Mission Statement

In Zen Buddhism, “Satori” is the Japanese word for enlightenment, seeing into one’s own true nature. Since 1970, Satori has provided a forum for Winona State University students to express and share their own true nature and their creations with the university community.

Cover art: “To Garvin” by Emma Masiulewicz
A Note from the Editor in Chief

When I first started out at Winona State University, I dreamt of being a part of Satori during my senior year. As Editor in Chief of this year’s edition, I cannot help but feel extremely fulfilled and grateful for this opportunity. It has been so rewarding to collaborate with my fellow students to create Satori and watch our hard work develop into something physical. I hope that Satori inspires others to strive for their goals and continue to pursue not only their own art, but the art all around them.

Audrianna Wichman

Editor in Chief 2019
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ABOUT THE EDITORS
The Winona Prize
In
Creative Writing
The Winona Prize in Creative Writing is awarded to students annually for submissions in Poetry, Creative Nonfiction, and Fiction. The donor, who wishes to remain anonymous, hopes the prize will encourage students to pursue their writing and literary goals.
Before I was born,

my dad caught butterflies and gently plopped them in a jar, their wings fluttering in confusion as he placed a cotton ball soaked in rubbing alcohol inside and sealed the lid.

When I was a child, he taught me how to catch butterflies in my tiny yellow net, careful not to hurt their wings, showing me to slowly extend a finger inside the net until they perched, then drawing them out so they could fly away. But they were always content to fly away at their own will, so they remained on my hand, proboscis playfully tasting my finger, sun beating down on their open wings.

When he killed himself, he left behind cases and cases of Styrofoam squares, butterfly carcasses with wings outstretched, yellow-headed pins trapping their wings for eternity.

When he killed himself, he made me a butterfly.
Silvery heat climbs into the air from my steaming plate of saffron rice and seafood as I poke at the peas on my plate. There is something about a scrumptious loaded plate of paella, a favorite of the Salinas-Agurcia household for quite some time, that is utterly ruined by dried-out peas, but my grandmother does not seem to think so. Even with my protests of the peas and my grandmother’s light-hearted dismissal of my complaints, I know it is not the food itself that is significant, but rather who is making it that is. Paella is only made in our family for celebrations, but in Spanish culture, everything is a celebration; baptisms, first communions, weddings, get-togethers, birthdays, and even paydays. It is a food that brings communities and families together.

In my haziest childhood memories, my abuelita is speaking Spanish to me in her small kitchen during the steamy afternoons in the outskirts of New Orleans, Louisiana. I stand on my toes, happily munching on lady fingers and watching her make food. I watch the steam swirl into the air as her withered soft hands sauté onions in olive oil until they become translucent. She adds two cups of alabaster rice and four crimson saffron threads. Laughing, she swats my hand away from more ladyfingers as the saffron threads turn the rice a vivid goldenrod. After adding some water, she mixes in thawed mussels, jumbo shrimp, iridescent oysters, and pearly chunks of clam meat. The savory dish is ready after tossing in some frozen peas. The air hangs heavy with the thick aroma of spices and steamed seafood. The conversations rush loudly and freely, pulsating in the heat. As I look to the living room, my aunt and my uncle roar with laughter during a lively conversation, my mother with them, chuckling as they reminisce on memories from their childhoods. Everywhere I look and touch there is sizzling energy. On the walls, canary yellow and fuchsia pinks, paprika and cayenne pepper in the pantry. A drumming beat runs through the floor panels, the source never clear. There is a permanent egg stain on the ceiling of Wita’s (short for abuelita) kitchen where my grandfather tried to fry an egg, and there is an old ficus tree in the corner whose soil my great-grandmother, Moy, used to slide her leftover food. (Years from now, when my grandmother moves out of this house, my mother will discover years of “natural compost” my great-grandmother decided she did not want for dinner.) Here, in this place, there is culture, life, and a story.

My maternal great-grandmother, Carlota Domicila Zuniga, or “Moy” we called her, (short for amor) originated from La Ceiba, Honduras. In 1951, she brought my grandmother to New Orleans, Louisiana for a better life in America and began working as a nurse. I do not have very many memories of her, but I remember that family was very important to her. She absolutely loved spending time with us, singing to us, and especially dancing with us. Every time we would visit her, she would call out, “Ay mi muñequitas!” with such joy in her shining eyes. I will always remember her gentle hands
and her affinity for red lipstick and glitzy earrings. When I was a little girl, I loved to search through her jewelry collection. My fingers would comb through the garnet broaches and hairpins, fingering emerald pendants ornate with Celtic knotwork, interspersed with rosary beads and medals of the Virgin Mary. Moy let me have anything I wanted. Wita always said to me when I was little, and sometimes even now and then, that I reminded her of her mother because I loved sparkly things like she did.

My maternal grandmother, Maria Louisa Santoveña, or as we called her, Wita, was born in El Salvador. When I envision Wita’s house, I picture her entryway, and the portrait of a beautiful young woman in her 30s seated in front of a luminescent window, sweet tangy Mexican sunshine pouring through. The young woman pictured in the portrait is my grandmother, painted, 50 years ago in Mexico by her brother, Manolo. Her hair, almost as light as café con leche, falls on her shoulders gracefully and her face is stoic. Her eyes hold much wisdom and depth, and she is not smiling. This was a characteristic of my grandmother. She never smiled for photos or portraits. When I picture this portrait in my mind, my heart swells with appreciation of the culture that has been passed on to me. Preserving our culture was very important to my grandma. We sat down in the waning light of many Sunday afternoons, sharing her famous banana bread while she told me stories of her childhood in La Ceiba and her travels to Ecuador and Mexico. Her favorite stories were the ones about the laziness of my maternal grandfather, Abuelito, who also came from Honduras and was one of eight children. He served in the Air Force after immigrating to America in 1950 and worked as an accountant in Houston, Texas where he transplanted to after Hurricane Katrina. My grandmother divorced him after my mother was married. We frequently chuckled to ourselves when Wita told stories about him, her hand waving in dismissal and light-hearted melodrama. My sisters and I also loved the stories she told about my mother and her siblings. My mother was a quiet child, and Wita told us how she brought her to the doctor for fear she wouldn’t start speaking. When after two years, my mother began to speak, she was no longer worried, and as Wita recalls, “She has yet to shut up since!”

My mother, Lisette Agurcia, is the daughter of Wita and was born in New Orleans, Louisiana. When I imagine Mama, I picture her wide smile and her almond skin. Her hair, reflecting in the light, is so black it looks cobalt at times. Her eyes are a piercing dark chocolate color. I am eternally grateful to my mother. She is very patient, caring, and compassionate, but also strict and firm enough to indicate I dare not disobey her. When I was little, anything from a skinned knee or a bad dream called for my Mama’s “healing song” to me: “Sana, sana culito de rana, tidate un pedito para hoy y mañana.” She would press my head to her chest with her delicate hands and I would feel better and laugh at the song because it made no sense at all. Mama has beautiful hands, her fingernails always long and painted a sun dried-tomato color or a simmering sunset. I often clung to her dearly when I was a child, even when I did not understand some of the things she did. I never understood why on New Year’s she made sure my sisters and I each ate twelve grapes, one for each month of the new year, for good luck, or why we were not allowed to eat meat on Fridays during Lent, but both were traditions in our household. As I grew older, I came to appreciate my mother’s methods: they helped shape me into who I am.
My mother’s sister, Carolyn, or Noonie, as we called her, was always cracking jokes and sneaking me cookies under the table when Mama was not watching. (I admit I preferred Noonie to my mother at times, but I protest that was due to the serious deprivation of cookies in our house.) Growing up, during the summers when our extended family was together, all the cousins would spend the day together. We would listen to Julio Iglesias, or Gloria Estefan and play hide and seek. Running through the house, my cousins, Sayen, Emilio, and Sofia, and my sisters would squeal with laughter. Noonie loved to French braid my hair too, pulling at my thick unruly locks so tight tears gathered at the corners of my eyes and my lips pursed. I never said anything because I wanted to have pretty hair. I especially loved those days when all of us were together. Usually it was for a special occasion, like a birthday, and my aunt would make “birthday flan” with whipped cream. The sweet custard tasted creamy and delicious, melting in my mouth like how I imagined the Wicked Witch did in *The Wizard of Oz*.

When I reflect on the strong Spanish women who raised me and shaped me into who I am, I think about the things they sacrificed in their own lives to provide for me. I am filled with an overwhelming gratitude. But it was not only my Spanish heritage that had a profound impact on me, but also my Italian heritage.

My paternal grandmother’s grandfather was Giavonne Perrone. A tomato farmer and merchant, from Palermo, Sicily, Giovonne came to suburban New Orleans, Louisiana with almost nothing. He grew most of his own produce and started a small general store. My paternal grandfather’s father, and my great-grandfather, Gus Pete Salinas, came from Mexico for a better life in America, joined the Marines, and fought in World War II. When I visited New Orleans recently, my grandmother teaches me how to make her sweet marinara sauce and fresh pasta while my dad recalls a time when Grandma Anne (Congetta Perrone) taught him how to plant tomatoes like her father did.

"She had a fierce dedication to her family," my dad always says. "She was unbelievable."

This same fierce dedication carried through into my family. My father is Tom Salinas, a talented chef with mischievous dimples, a scruffy salt-and-pepper goatee since I can remember, and a side-splitting sense of humor. Fiercely hard-working and tough-as-nails, my father took much pride in his Italian heritage and took care to pass it down to my sisters and me. He speaks often of the importance of family and sharing culture. When I was young, my father taught me how to make pasta from scratch, first dusting the whole counter with a thick blanket of flour, (my favorite part), and then cracking a few eggs in a miniature crater of flour. We would then mix the eggs and flour until a buttery elastic batter appeared.

“Daddy, why can’t be just buy pasta this time? That’s what we usually do,” I said as my wrist smarted from rolling out the dough.

“We make pasta because making food is about family. It is about spending time with the people you love and teaching your children about culture,” he replied patiently.

“Why do we need to know about culture?” I asked, furrowing my eyebrows and wiping the back of my sticky pasta dough covered-hand on my forehead.
“We need to know about culture because you can only grow to be a humble person when you know where you came from.” He replied. After he measured out the basil and oregano, he handed me the cheese grater and a block of parmesan cheese and pulled bits of congealed batter from my hair.

“But right now, I need two cups of parmesan, Cali!” he teased, kissing me with his rough beard scratching my face. He always left my skin red after kissing me but I didn’t care. I loved spending time with him.

I had many more conversations with my dad about family and cultural awareness. I learned so much in the times when we would stand together in the kitchen, the light of the afternoon reflecting on the caramel wooden floors, a polaroid snapshot making food together, our favorite pastime. His strong callused hands were always pressed over mine, moving my fingers gently to pinch the edges of ravioli squares, or chopping onions and peppers and teaching me how to measure spices for red sauce.

In the Italian culture, St. Joseph’s Day, a religious holiday that usually takes place in the spring, is a very important day. In our house, it was the day when my father gathered all our family together to make a giant meal, complete with homemade ricotta and spinach ravioli, Italian sausage from our favorite Italian grocery store, Cossetta’s, and cuccidati, or iced cookies stuffed with fig preserves. This was one of my favorite days of the year, not only because of the food, but also because after the meal, my father would pull out the photo albums from his childhood and we could laugh at his high school pictures, how much more hair he had in his wedding photos, and my favorite, the picture of him as a baby sticking his hand in his father’s calculator-shaped birthday cake.

At the beginning of the school year each year, my father gave each of my sisters and me tiny fava beans, small thumb-sized maple-colored beans and a St. Joseph medal in a tiny bag.

“Why do we need to carry these, Daddy?” I asked as I squinted up at my father.

“They will protect you like St. Joseph protected Jesus. When you leave the house, he will protect you until you come back home.”

Both Italian and Spanish cultures have meant so much to me in my childhood and still to this day. I have pride from where I come from, and I am not ashamed at all. I am thankful for all my parents and grandparents have done for me. Although I have never felt that my life was difficult because of who I am, there were still times when I have had experiences where I was left wondering what it would be like to be from a different background.

“So where are you from?” one day a girl asked me in the hallway of my high school.

“Our family is Spanish and Italian, but I was born in New Orleans,” I responded. My heart always swelled with pride when I said that. I was proud of who I was.

“So, are you here, like, illegally?” The girl said to me.
What? I thought. *She can’t possibly be serious.* Her voice held a very informal tone, almost as if she expected me to answer her question in the same way.

“Um... no.” Bemusement clouded my brain as many questions rose to the surface of my mind.

“Oh okay. Cool!” She laughed, “Just making sure!”

This conversation still sticks with me today, not just because of the blatant words, but also because I couldn’t believe that someone did not understand the true diversity citizens of America, and hence, Americans, hold. Almost every person here in the US is an immigrant, even if generations removed. To hear that someone thought I could have been here illegally made me wonder what level of cultural awareness is truly being promoted in our modern-day lives. Was it enough?

I grew up in a household that spoke (as we so lovingly call it), Spanglish, and I feel conflicted sometimes. I do not feel quite American, but I also do not feel fully Spanish. My family lives vicariously through its superstitions, its anecdotes, and spreading *chisme*, but I feel that I am in a place that is not defined by only one culture, but rather in between two. It is something perhaps many second or third generation children may feel this way about their own cultures. It may be that they cannot speak the language, or perhaps it is that they feel ashamed of it, or even that they hesitate to express their cultural identity for fear of being judged or marginalized. It can be a variety of things, but I propose we embrace these feelings. Why is it that we feel that we need to be defined by one culture? And more importantly, why are we ashamed of our diversity?

I ask this question because I think about it frequently. America, since its birth, has been a place for immigrants and refugees. Yet, we are living in an era that is torn apart by cultural intolerance and racial discrimination. Each day, it appears there is yet another source of outrage against the beauty of diversity, a political landscape that perpetuates hatred and prejudice. We need to foster a social and political sphere that not only works to preach tolerance and empathy, but also embraces our cultural diversity as a country, and does not seek to eliminate outsiders.

Through preaching tolerance and empathy, we are provided with a new perspective of acceptance and tolerance. We cannot fully understand and empathize with others without choosing to understand their experiences. Our country is a melting pot of various cultures from all over the world and it is an incredible opportunity for us to learn about other backgrounds and gain respect for all heritages. It grieves me to see that rejection, oppression, and prejudice reigns in a country that has so many opportunities for all cultures. I truly believe the only way to achieve peace in a world torn apart by violence, lacerated by hatred, and wounded by prejudice is to embrace “the other”: as human beings, indifferent of race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, beliefs, and customs.

Essentially, prejudice finds its roots in fear. The only reason prejudice thrives is because of the fear of the *other*. When we foster an “*us versus them*” outlook, fear simply festers and is passed down from generation to generation. Prejudice takes root when we choose to ignore our similarities and focus on our differences.
Through embracing our cultural diversity as a country, we grow stronger and more aware of each other’s experiences. We could use knowledge from a multitude of cultures to solve problems, work together, and create a more peaceful place for future generations. Not only this, but by denying our cultural diversity, we are essentially denying the birthright of our country, which was itself founded by immigrants seeking asylum from their own persecution. Over time, it grew to be a place of refuge for many cultures who fled from their home countries from war, famine, and political unrest. How can we hold prejudice in our hearts now when we know we are all the same?

Because of my cultural background and my experiences listening to my grandparents’ stories, I can understand and appreciate the importance of knowing where I come from. I know that cultural awareness is an integral part of our society. Through my grandparent’s hard work and dedication to their family, they found success in America and paved the way for their future grandchildren and great grandchildren. There is no reason that all cultures and backgrounds should not come together to recognize their similarities, rather than their differences. After all, it is in our differences, our knowledge from all cultures and ethnicities, where we find our strengths.
Inevitable

She always seemed to find herself back in the dentist’s chair. Maybe it was the byproduct of a childhood filled with sweets and sodas, which gradually evolved to a more sophisticated taste for coffee (always black, no cream or sugar, ironically). Maybe it was because her mother and late father both had a history of cavities, root canals, and dental surgeries and graciously gifted it to her in the lottery of her DNA. Either way, she always ended up in that big beige chair, leaned back, curling her toes in anticipation for the inevitable, gum numbing prick.

Coincidentally she had always been one of those kids who cried at injections, too. No matter how quickly it was over with, no matter how relatively painless it was, shots always made her bawl like she had broken every bone in her body.

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In the fourth grade during Lincoln Elementary’s New Health Day when everyone lined up in the cramped nurse’s office to get their flu shots, she swore she wouldn’t be a baby like she always had been before.

“Now, it’s okay to be nervous. It’s even okay to cry! What’s important is that you understand that you’re basically becoming SUPERMAN and SUPERWOMAN by helping your bodies be healthy!” Ms. Miller beamed to the line of fourth graders.

“Yeah, but you’re a real pussy if you cry,” the boy in front of her whispered to the line leader before Ms. Miller shot him The Look.

She tried so hard to keep herself together, but for the next week and a half at recess she sat atop a snowbank alone, secretly wishing she had the courage to throw a snowball at everyone who so much as snickered at her as they passed her. Would violence make her stop being a pussy? Probably not. Would it make her feel better? Definitely. But she didn’t want to go to the office, where she was certain she’d have to go if she threw snow. So she sat by herself, alone in the snow, watching the colorful winter jackets whizz by and waiting for the jokes to stop.

As she grew older, she stopped making a scene when she had to get injections. Sure, she still cried every time, but it was reduced to tears and sniffles instead of the kind of chest heaving, shoulder bobbing blubbering that made your head hurt and your eyes sting afterwards. She still tried to keep this embarrassing secret to herself, but she was proud. Baby steps were still steps, and that was enough to convince her that she was making progress.

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When the summer before eighth grade rolled around, the dentist diagnosed her with her first cavity. During her check-up she anticipated placing a Polaroid picture of herself on
the “No Cavities Club” photo wall, rolling her eyes to conceal a smirk of pride as she picked the perfect placement for the photo.

“Alright, let’s walk to the lobby and go see Mom to set up an appointment,” the dental assistant smiled, showing her own million-dollar pearly whites.

“Appointment? For what?”

“Well dear, this time you have a cavity.”

“Are you serious?” she accused, knowing exactly what cavities entailed.

“Relax, it’s a normal part of life,” the assistant chuckled, shaking her ringlet curls, “you look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

I wish, she thought. I’d rather be haunted.

The next week, she sat in the stiff chair with a wooden tongue depressor of Orajel nested between her upper lip and gum, preparing the sensitive flesh for the injection and waiting for the dentist to come fill the crater in her molar. He had left 30 minutes earlier, promising to return as soon as he finished casting a mold for braces for a boy she recognized from class. Apparently the office was short staffed, but she couldn’t help but feel as if the universe was playing some sort of sick joke on her.

She blinked harder to try to swallow the tears back into her eyes in case the dentist returned. Why hadn’t he finished the boy’s braces before he called her from the waiting room? She could be flipping through pages of People instead of sitting here with a damn popsicle stick shoved up her lip and her toes tingling from sitting still for so long. It was miserable, but she was used to waiting. As the minute hand caressed the face of the clock her stomach sank the same way it did when she crept down the stairs to the basement past the voices of South Park blaring from the television to her drowsy father on the couch. They had had the same conversation at least once a week.

“Will you tell me a story tonight?”

“Not tonight, I’m too tired to be creative.”

“You said that last night, and the night be—”

“Fine. I’ll be up in a minute.”

She would stare at the green plastic glow in the dark stars on her ceiling, inventing her own constellations and imagining her own stories. The terse red numbers on her alarm clock would blink later and later, her eyes drooping shut.

As she slipped into sometimes sweet, sometimes terrible dreams, she would wonder if he knew how much she craved that time with him. In truth, it was the only time they seemed to actually connect. During the daytime she avoided him, tiptoeing around his temper and keeping their conversations to a minimum—you can’t say the wrong thing if you don’t say anything at all. But as the sun disappeared, so did their differences. They could stay up for hours talking and laughing, just the two of them: daddy and daughter, the best of friends, with his stack of empty beer cans getting larger and larger. As she
grew up, those nights grew fewer and further between. He started coming home later and later, sometimes not even at all.

One night—their last good night together, she would later learn—her father took her on a drive in his little brown Jeep to look at the stars. They drove to the state park three blocks from home, turning off the headlights to reduce the chance of being seen after hours by the police who frequented their neighborhood.

“That one right there, that’s a star in Virgo. That’s one of your stars,” he said as he swiveled the cheap telescope he had purchased at a garage sale towards her.

“If the sun is just a big star, does that mean it’ll eventually burn out like regular stars?”

“Eventually it will, yeah.”

“But what will we do when that happens? Would we just die?”

“They all end up the same way, every star, it’s inevitable. But we won’t be around when it happens, we’ll all be long dead by then.”

“Alright, it’s just gonna be a little pinch now,” the dentist shallowly reassured. Squeezing her eyes shut, the needle slowly entered the pink of her gum.

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After that day, her teeth seemed to be on a suicide mission. Even when she started brushing them three times a day, each dental checkup resulted in at least one new cavity (her personal record was five cavities at once). After the fourth time she had a filling, she stopped crying altogether.

Her father taught her how to toughen up, so to speak. As she saw him less and less, his temper grew worse and worse. One day, her mother asked him where it was that he always disappeared to.

“It’s none of your fuckin’ business.”

“I’m your wife. We’re your family. Don’t you think we deserve to know?”

“Just stay out of my goddamn business. Okay? Don’t worry about me, don’t worry about what I do, it doesn’t concern you. At all.”

“I think,” her mother shut her eyes, “we should get a divorce.”

***

The more she hated him, the more she loved him. A paradoxical sort of longing had been born out of her anger. She needed everything to go back to normal—whatever their “normal” was. She craved their old relationship, no matter how skewed it had been. She would be okay walking on eggshells around him if it meant that they still had those few perfect moments together. She would be okay looking for the needle in the haystack, as long as she knew it was in there somewhere.

After she learned to stop crying she became obsessed with needles. She couldn’t get enough. Well, maybe not needles, but what resulted from them. It came just after she
turned eighteen and just after she had gotten the call. The call that left two words seared in her mind, staring her in the face every time she closed her eyes: he’s dead.

Subconsciously she figured that when he killed himself, it was because of his deep emotional issues. He cycled through bouts of depression and fits of rage: he hated his own parents, hated the family he made, hated every rehab facility he checked into. She wanted to think that he had killed himself to prevent the suffering of some disease, maybe cancer. She hoped that he had cashed in his life insurance plan to cover bills instead of spending it on God knows what. She hoped that when he was gone for days at a time, he wasn’t off sleeping with women looking to cope with the same things he was. She hoped that the constellations of needle pricks on his forearms and his sunken, skeletal frame were from drugs to try to heal him.

She hoped more than anything that it had been cancer. She felt sick wishing cancer upon someone, but it certainly was plausible. It could have been in his liver, or his mouth, or his lungs. And he was so tired. Sometimes she would hear him murmur things as he laid on the couch in his filthy apartment in a sleepy daze—she had been told that talking in your sleep was a sign of exhaustion. Somehow it was a comforting thought to imagine that maybe he ended it because of the physical pain and the expenses and the inevitable doom of such a diagnosis and to save her family from watching him wither away to nothingness instead of ending it the same way he lived his life: running from something.

After the call, she couldn’t stop. A needle in her nose, depositing a tiny lavender stud. A needle through her eyebrow, inserting a barbell that her future ex-boyfriend would say made him want to vomit. A million little needles, decorating her body with flowers, band logos, lyrics to songs she didn’t even like. Needles everywhere. She hated the pain, got lightheaded from the idea of a foreign object penetrating her flesh, parting it and morphing it and alerting every nerve in the surrounding area until she almost fainted. It was a twisted relationship, her and needles, but the end result was well worth it. Pain in exchange for permanence.

***

She had dated the same boy for a year and a half, one of those on-again-off-again messes. She was drawn to his deep, mysterious blue eyes that reminded her of something—something she couldn’t quite place. He had been an inch shorter than her with bulging muscles, an aquiline nose, and a serious, monotone voice.

On their first date, he took her to a football game at their high school. During halftime he bought ice cream cones for both of them, and she skeptically licked at hers, wondering if the sugar would manage to infiltrate her enamel like it always seemed to. He called her name and as she turned her head, she was met with a cold shock of vanilla to the nose and a loud guffaw from her date. The ice cream had gotten up her nose and ruined the makeup she spent two hours on, but she supposed some people had different ways of flirting.

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Months passed with damage to her teeth. Each time she got the diagnosis, she would feel her body tense up. She craved the eventual numbness in her face, the idea that every
sensation could leave for a short amount of time, but she always hated the pain that came before it. She hated the little pinch the dentist guaranteed and his gloves that left a rubbery taste in her mouth and the way her jaw cramped from holding it open for an hour and the shooting pain as the dentist slowly filled her gums with Novocain.

She had abandoned the idea that it was cancer that caused him to kill himself. It was a nice thought, but nothing ever worked out like she hoped it would. It was the ending to a story she had never been told, and she was dumb to keep pretending.

As she sat in the chair three weeks before her twentieth birthday, she tried to distract herself from the goings on the dentist prepared on the counter. She tried not to think of the drug in the syringe, similar to the heroin her father probably dripped into his own syringes before whisking himself off to a different reality. Or was it cocaine? She knew for sure his life ended with methamphetamines before his heart stopped with alcohol and pills, but she wasn’t sure of the road that got him to that point. She wasn’t sure of anything, including why his death still haunted her.

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Like some sort of messenger from Hell, a strange woman had confirmed her father’s suspicious behaviors without even saying it. On a cloudy spring morning, the thin woman had knocked on the front door.

“Where’s yer daddy?” the woman pleaded.

“Um…he’s not here at the moment. Who are you?”

“I’m a friend of his…a very close friend. I needa talk t’him.”

“I haven’t seen him since Sunday. Why?”

“Kin I come in?”

The two stood in the entrance of the house for twenty minutes. The woman’s cheek bones jutted out of her wrinkled skin, freckled with tiny burgundy sores. She smelled like cigarettes and sweat. She looked to be at least six feet tall, although her frizzy blonde hair made up a good five inches of it. Her sunken eyes were rimmed with a thick line of smudged black, either from crying or poor makeup application, maybe both.

But the worst part about the woman was her teeth—or what was left of them. Some were tinted a putrid green-yellow color, while others were a deep brown. Some were too rectangular, some were too triangular, some were shapes that didn’t have names, jutting this way and that with jagged, random angles. Most were just empty holes where teeth used to be. The lips around the teeth sagged in a perpetual frown, as if her lips were too heavy for her face to support.

The woman told her about her own family. She had one daughter and three grandchildren that she wasn’t allowed to see anymore. She lived in a shed-turned-bedroom in her elderly mother’s yard, but her mother was getting older and weaker and would soon have to move. The woman began to cry.

“Did yer daddy leave anything fer me?”
She wanted to scoff at her, tell her she didn’t even know her, tell her that her dad didn’t live there anymore, tell her to get out of the house and go away and never come back. “No,” she murmured.

“Please, he’s gotta have left me somethin’. He said he did. He said it was ready. Did he leave it in his room? Jist a brown box, or a bag, or somethin’, please, I need it, I need it you do not understan’ how much I fuckin’ need it just let me check please just let me—”

“If you don’t get out right now, I’m calling the police,” she said through gritted teeth, her voice shaking.

The little pinch came; she curled her toes into her shoes and squeezed the armrests of the dentist’s chair.

***

After that filling, she had gone a whole year without a cavity. She had broken in twenty-one and wore it like a sweater that fit perfectly, frequenting bars each weekend and even occasionally on school nights when it was a rough week. Eventually the sugary drinks began to catch up with her, and she had two fresh craters in her teeth.

The dentist told her the cavities were shallow enough that she didn’t need to be injected with Novocain. She almost leapt off the chair and planted a fat kiss right on top of the bald spot on his head. Relief surged through her veins instead of Novocain. The dentist promised there would be no shot, just a little grinding and a little filling and she’d be good to go. She thanked him for his heroic deed with her eyes, and he rolled his own.

***

One time when she was a child, she ran barefoot around her house in the balmy summer air. Though her feet were calloused, she began wincing as she neared the row of pine trees bordering the left perimeter of the yard. She had been running too fast to stop and soon she stood screaming with short, spiky pine needles stuck in her feet. Her father, who had been in the garage, heard her screams and rushed to the backyard, wafting a sour odor behind him. He scooped her in his arms and carefully plucked each needle one by one from her flesh. She felt strangely secure in his strong arms, that scent—he thought—imprinting itself in her memory.

He carried her a safe distance away from the pine trees and set her down a little too rough.

“Wear shoes next time,” he scolded as he walked away.

***

The dentist ground her teeth, filling her mouth with ashy, bitter tooth dust and...blood? Did it always bleed? It was the first time she hadn’t been numb for the filling, but the discomfort was manageable. She wished fillings could always be like this: it wasn’t enjoyable by any means, but she didn’t have to squeeze her eyes shut or wiggle her feet to distract herself from the fact that there was a needle impaling her skin. It felt like the dentist had given her Novocain in her mind.
As he filled the cavities, the dentist lectured her about oral hygiene. He never seemed to believe her when she said she was a diligent brusher, flosser, and rinser. She supposed she didn’t blame him, though. She felt like an anomaly. Maybe she could submit herself to The Guinness Book of World Records. She could see the article: “Filled With Holes—Girl Gets Millionth Cavity Filled!” Maybe she should just let her teeth rot and fall out. It seemed to be the path she was going down anyways. Nothing she did ever seemed to help, so what was the point in trying? The doom of her teeth was inevitable.

The bells on the office door jingled as she walked out into the icy January air, appointment slip in hand reminding her to come back in two weeks. While cleaning her teeth after the fillings, the dentist had uncovered another cavity brooding on the back of her deepest molar, to no one’s surprise. She was done for today, but she would return. She always did. She shuffled through the lot and slid into the driver’s seat of the little brown Jeep. She rested her head on the wheel, willing new teeth to erupt from her flesh, pushing out the old ones so she could start again.
First Day

Beep Beep goes the alarm as I spring from my bed to land on my feet
Rush Rush I grasp my lunch packed the night before
Today is the first day of school
Chatter Chatter fills the halls kids buzzing like bees
Slam Slam the lockers shut, the first bell approaches
Quickly to my class I go. I know I am late.
Shuffle Shuffle the papers spread as I organize my desk
Ding Ding the bell goes off, class has begun
Up I look, all eyes are on me. I am the teacher now.
Emma Masiulewicz

Snowball
Bystander

I feel the water
Watch it with clouded eyes
The weeds drag you under
As fingers graze the surface

I bend to the water
Hands reaching down
I caress my reflection
And watch you drown
Allison Herrick

The Pursuit

Police sirens
piercing through everyone’s ears
yelling, weeping and running

Everyone searching for Carter
feeling sick to my stomach,
numb in my heart,
seeing only dismal darkness ahead.

Sadness, sorrow, worry and want
all filling my head.

The need, the desire
to find what has been lost
takes control over every single person’s body.

The only stench of wet grass
the only feeling of worry
the uncertainty of the future,
the unknown.
Jacelyn Schley

Heaven’s Light
A Mother’s Gift

a good watermelon should be heavy
with a flush pale bottom
avocados should be the color of juniper leaves
with a barely detectable thumb indent
my mother knows these things
because all mothers know these things
and I look forward to the moment I become a mother
and this information is beamed into my head
my mother wanders down the aisles
her hand hovers over the produce
she must have something like magnets
in her hands that tell her when fruit is ripe
she pauses at the apples and holds up one
places it down
grabs another and compares it to the rest
she studies it like a textbook
grapes are on sale she says and nods to me
pick out a good one
has my time come to carry the gift?
I touch each crinkling bag, peaking at the purple pearls
they all look the same
I squint at the bag like mother does
study a few under the harsh lights
pick one and put it gingerly in the cart
she pulls it out
guides my hand to a different bag
that one.
For as long as Frank could remember, his morning routine had remained the same. No matter what, vacation (which rarely ever happened), sick days, work days, days off. 6:00 AM, wake up. 6:01, go to the bathroom. 6:05, take a shower. 6:10, brush teeth. 6:13, floss. 6:15, get dressed. 6:20, make breakfast, a black coffee and eggs with bacon. 6:35, take Rosco out for a walk. 6:55, pick up the newspaper at the end of the driveway. 7:00, relax in his recliner and watch the news, the newspaper in his lap. Always the same routine, same shampoo, same toothpaste, same breakfast, same route, same newspaper, same news station. It had only gotten worse since he retired twenty years ago, even more so after his wife died five years ago. His routine was the one constant, other than his son, that remained. Now he spent all day in his recliner, switching between daytime soaps and talk shows, only getting up for food, the bathroom, or to let Rosco out. He ignored anything and everything else unless absolutely necessary.

But two things were different today for Frank. The first was that he woke up freezing, so cold to the point where he had to turn up the thermostat for the first time in five years. He had also cranked up the water temperature during his shower so high that he risked getting third degree burns. No luck. He teeth were chattering so hard that he had difficulty brushing them.

The second thing was that he had had terrible heartburn the night before, had even taken some antacids before bed. That hadn’t worked, waking up with even more burning pain than he had fallen asleep with. He tried another dose, doubled it actually, of the chalky, artificially tasteless discs, praying that they would help improve his already dour start to the day.

Probably shouldn’t have gone for seconds, or even thirds, of that lovely pulled pork Claire made last night. He had visited his son Charlie last night, and his wife Claire had made her famous pulled pork. Now, Frank could never resist pulled pork, but Claire’s was on a whole other level completely. If ever there was a last meal request of his, Claire’s pulled pork would be it. He would be buried with it if he could.

“Goddamn antacids better work this time.” Frank tossed the colorful bottle back into the medicine cabinet, tried to push the burning sensation in his chest out of his mind. “Hopefully breakfast fixes it.”

Frank sat down with his usual breakfast of a scalding cup of black coffee – none of that fancy latte, cappuccino, or sugar and cream shit – and scrambled eggs with a side of bacon, emphasis on greasy. Today though, his usual had lost its appeal. Frank blamed his doctor. He had gone in yesterday due to fatigue over the past weeks. His doctor had been blunt. Frank appreciated bluntness, but not this time.
His doctor had told him that his cholesterol levels were dangerously high. Dangerously high as in, if Frank didn’t get it back to a normal level, he was at risk for a massive heart attack. So massive that he wouldn’t be able to recover from it. At your age, his doctor had said, the risk of a heart attack significantly increases. And given that you’re a male and have high cholesterol, well, the odds, to be frank, are stacked against you.

Frank had told his doctor, in not so nice terms, where he could shove those odds. He was fine. Healthy as an ox, in fact. It would take more than some cholesterol to kill him.

His doctor had told him to consult a nutritionist, ordered him really, even gave him some recommendations. But Frank didn’t want any recommendations. He had already had a nutritionist in mind. That was why he went to visit Charlie and Claire last night. Charlie would be able to help him. Charlie would fix him. Things would be alright.

Frank downed the rest of his coffee, burning his tongue, a tongue that had been burned past the point of tasting much after so many years of the scalding abuse. He shoveled the rest of his eggs and bacon into his mouth, savoring it because, starting today, he likely would never have it again. Especially not if Charlie had anything to say about it. And Charlie always got his way. He took after his mother like that.

6:35, on the dot. He dumped his dishes in the sick, intending to clean them before Charlie arrived. “Rosco, let’s go buddy.” No response, no pitter-patter of paws. He whistled. Sometimes Rosco was selective in what he listened to. Crazy dog. He whistled again. Nothing. “Rosco, come on boy! Walk time.” Still nothing. What has gotten into that dog? Frank shuffled into the living room, stopping at the front door to put on his coat. Thinking better of it, he grabbed a second jacket and a scarf and hat as well. He yanked Rosco’s leash from its hook. If calling didn’t catch Rosco’s attention, the jingling of his leash usually could.

Rosco was not in the living room. Frank peered down the hallway. A flicker of Rosco’s tail popped out near his bedroom, and Frank could hear a faint scratching.

“Rosco, what are you doing back there? You better not be scratching up the floors again. I just got them replaced. It’s walk time, which means it’s time to go!” Rosco still didn’t answer. Frank rounded the corner and found Rosco posted in front of his closed bedroom door. Weird, I thought that I had left it open. He tried the door handle. The door wouldn’t budge. Must be jammed. I’ll deal with it after the news. He clipped the leash onto Rosco’s collar, and moved toward the front door, only to almost fall on his ass as Rosco remained in his place, pawing at the wood and whimpering. What is this dog’s problem today? He tried pulling on the leash again. The dog was a statue.

“Fine, no bathroom for you then. Shit on the floor for all I care.” Stupid dog. He dropped the leash and left his dog to whatever it was he was doing. “I’ll go on my own walk.”

Frank left his house, made it down to the end of the driveway before he doubled back for a pair of gloves. Damn Midwestern weather, even the thermostats can’t gauge things
correctly. It was supposed to be sixty with a light breeze this morning. Sixty degrees my ass. More like sixty below.

His morning walk was uneventful, almost lonely without the company of Rosco, who would always find a squirrel and try to chase it. Those mornings left Frank with an almost dislocated shoulder and face full of asphalt trying to restrain his dog. He made sure to pick up the newspaper on his way up the driveway.

Stopping inside the doorway to shed his many layers, Frank still couldn’t stop shivering, even though he had increased the heat in the house before he left on his walk. Perhaps another cup of coffee will do the trick. He made his way into the kitchen and started another pot of coffee. As the water was heating up, Frank checked his phone for any voicemails. The incessant beep that sounded every ten seconds indicated that there was one. One voicemail from caller ID: Charlie James. He pressed the playback button.

“Hey Dad, it’s Charlie. The kids got a ride to soccer, so it looks like I’ll be over around seven thirty instead of eight. I know you’re probably out with Rosco at the moment, but you are always back before the news. Hope you haven’t had breakfast yet because we are going to start your diet right away! See you soon.” Click. End of message.

Frank poured himself another cup of coffee and plopped down in his recliner with his newspaper just as the opening jingle for the seven o’clock news began. He set his cup on the side table and spread the sports section across his lap as the weatherman started explaining that snow was in the forecast for Friday night through Monday morning.

“Well looks like the football team has a shot at state this year... not soccer though, that coach needs to step it up if they ever want to win a game. The hockey lineup looks promising, swimming too. Wrestling has a new coach, hopefully he does better than the last one. That guy was a mess.” Normally, his commentary was directed at Rosco, who would curl up on his bed by Frank’s recliner after their walk. Today though, his only companion was his coffee cup and the reporter on the TV who was covering some red carpet movie premiere. Rosco was still by the bedroom, and Frank could still hear his faint whimpering and scratching. He must have chased a mouse or something under the door while I was making breakfast.

When the next commercial break started, Frank brought his now empty coffee cup to the sink, rinsing it out so the dark liquid wouldn’t stain the white ceramic, much like he wished he could reverse for his teeth. He stooped down, one hand on the counter for balance, to fill up Rosco’s food and water bowls from the supplies stowed on the counter, as far in the corner as possible, so Rosco couldn’t jump up against the counter and reach it. Frank could still hear an infomercial for non-stick pans in the background, so he decided to turn the commercial break into a bathroom one as well.

He returned to his seat just as the reporters were launching into some cooking segment on five different ways to prepare squash for fall time meals. Charlie would love these
recipes. Hell, he’ll probably try to push some of them on me. Frank could handle squash, for Charlie’s sake, but he drew the line at zucchini though. He didn’t see Charlie and Claire’s fascination with the so called “zoodles” these days. For him, noodles were flour, salt, eggs, and water. No vegetables, and certainly no weird colors. Simple, starchy, just like his wife used to make every winter for her homemade chicken noodle soup.

At 7:29, the home phone rang out from the kitchen. Frank shoved his newspaper to the ground and hoisted himself from his recliner. He made it to the phone on the third ring. Caller ID: Charlie James. Frank picked up on the fourth ring.

“Charlie? Are you almost here?”

“Hey Dad. I must have caught you during a commercial break. You’re probably in the bathroom at the moment.”

Bathroom? He was standing there and talking to him on the phone.

“Son, I’m here. Can you not hear me?” He checked to make sure he had actually answered the phone.

“Anyway, I just turned onto your block. I’ll be at your house any minute now. Can you open the front door? I have groceries for you. Told you we were going to start your new diet right away. See you in a few.” Click.

Frank put the phone back on the receiver. “Stupid electronics, you never work right. Must need a new battery, again.” Well, if Charlie couldn’t hear him, the least Frank could do was make sure the door was open when he got here. He opened the main door but left the screen door in place. Last thing I need is for Rosco to spot a squirrel and go running off down the street. Charlie could handle the screen door. Frank spotted Charlie’s car approaching just as nature called. Damn bladder never works anymore. He hurried to the bathroom, trusting Charlie to let himself in.

Frank was flushing the toilet and washing his hands when he heard a knock, knock. “Charlie, it’s open. Let yourself in.” Knock, knock. Frank dried off his hands and left the bathroom. “Charlie, the door is open.” Is it though? Did I forget to unlock the screen door? “Sorry kid, my mind must be going on me. Give me a sec.” Frank made it down the hall and was almost to the door, when the handle jiggled.

The door opened, and Charlie huffed through, one hand on the door handle and the other overflowing with grocery bags on the verge of exploding all over the floor.

“That must be one hell of a bathroom break dad, I can smell it from all the way up here!” Charlie moved into the kitchen to unload the groceries onto the kitchen table. Frank followed him.
“What the hell are you talking about son? It was just a piss. My coffee hasn’t hit yet.” But Rosco hadn’t gone to the bathroom yet. And when Rosco took a dump, it was almost downright toxic. “That damn dog better not have shit on the floor.” Charlie didn’t answer, only focusing on the produce that he was unpacking from plastic bags and transferring the new food into the fridge. Frank ran to the back of the house, but Rosco hadn’t moved from his spot in front of the bedroom door. No turds could be seen anywhere on the wood floor. False alarm. Charlie must have been pulling my leg.

Frank made his way back to the kitchen. “Anyway, what do you have in store for me today? I’m seeing some new food groups that I have never seen in my life.” He picks up a random package to prove a point. “What kind of shit is this anyway? Aye – ky? Never heard of it before.” Charlie continues stocking the fridge. “Come on son, I’m just messing with you, no need to give me the cold shoulder.”

Charlie remained silent as he finished unpacking the new groceries. He glanced around the kitchen, a look of turmoil on his face.

“Charlie? What is it?” Frank followed Charlie’s line of sight to the ground, right where Rosco’s full food and water dishes sat. Only they weren’t full, they were as empty as they were before Frank had filled them this morning. At least he thought he had. I really must be losing my mind. When Charlie moved away from the kitchen table, Frank caught a glimpse of the sink behind him.

Damnit, I forgot to do the dishes before Charlie got here. Frank went to follow Charlie but paused. Something didn’t seem right. He turned back to the sink. Frank knew he had put his coffee cup in the sink earlier, but it wasn’t there. Neither was his breakfast plate.

Something’s not right here, and I don’t like it.

“Dad? Are you even home?” First the dog, and now Charlie. Did I eat invisibility pills or something for breakfast? Charlie moved towards the living room. Frank followed. Why was no one was listening to him today? Was he being set up? Was this all a big prank? Was Claire in on it too? Did Claire and the kids ride with Charlie, were they just hiding, waiting to jump out and surprise him? Charlie did have a key to the house, he could have given it to Claire to use on the back door. “Come on Dad, you’ve got to be home, this is prime news time. Please say something.”

“What the hell are you talking about boy? I’m right here.” At this point, he was standing right next to Charlie, practically yelling in his ear. “You better stop fooling around with me, it isn’t funny anymore Charlie.”

Charlie had reached the living room. He froze when he realized that the living room was dark, the TV off and the newspaper that Frank had thrown on the floor in his haste to answer the phone no longer there. “Dad, the joke’s over. You can come out now. You got me.”
“Charlie, there is no joke. I’m right here, right next to you. If anything, you got me. Now can you stop playing around? You’re starting to scare me.” Still nothing from Charlie. Frank had no choice but to follow his son down the hall.

A bark sounded and Rosco came running at them, nearly bulldozing a crouching Charlie, forcing Charlie to stand up or risk suffocation by fur. Rosco continued to circle Charlie.

“Rosco, where’s you leash? I know I put it on you, and things don’t just vanish into thin air.” Frank looked for signs of the leash around him but saw nothing. He looked back down the hallway, only to see the leash still on its hook by the front door. Now I know I left that on Rosco this morning.

“Easy boy. It’s alright.” Rosco wouldn’t stop pacing, now whining and nudging Charlie to move. “What’s wrong?” Rosco continued to nudge Charlie towards Frank’s bedroom, more forceful now. “Where’s Dad?” More whining. “Rosco, where’s Dad? Take me to him.”

Rosco took off down the hall with Charlie hot on his heels. Frank followed closely behind, wondering where Rosco was going to lead them when Frank was right there next to them. Rosco nearly ran into the bedroom door in his haste. Instead he jumped up and began scratching the door, his whimpering now louder than ever.

Charlie started banging his fist against the door. “Dad? Dad, are you in there? Open up!” More banging.

“Son, what are you doing? I’m RIGHT HERE!” He was full on shouting now. Charlie was taking this game too far. He reached out to touch Charlie on his shoulder, to try and calm him down, but his son just g went down his cheeks and his calls were becoming frantic. “Dad! Open up! Open up right now or I’m breaking down the door.”

“Go on son, break down the door. But you’re paying for a new one. When you see that I’m not there, maybe you’ll quit this goddamn game once and for all.”

“Rosco, down boy. I don’t want to hurt you. Go sit by the bathroom.” Charlie backed up a few paces, squared himself off against the door, and rammed his shoulder against the wood. It didn’t budge. He tried a second time, it buckled. On the third try, the door caved on Charlie, and he went full speed into the room, barely stopping himself from flying onto the bed.

“Dad?” His voice shattered.

He found an outline standing over a bulge in the comforter. Bulge? What was in his bed? That damn mouse that Rosco chased in here better not have made a nest in my bed.

Frank moved into the room, passing Charlie on the way to his bed. “Charlie, help me catch this goddamn mouse so I can feed it to — “ But it wasn’t mice. No. The bulge was too big for that. Most of it was obscured by Charlie’s frame, but when he rounded his son, it was not what he was expecting.

Nothing could have prepared him for this.

That’s not possible. He was standing right there, next to Charlie.

Oh God, Charlie. Frank was getting dizzy. His vision was fading. He was going to pass out. Frank squeezed his eyes shut, tried to block out this nightmare.

Only it wasn’t a nightmare. It was real.

He opened his eyes again, but he was no longer standing next to Charlie. No, he was now looking up at Charlie. Charlie was looking down at him. Frank tried to stand up, to comfort his son, to do anything, but he couldn’t. His body was too stiff to do anything. He was nothing now. He was gone.

“Oh God. Dad!” Charlie was out of his stupor now. He bolted to the bed, reaching into his back pocket for something. As he reached Frank, he pulled out his cell. He fumbled for a second and then Charlie tossed the device next to himself as he knelt over the body. A faint ringing could be heard amid the comforter.

“911. What is your emergency?”

“Hi. I- I just found my dad unconscious a-and I don’t think he’s breathing.”

“Ok sir, what is your address?” “243 West Maple Street. It’s the one with the newspaper still at the end of the driveway.”

“Ok. An ambulance is en route to your location. Now, I need you to check to see if you can find a pulse on your father.”

“I-I don’t know how to do that. How do I do that?”

“Take your pointer and middle finger of one hand and place it on your father’s neck. When you locate a vein, push down and see if you can sense a pulse.”

“Ok. One sec.” Charlie reached a hand towards Frank, and Frank could see just how shaky it was. How terrified Charlie was. He felt light pressure on his neck where Charlie was feeling for a vein. “Ok, I found the vein, but I don’t feel anything. No pulse, nothing.”
“OK sir. The paramedics are still a few minutes out, so I need you to start compressions on your father. Can you do that? Interlock your hands, one on top of the other, place them on your father’s chest, right over his breast bone. Now push down, and push down hard, that’s a compression. It’s alright if you hear a rib or two crack, it means you’re doing things right. After thirty of those, you’re going to tilt your father’s head back to clear his airway. Plug his nose, then breath into his mouth. One second. Do two of those and then resume compressions. Got that?”

“I think so.” “Good. Now I need you to keep doing that until paramedics arrive. They will take over once they get there, but right now, you are the only thing that can help your father. I will stay on the line with you until they get there if you need any help.”

“Ok.” Charlie situated himself closer to Frank, leaning over him now. He placed his interlocked hands over Frank’s chest, took a deep breath, and pushed down.

One, two, three.

So this is it, this is how I go out.

Thirteen, fourteen, fifteen.

It’s not working son.

Twenty-eight, twenty-nine, thirty.

Charlie, stop.

Tilt head. Breath, breath.

“It’s not working!”

“Sir, you need to keep going. Keep going until paramedics arrive. Take a deep breath and start another round.”

One, two, three.

“Come on Dad.”

Ten, eleven, twelve.

“Come on! You son of a bitch!”

Twenty, twenty-one, twenty-two.

“Wake up!”
Twenty-seven, twenty-eight, twenty-nine.

“WAKE UP, damnit!”

Thirty.

It's over son. It's alright.

Tilt head. Breath, breath.

Goodbye Charlie.

I'll say ‘Hi’ to your mother for you.

FRANCIS “FRANK” JAMES

MAY 13TH, 1945 – OCTOBER 1ST, 2018

BELOVED SON, HUSBAND,

FATHER, AND GRANDFATHER
I was there when you left my mom.
Your dry ripped lips couldn’t close.
Your eyes crusted shut, you were mute.
    Listening, waiting for her.
There was water in your lungs.
I could hear it as you breathed.
\textit{In, hckkk, out, hckkk, then nothing}.
Your silence echoed in the room.
her hand gripped over her mouth,
tears slowly, methodically crawled over her fingers.
My eyes filled with tears, not for you,
    But for her.
Without you, she will lose her family.
Her sisters will follow your wife out of her life,
like the death that followed your addiction.

Later, when all the warmth had left your body,
I visited you with my mother.
She told me stories of a family of six girls,
she was the son you never had,
she worked outside on the farm with you...
away from her mother, away from trouble.
And once again, you leave her,
As the color leaves your skin.
Megan Martin

The Strength in Your Vulnerability

“You are so strong.
And I am so proud of you”
They say.
But what does it mean to be strong?

I didn’t feel strong when I was shaking from fear.
I didn’t feel strong when I had tears streaming down my face.
And I certainly didn’t feel strong when I felt so vulnerable.

But strength comes from moments like this,
Moments when you can feel a knot in your throat
Because you say goodbye to your grandma for the last time.
Moments when your palms sweat and heart races
Because you share your darkest secret with a friend.
Moments when tears flow down your cheeks
Because a story breaks your heart.

Life is hard.
But when you dare to hope,
And dream
And believe
And have faith
That life still contains so much joy,
You are strong.

When you allow yourself to feel,
You are strong.
Although the pain can be almost too much to handle,
You cannot heal by pushing it aside.

I am not weak for crying or having emotions.
I am brave because I allow myself to feel.
And when I choose to speak my truth,
I am strong
Not because I am not vulnerable,
But because I am.
Emma Masiulewicz

Summer Nights
Red Jewels

it’s the moment before sunset
the marigold tint spills over the grass
it shines through dry skeleton leaves still clinging to yawning tree branches
it smears across the distance bluffs, casting a mulberry shadow
in the blaze of sunset, there is red
in the death of the garden, dried cucumber ropes and rattling warped tomato stems
in the thick papyrus oak leaves, the earthy felled walnuts, black specks of mold
there is red
I stand in the middle of the raspberry patch, surrounded by sweet and thorn
as long as I am still, I need not experience either
I cup berries into the plastic Tupperware, leaving the cover free so that
beetles, leaping spiders, ants, and squash bugs might have chance to escape
the marigold sun beams down on each red jewel, their feathered hairs bleached white
I pop one in my mouth, press it against the roof of my mouth
and let the marigold sun wash over me
thinking back
when all it took to make me happy was a red jewel between my teeth


Dahlia Garofalo

Scherr Road

In hot August
the dry sand is dragged by the wind
across the brittle soy husks
and buries the corn husk stubble
like dandruff on a freshly shaved beard

The sun bakes the road
releasing the hazy dance
the illusion water over a sand dune
coyotes howl at night
yearning for it

And still there is a small release
a cooler breeze
that sways the rattling corn husks
to which a red-winged blackbird clings
a dot of black in a sea of sunny ash
Trouble With Tea

Taro stared into the mirror, growling instinctively at the clean pressed yukata tightly wrapped around him. The obi holding it all together was slightly askew; it wasn’t so noticeable that his parents (or so they called themselves) would bother to adjust it, but just so that it would give him a necessary sense of defiance. Because he hated it, all of it. From the dainty details lining the ceiling, to the over-the-top, gold plated mirror in front of him, to the fresh, specially imported tatami mats under his feet. It meant nothing, but no matter how much he told everyone, they would never understand.

“Boy! Are you ready yet!?” A short, elderly woman slowly inched into the room, her legs bound together by her kimono. She always looked down at him that same way: her long nose turned up, her eyes narrowed, and her slender arms crossed deeply within her sleeves.

“Yeah,” Taro mumbled, scowling at the ground. That wrinkled old prune always brought trouble as if it clung to her kimono’s tail. Just the sound of her voice made his stomach churn and his head throb.

“Address me properly, boy!” She swiftly slapped him over the back of the head, her voice squeaking with age.

“Yes, Grandmother,” Taro hissed through gritted teeth, spitting out each syllable with a tiny spark. Giving in to her demands always made him seethe.

“Filthy animal.” The woman made her way back out of the room, floating like the ghost Taro so wished she would become already. Passing inspection for the time being, he flopped back onto the futon a few feet away, staring up at the ceiling.

Suddenly, a playful paw spread its fingers over his line of sight and a fuzzy tail curled into his side. Blinking up in surprise, Taro swung into an upright position, more than happy to see his pal.

“Tama!” Taro tackled the monkey to the ground, laughing as it flipped him back over.

They rolled in this playful fashion for only a brief moment before the obvious question surfaced in Taro’s mind.

“How did you get in? I saw the old demon woman lock you out earlier!” Tama made a small eep of laughter, pointing to the open sliding door on the other side of the room. A grin rose to Taro’s face; he was always amazed by the skill of the monkey’s tail.
“Oh, Taro, your hair!” This woman’s voice was soothing, yet it brought a bubble of shame to Taro’s insides. He realized that wrestling with a monkey was probably not wise when he was just about to perform an important ceremony.

“Oh, honey, let me fix that for you. Your grandmother would never let you out of the room like that.” Slender fingers ran through his hair, smoothing their way through kinks and knots. Taro looked back at his adoptive mother. She was the only person he knew that was kind to him, that accepted him unconditionally.

“There we go, clean as a whistle!” She smiled, pulling the knot at the end of Taro’s braid tight. A small noise of realization left her throat after she took a last-minute inspection of his clothing in the mirror.

“Your obi’s a little loose,” Taro frowned as she bent down to retie his belt.

“Do we really have to do this, Ma?”

“Taro, I’m sorry, but you know we have to. You’ve spent weeks cleaning everything to your father’s specifications, not to mention all of the money and time we’ve spent on the--Pochi, get out of here!” The sudden outburst made Taro jump. Tama’s background shrieks and finger movements came to a stop as he looked from the woman, to Taro, and back to the woman again. With a small groan of disappointment, he bounded out the door, slowly closing it with a clack. A thick, tense atmosphere squeezed its way into the already cramped confines of the room.

“His name isn’t Pochi…” Taro mumbled, fracturing the silence.

“Yes, I know. I’m sorry…” She massaged her temples and heaved a sigh. Taro rarely heard her call Tama by the name his father had attempted to force upon him. Pochi was apparently the common name for a dog. A “respectable” pet, so he claimed. It was his idea of some sort of middle ground.

“We’re simply not used to him yet, that’s all.” The temperature sharply rose around him as Taro raised his voice in skepticism.

“You’re perfectly used to me, why not him?”

“Because, sweetie, you’re different--”

“No, I’m not!” Flames erupted around him, licking the gold of the mirror and the bamboo of the wall. His mother shrieked, batting down the flames with the nearest cloth she could reach. Taro crossed his arms in a huff, eyes cast downward.

“Honey, please.” Her eyes bore into his own as she gazed up at him, her hands latching onto his shoulders in desperation as she knelt to his eye level.
“What could possibly be taking so long? Our guests are going to arrive and be kept waiting, and we cannot have that, can we?” The slow clacking of wooden sandals echoed around the room as his adoptive father strode into the room. The look of contempt plastered on the man’s face stoked Taro’s fire once more.

“We’re ready now, dear!” Taro’s mother rose quickly, flicking out a small flame left on the edge of his braid.

“Very well,” his voice drawled on, slithering its way through Taro’s ears like a poisonous slug. It took all of Taro’s determination to not shiver. His father stepped forward, gliding out of the door, down the hall to the tearoom. Feelings of pin pricks sunk into Taro’s skin as he followed; this was the room he had spent days perfecting, the one the now flawless garden resided in front of. He was sick of this room before the ceremony even began.

“Do you remember what you must do?” A dainty bowl filled with higashi sweets was placed on the floor, close enough so someone behind it could open the door without major difficulty. Taro nodded, kneeling, then sitting with his legs tucked beneath him, a posture that he and his father had gone over tirelessly for many hours. This was his first tea ceremony and every move was to be made with precision. There was no fiber in Taro’s being that wanted to take part in any of his father’s demands or desires, but this was something he could not run from; he would do it for his mother, if nothing else. Despite how often his family attempted to convince him that there was something sacred or special about this ritualistic way of serving strange powder flavored water and shaped sugar globules, Taro knew it simply functioned to raise the status of the family.

It was when his mother explained her wish to use their increase in status to assist the local nature-centered groups in the community that he could bare participating in this entire charade.

Taking a deep breath, Taro reviewed the steps in his mind quickly. Opening the door, that seemed simple enough. Two-thirds with the left hand, then reach over with the right and fully open it; his father had repeated the phrase, checking his performance in their practices days previous. As he extended his left hand toward the door, he could see himself visibly shaking. Acting on impulse, he took a big breath. In, and--

The door nearly blasted open with Taro’s exhale, the wind wedging between the door and its frame. He scrambled to grab the edge, managing to hold it steady before it had slid out of his reach. After a moment, he opened it fully and properly with his right hand.

Silently, Taro stood, clutching the bowl with both hands. He strode into the room, left foot first, landing directly in front of his guests. Thrusting the sweets forward, he bowed.

“Please enjoy these sweets,” His speech was above a mutter, low enough to be both polite.
and heard. As was expected, he was greeted with no more than a silent bow as he set down the heavy bowl on the table. Dropping swiftly down to his knees, as if he had been born in seiza, he uttered another phrase drilled into his memory.

“I would like to make you some tea.”

If anyone had asked, Taro could not say what happened in the next passing hour or two. Countless utensils had passed through his hands, silence through his ears, tasteless noodles through his lips. He began to think that all of the preparation was for the best after all. Just as his shoulders began to relax, a sharp bark echoed from across the table, returning the tension to his muscles.

“This tea is awfully bitter!” This was the first phrase the old man had spoken all night, not that etiquette dictated differently. However, the bluntness of the blow sure stung a bit. Sure, Taro could hardly recall it, but he had spent at least an hour on that tea. His father had managed to stay out of sight to ensure that the guests fell for the illusion that Taro had managed this all on his own.

“At least it’s not as bad as those candies, those were much too hard,” the wife chimed in. Taro could feel flames forming on his fingertips as he clutched at the cloth in his lap. Insulting his tea was one thing, but his mother had made those.

“I’m sorry.” Taro took in a breath, careful not to let it out like a windstorm this time, trying to not set the floor on fire as he took the brunt of their senile glares. Each had an eyebrow raised as if they had expected he wouldn’t have been able to understand their complaints in the first place.

“Well, I suppose it’s not your fault. Your mother was the one who was supposed to teach you how to cook properly. I guess you can’t expect much from a woman who’s willing to actually take in a couple of wild animals in and keep one as a son!” Taro took in a hefty breath, attempting to will away the anger gnawing at his restraint. He looked out the near by window. His eyes widened when he saw a familiar furry tail and face.

“Need any help?” The monkey signed with his paws.

Taro instinctively shook his head. “No, please go,” Taro signed in his lap. He wanted nothing more than to let Tama go wild on these pathetic excuses for living beings, but his mother was counting on him. She couldn’t get him out of a mess this time.

“What are you looking at?” The old man waved a hand in front of Taro’s face, gaining his attention again.

“Nothing, I apologize again,” Taro gave a small bow to the impatient old man. He looked out of the corner of his eyes to Tama again, panic rising in him as he saw his fingers move.
“Sorry, I have to.” There was nothing Taro could sign, nothing he could do, before Tama burst into the room.

***

Taro lay in his futon, staring up at the ceiling with a persistent twitch in his left shoulder. It had been hours since tea had been sloshed across the room, unfinished higashi tossed carelessly into the air. And the screaming, the endless screaming. The old woman had screamed in fear, clinging to her husband who screamed in anger. Taro’s mother had screamed in shock, ducking behind the door she had been watching from. His father had screamed, attempting to shoo Tama from the room. Ah, yes, and Tama had screamed, too; it still echoed in Taro’s mind. It was a terrifying, high pitched howl, a song expressing Taro’s own bottled-up rage. Taro had never seen him this way, so terribly angry. To think those elderly fools, who had probably never seen a wild animal in their life, would spread ignorant rumors about just what they had seen today.

“Please, dear, you can’t!” Taro heard his mother’s voice through the thin paper wall separating his room from the living room. He instinctively shut his eyes and pretended to sleep.

“Our choice is clear now. The only real question is why we hadn’t done it sooner,” The man’s voice was as monotone and toxic as ever, making Taro’s eyes clench tighter.

“He’s all Taro has!” His entire upper body shot up at hearing this. In a mixture of curiosity and panic, Taro leaned closer to the wall.

“Yes, all he has connected to his previous life. If he has any hope here, we’re going to have to get rid of those sorts of things. Do you understand, Ai?” Taro could hear his mother sob as clacking, that obnoxious clacking, reverberated down the hallway and out the sliding door.

Feeling a sudden sense of urgency, Taro tore off his blankets and bounded out of his room. He peered out the still lazily open backyard door, instantly spotting his father with a drawn bow in hand. But the arrow was gone. He had already fired it.

“Father?” Taro couldn’t stop the formality before it choked its way out. His father looked casually over his shoulder.

“Hello, son. Do you need something? If not, I r--” None of his words were truly registering in Taro’s mind. The much more pressing matter at hand was the bloodied mass laying in the garden, a limp body of brown fur and a thin, curly tail.

“What did you do?!” Flames scorched even the cool evening night, burning him as he grasped at his tear-streaked face. Running over to Tama’s lifeless form, he was careful not to ignite the delicate fur. He screamed again. “What did you do?!”
The calm, snide look on the man’s face only brought more tremors to Taro’s body and flames to his surroundings. “Simply eliminating a nuisance. I planned to tell you in the morning. Please do calm down, we can buy you a new pet. Animals are in abundance, after all--”

Taro had tackled the man to the ground even faster than he was aware. “I’LL KILL YOU!” Taro’s body moved faster than his mind could keep up with, this phrase not being uttered until well after the man had begun to catch fire and wail in pain. The blood rubbing off on his fists evaporated in the heat radiating around him.

“Taro, stop! Stop!” The sound of his mother’s frantic voice stopped everything flat; it felt as if time itself had even stopped. Taro gazed down at the burnt form that was once a man. He rose, shaking once more, realizing what he had done.

“You disgusting animal! I knew we should have never taken you in!” His grandmother wrapped her arms around the trembling shoulders of the only one Taro might have left, the only one who had been kind to him. He waited for her to look up from her hands.

“Just...just go!” She pointed away from the house, in the direction of the forest of Taro’s origin. Taro’s eyes began to cloud up as he flinched, taking only a few steps to gather what was once his best friend, and took off. He could hear his mother’s distant screams and wails as he kept running, past the other houses. All of them blended together, most likely rightfully so; they all looked the same anyway. As he dove into the confines of the forest, he finally felt the raindrops around him he had started with all of his tears. He dropped his head, still shaking with sobs, wishing his powers would once, just once, help him give life instead of take it away.
Hajin Lee

Forest
Remington Schmidt

The Caretaker of St. Declan’s Well

The spire stood guard above plots of stone
A final resting place for those
The Angels of Heaven,
Or Demons of Hell to meet.

Silence hung as heavy as the mist upon
The dew-covered grass
And the sky was pale gray
As if the land were a-snooze.

Over a narrow winding trail we strolled
Past the expired and interred,
Through pyres and crumbling crosses
Down stairs, ancient and steep.

The tense quietude was pierced by a noise,
The squeak of a rusty wheel
Ragged breathing
And the scuffling of weary shoes.

A man hunched and grey with an old Irish cap
Had hands wrapped in knitted socks
Around a black barrow
And skin as pale as a sheet.

“Kind sir, who are you?” We asked.
Slowly, carefully he turned
And as he did the fog followed
Erasing him from our views.

Though he stays away from prying eyes,
Forever he will dwell
The wind to echo his reply
“The caretaker of St. Declan’s well.”
The rope swing swung back and forth beneath the oak’s strong branches. Sun gleamed upon the swing’s wooden seat, Warm laughter echoed in the summers of childhood.

But the laughter is cold; it echoes nowhere. The sun is replaced with gray skies and frigid air. The swing has rotten away. Leaving an old hanging rope.
family history

my grandfather comes to me in pigeons
on the corner of Huff Street and
at the intersection by the train tracks and
even on my window sill
once at dawn

my grandfather comes to me in pigeons
even though his history is still etched in Winona
on the walls of the Red Men Club and
on the produce stand that still bears his last name and
in the cracks of Sugar Loaf that his family was first to see

my grandfather comes to me in pigeons
like the ones he trained for the war and
the ones that later occupied his free time
a younger me loved the Winona birds and
sitting on his walker as he pushed me

my grandfather comes to me in pigeons
as I walk along the stamped cement sidewalks
my twenty-somethings where he spent his decades
a river town I will soon branch out of
but my roots will remain tightly clamped in a pigeon’s claw
Jacelyn Schley

Jellyfish
This Year Has to be Different

Ash was glad the teacher had decided not to introduce him to the class. The bell rang and he sat at the edge of his desk, rubbing the faded seam of his cargo shorts.

Ash’s chest felt like a hot coal like it always did the first day of class. It was this race against time to find the friends you would spend the rest of the year with, find the seat you would sit in, figure out which kids to stay away from. By fifth grade, he’d learned it was better to stay away from it all.

A lot of people thought that you could disappear in the back of the class but the really good place is in the middle. Not too much in the middle because the teacher’s line of vision can sometimes default there. No, the best place was slightly to the right or left depending on the teacher’s dominant hand. Ash watched Ms. Patel take attendance, jotting initials with her right hand. Good, he was middle left.

Ash raised his hand as his name was called, his face growing hot as three people ahead of him craned their necks to spot him. He liked his last name: Kennedy. It was right in the middle of the alphabet which meant he was never called on first in attendance. Most kids lost interest by then.

Lunch could be somewhat difficult. You couldn’t sit with too many gaps around you because it would bring attention, but you needed to avoid the talkative ones or the ones in a lunch group from the year before. The best strategy was to sit early, let people fill in around you, and hope that they would ignore you.

Ash packed his own lunch so that he could go directly to the tables instead of waiting in line for the hot lunches. Sure, it brought a little more attention but this way he could avoid the awkward “is this seat taken?”

Ash sat to the middle left of the table and pulled out his lunch. He didn’t plan to eat any of it but it would look suspicious to sit with a zipped lunch box.

“Is this seat taken?”

Ash looked up and numbly shook his head.

She plopped down directly across from him with her own lunch box and began pulling out mismatched Tupperware.

Ash avoided eye contact and pulled his history book from his backpack. He found that if seen reading boring material, people often left you alone.

“What are you reading?”
Ash stared at her mouth. It was better than meeting anyone’s gaze. She had yellow and orange braces that gave her a bit of a lisp. He had once overheard two kids talking a few schools ago about how you were never supposed to wear yellow or orange braces. They made your teeth look dirty.

Ash held up the heavy book to show the cover, hoping this would appease her and she would go back to her lunch.

“Oh, yeah, I’m in that class too. I have it 1st hour. What hour do you have it?”

“4th.”

“Oh cool, so are you one of the new kids?”

Ash nodded, feeling like something was fizzing in his insides. He noticed that no one else was sitting at their table.

“Yeah, that was me last year. My mom moved here when my dad kicked us out. She cheated with her boss but he didn’t want to be married to her either. I have family down here so we’re still living with them. I’m Marcy by the way.”

She stared at Ash as if expecting him to speak. “So what brings you here?”

Ash shrugged.

“What’s your name?”

“Ash.”

Marcy scrunched her nose. She was covered in millions of freckles like she’d been in the sun all summer. “That’s kind of a funny name. What’s it mean?”

Ash shrugged again.

Ash closed his front door quietly behind him, heading straight for his mother’s studio. He rapped the closed door and didn’t hear a reply so walked in.

His mother was standing in the middle of the room on a plastic tarp, swaying back and forth. She had her earbuds in and was staring up at a large canvas.

She turned around as if sensing him or maybe it was the flood of light from the hallway piercing the dark room. His mother said that it was better to paint in the dark than with unnatural lighting.

“Hey, Hun,” she said loudly, yanking out her earbuds.
Ash sat in a wooden chair in the corner splattered with dry paint. He unzipped his lunch box and began devouring his packed meal. “What are you working on?” he asked, a large bite of peanut butter sticking to the back of his teeth.

His mother turned back to the large canvas. Her messy bun flopped side to side as she tilted her head. Splatters of black paint covered her skin and clothes. Ash could always tell how impassioned his mother’s work was by how much paint actually got on the canvas.

“I can’t get it right,” she said and Ash could never tell if she was talking to him or herself when she said stuff like that.

The painting was of a large white bird with a dark background. The bird looked at if it had been slashed at and trickles of blood floated down from the gouges of its wings. Some of the blood fell to the bottom of the painting where what looked like dust plumed up in miniature explosions.

“It’s been a hard day,” his mother said in an airy tone.

Ash looked from the painting to his mother. She looked tired but strangely victorious.

“What does it mean?” he asked, standing to join his mother at the foot of her artwork.

She chuckled and wrapped her arm around him, squeezing his shoulder. “You’re too young to know about any of that.”

They stood in silence before his mother clapped him on the back, jolting him from his own contemplation. “How was school?”

“It was okay.”

“Did you make any friends?” His mother was now washing off her hands in a stale bucket of water across the room. She streaked her fingers down her apron.

Ash tried to think. “Yeah, there was a girl named Marcy.”

His mother’s face brightened. “A girl?”

“Mom,” Ash protested with disgust.

“All I’m saying is that by fifth grade, I was already on my second boyfriend.”

“It isn’t like that.” Ash wasn’t even sure if he liked Marcy at all, even as a friend. But his mom didn’t need to know that.

“Do you want to invite her over this weekend?”
“I’m good.”

His mom stared at him. “Ash, this year has to be different.”

“Hey, new kid.”

Ash looked up in surprise to see a tall figure approaching. He had a long lanky pace, confident. You had to watch out for kids with long lanky paces. Also, watch out for people who still called someone “new kid” in the second week of school.

The kid walked up and put out his fist like he wanted Ash to give him a fist bump. Ash stared at his hand until the kid stuffed it back in his pocket. “I’m JC.”

You should never trust someone who has initials for a name.

JC wrapped a bony arm around Ash’s shoulders. “Come hang with us, we’re just over there.” He pointed to one of the picnic tables near the side of school where five other kids sat.

“Actually, I need to-”

“Come on,” JC insisted, grabbing Ash’s arm hard. “It’ll be fun.”

Ash was used to being teased. He was used to a lot of things from moving around so much. His mom was so tired of moving him from school to school and was too busy with her art to homeschool him. She said he had to make this work. He couldn’t get bullied anymore. If you didn’t open your mouth, if you didn’t cause any confrontation, if you didn’t fight with anybody, you couldn’t be bullied.

Ash repeated this inner mantra as the corner of the building grew closer. Don’t say anything. Don’t cause anything. Don’t get bullied.

The five other boys looked older maybe in seventh grade. Two sat on top the picnic table, feet planted on the seats, while the other three kicked around a deflated ball. There was a salted ring along the bottom as if it had been sitting in water for a long time.

Ash’s stomach dropped. He was introduced to everyone. They were all lanky and tall and wore matching school wear with the school mascot. They probably waited here after school to pass the time before practice.

“You ever thought about baseball?” one of the kids asked.

Ash shook his head.
“Yo, man what’s your problem,” JC nudged him in the ribs. “Nobody here has ever even heard your voice.”

They gathered around him now like a pack of lions. Ash looked around for a teacher but the only ones outside were helping the younger grades board the buses.

“Come on,” JC urged. “What’s your favorite food?”

Ash couldn’t understand what they were trying to do. What were they trying to make fun of him for? He tried to think of something generic for a favorite food that might appease them. “I like cake, I guess.”

The eruption of laughter boiled in his ears as all six of them started howling and slapping each other. “I like cake, I guess,” one of the kids mimicked with a nasally tone, flipping his hand out in front of him.

“I told you he was a faggot,” JC screamed over the laughter.

Ash started to back away. He fought tears, but they still saw the watering of his eyes and laughed harder. He turned and ran.

Someone called after him, “See ya later, fruitcake!”

Ash skipped the bus and walked all the way home. When he finally closed the front door an hour later, his mother rushed at him, cupping his cheeks in her hands.

“Where were you? The bus never dropped you off.”

Ash pushed past her and hurried to his room, locking the door behind him. He could hear his mother knocking and calling his name, but he blocked out her voice as he pulled his laptop out from under his bed. He typed the word “fruitcake” into urban dictionary and stared at the screen for a full minute as the familiar pang returned of another school ruined. His gaze automatically fell to his closet.

“Hey, fruitcake!”

Ash turned to see Marcy running towards him with a flailing wave. Her heavy backpack slugged from side to side as did her low ponytail. Ash had been trying to avoid her the past few weeks, sitting in crowded areas so she couldn’t sit next to him.

“Don’t call me that.”

Marcy walked beside him, pushing him halfway off the sidewalk. “Sorry, I thought that was your new nickname.”

“It’s not a nice nickname,” Ash snapped. The one thing he could do around Marcy was talk. Unlike most of the other kids, she was a miss-fit, maybe the only person in the
school who had too many problems to make fun of his. That didn’t change the fact however that he wanted nothing to do with her.

“I’m sorry,” Marcy stammered. “I didn’t know it was a bad name.”

Ash quickened his pace. He was walking home from school again as he had for the past week and a half. There were too many kids on the bus that liked to chant “fruitcake” or “fag” while the bus driver tried to quiet them down.

For once, Marcy was silent as they walked. Ash wondered if Marcy lived somewhere around here or if she was planning to follow him all the way back to his house. Maybe she was avoiding the bus too.

“Is this about you being gay?”

Ash felt his cheeks grow hot. “What makes you think I’m gay?”

“That’s what everybody is saying.”

Ash tried to quicken his pace, hinting to Marcy to get lost but she was keeping up even with her large backpack.

“Is that why you don’t have any other friends? Because you’re gay?”

Ash tried to ignore her.

“I have an uncle who’s gay and he’s nice. My dad doesn’t talk to him anymore but sometimes my mom still visits him. I’ll be your friend even though you’re gay, you know.”

Marcy continued to babble the entire walk to Ash’s house. He begged silently for her to turn down a different street, but she kept following him and talking. At one point she was just listing gay people that she knew which consisted mostly of celebrities and obscure anime characters. Ash bit his lip as they ducked into the alley behind his house.

“Is this your house?” Marcy asked following Ash into his backyard.

Ash nodded and started walking towards his door. Marcy followed. He stopped. She stopped. He turned around about to finally tell her to get lost when he heard his mother’s squealing through the open screen window.

“Ash! Who’s your friend?”

Ash froze and cursed himself for getting so close to his own house before attempting to get rid of Marcy. He should have known that as soon as his mother saw him interacting with another kid, she would never let it go. He turned and forced a smile, formulating a
plan to get Marcy to leave as soon as possible. He would say that he had a lot of homework and that she could only stay for half an hour.

Ash sat on his bed, watching Marcy dance around his room, playing with his belongings. He had never had anyone besides family in his room before. It felt like a violation.

“Do you like football?” Marcy asked, trailing her fingers across the leathery surface of a signed ball on the pedestal.

Ash shook his head. His father gave that to him once after they went to some football game on one of their visits. They had been in the car talking about sports which Ash had never wanted anything to do with. That's when his father handed him the football. He said he got it when he was a boy from his father and that it might get Ash to “grow some balls”.

Ash stared at his closet door, shut tightly. He glanced towards Marcy surveying his room, but she seemed uninterested in the closed door and what was behind it. He was sure that he had everything else put away that he didn’t want her to see.

Ash heard the creaking of the upstairs hallway before his mother tapped on the door and stuck her head around the frame. “You kids having fun?”

Marcy flashed her dirty braces. “Yes, Mrs. Kennedy.”

Ash gave his mother a pleading look. She met his gaze, pursing her lips with what looked like disappointment before she said, “Marcy would you like to stay for dinner?”

Ash nearly gasped. His mother had never done this before. She knew the code. When he gave her the look she was supposed to make up an excuse for him.

Marcy beamed. “I would like that very much Mrs. Kennedy.”

“You can call me Karen. Do you need to call your parents?”

“No, I don’t usually go home until after dinner.”

Ash’s mother gave a look of mild confusion interrupted by Ash as he pulled on her arm. He led her all the way into the kitchen where he was sure Marcy couldn’t hear before he hissed, “Why did you do that?”

“She is your friend. You are supposed to do things with your friends, Ash.”

“She is NOT my friend.”

“Stop it,” his mother snapped. She had never talked to him like that.
She sighed and turned towards the afternoon light leaking through the cloudy window above the sink. “I’ve been watching these... parenting film things and they say that I need to stop coddling you. You’re a big boy now and I don’t want to be the one holding you back.” She turned Ash around and prodded him out of the kitchen. “Now get back in there and be nice to your guest.”

Ash shrugged away from his mother’s touch, anger burning in his throat. His only friend, his own mother, had betrayed him. His mind raced, thinking of any way to get out of this situation. To get Marcy out of his room, out of his house, and out of his life.

He took a breath to compose himself before stepping into his bedroom again. He froze in the doorway as the black gaping hole of the closet stared back at him.

Marcy stood in front of the mirror, swaying back and forth with a silky green dress pressed against her chest. She looked up as she noticed him and asked, “Why are there dresses in your closet?”

Something in Ash snapped. Maybe it was the violation of his privacy, his mother’s betrayal, the fact that a person he didn’t even like had found out about his secret.

Ash ripped the dress from Marcy’s hands, shoving it back into the closet along with the other things she had pulled out. He slammed the closet doors and seethed, “Don’t go in there again.” He clenched his fists and kicked the closet door until a chunk splintered away.

Marcy’s eyes widened. She nodded frantically.

Ash didn’t go down for dinner. He wasn’t sure if his mother had decided to still have Marcy stay or if she had driven her home.

Ash sat on his bed, staring at the shattered corner of his closet door, not thinking about anything. Maybe he should be feeling something like guilt that he had snapped like that, sadness that this was the way he was, anger towards Marcy or his mother. But he felt nothing.

His mother never called him down to dinner after Marcy ran out of the room crying. His mother probably wasn’t even here, taking the opportunity to stop at the local art shop or visit her new counselor friend in town. She had tried to get Ash to visit him but starting going herself a few weeks back. He was probably the one showing her those “parenting film things”.

Finally, Ash forced himself to move, slipping off his bed. He opened his closet door for a moment, staring at the mess of eyeshadow, lipsticks, and dresses left on the closet floor. This was routine by now.

Ash puckered his lips and stared into the full mirror next to his closet. He screwed the tip of the lipstick until the red jewel peaked above the metal tube. He racked the color
over his lips, tracing the invisible lines of the fuller lips he wished he had. He got most of his makeup from clearance isles, garage sales, and his grandmother’s basement although he had recently been experimenting with making his own makeup from coco powder and jolly ranchers.

He streaked his eyes next with two shades of purple. He had started blending a few months back, seeing that all the other girls at his last school had started wearing eyeliner and multiple colors of eyeshadows. He personally still couldn't get a straight line across his eyelids but he had to admit he was a natural at blending.

Ash stared at himself in the mirror, making pouting faces, then smiling, pretending like he was in some sort of photoshoot. He brought his gaze then to the dress that Marcy had been holding. It was one of his favorites. It had belonged to one of his aunts he assumed, since he found it a few months back in his grandmother’s basement. His grandparents and aunts only lived across town but Ash didn’t see them very often except for holidays. When he was a baby, his mother had moved across South Dakota to be with his dad but since then had been gradually moving back across the state to be closer to family. They had finally settled in Freeman a year and a half earlier. Ash had tried the public school on the east side but it didn’t turn out so his mother transferred him to the CDCA over the summer.

Ash picked the dress off the floor and smoothed it on the bed. The clothes he had on felt dirty as he wiggled out of them, tossing them across the room. His smile faded though once he faced the mirror and the dress sagged in his arms.

He stared at his body in disgust. He stared at his Adam's apple and pushed on his throat until he coughed. He turned his body to the side and hunched his shoulders, watching the crease of his breasts. He tried to ignore the most aggravating thing of all but eventually had to face it.

Ash stared at his penis, a sagging piece of useless flesh. Against his father’s religion, his mother had insisted he not be circumcised because she read somewhere that it can make your child less creative or something. So his crotch looked like an elephant trunk. An ugly no-eyed, no-eared elephant.

Ash opened his legs and pushed his penis back, squeezing his thighs. He stared in the mirror again and felt somewhat better.

Trying not to relax his legs, Ash picked up his dress again and slid it over his head. He admired himself, twisting back and forth. The dress swayed with him, reflecting the light pouring down on the mirror from the sunset beginning outside. He felt like a princess standing out on the balcony, long thick locks blowing across her face from the ocean side below.

Ash spun across his room to his tissue box, grabbing a handful of tissues in each hand and stuffing them down his dress. He fluffed the tissues into the right shape on his chest
then returned to the mirror to admire himself again. He sucked in his stomach and
turned from side to side. From certain angles, he could actually-

Ash gasped at the knock on his door. You should always make sure the door is locked.
The door began to creak open. “Ash, can I come in?”

Ash’s gaze fell on his old clothes across the room, his throat so tight he couldn’t make
out a word. He tore at his dress, wondering if it would be better for his mother to see
him naked. He didn’t have time to wipe off the makeup.

His mother stood in the doorway, her eyes widening for a moment before she pursed her
lips. Ash froze and stared back at her, waiting for her to say something.

“Ash, this year needs to be different.”

Ash sat through his classes. No teachers called on him. No kids talked to him though he
knew they were watching, silently judging. Boys don’t do that. Boys don’t do this.

Ash kept his gaze down so that nobody would notice his puffy eyelids or his chaffed nose
from wiping tears and snot all night. It had happened before, his mother walking in on
him. She blamed it on Ash’s father always forcing his masculinity onto Ash. She said it
was product of the messy divorce. They’d sat down before but it’d only ended with Ash
shamefully promising he’d never do it again.

Last night, his mom didn’t say anything to him. She hadn’t tried to comfort him or tell
him everything would be alright. She packed up the makeup, the dresses, the clip-on
earrings, and the flower headbands in a big black garbage bag while he wailed for her to
stop.

“Hi, Ash.”

Ash turned from his locker to see Marcy standing at a distance, wringing her hands in
front of her. She looked nervous. She was never nervous.

“Hi.”

She gave a small smile and ran her fingers through one of her pigtails. “Can I walk home
with you?”

It took a moment for Ash to respond. “Why do you want to walk home with me.” Before
she could answer, he pressed, “Why do you want to do anything with me?”

Marcy’s stare hardened. She was always smiling, always with those yellow braces
flashing. And now, for once, she stared at him with no smile, no words, like she was
waiting for him to say something.
Finally, Ash sighed and gestured for her to follow him.

She didn’t talk for nearly the entire walk back to his place. It made Ash anxious. He was never the one forced to carry on the conversation. He said a few words, trying to ignite the flame of a one-sided conversation by mentioning things Marcy usually talked about. She didn’t acknowledge that she had even heard him until he brought up the topic of drawing.

“Have you drawn anything, lately?” She was always talking about these little anime characters she was learning to draw along with various animal hybrids. She had an entire alternate universe in her green spiral notebook.

Marcy cast him a sideways glance, then stopped to dig something out of her backpack. She handed him the crinkled piece of paper without a word, then kept walking.

Ash didn’t follow her though as he stared at the paper in his hands. On it was a crude pencil drawing of him in the dress Marcy had been holding the night before. He was wearing earrings and a tiara with dainty strap-on sandals. His eyelashes were long like the other girl anime characters Marcy drew.

“I talked to my mom,” Marcy finally said, waiting a few feet ahead of him. “She told me about people like you.”

Ash blinked in confusion between Marcy and the paper until his eyes blurred. The next thing he knew, Marcy’s arms wrapped around him.

He didn’t know what to do. He didn’t like hugs, even from his mother. There had always been something too intimate and vulnerable about hugs. When you hugged someone, you trusted them not to squeeze you to death.

Marcy pulled away and started walking. Ash followed. He tried to hand the paper back but she shook her head. “Keep it.”

They walked in silence for a while longer before Marcy asked, “So you want to be a girl?”

The question caught Ash off-guard. “I don’t know. It just feels... normal to dress like...” He couldn’t say it. He had never talked about this with anyone before, not even with his mom. His ears burned hot with embarrassment but another urging tugged at his gut. He wanted to tell Marcy. She was the first person to react to him with curiosity instead of fear or judgment. She wasn’t mad at him, or grossed out, or angry.

Without thinking, Ash blurted, “My mom threw everything away last night, everything.” He blinked away another wave of stinging tears.

Marcy was quiet for a while and then said, “Do you want to come back to my house? I don’t have makeup, but I can give you some of my clothes if you want.”
Ash stopped in the middle of the sidewalk, crouched down and sobbed into his palms. Don’t cry in public. Don’t cry in front of people.

“What about this one?” Marcy asked, holding up a t-shirt with a worn graphic of another anime character Ash thought looked familiar.

“Don’t you wear that one?”

“Yeah, but I never liked it.”

Ash knew that she liked that shirt. He knew he had seen her wear it at least ten times in the past few weeks. “I’m okay, what about that one?” he pointed to something black folded on the top shelf.

“Oh yeah, go ahead and have that one.” Marcy pulled out the black dress for him to look at. It was long but looked tight and had little holes in the shoulders. “I wore it to my aunt’s wedding. I don’t like to wear dresses so you can actually have all these if you want.” She pulled out three other modest dresses from the back of her closet and slung them over her arm.

The room was chaotic, like Ash had visualized Marcy’s living space. There were pictures of wide-eyed anime figures all over the walls, printed off the local library’s printer since they were all in black and white. There was an entire wall of books along the back wall, mostly guidebooks about the world of Harry Potter and other fantasy books. She must have also got them from the library’s annual yard sale since most had barcodes scribbled out in blue sharpie. The place had a stale smell like the carpet had never been vacuumed. But, at the same time, it had a homey sort of feel.

“Do you want to try any of them on?” Marcy asked, removing the hangers from the dresses and handing them to him.

Ash’s cheeks burned, a terrible vulnerable feeling rising in his gut. “They’ll probably fit.”

Marcy stared at him with a sort of knowing look that Ash’s mother sometimes gave. “Try this one on first,” she suggested, holding up a simple black and plaid spaghetti strapped top.

Ash stared at the dress, something he wouldn’t consider his style but he wanted to show his appreciation. He nodded. Marcy left the room.

Ash stared into the mirror on the side of the bookshelf, holding the dress against his chest as he turned from side to side. A calmness came over him as he thought about the past few years for the first time without resentment and shame. Maybe there was still a little shame, but not right now. Not around Marcy anymore.
Ash held the dress against his chest and turned to the window beside him, looking out at the busy street next to the apartment complex. A small brown bird landed in the dirt in front of him and began to roll in the dust, tumbling faster than Ash’s eyes could follow. Then she straightened, shook herself off, and took flight.
Jacelyn Schley

Vibrant
Nicole Tompos

The Lament of a Fantasy Shop-keep

Hail and well met strange friend!  
Welcome to my shop at Avon’s bend.  
Your adventure has come to its end  
And you earned lots of gold to spend.

Take a look at all my wares.  
My items can meet any of your cares;  
I guarantee the fairest of fares!  
Half off anything with blood stains or tears.

I have potions to replenish health,  
Pouches that grow your wealth,  
A black cowl to increase stealth,  
And the magic sword of Duodecimus the Twelfth!

Don’t see anything you like?  
Then I suggest you take a hike.  
No, seriously - This isn’t a museum.  
I’m trying to run a business here...
nestling away the winter
under a wool army blanket
staring at a twelve-inch screen
he rubs your swollen belly
his square feet patter across the tangelo shag carpet
he comes back with two paper plates of hamburger helper
sprinkling yours with a handful of limp greens
and showering a snowstorm of salt on his
later you take a walk
with his box hands cupped around your mittens
you walk past the towering brick apartments
and off into the twisting rich neighborhoods
he points to the three car garages
the screen porch swings
the eternal acres
and promises you something like that
and you roll your eyes
and he gets that nervous look and stares at your belly
when he sees you looking he kisses your cranberry nose
on your walk back, you stop at the run-down gas station
he digs in his pockets and you dig in yours
and eventually you have enough to split a Hersey’s bar
Ted Cullen

Doppelgänger

Your lips told humorous tales
And offered my ears a place to stay when they were lonely
His lips were dry and colorless
Like the sand that wanders for miles in the desert
Your eyes blazed with hot fire
And if I waited long enough I was able to see the blazing blue embers of your existence
His eyes were nothing like yours
Black holes void of life
Two trails leading to nonexistence
Under his eyes lay purple bruises
But not in the shade of lavender, like my mother likes
Your eyebrows were characters within themselves
They were real
His eyebrows were artificial
Drifting away from one another like Pangea
Your voice was unique
Like a snowflake
He remains silent
I do not wish to hear him speak
You and he are both in the casket
Hajin Lee

Waterfront
Exhibit 24: Found Journal

This submission is the opening segment to a mystery/horror novel.

I am stretching against the thread that tethers me to reality. I need to write what I know. Then I can begin to comprehend what is just on the horizon.

I am Nobue Fukui. My maiden name is no longer relevant. I am 25 years old. My hometown is Houso, capital of Takai prefecture. I can write approximately 3,158 kanji.

All prose written in only simple sentences is boring.

I’m boring you. I’m sorry. I don’t mean to. I’m not used to this.

Let me try again.

When I was young, I found a book of logic puzzles. Similar to sudoku, you work to figure out a grid. But the point is to figure out the characteristics of a set of subjects in a given scenario. For example, say a puzzle has four female subjects: Naomi, Haruko, Mizuho, and Yuki, and they are all out for ice cream. The puzzle tells you they were wearing four different colored kimonos: pink, blue, red, and white; and they all got different flavors of ice cream: vanilla, red bean, green tea, and chocolate. Now, which girl had which color and flavor, and where at the table was she sitting? Then you read the clues and figure it out.

I was fascinated by these puzzles. The concept of understanding the entire situation from a few key details was unbearably enticing. I wasn’t very good at them until I began to take notes, writing out the facts in simple, undeniably true statements. That way, I could keep track of everything.

From what I’ve researched since, the logical tenant these puzzles revolve around is called a syllogism. It’s a way to deduce an additional conclusion from two true statements. So, when the puzzle says Mizuho had vanilla ice cream, and elsewhere in the puzzle has determined the girl who ate vanilla ice cream was wearing blue, we now know Mizuho was wearing blue. These are the basic logical outcomes of these exercises.

After this, I began to understand the world in a much sharper way. When I didn’t understand something, I wrote it out in one of the four acceptable forms of syllogistic premises and conclusions: all, none, some, or some (not). Examples: All women marry. No children take their mother’s maiden name. Some men get murdered. Some fathers do not come back home.

I’m getting ahead of myself. You need to know about Hinazoum
Hinazoumi is a town with a population of 1,836 and an area of 137 square miles, located just 52 miles outside of Houso, my hometown and the capital of our prefecture. While the capital is the site of the majority of commerce, Hinazoumi supplies the area with much needed resources, such as lumber and clay.

God, I’m doing it again. I know writing down the facts makes it easier for me, but I have another purpose here. I need you to know what is happening as much as I need me to know what is happening. I need to do this in a way that you can understand.

Third time’s the charm.

My first visit to Hinazoumi was in the summer for an origami workshop. I have always enjoyed origami as it combines artful crafting with the precision of step by step instructions. I found a flyer for the seminar at a teashop near my parents’ home. It was most likely meant to stimulate tourist interest in the area. It lasted for a three-day weekend, with the Sunday session ending in the early afternoon, giving us plenty of time to explore the town after we finished.

I arrived on Thursday evening, making my way down a smooth dirt road through the town to the inn resting at its end. In the sunset, the light spread over the valley, giving the air a tinge of gold. All of the houses looked like big brown triangles, their thatched roofs imposing over their tiny frames and their walls obscured by foliage. Each one had three square windows dotted above the door. They were all uniform in design, and yet altogether different from any houses in Houso.

I met my husband, Satoru, during this event. He sat in the seat directly next to me behind one of the long wooden tables that divided the room into even thirds. I remember he brushed a dark brown strand of naturally wavy hair from out of his face when he confided in me that he was not here due to an interest in the craft. His mother had insisted he improve his skill in folding cranes.

All weddings require a zenba. All zenba require 1000 origami cranes. If Satoru was to get married, he needed to be able to make cranes.

Our wedding was 6 months later. The way the snow stacked on top of the houses made it feel like there was much more of it than had actually fallen. My white kimono blended in with the ground as we walked into the temple together. It had seemed so easy to become one with this place then.

I have never been an avid reader. However, I did enjoy fables growing up. My mother read to me out of a collection of them she had picked up at a foreign goods store. One in particular that stood out of me was the story of The Scorpion and the Frog. The fable goes that the scorpion asks the frog for a ride on her back across the water. When she agrees, he stings her, because it’s in his nature. I have been thinking extensively about this fable lately. Everyone expects me to be a victim.
After my wedding, as soon as they heard my husband’s name, everyone around me became worried and smug in quick succession: don’t you know the story of the Fukui? Don’t you know what a scorpion is? Of course I know what a scorpion is. And of course I know who the Fukuis are. Everyone does. But maybe you don’t. Indulge me in my facts once more.

Three men founded this country: Akihisa Iwaike, Hideyoshi Kiyokuro, and Akiyoshi Fukui. That Fukui, Satoru’s grandfather, was meant to rule our prefecture. However, before the founders were able to meet and agree on official borders, he fell ill. During his final few years, he relinquished power to another family that he had grown to trust. Akina Fukui, his only daughter, was only a 19 year old girl, and he did not see fit for her to take his place. She settled down in Hinazoumi to focus on growing her family. In this, she was objectively successful. With four sons and eight daughters, the number expanding as her children made families of their own, almost anyone could say they were proud of such an expansion to their lineage. Even those who attempted to warn me away had to admit that Akina had succeeded in this goal of hers.

I thought I knew something those in my hometown didn’t. And that was true. Satoru is a kind, patient, loving man without an ounce of poison in his veins. I, the frog, have lived to tell you that the scorpion didn’t try to kill me at all; there is something below the water that is dragging the both of us down.

Directly following the wedding, we packed my belongings from my home in Houso and made the trek back to Hinazoumi. I sat in the ox-drawn cart as Satoru walked beside it. As we found our way back to that familiar dirt road, we turned to walk past a set of rice fields, mirrored across the plots of land on either side of our path. We entered a section of the town that was secluded and bordered by a line of trees.

The Fukui residence was more akin to a neighborhood of its own. There were at least a dozen homes, all lined on either side of one road that ended in a much larger house. If it weren’t for the similar style of the buildings, it would have felt as if I had ridden into another town completely. All of Akina’s children had a house that they would inherit in this little offshoot from the town. The sons had their houses on the left, the daughters on the right, and Akina’s home was at the head of the street.

While Satoru and his brothers moved both my belongings from the cart and Satoru’s from his mother’s home to our new one, I sat with my fellow sisters-in-law for some tea. After a moment, I noted that it truly was only sisters-in-law, and that none of Satoru’s blood relatives were in attendance. Though maybe it was just happenstance; it was a weekday, and most of his sisters were probably at school.

“So, Nobue, I hear you’re an only child.” Fuu is Etsuo’s wife. He is the eldest of the Fukui siblings.
“Yes. My parents married when they were somewhat older. And they wanted to be sure that I would receive the care and attention I needed.”

“I find that fascinating!” Fuu rested her elbow on the table, hand pressed against her face for a moment. Her fingers slid through her light brown hair as she flipped it behind her. “I grew up with two brothers and three sisters, so big family life just sort of comes naturally to me.”

“I would imagine this much family would take getting used to for anyone, though.” Suzu is Takeo’s wife. She and her husband are almost exactly the same height. When Etsuo came to bring Takeo to help with the moving duties, it was easy to tell who was the older brother.

“Not really.” Rei sipped the last of her tea quickly, holding out her cup expectantly. I was compelled to pour her some more and I did. “It just takes a little effort to get to know everybody. At least your husbands are sociable. Imagine how it was for me!”

“Who is your husband?” A silence rang and I knew I had asked the wrong question. This seems to happen to me often. I have learned to ignore it; my urge to learn the facts is much stronger than my embarrassment.

“Oh, I suppose you haven’t met Kenji,” Rei said, smiling so that her teeth held back her tongue. She took another sip of tea before continuing, “He’s not one for doing physical labor, so he didn’t come today. He figured since he’d be no use, he might as well stay at home.”

“Wouldn’t he be able to come and have tea with us?” I asked, raising an eyebrow. Suzu’s eyes shot down to her hands that were clasped around her teacup.

Rei shot me an equally perturbed glance. “What would he want to do that for?”

“I fear we might bore him if he were to sit with us women chattering away.” Fuu laughed, pouring the small remaining tea into my glass to top it off. “Oh dear, I had better make more before the others arrive.”

As Fuu began to prepare the next pot of green tea, scooping the powder into the water, Akina and her eldest daughter, Shinako, glided through the kitchen door.

“Hello everyone.” The women instinctively straightened as Akina walked in the room. They all bowed their heads politely, giving indistinguishable, quiet greetings with small, uniform smiles. Shinako set a box on the table. “Is everyone ready?”

While we were gathered to pass the time while the men set up the house, we were also opening the wedding offerings. The wedding had not been so big as to warrant six people to labor over opening envelopes, but Akina insisted that it was an activity for the wives to all take part in. I ask questions, but I also pick my battles.
“Who wants to record the names?” Akina sat herself at the head of the table and held out a scroll of paper.

“Oh, I would!” Fuu reached to accept the scroll from Akina, unrolling it and dipping her brush in her inkwell and looking at me. Her eyes were bright and empty. Shinako nudged the box in my direction.

“Nobue, please read the names on the envelope for Fuu and pass them this way. Rei will collect the envelopes and I will tabulate the offerings.”

A diligent silence settled over the group as I read off names. Every name I spoke felt like a judgement that I was completely unequipped to pass. The wedding had been large, with most of the town invited to the reception as well as my own family and friends. However, my voice grew hoarse as I read on. It was more akin to reading a census than a guest list.

“Fujieda Tomo.” Fuu’s brush paused mid-stroke. Suzu looked up at me in slight surprise. The corners of Akina’s mouth crept across her face in a subtle smile.

“Ah, the Fujieda’s did make it this time. I was afraid we had missed them again.” Akina’s glance darted to the contents of the envelope that Rei passed to her. She thumbed through the bills with a brush of her thumb. “I see they did make up for missing the last wedding, as promised.”

“People learn their place eventually.” Rei tucked the envelope within the others. “Their envelope could use some work, though. The bow isn’t tied very neatly, and the ribbon is clearly of poor quality.”

“We must have patience, Rei.” Akina set the money beside the other piles. “As you said, people do learn eventually.”

We continued until my nails brushed against the bottom of the box, spreading out against the smooth interior. I peered in, thankful to see the contents depleted.

“That’s all of them, then?” Akina looked content as I looked up towards her. She nodded.

“Yes, it would seem so. I am actually quite surprised that so many turned up for an unorthodox wedding, you being from out of town and all. But I suppose a Fukui wedding is still a Fukui wedding.”

The women began to rise from their seats, chatting and murmuring as they streamed out the door. They waved behind them, thanking me and commending us all for the hard work we had done. Akina remained in her seat at the head of the table.

“Oh, Nobue, before I go.” She pulled an envelope from her sleeve. “This is for you. Just for you. I have separated the offerings from your guests from Houso, as well as a share of those from our family’s guests.”
“Thank you.” I had anticipated Akina being placed in charge of the monetary contributions from our wedding. She had executed nearly every facet of the enterprise, so I had no qualms with her taking in equity with what she gave.

“I want to be sure to make you feel like a part of this family, Nobue.” I heard Akina rise and the floor creak slightly beneath her. My gaze was fixed to the envelope.

“Yes ma’am.”

“I also included some of our family history I thought you may find interesting. I give it to all of the daughters that marry into the family. As notorious as we are, we may be considered a bit misunderstood. Please look it over when you have the time.” I looked up to see Akina standing beside me. She cast a glance at the envelope in my hands and another to me. Then she followed her daughters out of the kitchen door.

I couldn’t put the exchange out of my mind even after I sat down in my bed for the night. My eyes glazed over as I stared at the white expanse of the paper, just large enough to cover my palms. I slipped it under the futon silently as Satoru entered the room.

“How does the mattress feel? Getting it through the house was more of a hassle than I had expected.” He chuckled to himself, giving a glance in my direction, awaiting my response.

“It’s good. Comfortable.” I nodded and he took my answer as satisfactory with another laugh.

“Good to hear! I’m ready for some shut-eye after all of that lifting all day.” He shrugged against his jinbei, the loose fabric of the nightclothes settling back against his shoulders. Settling next to me, he began to stretch. “How was the little gathering with my mom and the girls? She didn’t get to you too bad, did she?”

“It was fine. Trying to keep up with all of them was a bit tough, but I think I did my best.”

“I think we’ve both earned our rest, then.” He kissed me on the cheek, my inadvertent smile making my face rise to meet his lips, and he turned over to fall asleep.

As his breaths grew deeper and his shifting stilled, I reached for the envelope and began to open it, the tiny rips of the paper flap echoing through the room. Along with the stack of bills was a piece of official-looking stationary, faded due to age. The lantern light illuminated the page from behind with a soft orange glow.

Exhibit 2. Testimony of family and close friends.

Year: 53 of Gen 1
Akiyoshi Fukui, prospective leader of the land deemed Takai, died after the annual meeting of the founders yesterday evening. The family doctor, who asked to remain anonymous, diagnosed the man with a fever and prescribed medicine and rest. Upon investigation, the doctor claimed the disease progressed far more quickly than expected.

(family doctor): It was my understanding that his sickness was either caused by faulty preparation of food or a seasonal sickness. I am extremely ashamed of my lack of ability to cure him in time.

Akina, the man’s daughter, was also interviewed. During her interview, she refused to answer most questions and was visually upset.

Akina Fukui (daughter): My father wasn’t sick, he was murdered! How can you people think this was a coincidence? He met with other power-hungry leaders and you think he just up and died? How are we supposed to believe you’ll protect people??

Hideyoshi Kiyokuro (friend and colleague): Yes, it is quite tragic that Akiyoshi has fallen to illness. He and I were quite close, though somewhat less so recently due to distance. I am simply glad I got to talk with him as much as I did during our dinner yesterday evening. Anything I can do to assist this investigation would be an honor.
Due to Hideyoshi’s cooperative spirit and our lack of jurisdiction in his prefecture, to which he returned, he was cleared of suspicion as well. The case has been closed as a death due to illness.

On the back, over top of the article that had been on the opposite side of the page, there was a question written in red ink.

*Why was this removed from the public record?*

In every instance I had heard the story of Akiyoshi Fukui, whether from someone who believed he had been the rightful leader or not, had stated he had relinquished power before his death. I had never heard it had even been considered that the Kiyokuro family had been involved. It had been implied that Akiyoshi had simply been sick for a long time. That conclusion wasn’t particularly outlandish, but the premises simply weren’t adding up.

As I tucked the envelope and its contents under my side of the futon, I tried to boil down the circumstances into “all” statements:

All of the daughters are given this article when they marry into the family.

All of the women at the gift opening party were a part of the family.

All of the women had seen this document.

All of the people in this town learn their place eventually.
Emma Masiulewicz

Plum Sky
Ted Cullen

Next Year

It’s fall
Mother keeps me chained to the pillar on the front porch
I want to jump in the orange leaves
And climb the yellow trees
But I am not allowed to leave the front porch
So I just watch as the world passes by

It’s winter now
I’m still chained to the pillar on the front porch
Father brings me dinner and says that he loves me
But he keeps me chained
Snow falls from the sky
Tears freeze on my face while I cry
But I am not allowed to leave the front porch
So I just watch as the world passes by

It’s spring now
The rusty chains rub me raw
Sister tells me not to scream
Since the noise irritates Mother and Father
The birds chirp away
I close my eyes and silently pray
But I am not allowed to leave the front porch
So I just watch as the world passes by

It’s summertime
I’m still chained to the pillar on the front porch
Water is all I think about, and I want some
The dog gets plenty, but I get none
I watch the children laugh as they play
In the sunshine, happy and gay
But I am not allowed to leave
So I just watch as the world passes by

It’s fall again
Mother keeps me chained to the pillar on the front porch
I want to jump in the orange leaves
And climb the yellow trees
But I am not allowed to leave
So I just watch as the world passes by

Maybe things will be different next year
About the Editors

Editor in Chief
Audrianna Wichman is graduating in 2019 and majoring in English Writing and English Literature and Language with a minor in Creative Writing. After graduation, she wishes to pursue a career in editing while continuing to explore her passion for creative writing.

Poetry Committee
Dahlia Garofalo is a junior majoring in English with a minor in Sustainability. She enjoys writing, crocheting, gardening, reading, and spending time with animals. Her ultimate writing goals are to be a voice for marginalized groups who have a story to tell and to promote ecojustice.

Nicole Tompos is majoring in Communication Arts and Literature Teaching with a minor in Creative Writing. She plans to go into teaching after graduation.

Travis Zurn is a junior majoring in Applied and Professional Writing. After graduation he plans to become a technical writer.

Prose Committee
Chad Herbst is a fourth-year student majoring in Applied Linguistics and Spanish with a minor in Biology. He is a member of the WSU baseball team and Student Senate. In his free time, he enjoys being active, reading, listening to music, and hanging out at the lake or beach with family and friends.

Ashley Renne is a student at Winona State University and a member of this year’s Satori.

Jacelyn Schley is a junior majoring in English Writing and a minor in Psychology. She is an aspiring author and plans to publish the novel she has worked on for over seven years while looking into other careers to support her while she writes.
Art Committee

Hyo Jin Kim is a junior majoring in English Literature and Language. She is an exchange student from Korea.

Samantha Matera is majoring in Data Science with minors in Statistics and English. After graduation she wants to pursue a career as a research analyst, mainly focusing on sharks and their migration patterns.

Haewon Yang is an exchange student majoring in English Education. She is learning multiple languages and hopes to teach high school students about different languages and cultures in the future.
Audrianna Wichman
Abbey Johnson
Allison Herrick
Caitlyn Salinas
Dahlia Garofalo
Emma Masiulewicz
Hajin Lee
Jacelyn Schley
Julia Fogarty
Kendra Devine-Pringle
Lucas Bordeau
Madeline Amundson
Megan Martin
Nicole Tompos
Remington Schmidt
Ted Cullen