



S P I R E S

TWO THOUSAND FOURTEEN
Spring



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Front cover: "Untitled" by Kate Hunt (acrylic paint on canvas, Webster University, 2014)

Back cover: "Fire-breather" by Lauren Marx (mixed media, Webster University, 2014)

spiresmagazine@gmail.com
spiresmagazine.org

Twenty Years of Spires!

LITERATURE

Inga Lynn	SMALL BLACK DOG AND WHALE CARCASS.....	5
Aurora Myers	A BOSTON WEDDING.....	6
	SCULPTING.....	7
Daniel Starosta	WATERBORNE.....	8
Leora Spitzer	INTERSTELLAR MEDIUM.....	9
Kayci Merritté	WHEN SHE FEELS UNCOMFORTABLE SHE LOOKS AT HER FEET.....	10
Shilpa Iyyer	THERE'S SOMETHING ON THE PORCH.....	11
	A VALEDICTION.....	12
Silas C. Coghill	AN UNEXPECTED ROBBERY.....	13
Armine Pilikian	ACHELOIS.....	14
	MARTIN STARR.....	15
Minxi Chua	FOR THE LOVE OF MY MOTHER.....	16
Lauren Kelly-Jones	MAGPIE.....	17
Daniel Starosta	PITTER PATT.....	18
Meytal Chernoff	THE VOID.....	21
Catalina Ouyang	IN THE APARTMENT WITH NO HEAT.....	22
Christine Huang	FADE OUT.	27
Rebecca Balton	SWEET BLUE {	
	GUSTS.....	40
	MOSS AND ACHE.....	41
	RAINSTAINED.....	42
	HOW TO COLOR.....	43
	FLEECE.....	44
	}	
Cody Koester	CRACKS.....	45
Ben Harvey	WATERGATE.....	46
	WITTY TITLE.....	47

ART

Brittany Breeden	BEHIND HER EYES.....	23
Abhinaya Alwar	ROOTS.....	24
	THE CHASE.....	25
Katherine Bourek	DIDO.....	26

STAFF

Editors-in-chief:	Miri Zawadzki Christina Chady
Literary Editor:	Meytal Chernoff
Treasurer:	Anna Mai
Layout Editor:	Shelby Ozer
Art Editor:	Erika Castriz
Public Relations:	Dante Migone-Ojeda
Webmaster:	Peter Jones
Staff:	Katherine Bourek Ben Harvey Eric Hintikka Shilpa Iyyer Katelyn Mae Petrin Douglas Rogerson Cassie Snyder George Zhou

SMALL BLACK DOG AND WHALE CARCASS

Liquid water turns to gas, becomes a new environment
or at least, potential divergence— the fog, I mean—
passage of emotions like dreams, a new expression
of time and pleasure. A transition. And then it starts to rain,
another shift; and I turn, seeking clarification or at least
a better sense. And you answer, speak of ravens as they flash
odd symbols in display of power and aggression, of violence
and then I fear I might be dreaming. It happens far too often.
I turn to face the ocean, attention falling like fine mist caught in trees
as I contemplate a new dichotomy: small dog and whale carcass arouse
the strong proclivity to approach and poke it with a stick.

Inga Lynn
Sonoma State University, '14

A Boston Wedding

She ran back to the rubble
in a space suit cape, the silver cloak
whirling up dust as she
clenched its edges with her fists,
inhaling the smoky neon thumping
of panic when she saw his hand,
his fingers scrawling the colors that had
spilled from his insides across concrete.

It took two years, two thousand miles of traveling
to Sweden or Barcelona across Bowker Overpass,
eight pairs of shoes that prepared this woman
for the moment to wrap her
tin foil blanket around this man's limp body,
run those last 30 yards this time with
him in her arms
to cross the finish line.

Looking down at him, ears ringing,
she remembered the photo of an Afghan bride
several years back in the paper
who lay face down in dirt,
lips frosted with icing
from the wedding cake
she only took one bite of, the sticky
sweetness of uneaten medjools by her
upturned palm:

this kind of celebratory sweetness or denial —
she could taste it as the medic secured
his grip around the man,
wheeled someone's grandpa or groom
into the ambulance.

*Aurora Myers
University of Portland, '15*

Sculpting

He tries painting her elbows,
but her poses evolved too quickly,
distracted his strokes as
she curled her body into syllables,
unfurling herself into sentences:
Om, mani padme hum, and repeat.

She shifts, her legs dangling modifiers,
rotates to plant her hands like rooted
starfish, pinwheels open, her torso twisting,
suspended between two sheets of
imaginary glass.

He questions not the authenticity of this
prose, this moving mantra, but wondered if
it was reasonable to inaccurately transcribe
her beauty through paint the way she used
her body to write, commit plagiarism with
his brushes because they couldn't bend as
swiftly as her body did.

She was a crow, firefly, cat, and he was
running out of colors, sheets of paper until

she melted into the Earth, inhaling and
exhaling at a rhythm of 5-7-5, a haiku
inscribing itself on her lips.

He looks down at his hands,
thinks about the strings she strummed
with her breath. . . Could he learn to
write novellas while on tiptoes? It was as if
she reincarnated Thoreau through the
branches of her body.

The collection was exquisite: in his regard,
unfinished, in hers, cyclical.

The installation's placard says she works at
an art gallery, teaches pottery, lives in a
sculpture for a house. He could only paint the handle.
He wanted her help building his house.

*Aurora Myers
University of Portland, '15*

Waterborne

When the bobber dips under the water we all crane our necks to see the ripples of what yanked it down. Most of the time it pops back up, untouched, and we turn back to our own lines, certain that our jig is the lucky one, the next fish ours, that the next big pull won't just be a bird's nest tangle that'll waste half the day undoing. There's whoops and cheers that go out when some big old mongrel gets pulled up and the little kids run over and ask "what is it what is it" and after poking it a few times, get a lecture, or a story, or sometimes the fish. We don't catch much but we keep coming out, because we've all got that handful of stories from some boat or point or reef and the fight of our lives catching a crazy one, and even if the pier scene is slow and nobody talks all that much, the gulls sing and the wind blows and the waves drive in and it's hard not to be alright with catching a boot once in a while.

It's soothing, the salt life, gulf breezes dragging the smell of the sea up the coast and us with our ratty hats and calloused hands and fish scales crusted on our sandals. This is not fish catching. It's just fishing. Else we'd be in boats banging out the sonar and following schools of 'em. No, this is homegrown, with the kind of precision and care drawn from decades of fishing in lakes and ponds on the swampy side of Florida backyards, fathers teaching sons to properly fillet fish, sons dangling hand-lines with wide eyes, hoping for the excitement of tiny minnows.

Sometimes these things get forgotten, and the folks in the sand or water get yelled at for straying too close, for being hoodlums, for doing whatever it is

that pushes the buttons of wrinkled sunburnt anglers who want nothing more than to bask in the sun and not have teenagers scare off the few fish around to begin with. Some of us sit with a smirk, knowing the shallow water spots where the surfers are, that's where the black tips lurk, sitting in the sun in great big families and scaring off all the tourists every winter's end.

I never yell because I've been that kid, I've not seen the fins but I've strayed to their bad side. More often than not I'm drifting too close to the pier hoping that today's the day there's decent waves; fishing I got spots for days, waves are a bit more fickle, and that's something some of us out on the pier could never understand. These are grizzled men dedicated to the undying art of very seldom catching fish. We sit on piers and jetties poking out like rocky fingers, cast-nets in the gullies for miles up and down the coast searching for that spot that I'll show my grandkids. I'm not much grizzled and I've not much swamp to me, more often I'm one of the assailants, the kids surfing close enough to the pylons to get angry whistles from the older guys. I was raised in the waters and but I don't need to fish for solace like they do. And I'm certainly not them, but I come around for the quiet and the calm, sunburnt shadows of salty lives, barely there and perfectly okay with it, living sunrise to sunrise dreaming the next cast might be the big one that won't get away.

*Daniel Starosta,
Washington University in St. Louis, '13*

Interstellar Medium

The damp grass tickles my back
and I breathe in the earthy air,
playing connect-the-dots with the stars.

At first I try to focus on traditional clusters
but Orion doesn't hunt in the summer sky
and I'm not sure if the cross above me is Cygnus—
It doesn't seem remotely swanlike.

I sketch my own pictures from star to star to star
and wonder about the strange impulse
to add lines to the heavens.

We draw constellations the way we write poetry.

I wish I had a purple crayon
to form dragons and apple pies

filling in all that mostly empty space
with the tangible material of my thoughts,
scrawling we are here across the skies
of distant worlds.

I imagine the hubris of the Ancients
who looked at the sky and saw stories,
as if the whole universe conspired
so that their sky would make sense.
How small they must have felt,
how small I am
trying to fathom the infinite—
How much more manageable it is
to fill in the blanks and call the shape a hero.

Because we draw lines in the sky
the way we write poetry—
reaching out to grasp infinity

*Leora Spitzer
Washington University in St. Louis, '16*

When She Feels Uncomfortable She Looks At Her Feet

She went into the bakery called THINGS TO EAT THAT ARE MADE WITH FLOUR AND SUGAR USUALLY. There was a bell on the door that rattled as long as her hand was on the door. The display cases were filled with nothing. There was a man standing behind the cases. He wore a white apron over a white shirt with a collar, both of which matched his white mustache. He was thin but the apron seemed to barely cover his protruding stomach. She stared at him and waited for him to welcome her to the bakery and inquire to see if she needed anything, which she did. She needed baked goods. He stared at her. He was waiting for her to ask him where all the baked goods were but no one instigated any form of communication and they just blinked at each other. The man's cheeks began to turn red and then red blotches began to appear on his neck. She watched the blotches emerge and he watched her watch his neck, which made the blotches appear faster and larger. He turned around and walked through the swinging door behind him. She stared at the swinging door, waiting for him to return. She stared at her shoes for a while and waited for him to return. She stared at the door he had escaped through for a little while more. She turned around and walked back through the door with the bells that rattled until the door closed on the empty bakery.

Kayci Merritté
Washington University in St. Louis, '13

There Is Something On The Porch

There is something on the porch, but I can't see it from the street. It flickers, distant, crab-walks a bit to the left and pauses with a mean stare fixed at the mailbox. There is a glint rising off its transparent, silent body. Everything on your porch shines icy with the noise of sun, the volume of heat. What I'm trying to say is that I don't know what the glint is.

The creature doesn't advance either way, from what I can see. A low, asthmatic mewling curls through the long grass as it rolls back to the right and stands up straight. A parrot nose cocks upward, and a single girlish finger extends toward me in a point from the protoplasmic belly. Immobile—you wouldn't recognize me otherwise—I'm rooted to the curb. I feel the concrete rise in me, I in it.

The animal rolls a joint. Speaks in tongues. Grows older, taller. Laughs easily. Catches crickets and lets them go. It gets stranger to watch from here. Cars pass. Picture a year-by-year montage of seasons slipping by. I'm in the corner, a long shadow upon your short Kentucky bluegrass.

One evening, a few feathers begin unfurling from the surface of the creature's nothingness. I would say they were indigo, but you'd probably say violet. I'd ask the difference, and you'd explain colormixing and Tyrian purples and amethysts and amaranths and how two bodies can conflate into one. You grow sage in the moments of argument, your brows ascending to the frontier of your forehead, nose tethered invisibly somewhere to wrinkle upon the satisfaction of making a point. I am fortunate to lose arguments to you.

This is hypothetical. I move only in speculation. The air feels like peanut butter. The creature is yelping. Pain. A flash of cancer in its pepper clump eyes. Was it the toxins they found in the tap water? Was it early morning breakfast with me, mugs replete with pink wine and plates of honey? Was it the sea air from Monterrey? Was it that man who called you a bitch in the checkout line at the supermarket, when you discovered the pie crust was cracked in four places and made him wait while you grabbed another?

It takes four summers for the sun to finally sit on your house. I don't see the animal anymore, or hear the thrum of its breath against the wet air. Where now is my shadow, stretched across your yard? Where is yours?

Shilpa Iyyer
Washington University in St. Louis, '16

A Valediction

It started like this, and I know how that sounds, how everything starts like this, but our this was an order of magnitude different than everyone else's this. It wasn't a meet-cute, with dropped groceries and touched foreheads and absurd hand foreplay. No hair tucked coy behind my elven ears, like I had sock-drawer secrets that desperately needed discovering. No high school swim team muscle on you that you could have worked into your Boyish Charm quotient. I didn't have the smile of Julia Roberts, and you didn't have the everything of John Stamos. No, it started like this.

You hit Lori with your helicar. You were grazing low, and I don't know how it happened, but one second she was next to me peeling the last third of a clementine, and the next she was a wheezing mound of motor oil and blood. I was pissed. But not how you think, I should say. I was pissed in the way that I used to get pissed, when genuine, grade-A shit happened to people who weren't me. Everyone else had a voucher for their anger, broken homes and creepy uncles and whatnot. And then what did I get? I got mild lactose-intolerance. That's what.

You emerged from the burgundy pod with a spastic unrest about your arms, yelling angrily at Lori for getting in the way, for having limbs that had failed to avoid your leisurely cruising Iron Maiden cocoon. You told her it was irresponsible that she hadn't been Fortified recently. She cried quietly so you stopped looking at her, fishing the landscape for another object to recruit in some sort of can-you-believe-this-shit alliance.

Don't laugh now, but it happened when our gaze met. The staccato zeet-zeet of the cars above us was falling percussively, pricking the air, the sound of surface breaking.

You looked remarkably insane. It was a thorough trifecta, really, that did it: the too-small black statement tee ("Just Say Drugs"), spackled green Adidas that belonged neither to sport nor style, and a disobedient beard that gave you a confused aura of paternity.

(I hope you're not laughing.)

It was your head, though, that did it. I know how people say that, that something did it, all dramatic and final and electric. That's how I mean it. I mean it like that.

Shaven and goosebumpy, you reminded me irresistibly of a suburban ex-con for whom life could only be sarcastic, never sincere. I saw the years you had spent as a fellow Nothing, arms stretched flat and long on a friend's couch, discussing misanthropic nonsense over gummy worms as the smell of bong water and Mom's homemade roast descended down together from the basement ether. I wanted you to stay there, in the middle of helipath. I had more eyes in me. I was not done.

I don't really remember what happened after the accident and the zeet-zeet and the hospital. I think you bought me some pistachios and we fell in love. The Healers replaced Lori's entire brachial unit with a new one. She's okay now, but sometimes, you know, when it rains. You always felt really bad about it, something wedging in your eyes whenever you looked at her after that.

Sometimes, in relationships, you must decide who is the most broken. You must gather up your ugliness in a blanket or a pillowcase or fifty-five pistachio shells and put it next to someone else's and decide.

Shilpa Iyyer
Washington University in St. Louis, '16

An Unexpected Robbery

Be.
(a)
Safe.

Silas C. Coghill
Indiana University Bloomington

Achelois

we're covered in white sheets and the sun's crust
you're curled next to me like a dried mango
I nudge you but you curl deeper so I walk to the

store, it's raining but I need to buy some eggs
and tarragon. the streets are frenzied and silky,
the cashier has a Czech accent. I want to be in bed but

you're strolling around the apartment in your
underwear, hair in a bird's nest bun, concerned.
we shouldn't have, you say, you're too late to be—

I turn from you to the hardened pan. I crack two
perfectly warm eggs. whites leak from shell crescent,
spread with a dull hiss, mouthing—

if I told the truth your spinal fluid would harden,
I'd have to soak you in dishwater and spoon-feed you oils
but now, instead, I'll make you breakfast

is served, two plates with golden eyes and
hot white frills, peppered, with a side of toast.
but you're by the window, fingers

fidgeting, spinning like sands under the bellies of
distant moon tides.

*Armine Pilikian
Stanford University, '13*

Martin Starr

you wrap your crooked, string-bean
arm round me and whisper
we'll set the fields on fire
your breath smelling of sweet
candy-red borscht.
the fields layer in sharp colors
blue, green and yellow
like little turkish delights
we circle around, find a patch
and place down a blanket,
breads and cheeses
and cherries.

your glasses, powerful as distant
silvery planets gleam
in the sun, and as you brush
the curls from my face
I feel the stitches in your body
snap and break.
you smile, then laugh
then giggle wildly. I want to
hold the gaps in your teeth
fast in my palm and never let the wind
carry them north.

*Armine Pilikian
Stanford University, '13*

for the love of my mother

since I was twelve I knew that
love did not exist. the television
set downstairs conceived it
in America, for the pretty-white-blonde
women. Chinese girls only
endure.

do we seek lovers like our fathers
because we hate our mothers?
we saw their pale lips bitten
shut, their bitter tears,
and hoped to best them at their
game. we could defeat their faulty
silence.

my brothers thought I was the
favorite, it was obvious. but I
knew favor only goes so far.
boys grow up and
girls grow old.
too tall to have my forehead kissed
but still no one will meet my
eyes.

I do it out of love, to realize
a mother's pain. we marry men
who break our bodies slow like congee.
we kiss the types that kill
with cruel tongue and cash.
we bear them sons and breed killers
anew –

our daughters watching,
faintly loved and
loving, never forgiving, tears never
falling.

Minxi Chua
New York University, '16

Magpie

Nonna,
The only thing I remember about you is your hands
Tanned and cracked and grooved to the quick
Like every story you'd ever told
Had been traced there

Those hands stirring my bathwater,
Pruning roses, birthing babies,
You
Were always crafting something

I would recognize you anywhere from the smell of
your fingers
Sweet fresh meat from those dawn-break days,
When the magpies in the garden would feast
On the pink minced in your palms.
I am inclined to believe that the birds called you their
own Nonna too,
But tell me -- where did that ritual come from?

In the sun-lit rally days of your life,
The sound the crowd makes
Is a little like the murmurs of Communism,
like a book-worm's pages turning under sheets in the
night,
like the whispers of a nurse in white who always got
her hands dirtier than the doctors,
Who cared for everyone,
Even the soldiers who couldn't remember your name.

You were my favorite storyteller.
You were my Boolooroo bush-girl who never quite
left the red earth she came from,
And once,
When I confessed,
That the body I was dressed in wasn't what I wanted,
Mum told me that this hair and this mind and these
gums,
Belonged to you.

And I wish I'd inherited everything.

Because even though your mind has run so quickly
It's left you,
The fabric of your self is full of holes,
And you're a white haired infant in a lonely home
who cradles the doll
We gave you like its body is inhabited,
I love,
That they tell us you will still walk outside,
Laughing like a magpie,
Lifting your palms to the birds.

Lauren Kelly-Jones
University of Chicago, '14

Pitter-Patter

It's not even really raining anymore. I can tell you about rain—here it rains twice a day, every day, my entire life. And I've lived through hurricanes too. I don't know why they call it the Sunshine State. With the big nasty kind of storms, I get it when the old people are spooked, but the only rain falling right now is the leftovers dripping off of the roof. From the concession stand, dry and comfortable, I can see the sprawl of green soccer fields. Usually they're clean and neat; right now they look dirty and patchy as a bunch of stray dogs. The sidelines are crammed with parents huddled under umbrellas and children sitting bored in the mud. There are coaches talking to referees and impatient dads, all waiting for the go-ahead to play. I wonder when the lightning alarm will go off again.

“One blue icee, please.”

Today the nice lady is working. She's a little bit older than my mom with a few more wrinkles and pounds on her, but she gives me free bubble gum sometimes. It only costs five cents, but it's still nice. Her son used to play here and she likes the place, even has an official green polo. I wish they made them in kid's sizes. She pushes a cup full of neon blue towards me and I reach up on my tip-toes to take it. The wind whistles through the chipped cement and wet grass. Muddy footprints follow every person that passes by.

“That's fifty cents, little guy.”

With a grunt, I stretch over the counter and give her my two quarters. She laughs a little. I whisper a thank you.

I don't think blue is a real flavor, but that what they've got. Brian asked for cherry last time and we looked at him funny. But that's also because red is the gross flavor. Blue-flavored, red-flavored, or green-flavored; I don't think they'll ever get real-people flavors. Real-people flavors wouldn't color your mouth like blue red green do, like weird temporary tattoos. It would be nice if breaking car windows did that too, colored your mouth, I mean—then we would know who's been doing it to cars in the parking lot.

Sometimes people look at us funny with our ice-stained lips. Most of the time we just smile back. We can't be too serious with faces like that.

I sit back down against the rough concrete wall where Brian and Gabe are. A kid passes by with those cool red soccer sneakers my mom won't get me, mine are covered in mud. We sit around on the ground nursing icees lumped into styrofoam cups, accidentally in height order. Loitering is pretty acceptable, but only because we've all been coming here as long as I can remember. Rec league, travel league, my league, his league. We are soccer players. We are little brothers of soccer players. We get dragged together to Pine Island Park on every Saturday afternoon there will ever be. I blow my nose on my shirt.

Usually we just run around on the closest empty field and play tag or kick a ball, or if we're tired we can go talk to the team. There's Tall Andre, that's Gabe's older brother, and Gallagher, whose first name I don't know, Corey from Florida and Corey from New York. There's

also Robbie and Brett who are brothers but not twins and their dad is the ref, which is weird. And there's MJ; sometimes I imagine what the letters really stand for. Master Janitor. Mark Japanese. Making Junipers. I like when MJ is there because his big brother Matt comes and he plays football with us. Matt wants to be a race car mechanic.

I'm still waiting for the lightning alarm. One blare means get off the field, three means get back on, but right now there is nothing. We just wait. There is a constant pitter-patter of rain-drops on the metal overhang that sounds like an out-of-tune wind chime. I look up and see a hole, black and jagged around the edges, where the lightning hit during Hurricane Wilma. The dark clouds drifting across the matte grey sky look like they're speeding by through there. I close one eye and squint to see it better.

The low rumble of the storm a few miles away drifts through the humid air. I strain my ears to catch the sound. It makes me happy, the thunderclap echoes and lightning streaks. Maybe it's just familiar. Our moms are probably worried, but they're always worried.

The firemen have come out, though it could be only because they work right next door. Balls always get kicked over the fence into their station, and I'm not sure if they think it's cute or just hate us. I always wave to them anyways. They probably can't see me from here, not the tooth marks on my cup or the dark stains on the concrete floor, but the concession stand for sure. It sits on a little hill in the middle of the park, short and wide and boxy and strong enough to

take a hundred years of storms. With a view almost into my neighborhood, the place stocked with drinks and snacks and that nice lady stands guard like a stocky sentinel.

Standing on a chair I can see it from my bedroom window at home. I can see the tall lights looming over the city and the big oaks peeking over the mess of palm trees, even with houses in the way. The neon glow from the night games is strong enough to shine on my windowsill. I can hear every whistle and cheer, and every single time the siren goes off. I always know when they play.

My mom says they spent a lot of money to make sure the lightning alarm works right. She told me they put it there for our safety. I look out into the muddy field, barely a drizzle hitting the ground, and wonder when it'll go off again so everyone can go back to playing. We've been waiting for ten minutes already. I think they just put all the money into making it as loud as they could.

“You think it really works?” I wonder aloud.

Brian looks over to us and grumbles.

“Doesn't matter. They should make the parking lot safe first.”

Last week, while we were watching a game, someone smashed the window of his mom's car and took everything that was inside. Didn't even leave the broken radio. Now their window is a garbage bag, and Brian's mom hates it.

“Nobody cared about that alarm.”

They took his cleats too.

I pick at my icee, trying to make all the blue stuff go to the bottom. If you don't, everything gets too sweet and sticky and drips everywhere. It's how I stained my favorite shirt. I guess that's how I stain most of my shirts.

I see my mom walking over, eyes a little wild. She was probably worried, but she's always worried.

I see parents and coaches standing around, older kids disappointed at having to go home, a pair of guys about to take a brick to the passenger window of a blue sedan. I turn to look at Brian, but he's already gone, running towards the parking lot. He yells something about his stolen cleats. I chase after him. My mom taught me not to look for trouble, Brian's mom did too. We both still look for trouble. We should listen to them more.

Picking up a big rock, Brian winds up. I look around, maybe for someone to yell to, older brothers or parents or the concession stand lady. I grab a rock too. Mine lands short of them, and Brian hits a nearby car. The dent is loud enough to get their attention. They look at us and Brian turns pale. I hold tight onto my Styrofoam cup. We almost run away. Instead we throw more rocks. Mine hits one of them. Brian's almost breaks a window.

We turn to check if anyone saw us be heroes, but there's only a frantic lady screaming about idiot kids throwing rocks at cars. The almost thieves are already gone, the parking lot empty.

We're not sure what to do, so we go back to the concession stand. We get more icees.

The games have been cancelled. The weather remains unchanged. No turn for the better or the worse, just the predictable sprinkle of afternoon showers. We sit on the ground telling dirty jokes and breaking off pieces of the styrofoam cups. The concession stand lady has to be preparing for the coming onslaught of runts demanding icees and sodas and M&Ms. For now, though, we watch our parents approaching to mark another end to another Saturday afternoon. I wonder who will slurp icees and watch us when we finally play, maybe in a few years.

Brian's mom runs over and smacks him on the back of the head. She says something in Spanish that we don't understand. He was supposed to check in with her, but he forgot. He apologizes quietly into his cup. She sighs, and it sounds just like the wind. I want to tell her what happened, but I keep quiet.

The edges of the clouds are getting brighter, like the sun just wants to get a peek of the crowds. The mass of people surges closer towards the concession stand and I play with a string on the end of my shirt. We all look up at Brian's mom as she tells us it's time to go.

She tries to look mad, but her lips are stained blue too.

Daniel Starosta
Washington University in St. Louis, '13

The Void

Funny how the mind works. Too often an endless void of random thoughts bouncing off walls. Echoes, too distorted to properly be understood, and then, out of nowhere...something. A moment of clarity illuminates the cobwebbed attic that sits behind the eyes, and then the floodgates splinter, shatter, gone. Then the room seems too small, too cluttered. Individual objects impossible to catch. In these moments we might miss the void, but we have entered an endless loop. We search frantically for something to hold on to. And then, for the briefest moment we manage to grasp a thought of our own. Attention narrows as we hunch over our prize...only to realize exactly how wrong it is.

Meytal Chernoff
Washington University in St. Louis, '16

in the apartment with no heat

there were no sheets but a sleeping bag instead.
the pillows wore old t-shirts of bands you didn't like anymore
speckled with stains of mulled wine, dark red,
and the sticky stench of dried spit.
we shivered and pretended the fact of you in me
was to keep from being cold, not lonely.

*Catalina Ouyang
Washington University in St. Louis, '15*



“Behind Her Eyes”

*Brittany Breeden
Webster University, '15
Photo, wood, wire, and nails*



“Roots”

Abhinaya Alwar

Washington University in St. Louis, '16

Colored pencil, India ink, and pen

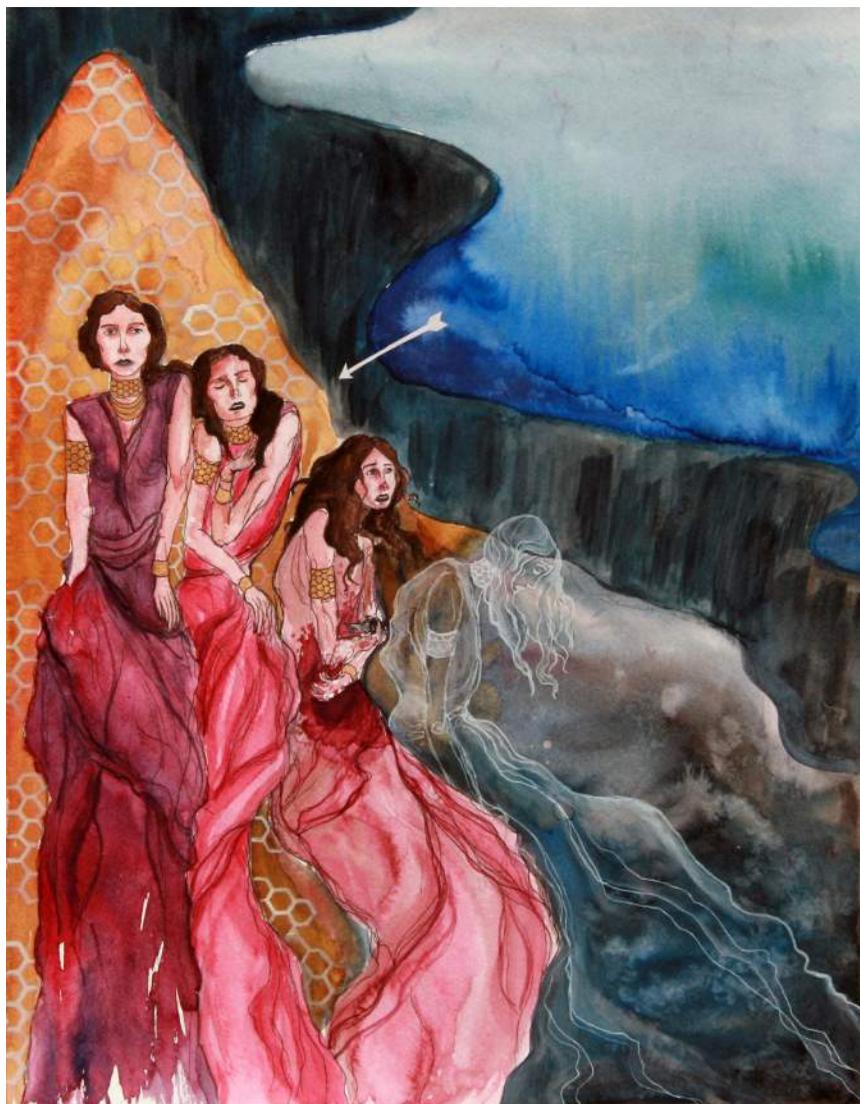


“The Chase”

Abhinaya Alwar

Washington University in St. Louis '16

Colored pencil, India ink, and pen



“Dido”

Katherine Bourek

Washington University in St. Louis, '17

FADE OUT.

Grandma died the summer after Shinn ordained. A stroke—sudden.

When I caught sight of her small figure crumpled on the kitchen floor, I dialed the only number I had committed to memory. Shinn, who had lived with us for half a year when he first dropped out of Binghamton, recognized it was me before I had even gotten a word out. Despite the bad reception, his voice still sliced straight through me. When he arrived at my door, I buried my face in his brown robe and breathed in the stinging perfume.

After we returned from the hospital, I collapsed in a heap on the living room couch, not bothering to lick the saltwater from my lips. Later, I half-dreamt hearing Shinn call my eighth-grade teacher to tell her I had pneumonia. I woke up to find coffee beans, a carton of eggs, and a stack of DVDs on the dining room table.

I had just turned twelve when Shinn first came to live with us. Back then my grandmother was spending more time at the monastery than at home on account of Thay, the abbot and our Zen teacher. We lived in Creekside, a small hamlet even by Erie County standards, and each day, my grandmother made the twenty-five minute trek from our house to the Forest Refuge Monastery and Recovery Center by foot. She felt for Thay the kind of blind devotion middle-school girls feel for the Backstreet Boys, and I always had a sense that she would have happily become a nun if not for me. So when Thay told Shinn Archer from Long Island to wait another year before ordaining, my grandmother—in a sudden

stroke of open-heartedness—took him in.

The morning Shinn moved in, I found him in our kitchen, trying to eat yogurt with chopsticks. I could not take my eyes off his forearm, which was littered with Chinese characters and elaborate designs.

“Can’t find any damn spoons around here,” he said by way of introducing himself.

When later that day, my grandmother hobbled into the kitchen and caught me staring at him dagger-eyed, she simply pointed at his face and said, “He name Shinn. He live with us.”

It had only been nine months since my mother was taken away, and life had just begun to feel normal again. I hated her for letting a stranger into the delicate, perfect co-existence we had worked so hard to fabricate; hated him for his bright eyes, foul mouth, sharp laughter.

For weeks after he moved in, Shinn and I lived in a strange conspiracy of silence, determined not to trespass into one another’s well-protected territory. Evenings, when my grandmother left to help cook meals in the pagoda or work the reception desk, I crept cat-like around the house, sneaking into the kitchen for porridge or a slice of toast only when I was sure the coast was clear.

One night, however, my grandmother told me she was needed at the pagoda overnight. As she put on her shoes and got ready to leave, I hovered by the front door; in the nine months I had lived with her, it was the only time she had left me alone all night.

“What are you doing, foolish little bug?” she asked me in dialect-peppered Chinese. “Go do your homework.”

“You’re coming back before breakfast, right?” I confirmed.

“Did you fall on something and break your head?” She shooed me away from the door. “Of course I am.”

Hours later, the sharp scent of smoke drifted into my bedroom. In a fit of panic, I scurried into the kitchen where I found Shinn at the stove, standing over a pot of boiling water.

“Shit,” I heard him mutter before he reached over the sink to open the window. When he caught sight of me hiding behind the refrigerator, eyes wide in terror, he revealed a sheepish grin. “Dude, I’ve got it all under control.”

When finally, we finished propping open all the doors and windows in the house, we sat on the driveway and ate Domino’s pizza, wiping our greasy fingers in the grass.

“What kind of monk are you gonna be if you can’t even focus long enough to boil water?” I asked him. (It would not be until years afterward—long after he had ordained, and even after he returned from Myanmar—that I told him why the scent of smoke had nearly given me an aneurysm that day.)

“Whoa there, son. I just distracted, okay?”

“By what?” When he did not respond, I asked, “Why do you even want to be a monk anyway?”

“When I was little, I could see ghosts,” he told me matter-of-factly. “I was about six and thought I’d go looking for a Confucius-looking master who could get rid of them for me. A few years later, I stopped seeing the ghosts, but kept looking for Confucius. Then when I was in college, Thay came to Binghamton to give a talk on Buddhism. Me and my friends wanted to go fuck shit up backstage. We thought it’d be funny. But then I saw Thay, and man. The guy’s a rock star. So I changed my mind about

fucking shit up.”

After we ate, I did my homework on the driveway, scratching the words preposition, linking verb, proper noun, onto a worksheet while Shinn meditated beside me.

But for two days after my grandmother died, I could not talk to him. I did not want him to try to comfort me again—because I was fourteen by then, nearly a grown woman already; because I was weak with gratitude, the eggs, coffee, and movies touching me in a way death could not.

“Get out,” I said to him on the third day, my grief, shame, and longing translating into cruelty. His eyes, suddenly impersonal, startled me. For a moment, I almost wanted to reach out my arms and apologize. The open window admitted a brief draft and I could see him shaking. I shivered too.

“Maggie.” The word felt like a punch to my stomach. In the midst of my delirium, I remembered my second-grade teacher telling me that the magnolia flower, my namesake, ranked among the strongest of flowers, and knew how much the irony must have amused my mother. But ever since Shinn left us, I had insisted on being called my full name.

When it grew dark, Shinn proposed that we make scrambled eggs. I had not eaten eggs in eight years and had not planned to break the drought. My mother used to microwave them on days she could not be bothered to get dressed, setting the timer for over a minute so the eggs were overdone.

Long after we had gone our separate ways and the sound of Shinn’s voice had thoroughly faded from my memory save a rough impression of its gravelly timbre and faint, indistinct accent, I still could not shed the memory of how he taught me to cook that egg. I

could not have known then how important the act of cooking was to me during that time of purgatorial numbness—how those twenty minutes, an untouchable island of tranquility, recalled to life what I was certain I had lost forever, and (what’s worse) felt no desire to reclaim.

What I remember most now are the eggshells.

Fragile, chalky, jagged flakes sticking willfully to the yolk when the egg was cracked the wrong way.

“You suck at this, Mags,” Shinn laughed when I stuck my thumb through the fragile shell a second time, speckled yolk leaking through my fingers.

“How about you quit making fun of me for once and get me a bowl?” I grumbled, watching the liquid mess drip through and already seeing in my mind the cold, unsalvageable puddle it would soon become; hating that I could not stop the whole sad progression.

With excess bravura, Shinn rolled up his brown sleeves and lightly tapped a fresh egg against the inside of the sink. The shell cracked neatly, yolk and white sliding swiftly into the bowl. Tilting the bowl slightly, I whisked everything with a pair of chopsticks as I’d once seen my grandmother do.

“Beautiful,” he said to me.

For the rest of that week, Shinn and I watched movies in the living room, our sleeping bags separating us as the harsh light flickered above our heads and in our dreams. Though he knew no Chinese, he had an affinity for dramatic Asian films. After *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon*, we watched martial arts movies for two days straight before graduating to the classics—*Farewell My Concubine*, *The Goddess*, *In the Mood for Love*, which he insisted on watching without subtitles so I could translate for him. Though I was embarrassed to admit it, I began taking

pleasure in finding the perfect equivalent for those elegant Chinese turns of phrases in the bold-stroked language we shared.

After my grandmother’s funeral, I announced to Shinn that I was not going back to school. Carey Hunter, the pagoda’s operations manager, made me a bargain: if I finished off the rest of the year and graduated properly from middle school in May, she would tutor me for the next four years. By the time I got my head around the fact that I was moving to the pagoda for good, Shinn and Carey had already sold my grandmother’s house.

I soon learned that being tutored by Carey was better than being tutored by an army of teachers from Princeton Review. Beneath her ethereal demeanor and nun-like calm hid a cerebral and practical powerhouse. She was barely twenty-one when she first met Thay in Inner Mongolia where he was giving one of his early workshops, and proceeded to single-handedly found a monastery in her hometown. Within a year, she expanded the monastery into a recovery center, and Forest Refuge began drawing people from all over the country to Creekside, New York.

In the monastery’s pagoda, Carey gave me a room next to hers in the women’s quarters. Determined to whittle my life into some semblance of normalcy, she insisted that I keep to a strict schedule of meals, studying, and helping out around the pagoda. Each morning, I woke before sunrise and watched as nineteen monks and nuns proceeded to the Great Hall in mindful silence, heads bowed, feet caressing the earth. By breakfast, upwards of fifty people had gathered there for the first formal meditation of the day with Thay sitting cross-legged at the front of the hall.

Thay taught the edgiest kind of Buddhism I had ever heard of—a blend of western psychology, Zen, and a dose of pure guts. Instead of teaching the transcendence of worldly feelings, he asked students to confront their addictions, erotic desires, traumatic pasts, and unconscious fears. He didn't mind getting his hands dirty, and pushed his students to do the same. Meditation sessions were rigorous, but the retreats and workshops were even more intense. Though Carey prevented me from attending them, I always knew when they happened, for the sound of sobbing inevitably trickled from the Great Hall.

The monastery became home to a curious cast of characters: middle-aged widows, tree-hugging college students, Wall Street bankers, professional ballerinas, French, Korean, Indonesian, wealthy, adopted, devastated, celebrated. I ate their stories up with the hunger of a Catholic schoolboy flipping through his first copy of Playboy, their lives real to me in a way my memories could never be.

In the end, it was Shinn who suggested that I take over as the translator for Thay. With my grandmother gone, Thay needed someone who knew some Korean and whose Chinese was flawless. Though my mother had refused to teach me Korean after my father left, what I had picked up through listening to their feverish arguments was enough so that I could get by. But I protested, arguing it would be unsuitable for him to use someone who blatantly lacked spiritual vocabulary.

“Less words, less bullshit,” Shinn replied with a smile.

I quickly found that I liked the transparency of translation, of letting another's words permeate my own. I looked forward to the few times a week when Thay summoned me into the conference room where he met with students too lost to string together

foreign words. My features arranged easily into the appropriate guise of gentle detachment, rarely betraying any emotion.

In the evenings, Shinn, Carey, and I frequently snuck onto the back porch of the pagoda where I unveiled the latest secrets I had gleaned from the translation sessions. Inevitably, as the night wore on, Shinn and Carey's discussions veered toward Thay's teachings and their sentences became laced with words like non-selfhood, material life, and liberation. Though the meaning of their exchanges sometimes eluded me, I grew accustomed to their language and savored the feeling of being swathed in their voices. Yet as the weeks passed, Shinn grew quieter during our evening debates, sometimes even falling silent mid-sentence, only to pick up with a thought altogether unrelated.

That summer, he left for Myanmar. It would do him good to practice in a land of spiritual vigilance, he explained. But I suspected the real reason was that Thay's teachings had treaded dangerously close to home, and he needed refuge. The night before his flight, he listened as I accused him of running away, of being a coward, of escaping to reverie and isolation.

Half a year, he had said.

The seventh month crept up on me and still, I had not heard from him. By the time I turned sixteen the following March, I detected even in Carey's eyes a touch of anticipation each time she sorted through the mail.

But one evening late that summer, Carey snuck up on me in the kitchen while I did the dishes.

“Magnolia, baby doll,” she said, causing me to jump. “Guess who's coming in today?”

“Woody Allen.”

“Close but no cigar.” She smiled that one-sided smile of hers I loved. “It's Shinn.”

When I made no response, she asked, “What's wrong? Don't you want to go to the airport to pick him up?”

I shook my head, unable to forgive him for his silence over the last several months.

“Oh, Magnolia,” Carey sighed, looking at me as though from a great distance. No words were exchanged between us for a long time, until finally, she glanced at her watch and said, “He's fond of you, you know.”

Over the years, the night Shinn returned has adopted a quality of such ambiguity that I can never think of it except as a scene in a film. My memory seems to end at the moment when Carey leaves the back porch where the three of us had sat after they returned from the airport.

“Good night my darlings,” were the words she spoke as she shut the door.

FADE IN.

EXT. PAGODA PORCH – NIGHT

SHINN, 23, and MAGNOLIA, 16, sit on the steps of the pagoda's back porch. A slight gap between them indicates that another person had been with them only moments ago. The night is entirely still. Shinn stretches out his legs and smiles.

SHINN

Oh man...so good to be back.

He envelops Magnolia in a bear hug.

MAGNOLIA

(muffled)

Took you long enough. Asshole.

SHINN

(squeezing her tighter)

What? You're not gonna hug me back?

Magnolia pulls away from him and punches him in the arm.

SHINN
How you been?

MAGNOLIA
The same.

A beat.

MAGNOLIA
So you got enlightened in Cambodia, or what?

SHINN
Myanmar.

MAGNOLIA
Same thing.

SHINN
And to answer your question, yes, I can...levitate
and shit, I'm that good.

Magnolia can't keep a straight face.

MAGNOLIA
Fulla shit. As always.

SHINN
Hey, listen, sassafras. I have something
for you.

MAGNOLIA
Where?

SHINN
Inside. My stuff's in the conference room.

MAGNOLIA
Why didn't you move it into your room?

SHINN
We got back too late. The men's quarter was closed
already so Carey said to sleep in the conference room
for the night.

MAGNOLIA
Show me what you got then.

Shinn gets up.

MAGNOLIA
Can I come?

SHINN
Only if you promise to keep quiet.

INT. CONFERENCE ROOM – NIGHT (LATER)

Maggie and Shinn sit on the floor of the conference room, a sleeping bag spread out like a picnic blanket beneath them. Two unopened suitcases crowd the room. The lamp is dim, and the window is open. Shinn, hands Maggie a cup of tea and pours some for himself. Maggie sniffs the cup.

MAGGIE
Oolong?

SHINN
Not bad, missy. It's actually called jungle
green. But yes, there's oolong in it.

Maggie takes a sip.

SHINN

You like it?

MAGGIE

Tastes like shit.

Shinn feigns outrage and tries to snatch her cup away.

MAGGIE

Careful, you're gonna spill it on me. And I'm
just kidding.

She takes another sip and closes her eyes.

MAGGIE

It's perfect.

A few minutes pass in silence.

SHINN

You didn't come to the airport today.

MAGGIE

Didn't make a difference. You got here fine all
the same.

SHINN

You mad at me? Is that what this is about?

Maggie closes her eyes again.

SHINN

Is it because I didn't write?

A drawn-out silence follows.

MAGGIE

Why did you even have to go?

SHINN

I thought I told you this before I went. I needed to
deepen my practice by—

MAGGIE

Deepen your practice? Bullshit. You could've done that
just fine even if you'd stayed. Is it Thay that you were
trying to get away from, or what?

SHINN

I wanted to understand some things that Thay couldn't
show me.

MAGGIE

What things, exactly?

Shinn says nothing, only looks at her.

MAGGIE

I think you went there because you became a monk
to try to make those ghosts go away, but then realized
some things never go away.

SHINN

Maggie—

MAGGIE

Or maybe because you'd dropped out of college to look for
Confucius so he could make you invincible and ageless
and shit. But then you met Thay, and instead of doing
all that, he did the opposite.

SHINN

Or maybe, Maggie, because I just needed a break. A
change of scene. That's all.

A beat.

MAGGIE

A change of scene, huh?

Maggie takes a breath and puts her empty teacup down. She stares vacantly at a spot on the floor and does not move. Several minutes pass and eventually, Shinn puts his hand on her shoulder.

MAGGIE

So maybe that's why my mother tried lighting it on fire.

SHINN

What?

MAGGIE

You remember that time when you first came to live with us and Grandma was gone for the night?

Shinn nods.

MAGGIE

You forgot to turn off the stove and things started burning up so I freaked out. Do you remember?

SHINN

Not my proudest moment, but yeah...

MAGGIE

My old house, my mother's house, caught on fire. One day I came home late from school and it was just... the whole place...the whole damn place...And all these fire engines and ambulances on the driveway. My mother was in an ambulance. She kept saying she was fine. That she just couldn't stand seeing my dad's shirts and cups all the time. She kept telling me to go with her. The next day my grandma came to get me and brought me to her house.

Maggie lies down on the sleeping back and covers her eyes with her arm.

MAGGIE

I guess she just wanted a change of scene.

A long pause. Shinn lies down beside her. She does not move. He moves the stray strands of her hair away from her face. Maggie turns over to lie on her stomach. Shinn rests his hand on her back. Maggie carefully frees one arm, and finds Shinn's hand, which has slid off her back. Though she does not look at him, she squeezes his hand tightly. Outside: the sound of crickets.

SHINN

Hold me.

No movement or sound at first. Then Maggie turns to him and moves her arm under his neck, pressing his bare head against her flat chest. Shinn slides his hand carefully beneath her shirt and, moving his legs over hers, brings her face to his own.

Two nights later, driven by an insurmountable sense of urgency, I left the pagoda. For fifteen months I wandered the coast, trading labor for shelter and enduring a string of senseless relationships with boys who loved me beyond their capacity to do so or men who could not be bothered to look me in the eye. By the time I burnt myself out, I was deep in the Berkshires, haunted by the voices from which no amount of distance could shield me.

But even during moments of starkest loneliness, I did not consider returning to the monastery. In the lengthy letter I left to Carey, I told her somewhat untruthfully that I would not return because I needed

to leave part of myself behind. It was not until the end of my fifteen-month-long journey that I finally decided to write to Shinn. Though it was the product of an entire week's work, the letter was clumsy.

Shinn,

I think I owe you an attempt at explanation. I couldn't have told you then even if I'd wanted to, but in the same way you knew you needed to ordain, I knew I could no longer stay. It's taken me this long just to get even an idea of why I left, and it may take a lifetime for that idea to become focused in my mind. I know I always accused you of running away, but I guess we can never see ourselves except in others. There comes a time when the root

of misery doesn't even matter anymore, because what's important, what's at stake, is survival. I'm going to be honest. You can't know how or why everything that night affected me, nor do I want you to. I already feel bad enough about leaving like that. But I'll just say this: I couldn't let you start becoming something to me that I knew you could never really be.

Don't think the wrong way, though. I admit that part of me did leave because of you, and because of that night, but really, I left to find out the reason why I could no longer stay. Does that make sense?

Magnolia

It took me seven months and nine days to acquire the phone number and address of Ashbrook Assisted Living Facility, six days to confirm that Wei-ting Song lived there, and another thirty-two hours to provide sufficient evidence of my blood relationship to Ms. Song that the receptionist was willing to divulge what I wanted to know: that Ms. Song, age 54, of Chinese descent, had been transferred to them from the Hanson Trauma Center in Alloway four years ago because she had developed early onset Alzheimer's.

Before I hung up, the receptionist asked me if I might pay Ms. Song a visit. "Hardly anyone's ever come to see her," she told me in a voice that briefly touched me. "Soon it'll be too late." I gave her a non-committal response and thanked her for her concern, restraining my questions about how Wei-ting Song, handicapped by her stubborn refusal to learn English, found her way from Alloway to Ashbrook—how, with no one to support her after my grandmother's death, she had managed to afford to stay at the facilities for so many years.

Some time later I received a brief voicemail from the Ashbrook receptionist, informing me that Ms. Song was being relocated to an intensive care nursing home. There was a long pause before she said, "Forgive me for stepping out of line, but I thought you should know something. I been here twenty-one years, long enough to know what regret looks like. But... I don't think I ever saw someone whose guilt has chased her this far into the disease." Another long pause. "Don't know if it'd do her any good at this point, but if you'd like the address of the facility she's at now, give me a ring."

The Advanced Memory Care unit at Wickham Nursing Home was more tranquil than I had anticipated. Instead of the narrow, dark corridor I expected, the unit was flooded with light and featured a circular floor plan. As she led me to the second floor, the nurse explained that it prevented residents from getting agitated by dead ends if they got lost.

Wei-ting Song occupied room East 252, a double unit, which she shared with an elderly Hispanic woman. I lingered at the door for a long time, my eyes fixed on the sign with the familiar name, before stepping inside.

I had half-expected to find her sitting up, wild-haired and glossy-eyed, or pacing about like a withered Lady Macbeth, but when I went in, she was asleep. The sound of my footsteps startled the young red-headed nurse nodding off by the bed. At the sight of me, she tilted her head and rubbed her eyes.

"Can I help you, miss?"

I opened my mouth to speak, but then closed it again. Moving closer to the bed, I studied the face I had not seen in nearly a decade. Wrinkles had softened her harsh features. Her hair, which I vividly remembered as dark and sleek, was now a close-cropped

white bob. I rested my hands at the bottom of the bed inches away from her small feet. Though her eyelids fluttered restlessly, her faint snores assured me she was sound asleep.

"Are you related to Ms. Song?" the nursed asked.

I ignored her question. "How long have you been taking care of Ms. Song?"

"I'd say... well, ever since she first got here about a month ago."

"Every day? Are you always the one on duty?"

"Well, with some other patients we switch off. Most have someone at their bedside all the time, but it's not always the same nurse, you know. But, with patients with a history like Ms. Song's, you know, we figured it'd be best to—" She stopped as though she had said too much. "If you don't mind my asking again... are you related to Ms. Song?"

I reached out my hand and my fingertips skimmed the edge of the blanket. Her leg twitched and she shifted so her left foot stuck out from under the blanket. I was surprised that I recognized the sock on her foot—red, with a garish Santa Claus design on it. She had bought it for me the Christmas before she was taken away, but I had stubbornly refused to wear such an ugly design even on my feet.

"I'm her daughter," I finally said. I turned to the nurse and held out my hand. "Magnolia Song. It's good to meet you."

I lay awake that night, unable to sleep. But my days of substituting stories for lullabies were over. Of my life's nineteen years, I could recall only fragments: the sound of my grandmother's footsteps, the sweet sting of incense, Carey's crooked smile, my mother's green AMC Hornet driving away for the last time, chopsticks beating eggs against a bowl; Shinn's voice

saying "hold me"—the way two small words contained everything I had never dared to ask for.

Once upon a time, I wanted to track my life with a ruler and pencil as though it were a linear progression whose slope I could calculate.

That night, lying in the humid two-room cabin I still feared to call home, the voices of those I had unwittingly kidnapped into my untidy life snuck back to their rightful owners. Outside, the crickets I had long believed to be dead chirped.

*Christine Huang
University of Chicago, '15*

The Sweet Blue

gusts

take the wind in my teeth
for these immobilized mornings
when ice water tastes a little bit sweet
snow just a little bit dry
and flaking

an appetite for fools
and bread
so crumble up tight
those slow-blown sleet-breezes
a little like loaves but
wake up
and bite down
on an absence of petals
let loose the music
the morning

the missing

an unleavened pause
on my tongue tasting a little like watercolor
cream and paralysis
find flavor in wintertime
eat
tomorrow is not yet filled up

moss and ache

I don't hate the buildings that take up the sky
or the rumbling taste of the city
I'd rather watch my socks unravel
spoolish
through swollen toes
homesick for a sweeter sidewalk
balmy pennies
in their mossy copper
the cherry scrape on your chin
red-rimmed in the sun and all drawn
with smudgier pencil
such a small sun it is
to be
the one who aches less
to run for softer reasons through the cigarette butts
their serene burn
their withering paper
my swollen toes
your cherry scrape

tomorrow I think I will catch a few leaves
and sweat with their sap
breathe when you don't

belovedly
small
spill some moss and some ache and
let it tickle a little
melt through the moss
and thaw the cement
with the numb and the buildings that take up the sky

like I've lost
an extremity
or maybe a sock

rainstained

this is a cry for help me remember
mud warm love from the wet wrists down
puddled noons and toppling clouds
and wormy summer streets
these puddles once were rain
these warm wrists once were sane
like love in the noon mud
this too shall pour

help me remember fistfuls of rain
noon grey kiss in the once wet street
your lisp a noon blue
on the july skyline
warm toppling storm
in puddles of sane wet worms
and lispfuls and kissfuls and wristfuls of rain

this is a cry for not a clean
not a dry
but a lightening

how to color:

to bruise:
wait for an accident

when it doesn't come get frustrated
and kick something
not quite as hard as you hoped you could

swallow the vibrations
of high pressure violet
 pinch the mottled green
 watch it wide-eyed
a function of time and swelling
 with a heartbeat of its own thuddy blue

to burn:
simple
stay still and be

it will come to you

 open up your face and cheeks
 to the crisping twinge
a fire on the smooth summits of your knees
 stinging when they wrinkle
like a raisin full of luck and flavor
the hot and radiant of having been touched

blue bruise and a red burn
molding in a sweet purple
and throbbing like an iamb
like it would taste plummy and shining
 overripe
and shivering with the lovelost moths

fleece

this moonlit pile of squirming sheep
with pulpy knees
and bruised fleece
frantic limbs all bumped
and wild froth
cotton balls in the oozy grass

a pillow full of stupid sheep
who can't jump numbers
there
and you
still snoring shallow sweet and blue
and mumbling sleepy nonsense
while these dumb sheep ooof
bumbling sloppily up and over
and into the writhing fuzz

you're still drooling candied moonlight
so I climb the night
and jump
into waves of tangled wool
all steamy coarse and cozy
white and I can't remember
when I lost count

I wake up breathless itchy warm
and over toast you squint
and smile slow
pull fleece out of my hair and ask
 build high
 you your too again?
did fence

*Rebecca Balton
Brown University, '14*

Cracks

I find comfort in sidewalk cracks, joining geometrically at seams, or wandering black along the pavement in lost thoughts. Childhood, that saying about cracks and mothers' backs, unsettling like back-to-school shoes, mind delicate and guided by that saying, cautious of each step. I know now straight cracks can't hold such mystery, are placed purposely, allow free play in concrete as it expands, contracts with fluctuating seasons, to ease stress that might cause wild ones. That summer, my parent's marriage cracking at the core, crack and again crack those days went. And one evening, my father turning burgers in the backyard, my mother playing freeze tag with us kids, perhaps it was the wine-- or something unseen-- she tripped, and my father, struggling to catch her, missed. They both fell, us kids watching, frozen, and my father cracked a joke about falling so hard she might have a crack in her ass, and we all cracked up together, my mother in my father's arms the way they must have held each other before all this, the burgers burning on the barbecue, the pavement still warm in the dusk.

*Cody Koester
University of California, Los Angeles*

Watergate

What are those trails that planes leave behind them called that seem to be everywhere in the summer sky, but invisible every other time of year. Conspiracy theorists say they're full of the brain-controlling chemicals Nixon wanted you to inhale, and that his reincarnation, the Islamic Antichrist, is continuing that trend. Who the hell comes up with this?

Whatever they're called, they're doing a fantastic job of challenging her. I'm lying next to her on the blanket, and she's sketching, or, drawing. I guess. I'm not an artist. She's got a pad of thick paper and a box of oil pastels (it says so on the carton), and she's sprawled out on her stomach next to me, trying to capture a sky bisected a thousand times over by mind-controlling streaks of white, cutting apart the blue and grey and green to the east, the pink and red and smiling purple to the west. She's hurrying, because in ten minutes it's going to be gone, leaving only a dense sheet, backlit and perforated by stars; there will still be light spilling over the horizon but not enough to overpower the little white eyes watching.

I'm watching too. She's different when she's drawing. She's intense, passionate. When she sings, her face is bright with fire and joy; when she reads, it's heavy and dark in concentration; when we make love, her eyes are wide and honest, her lips set in that way that's both beautiful and terrifying, like they are now. Appearing on the heavy paper is a likeness of the sky, different but similar. It's like a photonegative, but not in the sense of colors being reversed. It's more that she doesn't care about the colors at all, and simply wants to capture the texture of the sky and the air and the words I'm feeding to her. I'm painting the world she can't see, and she's drawing my voice. I wonder if it would be different if the waves weren't washing on the shore next to us, shading my voice with their cool, even flow. Maybe I'll drive her to the mountains next time she wants to draw. The air is different there; the smell of pine makes her smile differently. And I'd love to see it through her eyes.

Ben Harvey
Washington University in St. Louis, '16

Witty Title

Have you ever written something, only to look back on it and realize it's a complete waste of everyone's time? Because that's what this is. You're welcome.

Ben Harvey
Washington University in St. Louis, '16

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spiresmagazine@gmail.com
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