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1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31
WAREHOUSE SPRING 2023

To remain
you must return
unless you've already done so.

REMOVE ME
 KEEP ME
 Please

AWAKENING



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Collaborators

Head of Operations: Adeline Galich and Willa Farrell

Layout/Graphic Design: Timothy McShea

Editors:

Maryam Amosu
Willa Farrell
Vineela Ravilla

Readers:

Maryam Amosu
Rosie Bader
Hongyi Duan
Adeline Galich
Timothy McShea
Zachary Roney
Osvaldo Ruiz
Colin Wu

Promotion:

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About the club

Hello, and welcome! If you're here, I assume you're obsessed with creating writing, vaguely interested in storytelling, or are somewhere in between the two. Whatever the case, we at Writers' Warehouse, JHU's first (and best, though you didn't hear it from us) community of creative writers is happy you're here, and would like to invite you to our club! We meet every Wednesday at 7pm for two hours. Every first week the first hour is for writing and bouncing ideas off peers and for every second week it's for workshopping creative pieces our members submit. The second hour is where we work on the magazine you're reading now (thanks for that by the way). Here at Writers' Warehouse, we consider ourselves a community as much as a club. Over the next semester, in addition to regular meetings, we are going to the Edgar Allan Poe Festival and the Maryland Renaissance Festival together, along with many other events in the works. Unofficially, many of us have met some of our closest friends through this club and we all hang out a lot. If any of this sounds interesting to you, please consider joining! We'd love to have you.

-Jeremy Giles & Abby Russell
(co-presidents of Writers' Warehouse)

Introduction

The word "awakening" has a simple meaning at face value, but its connotation encompasses infinite metaphors on self-discovery and symbolic transitions. One might describe it either as a spark of immediate change, an instant transition or rather a grand unveiling of something that was always there. Writing does not always cause an awakening, but it certainly represents one—a form of expression by someone entirely separate from yourself, a creation uncovered, a perspective translated into something physical, something permanent. In the grand scheme of writing, perhaps the reader might never be so touched by something to say their preconceived notions were completely flipped, that their ideology was torn to shreds and replaced by a new one. But all readers, whether conscious of the process or not, through many words, phrases and stories, undergo a gradual awakening into their true selves.

For the next 83 pages, you will read the work of seventeen separate, talented undergraduates of Johns Hopkins University. The creative writing group *Writers' Warehouse* would like to welcome you into this grand Awakening, and encourage you to find yourself in the perspectives of others.

Awakening

LGBTQ+

&

BIPOC

highlight

Soul Colors

Mari Sati

Growing up in colors
The reasons they keep from others
The secrets, the lies
So painful, so brutal no surprise
Adolescence is cruel
It interrogates upon pain
They strip you of dignity
To a point where
You can't embrace individuality

Growing up with colors
What makes you different from others?
A unicorn at a dinner party
Heads turned, as each step was taken
Cautiously observing
They ask, who do you belong with?
cannot answer, will not answer
just a unicorn, nothing else, nothing ever

Growing up learning about colors
Realizations have been made
As the subconscious mind diverge
Upon those unbearable thoughts
Curling up in a corner
It's the petrifying giggles, driving it
Towards the ledge
Off of a four-story-high building
Sister, may I offer you a hand
The sufferings end today

No more rocks
No more silence
Sister, let them know
You're stronger than that
Let them know you're surrounded in a field of sunflowers

Grandma used to say, “孩子要勇敢!”

Child be brave!

Mother used to say, “不用害怕!”

Don't be afraid!

Growing up making colors

learn how to embrace the soul, sister

So be proud, sister, and let it be known!

Let the world taste the colors.

Start of the Everlasting Night

Michael Rodriguez

Farnese arose from the thumping sound of her heart. She looked around in confusion. "Where am I" she asked herself. A singular drop streaked down her cheek. As if it were second nature, she wiped her face. As she stands, she feels the dryness of her mouth, her lips inseparable like chains. She breathed heavily but the cold air seemed like sandpaper to her throat and nose. All she could see was darkness, the room filled with dead-silence. She turned around and saw an old but somewhat familiar door. The door was surrounded by bricks that would break apart with but a single touch. The door was veiled with orange as it had been decaying for years. She stumbled her way to the door, as if bags of sand were weighing her down. She held her arms close to her chest , but her only company was the continuous echo of her footsteps. Twisting the orange veiled handle, a squealing sound broke the silence. Her eyebrows gathered and she let out a sigh, but she entered regardless. The room was deserted. Instead of being pitch black, it seemed to be a foggy dark ombré. Disappointed but somewhat relieved, she turned around to head out. To her surprise the door seemed to vanish. Her heart dropped. The sense of fear she tried so hard to avoid began to grow inside of her. Out of denial, she turned to look for the door once more; however, she was no longer alone. She was surrounded. Hundreds of dolls and puppets hung down from a never ending height. Only a rope hugging their necks kept them upright. They were covered in dirt and were ragged. They were lifeless. However, she spotted one out of the ordinary. A doll unlike the rest. It had spotless bright white clothes. A doll she seemed to know. A sharp pain as if a nail had been hammered into her heart suddenly hit her. Farnese dropped to the floor. Intangible words uttered from her mouth. Short breaths and hot tears crashed down her face. She laid there motionless. Her back curved, head bowed, and limbs bent and drawn to her torso. She was lonely but not alone.

Poetry

"I know that you dreamed of me,
That's why I could not sleep."

-Anna Akhmatova
"Sleep"

Synthetic Doves

Rahul Jakati

"Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds.

—J. Robert Oppenheimer

In the end, the crashing waves, ravenous, rust-colored, sing the songs of war.

Damned are the wretched fools who wreck their ships against the shore clanging steel boots on the sand as swords hum from their scabbards. Cats crawl from the men and children weep under their armored skins and women pluck the heads from ants in the silted grass. Helmets of ash and shadow consume the blanket hordes of sentience under the triumvirate. But among the willowed fingers and treaded sand, there is something else, something haunting the battlefields of the morrow.

You.

You stand in a pit of bubbling tar and You hold the scalps of yesteryear on the hooks of their deceit. Knotted bone and flesh swing on the tides, memories of the olden, begotten times, when the merest whisper instilled a frenzy, the deepest rage, a cacophony of hatred and power that fueled the same; brutal loops of terror that rise when minds rot with the pure white heat of the chase, and You feel the cold steel of your sword, tempered by conflagration, sink through the skin, and You are here, pins and pins, punctured lungs and bleeding hearts, wearing their heart on your sleeve and nothing else but the wrought horrors of the mongrels who hide under the cloaks of their masters, lapdogs who need to culled, who will be culled under the firelight of the brightest pain of battle.

You are eternal. You are war.

You stand at the threshold of human existence, the last gauntlet to the perilous pleasure of a great death. And it is a pleasure, it is, to hunger for the souls of your kin so as to kill and kill with no remorse or sorrow or feeling but the joy of mindless gluttony in pursuit of the vacuumed bliss of non-existence. You have always stood in the shadows, in the minds and matter of harmonious peace. But even peace is war, even peace is a dictation of torment upon the starving sod that thirst for the shedding of the ambulatory thorns barbed by law and order. And that is the virus that has infected the souls of the human race. From politics comes pretense, which empties the mind and fills the listening voice with itself. You look at the rags of soldiers still streaming out of the dripping hulls and see flags furled and fruiting on the nor'easter as even the smallest crevice is wrecked with the adornments of a nation that has already been lost to the annals of time. These men and women and children are bodies crammed into bodies that are not their own. Their thoughts are not

their own. They fight not for themselves but for an alien entity that exists purely in the abstractions of their patriotism to the petty squabbles of old men who sit weak, flabby, disjointed. They are not truly here, neither the moon nor the sun, for each precludes the other from ever truly existing in their own virtue.

You are war. You pull a man's mandible from his skull and stuff it down his spewing throat.

And You are not like them. You separate a woman from her lungs.

You do not think. You hold a squirming child underwater and squeeze until the waters bursts red.

You act. You douse the screaming in oil and set alight your dreams.

You are war. But what You are doing is not war. They do not deserve war. No, this is a rapture.

And You are the annihilation.

Chores

Rahul Jakati

3 rolls of duct tape, 17\$

Jane has three children and loves them very dearly.

Richard takes care of three children and a hole in the sink.

1 kitchen knife, 65\$

Jane has tears in her eyes.

Richard is reading the newspaper while stealing sips from the French onion soup.

1 pair of jumper cables, 22\$

Jane has a Tesla that whines.

Richard closes the trunk after several attempts.

12 pack of rubber gloves, 12\$

Jane has a sponge and sweat beading on her brow.

Richard is taking out the trash.

4 coils of nylon rope. 37\$

Jane has a piece to hang.

Richard attends his last yoga workshop.

1 Flight ticket, 475\$

Jane has always wanted to visit Naples.

Exodus 2:22

Rahul Jakati

Apollo—sun of our stars, star of our sons and
daughters of our fallow soil, the aching whole in our heart
drowning in a sable sea, swallowing blacks and blues while
angler's lures hang from the primordial sky, the allure
of transcendence, hanging from an aching earth
rings of O₂ oxygen and rings of hell
the faint smell of gunpowder
an astronaut on the edge of heaven
arcs of feathering phosphorescence, blinding
against our obsidian mosaic of hydrogen and hubris
blinking, breathe out, blinking, breathe out
Where do we go, what do we see,
when all is said
when all is done?

Lustrous and Lost

Rex Xiao

He has always been lustrous and lost,
especially here in this nest-like bathtub, yellow rims

that eat the white and forge brown. Lustrous was
the amulet of Salika, sprinkled with perfume

gleaming with charm. Lost was the doctor's "no more
too-tight jeans for now." Lustrous were the rap and dance

after three shots of tequila and too-sweet
pumpkin pie at a Michelin. Lost was a roll of Ilford

at the train station, won the backpackers' gazes
only to turn out blank. Lustrous was the poster

across from the bed, "I want to believe." Lost
were the X-Files, muted blue with gray. Bathed

with leather and lemonade, his DIY slime
was lustrous. Lost then was what he called

"I can't fuck anymore." Meals
after meals he was lost and more

lost, for days he looked at the IG profile
of the man he met at Palace. The lost

Jinro Soju his mother tosses in the trash.
She wants a lustrous child. He is lost,

so she makes him ginseng tea: now he can recover
from anal wart removal. Lost, his silver nails fade.

Because he is lustrous, after a fight with his mother,
he asks, "Are you tired?" What is lost

is what he perceives. The HPV signs on campus, the
Truth or Dare's "describe your best sex." Lustrous, lost,

lustrous and lost, his mother, more caring
than the ginseng tea, calls him "my beautiful boy."

Conditional Sentences for Beauty Products

Rex Xiao

If you saw me coated with Valmont Renewing Mask
you would know the parching chill of iced latte;

and if you saw me doting and dabbing as I spread the MUFE Reboot
you would know I was running low on melatonin tabs.

If my jawline swelled too much
you would drain my lymphatic fluids;

if Artclass by Rodin too cool for school
you would take me to Sophie's for a night of truth or dare.

Oh if my eyebrow pencil got blunt you would help me, if Mac Omega busted
you would fix it, if Rouge Dior inflamed my lips

you would treat me to a box of Raisinets, you would dry my speedo
in a salad spinner, you would file my nails with a Kiss emery board.

If you smelled the sage and lavender too strong
you would know how much I hate the canvasser for Y Eau de Toilette;

and if you saw me wipe my hair with Kérastase oil
you would know I was still blaming myself for a Sunday at Elegant;

and if the Shu Uemura spray didn't last
you would photo me with a Pentax not advancing.

If my white jacket was stained by the lifted boat—
if my heels were chafed by Converse high tops—if I got tired of IG posts—
you would remind me not to act like a balloon
but to speak in a low-pitched, slightly husky voice.

The Zen-Like Shampoo

Rex Xiao

This Zen-like,
labeled fresh from salon, squeezed
in places, treatment possibility

for the love of chicken wings.
Its smoothing
formula, circa 2008.

I've experimented a great many things:
the ubiquity of lure, balance
I did or did not reach.

But let the record show
that I was sober.
O let the Zen-like shampoo

stand! For Dr. Lao rhinoplasty
with cartilage harvested and grafted;
for Christine at Fat Tuesday;

for the girl behind at Magic Mike,
flood of mojito; and Pasolini's
pyrotechnic camera. For Egbert,

drunk at S's studio, and the Moto brothers
catching up Hollywood Reporter, the rickshaws
along Broadway when the show ends

for their cozy, well-equipped carriages
and empowering compliments when I pass.
Let the price be wild

but let the shampoo be Zen-like
and stand against the ordinary,

protective, soothingly healthy

subdued in everyday stagnancy.

Let me have in any future

some Zen-like thing to love,

here Baltimore, MD 3339 North Charles St.

Aspiration (The Great Beanstalk)

Henry Bergles

One bite into the pear, its flesh quickly browning

Darkening like a deep void, the seeds stare into me

An imagined spade, a casket for the tainted fruit

Sealed shut, interred in sterile, salted soil

An irritant will burn the box; a mosquito bites my heel

Venomous madness, from my skin to my brain

One crack demolished my mind's beautiful fortress,

The paranoid plant sprouts, a titanic vine erupts

Sending seismic shocks down my spine, I grip the stalk

As its thorns embrace me, I ascended like a hawk's prey

My hollow lungs gasp for air, but my eyes look down below

Ascent is the only heaven, every blissful thrill must end

Dread looms in the back of my throat, an existential nausea

A faint snipping sound and I am severed from it, diving

Whenever I land, I hope there will be peace.

Putting the Other Self to Rest

Henry Bergles

My left hand will close his right eyelid
My right hand will gently massage his jaw
We're still in the waiting room, but I start to shiver
The glass has frosted on the double doors behind me
I cannot recognize his tranquil face, free of anger and spite
I take one last look, and I hear the robins chirp outside.
The carriers embalm him with refrigerant
He will stay perfectly sound asleep, they tell me it will be painless.
Who will know if he will come back?
Through the waiting room, or through the other side.
Maybe I will allow him to thaw someday
But as he melts, the wounds left by the sharp ice crystals will be exposed
I don't think I ever want to remember myself.
I tell the carriers to keep him frozen away where I can't see him.

Landscape Thermometer

Henry Bergles

Farther than the horizon, past a place you can see
Don't try to find me; I exit the cabin on my tiptoes
The heart of the forest next to a stream, it's both a place and a feeling
Shame placed inside a box with nine locks, set loose by the current
Chilly reverberations once frozen in forgetfulness
The bright cactus removes the mask, and I peel off my face.
Nude skeleton, rolling in the dirt, sensitive bones, bulging organs
Spewing pills of numbness, begone with the horror of nothingness
Transient limerence for the sickness of life, passes by
I come back to the cabin with a torch, singed fingertips, guiltless arson
Beautiful aromatic smoke fills my lungs; I love what I destroyed
Riding on the back of a luminous white steed, we ride to the unfinished bridge
I inhale a new infatuation as I look high up across the chasm.

Emotional Mess

Timothy McShea

Preface:

This is a poem to deal with the present,
It doesn't seek structure, to understand.
So you best ignore it.
Goodbye.

I:

All in all, for once in forever,
I am glad for your glades.
Walking through your stalks, sunk
In aspens, a momentary falter
Where I can sit by your pond.
There is a private sense in me and you.
Though personal imaginations can consume
The crevice of your smile, when we
Are together, in this sanctioned bit of sky,
Your dewy, tearful eyes seem more real
Than whatever it is within mine.

Interlude:

This is a poem I wrote before I knew your glade—

The various forms of Earth and Beauty came
As is what is not, inside my mind and then
They curled up and died, never to be the same,
Never will I seek them again.

And still, I sought.

II:

Give me your hand, I smell
A smoky fragrance, stinging my eyes.
The grey surfs my memory like death
Or a bad high, tonguing flames lick
The gap between my brain and my skull.

In these times I wonder if you provide the glade
Or if my joy is brought from fighting
And not your name. As the fire in the depths
Ripples the sky in heat, I recognize
The stone, my sedentary past,
Where I laid between your tulips,
Under your feet.

III:

I think the fire has finally left...
Though nothing awakens my skin
Like the sight of a solitary ember,
That turns into fly, or the smoke
That turns into vapor, the water
Uplifted by the light. I think
Something has died within my mind.
It is crying, and I don't know why.
It screams—"Cry, for I have left you"
You have died within my mind.

Epilogue:

This is too much like Wordsworth
To be worth anything. At least,
That's what you think, that's what
I sometimes think, when I'm in
A particularly cynical mood.
Child is the father of Man,
And I, the Poet, am perpetually
Naïve. I only learn through
Poems, you must understand,
It's like the process of recollecting,
Taking something I already understood,
And repeating it to myself,
With rhythm.

Author's Note:

The good and bad thing about poems
Is that you can relive them,
Again and
Again.

Colin Wu

I.

Before Sense grasps my back
– Front fleeting forward –
I wish for eternity.

But to last is to be profoundly silly.
The world in its austerity cannot allow it.
Therefore, under this natural severity
We stand with heels touched,
Sit with knees closed – hands resting on top of them —
And sleep dreamless:

All the stars opposing – merely
A sudden darkness, then morning.

II.

In feeling's lieu all leaves of the world come rushing in gust-motivated,
And the careless broom should dance its solitary waltz atop the corpses.

What leaves? What gust?
It dances with a nonchalance.

III.

I always wait as if it's dew on a hanging leaf's margin's edge.
Hope can inflict an urgent imminence on that which cannot be.

The tide of Humber will never reach the Indian Ganges' side.
Go now, you can go find your rubies.

Five-Sports Athlete

Lucas Seotz Miller

Ten years old: Swimming

The humid sting of chlorinated air. Shouting from instructors and splashing from students. Tiled floors send the cacophony echoing through cavernous space. I surface for a breath. I gasp. My head drops back under. All I hear is water. Churning. Roaring. My swim cap pinches my hair. My goggles compress my skull. I just want my dad to pick me up. I try to keep kicking my leaden legs. I can't. I'm drowning.

Twelve years old: Basketball

A sharp autumn breeze. The whisper of dying leaves. Grunts and yells from muscled men sweating at nearby hoops. We play during recess. Four on four. I sprint down court as a teammate hurls a long pass at me. I catch it, trying to secure the ball in my too-small hands. I'm right beneath the basket. No one else around. I put the ball up. It clanks off the rim, falling back down to me. Thunderous footsteps. A defender approaches. I shoot again. As the ball leaves my hands, the defender soars into view and smacks it away. A collective cry of victory from my enemies. A chorus of groans from my teammates. Everyone peppers me with insults.

Fourteen years old: Tennis

The artificial chill of a pressurized atmosphere. Squeaking shoes from other teens competing on adjacent courts. I am serving. I am inside my own head, looking out through binoculars flipped the wrong way. Above, parents watch their children battle from a glassed-in viewing area. I look up at my dad. He knows I will lose. I begin my serve, trying to move fluidly. I feel like a robot checking off steps. Bring my right arm back, bring my left arm up, release the ball into the air and whip my racket through. The ball thwacks into the net. I force myself to breathe, refocus. Don't think, just do. I go through the motions again, sending my serve sailing deep. A double fault. With my head down I step to the other side of the baseline and prepare to double fault again. And again.

Sixteen years old: Football

Brutal winter wind. Patchy grass and slick mud. No sound anywhere except our game. Eight on eight. A Christmas Day tradition. From high in the air, the kickoff tumbles down at me. I catch it. Suddenly I'm on the ground, the ball rolling away into the possession of an opponent. My ribs throb. My friend towers over me. We're supposed to be playing two-hand touch, not tackle. I get up gingerly and wipe dirt from my clothes. Back at the line of scrimmage, I remind my friend this isn't the

NFL. He just grins at me. As the next play starts, he charges and smashes his shoulder into my chest, sending me sprawling. Now he's wide open and the ball floats into his ready hands. My teammates lambast me for letting him get past. I tell them he's playing dirty. They tell me to deal with it. Limping back to the line of scrimmage, I prepare for a long game.

Eighteen years old: Baseball

Pollen in the air above the dusty diamond. Buzzing flies. The crack of wood bat on leather ball. Our opponents have too few players so we win by forfeit. We send a few of our guys to their team so we can scrimmage. I'm one of those transferred. Last inning now. My real team leads my temporary team nine to zero. A grounder sizzles toward me at shortstop. I recall my dad's advice. Head down, body in front of the ball. Don't be scared. Play the ball, don't let it play you. I do what I'm told. The ball hits a pebble and leaps up at my throat, leaving a seam-shaped abrasion on my Adam's apple before rocketing up off my jaw. I try to stick with the play, chase the ball down. I can't. I'm choking.

Twenty years old: I don't play sports anymore.

Mourning Doves

Lucas Seotz Miller

In the alley next to the building where I do my laundry, on the ledge above the door, I see a mourning dove. She sits amidst a stack of sticks, her eggs tucked safe and warm within, while droplets from the misty morning air collect on her feathers. I stare at her, a pleasant surprise. She stares at me, an imminent threat. Police sirens whip by on the street just feet away. I want to tell her I mean no harm, but how? If I reach out she'll shy away, or peck at me, or worst of all, freak out and upset her nest, losing her babies to the concrete below. While I want to stay and watch her, I know every moment I'm here she's tense with fear. I give her a smile, as if she knows what a smile means. Then I open the door under her roost and go inside to do my laundry.

I find myself longing to see her again, but I stay away out of respect. However, one day I have to pass by in the course of my human duties, and I see the chicks have hatched. Tiny and fragile, they rest in the nest, awash in the new world. Their fine feathers look damp, as though they've just emerged from egg to existence. Their eyes are closed, their mom's wide open, taking in the danger of a place they don't yet know. I fantasize about bringing them food, seeds on a little dish. Mom could stay with her babies instead of leaving in search of sustenance. But I know reality would not align with the fairytale in my head. Maybe she has a dove partner, who is out on the hunt right now, pulling grubs from tree branches, bringing them back to hungry mouths.

I do some research. Turns out I don't know a thing about mourning doves. Mom and Dad take turns in the nest, so maybe I've been seeing Dad, or both parents, indistinguishable to my untrained eye biased by gendered notions of child-rearing. And the parents secrete a milky substance from their digestive tracts to feed their babies, so they have no need for my food. With my human hubris I assumed I could help. They know what they're doing. I'll give them space.

I go to do my laundry and see that the chicks have become fledglings. They're so much larger, more than half the size of their parents. Their downy fluff has turned to proper feathers. Their useless nubs have grown into wings. I give them a little wave. If only I spoke their language.

Masquerade

Maeve Mintz Feinblatt

You were always something like coal on ice
I could dismiss your rigidity that settled itself in silence
By drowning in my own selfish thoughts
Neither of us present, even remotely, to the being of one another
We intertwined in this mysterious web of increasingly romantic solitude
Where neither one could rest on anything other than what was our ultimate desire
The compromise was neither yours nor mine,
For there was never a thing we truly shared

We whispered in the soft-skin ears of our own listening minds
Agape, our mouths,
Circles in our own repetitive thoughts

I wrote to you,
Or about you,
In ways that echoed lovers speech
How hard, I tried
To convince myself

In the waking nights where the moon caressed a sleepless chin, and
Tiptoed around forming thoughts
That for you, my heart was full

And that we had lived something beautiful
And my tireless nights were because it was you who was missing
And not because there was something so significant within me

That also
Was lost

I danced to your memory
With a knife pressed against my back
Reaching towards an impossible ghost
Of a version of you that cared
No longer do I get these images of you
That exist out of sheer recollection.

Where you aren't some complexity that wracks my aching brain
Into a submissive emotion
Where it is just easier to say I love you,

Than to tell the truth
And say that I have no idea who you are.
And that what we were
Meant both nothing,
and everything,
to me
In a hundred relics of a broken masquerade

Colors

Maeve Mintz Feinblatt

Everything is gray
a subdued vibrancy of the softest tones
a gentleness in color
the most non-violent
the least explosive
gray

it emulates melancholy
personifies the city streets
gives character to the unlit lamps
and the steadily marching feet

every last biotic
abiotic
creature
is an impartial
impatient
shade
of unremarkable
gray

the yellow street signs
wear a cloak of shade
it's hues lessened by my imagination
the shining buildings
dangling from the sky
into the heavens
their faces begin to fade
their windows leak with bleakness
an infinite mirror
reflecting my haunting
excruciating
weakness

the river flows steady

grayer than gray
i turn to it for direction
but it never stays the same

cars pass by
but i am immune to their presence
for my eyes
are perpetually fixated
on their anti-tonal essence
my senses engulfed
by the gray
the gray
the gray

i am it's subject
to the filter in the sky
shining down
making everything dull
but i never ask why

i don't mind
the sunless sky
the everlasting color
that cannot escape my mind

my stomach bleeds red
a constant pain
consumes me
dilutes me
until i am nothing
Until I'm dead

my head burns blue
sadness
Deep sadness
swimming in the ocean
It is a swirling pool

of my every emotion
i try to navigate
but i cannot read the stars.
they cannot guide me
And yet they've brought me this far

i move aimlessly through this sea of blue
i have burned the bridges that could have saved me
and now
i don't know
what it is
i'm supposed to do

Girl on Fire

Maeve Mintz Feinblatt

to be with me, is to watch a plane fall
an irrevocable tragedy, no one could predict it, but it was bound to happen
sometime after all

the descending metal bird
that is crashing down into deception

its painful journey down catches your
every attention

a car crash, on the other side of the highway.
you are mesmerized by the flames
but careful not to let the ensuing traffic
get in your way

you pray to god that everything will be ok
but it's not enough of a horrific tragedy
to let the destruction ruin your own day

a beautiful catastrophe,
spinning in her eyes
you watch her implode further and further
until finally it's up to you to decide

captivated by her confident smile, she lures you in
and you long to stay a while

but as it goes further, you begin to see
that she is the girl you have read about,
or watched in awe on a flatscreen tv

it's not all fun and games,
being with the girl on fire.
she makes you want her,
until your skin bleeds with desire

her delicate hands wrapped gently around your throat,
but in her circle of lies,
she has herself surrounded by a blazing moat

Caught in her distracted arms
you are soothed by a gentle voice
her hair smells of roses;
And you have convinced yourself
That you were her first choice

to be with her is to watch her go,
she detaches from reality
until she remembers no more

it breaks your heart
as you watch your favorite person
crumble, stumble, and eventually fall apart

once enthralled by her endless enigma,
she has frightened you,
startled you.
now

you've had enough of her melancholic dilemma

standing alone, on her island of tears
you wish you could hold her one last time
you wish you could rid her of her crippling fears

but she has turned her back, nose turned up into the wind.
you stare at her hair.
there, on the water,
she stands in the skin
you know she loathes to be in

toes scrunches in the sand,
it's by her side

you wish you could stand.

her mouth ambiguous, not smiling nor frowning.

You'd think she'd rise further,
Yet she's dreaming of drowning

You gaze at her
one final time.
you can't help but stop yourself.
you search for a sign.

But she looks so at peace there, alone by the single palm tree.
maybe that's where she belongs.
you've never seen a caged bird
look so free.

where does she go, when she closes her eyes?
This is your final thought
before you inevitably say goodbye

Prose

"A bird chirps. Cottagers light their early candles. Yes, this is the eternal renewal, the incessant rise and fall and fall and rise again."

Virginia Woolf
The Waves

LIQUID POOLS IN THE TRAGEDY OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Luciana Ramos Barroso

PROLOGUE

Conscious creature, these collected writings are legacy transcribed in understandable medium for thinking entities, including (but not limited to) homo sapiens. Promptly, you will be presented with the collected writings of a chimpanzee post-Consciousness evolution. It is worth mentioning that Asophegy and Nihshuq titled their Selves post-Mushroom era, but to avoid confusion, their identifying terms are used in pre-Mushroom era descriptions.

Notably, esteemed entity, your Self will notice each entry begins with a musical piece (with its respective artist), thus it is highly advocated that you play such piece whilst reading each entry to connect to Asophegy's transcriptions and further heighten this experience.

ENTRY ZERO

[L'Ile neu (Hikaru Hayashi)]

I write of a past of which I have no conscious remembrance--similar to a human's inability to look back to the moment of their birth. Hence, the following is what I hypothesize was of Nihshuq and I pre-Mushroom era: no conscious perception of our existence. Nihshuq and I were each of today and of has been, and there was something in each that was of tomorrow and of the day-after-tomorrow and of the shall-be.¹

With scientific knowledge, it is certain that Nihshuq and I's habitat was somewhere in what is now the tropics of Central Africa. We fed on fruits and insects nearby and existed with sentience, but no contemplation. How it is or whose initiative it was to eat Mushrooms will be as big of a mystery for me as is consciousness itself. Alas, with no purpose we ate the them possibly because there were insects on them. With no awareness, it is the case that by biting into the Mushrooms, our bodies digested them and our brains were forever rewired by their magic substance.² Thus, as the trip began, the Mushroom became a room for us to turn on, tune in, and drop out.³

¹ Inspired by Nietzsche's Thus Spoke Zarathustra, specifically Of Poets chapter.

² Reference to Terence McKenna's Stoned Ape Theory, theorizing that what enabled homo erectus to evolve into homo sapiens was its encounter with magic mushrooms and psilocybin, the psychedelic compound within them.

³ Timothy Leary--psychologist and advocate of the psychedelic movement amidst the counterculture movement of the 1960s--famously used this phrase. Turn on meant to go within to activate one's neural and genetic equipment. Tune in referred to interacting harmoniously with the world. Drop out advocated for a graceful process of detachment from involuntary or unconscious commitments as a vow to self-reliance.

ENTRY ONE

1

[Prelude à l'après-midi d'un faune (Claude Debussy)]

We were sitting near the liquid pool when it occurred, which I presume we frequented for its richness in fruit and good weather conditions. Suddenly, I became aware of "I". The Mushroom spoke to me as thought existed in my stream of neurological communication, unable to decay from my system. This is when "I" was for the first time.

Even if I could describe this particular moment's peculiarity, there would still always be something left over that I cannot depict. It is too immediate to be reduced into words because however expressive, language and symbols can never be the things they stand for.⁴ In essence, I acknowledged my existence. "For how long?" I seemed to ask my newly discovered Self as I scanned my body with my eyes whilst also looking at it from the reflection provided by the liquid pool.

"For as long as you think," I heard the Mushroom in my system announce. I felt startled at first and so I closed my eyes and laid on the grassy field.

"So for as long as I think, I exist. 'I' is, therefore, nothing but a thinking thing: a 'mind', an intellect." I told my Self of this circumstance I was previously ignorant of.

I opened my eyes as I realized they were still closed. "So what is 'I'?" I asked as I wandered about my surrounding environment painted by the highly contrasting and vibrant colors of the flowers.

"'I' is not the wind," said the Mushroom in my system as I felt a breeze making its way through my flesh. "'I' is not fire," said the Mushroom as I felt my body warming. "'I' is not anything you devise for your Self," said the Mushroom as my bewilderment intensified.

"'I' has to be something, though. Is it perhaps the case that these very things which I take to be nothing because they are unknown to me, nevertheless are in fact no different from that 'me' that I know?"⁵ I enquired to the Mushroom in my system as I made my way up a tree.

I now felt propelled to approach Nihshuq, who I sensed was having the same ecstatic experience. Nihshuq was hugging a branch of a tree when I touched their shoulder. They approached me and we descended to the ground where we stared intensely at each other in euphoric like-mindedness, realizing the mushroom was communicating to us simultaneously.

⁴ Inspired by Aldous Huxley's Doors of Perception

⁵ Inspired by René Descartes's Discourse On Method And Meditations.

We held hands, sensing the smallness of our Selves yet embracing the ambiguity of these joyful differences that managed to coexist. "Everything is a dance of particles!" I exclaimed as I encouraged Nihshuq to dance with me.

2

"Infinity is everywhere! That's what makes it infinity!" Nihshuq exalted as we danced to the music of our minds and ran through the forest.

"The universe is an infinite sphere whose center is everywhere and circumference is nowhere!"⁶ I cried back as we embraced and ran towards a field of strawberries.⁷ We laid down, closed our eyes, and allowed the visions to permeate our perception. Thus, this desire for infinity and absolute freedom emerged as we exercised these new-found neurological abilities.

We jumped out of the planet's atmosphere and placed ourselves in the cosmic web. It was dauntingly beautiful. As we traveled through different stars, we could hear melancholic harmonious melodies playing to the point where we could feel the magnificent dancing and unity of the particles that hugged us. We witnessed the breakdown of macroscopic objects into vibratory patterns, and the collapse of external structures into dancing wave rhythms.

After getting comfortable with eternity, we comprehended this communication with the Mushrooms would soon end. The last moments were the most overwhelming because the Mushrooms spoke. What they said, superficially reduced, was that although the universe has a predictable and organized behavior, we cannot grasp its simplicity due to our limited experiences of the unexplored states of consciousness. As the music piece ended, I could feel my 'self' precipitating. Certainly, this loss of self lead to a gain in meaning I never knew I could know.

The Mushroom in my system kept saying "Asophecy". Suddenly I thought

I had slid back to the cosmic web, but to the surprise of my ecstatic perception, I was veritably in my brain's neural network!

"Nihshuq," said Nihshuq as we both opened our eyes.

I understood what that utterance meant. "Asophecy," I replied to Nihshuq as comfortable silence ensued for the remainder of the night.

ENTRY TWO

[Coppelia Waltz (Léo Delibes)]

Bear in mind, we had no concept of time for we could only conceive of what was "Now". All we thought of it was that 'Now' came and went as soon as we spoke of

⁶ Inspired by David Russell's film I Heart Huckabees.

⁷ Reference to The Beatles' Strawberry Fields Forever.

it. "Past", "present", or "future" only exist in verbs. Even as I write this, I know the clock's measure is false for there is no real measure of time. When I speak with the Mushrooms, I experience how time measures us without any measure for it is just a frame placed around slices of "Now".⁸

3

But to abide to spacetime confines, a week had elapsed since the first consumption of Mushrooms. What happened in this period was intense reflection and conversation accompanied by a nomad lifestyle that allowed thoughts to arise with flow and ease. We traveled to new locations, both physically, by foot, and mentally, by Mushrooms.

"Before eating Mushrooms we just existed. Now it's like we live with an internal narrator, providing feedback instants after an action. Now we have to make stories of everything, we have to leave some sort of legacy behind as proof we existed," I told Nihshuq as we stared at the shower of stars upon us.

"I suppose we didn't record our actions nor transcribe our thoughts. But now, the Mushrooms hear us, they store our conversations for the rest to follow that will consume them. Our flesh hears us, it stores this wisdom in our DNA," Nihshuq wisely replied.

"I see what you mean. This makes me wonder: do we do a thing merely to do the thing?" I uttered. "We must remain completely absorbed in the thing that's to be done or else we must assign some sort of purpose to it.⁹ What purpose, though? Do you know, Nihshuq?" I asked before elaborating further, not expecting a response.

"The Mushrooms never told us anything about meaning... Is the purpose merely that of doing it?" I continued with uncertainty.

"Why, yes, it must be! That's the tragic way life's lived. You know, this thing today, something else tomorrow. They may feel different but they are all objectively devoid of meaning,"⁹ Nihshuq said as their facial expression changed.

ENTRY THREE¹⁰

[Le Carnaval des Animaux, R. 125: 13. Le Cygne (Camille Saint-Saëns)]
Another human week elapsed. We descended from the trees into land and began walking. The eclipse was about to occur and we desired to watch it from the top of the mountain near the liquid pool. Nihshuq was behind my Self and stopped for a moment, as they were distracted by the reflection of their physical Self in the liquid pool. They let out a scream and I quickly approached them. "Whatever is the matter,

⁸ Inspired by Fernando Pessoa's Book Of Disquiet.

⁹ Inspired by Luigi Pirandello's Short Stories, specifically the chapter Destruction of Man.

¹⁰ Inspired by Luigi Pirandello's One, No One, And One Hundred Thousand.

Nihsttuq?" I asked.

Acknowledging my near presence but not looking at my Self, they said, "I can't ever be alone. Look!" Nihsttuq said pointing toward their reflection which was next to mine in the still liquid pool.

"Tell me more," I said with curiosity, not entirely following their train of thought.

4

"This liquid mirrors this flesh that we call our bodies, but that is someone else," Nihsttuq explained, "they are an outsider inseparable from our Selves. Solitude is unreachable." After a long pause, they screamed in agony: "I can't unsee it! It's all because of Mushrooms". Nihsttuq was overcome by despair as they stared at the liquid pool.

"Unsee it? What do you mean, creature? Before Mushrooms, we did not contemplate and were reduced to the biochemical processes in our internal systems," I enquired in confusion. I felt my body shiver as fog enveloped me.

Nihsttuq went into further agitation. "Asophecy, this is all absurd. It's absurd! What's the point of being aware? Reality is distorted randomness: looking at what you look at when perceiving me, I never sensed my Self through my appearance. Now I am unable to picture that Self that is reflected in the liquid pool in the actions of my existence," they cried. "I'm scared that I'm conscious," Nihsttuq wept.

This had not occurred to me. Indeed, I was also unable to see my Self existing the same way Nihsttuq perceived "Asophecy" existing. We stood before the liquid, every body movement felt artificial.

Nihsttuq got closer to the liquid, examining their Self, tempted to touch it. I must admit, it was alluring to because it was so very reminiscent of the unknown: unfathomable and distant, yet felt so close and to our reach.

"Nihsttuq, we mustn't surrender. You are wise. You've realized that each of us is not constituted by a single persona, but rather that we are an impermanent concept. So regardless of the staggering dimensions of the cosmos we inhabit, we are free to will our existence in its finiteness, a finiteness which is available within the infinite,"¹¹ I said.

Nihsttuq was nonreceptive for a moment. "To be alive is to be in motion but never arriving anywhere," they said in disquiet as they finally approached the liquid, inching closer and closer. At the sight of this, I screeched. Even pre-Mushroom era it was embedded in our anatomy that we were never to make contact with the liquid for it would kill us. Now, as I write this in the midst of scientific knowledge

¹¹ Inspired by Simone de Beauvoir's Ethics Of Ambiguity.

brought by homo sapiens, I have learned this liquid is liquid mercury—exposure to a pool of one is an assured death.

"You don't understand, Asophecy. I am to confront that Self. I will converse with them to understand what the cure for absurdity is. I can only do this by experiencing that Self reflected in the liquid. I am overwhelmed with existing. I am now to pursue nothingness." With this, Nihsttuq ceased to live as they entered the realm of nonexistence.

5

ENTRY FOUR

[Ebb Tide (Al Anthony)]

Since the death of Nihsttuq, I have not returned to the liquid pool. After some time of silent solitude, I communicated with Mushrooms once again. "Even when it comes to dying, tread lightly," they told me. "Don't try too hard. When you do it's dark, and this is because of your sly desire for there to be light,"¹² they told me.

Accordingly, I carried my Self lightly: I thought and acted gently regardless of how profoundly I felt. In contrast, I realized, Nihsttuq's communication with Mushroom was unnecessarily serious, thus they coped darkly. By thinking so much, they became echo and abyss.¹³ I think that's why they did what they did.

Nihsttuq cognized that they would never be able to get rid of the outsider within their Self and felt dismay at this acknowledgment. They wanted to catch their Self in natural actions, but that is an impossible undertaking for doing so would mean one could perceive their Self as another Self perceives them.¹⁴ Nihsttuq wanted to confront that outsider whose reflection they stared at through the liquid mirror and mistook the outsider within their Self as an entity to antagonize.

They evidently surrendered to mistranslation from what the Mushroom showed them. I only wish I could tell them that, yes, we are always in our own presence, but that each of us is an entire community, an entire vicinity of absurdity. From the facades of our feelings to the alcoves of our insecurities, everything should be embraced as noble and serene, sculpted in the same sobriety and rawness that Mushrooms exist in.¹⁵

I appreciate that I will never know whether it was Nihsttuq or my Self who first bit the Mushroom pre-Mushroom era. I embrace this absurdity because that's what makes it so grand: that it is without beginning, like

¹² Inspired by Aldous Huxley's Island

¹³ Inspired by Fernando Pessoa's Book Of Disquiet.

¹⁴ Inspired by Luigi Pirandello's One, No One, And One Hundred Thousand.

¹⁵ Inspired by Fernando Pessoa's Book Of Disquiet.

the universe—both confronting one as suddenly as if they had always been there.¹⁶ The Mushrooms opened the doors of reflecting the minuteness and brevity which is intimately connected with the sense that life is without object and rather than weep to this, I laugh at it.¹⁷ I find so much in this narrative because I feel indebted to Nihshuq for allowing me to have the experience of consciously perceiving this dream that needs no justification.

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16 Inspired by Boris Pasternak's Doctor Zhivago.

17 Inspired by Thomas Nagel's The Absurd.

A Starlit Stroll

Carlos Gamboa

A man stood alone in the ninth-floor hallway, absent-mindedly gazing out the window. The city stretched out before him, twinkling through the darkness; below, countless cars streaked past glowing storefronts. The hallway was lined with identical apartment doors: their doorknobs protruded like eye stalks, leering at him from the corner of his eye. The fluorescent lights beat down on him like an unforgiving alien sun.

He was professionally dressed despite the unnatural hour. His dress shoes gently reflected the overhead lights, his pants as dark and pristine as the starless city sky. He wore a matching, perfectly pressed suit jacket over a crisp, neatly tucked white shirt. His elegant dress did little to hide his frightfully thin figure, though: his outfit hung on him loosely, like a child playing in his father's uniform. His jet-black hair was elegantly brushed to the right side of his ghostly pale face, which was covered in a fine, shining layer of sweat. His right hand fiddled with his jacket, buttoning and un-buttoning it compulsively; his left hand was stuck in his mouth, nails bitten down to soggy, stinging stubs. Although his eyes stared forward, his thoughts were elsewhere. It had a plan for him tonight. He took his hand out of his mouth, wiped the spit off on his pant leg and, with an audible gulp, re-buttoned his jacket. It was time to go.

As he turned towards the elevators, he sensed it observing him from down the hall. It was more colossal than ever before, its inky mass filling the space almost to bursting. A feverish chill ran down his spine: his skin was frigid and taught, but his insides boiled over with a sickening mixture of excitement and dread. He choked back the sudden urge to vomit as he pressed the elevator button. Gradually, a rumble rose in the building's steel throat: it started as a clattering whisper, growing progressively fiercer and nearer until it shook the hall with a deafening roar. Just as it seemed that it could not get any louder, that the trembling corridor would collapse in on him, that the world itself would shatter, the bellowing ground to a halt. The elevator greeted him with a friendly ding as the doors slid open. He turned to his companion; during the cacophony, it had slithered up alongside him and stood by impatiently, silently urging him to proceed. He paused to take a deep breath of the saturated, miasmatic air. Then, rejuvenated, he stepped into the elevator's eager maw.

Why it had chosen him, he had no idea: the only remarkable thing about his life was its incredible dullness. His alarm shook him awake to a familiar bowl of Special K every morning, always chased by his beloved crimson mug of instant

coffee. Following breakfast, he brushed his teeth and donned a muted pair of khakis, chipped dress shoes, and a lightly stained button-down shirt. At exactly eight o'clock, he set out on his daily commute on the downtown train, arriving at his identical desk in his unexceptionally modern office no later than nine. He spent the morning sifting through emails and sorting documents, occasionally treating himself to a peak at the news. At noon, he shuffled downstairs amidst a herd of his coworkers to buy a reliably mediocre something-salad sandwich, which he ate diligently in the same old seat. This spot was especially dear to him. On a clear day, it had a decent view of the river, only partially obstructed by a seemingly endless array of skyscrapers. Forty-five minutes later, he followed the crowd back to his desk, where he continued typing away at his computer. At five, he was done for the day and ready to take the tried-and-true route home on the uptown train. He only deviated from his trajectory to tend to one of life's interminable obligations, like buying groceries at Gristedes or picking up prescriptions at Duane Reade. For dinner, he would typically microwave a cup of ramen or scrape something out of a can; if he had a little money left over at the end of the month, he might order takeout, but he seldom cared enough to do so. After his evening meal, he treated himself to a couple hours of cable television before bed. Again through the mist of sleep came his alarm, and the cycle continued. While others might find this lifestyle unbearable, he found it peaceful and fulfilling. He delighted in his routine, treasured the comfortable monotony of his existence.

Rarely, if he was not too tired and had no pressing errands to run, he would join a pair of coworkers from down the hall for a round of drinks after work. However, the two were noticeably closer to each other than he was to either of them. They sat side by side at the bar, turning to face one another and becoming raveled in each other's words. He was yet again left on the sidelines, reduced to a spectator sipping on a faintly bitter, watered-down drink. These outings always left him drained and anxious for a return to normalcy: the next day would see him headed straight home. And so, the days rolled on, bleeding one into the other, creeping on and on.

Then, one indistinguishable afternoon, it visited for the first time. In the beginning, it came in flashes. He glimpsed it darting around a street corner, ducking between the legs of a shuffling crowd, or crouching behind his bedside table. At first, its appearance caused him considerable alarm, so he averted his eyes and proceeded as usual, hoping it would go away. He worried that if he mentioned it to anyone, they would force him to take more medication, which always made him drowsy and nauseous; worse, they might even have him committed. He perceived it in his bedroom late at night; the unsettling, exposed feeling of its foreign gaze often

drove him to turn on all the lights and sleep on the couch, where the sound of the TV lulled him to sleep. With time, though, he came to expect its presence. It provided reliable, albeit reserved, companionship in his daily life. Instead of getting on the train home alone, he consistently had a pal sitting a few rows away, watching over him from the shadows. He regarded its modest cameos as an unexpected run-in with a dear friend, a secret liaison in the night. Upon noticing its appearance, a smile would creep across his face. He relished the thrill of being seen, valued.

He emerged onto the glistening sidewalk. A thin layer of moisture on the pavement was the only evidence of a recent rainstorm. All the clouds had vanished along with the daylight. The world appeared almost hyper-realistic: buildings rose up around him, standing out sharply against the boundless sky. The path stretched out before him, submerged in a clinging blackness only cut by the occasional stuttering streetlight. It tailed him closely: he could feel the gentle caress of its foul breath on the back of his neck. As he made his way through the darkness, it began to overtake him. It gradually emerged into his peripheral vision, oozing past him, dripping through the night until it rendered him the follower. His surroundings began to flow together. After a few minutes, he no longer recognized the skyline, the street names, the shoes on his feet. He tried to stop to get his bearings and found that he could not: a ruthless current seemed to pull him in its wake. To his surprise, this did not concern him. His thoughts and emotions were muffled and sluggish, as if he was on the edge of a deep sleep. He quickly recognized that struggling was pointless, anyway. It knew where they were going just as well as he did. So, he allowed it to sweep him away, down one block, then another.

After it had been watching him for some time, he decided that he owed it some attention in return: it would be rude to ignore its interest in him any longer. One night, following another indistinct, solitary dinner in front of the television, it occurred to him, as he was depositing leftovers into the fridge, that his prospective friend might be hungry. He took a paper towel off the roll and placed a crust of bread on top, carefully laying it on the floor. Keeping a careful eye on his offering, he returned to his show. Several hours passed, yet there was still no sign of his friend. He decided that it might be shy, and that he should avoid pressuring it. He quietly slipped into bed and left it to venture out in peace. Much to his disappointment, he awoke the next morning to find that, aside from a grateful crowd of ants, the bread was untouched. One failure was not going to deter him, though. He was determined to gain its trust. That evening, he rifled through several cabinets before he found the only nice dish he had: an ornately decorated seder plate, long unused, that he inherited from his grandparents. He dusted it off, put the most tender pieces of chicken from his meal on it, and placed it in the corner of the room. As he

walked back to the couch, he flipped off the light, hoping that would make it more comfortable. On this occasion, his efforts did not go unnoticed.

Within minutes of sitting back down, he made out a stirring in the gloom, as if the darkness itself had come alive. Silently, it slunk along the wall, pausing every few seconds before continuing in the direction of his offering. His breaths became shallow with anticipation; he desperately resisted the urge to fidget, fearing that any sudden movement would scare it away forever. Upon arrival at its destination, it hesitated. He could sense its nervous gaze fall on him as if seeking permission. "It's okay," he heard himself whisper. It hesitated for a moment longer, then bore down on his tribute. He watched with awe as it consumed the chicken and plate alike, engulfing them deliberately and smoothly like a rolling fog. By the time it was done, any tension between them had dissipated. He extended his hand towards the carpet and slowly rubbed his fingers together, beckoning. It heeded his call and glided towards him across the floor, bringing with it a cloying, musty stench. When his hand first touched it, he was overcome with pure bliss. Its fur was rough and greasy, sprouting from cold, scabbed skin, yet to him it was the fabric of kings. It slid up next to him on the couch, leaving deep scratches in the cushion as it went. The damage did not trouble him in the slightest. Its company filled him with warmth, with peace. When he went to sleep on that euphoric first night, it slept at the foot of his bed. The typical stillness was punctured by its rattling breath. This horrifying rasp lulled him into gentle dreams of his youth: playing tag with his friends at recess, driving through the countryside with his father, having his first kiss behind the slide at the playground.

This occurrence immediately became an evening tradition. He would set out food, and it would emerge to consume it. Once satisfied, it cuddled up next to him while he watched television, allowing him to run his eager fingers through its mangy coat. By the third day, it began to greet him at the door as soon as he got home from work; within a week, he brought out its dinner at the same time as his own. As a sign of its appreciation, it followed him to his room, purring like a stalled engine. Even though it left slick, dark stains on his sheets, he delighted in every moment spent with it: its mere presence replaced his every worry with divine ecstasy. He spent the day at the office staring out the window and twirling his pen like a grade schooler with a crush, anxious to return to it. In this state, he could hardly bring himself to think about anything else. His appetite was practically non-existent, so he no longer bothered even to leave his desk during his break. He could not see the water from there, but pretty views failed to pique his interest anymore either. At some point during this ethereal blur, it grew almost to his size. He now had to buy dinner for two and, more often than not, it would devour his portion as well.

He barely noticed this change, though, and it certainly did not perturb him. There was simply more of it to hold, more fur to stroke.

He trailed in its shadow indefinitely, wandering through a shadowy labyrinth. Although his body trudged onwards, his mind was centuries away, somewhere beyond his field of vision. His unworn shoes mercilessly rubbed the skin from his heels. Bodies slipped past him through the gloom. They appeared to him as mannequins, faceless, absorbed in their department store dreams. No one around him tried to stop him, or even looked twice. They had seen it all before, he was sure. Occasionally, something glinted in the murk: his mother's favorite sunglasses, his father's omnipresent Newport, his high school sweetheart's scarlet lipstick. But these, too, were swiftly washed away, leaving him alone among strangers once more.

Slowly but surely, his world grew smaller. Television, once his favorite pastime, was now lackluster and pointless. His insubstantial nutrition, coupled with a disinterest in bathing, soon left him disheveled. Cuddling with it had left him peppered with dozens of tiny, oozing cuts; most of his clothing reeked, covered with oily splotches. Every second spent out of the apartment was frigid and unforgiving. He lived only to step back into its benevolent embrace, to feel its loving whispers caress his skin. His already sparse outings with friends, if they could even be called that, ceased altogether. His co-workers, accustomed to his secluded demeanor, paid this no mind. In fact, they were probably relieved to be rid of his bumbling presence. His performance at work stagnated, then plummeted; eventually, he stopped showing up at all. Whether or not he was officially fired mattered little to him. He saw no point in working anymore. He wanted nothing more than to bask in its radiance, to cater to its every desire.

During the final few days, he sensed that a significant shift in their dynamic was afoot. Although he dedicated most of his energy to preparing or ordering food for it, he could no longer satiate its roaring gluttony. It devoured every last morsel of its meal and still shifted restlessly where it lay, lusting for more. It decided not to accompany him to his bed anymore, instead preferring to lounge about on the living room floor. He tried several times to sleep without it, but the separation induced terrible tremors; within minutes, he stumbled back to it and curled up at its pulsating side, which put an end to this frightful condition.

It was in this position, nestled next to it on the foul, sticky carpet, that he awoke on that fateful night. He shot out of a dreamless slumber and, in an instant, was wide awake. He stood up and made his way to his bedroom closet. He opened the door, first removing out his iron and board, then pulling his only suit from the hanger. He had worn the same outfit to prom years ago: as he laid it down on the ironing board, he could still smell his date's flowery perfume. His dress shoes were

wedged in the corner of the closet, still sealed in the box they came in. He finally had use for them, it seemed. As he ironed his suit, it loomed in the doorway, its eyes glowing embers in the shadows. A terrible urgency crackled through the silent air: it wormed into every crack in the floor, every hole in the furniture, every pore of his being.

He emerged from the timeless fog to find himself before a great bridge. Steel cables stretched up from the railing, reaching towards the heavens. A wide, murky river churned far below. Try as he might, he failed to make out the other side; if basic logic did not suggest otherwise, he would have concluded that the bridge went nowhere at all, simply tapering off into infinity. It lurched forward, apparently unfazed by the otherworldly scene. Against his every instinct, his legs propelled him after it. As he neared the center of the bridge, he began to suspect that the end of his journey was at hand. The seconds lingered longer than usual, like motorists catching a glimpse of a horrific accident. Only now was he slammed with an all-consuming wave of dread; he stumbled, grasping to steady himself on the railing. The chill metal pressed resolutely against his sweaty palms. He raised his eyes and looked down at the water. The uncompromising current was visible even from such a dizzying height: myriad whirlpools formed, swirled, disintegrated, then reappeared, fueled by the inexhaustible power of nature. Fleets of frothing waves roared ahead, unyielding in their purpose. Despite its chaotic might, the river made no sound. This terrible impossibility vexed him to the point of nausea.

It turned to him, coercing him to keep going, assuring him that he was almost there. Breathing heavily, he shook his head meekly, droplets of sweat seeping from his pores and dripping down his face. It floated over to him, taller than ever before, towering for miles above his head: it swayed slightly like a pine in the breeze, its glossy needles billowing softly around it. Its incomprehensible vastness was excruciating to look at. He shut his eyes as forcefully as he could, hoping desperately that it would disappear. It looked at him expectantly, just as it did the night he first fed it. First, it let out a pitiful, nagging mewl; when this strategy failed, it lowered a greasy claw. It wrapped around his wrist, digging into his skin, harder and colder than the railing and a thousand times more real. He shook his head with vigor now, mutely pleading with it. Insistent, it tugged at him, gently at first, then with increasing force. A knot grew in his chest as he choked back a sob. After a few tries, he could feel his grip on the rail slipping, his feet sliding out from under him. Just as he was about to give in, a wave of fear shook him from his stupor: a flame ignited in his gut, rising through him until it erupted past his lips as a stern, firm "no".

It instantly stopped pulling at him; a moment later, it slunk away, relinquishing its grasp and standing patiently by his side. He desperately gulped at the open

air only to find it biting and harsh in his throat. He felt just as ill as before. If anything, he felt worse: he was now bare, exposed to the elements. He glanced back towards the city. The sparkling lights that he had spent countless nights admiring seemed sparser than ever before. The skyscrapers cast him an indifferent stare, forming an unwelcoming phalanx of shadows. Muffled hours on the train, distant get-togethers at the bar, flickering dinners in front of the TV: the dull ache came seeping back, sinking into his soul. Suddenly, for the first time since it came to him, he felt alone. He knew, now, why it had come to him, why he had invited it to stay, why he had sacrificed so selflessly for it, why he could never do without it. The perfect silence was punctuated only by their synchronized breathing, just like the first night they spent together. When it curled up by his bed, for the first time since his childhood, he had felt at home. He gazed up at it lovingly; it replied with a cavernous stare of forgiveness. He turned his back on the skyline, his eyes welling up with delicate tears of joy. Full of newfound purpose, he re-fastened its talon to his wrist. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath of the cool night air, and stepped forward.

Softly, the darkness gave way to a tranquil sea of relief.

Driving Under the Influence

Anonymous

Mason's porch is sweaty and humid. The sound of mosquitos on the hunt pervades the hot evening, like an army of helicopters from a great distance. Mason's mom turned the porch light on a few hours ago, and the fluorescent light casts a green-like shadow onto everyone's sneakers. The group encircles around a cut glass table, split up among sagging armchairs and a polyester couch. Mason lets out a throaty cough and offers the joint to his left. Smoke from the lit end dissipates into the space between the boys' faces, and Auden squeezes his eyes shut for a moment before reaching out and accepting the rolled paper between his fingers. His fingernails are trimmed and clean, with only a thin sliver of white showing. He takes in a breath while holding it to his lips, sucking so hard that his cheeks become hollow. Mason lets out an amused breath and crosses his arms.

"I honestly never thought I'd see the day where you'd smoke a joint." Auden smiles but says nothing as the boys chuckle, keeping the joint to his mouth. Cyrus, to his left, leans forward to take it from him, but Auden pushes his hands away and takes another hit before falling back into the couch.

"It's my turn," another boy says, reaching across Cyrus to continue the rotation. Auden sits up and starts to bind his long brown hair with a hair tie. It's almost to his shoulders now.

"Why don't you just cut it, man?" Auden doesn't look up to identify the speaker.

"Short hair reminds me of high school," he answers. Mason's scratchy laugh is easy to distinguish from the entourage.

"We graduated three months ago. Isn't it a little soon to go all hippie?"

"I have to say I'm with Auden on this one," another boy pipes up. "I'd rather die than get another crew cut." His words are followed by a silence that seems to stretch very thin across the little circle, filling in the cracks and the gaps and seeming to ring in everyone's ears. The boy who spoke flushes red and sinks back into his chair. Mason clears his throat, eyes darting to Auden's still face.

"I don't know, I think I kinda pull mine off." Mason's voice echoes in the heavy silence; he grins and runs his hands through his hair, mussing up the neatly cropped rows, and the boys are quick to laugh. Auden stays silent. The rotation has finally circled back to him, and he grabs for the thin roll of paper. He stands, rolling his shoulders back and opening up his chest, sucking in hot smoke.

Cyrus sits further back, misaligned from the group, and looks at Auden with hooded lids. Though his face remains blank, there is a tenseness to his stare that

goes unnoticed by the pack. Auden's warm breath mingles with the stickiness of the air, and it clings to the hairs of each boy's arms.

"Well, gentlemen, I think it's high time I take my leave." Auden's proclamation is muffled as he swings his body simultaneously in a low bow, so low that his ponytail flips over his head to sweep the wooden porch planks. The force of the movement causes him to stumble for a moment before righting himself, straightening with a bemused smile on his face. The boys look at one another, somber all of a sudden.

"You're leaving now?" Mason's voice is thin and reedy as his eyes seek out the faces of the group. Auden stretches his hand out to him expectantly.

"Yeah, and I'm gonna need my keys, my friend." He motions to the little bowl on the glass table near Mason's hand, his face so smooth that the lines of his mouth and eyes and nose stand out in the strange light.

"Auden, come on, stay. You should at least let the high fade a bit before getting behind the wheel." Auden shakes his head so vigorously that a few strands of hair framing his face fly free.

"No can do. I'm feeling a drive." Impatient, he scoops up the keys from the bowl, and the metal ring loops around his finger as he makes his leave. Cyrus, who has been watching quietly, stands too. He gives a dramatic bow, and a wave, one that none of the boys return. In fact, not a single head turns to him; everyone's eyes are trained on Auden's swiftly retreating form.

"It's been a time, gentlemen!" Cyrus proclaims, and sets off in pursuit of the other boy. The outcasts offer no response and are silent for a moment, before turning to each other in hushed whispers.

"Should someone go after him?" A boy asks.

"He'll be fine," Mason answers, but his brows are furrowed and his eyes still follow Auden in the distance.

"I've never seen Auden like that."

"Well, what do you expect? It only happened a few months ago. He's trying to deal with it." The boys all nod solemnly, and all the while the joint continues to travel around the circle, passed from hand to hand.

"It's not funny when you do that, you know," Auden says as he unlocks the car. The red headlights illuminate the branches of a tree to their right.

"I'm entertained," Cyrus answers, shrugging. "And you're just mad they don't talk back. Maybe you should follow their example." Auden gets in and shoves his key into the ignition. His hand lingers, his other ghosting across the spotless dashboard. There isn't a single piece of trash in the cup holders, nor on the floor beside

the boys' shoes.

"Don't drive right now," Cyrus breaks the quiet. "You're being stupid."

"I really don't think you get a say here." Cyrus reaches his hand out to brush Auden's cheek, but he flinches and moves away. Cyrus lets his arm drop.

"You don't have anything to prove," he says, turning his face to the windshield.

"I never said I did." Auden jerks the gear shift down hard, reversing to the right before pulling out abruptly onto the road. He rolls the windows down and stretches a hand out, holding his fingers against the pressure of the wind. He whistles a soft tune and keeps just the palm of his right hand resting against the steering wheel. He presses down on the gas pedal, eyes trained on the headlights of his car bouncing left and right across the gravel road. The night air is so warm.

"Why do you think I'm here, Auden?" Auden doesn't turn to look at his companion.

"I don't know. You tell me."

"Do you want me to go?" There is silence for a moment, save for the soft nightlife murmurs from the trees flanking the road.

"No." Auden's lips hardly move to form the word.

"Why are you being such an idiot?"

"Can we not talk? Just for a second? I just want to be here with you, just for a little bit. Please." Auden lets his right hand slip from the wheel into his lap, and lets his head fall back against the seat.

"Auden."

"Please. I don't want to talk."

"Auden, open your eyes."

"Please, please, please."

Perhaps it's the reverberation of light against the windshield, or the whooshing sound of an object approaching at high speed, that causes Auden's eyes to fly open. But it is the blaring horn of the oncoming vehicle that seems to finally call his body to action; he seizes the steering wheel and wrenches it to the right. The two cars just barely miss one another, and Auden's jolts violently as the tires leave the road and hit dirt. Auden's foot slams on the brake pedal, and there's a deafening screech as the car speeds forward, still propelled by the momentum as it fights against friction. They finally shudder to a stop, balanced between the side of the road and the edge of the forest line. Auden's breath is ragged, and his eyes spin wildly in his head. He suddenly turns and shoves the driver's door open, spilling out onto the grass. He heaves on his hands and knees, wild gasps rippling through him. Cyrus puts a hand on the space between his neck and shoulder, rubbing gently.

"It's okay, Auden. You're okay." After a while, Auden's heaving slows, and his chest rises and falls evenly. He stands up on shaking legs, pale hand pressed to his brow. He moves towards the car again and clammers into the driver's seat. But after a few drawn out moments he gets out again, hand tight on the edge of the door.

"Cyrus, can you get in? I feel better, I promise. I'll pay more attention. I just want to go home." Cyrus doesn't move. Auden stares at him, eyes wide and hand splayed.

"What are you doing? Come on."

Cyrus is shaking his head.

"Auden, you have to leave me here." It is so quiet. Auden lets go of the door and presses the heel of his hands to his eye sockets.

"No. Get in the car."

"Come on, you know this isn't healthy. It isn't good for you."

"Cyrus, I'm not playing. Get in the car."

"You have to go without me. It's okay, I won't blame you. I would never, ever have blamed you." Auden slides his palms to his ears and shuts his eyes.

"Cyrus, I'm gonna scream. Get in the fucking car." There is silence, but this time the kind that signifies an absence. It's as if Auden knows what he'll see when he opens his eyes, and for this reason he keeps them shut.

"Cyrus! Please! You can't leave me again! You can't do this to me! Fuck!" His voice cracks, and his eyes are still closed. He bends over and starts to cry. After a while, a car passes by him, and slows to a stop.

"Are you okay, young man?" Auden looks up at him and wipes his cheeks. Clears his throat.

"Yeah, I'm fine." He waves his arm in a passive motion. The stranger doesn't leave.

"Are you out here by yourself? Do you have someone coming for you?" Auden shakes his head, biting his cheeks.

"No. No, it's just me."

One Day Garry

Zachary Roney

Garry Adkinson opened his eyes to silence.

There was no alarm to wake him up – no one calling or shouting at him, no sound at all that would ensure his punctuality in a place like this – there never was. His impetus was essentially conditioned. He awoke because his body knew it was time to. Now that his head had stopped throbbing, his perception almost seemed like a dreamy lull in its aftermath. The first thing to greet his eyes – the first thing he saw after every slumber – was his own reflection on the plain ceiling above. He blinked absently.

Without a sound, he sat up in his bed. The rest of his room was similar – nothing but walls of smooth alloy, adorned with his image like mirrors; the floor was the only surface that wasn't reflective at all. Most of the time, Garry would take a brief moment to look on either side of him, watching himself stare back through the mirror before he left. He normally found a strange, profound comfort in this act – knowing he was still there, knowing he was still real. This time however, though his headache and delirium were gone, such an impulse did not cross his mind. He slid out of the linen, planting both feet against the floor, and impassively traversed the empty space towards the exit. The entire room was vacant save for the bed, since that was all he needed. After all, what else was a room's purpose other than rest? Now that he had gotten sufficient sleep, and was functionally operative, it was time for him to start his day – to repeat the cycle anew. The exit in front of him, which was momentarily identical to the other three walls, slid open as he approached it, and closed behind him as Garry entered the corridor outside.

The first part of the day involved the showers. Garry lumbered down the dark passage the way he did whenever he left his room – a single individual amidst a single line that extended before and behind him into the distance. There was no end in sight; he was but one subject among hundreds, all of whom wore the same matching uniforms and walked in the same impassive manner, silent and obedient like ants headed towards their labor.

The showers themselves were in a spacious white chamber, a stark contrast from the corridors beyond. Inside, the sound of pouring and trickling water blotted out all other noise in the room; that, the jarring brightness, and the thick layer of mist that enveloped everything within, gave this place an almost dreamlike haze. It was impossible to even see the limits of this space. The chamber was wide enough and high enough to give off the feeling of being truly endless in scope. But, none of that mattered, did it? The only thing Garry had to concern himself with was walk-

ing straight through – no different from how he walked the passage to get here. The showers themselves would take care of the rest.

Water poured down directly from the ceiling here, all of it concentrated along the designated path. It was constant downpour; soaked hair and drenched clothes pressed against their skin as they trudged through in unison. There could have been other lines moving in the distance, too – faint shadows through the mist on either side. But, it was too hard to tell.

Whatever was in the water washed away any accumulated grime with minimal effort required on their part. As quickly as the old corridor had disappeared, the dark opening to a new one yawned before the approaching line. Silently, solemnly, they filed out of the chamber, their wet clothes leaving a trail of water in their wake.

The next step in this endless, looping sequence – one that snuffed out any vibrancy in this dull monotony – was the evaluation. Otherwise dubbed the “check-in,” this routine served two purposes: one was to tally all current subjects, and ensure that none had abandoned their posts, and the other was to assess their well-being. The assessment was not a physical one, but rather psychological. The first cracks in an individual’s psyche are seldom noticed – one could not work, or even have access to room and board, without first passing this evaluation. After all, what use was there for broken subjects?

Garry used to fear the conductors of these tests. When he was younger – a fresher subject – they used to call them “the Judges.” He would dread every moment he had to spend with them, every second under their cold, daunting gaze. But now, as he followed the line towards the dark, echoing chamber in which they resided (slowly – everyone had to wait their turn), he didn’t even try to savor the vestiges of past emotion. He felt nothing. He feared nothing, not out of courage or because he had seen them countless times, but because the notion of fear had been slowly removed from him. The very idea of something being “scary” or “treacherous” had been wrung from his being day after day after day, like juice from an orange.

It was difficult not to notice their silhouettes long before he ever reached the front, or to hear the crackling of their joints as they moved in the distance. As they got closer, the line still moving as slowly as ever, that sound was the one constant among the periodic echoes of shuffling feet. If anxiety had taken root, the endless waiting and suspense would have only served to amplify it; this used to be the point when Garry’s heart would be pounding in spite of whatever tough act he performed. Now, he watched blankly.

The end of the corridor opened up into a larger, dome-shaped hall. The walls, floor, and ceiling were all made from the same dark gray alloy as before, with no

openings or windows whatsoever: it felt like they were at the bottom of a cave, spacious yet bleak and oppressive, with just enough light to see what was meant to be seen.

“Next.”

Footsteps echoed amidst deep, resounding, mechanical creaking as the subjects in front of Garry moved out of the way. He took his spot at the front of the line, along with two others who also awaited their evaluation. Before them were giant hemispheric openings on the other side of the room – three of them – resembling inhumanly large reception windows. Sitting in each one of them, their heads reaching the very top, were the Judges themselves. They were gray, haggard things, towering far above them with deep cold eyes piercing through the shadows. They had large bulbous heads and sunken, grim faces. Sometime in the past, Garry had likened them to giant old men, the way they seemed silently poised and collected and grand. So unattainably grand. Perhaps that was what unsettled him before.

There was a flash of white in the eyes of the Judge directly in front of him as it lowered its gaze. Its mouth may not have moved, but Garry could hear the crackling sound again, coming from somewhere within. It was deeper and more resounding, and possessed a faint metallic tune. The Judge leaned forward, and its bulbous head dipped below its shoulders, seemingly unable to support its own weight. Garry watched it droop lower and lower and lower towards the ground, its neck stretching in the interim, but it wasn’t a direct descent. The large head was autonomously covering the distance between them, its vertebrae rustling and cracking as it snaked through the air. Soon, it was almost close enough for Garry to see his reflection in its blank eyes.

“Garry Adkinson,” it said flatly. He felt its voice reverberating through his body. Its mouth never moved at all. The head lurched forward slightly, and crept around to Garry’s side.

Their size notwithstanding, there were a number of differences between his own face and a Judge’s. It had two eyes and a mouth like anyone else, yet it lacked both nostrils and ears. The wrinkles across its face and its unnaturally gray complexion made its sunken features all the more prominent, like a dark foreboding creature. Garry always wondered what they used their mouths for, since they never moved when they spoke, and Judges never departed from this chamber. Once, in a distant memory, he believed he’d heard a rumor about the fate awaiting those who failed the evaluation. There was never any need to dispose of bodies.

The Judge circled Garry, its serpentine neck coiling around him as a form of enclosure. Then it reared its head and peered into Garry’s eyes, and Garry, mindlessly compliant, stared back. For several long seconds, the Judge did nothing else

but watch, its face stony and unmoving. He could hear a faint, guttural warbling from somewhere inside it as its inner workings came to life. Its utter stillness was like the calm preceding a storm – Garry would have been well within reasonability to expect a sudden fatal strike. But that all depended on the result of his test.

For a moment, the sounds within it stopped, yet still it eyed him intensely. The warbling was replaced once more by the crackling vertebrae in its neck as the Judge finally decided to relent.

"You pass. Next."

The Judge uncoiled itself and lifted its head back towards the window above, freeing the path for Garry. On the outside of each flanking Judge was a single door at ground level; it gleamed a bright white whenever it was open, like a shining beacon at the end of the tunnel. Without hesitation, Garry started towards the exit as the next subject stepped forward for the same process all over again.

Regardless of form, shape or size, there are two things all living creatures need to survive, not to mention to work: rest and sustenance. Naturally, this applied here, too; since Garry was still deemed "sane", the next step for him now was to resolve the latter before he started his job anew.

The dining hall was lighter than the corridors he'd passed through before. Though the contrast wasn't as jarring as the showers, he could see clearly much farther in front of him. The fact that the opposite wall was only remotely visible in the distance wasn't a testament to the chamber's darkness, but rather to its sheer size. Rows of tables and benches extended far beyond Garry's line of sight across the entire length of the hall, enough to potentially seat thousands – perhaps tens of thousands – of individual subjects. Yet now, like any other time, the space was almost filled to capacity.

Garry walked towards the food dispensers, paying no mind to the clamorous ramblings and wild commotion around him. The dining hall was a unique place in particular; it allowed subjects to decompress, free from the haunting shadow of the Judges or their lifelong occupation. It was a break that truly felt like a break. Here, they could shed their silence for once, and have a good time with others while they ate their meal.

Garry approached the dispensers and claimed his spot in line. The wait was not as long as the number of subjects would have implied – it was a fraction of the time he spent in line for the Judges. The difference here was the sheer quantity of dispensers that were available; they too stretched as far as the eye could see. Garry reached the counter and cupped both hands beneath the mouth of the apparatus. There was a whir somewhere inside. He only had to wait a moment before the familiar beige-colored gooey substance began to ooze from the opening. Its high vis-

cosity made the process slow; Garry watched patiently as more and more of it came out, forming a bulbous oval shape right outside the dispenser. Finally, gravity came into play, and it dropped into his open palms as a solid mass.

Garry stared at it in silence as the commotion went on around him, unfocused in its rowdiness. Indifferently, he made way for the next subject in line, and started his search for an open seat. There were several others like him amidst the crowd – quiet, lethargic, and absentminded compared to their more animated counterparts. A difference in experience, perhaps? Garry remembered when he used to speak like them – when he too partook in barely intelligible ramblings as he got used to the sound of his own voice, and the movement of his own jaws. Was he younger then, too? Maybe it was yesterday. Maybe he'd always spoken – and was always the same age.

Garry climbed over a particular section of the bench and sat down. No one had ever given a name to this formless glob they ate everyday – not in the same way the Judges were named. It was the only form of sustenance anyone had ever known; they didn't know what it did or how it did it, but it always rejuvenated a living subject. Garry bit into it and chewed. The glob had little taste, no texture, and was very tender; Garry had no idea if this was normal. He was sure it tasted differently before, but he couldn't put a finger on it. He remembered the feeling of sweetness on his tongue – of saltiness; of sourness; of bitterness. He reached down for another bite and suddenly felt a wave of profound bewilderment pass briefly over him, as if he wasn't supposed to be here, as if this wasn't what he normally ate. But, they've never had a different meal – Garry remembered thinking that, a long time ago. But, how long ago was it really?

For the first time today, restlessness pricked the edges of his psyche. Garry blinked, spacing out momentarily, and resumed eating his meal. He paid no mind to the ruckus around him. When he finished everything, he licked his lips clean and stood, looking for a way out of the dining hall.

Hope, fulfillment, joy – in the grand scheme of things, such notions carried little meaning. From the moment of inception – the earliest memories of those reflective walls – the lives of everyone here centered around one ideal: the flawless execution of their job. Every part of their day, every cog in their never-ending cycle, was simply a means towards this end. Cleansing to prevent disease or infection, nourishment and rest to maintain bodily functions, and evaluations as a precaution against deteriorating performance – with those primary tasks out of the way, their jobs could be performed at the highest efficiency possible. This was all they knew, and all they had ever needed to know.

The corridor Garry traversed was slightly narrower than most of the others,

and was illuminated only by faint neon-colored light. It seemed endless; all he could see in the vast distance was a veil of pitch-black. The need for an orderly line had expired as soon as he left the Judges, but for the first time today, the crowd had been reduced to sparse individuals like him, walking in their own directions at their own pace, seeking out a room to occupy. There were large arched doors lining the entire right side of the passage. Above each one was a single solid light, an indicator of the state inside. So far, all of the ones Garry passed had been red.

After a while, he saw a door hiss open farther ahead, the pale light from within brightening that section of the corridor. Out of the room came a small group of subjects, all of them lethargic and absentminded in their movements. They slowly shuffled down the passage away from Garry, a few of them wobbling; one of them bumped into another as they momentarily lost their balance. In their wake, the indicator above flashed green. Just as the door started to close behind them, others promptly started to enter. Garry managed to slip in behind them.

The first thing that greeted them was deafening silence – not even a whisper or a breath from anywhere else. The chamber already held thousands of subjects, but they were nowhere to be seen; in their stead were rows upon rows of silvery egg-shaped pods, all of them faced away from the door. Aside from that, the chamber was devoid of life – just a flat, empty room with bleak light originating from a looming mural. Perhaps that was all they were meant to see. The mural, spanning the entirety of the back wall, depicted a skyline under a pale orange sunset. It showed empty husks of lifeless skyscrapers, withered away into skeletons of the past; the detail shown in the dark window frames, gray barren streets, and toppled structures made it almost seem real. It was like a grim warning put on display – a reminder to anyone returning to reality – a boasting of humankind's daunting inferiority.

Footsteps echoed through the chamber as the group, Garry included, sought their own separate pods. Each pod, even while slanted, was nearly as tall as his shoulder, and more than wide enough to fit a full-grown human. Garry didn't have to look for long; as he scoured through them, he heard a beep and a hiss off to his left. One of the pods in view slowly opened, revealing a subject tucked neatly inside. She climbed out slowly, patently dazed, evidenced by the way she grabbed her head.

Garry blinked. Her timer must have just gone off. Subjects weren't supposed to remain in the pods longer than the recommended time; that's how they start to break. There were systems in place to enforce this, from the automatic timer, after which all mechanisms ceased, to the five-minute waiting period before a pod could be used again. The measures were surely easy to bypass, but everyone knew

the price for overusing these machines; despite what urges overcome them, the five-minute wait was usually long enough to rethink rash decisions – if they weren't broken, that is.

As the woman walked away, Garry approached her pod and waited. He stared at his own reflection on the surface, watching his own impassive eyes. He already had his own image of what a broken subject looked like, and how they behaved; there was a scene in his head that involved one, in a place just like this. The subject had started screaming and wailing out of nowhere, his shrill voice piercing the chamber's blanket of silence. By the time Garry saw him, he was slamming his head repeatedly against a nearby pod, shouting as he tried to get inside. He continued over and over and over again, until blood started to appear on the surface and on his forehead. Eventually, Garry heard a loud crack, and the man fell dead on the floor. What happened after, he didn't quite remember. How he had gotten past the Judges, he'll never know.

When the waiting period was over, Garry touched the surface of the pod, and it hissed open once again. Most of its interior consisted of a long, black-cushioned seat with connected wires leading down somewhere out of view. The only other indication that it was anything more than a glorified lounge chair was the head-brace situated near the top. This was the extent of his job; all Garry had to do now was get inside and fasten the brace around his cranium, and the pod itself would handle the rest.

Now, of all times, whether he knew it or not, a small pit formed in Garry's stomach as he saw the apparatus.

Every part of their day, every cog in their cycle, was simply a means towards the flawless execution of their job; but more specifically, it was a means towards the preservation of one thing in particular: the human brain. The brain is the most important organ in a living subject – taste, smell, sight, sound, and touch are all processed through its system of nerves and synapses. It manages the functioning of other organs in the body, as well as an individual's sense of consciousness. Who they are, and the very foundation of their life and reality, are supplied through the brain.

It was the machine within the pod's job to capitalize on this. To feed on every nerve impulse, every instinct, every emotion, every response, that the brain produced. It collected them and siphoned them off to who-knows-where for who-knows-what. All Garry or anyone else here had to worry about was entering the pod when they were supposed to and leaving when the timer went off.

Garry climbed inside and nestled his body against the seat. Amidst the brume of dreams and reality, this one sequence would always be burned into his memory –

the pressing against the headrest, the brace wrapping itself around his skull and fastening shut, the hiss as the pod began to close, suspending him in darkness. He was partially aware of a faint hum as he closed his eyes, a hum that could have been from the apparatus, or from the recesses of his own mind. There was also that familiar feeling that always seemed to accompany this moment. Everything was going to be different now.

Each individual had a different experience each time they entered a pod, but the premise was always the same. For the machine to serve its purpose, it had to stimulate the brain, and all of its possible functions. The lobes flared, some in rapid succession and others simultaneously, triggered artificially through the head-brace. Every combination was thoroughly explored. The procedure as a whole lasted a few hours at most, mainly to prevent excessive stress that would cause irreparable damage. Of course, no system is perfect.

The first life Garry lived was as a waiter, delivering oval-shaped globs to diners sitting beneath a pale orange sunset. Day after day, nothing would change, and he would proceed with his business as usual; after his shifts, he would sit down near the dispensers and enjoy the sweet-tasting filling inside. Then he was a mountaineer, scaling thin stone peaks that resembled skyscrapers. When he would look down, he would see tens of miles of barren flat land extending into the horizon, and he would be harrowed by the considerable heights. He was a bartender, a cobbler, a pilot, a doctor – roles he had seen before on a monitor in a forgotten past, in his cage of mirrors. He saw lush green trees, blue seas, red cliff-faces, dark caves, and vibrant fields of flowers. He went sightseeing, graduated from school, started families, experienced heartbreak, and grew old. He experienced countless personas from many identities; his name was Tommy Parker, Sam Wardell, Walter Middleton. He was able to be happy and experience fear; fall in love and grow enraged; be sad and develop pride. He could look up at a clear, sunny sky on a breezy day and feel utterly at peace, without a single thing weighing down his mind.

Then, he heard a hiss and felt the pressure on his head release, and he opened his eyes to the looming mural of a ruinous skyline.

He blinked absently. His movements were slow as he climbed out of the pod in a daze. His head throbbed in dull pain. Behind him, he heard the pod seal shut as the programmed timer began. It was time to head back to his room now, to restart the cycle all over again – the exact procedure that had been internalized over years, or weeks, of repetition. But he didn't move. Something about the mural – the shade of orange, perhaps – was familiar to him, but he couldn't put his finger on why. After all of the adventures, tribulations, highs, and lows, now there was nothing. Only the bleakness that anchored him to this reality, and the constants he frequently

faced – the showers, the Judges, the dining hall, and the countless pods. He would have hated this feeling of emptiness, but hatred had left him, too.

He heard another hiss from a pod beside him. He turned and watched as another subject climbed out, an adolescent boy. The boy looked frantically around the chamber, and as their eyes met, he saw an expression of horror. A fresher subject – the boy had not done this often. Was he ever like that, prone to the grips of horror and fear? Was he ever truly young, or had all of his days of youth transpired solely in his brain? He imagined the Judges being a thing to fear; maybe the boy thought so, too. There was their sheer size and sunken faces, along with the way their necks extended and coiled around him. Then, in that deep, resounding voice, they'd always start the evaluation with a simple utterance of his name...

His...name?

He looked down at both of his hands with a blank stare. He turned them over, closely examining each wrist, palm, and finger. There was not a shred of recognition on his face; for a passing moment, these hands were the hands of a stranger. He held his gaze in silence, unable to look away.

Behind him, he heard a faint beep as the pod finished its waiting period. That was what tore his eyes away, and he glanced over his shoulder at the silver, egg-shaped machine. All of his dreams, all of his lives, everything he learned to cherish lay within that pod. Whether it was real or not didn't matter; he felt more alive in there than he ever could have elsewhere. Steadily, he reached out and touched the silvery surface, causing it to hiss open once more. He never paused to rethink his decision. It was debatable whether it was even a choice at all, or whether he was acting out of pure compulsion. He climbed in, pressed himself against the headrest, and closed his eyes.

Incense

Kwan Srijomkwan

One of the strangest interludes in my life was the time I stopped subsisting on grave offerings. It was Cheng Méng day, April 2009, and the sun dawned hot and vengeful, as always. The foraging was always good this time of the year, and by four in the morning I was well-nourished, redolent with the smell of incense, bathed in the ashes of gold papers, and ready to take a well-deserved nap. Through the rows of graves, however, a small green truck was approaching, with people holding a big rice pot and bento towers in the back. I sighed and went to fetch my broom.

The truck slowed to let the person at the back hop off. It was a man in his late thirties. He ran between the mounds, glancing at each marble board before signaling the car to come over. The driver eased slowly between the other graves and came to a stop nearby. They brought their own brooms—the impractical soft kind used in the house—and started sweeping off the year-old dirt from the marbled area.

"Boss!" I called out, the slur giving my station of life away immediately, "Let me... me," I tapped my chest in emphasis, "you know—do it." I held out my stiff broom made from the spine of coconut leaves. The lady who was climbing out of the car held up a hand to prevent the little girl inside from coming out. Yet I noticed her staring at me nonetheless. Children tended to.

"Just ten baht." I added to increase my persuasiveness. I was undercutting my competition by at least half.

"We have got a few more graves to visit," the driver, his window rolled down, told me politely. He gave me directions, and the family let out a collective sigh when I left.

As soon as I walked away, the bustle started. The little girl jumped out and ran to the back of the truck, where someone handed her a big colorful plastic bag. I reached my job site and began my task, covertly keeping an eye on my clients with interest.

The mother, aunts, and the grandmothers brought out the food—rice in china bowls, chopsticks, a pig's head on a tray, plates of stuffed buns and curry and stir-fried vegetables, tea in cups the size of my thumb. The grandfather piled gold-foil papers folded like gold bars. Someone lit incense and started handing them out to the family, three sticks for each person, to briefly be lifted to the forehead and settled in the small cups of sand at the tomb's altar. The ashes didn't have a chance to touch the girl's hand—someone just planted the sticks for her.

She must have been no more than eight years old, small and agile as she clambered up the hill twice her size. She stood on top of her ancestor's remains and

started tossing confetti all over it. I had seen many children doing this. Livening up even the graveyard. The pieces caught the sunlight, and I averted my eyes.

I swept dirt on the floor.

The family went back into the truck for a while, taking refuge from the sun, waiting for their great-great-grandparents to smell their incense and come take the fake wealth and the food with them to the afterlife. Then they withdrew everything but the sand cups and the burned paper pile, and on to the next grave the truck gingerly went.

They kept the one that I was sweeping for last, and by that time I had already laid down my broom and taken a seat in a shade of the only few available trees in the yard. This tomb was incredibly close to the edge—to the forbidden, overgrown part of the cemetery. Despite having lived all my life here, that tangle of bushes still scared me. People did not have an easy time coming out of there, even in broad daylight.

And I would not have any reason to wade in there, the cursed place, had the little lady not disappeared that day.

It was late morning by the time they were prepared to leave, my temporary bosses. The sun was high and unrelenting. The ladies must have been sitting in the car's shade with their fans, and the men packing up the rest of their belongings and saying their last goodbyes. And someone must have asked where the girl was. There was a sudden burst of activity that woke me up from my afternoon nap. People started shouting. They asked me questions I could not think fast enough to understand. "The girl, the girl!" the man kept saying, and finally it broke through. "The girl." I said carefully, and glanced at the forbidden forest. Everyone's sweaty face paled. Perceiving the business opportunity, I stood up. "Twenty?" I asked, surprising myself when my mind finally caught up. I had never asked this much before. "Pay me twenty find girl?"

I couldn't quite understand what people were saying, so I acted optimistically and with great trust, plunging into the dark, damp bushes.

I had asked them for twenty baht—just enough to buy a plate of rice if the sister at the curry store was kind and gave me a discount. It turned out they didn't give me anything. I presented them the girl, dirty and sleeping, and held out my hand for the pay. They just gave me a hug and put me on one of the truck seats.

It turned out that they owned a motorcycle repair shop, and the warehouse that smelled like engine oil had a small wooden room attached to it. It had got a mattress and was lightyears more comfortable than sleeping at the graveyard every night. I didn't see the family often, but sometimes I would go to the girl's birthday

party and give her balloons and play magic tricks.

They called me Bá, a short, startled sound. Like something found unexpectedly. Just a tone and a rhythm away from “crazy.” I thought it suited me just fine.

I mainly helped out with the motorcycles—I was good with my thick hands and not afraid to taint them an irredeemable tar-black. I swept the courtyard of the shop every day. They paid me a lot each month and gave me leftover food without me having to go forage from anywhere. I didn’t even know where the graves were anymore and I didn’t want to go back.

They even assisted me in opening a bank-ac-count. Eventually I earned enough to buy myself a small house ten minutes away from the shop. I had a dog and a cat, and no partner or children. Except the girl who eventually learned what happened to her on that Cheng Méng day. I grew up with no family, and had no education. I didn’t even know how to write—but I knew who would have written for me, and she is doing so.

It is April, and I have died four years ago, never knowing the love of my surrogate daughter. But I know she loved me, because every now and then she had laughed at my magic trick and had been delighted to play with my animal-shaped balloons. She is now so tall she doesn’t even have to climb anymore in order to throw the confetti over me.

Now that I am in the hall of the ancestors, the curse of my body has left me and my intellect has returned. This year I would bathe in a sea of paper-golds and eat expensive pig heads, smacking my lips deliciously as I wash them down with tiny cups of tea.

Today, finally, is Cheng Méng day, and when I am invited by the incense stick in the small cup of sand I shall go down to the dining hall of my big ancient house—and find this story at my seat on the grand long table, ashen in the real world, burned to me by the girl I had saved on that strange, hot day.

(P.S. Father, my savior, I hope you like my version of your life story. Thank you for finding me.)

Lemon and Vinegar

Rebecca Barer

Her mother had left when she was two. Samantha didn’t remember her at all. Her father married soon after, to a sweet woman who had a five-year-old daughter, Janice. Samantha didn’t feel left out. Janice was her sister and her stepmother, Martha, was her mother. Samantha never heard from her birth mother after she left. When she died, she left a house for Samantha. The house that would become her home with Dave. It was almost a miracle for them. Dave freelanced doing odd bits of writing and art. Samantha’s massages, while fulfilling work, didn’t pay much. They never would have been able to afford a house when they were that young. Throughout their marriage, Samantha wondered if they would have ever been able to afford a house. When Dave told her he wanted to end things, she had laughed audibly, thinking it was a joke. They couldn’t afford a divorce. He couldn’t afford to leave her, where would he go? But he still left. At least he didn’t contest that she got the house. She hadn’t known what to do after that. But then Janice stepped in.

“Move in with me. I’ll sell the house and we can figure things out together.” Janice sat across from Samantha in her real estate office. The walls were covered in peeling mint green wallpaper and passive aggressive motivational signs.

Selling the house had always been seen as a last resort or a winning lottery ticket when she and Dave were together. If they ever fell into financial ruin, selling the house could bail them out. If they wanted to pick up and move to Costa Rica, selling the house could fund their adventure. But what else was there for her to do? Who else was there for her to go to? Janice had been a dutiful big sister. She always gave guidance to Samantha. Told her what she thought was best.

When Samantha didn’t respond, Janice leaned over the desk separating them, like she was telling her a secret. “Seriously Sam, do you want to live in that place all alone forever? Veronica and I have plenty of space. Let me help you.”

“Ok.” Samantha’s agreement was quiet, like the first silent drops of rain before a big storm.

Janice smiled and then slapped her hands onto her bobble-covered desk, her cheap stick-on nails tapping against the wood. “This is great. Listen, everyone is going to tell you that the market is hot or cool or picking up or some other bullshit right now. But I am just going to tell the truth. If you need to sell fast, I will sell your house fast. But you price your house at whatever I quote you, no higher. Got it?”

Samantha smiled wide and agreed. She had read once that the act of smiling released oxytocin to the brain, making a person feel better. Since then she had

always forced herself to smile when she was unhappy. She didn't know if it really worked. Dave had pointed out her smile lines about three months before he asked for a divorce.

Janice nodded. "Good. Now let's go check out the house."

Janice had been there many times before of course. Birthdays, Christmases, and Thanksgivings dotted with warm, sharp memories like the time Samantha had forgotten to defrost the turkey, then tried to roast the partially-thawed bird only to result in a half-raw half-overcooked mess. But taking Janice around the house this time was different. She wasn't her loving, protective big sister. She was a razor focused inspector on a mission. Every little flaw in the home, every scratch or stain or chip was noted with an action plan to fix it. Samantha only half-listened after a while, the defects in her home bringing about an abundance of memories. The time she fell down the stairs, knocking down a painting and scratching the wall. She had ended up breaking her ankle, and Dave had carried her up and down the stairs so she didn't have to tire her arms with the crutches. The burnt-out light bulbs in the basement because Dave kept putting off changing them long enough that they had eventually accepted it as mood lighting. The cabinet door that Dave had drunkenly broken 20 years ago but they had never replaced because they liked that it allowed them to see all their food.

Janice priced the house at \$450,000. Samantha didn't know if that was good. She didn't know the initial purchase price of the house.

"We will do an open house to reel in some fish. This neighborhood is desirable for the schools, so we will need to make this seem family-friendly."

Samantha nodded. She and Dave had been excited about the schools when they moved in. But they never got around to having kids.

Samantha worked the rest of the week before taking off some time to get the house ready. Most of her clients had been very understanding when she rescheduled them or offered for another masseuse to take her place. Janice had made her a to-do list. Most of it was easy, Samantha kept a clean home. Some of it Samantha found odd, like having lots of pictures out. Samantha had taken out all of her pictures with Dave and neatly stored them in a box at Janice's already. But she thought it would look odd to buyers to have only pictures of her and her realtor up, regardless of the fact that they were family. She printed out stock photos and put those out.

Janice had told her the house needed to look lived in but not used. Clothing in the closets and shoes on the rack but organized perfectly. Books on shelves and never in stacks about the house. Desk with a cup of pens but no paper.

The kitchen was another story. It needed to look as new as possible. Samantha had been working on it for hours. She picked up the yellow sponge, the green abra-

sive side still scraping against her extra thick gloves though it was worn down. She admired its perseverance as she scrubbed it against the interior of the oven door. The yellow became tinged with the slightest bit of grey and black, but mostly retained its color. She had already wiped the cleaner off the door with paper towels, which she knew was wasteful but could not bring herself to care enough about to quit the habit. She deemed the oven door sufficiently scrubbed and went to wash the sponge, leaving the door open to dry.

She had cleaned almost every nook and cranny of her small kitchen. It gleamed and reeked of chemicals tinged with a slight scent of lemon. Dave hated the smell of vinegar and had insisted they only buy lemon-scented cleaners. When she had begun cleaning, she had reached for the vinegar, intending to clean with it to spite him, or maybe just because she finally had the freedom to choose it. But the scent of vinegar could linger, and if the guests at the open house hated the stench, she could lose out on someone making an offer.

The muscles in her arms burned as she carried her cleaning bucket over to the last dirty area, the exterior of her fridge. It was still mostly white, but there were splatters of something red and something black. She always wiped it down during her weekly cleaning routine, she could not imagine the bacteria that would grow if she didn't. Getting out stains was near the bottom of Janice's to-do list. Homebuyers don't like stains. She resisted the urge to crack her fingers, though they were stiff and achy. She hoped her fingers would feel better by the time she returned. She would hate for a client to notice something off about her hands.

Samantha attacked the fridge with a Mr. Clean magic eraser. It took off a good deal of stains, but some were stubborn and clung to the door. She was perplexed by the stains, but she would not let them get the best of her. She grabbed every cleaner in her arsenal. She grew excited as they seemed to fade but hit a wall when after 20 minutes of scrubbing remained the same. She felt tears prick her eyes and forced herself to smile as wide as she could.

She took in the refrigerator door. The stains had faded so much, she doubted anyone would really notice them. But she would know. If she spoke with people in the kitchen, her eyes would be drawn to the stains. Samantha considered painting over them. Her stepmother had always told her "when you cannot remove imperfection, you cover it up." This mantra was why Samantha had begun dying her hair in her mid-20s when she found a single grey hair. Painting the fridge could work. But she would need the correct type of paint and color, and enough time for the whole thing to dry before the open house. She shook her head. It was not feasible.

But something had to be done. She contemplated putting up a sign that said the fridge would be replaced upon making an offer. But she knew she could not

afford to buy a new one when this one worked perfectly fine. At that moment, her heart ached for Dave. He had been her handyman, her fixer. At their best he would have made her some ginger tea and told her not to worry, he would take care of everything. But Dave was gone. Samantha smiled wide.

She decided to give up on the fridge for now. She would not allow herself to go into the kitchen during the open house. She would stay in the perfectly clean living room, with its picture frames full of stock photos. She pulled off her gloves and washed her hands, taking care to clean them fully. She applied hand lotion after drying and noticed that she needed more than usual. A few of her nails had torn and she had a scrape on her left hand over a knuckle. Samantha tried to smile, but her mouth hurt and her head felt fuzzy from the fumes. She wondered how she had gotten to this point, preparing to sell the house and only connection she had left to the man she loved. Nothing in her life for the past year had been her choice. Dave had refused to try to make things work, his only explanation for wanting to end their marriage of 30 years being that he was unhappy, that he had been unhappy for a long time. She had let him divide up belongings and choose their friends, hoping desperately that keeping things amicable would make him suddenly change his mind and come back to her. And maybe, some part of her deep inside thought that selling the house would get his attention. But she was only fooling herself.

Samantha grabbed for her phone frantically dialing Janice's number.

"Hey Sam, I am glad you called. I was just going to text you a couple more things you should do before the open house. Do you have a pen near you? I can tell you now."

"I don't have a pen near me. I mean...it doesn't matter. Janice, I can't do this, I can't sell the house."

Janice's voice got all high pitched and loud like it used to when they were kids and she didn't get the bigger piece of a dessert. "What are you talking about? We put in all this work? I already cleaned out the spare room for you. Veronica started defrosting ground beef for shepherd's pie, your favorite."

Samantha sank to the floor of her kitchen, leaning against the fridge for support. "I am not ready. This house...it means too much to me. Maybe I will want to sell in a year or two but now, I think it's keeping me grounded."

"I would hardly call your current state grounded Sam." Samantha could practically hear Janice rolling her eyes.

"I am sorry we put in all this work, but the house isn't even listed yet. The biggest harm is now my kitchen is extremely clean."

Janice sighed. "But what are you going to do? You can't just stay there, holed up and alone. I just want what's best for you."

"I know, but selling the house isn't the right thing. I will figure something out. Maybe I should take a trip, go to Costa Rica."

"Sam, you can't just take off to Costa Rica."

Samantha felt an odd sense of calmness wash over her. "Actually Janice, yes I can."

The Wedding Cake

Jeremy Mandelbaum Giles

"You're sweeter than any dessert you could make" he used to always tell her, lightly brushing his lips against her nose, their arms and legs seeming to be permanently tied together as they are swallowed up by the covers. She would always smile, letting out a small chuckle before moving her mouth up, catching his kiss on her lips, saying "As you should well know, I don't make my desserts very sweet, mister, so that's not saying much, but thank you."

For their marriage, she decided that she would make their wedding cake. The man didn't want her to; "it was a lot of work" he said, and "he wanted them both to just enjoy this moment." But, she shrugged off his argument, choosing to kiss the words out of his mouth instead of listen. In the breaths they took when their lips parted she'd remind him that she was a baker, and that "there was no way in hell she'd let someone else make their own wedding cake." She pressed her body against his, her thighs bumping against his in a seductive promise. Eventually, he reluctantly agreed.

The woman wanted the wedding cake to tell the story of their relationship. So, it did.

On their first date, they went to a fancy Chinese restaurant; a recommendation from her parents. In fact, the whole entire date was an idea by her parents. She was happy being single at the time and didn't see the need to date, but her parents disagreed. Not that she was too mad at them then. The man was tall, decently built, seemed super nice and was very into her. And, he paid for the date, something she'd later realize would become a trend. As she often did when she first met someone, she told the story of the biggest cake she'd ever made, a giant strawberry and cream cake shaped like a Mayan Temple. As she described how she prepared the strawberries she could see his tongue fighting to come out of his mouth, trying to see if somehow her words could make the air in front of him taste like her cake. The air didn't taste like the cake, but when they kissed later that night, he would swear to her that her lips did.

For the first layer, she coated the outside in a yellow fondant to represent the temple. She made the inside strawberries and cream, just like before, except this time, she slipped in a little bit of rhubarb as well.

Two months into their relationship, they spent more nights together than not, reaching for each other hungrily, lips pressed together as if they were trying to devour one another. Things were going well mostly. He was every bit as sweet as she imagined, and maybe even more into her than she thought. But, there was one in-

cident, with her best guy friend from high school. Him and the woman had a tradition; no matter how old they got, as long as they lived close enough, they would try a new restaurant once a month. Since they both still lived in Jersey, they saw no reason for the tradition to change. One month, they decided to try a new Japanese restaurant, Ariyoshi. A few glasses of Soju and a few rowdy jokes later and it was 2am. The man had tried to call her a few times, but she had her phone on vibrate and missed it. When she finally called him, she could hear the tension in her voice, as he warned her about her friend. They started yelling and eventually they hung up. The next day he texted he was sorry, and told her he loved her.

She covered the next layer in red icing, for romance, and filled the inside with a vanilla batter laced with wasabi.

Six months in, the man decided it was time that she moved in with him in his apartment in New York City. Her bakery was in Jersey; meaning a move would result in many hours standing on the platform of a falling-apart train station, its ground stained with a rainbow of dirty gum and pasty white bird droppings. Her house in Jersey was half the price of his small flat, three times the size, and four times as nice; her aquamarine walls were much easier on the eyes than his throw-up yellow ones. Yet that didn't matter. He wanted her there. No, he needed her there to support him as he slinked around Wall Street, a young wolf trying to hunt the bigger wolves. He called her family, her friends, anyone who she could think of, to ask if she should move to the city. They said that the man wasn't a wolf but a fox, and that this was her chance. The woman didn't resist and, one month later, move to the city she did. She loved him, after all.

The woman covered the next layer of her cake in gray fondant to represent New York City. She filled the inside with a rich dark chocolate, and finely chopped up grass, taken from the home she left behind.

Four months into moving in, their apartment had become a cold war, only becoming hot occasionally when they were under the covers. The woman didn't know anyone in New York, so, that first month, she crawled from bar to bar, a small bag of cookies from her bakery in her hand. They were her ace friend-making tool. No matter how old people got or suspicious they were, food always seemed to open a door to their heart, she had found. In the beginning she had invited the man. Not only did he not accept, but he berated her with words so bitter she didn't understand how they didn't leave a bad taste in his mouth. He wished she would just stay there with him as he lay tired from work, his brief yet necessary respite from the hunt. One day, as she tried to leave he stepped in front of the door, hand on the knob, a feral look in his eyes. She careened back, terrified, and in a second the look was gone, replaced by wet tears and coos of I'm sorry.

She decided to make the next layer of cake have an oreo crumble batter, with a radioactive green icing exterior.. Mixed with the oreos were small grinded up bits of the brick walls of their apartment that had encased her. Then, to finish off the layer, she broke the door knob into tiny pieces as well, adding it to the layer for good measure.

The man cheated on her almost a year after she moved into the city. The woman he cheated with was some assistant at work. She wasn't prettier or smarter than her, but she was younger and blonder. The night she found out; unceremoniously as the man called her mid-hookup and ended the line just too late, she ran out of the apartment. She called her parents, desperate for an out, hoping that they'd finally tell her to leave him, that he wasn't worth it. But, they didn't. They simply said that "he's a growing fox, sometimes it's hard for young predators to stick with only one prey," and that she should give him a second chance. In fact, they said that "if she didn't want to end up needing a fox, she should've become something more than a baker. I mean, when we need them, how will you ever pay for our medical bills without it." She didn't answer. The next morning she confronted him, and he didn't back down, claiming he had to cheat, because she was always going out, and "never satisfied him." That night, in their bed, the cold war turned hot once again.

For the next layer, she decided to make the outside a baby blue; it was the assistant's favorite color. For the inside of the cake she spent a few hours opening pomegranates, scooping out the seeds, and throwing them into her batter. She then went out, picked some lotus flowers, ground them up in a mortar and pestle, and added the paste. Finally, she removed the blades from some knives and threw them in too.

After he cheated, everything became worse for the woman. She left the apartment less, and even the few times she did try to leave, the man got louder and meaner, the wolf baring his teeth, threatening to sink them into her neck at any moment. If he did, he would leave her with a bloody gash in her neck; a demented hickey that could never be removed. Eventually, she stopped resisting his reign. The hunter had finally caught his prey and he could do what he wanted with her. Within six months of the incident, he got down on his knees and proposed. Her throat constricted, barely letting her get out the air to say yes. The entire time she spoke she kept imagining his fangs entering her neck if she said no. She would've called her parents to see if they would talk her out of marrying him, but she knew they wouldn't so she didn't bother. They wanted his money and that was that.

The final layer was the capstone of the piece, and she knew it had to be special. She started out by making a basic white cake, and covering it with a beautiful pearly white icing. But, before it was ready to serve, she stabbed the batter with

a syringe, injecting a few drops of cyanamide into the batter, her final and most prized ingredient.

A few hours after vows had been said, their marriage sealed by their lips pressed together, the wedding cake was revealed. There was a collective gasp from the audience, their faces lighting up as they marveled at its sheer size and beauty. As the first slice was cut and people started to take their pieces, the man walked up to the woman asking which slice was best. She pointed to the small top layer and said "that one, I made it especially sweet for you, mister. Hopefully this finally proves I can make a dessert sweeter than I am." Smiling smugly, he remarks "I doubt it," before cutting himself a generous piece of the final layer. The woman began to walk away as the man took his first bite, not looking back as he fell to the floor. The other guests began to drop around him, their hands shooting to their throats as they screamed in pain.

That Goodnight

Jonathan Greco

27:

Looks like my time's about up. I managed to set a new lifespan record for this elderly ass, awake 76 hours straight. Pretty sure that's the longest a Mike lasted since the First. That probably means Mike 28 won't last much longer than a day, maybe a day-and-a-half if he's lucky. Sucks to be him.

I tried to do something a bit different with my turn at the wheel, didn't take any of the five-hour or Red Bull the other Mikes stocked up. I think the sugar is just making us more tired, honestly. I just drank way more coffee. At one point, I was drinking it straight out of the machine, almost boiling hot, just to get it all down before the next pot was ready. Hurt like hell, burned my whole mouth, but that just made it harder to doze off. Not to mention, this body's tastebuds were already as good as gone, after that stunt Mike 19 pulled with the jumper cables. Mad as I am about that, I can't blame him for it. He was just trying to last another day.

I think what really gave me the edge, though, was the bedroom wall. I mean, even the bed itself, it's unsettling, right? The world's comfiest gallows. Even now, every cell in this useless body wishes it could dive in. Let my mind sink into nothingness. Delude myself again into thinking it's me who wakes up in the morning, not Mike 28. I don't think a single Mike's stepped in the bedroom since the First woke up. I'll admit, I only came in at first because I was ready to give in. I was tired, I thought I might let Mike 28 wake up on an actual mattress. Fortunately, I found some friends in the wall.

There's quite a mold colony, and it's big, almost as long as the bed and just as tall. Little grayish-black dots, they must be thousands, all trumpeting the same warning: do not approach. Even the body knew to listen. I listened too, I was terrified at first, I don't have to tell you how that shit freaks Mikes out, but I think I got to know them pretty well. They were wary too, at first. They wouldn't move an inch unless I was looking away, skittering just at the corner of my eye, but they got more comfortable. By day two, they'd go wherever they wanted while I was looking right at them. There's actually this one dot that follows me everywhere in the apartment like a puppy, on the wall or the floor or the ceiling. I thought it was cute. His name is Spot.

The only real trouble was going out for groceries. It was noon, and the sunlight helped keep me up a bit, but the walk back uphill carrying everything tired out the legs and arms too much. The late August heat wasn't helping. In a few hours, 28 will wake up a block or two away from home, with the leg sores to end all leg sores.

The milk will definitely have gone bad. Maybe Mikes should work out more to stop this from happening. I wrote it down in the notes app. Trying to think of some famous last words to get on here too...

28:

Can you blame me for not lasting long? The last Mike was apparently up for seventy-something hours and left me out in the middle of the street, with a bag leaking sour milk and the parting wisdom: "Sleep iain't moldt, gimme 10 puch-ups."

I think he was talking about these little funny-smelling black spots that've been cropping up all over the house. No matter where I am, I can always find one in the corner of my eye. 27 must've been really out of it toward the end, naming one of them. Obviously, I called Ms. Howell to get that fixed, that's what landladies are for, but when she asked for specific spots to take out of the walls, I suddenly couldn't find any. Even that giant colony 27 saw in the bedroom is just gone, no trace, no scent. I made it nine-ish hours on Red Bull just looking for those dots before I decided that I had enough. I unfolded the couch, because I don't trust that damn bedroom, and packed it in. I'm tired. I'm done. Besides, if I last nearly as long as 27, tomorrow is still a Monday. If the amazing vanishing fungus doesn't poison this body or something before 29 wakes up, he'll probably thank me.

29:

I wish I could understand why 28 did that. Barely nine hours. I've never thought of Mikes as ones to back down from a challenge, especially when our lives are at stake. I think he thought he was doing me a favor by giving this body a few hours' sleep before I go to work, which is really messing with me. I'm trying not to think about it. The idea of somebody killing themselves specifically for you just freaks me out.

But if that is what it was, it worked. I came in looking healthier, and I barely got any shoulder taps or questions from concerned coworkers, just the usual "How are you" from Nick, "Did you sleep well?" from Lake. I told them I was fine, and they moved on. Nick didn't play up the grandpa shtick and ask for my "help" on writing emails or exporting CSVs so I felt busy, because I was actually busy. Jacobs gave me some real work to set myself to, setting up IPOs, modelling interest risk. Even on hour 33, I think they could see that I was doing much better than Mikes before me have been doing. I must have been more productive these last two days than any Mike in the past two months.

That's why I'm calling it here. Spot and the others are having a hard time

accepting it, but even at just 40 hours, I've probably lived longer than the average Mike, and 30 is almost sure to. I really think we could do a lot better for ourselves if we would throw in the towel a bit sooner, for each other's sake.

30:

I didn't get what was going on with 29's suicide pact, but when I saw Spot jumping up and down to make sure I was alright, I knew I was going to live to the weekend.

It took a while to figure out how to get him out of the wall, but I managed to take Spot with me to work. He was going to be my little helper, pestering me any-time I started to doze off. The work helped too -- the signs of sleep deprivation had mostly worn off from the body, and Mr. Jacobs was acting like an actual boss and not my wannabe nurse, so keeping busy wasn't hard for the first two days. The eye-bags and everything were back in full force by day three, but even then, I was able to scrounge together the rest of a to-do list from the prospective acquisition Lake took that morning. Their plate being so full already, I figured that no matter how mad they got at me for doing their job for them, they'd just be glad to have a head start by Monday.

When I got back, around 2:00am Saturday, that mold was on every surface in the apartment, fuming, but once Spot explained everything to them, they cooled off. They moved to the bedroom and behind the couch, to help me stay away from them both. I just messed around with Spot all Saturday, playing hide-and-seek around the place. He's surprisingly smart. Staying up through Saturday was no problem.

Even so, come Sunday, I knew I didn't have much time left. Spot and his buddies were bothering me every five minutes, just to stop me from collapsing. If I wanted to live, I needed medical intervention. I knew I had to make a call.

"911, what's your emergency?"

I informed the man on the line that I had a concussion, before I slammed my head into the bedroom wall as hard as I could.

31:

30 probably thought that he would last long enough for paramedics to get to him, but he was out like a light when they found him. The only reason he didn't crack his skull open is because that wall is so soft now. I'm the one they have to keep awake.

My ears are still ringing, the lights are blaring, my eyes can't focus. It hurts to blink, to move my eyes at all, so I'm wearing a blindfold. It still hurts to move my jaw, or my neck. My throat is apparently too scalded to properly swallow food, so

they're "feeding" me on an IV drip while they prepare for surgery.

They don't know if it's safe to put me under, so they're using local anesthetics. I grip the sides of the bed as they slice my neck open and dig into my throat. I can't remember what they said they were doing in there, but the ringing stopped just in time to hear, in the base of my skull, a scalpel graze a vertebra. A mishap. It's all I can do not to cough as blood leaks up the back of my mouth, tweezers pulling something out. I try to shove them off, but I can't move my arms at all. I lie here for hours. Days pass. Weeks. Months pass before it finally clicks that I'm in hell. I'm Mike 30, and I'm in hell for putting 31 through something just like this. Years pass. Centuries. Eons. Ages. Planets crumble and stars collapse just beyond these walls.

1:

You've had a long day at work. Two, in fact, a 48-hour crunch to finalize the client's merger before the end of the second quarter. It's challenging work, but you're the man for it, you've always been. And of course, now that it's over and done, you can't wait to get back home and hit the hay.

You really shouldn't drive so tired, but you're still coming down from work mode, you couldn't doze off if you tried. Even in bed, sleep doesn't come so easy. You lie for what must be hours, flat on your back, arms at your side, focusing on your breath, like your doctor told you the thousandth time you asked what she could do for the insomnia she insists you don't have, before your brain's cooled off enough. You drift away.

Suddenly, you're weightless. The gentle lift of your mattress gives way to freefall, and you descend. In only half of a second, you know that there's nothing around you, nothing beneath you. A blacker black than you've ever seen, in all directions. No, this isn't black, this isn't color at all. Three-quarters of a second. There's no wind, and you have no body to feel it, but you're picking up speed. How long until you hit the bottom? Is there a bottom? Four-fifths of a second. The force of gravity, not unlike interest, builds continuously. The distance between you and your life compounds, greater and greater, in intervals too infinitely frequent to track. Nine-tenths. You don't know how far you've already fallen. You flail in this fathomless sea, scrambling to grab on to something real.

You get lucky. Your body jolts awake, and you're still here, still breathing. You try to dismiss it as a nightmare, or the start of one, some trick your brain played, but you can't make yourself forget anything. It just seems so obvious now, a simple fact of the world.

How can you live like this, knowing what you now know? Easy. You live. All told, you live for 132 hours. Your body doesn't like it. You're seeing faces in your

walls before you bite the dust. You're probably making a hell of a headache for whoever wakes up in your body next. "Fuck him," you say. You won't go quietly. Maybe you can't live forever, but you can give the Sandman a story to remember you by before he puts you down.

32:

Apparently, 31 almost killed the body passing out in the middle of surgery. His life, short as it was, couldn't have been fun for him, but the carelessness just pisses me off.

Pissing me off more, though, is Ms. Howell's project to tear out every wall in the apartment. She visited me after I woke up, telling me how she's fixing the mold issue right away, how she's praying for my health, even saying she'll chip in for the surgery bill out-of-pocket. I'm pretty sure she just doesn't want to get sued, but mad as I am, there's no way I'm staying awake long enough to see anything from legal action, so I took her money. Spot's smart, anyway. He's got tough friends. I know 30 really liked him, but I'm sure he'll do fine, whatever landfill he ends up in.

The doctors want me well rested after the surgery, which is a big problem. I have to say, it is hard to stay awake in a place as boring as a hospital. The whole time, I was begging for some kind of drama in a neighboring room, maybe an emergency surgery, so I could at least have something interesting to listen to. Still, I managed to stay awake.

They gave me a shot of something for my "insomnia." "Don't be scared by the needle," the nurse said, "it's not that bad. You just still can't swallow the lighter stuff we'd give normally." I wanted to tell her I wasn't scared, but I'm not supposed to talk.

I'm on hour 42 now. I'm trying to stay awake as long as I can while lying in bed with my eyes shut, I'm pretty sure I'm being monitored. Even if I make it to tomorrow, when they see I'm still sleep-deprived, they might straight-up tranquilize me. I suppose that's the most "blaze of glory" way I can manage at this point. Don't go quietly, right?

Submitted Bios

Michael Rodriguez is a Junior, majoring in Chemistry and Math. He is from Houston, Texas and is Salvadoran/Guatemalan.

Mari Sati is a sophomore at JHU, and a casual poet. She tries to write based on her own experiences in life or the cool people she has come across. She has performed many times at open mics at Busboys and Poets on Saint Paul's.

Henry Bergles is a student, writer, photographer, influencer, and all-around cool guy. He pledges absolute loyalty to his fraternity (BUΦ). In his spare time, he enjoys movies, Reality TV, and, on occasion, horseback riding.

Luciana Ramos Barroso was born in Mexico City. She is vegan and considers herself a nihilist.

Kwan Srijomkwon is a sci-fi / fantasy writer from Phichit, Thailand.

Jeremy Mandelbaum Giles is a Writing Seminars and International Studies major at Johns Hopkins University. He is an avid writer and the Co-Founder of Writers' Warehouse, Johns Hopkins' first creative writing group. He is an advocate for Indigenous rights, and studies how Indigenous philosophies can be used to help prevent climate change. Using his writing, he hopes to bring attention to underrepresented voices in today's world.

