Richmond Art and Writing Region of the Scholastic Art & Writing Awards

Gold Key Recipients in Writing
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Category: Poetry

I see God in the garden

I see God in the garden
the watermelons pull
hard on their stems,
dark and heavy,
full of promise.
I cradle one
between my palms
and let its cold body
find rest.

months ago, in the choked light
of an early morning
I pressed seeds into ripe soil,
fingertips wet with dew.
I did not dare hope for fruit.

beneath the earth
the pupils of those seeds split
and opened, shoved forth shoots
pale with newness,
gasping for life.

I am brought to my knees
by the thought of those first
green tendrils, searching blindly
for something to hold,
like the warm starfish
of an infant’s hand:
thrust upwards as if in prayer.
new gospel

new gospel

i.

long ago, there was no God.
no right or wrong,
no promises.

then, in the flatness
of cess-laden ponds, Man
began to bloom.

in flickers of movement
across the millennia:

the embryo of Man—still
a pinprick of darkness—
widens gently into an eclipse.

limbs push out from
boneless bodies,
vertebrae rise, ridging
taut skin, brutish palms
leave the ground and never return.

the spine learns tension,
forgets its harsh parabola,
and becomes trapped like a mouse
between the shoulderblades.

ii.

there was never any God,
only crisis:
hurricanes coil over coastlines
and wreak petty havoc.

meaningless wars hold us
by the throat, and while
fathers conquer the high ground,
their children are martyred
in the name of nothingness.

wide-eyed, powerless to
each chaotic dawn,
we watch coincidence unfold
and call it fate.

and each night, consumed by fear,
we pray into a vast
blank ocean of stars,
hoping to be touched
by the intangible.

iii.
we are promised something
after death:
when we leave our bodies,
our sins fall into the hands
of a man called God.

we wait a lifetime to be
reckoned: we cower for him,
shed blood for him,
clap our hands and scream
for him

we worship him with fervor:
this golden icon
made in our likeness,
and we choose to forget
that from which we came.

iv.
deep underwater,
our fishlike ancestors feel
a similar reverence and fear.
they cling to algae-slick stones
and shy away from the shore,

terrified of their cruel
distant children.
state of Being

he’s driving too fast down Riverside but tonight
I am invincible, rolling like a dog in the dirt
of sensation. the wind slaps, caresses; takes
my hair into its fist and pulls hard,
full of longing like everything else.

I remember what it’s like to be the weapon,
angles tangy with aggression,
but tonight I am the wound, and I bask
in that sting.

tonight I’m making love to this faceless world,
doing anything to feel something new.

tonight I’m choosing to breathe in the wine
of my youth, to drown in it—
    the sweetest moscato of all—
less than myself

_lately I am_
 less than myself.

_I am_
 convenient.

_I am_
 a phone call, 
a single shot of vodka, 
a trinket: something 
found & kept.

_I have been tucked_
 in his back-pocket archives, 
my number saved under 
_Anonymous._

_I have been used_
 like a rag, 
shouldered 
like a burden, 
spread 
like butter and 
flipped 
like a dime.

_I have shouted, screamed,_ 
_ shoved him hard, stumbled back;_
_I have shut up, shut down, 
slammed the car door._

_I have been left_
 on the corner 
of Monument and Davis 
with everything I have ever loved 
running into the intersection.

_I have pressed my hands_
 over my face like a bandage, 
waiting and waiting and waiting 
for someone to call my bluff._
self portrait

I am a meathook bowing
the lean form of a fishing pole:
the barb of my body
is full of love letters, hair ties, dimebags,
all that is lost-and-found.

with this miscellaneous bait, I am cast
again and again into the stillness of others,
who find that I gouge their depths
because their being is not a pond
but a puddle, so I am made empty
for no one, taut as a fist. slack
as a fishless line.

I am a city of sinkholes,
of beehives, of Movieland
parking lots, all things that are meant to
(or are praying to) be filled.

but the pavement keeps
collapsing in on itself.
the hives are deadened with smoke.
and the Movieland
is screening only fox news
in a town full of liberals.

so finally I come to rest, with the finality
of a shattered glass stilling on the kitchen floor,
with the resignation of a moth that has battered
itself against the light fixture of promise
for too long.

so finally I come to rest,
like the fisherman at the reel, knowing
before he draws his line from the water
that the bait at its end has been nipped away—
not a thing to show for it,
just gone, parted neatly from the hook
like flesh from bone.
perspective of a calculator getting laid

her body becomes abstract,
lines & simple algebra.

the domain of her
languid silhouette
plotted into perfection:
(-2 ≤ x ≤ 2)

ribs stretch her skin—
bony grid lines,
parabolas of the anatomy.

unending asymptote
of legs, torso,
the slope of her thigh
gentle and pixelated:
y = -4x + 2

searching for a formula
to calculate those hips,
quadratics, translations,
graph of motion,
irrational craving,
nameless need—
error
the universe is trial and error

the universe is trial and error

he traces the twin breasts  
of an infinity sign  
on my hip:  
as if forever  
could be born  
out of a friday night  
on clay street.

there is something holy  
about that sweet ignorance:

together, we kid ourselves  
into thinking that the minute  
brushing of our paths  
is anything but a well-timed  
accident.

I like to think  
I know the truth:  
nothing is mapped  
in the dark spaces  
between the stars—  
and yet—
secular opponent

I hate the way she crosses her legs—
as if she was bred for close-lipped smiles,
as if she has been trained into silence.

she has never seen tree trunks with my eyes—
how their oddities mimic the woman’s wide hips.

she is mother to a certain brand of idiocy,
she is pale with it.
she has never felt mountains in her throat,
ever given herself to the world.

her openness should stretch
like a wound down her chest—
she should be wild with
things left unsaid.

instead, she crosses her legs
and smiles without teeth.
For My Name: Reclaimed Princess, Relearning My Arabic Alphabet, The Woman Wading in Yellow

Reclaimed Princess

After Adachi Amaram’s "Barefoot Queen"

I forgot my language
Broken Arabic used to slip
From my lips and Yoruba beat in my heart
My first name Muslim and last, Nigerian
My name always alluded to what I should’ve been

I forgot my country
Grasping for anything Black
Staring at pictures of Nigerian-Fulani people
Looking for a resemblance
In the lips, the nose, anything to recognize myself in something larger than me

I forgot my origin
But isn’t that America
Isn’t that Black
Erasing the history of me I’m told I should forget
Ancestors cup their hands on my cheeks
Wishing I could open my eyes
To the beauty of what used to be home
Bright sun shining off the leaves of coffee trees
All of this land was ours, it could have been ours
I could have known my name

I forgot until I met her
The Igbo princess in a ripped crop top
Her steps graced against white marble
We listened to each others’ heartbeats
Hearing our longing for home
She spoke broken Hebrew
She told me of Nigeria, telling me
It’s not too late to find our families
I told her we’ll go together and I will
Finally feel what it’s like to be home

Until then, we decide to write
through poetry, we laugh and we yell
through poetry, I find a glimpse of myself
Of the warm wind that tells me
This is where you belong, tells me to come home
It tells me we’ve waited so long for you
There’s so much to do before I can go
So much language I have to speak again
The Igbo princess smiles and touches hands
with the lost Fulani girl
And for a moment,

I remember

Relearning My Arabic Alphabet

my sa’ad doesn’t write the same
doesn’t slip from my tongue the way it used to
there are caves found where my accent once flowered
my name now written by the hands of a girl
whose home has been lost

//
in kindergarten, my english alphabet played tag
with quarter notes, danced on wet grass and let small
children sing their song, but my arabic had no melody
it went down my throat like cinnamon with sugar, rough
and sweet i took in a breath of cinnamon and smiled

now my palm bends the blue pen grasped under my fingers
waiting for when my alif, jiim, noon will be as familiar
as the english engraved into my knuckles

a man, his brown skin covered in a silver thobe
smelled of his own mecca, spoke with cinnamon
coarse and sharp, each syllable long enough to meet his echo

he asks me to speak arabic
and the roof of my mouth collapsed into me

two kids sit regal on cafeteria tables
dressed in hollister sweatshirts and jordans like me
their mouths filled with school burgers and homebrewed
english bearing questions

they ask me to speak arabic
and i talk in a language that is not my own

i still pick the pen up again
write my alphabet with slanted letters
watch as my scribbles turn to words
my arabic name becomes my own

//
i want my children to learn what i can’t seem to keep
find language a home within their mouths
their fingers twined into mine as i whisper my arabic
alphabet to a melody that’s always been there

The Woman Wading in Yellow: A Self Portrait

Today you’re an artist
Painting white space
With golden brown
Giving life to the breathless
You pencil in large eyes
Trace the bridge of nose
Color in every piece of
You are to be seen by all

//
A woman walking next to a river
Her light steps waver on wet rocks
A dress the color of a rising sun dancing
In the wind behind her bare cocoa butter feet
Yellow paint chipped against nail beds
Henna flowers her full arms and circles fingers

Her lips touch the warm water, whispers a prayer
To Oshun, Allah, anyone who will listen
The river holds the ends of her hijab
Embroidered with words of every slur
Every joke taken too lightly
With each Bible quote poured down her throat
Wrapped around her neck and over her head
She kisses her hand and pearls drape against brown skin
When jewelry slips to water, it turns into gold

//
Etch the woman until there are lips
Parted, smiling, filled with Ebonics
And rebirthed Arabic
Breathe her life, add the final stroke
See yourself appear from nothing
Friends Forever

She’s forgotten me.

My best friend, the only person who’s ever cared about me.

She’s forgotten me.

I can tell from the way she pushes our princess dresses to the back of the closet, how our tea set gathers dust, how my name never leaves her mouth. It used to be music to my ears when she called my name, "Penny! Lunch time!"

"Penny! Let’s play dolls!"

"You’re right Penny, this is a lovely tea party."

But now she has new friends.

She used to play with me every day, but now I’m just a phase, an embarrassing chapter in her life that she’s eager to close. Currently, I’m being forced to watch as Abby plays tag with her “real” friend, Lola. I glare at them as jealousy cuts through my chest, ice cold and filled with longing. I wish, more than you could know, that I could march right over to them and make them leave. Or better yet, pull Abby away and make sure that she can’t get rid of me ever again. I’d give anything to be able to do this, to make my presence known, but I can’t. She would look right past my begging eyes, never hear my pleading words. She wouldn’t even know I was there… because to her I’m not.

That’s the thing about being an, as grownups like to call it, “imaginary friend.” I’m always here, and I see everything, but I can’t do anything once I’ve been forgotten. Well, I can’t do anything much. If I focus really hard, sometimes I can move things. I’ve tried writing Abby letters telling her that I’m still here, that if she just remembers me I could be real to her again, but I never learned how to write, so I mess it up every time. Looking back at my failed attempts, the only clear thing on the pages are the stains of my splashed tears. I tried other ways to reach her too; I set our art projects out on her desk, but she threw them away; I laid our Halloween costumes on her bed, but she stuffed them in her dresser. I’ve just about given up hope.

As I watch Abby giggle and run towards Lola, I seethe, desperate to end their relationship as soon as possible. Suddenly, Lola pauses, taking off her precious pink bow and setting it on a bench so it doesn’t get dirty while she plays. The accessory is her pride and joy, a birthday present from her mom, and she loves to brag about it everyday on the playground. My lips curl into a snarl; how can Abby tolerate her?

I gasp, an idea quickly forming in my brain. Lola doesn’t appreciate Abby; in fact I bet she’d turn on her in a minute! I hurry over to the bench, waiting until Lola’s back is turned to pick the bow up. Its silky, delicate fabric feels tangible in my hands, even if I’m just a memory. I shudder. How could something so pretty belong to someone so awful? I close my eyes, channeling my deep hatred for Lola, and frown down at the bow for a moment before coiling my fingers around it and yanking as hard as I can, the ribbon tearing apart with a satisfying RIIIP. I stare down at the threadbare, tattered bow in my hands, smiling smugly and tossing it back on the bench.

It’s not long before Lola finishes up her game (she lost, of course), and heads back to the bench for her bow. I grin eagerly as I watch the realization hit her; she lets out a loud gasp and her face crumples, hot tears filling her eyes. I don’t even feel a pinch of guilt.

She picks it up, desperately trying to retie it, but it’s beyond repair. She cries a few broken sobs before Abby rushes over to comfort her.

“What’s wrong? What happened?” I hear her ask Lola, and I feel another pang of jealousy.

“S-someone tore my bow,” she says, gasping. It’s hard to tell if she’s angry or devastated or both. She looks suspiciously at Abby for a moment before asking quietly, “Did you?”

Abby’s jaw drops, shocked that Lola would accuse her of something like that, “No, I swear I didn’t!”

Lola doesn’t look convinced, and her next words come out fast and fierce: “You always said you wanted one just like it! I bet you couldn’t stand to see me wear it, so you had to ruin it for me!” Now Abby looks like she’s on the verge of tears. I feel bad for Abby, but at least now she understands how horrible Lola truly is. Lola storms away to the teacher, and Abby looks like she’s just been slapped.
“No, Lola- wait! I really didn’t do it!” But it’s too late, Lola’s already run away, most likely to tell on Abby. Some friend she is; I would never do something like that. Abby sinks onto the bench, crying hard now, and although I hate to see her hurt, I can’t help but smile with victory. It worked! Abby’s sure to turn to me now! I wait a minute, maybe two, to be called by her, but nothing happens. She continues to shake and let out shuddering sobs, the same defeated tears I often find myself crying as well.

I trust that she’ll remember me, but ten minutes later, my skin still looks translucent, and my vision is still obscured by a hazy fog, like I’m looking at the world through a frosted window. I shriek with frustration. This CAN’T be happening. I frantically run over to my best friend, the girl I know misses me, and shake her by the shoulders.

“Remember me! Abby, remember me!” I plead, my volume gradually increasing with desperation until I’m screaming: “Remember!!! REMEMBER!” Hot tears pelt my cheeks, and my entire body is filled with a longing that makes my chest physically hurt. Of course she hears none of this, and tries to wipe away her own tears.

Drawing in a shuddering breath, despair still churning in my stomach, I wrap her into a hug and whisper into her ear, “Abby, it’s Penny. Remember me. Please.”

I pull away as she looks up suddenly, staring right into my eyes. She heard me! She’s seeing me for the first time in a year! It worked! It worked, it worked, it worked, it worked!!!! Joy and relief explode in my chest before-

“Abby, I’m so sorry. I talked to Mrs. Robertson, and I realized that you wouldn’t do something like that... I believe you.” Lola’s apologetic voice comes from behind me.

I turn around slowly, looking at the actual reason Abby looked up so expectantly.

She didn’t hear me at all. She never will.

I feel hollow.

Abby lets out a sigh of relief, and her lips turn up into a hesitant smile. Every little bit of hope I had left shatters inside of me, and I know I won’t be able to glue it back together this time. Lola helps Abby to her feet, and together they wander over to their “secret hide-out,” a mossy oak that they love to play fairies in. My fists clench and jaw locks as I scowl after them, but I follow anyway. How is it that I can need her so badly, and she can just tune me out?

When we get to the tree, the cool, dark shade hides us from the rest of the kids playing. We’re completely alone. Something about the solitude makes me braver, and the flame of anger inside me reignites as Abby hugs Lola. I hate her. I hate her. I hate her! Squeezing my eyes shut and throwing my head back to scream, the injustice of the entire situation pours out of me. The sound that fills the air is so rich with torment I almost don’t believe it comes from my mouth. It’s all too much. Lola doesn’t deserve her. I deserve her. She needs me. I need her. They need to be apart. We need to be together. I love her. She needs to love me. My body acts without my mind’s consent, and suddenly I’m running at the two of them, reaching into the deepest part of my want, my need, for her to remember me. My whole body tenses as my view of the world clears for a moment. Through sheer force of will, I push the reconciled friends apart with every bit of my strength. I don’t see the school bus lumbering down the road. It doesn’t register that we’re two feet from the street. For just a moment, I’m real, and I’m only motivated for my desire to separate them. The next thing I know, Lola’s sprawled on the uneven ground by the tree roots, and Abby stumbles into the middle of the street, right in front of the bright yellow school bus. There’s a screeching of the brakes, but it’s too late. The bus hits her, but I’m the one who feels as if the breath has been knocked out of my lungs. I don’t understand why my heart hurts so much until I realize that Abby’s gone. And I’m the reason why.

Everything is too loud. Lola’s screams. The too-late honking of the bus. The wind in the trees. A single bird’s chirp. The world should be quiet. Because she’s quiet.

Cold seeps into my bones, and looking down, my body isn’t all there. It’s wispy and clear, like I’m made of smoke. Though my vision is rapidly blurring, I watch in horror as I disappear, not grasping why. But as everything turns dark, the answer comes to me. I’ve lost my only tether to reality. Abby’s gone.

And so am I.
Slipping

Fading
3 years removed, the picture rests beside piled envelopes and mail unread, essay prompts and stacked novels, anthologies, poems of November tucking its chill between vertebrae. I peeled the image from Time magazine— it is still here.

A thumb over Ball Park glass, sun curled into rest, and hiccup flashes of fireflies. An open field. A gentle hand.

It is too late. to swing open kitchen cabinets, carry a mason jar into the crisping night, wait for a dim glow to illuminate the summers whose only warmth was steam and my collapsing silhouette folding skin and time, now glazed ice no firefly light sees past. I see

The child’s swaying shadow and hips who have yet to know the transparency of chilled glass, under the sun’s diminishing warmth, how it slows.

My chin tucks to chest, I imagine stroking my soft thighs and sifting through poems, to illuminate a space—the bulb of a firefly—a first greeting to stillness like a child holding her new-found breasts in warm hands, how could anything be this pleasant this young this free this lost?

Melatonin for My Sister

It is 1AM and the curtains fray—
I remember peeking through, squinting at budding adulthood and papers I guessed to be love songs. I thought this fabric would last, your 18 year warmth on my shoulder, leaning, with our dazing limbs strewn about as unmatched socks. I liked it back then, our impromptu naps and the hush you never spoke through.
The words unsaid are here now,
slipping
through loose seams
splatting
on our pebbled sidewalk.

I forgot what it is they say to say,
when a breath carries weight,
maybe that’s why you didn’t tell me
maybe that’s why you drew curtains—
you knew I had my own.
I paint them shades of sky blue,
so when nights fall into my sunken chest
I know the sun will always arrive.
Miles it reaches itself to peek through blinds.

so,
if I show up to your doorstep
with a bucket of sky-blue paint,
could we re-stitch our worn socks
to dangle
as feathers from open windows?

The Transition

In the hollow swirl of a whale’s stomach wide as the night sky, lit only by your car, burning—
I see your heaving undulate in oranges which reminds me of the day we shared mandarins &
held the stringy rinds the same way I am trying to hold this for you, please, let me sit in the torn
leather seats and smack your hand as it reaches for the stick shift to reverse haircuts and chest
tape.

I know, your mom said God said. No, I don’t believe in that God.
Hurl the black-dyed follicles to the smoky fumes moving like jellyfish, and wonder how manly
your run would look if you went for the edges of this capsule, let the sky holler its churning
from body to whale, from belly to heart, decide God is the man burning the peel, the
You, ask why fate is so cruel, ask how to drive
a car, ask where is hell? Here, I argue.

(The heart of a whale is tall enough for a human to stand in.)
Untold stories

Aftershock

The pub door stands on the other side of the broken road, Past the blanket clouds of dust and titled hulks of once machinery. And blank spots were once dead used to lay, Curled up in their little balls or splayed out like angels. As grandmas screamed for their little kids to come back to the beds. Further down the street is where once a church used to stand, Now only a ghostly white structure remains, old ramparts hanging Pulpit tossed to the side, lead punching through the wood A few benches stand, others lay toppled like a house of cards once someone flips on the fan. You can tell where a body once laid, the dust outlines them, especially the small ones. A shredded Leopard sits without a growl in the dry river bank, Black char peeling off the edges, Stumps where once trees stood And holes like god had taken a shovel to the dirt Outline the chaos. Through the sandbags that weren’t packed enough, Past a dozen more blank spots in front of what remains of a school, And deep into the shaken town. Ash flutters down like the paratroopers into the German guns. Broken tanks dot the streets like candy wrappers on Valentines day, But these wrappers scream as their sugar piles out on the dirty snow, To whom the bell tolls, As the names of mothers and gods clog the skies.

Old Man

In a small winter hut, a man sat waiting, His small wool jacket frozen to his skin, Wind snapping the trees branches like the kindling in his damp fire He had a story, we all do But his must be told before he too is gone like all the other little boys, His name is Wig Dagma, just a Russian farmer His dusty old eyes and fur jacket tell a different tale, One of crying men and purring metal, One where little boys did stuff that grown men shouldn’t have to, A tale with a wall splattered with holes, And dirt like rain, mixed in with a few broken tales,
Stories and lives to be carried on by others.
But he won’t tell his story, his body does that for him.
Wrinkled old lips, pruned cheeks, and whitening hair,
Mud soaked boots from years of hard work,
Just another farmer he tells us,
A farmer who did nothing wrong,
A farmer who didn’t stand by and watch the line crack and fall,
A farmer who just watered his plants,
Not a young boy, trapped in a dying town,
Wearing an armband,
praying and crying as the world flipped and froze,
People burned and stumbled,
Trucks and tanks turned to a daze,
Houses tore to shreds, debris spraying,
Clouds of ash and bodies rising about the stained grey marble buildings,
And little boys pleaded and cried,
Voices filling the sky like a church,
All the same message, a thousand little scared voices.
Just begging for it to all end.
The little boys grabbing their rifles,
Hands trembling as whistles blew and men marched,
Clicks and snaps coming from every side,
Discarded shells hitting the ground,
accompanied by bodies like luggage,
Little boys in hastily dug foxholes,
Dying on the streets they grew up playing on,
Or already just discarded, like cards,
But he’s just a farmer he promised,
Nothing more, never less.
He just watered the ground
with the stories
of all the others that didn’t make it out of that city.

Little boys

They were just little boys, sitting and waiting, dug in like rabbits in a corn field
Trying to hide out till the giant across the hill stopped pounding on their door
Even though the little boys would know that the hordes would then come
Marching, stomping, rolling
down through the grasses in their millions.
But the little boy bunkered down harder in their holes as
Debris filled them back up again,
Dirt raining down on the helmets like the winters rain.
Shells slammed out the sound of the wounded
No one tried to help, they learned not to look, not the help,
and they didn’t expect anyone to do anything when it was them in the daisies
Vision fading from the red shells and marching,
Praying for the bullet to arrive,
for it to be over,
for the letter to get home safely.
More dirt came raining down as the earth rumbled from the tanks,
Thumping feet marching down the hill toward the terrified little
Boys.
Each one praying and crying as whistles blew,
MG42s crackled and popped,
A slight breeze carried the scent of russian blood to the frightened little boys,
Some whimpered like the dogs under their panzers,
As more shells landed,
Dust mingled with air,
Blood with mud,
And the little boys just sat there and cried, pleading to please let it all-
End.
Alys Goodwin
Age: 18, Grade: 12
School Name: Maggie L Walker Governor's School, Richmond, VA
Educator: Lisa Williams
Category: Flash Fiction

Tired

The biting air leaves a natural blush on my cheeks and nose. The cold is seizing my hands even from within my coat pockets. My coat slinks down to my knees, meeting the rims of my heeled boots. My curls bounce delicately on my shoulders, as crimson red slips from my lips to my teeth. I feel the paste plaster to my teeth, and make a conscious effort to fix it once I’m sitting down. I hurry down the steps and turn toward the Seventh Avenue Line. The frigid temperature and musty underground air create a bitter cocktail that presses down my throat and makes it hard to breathe. The doors open with a thud and I step inside. I’m greeted with warmer, no less musty air. The car is nearly empty, leaving a fine selection of stained and cracked seats to choose from. I find my place in a corner, where I can rest my head as I examine the hodgepodge of humanity around me.

There’s a man to my right, whose wrinkles and tanned skin give him the appearance of a weeks old clementine. His hair hangs black and greasy over his face, obstructing my view of his eyes. A battered guitar case rests against his legs, covered in colorful markings and peeling stickers that hint at a long life brimming with stories. His fingers are rifling through the inside of a hat, only landing on pennies and nickels, with the rare and coveted quarter surfacing occasionally. He is tired.

My eyes shift to the young girl across the car. She sits with her legs crossed and back straight in the guise of composure, but her eyes are watermarked. Her well tailored dress wrinkled, her lipstick dulled, her hair tangled at the ends. A bag sits next to her, spilling its contents onto the surrounding seats. Courier font stains my vision. After what audition did she stop smoothing out her dress, reapplying her lipstick, combing through her hair? She is tired.

Another woman is slouched further down the car, not even bothering to cross her legs. She sports a tour company logo and tattered puffer coat. Even the too long sleeves can’t hide the paint splotches on her hands, the too long body can’t hide the colorful stains on her jeans. She is tired.

All these people are tired. The weight of living with a dream deferred has taken its toll. And I want to stay on this subway car just a little longer. I want to stay tucked snuggly behind this facade, wearing this coat, this makeup, these curls. I want these people to look at me and see a woman who exudes superiority. But then again, people in pain have a way of sniffing out others with the same ache. Do they all know? Can they all tell? I am yanked from my reverie when the car screeches to a halt. This is me, Wall Street. My work place. The sun is low in the sky and the self-proclaimed “overworked” husbands are flooding the streets, looking for somewhere to displace their frustrations before walking through the door to kiss their wife and snuggle their children. For the right price, I can be that place and more. Situated in my open air office, I shed my coat. The air hits my bare skin like a frozen wall. The force makes me wobble on my heels, but I quickly find my perch, a perfect mixture of sultry confidence and helpless longing. You never know what your clientele is looking for. From my perch, I adjust my skin tight skirt, fluff my curls, and coat my lips one last time. My dream deferred scratches at my heart, but there is no time. I’m open for business. I’m tired.
"Sorryyy," Leyla whines. I turn around and shoot her a glare, but how could I be mad at her? She looks genuinely upset. I just playfully stick my tongue out at her. She's eight, so of course she sticks her tongue back out at me. I smile and squint my eyes at her in a mocking way. Leyla does the same. Once again, she's eight.

We finish up tying our shoelaces, so we stand up and I haul my hefty, new blue backpack over my shoulder. It's the start of a new school for both of us, and I'm trying to be a supportive big brother, but at the same time the weight of "first impressions" keeps holding me down.

In middle school I was the leader, but now I'm nothing again. I had to leave behind my friends (all four of which are in eighth grade), but my mom tells me it's a chance to meet new people. She doesn't say it, but I can tell she just wants me to have some friends who are my age. That's okay, she's just worried about me. I'm fine how I am, though. Kids my age are jerks. Although there are some exceptions, like Tisha and Ester. Girls like them are nice. In eighth grade they always asked me how my day was. Only Tisha's going to Copper High. I hope we can date or at the very least be friends. She's cool.

Of course, things like that would never happen. A guy like me, a girl like her, no way. She has beautiful mahogany skin and the tips of her hair that she dyed bright red in the last month of school. Me, well, I'm less lucky. I mean who would want to date some five-foot-seven nobody Middle-Eastern kid who, when on the rare occasions when he does talk, his voice cracks every second. I, for one, know I'd date the heck outta me.

Mom starts small talk as Ley-Ley and I sit, the car wheels drawing us closer and closer to school. Our conversation goes something like this:

Mom: "Are you nervous about first day?"
Me: "Yeah"
Mom: "Don't worry it, you will be fine."
Me: "Thanks."
Mom: "Remember, don't slouch. It is bad posture."
Me: "Uh-huh"

She glances behind her to see if I'm paying any attention to the conversation.

Mom, continuing the unwanted conversation: "Slouch lead to no friend."
Me: "Thanks."

Her English isn't the best, but somehow it suits her. Don't ask me how.

Rather than answering mom's questions about how I'm feeling, I focus my attention on Ley-Ley. I notice the way she fiddles with the tips of her fingers, a blank expression on her face as she stares straight ahead at the back of mom's seat. My mom's conversation with me swiftly ends as she gives up on her attempts of getting anything other than simple one-word answers from her anxious son. I can tell Leyla's nervous — I think everyone in the car is. It's not just my first day of school, after all. One thing I've learned from all my fourteen-and-a-half years on Earth is that everyone responds to anxiety differently.

We, meaning me, arrive at my school. As we drive into carpool, I see the building looming over me — even though it has to be only, like, two to three stories high. I've been here before and it wasn't that scary... Now that this is my high school, however, it looks like a monstrous, dark, towering airport. And if you know anything about me, you'd know that I despise airports.

The good news is that this is not an airport. The bad news is that it's my first day of high school, anddd we're here.

After brief goodbyes and a comforting smile to Leyla, I open the car door and hop out of my mom's red car. My grey gym shorts that end right above my knee brush against my thighs as I walk towards the gym's main entrance where we're supposed to meet.

It's 7:34. I open the double doors and I'm greeted by a crowd of freshmen, loud and rowdy teens, talking to one-another. Looking around, I see them put into groups. A tall boy, most likely a senior helping out, gives me a sticker and points me to a group. By instinct, I walk over to the group and awkwardly stand there. The kids all seem busy talking to each other, so I take this as an opportunity to look around at the people whom I assume to be in my homeroom. Five girls and three, no, four, boys. From the way they talk and dress, I can be certain when I say these are the most basic, stereotypical freshman I have ever seen. As the "standard Asian," I don't fit in. Even
worse is that out of all the young faces in the gym, I can only make out a few people from Copper Middle.

My thoughts are interrupted as I feel a gentle tap on my shoulder. Turning around allows a wave of relief to wash over me as I see Tisha's lively face, her dark chocolate eyes glistening as she stands in front of me.

"Arya?" she hesitates. Screaming internally, I automatically reply with a "Yeah?" She smiles and her expression relaxes.

"Oh, I was just wonderin' how your summer was," she says, stuttering a bit. Oh right. I forgot how nice Tisha is.

"It was fun," I look away nervously. Socializing isn't really my thing. She feels my discomfort and smiles gently, taking a small, casual step backward.

"What'd you do? I saw my grandparents in Hawai'i." 

"Oh," I stuttered. "I saw my family in Iran. It was nice. Was Hawaii hot?" Praise Allah, why did I just say that? Was Hawaii hot? I mentally facepalm myself.

"Oh, yeah, it was! We went to loads of shops, and I had mochi for the first time."

How is she so good at talking to people? "How is she so good at talking to people? "You know what mochi is, right?" she hastily adds, her eyes scanning my confused face.

"Yeah, I know what mochi is, what flavor did you try?"

"Strawberry."

"That's my favorite," I reply with a shy smile. I feel less nervous now, having a dumb conversation once in a while is nice.

I see her staring past me. I look behind me and see one of her friends. Expecting her to leave me to talk to him, I pull out my phone and start scrolling through Instagram, acting like I have a friend to talk to. I don't. All my friends are busy catching up with each other on their first day of eighth grade.

The first image I see when I open Instagram is two of my middle school friends smiling together with the caption "first day of school!!" I look up, and to my surprise see Tisha just standing there, thumbs in her jean pockets. Does she want something? Is she mad that I ended the conversation?

I start to get nervous, so of course, I attempt to read her face. She notices me staring, so she looks at me and smiles gently.

"Are you friends with anyone here?" She asks me calmly, her voice holding a different tone than before.

"Not really," I tell her honestly.

"Me neither." What? I'm surprised by this, isn't she friends with, like, everyone? I gesture over to one of the girls I saw her hang out with in eighth grade.

"What about her? I thought you guys were friends," I question, referring to the girl I'm pointing to. Tisha looks down at her feet.

"Not really," she replies, a small, sad smirk on her face. Wanting to further explain herself, she continues. "Nobody in Copper Middle was mean, they just weren't interested in being my friend. I realized that over the summer."

I feel slightly uncomfortable because someone I don't know that well is talking to me about stuff this private. At the same time, however, it feels nice.

To my surprise, as we're being guided to our homerooms, she asks me for my number.

Part II

My first day of school was... okay. Throughout the whole day, I just felt like I didn't really fit in. The teachers were pretty cool though — especially our English teacher, Ms. Morris. She's Canadian. My homeroom teacher's name is Mr. Abernathy. He's kind of strict, but nice. At lunch we sat with our homeroom. Tisha sat down next to me, and we had a nice conversation about our favorite shows. She doesn't strike me as the type of person to like shows like Family Guy and The Simpsons, but I guess she is.

When I enter my car, I'm greeted by my mom and Leyla. Immediately, mom asks me how my first day was.

"Good," I reply nonchalantly. She nods her head in response. Eagerly, I turn to Leyla and smile. "How was your first day?" I ask, eagerly but gently. My smile turns into worry as she turns around to look at me, tears down her face.

"What's wrong?" I ask, unbuckling my seatbelt. I scoot next to Leyla to comfort her. She sniffs and turns back to the window.

Mom, turning the wheel, chimes in.

"Max is not the friend anymore. " What?

"Max Graves?" I ask, dumbfounded.

"Yes." I turn back to Leyla and look at the back of her head.

"Ley-Ley, Max is a jerk." She turns to me, her face still wet, and hugs me. I embrace her in response, my arms loose around her back.

"Did you make any friends?" I ask gently, changing the topic. She nods and I wipe her tears. I smile at her. "Okay, that's good."

“What’s their name? What’re they like?” I ask, more upbeat than before.

"Mary. She likes cats and she has a pet fish." I smile, chuckling to myself. Mom joins the conversation, shifting the subject to me.

"And you? Do you make friend?" Not wanting to talk, I don’t go into details.

"Yeah." 

Her head whips around to meet my eyes. I look down at my phone. Looking back at the road, she continues.

"What’s his name?" she buzzes. Not letting my eyes leave the game I’m playing, I respond.

"Her name’s Tisha."

"Ohhh," she delivers, more mild than before. And that’s that.

I arrive home and hop on my computer to play video games. I see if any of my friends are online. Nope. I let out a sigh as I grab my
phone and open iMessage. I’m about to text “the group chat” when I see two new texts from an unknown number. My eyes scan over the words.

Unknown number: Hey it’s Tisha
Unknown number: This is Aria right??
I respond, thinking of the right words to say.
Me: Yeah this is Arya
I check when she sent the text. 4:12 — It’s 4:43 now.
“Shit,” I whisper under my breath. She probably thinks I ignored her.
Me: I didn’t get your text before :(
Me: I’m sorry hahaha
A couple minutes pass and I get a new message.
Tisha: It’s alright!! Are u busy?? I wanted to show you a meme lol
Being me, never passing up an opportunity to get a good chuckle, I say I’m not busy. We continue talking about stuff and once again, I feel the yarn ball of my social anxiety loosen and unwind into relaxation and trust.
It’s 7:18 when I hear my mom yell my name from downstairs. I text Tisha a hasty goodbye, and I throw my phone on my bed. While running down the stairs, I slip trying to take my Elvis hoodie off. I yelp as my hands and knees hit the floor, right before the eyes of my dad, mom, and Leyla. Groaning, I get up and I hear Leya’s little footsteps as she rushes to my aid. She has a face full of concern — her eyes are big and her lips are pouty in that little kid type way.
The exact moment my body touches the chair, my mom looks at my dad and throws news from her mouth.
“Behnam,” she says, captivating his attention with the excitement in her voice. “Arya has made friend.”
No, mom. No I didn’t.
Of course, dad’s eyes shoot to me, a smile on his face. Of course he’s surprised — ‘Arya has made friend.’ What news to celebrate? Oh joyous day, Aya has made a friend who isn’t a twelve year old!
Mom made pilaf for dinner. I put the spoon in my mouth and avoid eye contact with everyone.
“I’m proud of you,” Dad claims.
“Thanks,” I murmur in response.
“What’s his name?” Now all eyes are on me.
Just why can’t you drop the conversation, dad?
“Tisha.” I mumble.
Silence.
—her name’s Tisha,” I continue stronger, my eyes remaining down.
An awkward pause and then a sigh from my dad. He then starts up a whole other conversation with my mom. Leyley looks at me with empathy in her eyes. I smile at her and roll my eyes, gesturing to my dad. I don’t like her feeling bad for me — she’s an eight year old, not a therapist. That’s why I’m pretending like dad didn’t just throw my feelings on the ground.
Even though he did.
After an uncomfortable dinner, dad pulls me over and mutters something I can’t hear.
“What?” I ask, my palms sweating. He repeats, clearer.
“Are you gay?”
What. The. Actual. --
“—WHAT!” I shout. This time I heard him, ohohoho, I heard him well and clear. My nervousness twists and contorts into anger. He’s staring me in the eyes like a statue. His face doesn’t change.
“Are you ga--” he repeats as I cut him off.
“NO! Why would you--” I stutter. “Why would you think that, Dad?” I almost yell. Before he can respond, I groan and dart up the stairs, not caring about the sound I make as my feet hit the wood.
I run into my room and slam the door shut with a loud, croaking bang. Flopping onto my bed, I fall on my phone and let out a yelp of irritation.
Why would he think that? No, why would he SAY that? Do I act ‘gay’? Do I look ‘gay’? What about me would he think is... Oh.
Heart beating, face reddening, I come to the realization that it’s Tisha. My confusion turns into helplessness and frustration as I grab my pillow and squeeze it with my entire body.
He’s not American, he wouldn’t understand.
Or maybe...
Maybe he’s right.
I now know my mission. I make a mental checklist.
Friend requirements for not being called a homo:

1. Friend has to be male.
2. Friend has to be my age.

*That can’t be too hard, can it?*

I pull out my phone and go to the app store. I type in keywords like ‘social’ and ‘friends.’ I download a few apps and wait for them to load up.

Once I’ve thought of a username, I start on my bio.

Name: A.
Education: 9th grade
D.O.B.: December 14, 2005
Gender: Male
Looking for: A friend who I can play videogames with, preferably a guy
Likes: Memes, my computer, and phone

*Kinda lame, but whatever.*

Dislikes: People who assume things

*Is that all I don’t like?*

I update my dislikes.
Dislikes: People who assume things and JERKS

*Seems good enough.*

I copy-and-paste my bio onto the other apps and press submit. I take a picture of myself for the profile picture and scroll through people with common interests. It’s mostly older teens, but then someone on one of the apps stands out — a scrawny kid with dirty-blond, shaggy hair. He appears my age, so I check out his bio.

Name: jakob
Education: AHS
No. Way.

He was born the day after me.

*What should I send him? I didn’t really think this through.*

My social anxiety overtakes me and I end up just sending him a meme. I kinda forget about it until the next morning, I check my phone.

At 12:32 AM, he responded to my DM.

**Leo:** loll do you have any more memes

I search through my gallery and find another good one.

**Me:** [meme]

**Me:** What time is it there?? Lol

**Jakob:** 12:16 . I live in austria

**Me:** That’s so cool :0

**Me:** I live in Michigan so it’s 6 AM

**Jakob:** is michigan in the states?

**Me:** Yea, does Austria have states?

**Jakob:** kind of , we have provinces

I didn’t think I’d be getting a geographical lesson from making a friend.

Anyway, the conversation continued, and we enjoy a nice time messaging each other.

I would never have thought that a year from now I’d be in the scariest place in the world, the airport, waiting with Tisha for our best friend, Jakob, to land in Michigan.
A Muslim Girl's Guide to Life's Big Changes

1. Hijab (Hee-JAAb)

[What’s that called again?
Oh, Hijab!
or Khimar
you can just say Hijab though.
Hee-jawb?
Yeah, you got it.]

Everyone will pick apart the pieces of you that are hardly understood within your own head and heart. Pretend to know less than you do and pretend that it’s too complicated for them to understand. Have them trip in your trap, it’s hardly their business anyhow.

[Do you have cancer? Marcus asks me, with his big old mohawk and his mucus voice. Fourth grade. I’m trying not to cry. He’s taller than me and I don’t like crying underneath people. The tears I’m holding back begin to boil. I do not have cancer, that’s really stupid to say. I stomp my boots into dusty mulch. My friends back me up. God, Marcus don’t be an idiot. Jeez, I didn’t know! What is it for if she doesn’t have cancer?]

Say: religious purposes. Fourth grade, you don’t really know what you’re wearing it for. But, it definitely means you’re Muslim. Religious purposes is the way to go. It’s to the point, and leaves little room for questioning.

[Oh you’re like one of those mooz-leans?]

They always know more than they let on. Don’t falter, walk away with your head up and your stomach hurting. Eventually, you’ll run out of the energy it takes to stand up for yourself. People will never really understand. It’s difficult to explain you’re wearing Hijab by choice to people obsessed with your oppression. There’s no right way to call out projected ideas of trauma in Islam. Because it exists, but you are in fourth grade and you do not know enough.

2. Prayer

[ Is there a space available for Aliyah to pray here?
She can go to a teacher with a planning block.
Hmm, is there any place she could be alone?
Let me ask.
Unfortunately, we don’t have a room for Aliyah to pray here.
Oh, okay. Thank you for asking.]

Pray during Ramadan to pass the time. Pray when your dad is in a bad mood and you want to see him happy. Pray when someone dies. Pray so that the ground shivers and the canyon between you and Islam fills up with a few tiny pebbles. At this rate, it will take your entire life to close the gap and make your way across.

[I crouch underneath the computer table, reading a particularly sexy Maximum Ride Fanfiction. Max had to postpone sex with Fang because she’d gotten her period. Which is really fantastic to me. ‘Sorry hot winged boyfriend, I’m on my period!’ I figure that’s how life will be once I get my period and live on my own, and I want it so deeply. It’s the idealistic life to a bookish sixth grader.]
You forget how to make Wuḍū every time you decide to pray. But, you always remember that you’ve got to rinse your mouth and your feet. Just close the door if you don’t think you can do it correctly. That way nobody can see you’re doing it wrong. Stick your hand in warm flowing water, and splash it on your face. Rub your arms and your neck and breathe the water into your nose. Make sure everyone can see the droplets on your face, they won’t know the difference.

[So I press my eyes tightly together, and clutch my Nexus tablet and pray in the way they show in movies. I never pray this way, knees bent and eyes closed and thinking only of myself. Please let me get my period. Please, please, please.]

You like the way the prayer rug smells clean and new. You push against the smooth layering of suede. Your dad is singing the call to prayer, and you echo it in your own head. I could do that, how come he’s the only one who calls the Adhan?

[The next day, my head arches over my brown-stained underwear. It’s not glorious or sexy. I’m not even completely sure that it’s my period, but I go into my suitcase from camp and grab a pad anyways. It’s not as comfortable as the panty-liners the nurse gave all the girls in fourth grade. It’s actually not comfortable at all. This sucks, I say to myself while crying. Why did I want this so badly?]

3. Faith

[Everyone in here is a believer of Allah
Takbīr   Allahu akbar
Takbīr   Allahu akbar
At least I hope we all are]

You’re going to make friends that don’t want you to be who you are. You are going to decide you don’t want to be who you are either. Christians don’t have to cover up, you’ll think. Christians are allowed Santa Clause and pork-fat gummy bears. Christians wear shorts and crop tops and braid each other’s hair during class.

[I hate having something particular to say to someone. It sits in my belly and writhes around and I know it’s in there so what does it have to make such a ruckus about?]

You ask your newest friend if she believes in God. She laughs. The word atheist feels like a breath of fresh air infused with carbon monoxide. How freeing would that be? you’ll say to yourself. To have no responsibilities except to live and to die. Lean into your hidden desire and taste your ideas of liberation. It will spread across your tongue and melt into tangy discomfort.

[I climb in the front seat, and shut the door. It’s dark outside and all I’m thinking is that I’ve never been grocery shopping this late. My mom had asked me if I wanted to go. I did not want to go, but the creature in my stomach said yes. There was only one way to kill it.]

You’ll feel more disconnected to Islam than you’ve ever felt, you’ll feel repulsed by it. You find yourself thinking “fuck God” and then you find yourself ashamed of it. You tell your friends you don’t believe in God. They laugh. Well then what are you doing with that on? What’s that called again?

[In the aisle with the canned beans, I tell my mom I don’t believe in God. In the aisle with the canned beans my mom looks at me with only fear. It’s quiet. There’s a book about prophet Muhammed on my desk the next morning. I don’t read it.]

You’ll want to be like everyone else, because there is no value in who you are right now. There is no value in Islam. The ground rumbles this time and brings down red clouds and boulders and coyotes and tarantulas. You stand below it all, letting your whole life fall around you, sand cutting your lifted face.

As things move and crumble you have to stay strong, and put your trust in Allah. Stop wanting so goddamn much, some things you just cannot have. Put your trust in Allah alayhi s-salīm.
Speak.

Don’t speak. Start speaking. Speak slowly, speak softly. Speak excited, speak curious. Speak unafraid, speak unknowing. Speak timid, speak shy. Speak nervous and scared. Speak angry because your parents “suck.” Befriend new people because you think they’re cool. Bully the smart kid who reads books all the time to amuse your friends. Gossip about other people behind their backs. Riddle the one poor kid in your class who smells like the dumpster and is always asking for extra food during lunch. Speak to the girl who you have been staring at for the past four months. Speak about the good old days, because for the first time, you realize that time is flying by. Enter the beehive of social conformity. Speak through your clothes and your looks. Speak through your clout and your popularity. Groan about the pressure and constant stress put on you. Speak about the first sip of freedom and the feeling of elation coursing through your veins. Speak reminiscent about the good old days again, this time to a much larger crowd.

Speak about the first step on campus, where the hues of summer are fading away, introducing a new beginning. Speak with confidence, not arrogance. Speak mature and thoughtful. Speak young and hopeful. Speak big and bold. Speak after success, a product of your hard work and dedication. Speak on one knee after popping the everlasting question. Raise a glass of wine to the bright sun that has been placed on you. Even though you are busy, there is still time to speak to the ones from your past. Speak to soothe the wailing cry that has become permanently stuck into your head. Allow the reins of knowledge to be free and wash over your offspring. Speak to the moms and dads at soccer games, birthday parties, and everything else in between. Watch as the child whom you so dearly love finds a voice of their own.

Your once exuberant self has now been contaminated with a moody dreariness. Speak about your tragedies, and the ones you’ve lost. Speak about your pain, and the things that have caused it. Speak about your anger, and what has sparked it. Speak about your depression, your insignificance in this world. Get mad at your family, leave them behind after another unbearable night. Travel around the country with your radio, speaking the words of loneliness. Come back to your family, speak to the boy who has become a man. Speak of your mistakes and sorrow. Speak through apology and remorse. Recount your regrets and failures. Accept these and move on. Speak about the sunset, and the breathtaking aura it sends throughout the evening sky. Sit with your kids’ kids and speak about man’s greatest strength. As night creeps up upon the horizon, remind them to never forget the power of their voice, their expression, and their speech. The night brings loss. They speak in monotone about you and express thoughts through tears and emotion. Yet you know that although you may not be remembered for doing great things or being a virtuous man, you will always be remembered for your powerful, grateful, and everlasting voice.
Gift

The mayor gifted her a bouquet of white lilies. The stems were trimmed in a perfect line, and the anthers had been removed with a florist’s delicate work. Alice didn’t see the purpose behind it; the pollen couldn’t affect her, but she guessed that the mayor had commissioned a florist in a neighboring city and neglected to say what the bouquet was for.

Such things were typical of the man. The mayor was dutiful and hardworking, but tended to slip up when he had too much on his mind. He was often seen darting about the town when not in his office, constantly active. Alice didn’t know the man well; he’d only given her the lilies out of a sense of obligation. She appreciated them all the same, even if the stems were a little squished, even if she didn’t like lilies or the color white, even if he’d only been present for a second to drop off the bouquet before running to his next meeting, a briefcase in one hand and dark bags under his eyes, his striped tie crooked.

The lilies were tied together with a pale yellow ribbon—Alice’s favorite color—that was soft and silky to the touch. She spent more time staring at the ribbon than at the flowers.

Her classmates gave her a stack of letters. Alice found it a rather wasteful use of paper, but she supposed her teacher, Mrs. Winrow, hadn’t wanted to risk having her students bring physical objects. They were a rowdy bunch, and inviting them to bring their own gifts was a recipe for disaster.

Alice was surprised that everyone in her class had written one—even Noah, who always sat in the back of the class with a dazed look on his face, had written one in his tiny, slanted handwriting. Alice could tell that a good number of her classmates had used a template, likely provided by Mrs. Winrow, and only changed around a couple of words like some sort of morbid mad lib. Some of the letters had hastily erased tic tac toe boards scrawled in the corner, and Alice found herself strangely touched that they had bothered trying to erase the doodles.

Only one letter was missing, and that was Monica’s. She’d moved into town a year ago and gotten a reputation for always being late to class. She’d suddenly get up and leave in the middle of a lesson to head down to the nurse’s office for hours at a time, and none of the teachers made any mention of her absences. There’d been a good amount of rumors surrounding her—at some point someone had started a betting pool with a winning prize of leftover Halloween candy. Many avoided her on instinct, but Monica had always smiled at Alice when she passed by, and the two often found themselves working together on projects, typically because they were the last ones left when the teacher told the class to form their own groups. This happened so often that they started partnering off deliberately. Monica did her part in the projects, and though conversation between them was often stilted, Alice found she didn’t really mind. Monica had a nice smile, she thought. Alice liked to think they were friends, but Monica had moved away a month ago.

Still, Alice couldn’t help but stare at the letters and feel strangely disappointed.

Roderick visited a week after the class had given her letters. He dug around in his pockets before pulling out a single dime that had a strange fuzzy green substance coating its edges. Alice was surprised to see him. He wore an inscrutable expression as he studied the coin, turning it over in his hands like it was something precious. Roderick was rather notorious for back talking to teachers and getting into fights, though the former didn’t seem intentional. He didn’t speak much to begin with, often choosing to answer in grunts and hand waves, leading Alice to suspect that his attitude was more a result of not having been taught proper manners than some genuine desire to rebel.

That being said, there was no denying that he frequently came in with scuffs and scratches over his fists, and he always walked with tense shoulders, looking at once like a predator on the prowl and like prey waiting, paranoid, for an attack.

As Roderick set the coin down, Alice noticed extra scratches along his nails and fingertips from when he’d bite the tips of his fingers in an attempt to sand down his nails with his teeth.

Alice barely knew him. They only spoke when Roderick approached her to ask what the homework was after he dozed off during class, and she’d answer him. Sometimes she loaned him pencils when he forgot to bring his, but that was the extent of their conversation.

So when Roderick turned and walked away with long strides, hands in his pockets, Alice simply stared at the coin he’d left behind,
As always, she left nothing swinging with the movement. Elizabeth was carrying a suitcase with her, one of the small plastic ones with the wheels that never quitted her, and Alice noticed it the moment she turned her head. 

Elizabeth was not by her parents—anything, really—with an intensity that suggested these things had personally offended her. She’d always been like that; Alice remembered when she was celebrating her twelfth birthday, how Elizabeth had thrown a fit when their mother told her she wasn’t supposed to have the first slice of cake, claiming their mother was biased in her sister’s favor. Elizabeth operated under the assumption that the world was out to get her, and Alice couldn’t blame her for it, even if it got a little tiring.

But every now and then, Elizabeth would quiet during one of her rants, and she’d whisper, “I miss you,” and Alice would wish she kept being angry instead.

On that day, Elizabeth had her hair pulled up in a ponytail. She had on her favorite earrings, the ones Alice had given her, and Alice could see her sharp cheekbones, and stood with a slightly off center posture that resembled their father. Alice wondered how many years had passed. She realized that she didn’t know the answer.

Elizabeth left in a rush, a voice calling to her from an unfamiliar blue car waiting by the road, and she turned and ran away, her earrings drive away, her father trailing a few feet behind. Both of their cars were there, Alice realized, and she watched them slip into the two separate vehicles and drive away, her father waiting a few minutes until her mother’s car had faded over the horizon before pulling away from the curb.

The bouquet they’d left was comprised of bright blue anemones. They lay there, pressed awkwardly against the ground, petals bent at unnatural angles.

Weeds had taken over the surrounding grass. They dotted the area in patches in some carefully devised plan to crowd out their competition. Alice’s mother frowned at them as she passed by. She found they were going to start. She held another bouquet in her arms, and a little bit behind her, Alice could see her father trailing a few feet back. The two walked far apart from each other, never touching, and Alice saw the stiff way her mother set the flowers down. Her parents didn’t talk to one another, instead taking turns to step up and speak to Alice. She wasn’t used to this strange, disconnected atmosphere between the two. In the past, they’d yell and argue with each other freely, allowing tension and stress to bubble over in heated shouting matches. They were loud, and Alice often left the room, if not the house itself, when she could tell they were going to start. She found she wasn’t sure if she liked this jagged silence more or less.

Her most frequent visitor was a woman who she learned was named Ruth from the whispers that she’d hear about her. Alice didn’t know Ruth well, had only seen her occasionally in grocery stores or outside with her three little boys, triplets, in a beaten down stroller that liked to roll right when left to its own devices. She brought them everywhere, like she didn’t trust anyone else to watch them, and often seemed haggard when Alice would chance a look in her direction. The oldest triplet was loud and talkative; once he learned how to form sounds, he never stopped babbling. The middle one liked to point at things, from pine trees to air fresheners to strangers, and Ruth would hastily remind him that it was rude to point, though that never seemed to stop him. The third, from what Alice had seen, was quiet and well behaved. Unlike his brothers, he simply lay back in his stroller, making no noise or fuss, though Alice found the distant sheen in his eyes a little troubling.

Alice didn’t remember that day well, only the shrillness of screeching tires and flashes of images, but among the things she did remember was the sight of Ruth’s face, fear etched in bloodshot eyes as her arms jerked the steering wheel to the side, frantic.

Whenever Alice’s mother saw that Ruth had left flowers, she’d snatch them up and take them away with a scowl, though that had been happening less as her mother’s visits became more infrequent.

That day, Ruth arrived with her triplets in tow, her hair messy and loose and shoulders slumped with exhaustion. She left a single unlit candle and whispered a final apology before rushing away. Her youngest son stayed back a little longer, dazed, staring at Alice, before Ruth hurriedly snatched his arm and ushered him away.

The candle smelled of gardenias.

Elizabeth visited often, but she never brought anything. At first, her visits were quiet, wordless hours spent staring at the sky and waiting for time to pass. Then, Elizabeth started scowling and talking more, looking much more like the little sister Alice was used to. She ranted about the weather, the neighbor’s cat, their parents—anything, really—with an intensity that suggested these things had personally offended her. She’d always been like that; Alice remembered when she was celebrating her twelfth birthday, how Elizabeth had thrown a fit when their mother told her she wasn’t supposed to have the first slice of cake, claiming their mother was biased in her sister’s favor. Elizabeth operated under the assumption that the world was out to get her, and Alice couldn’t blame her for it, even if it got a little tiring.

But every now and then, Elizabeth would quiet during one of her rants, and she’d whisper, “I miss you,” and Alice would wish she kept being angry instead.

On that day, Elizabeth had on her favorite earrings, the ones Alice had given her, and was wearing old worn down sneakers that used to be Alice’s. Elizabeth had complained when her mother had first handed them to her, refusing to touch them until their parents gave in and bought her her own new shoes. It was strange to see her wearing them. Alice thought they suited her well.

Elizabeth was carrying a suitcase with her, one of the small plastic ones with the wheels that never quite rolled straight. She bit her lip, and Alice suspected that the visit was going to be one of the silent ones.

She was proven wrong when Elizabeth started talking, words tumbling out in a rush of incoherent phrases.

As she spoke, shifting her weight from foot to foot, Alice realized with a start that Elizabeth had grown significantly. Her face was once padded out her sharp cheekbones, and stood with a slightly off center posture that resembled their father. Alice wondered how many years had passed. She realized that she didn’t know the answer.

Elizabeth left in a rush, a voice calling to her from an unfamiliar blue car waiting by the road, and Alice watched the two separate vehicles and drive away, her father waiting a few minutes until her mother’s car had faded over the horizon before pulling away from the curb.

The bouquet they’d left was comprised of bright blue anemones. They lay there, pressed awkwardly against the ground, petals bent at unnatural angles.
Alice didn’t know how long it was until someone visited again. Snows fell and melted; the sky shifted from deep lavender hues to gold to blue and then back. The town became a stranger. She noticed unfamiliar people crossing streets, heard a chatter from the sidewalks that grew louder with each year. She could feel herself drift off into something resembling sleep, where images passed by her eyes unprocessed and were quickly forgotten, but she didn’t know how long she stayed in this state.

When she awoke, she found herself face to face with an unfamiliar woman.

The woman was rather tall and dressed in a business suit. She bit her lip and shifted her weight from foot to foot, and Alice realized with a start that she looked a lot like Elizabeth. They had the same jawline, the same texture of hair, though her eyes were an unfamiliar shade of leafy green. The woman didn’t speak, simply squinted as though verifying her location, before stepping forward and placing a small box down. Alice recognized it as the box containing the earrings she’d given her sister. They were long and dangly and fitted with blue stones that Alice had thought matched her little sister’s eyes. It was the only gift Alice had ever felt confident in giving, and she always smiled to herself when she saw Elizabeth wearing them afterwards.

The woman took a step back and made to leave before pausing, hesitating. She spun around and bent down, plucked one of the dandelions growing in a cluster nearby, and dropped it onto the box before hurrying away.

The dandelion’s bright yellow stood in stark contrast to the deep blue box, and part of the roots had been pulled up in the woman’s haste. Alice reached for the petals, grainy with dirt, and for the box, scuffed and scratched from years of being moved and carried.

A soft breeze passed by, scattering the yellow petals. Alice closed her eyes and smiled.
Bring Them Home

I

Amara returned one week after the message was broadcast across the world, three days before an inevitable end that drove prodigal sons to beg forgiveness at their parents’ doorsteps and brought wanderers back to their childhood haunts.

Amara sent no emails, made no calls or attempts at an explanation. She simply showed up at the home she’d abandoned and rang the doorbell, two times in a row like she always did. And when Evelyn swung the door open, Amara stood there with that crooked smile of hers, tilted her shoulder so that the line of her body was uneven, and waved, quick and hesitant, so familiar.

“Hey.” Amara’s voice was soft. Evelyn’s grip on the doorknob tightened. She remained standing in the doorway, a final barrier between Amara and the home that had once been hers. Amara dropped her hand and cleared her throat.

“It’s been a long time, huh?” Amara said.

“Nine years,” Evelyn corrected. Amara flinched and stared down at her feet. Evelyn was struck by the sight of her hairline, jagged and dotted with early gray hairs. In the past, Evelyn had always been the shorter one, the one looking up.

“Look, can I come inside?” Amara shifted her weight to her other foot. “It’s a little hard to breathe out here, and I didn’t bring a mask.”

That was an understatement. The atmosphere had long grown into a haze of pollution and dust that left a permanent rotten stench cloaking the earth. It was a smoke that seeped into the lungs and seized a person’s breath. Evelyn and Amara’s father had been one of the millions of victims to it. One day he’d hunched over, coughing, and never stopped until his body was cold and his corpse was sent to the warehouses they kept the dead in, having long since lost the room for proper burials in the city. Evelyn had always thought that was how things would end, with dry throats and gray skies. She wondered if the latest calamity was a mercy, if someone had taken pity on the dying planet and decided to end things quickly. All at once, like ripping off a bandaid, as Amara would say, reminding her sister that it was easier to get the sting over with and then move on.

Then why, Evelyn wondered, had she come back? Evelyn would’ve been content to spend her last days confined to her home, the house she’d spent her life in, but Amara had returned a mere three days before the end with that smile of hers, as though she hadn’t been the one to abandon them.

Evelyn didn’t move from the doorway, still staring at the person her sister had grown into. Amara had her hair pulled back in a ponytail, mussed and falling apart from travel. The ends of her sleeves were frayed, and dark circles sat under her eyes like bruises.

Something seized Evelyn, and wordlessly she found herself stepping aside in stilted, jerky movements, hand still glued to the doorknob. Amara’s shoulders relaxed, and after a moment of hesitation she stepped inside. The door swung shut behind them.

Amara’s eyes scanned the house with something akin to wonder, a childish sense of awe lingering in the way her mouth fell open as she took in the different furniture, the pristine cleanliness that Evelyn had replaced the old messes with. Between the two, Evelyn had always been the neater one, the one who wiped down the tables whenever she had free time. When she was younger, her father had assumed it was paranoia and gently reminded her that it was impossible to predict the whims of the diseases that flitted through the population, and excessive cleanliness would do nothing to prevent it. Evelyn had told him she didn’t care about that, instead stating that she simply didn’t like messes. Amara, passing by, had laughed at that, deliberately reaching out a hand and mussing her younger sister’s hair. That became her favorite way of greeting Evelyn.

But that was nearly a decade ago, when their father was still alive, when Amara had still lived in the room across the hall from her. Evelyn hadn’t touched that room in years, the one place she refused to dust or clean. The faster it rotted, the more unrecognizable it became, the better.

Amara herself made no mention of her old room, instead taking a seat on a couch in the living room. Evelyn sat down across from her, deeming the short coffee table a suitable boundary between the two.

Amara was still smiling, strained, and Evelyn wondered if that had simply become her default expression. Amara leaned back on the couch, casual.

“So… how’ve things been?” she asked. Evelyn narrowed her eyes.
“Dad died,” she said, blunt. Amara flinched, but maintained her practiced posture.
“I—I see. When was that? Did you have a funeral, or?”
“Two years after you left,” Evelyn said. “And what do you think?”
“Yeah, I figured,” Amara mumbled. The last proper funeral they’d heard of was for the old mayor, and even then they’d had to cut up his corpse to get him to fit in the plot of land his family had purchased for him.
“What about you?” Evelyn’s voice was carefully neutral.
Amara pursed her lips. “I’ve been fine,” she said. “I got engaged. You’d like her, her name’s Erin.”
Evelyn crossed her arms over her chest. “You’ve been happy?” The words held the hint of an accusation.
Amara nodded, slow, unsure of where the conversation was going. It gave Evelyn a sick sense of joy to see her so uncertain. Amara had always been the confident one, the one who walked with long strides and her head held high. For the first time that day, Evelyn allowed a smile to spread across her face. She leaned back in the couch, voice smug.
“Then why,” she asked, “did you come back?”
A thump. Evelyn looked up; Amara had stood, abrupt, a wild look in her eyes. As she met Evelyn’s steady gaze, something seemed to snap in her, and Amara shakily sat back down on the couch, broken out of whatever daze had temporarily taken hold. Amara bit her lip, forcing out a laugh that came out choppy and hoarse.
“Can’t I visit my family one last time before the world ends?” Amara took a deep breath, swallowing, before continuing with a heavy sigh. “Look, Evelyn, I’m not trying to start a fight or make you upset. I just… I just missed this place,” she said.
“Missed,” Evelyn muttered, sarcasm dripping from her words.
“It’s true!” Amara narrowed her eyes, indignant. “God, you’re always like this. You haven’t changed one bit.”
“And neither have you,” Evelyn said, “if you really thought you could waltz back in here after everything you’ve done.”
“I didn’t do anything.”
“You left,” Evelyn said, for the first time realizing how loud her voice had gotten. “You left when we needed you, and now you dare come back like everything’s okay.”
“You don’t understand,” Amara said. She stood, Evelyn following suit. Amara kept speaking, fists clenched. “You know what, Evelyn? You really are the same. You were a stupid, spoiled little brat back then, and you still are.”
“You’re the one,” Evelyn hissed, “who left me alone to take care of dad. I was fifteen. You’re the one who left this house. Don’t you dare tell me you want to come back now.”
A hint of guilt flashed in Amara’s eyes, but it was quickly replaced with something cold and steely when she spoke again. “Yeah? And so what. I left, fine, I admit it. But you know what?” She leaned forward over the coffee table, her next words barely louder than a whisper. “I don’t regret it one bit.”
“Get out.”
Amara’s eyes snapped up just in time to see Evelyn shove her towards the doorway. Amara stumbled, an indignant cry on her lips, but Evelyn didn’t respond, just kept on walking and pulling her towards the door. She grabbed the handle and swung it open, sending her sister stumbling out with a final push.
“Get out,” she said again, her voice strangely calm, like it didn’t belong to her. “Don’t come back.”
Evelyn slammed the door shut before Amara had the chance to answer, before she could see what sort of expression her sister was wearing.
Alone, Evelyn slid to the cold floor, back against the door, and hugged her knees, feeling, for the first time in many years, like that child who’d hugged her sister and sobbed when she’d first learned that her father was ill.
She whispered to the empty room, words muffled in her knees, “I wish you had never come back.”

II

It had been a week since the report, since Erin had come home, lips pursed, and dropped her bag with a heavy thud on the floor. Amara wondered if she should’ve been more upset when she heard the world was ending, but she found it barely registered. The information passed through her head, nothing more than a slight ripple. This had been happening for some time now; this sense of distance, like Amara was merely watching the events in front of her unfold, a separate entity entirely. She hadn’t even moved until Erin started crying, because Erin had never once cried in front of her. Even then, when she wrapped her arms around the shaking woman, her limbs felt strangely cold.
It wasn’t until three days later, after the information had settled, that Amara thought back to the little home she’d grown up in and the little sister she’d left behind.
It was strange; after Amara had first left in the early hours of the morning, she’d thought of Evelyn nonstop. Wondering what she was doing, if she and her father were eating, but she’d push the thoughts away. Eventually, she’d denied them enough times that they stopped appearing.
Erin noticed Amara staring out the window, head resting on her hand, and took a seat beside her on the couch.
“Are you thinking about Evelyn?” she asked. Amara slowly turned her head to return her gaze.
“Mind reading powers still going as strong as ever, I see,” she joked, but it came out weak. Erin had always been like that. She often knew Amara’s head better than she knew herself. Amara turned back to the window.
“Yeah, I guess,” she mumbled. Erin was silent for a moment in that contemplative way of hers.

“You should visit,” Erin finally said. “There’s still time. If you leave now, you can make it before... before the last day.” There was always a bit of hesitation whenever Erin spoke of it, the “last day” as people had dubbed it, as though she could speak it into existence if her voice was loud.

Amara considered her words, knowing them to be true. And yet, when she tried to remember her home, she found she could no longer recall the color of the door, the feel of the doorknob—sensations that had once been so ingrained in her. The years were nothing but a swirling cloud of occasional images and feelings, words spoken on disconnected days, the sound of coughing, memories of measuring Evelyn’s height on the living room wall. She knew she had little right to cling to them when she was the one who left, yet Amara couldn’t help but feel apprehensive when she thought of returning, of shattering the picture of her childhood that she’d held onto for all these years. She at once wanted to see what had happened, whether her father was able to overcome his illness, how tall Evelyn had grown, yet also didn’t want her memories of the little wooden home and Evelyn to be replaced.

Something in Erin’s expression shifted when Amara told her she didn’t plan to return, and without another word she stood and left Amara sitting alone by the window. Her retreating figure reminded Amara of the day she’d first told Erin about Evelyn and how she’d abandoned her family. Erin hadn’t spoken to her for a week afterwards, and even after they began talking again, Erin never truly forgave her.

It was strange to Amara, to think that Erin could be so angry on someone else’s behalf. But then, Erin herself had grown up alone, a member of the increasingly large number of children left in orphanages by parents who either died or were no longer able to care for them. Erin had always dreamed of having a sister; she’d told Amara as much during long nights when they slept beside each other, bodies relaxed and tongues loose.

It was in that moment, on that night with the covers pulled over her chest, that Amara realized that Erin would never understand, would never understand the suffocation of waking up in the morning to bright eyes staring at you with the expectations of the world, to gaze out the window and see old classmates laughing on the streets, to pick up your little sister’s math homework out of curiosity and realize you don’t understand the problems, to have one place always tugging even when you’re away, always there, always present, always confining.

Outside, Amara noticed a group of children chasing each other down the streets, uncaring of the air. There wasn’t much fear when the world itself was ending. Amara’s throat suddenly felt dry. She coughed into her hand, gaze fixed on their retreating figures.

Once, a year or so after Amara had told her the truth, Erin had asked, quiet, if Amara regretted things. If she felt guilty.

Now, as Amara stared out the window, she felt the same sensation she did back then gripping her, a hand unconsciously covering her chest. Amara hadn’t answered back then, and she didn’t know if she could now. Slowly, Amara closed her eyes, releasing a long, shaky breath and leaning back against the couch, mind churning with memories.

There was a rustling sound, and Amara opened her eyes to see Erin standing over her, a packed bag of clothes in one hand and Amara’s car keys in the other. Wordlessly, Erin thrust the bag and keys at Amara.

Amara smiled weakly. “I should’ve known you wouldn’t give up,” she said. Amara took the keys. They were heavy and cold in her hands.

Amara banged against the door, but there was no response. Her hand ached, bruised and swollen from the last hour she’d spent relentlessly hitting her skin against the solid wood.

“Evelyn!” she yelled, her throat so hoarse by now that she could hardly recognize her own words. She swallowed and coughed, trying to clear the smoke clinging to her throat. “Open up! I know you’re in there!”

Silence. Amara’s shoulders slumped, her head falling against the door with a soft thumping noise.

“I know you’re in there,” she whispered. Her voice trembled.

The sun was beginning to make its descent below the horizon. The shadows grew in length, stretching into long dark stripes that crawled across the ground. Amara leaned back, legs sliding out beneath her until she was resting on the cold cement. She stared, absentminded, into the sun. She’d heard once that people weren’t supposed to look directly at the sun, but she supposed that it didn’t matter now.

A weariness settled over Amara’s eyes, and she struggled to keep them open. Her hands dropped to the ground. The house remained silent.

Amara didn’t know how long she spent there, back against the door, the sun casting soft rays against her face. She felt her mind start to drift, the burning in her eyes becoming harder to ignore. For a second she tried to fight it, but she soon gave up. No matter what she did, Amara knew that Evelyn would not open the door again.

Amara inhaled, relaxing the muscles in her body, and allowed herself to succumb to exhaustion. Guilt prodded at her thoughts, whispering that she should’ve said something else, done something else, but she pushed the feelings away.

It was too late for that sort of thinking, she thought, sinking deeper into the ground. She closed her eyes.

It was far too late.
Mavie looked coyly at the ground, her perfectly shaped locks blowing gently in the wind behind her. Her arms and feet were bare on the freezing sand and she shivered, not letting a hint of the cold show on her face. ‘Only ten more minutes. Ten more.’ She told herself.

Photographers grinned at her encouragingly as she struck another effortless pose. Mavie wanted to scream. She had been doing this for almost eight hours straight and couldn’t wait to get off of this godforsaken Icelandic beach.

“Just one more pose, c’mon Mavie. Show us what you got.” A handsome photographer held up a single finger to signify how close she was to being finished. Mavie nodded, rearranging the stupid fluff of the bottom of the dress. A depressing thought wormed its way into her head. ‘I would rather be back on the streets of Bulgaria begging for food.’ But then it was crushed by the neverending being living inside of her; the hunger. Just thinking about it made her stomach fold in on itself with displeasure. Her biggest darkest secret.

Models were expected to be tall, thin, beautiful, with perfectly clear skin that shone. Oozing with elegance and poise. When Mavie had first been discovered as a model, she had been none of these things; scrounging on the streets for scraps covered in filth. Hiding behind a trash bin, scared out of her mind was where Roy O’Mally had found her.

Though he had only been in Bulgaria for a thirteen hour layover, he knew immediately when he saw her that she was model material. Not just any model either, but a star. Mavie owed everything to Roy. She couldn’t betray him by quitting modeling. So she prevailed.

“And that’s a wrap!” The lead photographer snapped the last shot. Mavie practically sprinted for the van, feet completely devoid of feeling. She was so ready for a normal sized meal. With a happy laugh, she threw open the trailer door and bounded into the kitchen.

Sitting on the table was a single celery stick. Mavie felt tears begin to well in her eyes. Desperately, she began to search through the cupboards and cabinets for anything else.


With a frustrated cry, Mavie collapsed on the floor of the trailer. She had been practically starving herself for weeks, waiting for this shoot and now that it was over, Roy dared to taunt her with celery. Celery. Her least favorite food. The only food that she couldn’t eat without throwing up.

Mavie heard the toilet flush and the bathroom door at the back of the trailer open. A foul smell spilled out into the kitchen. She began to choke on her tears. Only one person smelled this bad. It was Roy.

Blundering footsteps entered the kitchen, shaking the floor. One big bulbous leg entered the doorway, followed by another. Mavie’s stomach did a somersault, twisting and turning to accommodate the anticipation.

“Mavie, baby, what are you doing on the ground? Your makeup is getting all smeared.” With a hand of fat fingers, Roy helped Mavie onto her feet. He mopped at his nose with his elbow, sniffling snot into his stinky t-shirt. With a little lick at his lips, he collapsed into one of the wooden chairs at the table with a grunt. Mavie could see cracks appear in the legs of the chair.

“So, did you eat that celery I left out for you? You know that’s the best model food. You actually lose weight from eating it.” Drool dribbled down his chin as he spoke, spilling out of his lips. Mavie knew from years of living with him that Roy could hold in the spit if he wanted but chose to let it go where it wanted.

“I actually hate celery. It’s the only food I won’t eat.” Mavie closed her eyes, praying for patience. “As I’ve told you one hundred times. And I’m so hungry after the shoot.” At her words, Roy sighed and rolled his small bird-like eyes as if she was speaking nonsense.

“Well of course I know that but if you eat anything else, you’ll get fat. And there ain’t nobody that want a fat model.” He held out the plate with the celery. “So you eat this, or you eat nothing.” Mavie felt a wave of anger wash over her.

“You can’t tell me what to do Roy. I’m not just a dog that you can tell to fetch and I’ll do it. I’m an actual human being.” Mavie wrung her delicate fingers together, wishing she could strangle something else. Her delicate features twisted into an unpleasant grimace. Roy’s face reddened with blood, eyebrows knitting together with rage.

“I made you. I tell you to do something, you do it. You sit, you eat, you beg. I am your creator and you will respect me!” Roy’s chubby fist smushed onto the table, his nose flaring with rage. Mavie backed away from him towards the door.
“You didn’t create me. I was someone before I met you. In fact, I was happier fighting for my life than I am here. I’m done with you and I’m leaving right now.” Roy’s face turned a deep magenta as Mavie turned away triumphantly. Finally, she was going to get away from this horrible place.

Then Roy grabbed her shoulder. With a terrifying roar, he wrenched her away from the door and threw her into the wall. Mavie hit the wall headfirst, brain bouncing against her skull like a car on a dirt road. Blood seeped into the once perfect arrangement of ringlets as Mavie lay there. Out of the corner of her eye, Mavie saw Roy approaching from the side.

He held the smashed celery plate in his hand. His eyes were bright with maniacal glee as he lunged. What happened next was a blur to Mavie.

As Roy dived towards Mavie, she felt something inside of her click.

Mavie shifted, grabbing the plate out of his hand as he fell to the floor, wide eyed. Now Mavie was on top. What she did next was something she had never thought herself capable of. Without a blink, she plunged the plate into his carotid artery. Blood spurted into the air as Roy’s piggy eyes darkened with death.

Surprisingly calm, Mavie began to cut off Roy’s head with the plate. It was slow work but Mavie managed to separate it. Searching through the cupboards, Mavie looked for the thing she needed.

With a little grin, Mavie pulled out a cookie tray. Carefully she placed Roy’s head on it, backing away to examine her masterpiece. But something was missing. Mavie looked around, searching for the answer to her dissatisfaction. Then she spotted it. Lying there, still on the floor. The celery.

Mavie picked it up, washed it off, and slid it into Roy’s open mouth. His gruesome overbite cradled the celery perfectly in his jaw.

Mavie smiled. Sliding the tray into the oven, Mavie sat down in the corner with Roy’s headless body.

Putting his hand, she spoke six words. “I won’t be eating the celery.”
ALS (A Love Story)

I wheel my defeated nostrils to your filthy green towel and breathe you in. I wish I could still take it all the way, absorbing you like I was your towel and you were the drops of water cohesing into murals on your slickened skin. Soaking up all your tears. That’s the way it worked. Now I cry, you dry.

I grip your grimy cotton rectangle like my life depends on it, and no, the metaphors are not yet lost on me. It’s the only thing I’ve got to hold on to. Honestly, I wish it were me.

The accursed thing even smells green—like a sunny meadow; clover leaves; a mango ripped too soon from its tree; even, a rawer voice whispers, envy?

But is it sicker than I am to wish our roles were still reversed? I sink a little further back into the nauseating comfort of my chair. Maybe grieving would be easier than knowing that’s exactly what you’ll do. Or maybe grieving is the latter.

Brushing my fingers over the valleys, I feel for the rivers I imagine should be flowing through them and find them streaming down my cheeks. It’s only been two years post-diagnosis, but that’s 730 days of you running with the rivers, running with no sleep; 730 days of my new needs consuming you as the disease consumes me, and you coming back every single day to water the weeds.

Why bother? I’ve even dedicated my epilogue to you; you, whose trembling became a part of me as its commencement was affirmed by the doctor, then the attorney; you, who saw the rivers give birth to others; you, who accepted my gurneys as part of your journey; you, who sat clutching my left hand as the other fumbled for signature after signature. You, who signed with me, stiffly, knowing that even our right hands felt the wrong ones to do it. You, who helped me order the meds, both the ones that’d keep me alive and the ones they told us would reverse their effects. You, who knows this as well as me. You, who knows it even better.

But seeing you give it all back like this is something I can’t bear to see—the stars in your eyes, a few shades duller; the song in your voice just starting to falter; it’s like you can’t accept that death has only sent for one of us, and it’s me. For once, please. Ease up on the jealousy.

When we first saw the letters pour from the doctor’s lips and spill into our laps like paperweights, I thought that that they were perfect. They might have been a death sentence, but to me, they spelled out a love story. Our love story. I watched the apology fill the space between my thighs and thought, all the great ones end in tragedy. And ours must be the greatest of them all.

This is my way of giving it back. Living like this isn’t living, much less living with enough left over to love. And I love you too much to not.

I’m using the eye tracker you bought to record this. And I’m sorry you had to buy it at all. I’m sorry it’s not my real voice. I’m sorry you’ll hear this at work. I’m sorry I won’t catch this filthy towel when it slips from my hands. I’m sorry it had to be like this. My daughter: this one’s for you.

Cheers
The Girl Who Likes to French

You know the one, who tiptoes around the word love. Pushes the harmlessness of a kiss. Lets only words linger on her lips. Not warmth. Not spit. The one who has seen wolves in the bushes. Heard them howl. Felt that fear. Masked it. And sits in the coldness of trying something new, different.

On the bench, in the garden of untouched tongues under the street light. The movie way. The right way. The wrong way.

Frenching the Girl Next Door—Premier

I waited and I waited. But she suggested it. And when is it that I say no? Bird like bones hopped up, thin thighs straddled the washer. You watched me pee. Wash my hands. And then stand between your knees. In a few years I will assume I was drunk, but it was January and I didn’t drink back then. You will remember the idea you had and the boy coming through, as if the air that held your brilliance had drifted to the bathroom. Rest slender hands on my shoulders, pull me in. My stomach will drop. Our lips meet. And then that tingle. That post tongue touch tingle will ensue. Do I even like it?
The Things Your Fingertips Become

Tense muscles form banks on the sides of the river that is my spine. It is here your fingertips turn to canoes. Traveling in rocky vertebræ water upstream to the cascade that is my hair. Our tongues are worms in the mud. It must have rained all week. Balmy nitrogen surrounds us. I become a hot air balloon, my shirt inflates till it flies off. It is here your fingertips become children, bouncing on every surface. Your eyes, the youthful mind, taking it all in. And my stomach buckles. Then, your fingertips become the strings of a kite that is my pants on a day that is windy and cold and sad.

Your fingertips turn to forks trying to find outlets, a spark and I become the wind, rerouting your attempts. Until both our fingertips become crab claws and hold each other in fury and need. Desperate for water. Your fingertips become hotdogs, sort themselves, filling the sunken space of the griddle that is my ribs. Each can feel the smoldering of my charcoal guts. I am no good. Only for your fingertips to become sloths, reaching up to a divinity that can no longer exist. I am no god, but I can whine like I am. At the end of the night your fingertips become tree roots on the steering wheel. Returning me home to a gallery of feelings, barred off by red velvet ropes.

Frenching the Girl Next Door—Fin

I kept my eyes on the window. The one we used to climb out onto the roof. To smoke, talk about the past, play with condoms.

We lay in the bed with the sticky sheets, waiting to make the same mistakes. Have the room reek. Why were we doing this; it was funny, stupid, and we were drunk.

It was a night of falling. So it makes sense that we too fell apart. Not in that loud way, that a building would. Rather in the way wet wood splinters, silent and uneven. I am lucky I never liked you like that. And when I took the keys to that squat house I didn’t feel bad. As I slipped out into the sharp night and we both kissed different boys we never saw ourselves kissing. I tell myself I didn’t think of you. And most days, I trust that memory.

From These Lips

My lips have legs and each word that spills out is kicked to the world waiting to be received, hoping to be embraced. Today, outside the movies, a top the washing machine, in the car, court room, restaurant, empty guest bedroom, on the park bench, my words all hit
the ground with a thud.
As the big conclusion fell
from these lips.
I stood outside the National, a popular concert venue in Richmond. My group found a spot by the large tour bus full of A$AP Ferg’s crew, talking to TJ, a man who identified as Ferg’s cousin and was travelling with him. We asked if he was on the bus and he said “Yes, but he doesn’t wanna come out, he’s a little mad about the audience.” He was mad at the lack of diversity, it was impossible to not notice that the audience was 97% white males. I remember thinking that was odd, but I thought of my peers—all the white boys I knew, and how they were all jealous they couldn’t be there. But why be mad? A$AP Ferg had an audience, and better yet attracted the people life has most separated with reality. These boys don’t recognize their privilege and the power that comes with it, the potential voice they can use for good. With this audience, he has an opportunity to teach a sea of ignorance a little about what it is like. Maybe it is this huge responsibility that made him mad, the longing to just say “fuck it” and make the music he wants. I won’t ever know.

Rap started as life-of-the-party people laying down lyrics to the beat. It was DJ’s and lyricist. Its roots trace back to mainly black male artists and even today, the top artists of the industry is held by that demographic; Jay-Z, Kanye West, Kendrick Lamar, Childish Gambino—the list goes on. However, they aren’t making music for just one demographic, and the audience shows that. Rap quickly cultivated not only a place in the music industry, but wiggled itself into culture—influencing style, politics, and other arts. The rap community became a place for those outcast by society due to race or socioeconomic status. Co-Editor Adam Bradley of The Rap Anthology cites founders of the movement like Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five as artists who curved the music to address the issues in America regarding race and wealth (or lack of it), releasing “The Message” in the early 80s (Bradley NPR). As the genre has expanded, it has branched into even more subgenres including Trap, Emo Rap, and Electronic Rap. The music has new platforms too, it’s no longer catching them on the radio with cassette recorder in hand or burning CDs for your crush. Spotify, Soundcloud and Apple music have made albums more accessible and artists easier to find. Another effect the mass shift in technology has had on music is this idea that artists are now celebrities. Many rappers now play the job of “role model” and while often artists take this title with pride, it also comes with a great pressure, the same pressure Ferg may have been feeling that November night.

However, for as much good as rap has been doing in comforting the beat down, its lyrics are guilty of tearing down women, promoting violence and drugs. It is these traits of the genre that are turn away a potential audience. Although it is not only in recent years that rap has been disregarded as an art. In more current years, the community has been shamed for sticking to its violent, sexist, and homophobic lyrics despite the change in the political climate. So why is it taking over the radio? Winning Grammys? In 2016, Kendrick Lamar won the Pulitzer prize for his album DAMN, becoming not only the first rap album to be recognized with the literary award, but the first that wasn’t classical or jazz. Kendrick Lamar has found a balance, using music to paint a picture of honesty while not outcasting his white audience, creating a space accessible for educating the ignorant and comforting those who have experienced inequality. He is the perfect example of what the bridge between audiences can look likes and it shows through his accolades. He further solidifies how rap is an art and not just a problematic style.

Besides the history making feat winning the Pulitzer was, it goes to show how liked the album is. In its craft and its topic, Lamar’s DAMN appealed to a board of judges that had tendencies to stick to the easier-to-like arts, art that everyone agrees is art. Joe Coscarelli, a music reporter for The New York Times interviewed Dana Canedy, the administrator of prizes, who said “the time was right” and the board was arranged properly so the best work won (Coscarelli). The album for Lamar had more of a popular sound but didn’t stray away from addressing issues he has faced growing up in Compton, and problems in America outside of Compton relating to race and money, with strong strings of religion woven through.

Today, the United States media and news is very filtered, biased and sometimes entirely misreported. It is important arts call out and shed light on issues some communities may never know exist. In Natalie Graham’s “What Slaves We Are” exploratory essay on Lamar’s album before DAMN, To Pimp a Butterfly, and how it showcased black culture—comparing it to slave narratives. Saying,
“To Pimp a Butterfly was black on purpose, and journalists noticed.” She goes on to note “He (Lamar) references Roots and slavery in “King Kunta,” “Vanities Slaves,” and “Vanities Slave Pt 2” to question and revise the enduring ideals that Kunta Kinte and slave caricatures represent.” (125 Graham) Graham picks the album apart, respecting it as an art and breaking down how important the messages Lamar was trying to get across are. Messages all audiences should hear.

As an art, rap holds the responsibility of giving voice to muffled issues—if police violence is one of them, then it isn’t wrong to talk about it. Audiences should be held equally accountable for analysing the art they consume, to listen and think about what was said, written, painted, etc. It is not that Kendrick Lamar’s lyrics don’t talk about drugs, violence and women but they do so in a way that is easier on the mind. There is no outcasting a type, pointing a finger or blaming. It’s his minimalist style that paints an image that is not only interesting to explore, but allows a listener to stand in his shoes and really feel all the things without the fear. In his song “Alright” off his album To Pimp a Butterfly he sings “and we hate po po/ wanna kill us dead in the street for sure,” a line critics on Fox News took issue with, citing it as promoting violence towards police. PBS reports that Lamar responded to the hate when talking to TMZ, explaining how it’s a shame a song with a positive message of “We gon’ be alright” was changed to “I wanna kill people” (Barajas). On his album DAMN, Lamar samples the clip from Fox News at the end of the song “BLOOD.” So his newer lyrics aren’t beating around the bush, they don’t hold back on acknowledging police brutality and even go so far as to call out those who are trying to hide the spotlight Kendrick Lamar has put on the topics. In his song “XXX.” Lamar sings “Alright, kids, we’re gonna talk about gun control,” the song goes on to talk about the border, Trump’s presidency, and the fear mongering Fox News partakes in. All of these relevant problems of today’s America. However, he is far from the first to rap in a narrative style that is unafraid of ugly truths, both Tupac and The Notorious B.I.G had songs that walked listeners through stories of their hardship in poverty and broken homes. Maybe they never got the recognition because of their early deaths, as both are respected now in the community. But aside from the early deaths, rap was also still just making way into mainstream culture. It was too new and too controversial, even today it is clear some still feel it is both these things.

Even today, some people are still nit-picking the “art” aspect of rap. “The Evolution of Rap in America” a paper by Henry Rhodes talks about how rap changed culture in the states, adding to the “issue” of vandalism. Rhodes notes how rap is illegitimate as an art and often more seen as a “fad.” (Rhode). In the American Conservative, writer Micah Mattix makes it seem like comparing rap and poetry is like comparing apples and oranges because rap is “often profane and can seem less serious.” Although he does think that some rap lyrics are musically strong they cannot be poetry because the lines don’t stand without a beat. Saying that rap without the beat is “incomplete poetry.” (Mattix). This is an example of critics disowning rap before delving into the substance behind the art that it is. Ruling it as “incomplete” is unfair and spreading that message to people is close-minded. If it was incomplete without the beat, DAMN would have been unable to obtain the Pulitzer, as it is an award for writing.

On the flip of its haters, are those being supported by the spread of the style. Rap is aiding people who have felt voiceless in society. Creating a home for youth who feel isolated by their race and/or their socioeconomic status. Adam Bradley, Co-Editor of The Anthology of Rap says, “Rap has always been about these tensions, the tension between the party and the profit, between the sense of social responsibility, but also the need to rock the crowd … to make people think and move their feet. Rap is all of these things at once, and it’s still that way today.” (Bradley NPR). While undoubtedly there has been a shift in the sounds and beat, rap lyrics have stayed true to their topics.

While ideally people would live in a society where art has fluidity in genre and isn’t categorized, it is just not the case. It shouldn’t matter what genre an art is, it just does, for awards, recommendations, and relations—we sort our art into groups. This would work if big public voices (i.e the Grammys, Oscars, Pulitzer) weren’t hiding arts that are on the fringe or controversial. Nelson and Havelock dive into this idea in their paper, “Politicians Must Remember Rap is Art” berating the way those in the field, like Bill Clinton who made a comment about Sister Souljah, are quick to throw judgement at rap without actually delving in and critiquing it like a “real” art. “It annoys me when people try to lump things into the categories of good or bad. Most creative endeavors, especially rap, are more complex than that and deserve more careful and thorough criticism. Rap is art—a fact that people like Tucker, Dole, and George Bush never even acknowledge—and should be treated as such.” (Havelock Nelson). Here, the two back up the idea rap is an art and call out big names who have gone out of their way to try and mess with the artistic reputation.

Once it is established the stories rap tells should be told. The question of who should tell the story comes into play, but also it’s flip is almost just as important—who should listen? The answer is, to a degree, everyone. If a viewer or listener is just not a fan of the style that shouldn’t be an excuse to remain ignorant to all the culture and work an industry can hold. As a society we have a duty to be open minded and aware of what is happening in our country, even if the truth is ugly. Sure, don’t download the album but do take a second to listen to a song, read an article about what it’s doing. People should be striving to step out of their comfort zone, an easy way to do this is take in an art that holds unfamiliarity. Though an artist may not make music for a certain audience, they should be grateful to have one, and welcome diversity in their crowd. As an artist, any chance not taken to educate the ignorant is a missed opportunity. Although, the art should always come first, most artists can combine their art with the voice they use to change the world. Langston Hughes discusses
this in his essay “The Negro Artist and The Racial Mountain” saying many of his black colleagues hesitate to write their roots, however it is a glorious moment when they do (Hughes). The best art is the kind that is fearless, and comes from a real place of creativity. Artists who hide from their identity or ignore the inspiration around them have weaker outcomes. Kendrick in “ELEMENT” off DAMN says “I don’t do it for the ‘Gram, I do it for Compton.” Every artist has their drive, and it should not have to be hidden to gain popularity. As audience members, it is vital we dig to find real art, even if it makes us uncomfortable. There is an important moment in Hughes essay where he notes that regardless of the white audience, he is gonna keep doing his thing—even though it isn’t easy and he faces backlash from both communities of black and white people. “The Negro artist works against an undertow of sharp criticism and misunderstanding from his own group and unintentional bribes from the whites.” (Hughes). He articulated the essence of his issue: black people are hesitant to accept the truth of the issues and white people won’t take the time to pay attention to art outside of their comfort zone. Our culture remains bland without diversity. There are struggles an artist faces as a minority and struggles they face as an artist, and sometimes those issues overlap.

If the culture is expecting honest art, as seen in the mass fad of documentaries and realistic fiction shows, and rising popularity of memoirs—why have we not been accepting honest art? Most rap holds a voice of truth and spotlights on issues taking place now, and should without a doubt be respected an art. Kendrick Lamar has been the first rapper to win the Pulitzer, though there is a long list of colleagues that have made equally great impacts. While Lamar is eloquent and original, he is not the first to make culturally important sonic works. For sure, part of it is that times have changed, and rap has really set its place in the music industry. Though it is also due to the inability to deny Lamar’s talent and the idea that the world as a whole is ready to, if not embrace it, recognize the importance of his music and the things it brings to light—the United States is still taking advantage of minorities. No matter who is listening, it is important they take away the issues Kendrick Lamar brings up, and use it to start conversations, spark change and keep our country from feeling comfortable in its corrupt systems.
Wilvern the Trashcan

Trash, most must deal with it at one point or another. People, Objects, Experiences, all of it can and will be trash. Most people prefer not to deal with trash a lot, but some are not that lucky. Wilvern the garbage can, had to deal with garbage his whole life. Wilvern was a decrepit public trash can with a lovely little cover to protect him from rain. He had metal ribbing and could hold up to 35 gallons of garbage, which Wilvern was very proud of. He had been in the business for quite a few years and had seen all sorts of things as he was stationed in a lush green park. Wilvern was mostly content with his job even through multiple beatings from hurricanes, dogs, and even a baseball bat. One day Wilvern was sitting outside on a miserably hot day, covered in sticky garbage residue and hot coffee, which someone had decided to throw into his gaping mouth.

“What a miserable day,” thought Wilvern to himself as a little girl accidentally dumped ice cream down his side instead of into his garbage hole.

“No wonder I’m so sticky,” he thought to himself as the ice cream pooled in a small puddle beneath him. The day continued as more and more people threw garbage into Wilvern and the sun continued to beat down on the park making everyone miserable. When six o’clock came around, Wilvern was quite bloated from having all that trash inside him, and was very happy when the groundskeeper came to change out his trash bag. The groundskeeper’s name was Travis and every night Travis would go around and clear out the trash bags. Wilvern appreciated Travis’s hard work since this man did so much for so little. Travis was always so upbeat, he was always listening to music and would go around the park with a large plastic cart that had a wobbly wheel and clean up all the garbage that didn’t make it into the cans. Travis had been doing this for longer than Wilvern existed, so Wilvern always trusted him to keep the place clean (even though he didn’t make those decisions). Wilvern thought of Travis as a fellow co-worker, taking care of trash, and cleaning up the park. Both of them united towards a common goal of cleanliness.

At around six o’clock Travis went home and locked up the park gates as the sunset and city around it fell into darkness. Wilvern patiently waited until dawn struck the sky. At around seven o’clock the next morning Travis came strolling up to the park in his usual joyful mood and finally unlocked the gates causing crowds of people to come pouring into the park on a new day. The day proceeded as normal with lots of people throwing their unwanted possessions into Wilvern. Although, at about halfway through the day a frazzled woman dashed towards him with a piece of paper he assumed she intended to throw away.

“I guess there’s no time to deliver this,” the woman quietly sighed to herself, “he’ll find out eventually.” The lady tossed the paper downwards into the trash hole as she quickly paced away to an unknown destination. The paper fluttered down and came to rest on the very edge of the Wilvern’s trash hole. He saw that it had writing on it, and was able to glimpse the details of the notes before it fluttered into his chasm within.

Dear Travis,
I, unfortunately, must leave on very urgent notice. I have family matters that I must deal with in England. I don’t have many details for what is going on, but I probably won’t be back for quite some time. My guess maybe a few months or years depending on the situation. I hope you’ll do fine without me…

Love, Venessa

“Wait!” thought Wilvern, “He doesn’t know she’s leaving! How’s he going to know? This person must be important to him!” Wilvern inwardly panicked for his beloved co-worker as the thought of Travis’s sadness filled his mind.

“What can I do? How do I tell him?” he thought as he desperately searched for an answer. Finally, there was an idea that sparked inside of Wilvern’s metal head.

“I’ll have to abandon my duties and leave the park, but anything for a fellow co-worker!” he thought to himself.

“But how will I do that? I’m only a trash-can” Wilvern thought. Then he tried something. He strained with all the potential force he felt in his body. Suddenly, Wilvern felt a tingling all over him, as though pins and needles were spreading throughout him. Now Wilvern felt he had complete control, and with a loud “CRACK!” he broke free from his concrete base and fell to the ground.
“How did I do that?” he thought as he now lay sideways on the park’s sidewalk with banana peels, bits of paper, and candy wrappers spilling out of him.

“Ah well, not everything makes sense, but now how do I move?” he mused. Then Wilvern realized that he was positioned on top of a hill, and with a little push of Wilvern’s strength he slid down and started to roll. Slowly and steadily Wilvern picked up momentum. He slowly got fatter and fatter as several passersby jumped out of the way to avoid being hit as he barreled down the hill towards the park gates. With a final burst of energy, Wilvern flew up over the hill and through the park gates, and into the city streets. There was the honking of cars, and squealing of tires, as cars skidded out of the way to avoid Wilvern rolling down the streets, spewing garbage as he went.

“Wait a minute where does Travis live?” thought Wilvern as he quickly stopped and realized he never even considered the thought. People around him started to get out of their cars and started to shout at each other. After a few seconds of glancing around in search, Wilvern spotted the maintenance cart Travis used for work at the park. The cart was chained to a bicycle rack stationed in an alleyway beside a tall, brick, apartment building.

“There!” Wilvern thought as he burst forward, and started to pick up momentum again. He barreled down the sidewalk, frightening commuters and tourists as he flung trash all over them in his wake. As Wilvern approached the apartment building he took a sharp turn, denting a lamp-post and busting through the apartment’s doors.

“How do I find out which apartment he’s in?” he thought to himself as he surveyed the empty lobby.

“Wait, I can find his room number using mail!” he deduced as he spotted the apartment’s metal mailboxes that lining the walls. Wilvern had no keys to open them, so he just barreled towards them, and rammed them open. The doors of the mailboxes were smashed open, causing letters to go everywhere. Wilvern studied the letters as they fluttered to the floor. There were a variety of letters, like letters from grandmas, leases, eviction notices, and among them a paycheck from the park that Wilvern was stationed in.

“Wait,” said Travis as he picked up the note and read over it, confused “Vannessa! She’s leaving! Why did she not tell me” Travis spat out the note, which dutifully drifted down and landed on Travis’s desk.

“Where is she?!” muttered Travis frantically. Wilvern peered around and saw the slightest flash of Venessa as she exited into one of the airplane gates. Wilvern started to roll and Travis looked over and decided it was not a time to doubt the direction of a sentient trash can. They both rushed into the terminal as one of the flight attendants yelled at Travis for not having a boarding pass. Both of them rolled into the plane, and Travis rushed over to Venessa and stumbled down to his knees.

“Don’t go Venessa!” yelled Travis, “I love you!”
“I know,” said Venessa “that’s not gonna change anything I still have to go.” said Venessa “Also, how did you find me and get on this plane.” With that, security busted in the door.

“Sir you are not allowed to be on this plane! You and your trash can need to leave!” yelled the security guard.

“I’m sorry Travis, but real life does not work out like a fairy tale,” said Venessa as the guards escorted him out. “Just because you love me doesn’t mean I can stay.” The guards escorted Travis and Wilvern to the doors and threw them back out onto the streets. Travis sat and moped as the two watched Vanessa’s plane fly off into the sky. Unfortunately, Wilvern was a trash can and could not offer any condolences or advice for Travis. So he silently rolled away, Venessa was right, not everything is a fairy tale. Even when you are a sentient garbage can.
I adjusted my backpack straps on my shoulder, taking a deep breath of the crisp, fall air. I let it out slowly, trying to keep my breath steady. I reassured myself that I could, in fact, talk to Caleb today, the guy I had been crushing on since the start of 8th grade.

"Garrett! Get your butt in the car!"

I snapped to reality as my brother shouted my name.

"Dude, chill out. I'm coming." I shuffled towards our minivan. As I slid into my seat, Teddy, my older brother, poked my knee from the front seat.

"You've been quiet recently, Gare. Anybody special on your mind?" Teddy grinned at me as I managed to shake my head, letting my hair fall in front of my reddening face. "What's her name?" Teddy poked my knee some more.

"It's nothing, ok?" I muttered as I slapped his hand off of my knee.

"Jeez," he let out a defensive groan, "nothing to get upset over," Teddy murmured as my mom got into the car.

"What are we talking about?" she asked, looking at my red face and Teddy's red hand.

"Nothing," We both said in unison. I looked up at Teddy, surprised he didn't rat me out this time. Turned out he was already on his phone, texting his latest girlfriend. I let out a sigh and looked out the window as the car started.

After riding in silence for a while, I saw my school looming over me around the corner of the street. My breath caught as I tried to get all my bags together. Slipping my lacrosse gear on my back and holding my backpack on one shoulder, I stumbled out of the car, offering a quick wave to my mom and an eye roll to my brother. He responded by continuing to ignore me. I hurried to the courtyard, where I scanned the crowd for familiar faces. I saw Caleb talking to a girl I didn't know, but I quickly looked away. I instead found my best friend, Rae (short for Rachel), and pushed my way towards her.

"Are you gonna do it?" She murmured persistently.

"I don't know! Stop asking," I pushed her away, pretending to act casual. "You know, people could really hate me for it," I mentioned nervously, looking around to see if anybody was eavesdropping.

"Come on, times are changing! Nobody really cares about that type of stuff anymore." Rae adjusted her glasses and continued, "Besides, you two were meant to be!"

I rolled my eyes but smiled at her reassuring words. What felt like ages passed by before I had a chance to even look at Caleb. His eyes were the weirdest shade of grey. I couldn't quite place whether I was weirded out by them or mesmerized. Anyways, as I looked over at him during break again, he turned around and met my gaze. His face twisted in confusion but then brightened as if he had just remembered something. He pushed up on the bench below him and weaved his way through the rest of our grade, heading towards me. I felt like running away, but I tried to take some deep breaths instead.

"Hey, Garrett. Rae said you wanted to talk to me?"

"I'm going to kill Rae.

"Y-yeah, I didn't really think she would actually tell you that," I glared at Rae from across the room, planning how I could strangle her after school.

"It's fine. What d'ya want to talk to me about?" He squinted at me with those eyes and I choked on my words.

"Y-yeah I wanna tell you that I--" My words were cut off by a lurching beneath my feet. I glanced over at Caleb, who was grabbing onto the bench for support, my mouth still open from being stopped mid-sentence.

"What was that?" Caleb's words were drowned out by a rumbling sound that almost knocked me over. I heard someone scream to my left, and someone blew a whistle to my right.
“Earthquake!” My P.E. coach yelled while attempting to shepherd fifty-six 8th graders into safety. I panicked, forgetting all about the confession I was about to make, and I dropped onto the ground, feeling unsteady on the quaking ground. I saw gravel dancing on the ground and chairs flying feet into the air. Dust rose from in between the bricks and quickly filled the air. Coughing, I pulled my shirt collar over my nose and tried to wipe my glasses at the same time. Not very effective. My ears were ringing from the crashing of walls around me, and the piercing sound of 5th-grade boys screaming their heads off. My vision was starting to get blurry from all of the debris in the air, so I decided to close my eyes and just find Rae by listening.

As I searched around for Rae, I thought over how I could’ve missed the signs that this earthquake was going to happen. I was so focused on talking to Caleb that I didn’t notice the rumble that knocked my picture frames off my bookshelf last night. I shook my head, chastising myself for letting such a superficial thing get in the way of my safety. Suddenly, I heard one yelp through all of the yelling and screaming that caught my attention. I scrambled towards the sound, opening my eyes to look for my friend. I saw a bob of black hair that was almost grey with all the dust in it, and I got up to my feet and jumped over my classmates to get to Rachel.

“Gare! I thought you were dead!” Rae said with a cough. Her hands were bleeding from falling on the ground and the knees of her white jeans were ripped open.

“Ok let’s not say dea- that word until all of this,” I gestured to the pandemonium around us, “is over.” Some people were crying, some people were staring blankly into the air in front of them, but most people were scrambling around, screaming for their friends and for safety. Like I had been earlier, I assumed.

“But did you talk to him?” Rae whispered loudly in my ear.

“Rae, do you seriously think that’s the best use of our time?” I yelled at her, angry at myself for wishing pain upon her earlier. “It doesn’t matter. We need to get inside,” I said, looking up at the trembling towers above us. I grabbed Rae’s shoulder, gesturing for her to crawl behind me, grimacing each time I saw her bloody hands hit the ground.

After what felt like hours of searching, Rae and I failed to find a space where we felt completely safe. We resorted to huddling in the corner of the Nurse’s office with other groups of students also huddled together in silence. The ground still shaking violently, I heard a faint rumbling noise above me. Ignoring it, I looked around at the dusty faces and tried to ignore the constant sound of fear. I tucked my knees in closer to my chest, burying my head in between my legs. Rae wrapped her arms around me, her body shaking. I’m pretty sure she was crying. My mind, which is normally calm and tranquil, was swimming with emotions, which were amplified by the panic of the natural disaster going on around me. I looked around the room again and recognized faces from around my school. Sophie, a 6th grader who practically worshipped me last year; Jacob, a 5th grader who I had to show around the school at the beginning of the year. I see Elizabeth, the girl I dated in 6th grade before I knew I didn’t like girls. I wish we could still be friends.

I finally see a mop of curly hair, formerly obscured by Jacob’s sobbing face. Caleb! I look around with caution like I usually do, but it’s not needed. Everyone has their own problems to deal with. I scoot over to Jacob, offer him a quick hug and then calm myself down to talk to Caleb.

“Caleb? Is that you?” I whisper to the curly mop. The mop turns around and I see it is, in fact, Caleb.

“Y-yeah. What the fuck is going on?” Caleb’s face twisted with fear.

“Yeah, what I wanted to tell you earlier was that-” I start repeating myself, but Caleb cuts me off, irritated.

“Dude, I don’t care one bit about what you had to say earlier. Our lives are at stake right now!”

My heart shattered in my chest, having been blown off so harshly.

“I guess you’re right. It doesn’t matter. I’ll go back to Rachel now,” I said with a tiny sigh.

“No, it’s ok. You can stay here,” Caleb said with an apologetic smile. I grinned back at him, and we sat next to each other. Probably a little closer than he would’ve liked, but I didn’t mind. I smiled to myself as I envisioned myself sacrificing my life for Caleb’s in some parallel universe. A parallel universe where he knew me enough to care.

Suddenly, I heard what sounded like gunshots. Gunshots…? But it wasn’t gunshots, it was cracks, snaking across the ceiling. Screams erupted around me as students crammed out of the door. I let Caleb go first, like the gentleman I was. In hindsight, I should’ve just run for myself, therefore avoiding what came next. As the cracks grew larger, I caught myself looking at Caleb, crouching in the hallway. I looked into his eyes, my mouth going limp. His mouth was moving, but I couldn’t hear anything. It looked like he was saying “You’re gonna get cruc-”

My ears started ringing as I processed what was happening. I snapped my head up, watching the ceiling break apart above me. Time seemed to slow down, and I felt like I was watching the scene play out on a screen. I saw Caleb, already turning his back on my inevitable death. Why would I ever chase after someone like him? I found myself asking, He doesn’t even care… I shifted my focus over to Rae in the hallway outside, her head whipping around at the sound of the ceiling collapsing, checking to see if I’m safe. My eyes burned with tears as I pictured her face when she eventually finds out I didn’t get out. I see all of the people in the room around me, their faces in various degrees of shock. I see Jacob’s tiny fists covering his ears, tears drawing lines through his dust-caked cheeks. I felt the pressure of the ceiling on my back, and I felt a calm sensation wash over me as I let out one last exhale, forcing dust out of my lungs.

As my vision grew dark, one tear made its way down my cheek. I thought one last thought. Quite a lesson, if I do say so myself. I thought about something I should’ve taken to heart a long time ago. You should’ve saved yourself, Garret. You’re worth more than a gay. And if you’re hearing this story, then you too, need to take that thought to heart.
The Creek Beside The Train Tracks
The Creek Beside The Train Tracks
For a very long time our parents would always tell us no. We would beg and plead and cry.
They would refuse, telling us things like, “There are monsters in the woods that will catch you if you were to ever step foot past those bushes.”

Now I have turned 12 and it’s time for the annual tradition to plead. Mom gives me a look that asks if we really want to go out there. Go out into the cold wilderness.

“Please, Mom. We’re older now. We can take care of ourselves.” Finally, in a patronizing tone, she says yes. We run straight to my room to get a bag and start throwing everything we could in there. Books, crayons, coloring pages, paper, binoculars, cans of food (crushed pineapple, fruit cocktails and vienna sausages. You know, the essentials), and plastic forks. Jacob reminds us that we need water bottles and I reach for the packets of bright red, artificial water flavoring. I even run up the stairs to dig up my brother’s old, dull switchblade knives and walkie talkies for this endeavor.

“Goodbye Mother! Goodbye Father! For we may not ever see each other again,” I sigh dramatically. Then I get frustrated with their lack of concern, “This is a dangerous journey, that only us, the most courageous kids in all of Virginia, could carry out” Dad hides his smirk with a drink and Mom laughs.

“Ok, but you guys should be back before dinner time. I’m making lasagna tonight.”

We jump the bushes and start our journey into the trees. After a short walk, I spot train tracks. Taking a look up and down the train tracks, I decide that they lead on for thousands and thousands of miles.

“Do you guys hear that?” Jacob, my best friend, asks.

“Hear what?” His little brother, Alex, replies.

“The water.” He starts walking towards the soft sound of water trickling through the trees. We all fall silent as we stop and listen to the noise.

I walk up to him and take a peek over the edge of a steep hill. All that we can see are trees and bushes and adventure.

“Let’s go,” I say with confidence. Smiling in agreement, they start following me. But in order to get down safely, we realize we have to sit down and slide. “I’ll go first” I sit down and immediately feel the cold, sticky mud cover my hands and bottom I’ll do anything for a good adventure. With caution I start my way down and eventually we all make it. I listen out for the water. I notice that it has gotten louder, which I know means that we have gotten closer. As we hike closer to the source of our curiosity, I am comforted that the trees enclose us and it makes me feel safer. I like the fact that I can imagine we are a million miles away from home on an abandoned island when, in reality, we’re less than 100 yards away from my house. I breathe in the smell of the forest and winter. It smells of pine needles and cold.

After carrying our heavy backpacks that are filled with things we want but don’t truly need, and stepping through thorns and what Alex seems to think is poison ivy, we are finally here. We stomp through the shallow creek with our rain boots.

“It has been a long journey, we have finally made it to a clean source of water,” I say in a British accent, mocking some survival guy that I saw on TV once.

Staring into the water, we watch the tiny tadpoles flick their tails, communicating probably. I felt like we were gods, staring down at these tiny little organisms, living their own life, just as we were living our own. I wonder if Jacob is thinking the same thing, but that thought is broken when he splashes me with the icy cold water, soaking my hair and making my glasses all blurry. A couple heartbeats pass of us just staring at each other, him trying to guess my next move and, me, thinking of what my next move is going to be. I end up taking the easy route and cup my hand to sling the water at him. He scrunches his face up as the freezing liquid hits him. Before he tries to continue this battle, Alex pushes his attention towards the fact that the water leads up somewhere. We all start running that way, hopping over tree roots, possible animal remains, and rocks.

Turning the corner, I am in awe. There is a tiny spot that looks like it could be out of a fairytale movie, or a horror movie. Depends on what kind of person you are. It is a pond-like water source, with tiny stepping stones that lay scattered throughout it. Around it is higher land that kind of encloses it, and then a giant pipe that water pours out of. There are pieces of glass in the water, that some people might think is sad, but I think it makes the water sparkle. Somewhere in the distance, I hear dogs barking and birds chirping. I’m pretty sure they should have migrated south by now, but I don’t put much thought into it.

Jacob and I look at each other and know precisely what to do next. We hop on each stone to try and make it to the pipe. This could be our next adventure, to see where the pipe leads, but it’s cut short when I hear mom calling for us. It’s dinner time.
A Product of My Immigrant Household

Tucking the wisps of growing bangs behind my ear, my grandmother gently slides clips into my hair and clicks them closed. The hair clips are red and they sparkle. She brought them from China after my mom marveled at my hair in a phone call. I wear them proudly. My grandmother turns me to face her, looking over the thick braids she’d so carefully done and running them through her hands once more. Ni tou-fa zhen duo, she says. I beam at her compliment, shaking my head to feel my hair whip around me. Now jokingly, she asks, jian yi dian rang wo mai ma? Not comprehending her tone, I consider her request for my hair to sell in China. In full seriousness, I respond. Hao, rang wo de tou-fa zhang liang nian, you liang ying-chi wo zai gei ni. I’ve promised her my hair, asking only that she wait two years until I have two feet to cut. The loving lightheartedness of this exchange escapes my four-year-old self, and my mom sends me, with my red hair clips, to daycare.

At daycare, I raise my hand to run my fingers over the smooth braids and continue upwards, feeling for the hair clips I’m so eager to show off. On the right side, I stop when I feel the clip. On the left side, it’s not there. Despair fills me. As I glance under tables and scan the alphabet carpet, my teacher asks the class, “Anyone lose a hair clip?” My head whips up, and I see my clip in her hand as she walks through the class. She gets to me, and I want to shout that it’s mine, that my grandmother put it in this morning, that it sparkles when you turn it. Instead, I nod once, silently, unable to articulate my thoughts in English. Seeing the clip’s companion in my hair, she’s satisfied and hands it to me. I am silent among my English-speaking peers for another year. It is a product of my immigrant household.

Eleven years later, I’m on a phone call with a friend when my mom asks a question, something mundane. Our conversation is in Chinese, as usual when we’re speaking to each other. My Chinese is now clumsy, but my mom’s words flow out of her. Chinese was both of our first languages, but I’ve forgotten it through years of disuse, having instead learned the complexities of English. After my mom leaves, my friend comments, “You sound different when you speak Chinese.” Of course I do. It’s another language. But he clarifies, “No, it’s your voice, how you speak.” I ask my mom if she notices a difference. It’s difficult to judge what’s significant because of the environments in which I speak each language, but she lists observations nonetheless. In Chinese, I’m louder, more curious, more assertive. In English, I’m more thoughtful, eloquent, elaborative. I notice differences in my mom too. There are idioms, poetry, and slang mixed in with her language whereas English sounds more formal, as if she learned it from a textbook. And she did.

Language has an identity. Its fluidity and characteristics bring with it a unique understanding of the world through the lens of another culture, another set of experiences. The intimate connections formed between two native speakers are difficult to replicate through the sterilized introduction of a taught language, with one exception, bilingualism. Living a second language gives birth to a separate identity. The two intertwine, coexist, but recognize where each belong, lying dormant until they’re beckoned. Chinese is natural. My early memories are undeniably in Chinese, marked by disjointedness and silence where English is forcibly inserted. However, as time progresses, as I form relationships in English, as the two identities are forced in their continued existence, division becomes coexistence.
Ryan Winegardner
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Category: Novel Writing

The King of Pots and Pans

Brief summary:

Cigarettes, socialism, poetry, and shootouts. The King of Pots and Pans is a story of vice and disillusionment as three upper class young adults decide to take over a small town in the west. Bob Ryan, the main character, is a famous poet who loses interest in life, and is convinced by his friend, Jules, to help overthrow Elko, a small town in the collective territory known as the Badlands. However, once they reach Elko, their relationship strains and Ryan is left to his own devices. Through a series of mishaps and general incompetence, Ryan becomes the head of a socialist rebellion which grows increasingly popular. Before Ryan can realize his leadership, his old friends assassinate him. This story deals with a boy struggling to grow up, and the ennui and disillusionment he faces. As well, it stands as a political allegory for revolution in the modern era.

Excerpt:

Act I.

This whole thing happened because of cigarettes. That’s what I blame it on, anyways. If it weren’t for cigarettes, I wouldn’t have needed money from Jules so bad and he would have never had the opportunity to get me sucked into this. Hindsight is 20/20, they say. But, I wanted cigarettes really bad.

You know it’s a bad day when you wake up at six in the morning shaking because you need a smoke. It made me feel really anxious, like when I was a kid and it was a Sunday evening and I knew my weekend was over. It’s strange, that’s the first thought that came into my head: those long evenings when I was a kid, feeling all anxious because I wasted my day playing video games or laying around the yard in my own filth, digging holes or whatever. I wasn’t a very anxious kid, but Sunday evenings always made me feel anxious. The whole school week stretched ahead of me and everything I had done seemed like just a flash, and I couldn’t really enjoy anything at that point.

Anyways, I stuck my arm out of my bed, felt around the ground for my jeans and spent about nine years trying to find my pocket with the carton of cigarettes. I pulled out the carton and smiled only to find there weren’t any cigarettes. I basically exploded. I’m about as poor as shit, and cigarettes are expensive nowadays. The reason why they’re so expensive is because of politics. Back when he was just a senator, Chuck the cuck Vanderson wanted to cut teenage smoking – which is basically the white whale of politics as far as I’m concerned. Once you get kids to stop smoking, you know you’ve got yourself a good government. Then again, Plato’s utopia would have never let kids smoke because that government would have bullied the hell out of people. I don’t know if that’s really a utopia or not.

So, Chuck Vanderson raised cigarette prices to $26.66, a hell of a price to pay. Only, no one fucking smokes anymore, anyways. Every kid I know vapes. So, this tax affected all of about nine people on the god damn planet. I know Chuck was cracked up by this tax, too, because it has 666, the devil’s number, in it. He’s not even religious. He probably just thought it was funny. The Senate is full of a bunch of billionaire crooks, who think it’s funny to make cigarettes hella expensive, if it has the devil’s number in it.

Well Chuck the cuck Vanderson was able to say he cut teenage smoking by 99%, which was only because vaping is all the rage with kids, but with a statistic like that, it’s really easy to be fooled.

I’m not a billionaire senator, so cigarettes are basically gold to me. That’s partly why I was pissed. Another reason why I was so angry when I discovered my pack was empty is because I bought cigarettes the night before. Literally, I bought some cigarettes on the way home from a party. I knew exactly what happened to those cigarettes too. My friend stole them. That really fucking pissed me off.
nearly broke my fist punching the wall.

My friend who walked me home was named Coolidge Johannes Wilhelm. Because the name Coolidge is antiquated as hell, everyone calls him Cool. Cool god damn Wilhelm. He’s rich as hell because his mom is a whore and his father is a bastard. And by that, I mean his mom sells herself for profit: she’s a corporate lawyer; meanwhile his father was born for profit: both of Father Wilhelm’s parents were basically corporate royalty, back in the day. Rich people are the worst crooks. It’s a well-known fact amongst socialists, but it’s still a statement that punches you right in the face. The reason rich people are crooks is because they don’t know any better. Money means nothing to them. They just don’t think about the fact that cigarettes cost $26.66, and that you only have $11.25 in your bank account. They can very easily buy a yacht whenever they want, so you know they don’t give an absolute fuck about cigarettes.

The more I thought about it, the more pissed off I got. I could perfectly picture Cool stealing my cigarettes, right out of the pack, because I was cross-faced as hell. Then, he probably cradled the loose cigarettes to his house and smoked them all, getting himself sick from all the nicotine. Cool can be very extravagant. It’s because he’s rich and can afford to be. I could see him getting very very sick, smoking all my cigarettes, all the while with a huge smile on his face.

The only reason I smoke at all is because it looks cool. Like I said, everyone else in the world vapes, it’s the wave. However, I smoke because it’s a lot cooler. When everyone else vapes, and you smoke, it makes you stand out. It makes you look like a real badass.

Plus, when I was a kid, I used to watch these Bob Dylan press conferences way back from when he went electric and everyone was either sucking his dick or trying to murder him. He could smoke a cigarette. No one makes anything sexier than Bob Dylan smoking a cigarette. It drove me nuts, when I was a kid, watching him talk and smoke and being all enigmatic. Smoking really is god damn cool. At least, when you can smoke like Bob fucking Dylan.

I’m kind of a narcissist. Not like I’m in love with myself, or anything like that, but I’m a narcissist.

After that, I calmed down a little and decided I would call my other rich friend, Jules. He’s the one that got me in this whole fucking mess. I love Jules though. Jules wasn’t a crook like the rest of my rich friends because he was born super poor. It’s because his mom started a tech company, and sunk all their money into that company. This tech company was basically a thing where they told people what the internet would think of them, and their social media accounts. It didn’t take off for a while, but when it did, it really took off. After that, they had a lot of money. So, Jules is pretty down-to-earth, because he remembers being poor.

Jules’ name is actually pretty funny. His parents were from around the time that Quentin Tarantino was still a huge deal and they absolutely loved Tarantino. There was this one character, from the movie Pulp Fiction, named Jules. He was probably the coolest character in the movie. This character was a funny gangster hitman, and then he had this whole character arc that made him become a bum, basically, but a bum in a good way.

Anyways, Jules was named after him. I wish I had a name like Jules. Or better yet, Vincent Vega. I really like that character. He can dance. My name is Bob Ryan. Two fucking first names. Everyone teases me about it, saying I was too poor to afford a last name and whatnot. Also, the name Bob is an absolute hick name. Because of that, most of my friends call me B.

But that’s why I liked Bob Dylan so much as a kid, because we have similar names. That’s how a lot of stuff works when you’re a kid. If you have a similar name to someone famous, they’re practically a god to you. And I really loved Bob Dylan.

I was feeling really calm, after sitting in bed for a while and thinking about Pulp Fiction and Bob Dylan and all that stuff. The only problem was that I was feeling sick as hell, and needed a smoke. I was about as anxious as I’d ever been. Smoking does that to you.

So, I finally took out my phone and called Jules. I really needed him to buy me cigarettes. It rang about three times before he answered.

“What do you need?” He sounded tired as hell. “It’s four in the morning, you, you-”


“Yes, bastard. That sounds good.”

“Well, what are you up to?”
“I’m trying to sleep, okay?”

“It’s seven in the morning, not god damn four, so quit bitching.”

“Whatever. It’s a saturday morning.”

“Alright, well I was wondering if you wanted to get breakfast somewhere. I can seriously wait, if you need all this beauty sleep, but I was just hoping to catch up with you.” Secretly, I was hoping I could get Jules to buy me breakfast and cigarettes. I had it all planned out. I’m a schemer. You have to be a schemer, to live my kind of lifestyle.

“Actually, I forgot – I wanted to talk to you about something over dinner. It’s something you really want to hear about.” Jules sounded a lot more alert, now. It’s probably because I told him to quit bitching.

“Can we just get breakfast instead? I mean you’re already awake.”

“No. I got shit to do first and foremost.”

“Dinner sounds good,” I said to him, “when and where?”

“Eight at the Jack Rabbit Slims?”

That absolutely cracked me up. The Jack Rabbit Slims is a restaurant downtown and its name is a reference to Pulp Fiction. In America, practically everything is a reference. Anyways, that cracked me up because Jules’ parents were huge Pulp Fiction fans, like I said. The apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.

“Sure, Jules. I’ll be there.”

“Great. I’ll see you. Don’t call me at this hour ever again.”

“One more thing, though. Can you pay for a pack of cigs for me? I bought my own last night but Cool fucking Wilhelm stole them all. The god damn crook. If I don’t get a smoke, I’ll probably kill myself before dinner tonight and you won’t be able to tell me about this thing, whatever the hell it is.”

Jules laughed really hard at that. He thinks I’m the cleverest guy ever, so he’s always laughing at stuff I say. That’s why I like hanging out with him – he thinks I’m clever. It puffs my ego nicely.

“Alright. How much are they?”

“$26.66.”

“Consider it yours. Bye.”

I knew that Jules would pay for my cigs. He’s a good man.

I knew that Jules would pay for my cigs. He’s a good man.

The reason why I hang out with all these rich bastards, even though I’m poor as hell, is because I’m a prince. Not a prince in the royal sense, but because I used to be a really famous god damn poet. Everyone was bending over backwards to kiss my ass. It’s because everyone does everything backwards in America, and they think that because you’re a poet you’re really a king – like an absolute monarch. If I were smarter, I could’ve taken over the whole country. No one knows that the whole reason I used to write good poetry was because I said corny shit and thought of random words and just put it all down, and afterwards people would ask me what it all meant and I would say something enigmatic as hell, like Bob Dylan used to do in his interviews, and everyone would absolutely riot. The critics and all loved me, back then.

The reason why I’m poor is also because I’m a god damn poet. Worst career path to go down, unless you think you can pull off a coup d’etat and run a country. Coup d’etat, more like coup de grace – that’s what I need. I can’t do any military-type shit, but I really wanted to learn. That’s how poets get rich – they become kings. Because everyone bends over backwards to kiss your ass, they think you know how to work a normal job and make money. I can’t do that – I’m a fucking poet. I’ve never worked at anything in my god damn life except, you know, poetry.
Sorry for all the swearing. I got heated. Anyways, I graduated high school at 16 because my parents are maniacs, and thought I would get a headstart. Plus, everyone was kissing my rear-end to read my poetry and that made it easier to graduate so early. After that I went to college and hated it and dropped out after maybe a year.

Now, I'm basically a court jester for all the rich people and wannabe sophisticos. I'm a court jester who would love to be a king. This whole story is about that. It's about cigarettes and kings. That sounds like a pretty nice title.

So that's my boring life story. Sorry to rattle on about all that, I just find stuff like that pretty important and I was thinking about all of that while I was on my bed, trying not to think about cigarettes. I was starting to sweat a little, and the bedsheets were sticking to me. That's how bad it was. I like my room really cold, like a god damn iceberg, so I was shivering a little, too.

Cigarettes are a pretty apt metaphor for late-capitalism. That term was invented by socialists in the 1930s or something. Now we're way past the 1930s, so I guess it should be late-late-capitalism, or something. Sort of like modernism and post-modernism and post-post-modernism. Like I said, everything in America is a god damn reference.

But here's why they're a good metaphor for capitalism: the bourgeois bastards start running out of money to build their palaces, or whatever, so they have to sell us something. Only, everyone has what they need. Like, if we focused on ourselves, we could be pretty happy. But, they come up with something we don't even want, and make us want it, and then we need it. Then, they gouge us for our money and they can build their palaces and no one is happy except for the bourgeois bastards. And they're only happy when they have new palaces.

Some things are more subtle than cigarettes, like phones or movies or pornography, for example. But, cigarettes are a pretty good metaphor for it all because I didn't even need cigarettes, nor did I want them, but after I figured out they were sexy as hell, I needed them more than anything. I might just be rambling.

My phone buzzed probably about ten minutes later. I looked at it and saw a notification:

*JulesJ sent you $26.66.*

He's always exact about everything. Jules does exactly as planned, no more, no less. That cracks me up. Anyone else would have rounded up to $30, because it's easier to click, and for someone rich as Jules, it doesn't matter. But, he's Jules. So he always sends $26.66 when you ask him for $26.66.

I took a hot shower after that. I like hot showers, especially in the morning. That made my skin feel less sticky. Then, I got dressed. I figured I would go down to the corner store and buy my cigarettes. It took me around thirty minutes to get dressed, though, because I'm a narcissist. I've always got to look nice, even if I'm just going down to the corner store for cigarettes. But god damn it, when I found my outfit, it really did look nice.

The corner store was a block away from my house. Even though it was seven-thirty in the morning, and the sun was already out, the corner store was all lit up with neon lights and LED. It looked like it was on fire, and everything. An absolute eyesore, is what that is, when it's seven-thirty in the morning and there's a corner store lit up like it's a god damn christmas tree. The sun had to compete with the fucking store. If I was the king of this country, I would blow the whole place up. I would blow a lot of places up, as a king. That's why everyone would like me. Kids my age are pretty hedonistic, and like to see shit get blown up. Anyone who opposed me would be hanged, as reactionary scum. Being socialist is great.

Well, I bought my cigarettes but realized Cool fucking Wilhelm stole my lighter too. The asshole. I only had $11.25 to my name, after buying the cigarettes. I didn't buy a lighter. When you're a poet-prince, you need to economize really well. I considered asking the store clerk for a light, but she was giving me the creeps. She was probably three years younger than me, and she was absolutely staring me down like I was a piece of meat and she was a hyena. Girls are always staring me down. You would think it would make me happy, but most of the time it just gives me the creeps. I shouldn't have dressed so nicely, but I'm a narcissist. We are all our own demise, I say.

Anyways, I fucking sprinted out of there, basically. When you're 19, a three year age difference is enough to creep you out. That girl was probably only 16. It kind of made me sad, how she was so young and practically working for me. Like normally, I call store clerks sir and ma'am, out of respect. But this girl, I couldn't call ma'am. Not with her being 16, and staring me down and all. I'm 19 and I don't work at all. That makes me really sad, seeing a girl that young working. Kids should be outside playing in the dirt or something, not working all the time.
My adrenaline was all through the roof after leaving the store, and I had time to kill, so I decided to walk five blocks downtown to a cafe where you could get coffee for $1. It was probably the only place in the world where you can get something that cheap. It was good coffee, too.
after

This is what they do not tell you, about the after.

It happened somewhere between the hours of nine and ten.

After, you are a number, a collection of curious sums and figures to be set aside, at a distance, analyzed and inspected like the specimen of a particularly perplexing lab. You are a number, and this new identity is recorded on little yellow notepads in carefully coordinated handwriting with monogrammed office pens and judiciously arranged smiles. You are another case, another day, another new number in an endless line of numbers going back to whenever it was when they first started keeping track. You are not special. You are not unique. You are not alone, either, but you do not know that yet, in the first few hours of the after, when everything is soaking and slipping like the insides of a wasting dream.

You went there on the sixth day of the week, with one friend in your car, to Janie’s sixteenth birthday. Your best friend lives four miles away and Mama plays One Direction on the twelve minutes there. At precisely seven you arrive; you wait with Hannah on the porch and Bella laughing behind you. Outside, the stars are as bright as your eyes. The night air kisses your neck and blooms peonies against your skin.

You are fifteen. In your mind you ponder a hundred things, each one as mundane as the last. Last week’s math test and this week’s Aeropostale sale and can you believe? It is your first party. Life is good because it cannot possibly be anything else, because tonight will be your first-time drinking, because tonight you get to grow up, and everything inside you screams ready.

After, they inspect you. Swab your neck with their ghostly glove hands and prod your stomach and shine lights up your nose. This is the second violation. This is for your own good. You lay down and dress you in paper so thin it is suffocating and then they take away all your things and pack them into plastic Ziplocs. Underwear? Is this your underwear, this lacy red thing that stinks of alcohol, that reeks of wanton suspicion, that oozes of sex?

He comes one hour late. Traffic, he says, and he is smiling like always, and your heart beats twice as fast. You drink your first beer with Janie, who you have known for eleven months. One kiss, two kisses, three kisses, and you make out with your best friend for twenty minutes over the top of an inky brown bottle. You have never felt so girlishly youthful before, so adolescently stupid, so vivaciously excited. You have never been stared at this way and he likes to stare; he likes to watch, one eyebrow raised and two eyes glinting like steel under Bella’s flashlight.

You watch him drink. One, two, three, and he is losing track. Mid-conversation and Hannah leaves somewhere with Andrew for thirty-seven minutes. When she comes back she is flushed and smiling, and he is watching you again. “Shall we also?” He says, exactly one time with that golden firefly smile.

And you will look back and think, just one time, just one. Fucking. Time.

After, you must tell your story. But you are confused, you are tired, you haven’t slept in God knows how long and something inside you just aches. Your throat is sore and ashy and scratches like sandpaper when you speak, and there is a stupid red hicke on the inside of your neck you’re not sure when you got. And your hips, your thighs, your insides burn, with hurt and shame and some other things you don’t quite know how to name. There are words at the back of your throat that cling like phlegm, memories seared into the flesh of your open retinas, handprints on the back of your shoulders and no one cares, no one cares enough to ask about anything except are you sure and how do you explain that you know, you just know, that there is evidence in every crevice of the body that he somehow got into
and how do you really explain that to a perfect total stranger? How do you explain the flick of his eyes as he entered you, as he locked the door, the dirty, thick cologne that seeped out from his pores and the fear, that visceral, raw, open fear that clawed the sides of your throat and froze your tongue into shards of breaking glass?

How, and no one will answer you, because some things cannot ever be said out loud.

He grabs your arm and leads you into the bathroom, the third room on the right. Okay, you tell him, just one blowjob, and we’re done. You might be kind of somewhat drunk but you are not stupid and you are smart enough set your boundaries and he shrugs, says yeah, fine by me and his fumbling, languid hands take three times to close bathroom door. He pulls off your clothes in five lazy motions and he kisses you for six. Then he pulls down his pants, and you blow him for nine minutes straight, and you thrill with pleasure as he moans, yeah, yeah ten times in a row. But then everything is going all wrong because apparently you aren’t as good as you thought and out of nowhere is he lifting you, all one hundred ten pounds of you, and suddenly he is on top of you but you don’t want to lose it here on Janie’s bathroom counter and you open your mouth and tell him no at least three times – you’re not sure how many times but you do remember that it was three, at least three times...

You will remember this moment until the day you die, and maybe other girls will think of their weddings and graduations and the births of their children but you, you will remember this one, this one moment where you forgot. This moment where you forgot that you are just a little girl growing up too fast and you went into a room with a boy forty pounds heavier than you and he knew what was going to happen long before you did, and who cares how many fucking beers he drank because in his heart he decided he was going to fuck you on that tiny bathroom counter long before you ever told him no. You will turn over this moment a hundred million times because other memories will crumble and fade to dust before the tempest of time but this one stays, as solid and alive as every other part of you.

After, they let you go for a bit, and you go through the motions. You lock yourself in your room and cry, for the things you can’t explain to Mama and Baba, for Janie’s ruined sixteenth birthday party and a bunch of other stupid things. And mostly you cry for yourself, for the things you lost that night, because you never knew womanhood meant this. Anxiety grips your ribs and blooms across your face in scores of angry pimples, knots your hair and flushes your cheeks, and you look yourself in the mirror and can’t believe that a boy would ever touch a face as revoltingly ugly as yours or would ever even want to, again. You sit on the floor of your bathroom and cry, because two days ago you lost something you didn’t know you could lose, and also, you will never look at bathrooms the same again. What a stupid thing to fear, and you imagine looking at your younger self and saying, well, I didn’t grow up to be a doctor or an actress or anything special, but I am scared of toilets. Are you proud of me, anyway?

They look at you differently. And you learn, you realize later, that he is just a boy, a stupid, raping, careless little boy, who blocks you on Instagram and never says sorry, never says one fucking word even though it was the only thing you ever wanted. His friends all begin to sneer, because you were fifteen and you put out, and now you are a whore, a slut, easy and tart and other four-letter words you never asked for. This is what it means to be a woman, and you begged so hard to be one that you didn’t even realize what it could mean.

Janie and you will cry together during the last twenty-five minutes of gym and she will tell you that last year, someone did something vile to her too, and when she told her first love he laughed in her face. And Bella will tell you about her ex-boyfriend, the one who locked her into a closet and wouldn’t let her leave, and all the friends she lost after, all the girls who only shrugged and looked away. And Hannah will tell you about her father, born out of a rape, and all the things men say when they are caught. And this is how you find your womanhood, not from broken bottles of alcohol and yellowing juul pods, not from him but the way you handle it after, the hope that springs from helplessness, the strength that will stitch together all the leftover pieces of your heart and mind.

And you are not alone, even though you will never ever wear red underwear again or listen to One Direction or look at bathrooms the same.

After, they will settle out of court. He will do a few hours of community service, pay a few grand and he will be safe. And you will see the relief that sinks into the sag of his shoulders and know you will never feel the same. For you, guilt tastes like copper and the first sip of alcohol and Walmart birthday cake. For him, it will taste like nothing at all.

He will not come near you again, never touch you again, but he will concoct stories of his own, mystical, magical, moonlight fairy tales where you are pleading yes and begging for more, and these things he will boast to his friends. Other girls will fall for his fiery smiles and lazy hands and steel-colored eyes, bite into your name with bitterness and envy. But you will learn to not care for them, and you will find beauty in the hazy days of the after, when Janie tells him off and Bella holds you in her arms and Hannah wakes up to answer your 2AM
calls. Some days you choke on your own guilt and other days anxiety sends your hair falling out in flurries of knotted silk and one day, some one day in the distant future, you will be okay.

You are the list of numbers on an aging police notebook somewhere in the repertoire of an antique office, but you are also the fire that scorches and flickers in your veins, the icy strength that glints in your bones and the hope, the hope that was born from the after, when everything was once soaking and slipping like the insides of a wasting dream.

This is what they do not tell you, about the after.
a slow and deliberate courtship

I once had sex with a poet.

I was sixteen, he was eighteen, but inside me he aged infinite amidst his adolescent wisdoms. Midway through and he urged an articulation of metaphysical means. Writing, he told me with an unbecoming shudder. Writing is like sex. By which he meant: this lovechild of Mercury is but a slow and deliberate courtship, an intercourse of syllabic salivic echo, the epicurean caress of a foreign tongue oozing athwart cerebrum matter. By which he meant the classics are but the unrepentant dis-evolution of a soul, a phlegmatic dissolution of the human heart, the steady dismantling of an unknown identity, a metaphor of humanistic mentality. By which he meant -

Every thrust, he purrs, and I take a part of you. What is the difference? You spill apart in my hands, across parchment, against padded paper bedsheets, between the margins of an anecdotal essay. You pour your heart out to a stranger. You pour yourself out to me and I don’t even know your middle name.

I am a poet and -

Intimacy, he theorizes, as he drags his lips down the valley of my chest. Intimacy comes in two forms. One in which we are first familiar. You treat me to a treatise of your favorite colors
and I treat you but only to
dinner.
We leaf through
conversation abnormal in her
mundane. Some days you concede
me a secret. Some nights I
conceal my own. Between the junction
of your thighs and we are
familiars, and then,
intimate. But
in this second form we do not discuss
ubiquity or abstraction
or inquire for inanities; midway through the
morning after and I have already
transitioned. A phoenix,
feathers riff like papyrus, ash of folio. I am
an allegory,
conceptualized like a fairy
tale; why stoop,
he asks,
to be as insipid as individuality?
Instead. Instead become one time at summer camp
or one night at a party. Ascension
is a blurb
on a menu of colloquialism, two or
three or
thirty-five hundred ingredients
tossed together. A salad, or a poem,
four stanzas and I have
deliquesced by lunchtime. Prose,
I learn, is simply a
contemporary compendium of copulation and -

Poetry is but sex. Good poetry is
as smooth as water, as thick as wine.
A spin of the Homeric mind. Ejaculation
of the Shakespearian. Good
poetry, I am so duly informed,
twists you undone. Ruminates
within. After all,
he concludes, the peak of
every great literature is termed a
climax. Now, lover, he
says. Let me
salivate over you. The cadence of
our love-making feels almost Woodsworthian in
assonance. I am holding you
within my teeth and mind like an
unusually scintillating sentence,
a phrase of
orgasmic proportion. You are
my contention of coitus;
come for me.

Let me turn you
into a ballad.
Let me turn you
into paper.

I once had sex with a poet.
A Tourist's Guide to the Asian Baby Girl

Class: Mammalia
Diet: Carnivore
Average life span: 10 - 15 years
Habitat: West Coast
Addictions: any and every. Mostly the high of life, you vibe?

About the Asian Baby Girl

Visiting the West Coast? You're probably here to see this fascinating creature. If you loved hearing Ming Na-Wen in Mulan, Lucy Liu in Kung Fu Panda, and even seeing Scarlett Johansson in Ghost in the Shell, then we're going to guess you are probably a fan of strong, Asian female leads too. Aren't we all? Maybe you'll even spot a few in real life! In this Trivago Guide, we explore one of the only three socially-acceptable paths second-generation Asian-American girls are allowed to pursue. This article covers the origins and lifestyle of this exotic mammal. For related species, see Subservient Office Workers (Female) and Anorexic Piano Prodigies.

Habitat

Hoping to see one soon? Hit the West Coast beaches today! One of the newest species of big cat prowling the shell-studded sands of California, she subsides entirely on a diet of taro beads and heartache. Asian Baby Girls are highly social animals and prefer to hunt in packs of three or four. Our research indicates peak activity takes place post-midnight, usually near frat houses and behind neon parking lots.

Born and bred underneath a canopy of smoke-colored stars somewhere in LA’s carbonic jungle, Asian Baby Girl hunts in the sunshine understories of UC Berkeley’s sociology campus. Walking at night? Beware her treacherous smile. She has crushed a thousand souls within that glass-shard jawline, swallowed their wailing shrieks between sips of jasmine bubble tea and coats of Fenty lipgloss. You are no exception.

Still interested? You can find her at the zoo, right next to the local panda exhibit.

History and Early Lifestyle

Dear reader, you may wonder where she has come from, this hybrid genus of alcohol and Asian-American assimilation gone wickedly wrong. Unfortunately, her origins are lost to ancient history; we must piece together her life from the rare bits of information we do have.

We know that the early American explorers shipped her in from somewhere exotic, and then we can only guess what must have occurred between those lost years. What we do know is that years and years later, little Asian girls got sick of only ever being quiet and boring and shed their graduation robes for lace-up tube tops and cheap satin thongs, the ones that rip into shreds when you’re drunk and stupid and trying to change out of an even stupider outfit.

What else does she look like? Let’s see, razor sharp eyeliner, check, and leather miniskirts and the Juul that she named after her ex who looks like a rip-off Asian version of Justin Bieber. You can identify her by that smell – each baby girl has her own distinct scent, but they all smell like sex. On good days, hairspray and Chanel trails in her wake; on bad days she stinks of old nicotine and cheap vodka. The
latter, of course, is a myth, one whispered over the years by some lone forgotten survivor: no one has lived to see ABG on her bad
days. Only the fittest survive in the jungle and Asian Baby Girl evolved to take that Chinese Doll mytho-porn-bullshit and make it into
her armor and the only bad thing about making your only weakness your greatest armor is that you can never, ever slip.

Anatomy

Underneath cheap university desks and nightclub seating you may find deep, gutteral scars. These are the trademark footprints of an
ABG; this fearsome animal carries two inches of nail on each finger and will claw your eyes out, so you might want to fuck out of her
DMs already, thank you very much.

A cat may occasionally hiss or spit, but a good cat never turns on her owners. Asian Baby Girl would like to clarify that she doesn’t hate
you, promise, she still wants you to have a good night and maybe use code Tori10 for 10% off at FashionNova! She would really
appreciate it, because she is very broke. Don’t lose sleep. Asian Baby Girl will survive.

After all, she was engineered by Silicon Valley. It’s just too bad even Silicon Valley fucks up and now Asian Baby Girl is a tigress, a
Geisha with fat tits and fake lips and rainbow hair, ready to blow them all in every single possible way. Sometimes you have to fuck
someone to get somewhere and Asian Baby Girl has evolved to be nothing but unstoppable.

Lifestyle and Behavior

She is a modern phenomenon, you see, cleverly adapted to the times. Asian Baby Girl exploits the white man’s fetish and is just enough
yellow to make them pant over her Dollskill pumps but American everywhere else, so she ends up feeling kind of second-class, kind of
not, and it’s confusing if she tries to explain, so shut up, feel her up, and take her word for it, okay? If you really press, and she had to
pinpoint, she would probably label third grade as the beginning of her evolution. That was back when she still played Pokémon, before it
got all uncool and gooky.

But she still remembers that one classic move: confusion. Who is this yellow girl with the blue eyes and blonde hair, who talks like LA
but dreams in Chinese? Right after she turned eighteen and moved out Asian Baby Girl tattooed Korean words on her ass that she
barely can pronounce. It’s okay because she promises she’ll learn one day, when she’s not so fucking tired all the time. It’s all these
raves, all these damn raves, but she can’t quit because – like FOMO and what else will go on her Snap story now? The thing she
dreads being called the most is too Asian. But she can’t control that, so she’ll settle for not being called its synonyms: boring, nerdy,
uptight. She wants to stick glitter on her skin, not...those words.

Asian Baby Girl was raised by those Asians, you know, the ones that stopped speaking chink at home and started coming to church
with the rest of us on Sundays. Asian Baby Girl’s mummy hated all boys and thought her daughter should only date her piano, so instead
of listening to Mamma Asian Baby Girl got her first Instagram and started sneaking out and now goes through three pods a week. Asian
Baby Girl goes to parties and tells the story of how she mistakenly lost her v-card at STEM camp when she was fourteen to her ex-
boyfriend and flunts it like a badge of pride. Asian Baby Girl calls her parents once for fifteen minutes a week out of pure obligation and
if you see her eyes water that’s just from Juul smoke and not regret, understand?

Portrayal in Media

Asian Baby Girl has managed the extraordinary feat of both being an inferior Asian and American. Asian Baby Girl fulfills the former
because UC Berkeley isn’t exactly Harvard, and the one time she went home to the motherland they sneered and called her a whore in a
language she could barely understand, because while she was too busy tanning she missed that one skin bleaching trend from left over
colonialism, and now she’s confused because Asian body standards are vastly different and once yet again, she has failed to fit in.

Oh, and of course Asian Baby Girl will always fulfill the latter because, well, you know why. It doesn’t matter how many shots she
throws back and how many American flag pasties she sticks on her nipples. At the end of the day, foreign pigments her skin and this
one is a badge she cannot flunt like all her other mistakes, because it was the only one she didn’t really choose, and you can’t own a
mistake unless you chose to do it. Asian Baby Girl didn’t choose to be born as an unwilling representative of East-Meets-West, it just
happened and now Asian Baby Girl is stuck decorating her crossroad with as many different pairs of fake eyelashes as she can. What
else is she supposed to do, study political science and become another pediatrician?

The truth is, sometimes Asian Baby Girl wants to throw open the window and scream what exactly do you want me to fucking do but
she won’t. This is because Asian Baby Girl is modern feminism and new-age liberalism and right-wing veneration all rolled up in one and
Asian Baby Girl just wants to break down lonely white boys, not the entirety of American society. Asian Baby Girl has a part to play
and no one knows that better than Asian Baby Girl.

**Mating Habits**

Asian Baby Girl leans over the sink with dead eyes and dead hair and dyes it a new color every week, because assimilation is a game with a foregone conclusion and new trends are as endless as her Snapchat streaks. Asian Baby Girl sucks at math to break stereotypes but wishes she didn’t and could just blend in somewhere as flawlessly as her foundation. Asian Baby Girl drinks Hennessy, wears bodycon and gets felt up by white boys at raves and she *likes* it, a little part of her really does. Asian Baby Girl fucks white boys so they can pretend they aren’t racist and is here to listen patiently as they discuss the Trump Inauguration like it isn’t something that puts her entire family at stake. Asian Baby Girl fucks her yellow brothers too, because yellow boys are entirely too emasculated and *someone* has to make them feel like a man. Asian Baby Girl fucks harder and drinks harder and goes harder and still has that perfect GPA, because Asian Baby Girl is fucking immortal and nothing will bring her down.

**Fun Facts**

*Here is a secret Asian Baby Girl doesn’t want you to know.*

Truth is, Asian Baby Girl wants to take off her eyeliner and her eyelashes and all sixteen other makeup items and just wear something ugly, like a dumpy old t-shirt or last season’s Supreme. Truth is, Asian Baby Girl is tired of her hair falling out and her eyes going red and is maybe possibly developing tabacosis but can hide it for fifteen minutes every week. Truth is, Asian Baby Girl is sick of drinking Boba all the time, is sick of the stereotypes, is sick of pretending to be obfuscatingly stupid all the time because *do you know how hard that actually is?* Asian Baby Girl wants to stop going to raves but doesn’t know what else she is good at. Maybe she can just call up the Justin Bieber ex and cry, and maybe after that she’ll just go back to her natural hair, because TBH she’s forgotten what it looked like. ABG is tired, wants to retire, but can’t quit and doesn’t know how to get fired.

*ABG thinks some other big cat should prowl the West Coast beach. Asian Baby Girl wants to know, don’t you think so too?*  

ABG says she’ll fuck you if you agree.
After The Satellites Came Crashing Down

When I awake, Mischa is praying over me again, lips moving soundlessly as she utters a litany of prayers. I keep my eyes closed. The moment Mischa sees I am awake, she will spring upon me with another tearful petitio

n of the life I have left to live and the joyous virtues of motherhood.

Mischa believes, quite passionately, that the lives of we women are set in stone. We are the tenants of New America, the pride of our subterranean worlds; it is our fruitful wombs that bring forth the brilliant laborers of New America. My uterine linings carry the dwindling destinies of menfolk. For Mischa, my desire to permanently erase my genes from existence is positively catastrophic in nature.

I think Mischa is full of horseshit.

Not that we have either. Horses have been extinct since the first earthquakes, and our pipes system process human waste neatly and quietly, in little satisfied keens that announce, ah, yes, Suite 301 just shat. We like to think of ourselves as a neat and quiet society, us New Americans, hiding deep beneath the Appalachian Mountains. We are not the only ones. There is Utopia, in the northern region they used to call Canada. There is the East Republic, thousands of miles away, under the Yellow Sea. The Sub-Confederation and the Grande Résistance share the trenches of the European underground and the secretive Prussia Union operates somewhere close.

But it is our region that bursts with fame within our little post-apocalyptic worlds. We deem ourselves the strongest, the fastest, the ones who still keep even as the world savages our broken bodies. Our proof hangs in our Wall of Heroes. Racers of ours almost always place first.

Racing. The thought sends my heartbeat into a frenzy. As soon as I sit up, Mischa launches herself at me, holding onto my hands and brushing my hair.

“Aida, please, change your mind,” she pleads as I begin dressing. I am not sure why she is still trying, but I give her credit for sisterly devotion. It is an unspoken rule: once you apply, you cannot back out. My training started as I turned seventeen, but I made my choice far earlier, when Mischa’s belly began swelling with the first of her many children. A life like Mischa’s, I decided years ago, was not really a life at all. We are opposites.

In another room, Naven cries out, and Mischa shuffles away. I take a final look around our suite. I would not miss the drainage pipes crawling across the stalactite beams, the decaying bulbs peppering our cement ceilings. But there were a few things I would miss, like Mischa’s aluminum bird clock or even the misshapen plastic drawers I had designed for my middle school graduation project. And most of all – well. Naven, Dal, and Silas have never been the most artistically inclined, but I spend several minutes committing their childish, waxy cinderblock drawings to my memory.

Mischa’s footsteps ring out, and she comes back with the traditional final gowning. Leaning down, my sister begins carefully applying my makeup. I have always done my own, and to have Mischa so near my face is strangely intimate. There is not much makeup left down here, not after 13 years away from the surface. But we make do. Mischa smudges ash to darken my eyebrows, taps chalk to brighten my face, smooths juice onto the apples of my cheeks. Her touches are careful, light, and measured; I note, with an acute sense of finality, that this is both a first and a last. A first because no one has ever done my makeup before and a last because, well, this is the last time I will ever have any makeup layering my skin.

I sneak a glance at the mirror. At first glance, Misha and I easily pass as clones. We share the same thin, dark hair and brows, the same gray eyes. The similarities end there. My midriff is flat and pale, unmarked and muscled. In contrast, Mischa’s abdomen is scarred and
grimaced with little clumps of cellulite. The understanding that my body will never look like Mischa’s empties my stomach, but only just a little. This has always been my choice.

“Are you nervous?” Mischa finally asks, as I begin lacing up my boots. My gowning is made specifically for survival – elastic leggings and a camouflage top attached to a helmet heavier than iron. I snap on my racing goggles and peer at Mischa through thick oily lenses. I must look utterly ridiculous and Mischa giggles in a hysterical sort of way, cupping my face and stroking her thumbs across my lips.

'Oh, Aida,” She says. “Oh my god. You’re really doing this. I can’t believe this.”

I am not an affectionate person. And yet, Mischa is my sister. I was five when the world ended, when the sea began frothing and the satellites came crashing down. It was Mischa who held my hand and rowed our makeshift raft to safety, even as our parents sunk somewhere in the ocean behind us. In the thirteen years since, it has been just us.

I hold Mischa’s hand in silence. She understands.

For a minute, we are one.

When we arrive at Capitol Hall, the seats are already full. Citizens from the nearby compounds begin to buzz like flies as I walk in. My compound waits in the front, which only makes things harder. I say good-bye to Zio, to the Webnes, to Riva and her ten children. I say good-bye until my throat is hoarse and tears threaten to spill out from my eyes. By the time President Madison’s cohort arrives, the tachyscreen is already on and the radios hiss noisily with static.

“Big day, huh, Miss Gray?” Madison says, his smile as plastic as my driving gloves. We pose together for my final portrait. One will be hung on our Wall of Heroes, and the other, Mischa will keep. In my head, I picture my empty smile plastered to Mischa’s cinder block walls, forever eighteen.

My thoughts are interrupted by words crackling on the radio. Utopia’s racer is ready. The minutes are counting down. It sinks in that I will never see New America again.

Madison ascends the stage and begins his speech. Nausea lingers under my tongue. I am a wreck. But it is too late to turn back or change my mind; New America would be left without a racer. We all have duties to fulfil. Especially because I volunteered for mine. My country looks down upon cowards, and so do I.

Still. I wonder if I have made the right choice. A life like Mischa’s is not inherently bad. A life like Mischa’s is calm. Predictable.

But then I think of Mischa, eighteen, waiting for her husband to come home. Lying back, thighs open, waiting. Calmly. Predictably. I think of Mischa, eyes twitching, panting, writhing with the force of her contractions. I imagine myself in Mischa’s shoes: sealing away my life to a stranger twice my age, my existence defined by a single body part. Anything is better.

Madison pins my ID to my collar. The crowd roars in excitement as we leave, chanting my name gleefully. This, I realize, will be the first and only time they will ever see me alive. I straighten my back and walk with a confidence I do not feel.

Only immediate family may see racers off, and I am forced to listen to Mischa’s snuffling sobs as we head to the garage. Ahead, the path climbs to a steep set of heavy iron doors. Directly before me…I hear Mischa gasp in awe.

“A thing of great beauty, isn’t she?” Madison whistles slyly. “It’s always their favorite project. Year after year. The engineers are quite proud.”

It is my first time seeing my car. She is as sleek and small as a bullet, with thick glass windows on each side, her top rising in a gentle dome. Her coat is a solid, dull black. Thousands of tiny solar panels shield her top, next to two glittering antennas. Three sets of solid white wheels, humming, waiting quietly for my approach.

Indescribably beautiful. The simulators I played while training are nothing compared to this work of art.

“It is an honor to serve New America,” I tell Madison, as I climb into the driver’s seat.

I strap myself in. “I hope I can bring our country glory. Set a new distance record.”
“Certainly. If there’s any racer that can do it, it’s you. You’ll ace that record, Miss Gray. Nothing’s out of your reach.”

I am sure Madison says the same words to each racer, but it is comforting to hear all the same. Carefully, I place my hands on the wheel. Back in practice, my trainers gave me a plastic disc connected to a tachyscreen. Holding an actual wheel in my hand, with all of its alien bumps and ridges, feels almost unnatural. I glide my fingers over the glossy black command pad is located underneath. This, at least, is familiar; I practiced with the same console in my simulator.

I turn the key, and the car lights up at my command. Mischa, Madison, and his fleet of officials step back. I shift the car and turn. Mischa lifts her hand in farewell, and I have just enough time to smile through the crystalline windows before the iron doors grind open with an awful screech.

I think of my nephews. The sunlight swallows me whole.

And then, I am gone.

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I emerge into scorching desert. Behind me, the iron doors have sealed shut once more. They will never open for me again. My heart aches. For a moment, I feel utterly alone.

But thoughts like these are no way to start a race. Instead of dwelling on what I have left behind, I focus on my mission. I check the oxygen canisters on my command pad. Full for a solid eight hours. If I survive that long, I will have to roll down the windows and take my chances in the alkaline air. From now on, I have only one objective: drive as long as I can. The placements are always compiled later, because signal travels slow from the Eurasia continent. But I certainly won’t take last.

I check communications. The radio and cameras are both on. They’re set up to be one-way only; I won’t hear anything from New America, but they will hear everything from mine – sounds from home are nothing but distractions to a fading racer. For a bit of company, I tune the radio into Utopia’s frequency.

It will drain my battery faster.

I am determined not to die alone.

The road beneath me is parched and withered, eroded from years of heat and racing. In the distance, I spy the skeletal corpse of a decaying city skyline. But for now, it is just me and the worn desert. The earthquakes have crumbled the Appalachians into twisted sorrel pillars, dotted with occasional spurts of dull green. I look up at the sky, at the murky gray clouds and the ashen sun. I am driving in a ghost world.

My radio hisses open. “Hello?” Says a dainty foreign voice. “Hello! This is Utopia.”

I ignore her. I keep driving, and she stutters out faint greetings before giving up. The Utopia drivers, I know, usually die under blistering hail storms or crash on the frozen roads.

I wonder how I will go. No one has driven for more than six hours straight. The Earth is not kind to us drivers. Usually it is the heat that gets us, that stalls the car and forces you out into the steaming air. Two years ago, it rained, and our racer literally disintegrated under the acid storm.

An hour in and driving grows monotonous. The landscape shifts from desert to urban wasteland; I drive through fractured highways littered with sun-bleached skulls and automobile husks. Fading billboards from departed worlds slump over make-shift slums, advertising liquor and jewelry and other useless hedonisms. The sun beats down until I am squirming in a puddle of my own sweat; I end up driving with only my right as my left-hand swells with cramps. The wind scrapes sand against the car so thick I am forced to squint out of my side windows. There is nothing to do except think.

And so, I do. Racing serves New America well. It gives us a sense of patriotism, that our cars and drivers last far longer than the rest of the remaining world. It weeds out possible rebels and sends them away. Then there are the cameras, I know, tucked somewhere beneath my car, that track the world for a hint of livability. The end result is girls like me, ill-content with the burden of broodmarling, driving out to our deaths in the name of honor and scientific research.
Three hours in, and the heat begins to take its toll on my car. My wheels shift unevenly, wheezing with each turn of the road. The temperature controls have completely died, and my car grows warmer with each passing second. I am not faring well either. My goggles dig into my eyes. The ash in my brows bleeds down my face in rivulets of black. Worst of all, my throat is as parched as the land outside. I picture Mischa reaching into my throat and tearing out my larynx. In my mind, she splits me apart like the broken ground; a spiderweb of bloody sinew.

I taste vomit.

I almost consider pulling to a stop and resting, when my radio squawks to life. Someone is sobbing. In the background, I hear high-pitched whirring and odd, dull thumps.

"Please, New America," The Utopian racer cries. "Please answer. I don't want to die alone. I am so scared. I miss my mama. I miss my …"

A blunt roar from the other end. A jeering crash. Mewling whimpers, fading away into the primordial wind. Ten minutes later, there is nothing but silence. The thought occurs that I have just heard her dying words. I wonder what her name was, what she looked like, why she volunteered. I wonder if she was like me, caught in a twisted system, defiant to the point of literal death. Either way, it does not matter, because Utopia is gone.

It is just me on this continent.

Three more hours before I break the record. If I break the record. With Utopia's dying sobs in my mind, I resolve to keep going. I envision myself stopping, watching the bony landscape. Sitting there, my thighs, growing wetter and hotter by the passing second, until they melt into the plastic cover of my seat. The skin on my lips, peeling away, my mouth a gaping hole as dry as the air. I blink. The sky is still pallid, as dry as bone.

With a start, I accelerate, chasing my gruesome thoughts away. I veer down another sloping hillside turn and the entire car jolts so sharply I am afraid it will collapse. But the moment passes and fades, and I am left once again with my thoughts. Stopping is a fantasy. Our countries can't exactly send out teams to recover our bodies. We die wherever we fail.

The fifth hour draws near. A dull sense of accomplishment pervades me, but mostly, I feel numb. Time is meaningless. The only thing that remains is the road. Instead of sweating, my body blisters red and crusts over with flaking scales of wrinkled skin. Breathing begins to send painful tremors down my body. I note with a vague, distant interest that I cannot feel my left leg. Every instinct screams at me to roll down my window and allow the wind to sweep me away, but I only accelerate harder.

The car jolts, rattles, and then, seethes to a sudden stop. My mind feels as grimy as the road. It hits me then that my race must be finished. My car is broken; my duty is over. It is time to close my eyes and sleep.

When I wake up, I will be lying in my bed again.

The command pad beeps. I crack my eyes open and note the bloodshot warning symbol blaring across the screen. And then – some ancient instinct pulls me awake again. I lurch forward. The engine is dead. Not enough lubricant.

My head is dizzy with dread, foggy with futility. If I had any liquid, I would be drinking it myself. And then I realize the one thing left to give. I fumble at the car doors, my fingers thick and stupid. Mischa's voice echoes in my head, pleading me to fight.

My helmet is no match for the outside air. I am suffocating under the weight of my own head. Acid stings at my cracked lips. Bitter puffs of sour ozone hammer my lungs. Somehow, I manage to crack the steaming car lid open. Where –?

There. I peel back my gloves, until my wrist is exposed. And then I am biting forth into my own flesh, my flaking skin giving way like butter. Blood gushes forth in a fountain of scarlet, fizzling in the atmosphere. Hissing, the engine groans in agony as it begins to toil once more. I can barely keep my eyes open long enough to stumble back into my seat.

The car shudders to life, one last time. A second later and I am driving again, my gloves slick with my blood. My wrists throb. My thoughts are as disjointed as the wind.
In the distance, I think I see Mischa.

I think I see the sun setting.