter of 1958, when his whole garden got destroyed by an animal around August. They planned their entire crop rotation on the seasons and pickled and canned many of their vegetables to last them through the brutal Canadian winters. My grandma had just delivered her second child and they were scrambling to provide for their ever-growing family. Their neighbors, aware of their struggles, yet also with just enough food to last them the winter came together and pooled their food to help them. He used this story and others like these to show me that I should always be thankful for what I have and that I should always look out for my family and friends no matter the cost.

After all seven of their kids were born, my grandparents found it increasingly difficult to put food on the table and meet their basic needs. In order to provide for their kids, my grandmother ran the dairy farm, kept up the large garden and raised all of the kids on her own. My grandfather was hired as logger, which forced him to travel away from home for several weeks at a time. This was the only possible way to make ends meet. After many years of this my grandfather decided it was no longer feasible. My grandfather has always had the mentality that he works to provide for his kids because they are his ultimate concern. When recounting this story my grandfather always says "I work to for my kids, in order to be with my kids. I married my beautiful wife to be with her and all our children." They ultimately moved to the United States because their poverty in Canada was making it so their family was never together at once. They never once moved for their opportunities or the money, they were solely seeking a way to feed their family, and all be together.

My grandparents emigrated with all their children to the west side of Manchester, New Hampshire, which was the French-Canadian part of Manchester at the time. They kept the house and the farm in the family and my grandfather's family, who still resided in Canada, moved in and maintained the dairy farm. I stayed in this house several times throughout my life and truly observed how my family lived. Although I stayed here from around my seventh birthday until now, staying in this house truly put you back in time to a simpler day. The garden was right next to the barn, the wooden frame was built by my grandfather and harvested by my grandmother and watered by my mom and aunts.

In this garden they grew all the vegetables they consumed. Up until this day there is only one small supermarket, or rather more like a convenience store, which is around a fifteen-minute drive from their house. This caused them and nearly everyone in their little town to produce practically all the food they make and to never let a speck of food go to waste. In this town there is one small church where everyone gets baptized, everyone gets married, and every funeral takes place.

My grandparents first lived in a small two-bedroom apartment with their seven kids. Moving to America was a shock. My grandfather recounts that he was amazed that all the houses were so close together and so populated. Moving here they had no land to start a garden, and they were so used to growing their own produce, so they rented a small piece of property from their church to grow vegetables. With seven kids their salaries did not sustain them. Their immigration opened their eyes to how much is readily available to consumers because of the high demands and every changing market of American consumerism. Before moving my grandmother had no idea that you could buy strawberries when they weren't in season and that most vegetables could be bought all year around. To this day my grandparents still can vegetables from their garden to last them through the winter even though they have the financial ability to buy whatever they please.

Their home in New Hampshire was hand built by my grandfather and my uncles and they carried the same principles with them to America. This new house maintained the same simplicity as their old house, yet it harshly contrasted to the houses in Canada. No matter their efforts, the American lifestyle was far more focused on money, wealth and status, things that have never once crossed their mind. To this day, they never let a morsel of food go to waste, never let their kids or grandchildren go hungry and they never take for granted their financial stability.

After they settled in the U.S. my grandfather quickly went to work in construction in Boston and my grandmother was a maid for several families locally. Despite not having the most glorious jobs, they were never once fazed, as it provided for their family and kept them afloat. In the United States the concept of upward mobility and moving up socio-economic groups is considered desirable. This mentality is the reason why so many want to immigrate to America. In contrast, this is not the case for French Canadian families and immigrants, and it was not the case for my family.

A journalism podcast by Vermont Public Radio covered the French-Canadian immigration to New England. The Vermont Public Radio includes a quote from their studies.

“French Canadians were criticized for, ‘They never want to get anywhere socially.’ Trying to compare the Yankee mentality of, you know, this social ladder, has nothing to do with French culture. Like for the most part it's, if everybody's fed, we're together and people are getting along, that everything is good.”

Upward mobility for many of these immigrants was simply not their main concern, the well-being and the family was far more important. My grandparents raised my mom as well as taught me this principle, through the way they treated others and valued non-tangible things. In their eyes, true happiness is not achieved by the things you wear, the cars you drive or the salary you make. The idea of family and community are of far greater importance. Although, they often struggled to fit in with the other families in their neighborhood. My mother recalls being a young girl at school and instantly feeling different than all the other kids at school. My grandmother made all of the clothes her kids wore, so showing up to school with the latest fashion trend was not an option. Many of her friends would have the newest converse, the latest edition of Seventeen magazine or were always caught up with the newest fad.

Over the years, Americans have become increasingly more materialistic, yet a developing trend is that these tangible things do not contribute to true happiness in any way, contrary to what most Americans might think. An article written by Tim Kasser, a professor of psychology at Knox College in Galesburg, Illinois, speaks about materialism in the world today “My colleagues at the University of Sussex and I recently published a meta-analysis...that showed that the more highly people endorsed materialistic values, the more they experienced unpleasant emotions, depression and anxiety.” By having a simpler lifestyle and not yearning for wealth, families are better off and more satisfied. My family in Canada remained in the same social class for decades and it wasn't until their move to the United States that they felt a shift in their social class.

Every year on New Year's Day, my extended family celebrates Christmas. This day starts off at 11 am and we all arrive to my grandparents' house in our Christmas best. We have a rather large family, our celebration is around 70 people, so set up and take down is a production. We pile into their house, snuggling on the couches or playing with the little ones.

Unlike other families across the United States, we have a rather limited gift exchange. We give gifts to both my grandparents simply because we know they will not splurge on themselves, yet we spend most of the day enjoying each other's company playing games and feasting on the great cuisine of my grandmother.

Every inch of table kitchen table is full of appetizers and snacks. Our lunch consists of a plethora of vegetables, grown from their garden, lamb which my grandfather spent hours cooking and marinating and several classic French-Canadian dishes that have become part of my diet. For dessert we have an assortment of cakes, pies, cookies and of course maple taffy. My great uncle operates a cabane a sucre about 10 miles from town where he and his family make maple syrup, maple butter, and maple products. He and his sons hand built the wooden frame of the building and created the sap collecting system. My family incorporates maple syrup in many desserts. Maple taffy is a tradition of ours on New Year's Day. After our meal we clear the tables and set up board games and card games.

For the next couple of hours, we do nothing but play board games and enjoy each other's company. Typically, my grandfather will start singing, "C'est le temps de jour de l'an", a French New Year's song that has been sung for generations and the rest of the family will join him in song. A "talent show" takes place every year after lunch and all the little children must perform a skit or talent and usually results in the whole family singing or dancing along. Our Christmas celebration is truly about spending time in each other's company and being joyful for the holiday. My grandparents have always celebrated this way and have continued to reflect the importance of this in all the children, grandchildren and great grandchildren.

My mom's humble upbringing demonstrated the value of family to me throughout my entire life. They have raised me in this way, yet the pervasive influence of the United States makes materialism so prevalent. Looking at my grandparents, they still can all their vegetables, grow all of their produce and have refused to buy into consumerism. Having this influence throughout my life has made me cherish family time and has created a strong bond with my relatives. Despite all of this, I still feel the pull of materialism. Growing up in the United States everything I needed has always been readily available to me. This is rather conflicting as I struggle to uphold the values I was raised while being an 18-year-old at a university with a plethora of wealth.

A journalism podcast by Vermont Public Radio covered the French-Canadian immigration to New England. The Vermont Public Radio includes a quote from their studies.

“French Canadians were criticized for, ‘They never want to get anywhere socially.’ Trying to compare the Yankee mentality of, you know, this social ladder, has nothing to do with French culture. Like for the most part it's, if everybody's fed, we're together and people are getting along, that everything is good.”

Upward mobility for many of these immigrants was simply not their main concern, the well-being and the family was far more important. My grandparents raised my mom as well as taught me this principle, through the way they treated others and valued non-tangible things. In their eyes, true happiness is not achieved by the things you wear, the cars you drive or the salary you make. The idea of family and community are of far greater importance. Although, they often struggled to fit in with the other families in their neighborhood. My mother recalls being a young girl at school and instantly feeling different than all the other kids at school. My grandmother made all of the clothes her kids wore, so showing up to school with the latest fashion trend was not an option. Many of her friends would have the newest converse, the latest edition of Seventeen magazine or were always caught up with the newest fad.

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the game changer

samantha moreau

In recent years there has been a significant increase in the amount of concussions in adolescent athletes ages 10 to 19. As contact sports become increasingly more competitive, more athletes are finding themselves sidelined due to head injuries. CDC reports indicate that in the last ten years the amount of reported concussions have more than doubled. The symptoms of concussions most often include headaches, tiredness, and dizziness, and resolve in two to four weeks (Maier, 2016). What doctors and coaches don't talk about, however, is the depression, fogginess, memory issues, and attitude changes that come along with concussions and can last for months, even years to follow.

A blast of cold air hit me as I swung open the door to the Marlborough Ice Rink. Although it was almost the middle of August, I still had yet to get used to playing hockey in the heat of the summer. In just a few weeks I would be starting my freshman year at Bentley University, but as for now I was just excited to be playing hockey with my friends for the last time. I adjusted the heavy bag on my shoulder and walked towards the locker room, the dimly lit hallway filled with the stench of hockey equipment. My last game of the summer, I was filled with mixed emotions as I laced up my skates before the game.

We were playing Shrewsbury, our biggest rival, and it was an extremely physical game from the initial puck drop. The refs were barely calling anything, resulting in a heavy contact game with limited penalties. Halfway through the third period I skated off the ice panting, trying to catch my breath from what had seemed like a never-ending shift. I leaned heavily against the boards and squirted water onto my face, trying to cool myself down before taking the ice again. My arm was still throbbing from a cross-check I received at center ice and I wiggled my fingers in my glove to try and ease the pain. Sweat poured from my head into my eyes and I had to blink numerous times in order to regain my vision.

What seemed like seconds passed and I was already back on the ice. The puck was sent in deep to the offensive zone and I skated hard for it, just barely beating the defender that was chasing after me. I tried to stick handle the puck, but the next thing I knew I was hit hard from behind, my head smacking into the boards in front of me. I collapsed instantly like a pile of bricks and fell face down on the ice, unable to move. Tears started to form in my eyes along with a pounding headache, and I was overcome with dizziness as I struggled to get to my feet. Surprisingly, the ref had blown the whistle and the girl who had hit me was sent to the box. I slowly skated over to the bench, no longer feeling the pain that had been throbbing in my arm as I tried to piece together in my head what had just happened.

I sat on the bench struggling to regain my breath, this time for a different reason besides pure exhaustion, as the trainer quickly approached me.

“How are you feeling? You took a pretty big hit to the head. I think that we should evaluate you for a concussion before you go back into the game,” she said to me, with a look of concern in her eyes.

Not wanting to be taken out of the last game of the year, I shook it off and told her that I felt fine and was ready to play again. I turned back towards the game and focused on coming back from a 3-1 deficit with little time left on the clock. The rest of the game was a blur. I skated in circles, always a step behind where I needed to be. I felt confused, unsure as to where I was and what I was doing on the ice. When the game finally ended and I was undressing in the locker room I laid my head in my hands, trying to alleviate the extreme pressure that had been building up since the hit.

Sitting in that locker room at that moment I couldn't help but wonder, Was the trainer right that I should have been evaluated for a concussion? Growing up an athlete, I had been taught from a young age what a concussion was and the signs and symptoms to look out for after a hit to the head. Every year more research comes out about professional athletes and how concussions are impacting them later in life as they continue to suffer from long-term symptoms. In this moment I remember one particular athlete, Junior Seau, who committed suicide after having suffering from a brain disease that was linked to repetitive hits to the head. Brain injuries are not something to brush off and I worried that I may have done long-term damage to my brain by continuing to play after this blow to my head. Why didn't I just stop playing? I thought to myself as I slowly packed my equipment into my bag.

The next few weeks I was in a haze, unsure of why I was feeling off, but deep down knowing what it must be. I brushed my uneasiness aside, however, convincing myself that nothing was wrong. The following week my family packed up the car and headed to Lake George, a trip I had been looking forward to all summer. However, when the time finally arrived, I was completely uninterested in the trip. My brain was in a fog and since my hockey game I had found it difficult to be emotional towards anything that was happening. In denial that anything was truly wrong, I didn't take care of my brain as I should have and still went hiking, ran, rode jet skis, and participated in countless other physical activities in the remaining weeks of the summer.

I had known for weeks that my brain was not functioning properly but was still unwilling to admit it. I was unable to follow simple conversations, forgetting what had been said at the beginning of the conversation before it even was over. I would wake up in the morning and have completely forgotten what I had done the day prior. I was in a daze, going through the motions but never truly interested in anything I was doing. I felt dead inside, completely unable to react to my surroundings, yet I continued to hide my feelings from my parents.

I spent hours looking up symptoms of concussions, and still believed that something bigger was going on in my brain since my symptoms didn't align with what I was reading online. I no longer had headaches or dizziness but was struggling with severe cognitive issues and memory loss. I read stories of professional athletes who had received upwards of six or seven concussions and recovered from symptoms after only a few weeks. I hit my head only once almost a month ago, I kept telling myself. There is no way that your symptoms are still related to that small hit to your head.

Upon returning from the lake trip, it was finally time to go shopping and pack for my freshman year at college. My mom took me to Target to get all of the essentials: towels, shampoo, conditioner, toothpaste, a toothbrush, sheets, a comforter. I walked through the store like a zombie, mindlessly placing things into the cart as we weaved in and out of the aisles. My mom grabbed me by the shoulder and hastily spun me around in front of the skin care products.

“Sam what has been going on with you lately?”

“Nothing. I'm fine.” I shortly responded, still unwilling to admit that something was wrong and that I still was not feeling right.

The next week flew by, and unfortunately, I was still not feeling any better. Before I knew it Thursday came and the car was packed full of everything needed to move me into college. I sat in the passenger seat, my hands fiddling with the papers in my lap. A million thoughts ran through my head: What if I never feel like myself again? How am I supposed to start school? Am I going to be able to sit through class on Monday? My mom, aware of how nervous I was, grabbed my hands and squeezed them.

“Don’t worry, everything is going to be okay,” she reassured me.

Yeah right. I didn’t believe a word she said. I knew that my mind was in no position to be taking on this next step in college. I barely could watch a movie without getting a headache, let alone sit through a class. I was still having major memory issues and knew that I would not be able to study. As we pulled into campus, the sun was shining and people were joyfully walking around everywhere, a smile on everyone’s face but my own. I lugged box after box of my belongings into my 12’ X 15’ dorm room, meeting along the way what felt like endless new faces, unable to remember any of their names.

After the final box was unloaded and unpacked, my mom got back in the car and drove away, leaving me all alone in this foreign place. I wasn’t on my own long, however. After the third day of classes, already having skipped two of them, I went back and forth over whether I would be able to study. Finally, I realized that I was never going to make it through the semester, and ultimately called my mom crying and told her she had to pick me up. Despite giving it my best efforts, my brain wasn’t in the right place to handle school. Just like that I started packing up the boxes I had only unpacked a few days prior.

That forty-five-minute car ride home felt endless. I stared out the window, unable to believe that I had really just taken a leave of absence from my first semester at Bentley. My heart started beating uncontrollably as tears rolled down my face. My breathing grew heavier, and I struggled to maintain my composure. As much as my parents were trying to remain strong for me, I could see tears in both of their eyes through the rearview mirror. I tried to accept my new reality but was unable to admit that this was really happening.

Next thing I knew I was sitting in a doctor’s office, the metal from the chair cool against my bare skin. Assuming I had a concussion, I was given a test to examine my cognitive function, an exam that was almost meaningless without baseline results to compare it to. Nonetheless, I was whisked out of the doctor’s office in a hurry, a paper in my hand saying I would be able to return to physical activity in a week.

The doctor told me to take it easy, avoid watching TV and using my phone, and I should be feeling better in no time. However, a week passed, and then a month, and I still was not feeling any better.

The next few months became very monotonous, filled with endless doctors' appointments and meetings with my therapist. I was a mess. I did not understand how hitting my head in August could still be impacting me months later. Having been valedictorian of my high school class, I never dreamed of not completing my first semester of college. My anxiety got worse as time went on and I still was not healing. I had numerous panic attacks, afraid that I would never feel like myself again.

Having played sports my whole life, I had been taught since a young age what a concussion was – a brain injury caused by a blow to the head or a violent shaking of the head or body, leading to temporary cognitive symptoms. This is the textbook definition, however, and what isn't explain to you is the uncommon symptoms that may occur as a result of a concussion. All people talk about are the headaches and dizziness that may accompany a concussion. What they do not talk about is the anxiety that comes along with it, the memory loss, the change in behavior, the shifts in personality.

Weekly doctors' appointments always resulted in the doctors telling me that I needed to give it time and let my brain properly heal on its own. Give it time? I thought to myself. Wasn't three months plenty of time for my brain to heal? During these months I became so depressed that it became difficult for me to even get out of bed. If my brain wasn't healed enough to do anything, I was going to do exactly that – nothing. I spent days just staring at my ceiling, wishing that I had taken proper care of myself after I had been hit during my hockey game. However, this was my reality and I began to accept it for what it was. By the time Christmas came and I began to feel healthy again, I finally admitted that the doctors were right – time was key in this situation.

I believe this change in perspective was a crucial part of my healing process. As I allowed time for my brain to rest and stopped putting so much pressure on myself, I began to see changes in my behavior as well as my cognitive abilities. My memory began to come back to me and I again was able to feel joy, experience pain, and rejoice in happiness. I started to become who I used to be, relieved that my brain was finally healing.

I had been completely unprepared for what that hit to my head during my hockey game was going to do to me. Little did I know that a hit in the summer would prevent me from attending school in the fall and result in endless months of unhappiness.

Had I taken better care of my head initially, I undoubtedly would have escaped many of the symptoms that I experienced. Young athletes must be educated on the dangers of concussions and warned of the many signs in order to prevent other them from going through a similar nightmare that I experienced at the end of that summer. For a brain injury that can cause so much long-term damage for young athletes, why are they not more properly educated on the signs and symptoms of concussions?

screenplay

mute

kyrsten arnold

EXT. SCHOOLYARD - DAY

On an overcast day, fallen leaves lie on the ground. The wind wisps through the hair of JOLINA, a 13-year-old girl dressed in a thick jacket. She sits alone at an outdoor table with an open paper bag next to her, her back to the school that she attends. With permanently sad eyes, Jolina munches on a thin sandwich as her peers rambunctiously interact with one another inside the cafeteria behind her. With headphones covering her ears, Jolina ignores the chaos behind her.

Instead, she chooses to engross herself in a worn, golden-brown sketchbook, its thick exterior lying on her lap.

Jolina delicately flips through the sketchbook as she takes another bite of her sandwich. Inside of the sketchbook are a variety of nature drawings. While some were clearly drawn with pencil, a few glisten with golden ink. With a sense of familiarity, Jolina traces a finger across a golden drawing of a house with luscious bushes and flowers surrounding it.

INT. MATH CLASSROOM - DAY

The school bell RINGS inside of a dull, grey classroom. The only decorations are cheesy posters with math puns on them. MRS. JENNINGS, an elderly woman with a bent back, rapidly scribbles problems onto her blackboard. She does so with chalk as her students file into the classroom. Jolina sits in the back with her science textbook open on her desk with the golden-brown sketchbook on top of it. She continues to gaze at the drawings. She flips to the first page of the sketchbook to see a picture of a family gazing at a sunset, drawn in pencil.

MRS. JENNINGS

Jolina.

Jolina continues to stare at the sketchbook in front of her.
Tracing the drawing with her finger.

MRS. JENNINGS
Jolina!

Jolina's startled body jerks, rattling her desk. Mrs. Jennings shakes her head as Jolina's books fall to the floor. Jolina's classmates stare at her, murmuring indistinctly.

MRS. JENNINGS
Are you paying attention?

Jolina nods and she bends down to pick up her belongings. As she holds her textbook and sketchbook in her hands, she notices a now open flap on the inside of the front cover of the golden-brown sketchbook. She stares at it curiously.

MRS. JENNINGS
Then what's the answer to the question
on the board?

Mrs. Jennings takes the piece of chalk she's holding and points it at the blackboard. Jolina's eyes break from the sketchbook for a moment and return Mrs. Jennings' gaze. She stares at the board before ultimately shrugging. Mrs. Jennings sighs.

MRS. JENNINGS
I hope you're ready for the quiz
today.

Jolina returns her gaze to the sketchbook and lifts the flap. Inside, she discovers an indent in the shape of a pen. Meanwhile, Mrs. Jennings calls on another student as she gathers the stack of papers on her desk.

EMILY

The answer is 22.

MRS. JENNINGS

Correct. Okay, notebooks away.

The students shuffle around their belongings, readying themselves for the quiz. Jolina, noticing the movement around her, begins to put away her books.

Once Mrs. Jennings slaps a quiz on Jolina's desk, Jolina stares at it for a moment. Then, she puts pencil to paper. As she does so, a classmate pushes their chair back and makes a loud SCREECHING sound. Jolina jolts upright.

CUT TO:

FLASHBACK: INT. CAR - NIGHT

Jolina's father, JACK, slams the break with his foot and the car swerves, making a terrifying SCREECHING sound.

CUT TO:

PRESENT DAY: INT. MATH CLASSROOM - DAY

Jolina's eyes are tightly closed and her hands clench. Her body is shaking.

Trembling, she puts her pencil down and stands up with her unfinished quiz. She throws her backpack over her shoulder and walks up to Mrs. Jennings. She lays the unfinished quiz down on her teacher's desk and abruptly leaves the classroom.

EXT. JOLINA'S HOUSE - AN HOUR LATER

With headphones on, Jolina walks along the side of a quiet road. She kicks rocks as she travels, holding the golden-brown sketchbook tightly under her arm.

When Jolina finally arrives at her destination, she looks up and begins to journey up the driveway of her house. But, she stops. Jolina looks up at the entirety of the house with a look of solemn appreciation. It's the house from the sketchbook. She looks down at the sketchbook and squeezes it against herself before eventually venturing inside.

JOSEPHINE

Hey, Jo.

Jolina looks up at her mother silently. She gives Josephine a small smile as she rests her cheek against her knees. Josephine sits on the edge of Jolina's bed. She looks down at the sketchbook by Jolina's feet.

JOSEPHINE

Is that what I think it is?

Josephine reaches for the sketchbook and smiles at the drawing.

JOSEPHINE

He was talented wasn't he?

Jolina stares at her mother with sad eyes and nods. Josephine turns the page and chuckles. Jolina sits up a bit. Josephine looks up at her daughter and turns the sketchbook around. It is the sketch of the golden house.

JOSEPHINE

I remember when he drew this.

Josephine puts the sketchbook down on the bed, but continues to stare at it.

JOSEPHINE

It was when we were in our tiny apartment before you were born. We wanted a bigger space and your father was very particular about what he wanted our first home to look like.

Jolina's eyebrows furrow. She sits up a little straighter with a curious look on her face. Josephine notices Jolina's confusion.

JOSEPHINE

He drew this not a day before we found
this place.

Josephine looks around the room for a second, recalling the
memory.

JOSEPHINE

I couldn't believe it. It
was..so...surreal.

Jolina stares at her mother, soaking the story in. She taps
the bed and Josephine looks up. With her mother's attention,
Jolina leans forward and flips the inside of the front cover.
She points at the open flap.

JOSEPHINE

Oh, no. Is the pen lost? Jack never
let it out of his sight...He wouldn't
even let me use it.

Josephine chuckles lightly at the memories of her husband.
Her smile fades, however, replaced with melancholy. Silence
fills the room as Jolina's fingers tap her bed, lightly this
time. She tucks her hair behind her ear, looking around her
room.

Josephine closes the sketchbook and looks up at her daughter.

JOSEPHINE

Alright, time for bed.

Jolina's eyes snap back to her mother before nodding her head
and sliding herself under her covers. Josephine tucks her
daughter in.

JOSEPHINE

Don't think we're not going to talk
about today later on. Your teacher
called.

Jolina gazes up at her mother with her timid and submissive eyes. Josephine sighs, picking up the sketchbook and placing it on Jolina's desk. Josephine returns her attention to Jolina.

JOSEPHINE

I love you.

Jolina gives Josephine a small smile. Josephine's shoulders fall a bit before she gives her daughter a kiss on the forehead. Josephine caresses Jolina's face for a moment before standing up and turning off the lights and exiting the bedroom. Jolina rolls over and begins to drift off to sleep.

FADE TO:

FLASHBACK: INT. CAR - NIGHT

Jolina sits in the passenger seat of a rusty mid-sized car.

Her father, Jack, sits in the driver's seat, dressed in a worn out brown jacket and washed jeans. They are both belting a song that's on the radio. They turn and sing to each other during a moment in the chorus. When Jolina turns her head back to windshield, there is a deer in the middle of the road.

JOLINA

Watch out!

Jack's attention quickly turns to the road and he steps on the brakes. The car swerves.

Begin a heart-clenching montage of the car running off of the side of the road and crashing into a tree; the police and ambulances arrive. A first responder reaches into the car and grabs Jolina, preparing to pull her out of the vehicle.

CUT TO:

PRESENT DAY: INT. JOLINA'S BEDROOM - MIDNIGHT

Jolina's eyes shoot open. She sits up suddenly. Jolina is drenched in cold sweat with tears streaming down her cheeks. Breathing hard, Jolina lifts her knees and begins to bang her head against them.

FLASHBACK: EXT. ROADSIDE - NIGHT

Slow motion of the deer turning its head towards Jack's car, the headlights flooding light onto the creature.

FLASHBACK: INT. CAR - NIGHT

Still in slow motion, Jack swerves and looks of horror creep onto both his and Jolina's faces. As the car runs off the road, a black sketchbook and golden pen can be seen falling off of Jolina's lap.

PRESENT DAY: INT. JOLINA'S BEDROOM - MIDNIGHT

Jolina's hands clutch her temples as the painful memory plays in her mind. Crying, she lifts her head up with a look of sudden realization. After a moment, Jolina whips her covers off of herself and gets out of bed.

Jolina takes a few steps towards her closet and opens it. She hesitates for a moment, but ultimately steps forth into it. After a few seconds of rummaging, Jolina retreats from the closet with a brown box. For a moment, Jolina looks like she is about to start profusely crying again, but she holds herself together. She wipes her face with her arm and sits down on the floor with the box. She opens it gently.

Jolina's chest rises and falls heavily as she stares into the box. A black sketchbook with "JOLINA" written in stickers lies at the bottom of the shallow box. She lifts the sketchbook gently and opens it with a sense of caution.

She flips through a few pages, lumping pages together here and there. The first few drawings were clearly that of a child, but the artistry matures the further into the book Jolina goes.

JACK (O.S.)

Draw me something.

FLASHBACK: INT. CAR - NIGHT

JOLINA

Like what?

Jack sits in the driver seat of his car with a wide-eyed Jolina next to him.

JACK

Whatever you want.

Jolina purses her lips as she opens her black sketchbook. When she comes to a fresh page she taps her jacket pockets.

JOLINA

I can't. I don't have a pencil.

JACK

Look in the glove compartment.

Jack keeps his eyes on the road, only looking away momentarily to turn on the radio. Soft MUSIC floods into the car. Meanwhile, Jolina searches for something to draw with. Next to a golden-brown sketchbook, Jolina sees a golden pen. She grabs it.

Jolina begins to sketch a drawing.

JACK

Found one?

Jack glances at Jolina out of the corner of his eye. Jolina lifts the cover of her sketchbook to conceal her drawing.

JOLINA

Don't look! Not until it's done.

Jack chuckles but complies.

PRESENT DAY: INT. JOLINA'S BEDROOM - MIDNIGHT

Jolina's eyes are so wide they may fall out of her head. She covers her mouth with her hand. As one half of the sketchbook slumps, no longer being supported, the gold pen rolls out of the sketchbook.

JOLINA (O.S.)
Okay, it's done.

FLASHBACK: INT. CAR - NIGHT
Jack smiles and reaches for the radio.

JACK
Show me at the next stop light. But
first...

Jack turns the volume on the radio up and the MUSIC pumps through the speakers. Jolina's eyes widen with delight as she looks at her father. Jack's smile widens as they both begin to sing along to the song.

FLASHBACK: EXT. ROADSIDE - NIGHT
As Jack's car drives up a dark road, the headlights increasingly flood onto a deer in the middle of the road.

PRESENT DAY: INT. JOLINA'S BEDROOM - MIDNIGHT
Fresh tears stream down Jolina's face as she drops the sketchbook and scurries away from it as if it may bite her. She begins to hyperventilate as she realizes what she drew on that fateful day: a deer in golden ink.

FLASHBACK: EXT. ROADSIDE - NIGHT
Rapid montage of the deer in the middle of the highway;
Jack's car swerving off the side of the road; the car
crashing into a thick tree.

PRESENT DAY: INT. JOLINA'S BEDROOM - MIDNIGHT

Fresh tears stream down Jolina's face as she drops the sketchbook and scurries away from it as if it may bite her. She begins to hyperventilate as she realizes what she drew on that fateful day: a deer in golden ink.

FLASHBACK: EXT. ROADSIDE - NIGHT

Rapid montage of the deer in the middle of the highway; Jack's car swerving off the side of the road; the car crashing into a thick tree.

PRESENT DAY: INT. JOLINA'S BEDROOM - MIDNIGHT

Jolina grabs her head with her hands and pulls on her hair with a face full of agony. Still hyperventilating, Jolina shakes her head.

FLASHBACK: EXT. ROADSIDE - NIGHT

From within an ambulance, a semi-conscious Jolina watches as her father's limp body is zippered into a body bag. A first responder closes the door as tears run down Jolina's face. She tries to speak, but can only seem to mouth the word, "Dad." With a worried look, Jolina tries to lift her arm to her throat but the first responder gently places her arm back on the gurney. Jolina tries to say "Dad" once more and fails.

PRESENT DAY: INT. JOLINA'S BEDROOM - MIDNIGHT

Now standing, Jolina hugs herself, clawing her rib cage with her fingernails. Her head droops and her back hunches over. She opens her mouth as if to scream - but nothing comes out.

Jolina finishes her silent scream but remains in distress. Her back straightens and her head tosses back. She looks at the ceiling for a moment before closing her eyes. When she opens them again, without moving her head, she side-eyes her sketchbook that is lying on the floor. Jolina's chest rises and falls before she finally moves and grabs the black sketchbook and golden pen.

Jolina flips to a fresh page with anger, hurt, and tears still in her eyes. She begins to draw a self-portrait.

PRESENT DAY: INT. JOLINA'S BEDROOM - MIDNIGHT

Fresh tears stream down Jolina's face as she drops the sketchbook and scurries away from it as if it may bite her. She begins to hyperventilate as she realizes what she drew on that fateful day: a deer in golden ink.

FLASHBACK: EXT. ROADSIDE - NIGHT

Rapid montage of the deer in the middle of the highway; Jack's car swerving off the side of the road; the car crashing into a thick tree.

PRESENT DAY: INT. JOLINA'S BEDROOM - MIDNIGHT

Jolina grabs her head with her hands and pulls on her hair with a face full of agony. Still hyperventilating, Jolina shakes her head.

FLASHBACK: EXT. ROADSIDE - NIGHT

From within an ambulance, a semi-conscious Jolina watches as her father's limp body is zippered into a body bag. A first responder closes the door as tears run down Jolina's face. She tries to speak, but can only seem to mouth the word, "Dad." With a worried look, Jolina tries to lift her arm to her throat but the first responder gently places her arm back on the gurney. Jolina tries to say "Dad" once more and fails.

PRESENT DAY: INT. JOLINA'S BEDROOM - MIDNIGHT

Now standing, Jolina hugs herself, clawing her rib cage with her fingernails. Her head droops and her back hunches over. She opens her mouth as if to scream - but nothing comes out.

Jolina finishes her silent scream but remains in distress. Her back straightens and her head tosses back. She looks at the ceiling for a moment before closing her eyes. When she opens them again, without moving her head, she side-eyes her sketchbook that is lying on the floor. Jolina's chest rises and falls before she finally moves and grabs the black sketchbook and golden pen.

Jolina flips to a fresh page with anger, hurt, and tears still in her eyes. She begins to draw a self-portrait.

INT. JOLINA'S BEDROOM - AN HOUR LATER

Jolina finishes drawing herself and stares at it for a moment, contemplating. She sniffles, holding back the rest of her tears as she puts pen to paper once again. She begins to draw a tight rope around her neck.

As she draws, she can feel the pressure against her airways and begins to have trouble breathing. Once she finishes, she drops the pen and grabs her neck, desperately gasping for air. Struck by the horrors of suffocation, she kicks the sketchbook and pen away from her, eyes bulging from her head.

Jolina's body still gasping for air, she watches as the sketchbook lands right underneath a photograph of her and her mother that hangs on her wall. Jolina's eyes droop, guilt suddenly washing over her.

The tears return as Jolina continues to struggle. She closes her eyes and turns her face away from the photograph. But, guilt forces her to reopen them and confront the smiling picture of herself and the mother she is getting ready to leave behind.

With her last ounce of strength, Jolina first fights with herself, choosing between life and death. Finally, she gasps and begins to crawl to the sketchbook. Her movements are painfully slow as her airways continue to be constricted. With red eyes and the colors drained from her face, Jolina uses what little strength she has left to reach for the sketchbook. Her fingertips touch the rough paper, but the strength to grab it escapes her.

Jolina looks up at the picture of herself and her mother one last time as her body gives up the fight.

Staring at the photograph, she mouths the words, "I'm sorry." With her face towards the ceiling and an outstretched arm, Jolina breathes her last breath as another tear washes down her pale face.

FADE TO BLACK:
THE END

