

TEACHER WRITER MAGAZINE



2022

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2022 TEACHER CONSULTANT CONTEST WINNERS AND HONORABLE MENTIONS

CONTEST WINNERS

POETRY:

JOAN MULLER (SI 2010), "SCHOONER"

PROSE NONFICTION:

DIANE AYER (SI 2005), "UNEXPECTED"

HONORABLE MENTIONS

POETRY:

JOAN MULLER (SI 2010), "WOUND WOOD"

JOANNE PELUSO (SI 2007), "AMTRAK PRINCESS"

PROSE FICTION:

JANE COOK, "FREE FALL"

PROSE NONFICTION:

JANE COOK (SI 2007), "SAVING HOPE"

MARY ARCHAMBAULT (SI 2022), "WALKING MEDITATION"

SPECIAL THANKS TO OUR JUDGES

POETRY: DAN HEALY

PROSE FICTION: TOLONDA HENDERSON

PROSE NONFICTION: MONALI DESAI

SCHOONER

JOAN MULLER (SI 10)

I thought of you.
I sent you a bobolink
clutching my
miniature portmanteau
packed with verses.
She will drop it at sea
above your tall masts
which only she can find
at a distance
trusting that horizons she crosses
to find you
will disprove the old lie
flat earthers tell
about edges
because even things
disappeared past them,
gone upside down on the other side
will come round again.

After her tiny grip releases,
exhausted,
she will still sing,
little virtuoso,
while the valise yaws
spilling my words midair,
the falling
also something
to tell you,
how sky loves sails,
loves how your spinnaker
draws your keel deeply
through swells
which strop it keen as a blade
you believe
won't leave a scar
because the sea
closes like a seam behind you.

My phrases have tumbled,

spun like cartwheels,
have turned into starfish
before they were done,
splashing in your wake
as hit or miss comets
so illumined in the zodiac
that sailors have
mapped them on charts.
You must have seen them.
Because there's this:
When I hang wet sheets
on my line
I hear them
over the loudest birdsong,
watch them luff with breeze
and the sound rigging makes.

UNEXPECTED

DIANE AYER (SI 05)

I pull into the West Hartford Reservoir twenty minutes early, wanting to scope out the scene before she arrives. The morning sun, which had been unbearable for days, is now only peeking out from misty clouds so I'm grateful for that, though it does not help my hair at all. I look in the rearview mirror and flatten out the wiry white ones in front; I really should have done more with my hair. Unclasping the seatbelt reveals my once-crisp linen shirt is now a wrinkled mess. What was I thinking? Fifty and I still can't dress myself. Also, I should be thinner. I actually consider apologizing for all of this that is me when I see her and then I warn myself not to seem so desperate for reassurances. I scoff at my vanity then cringe at not having done more to fix or at least maintain.

So, I am going through all my normal feels when meeting someone for the first time, but this time is different. Her importance and the momentousness of our meeting make me feel a queasy thrill. This is not our first meeting. I once knew her when no one else did: from late spring of 1987 until the winter of my senior year of high school, I carried her in my womb and planned how we would part.

During the first few months of carrying her, I mostly felt caught in a bewildering state of panicked inertia. I only confided to my journal and to my dog (*love you, Zeus!*) and worked hard to make sure nobody would notice my state. When afternoon torpor would overtake me in front of the television, I made sure to bury my belly into the couch cushions or call Zeus up to spoon. I was a passenger in my friend's beloved yellow Pinto when I learned orange juice would not be tolerated. I held the vomit in my mouth for several minutes until she stopped at the convenience store: I jumped out, spit it out, popped in gum, and stood back up before she noticed. By mid-August, all of my blouses looked like the shoulder pads had moved to my boobs and belly. For my senior portrait, I settled with an oversized sweater with a popped collar (popular in 1987, yes, but not so great during the summer) and lizard-covered Jams that had a drawstring waist. The cranky yearbook photographer shook his head when he saw me: they'd only take head and shoulder pics because I wasn't in the required formal dress. Perfect! No need for sucking it in *and* more focus on my perfectly triangular hair (#1987hairgoals).

I felt her kick for the first time that week and journalled how "totally miraculous yet wicked disasterous (sic)" it was. This baby hadn't left early (there'd be no praying away pregnancy for me), I hadn't followed through on having her surgically removed from the premises, and, by the time the school nurse called my parents a couple months later, several dates for my planned suicide had passed. I was going to have a baby, but I knew I could not be a mother.

There are still ten minutes until our appointment, but I figure I'll text now and let her know I'm there. I anticipate all the ways her reply could hurt: worst case scenario she forgot and isn't even available (Why hadn't I confirmed yesterday? My gut churns); second worst is that she's changed her mind and isn't ready for this; even worse than worst is if she says she doesn't ever want this. Wait, the worst of the worst is that something happened on the way and she's in an ambulance rushing to a hospital and I, who gave her life, am sitting here worried about my hair -- but look! Here's my phone buzzing. She's across the parking lot and walking towards me. Right now.

I signed the adoption papers knowing that I might never meet her again. I did it knowing that she might hate me for putting her up for adoption. I was prepared for either and felt the punishment would be just. I also knew that she might flourish or fail in life, but I should not be the one to provide the critical footing for her destiny. I knew I could not give her the best odds by the mere fact of who I was at that point in my life. Now, she has found me, has expressed only good vibes, and here we are meeting.

The incessant flow of vehicles through the lot came to a halt; joggers and dog-walkers smile and step back in reverence; bluebirds carry garlands of daisies that they wrap around this sacred plot; a pair of deer emerge from the woodland and a family of hedgehogs tumble out too; butterflies dance in figure eights around her head as she approaches.

Maybe it's because I'm a writer, or maybe it's because I'm bad at remembering and good at imagining, but I can recall several versions of what our first exchanges were when we met that day. No matter what the words were, they all felt wonderful. She is grateful and gracious, jovial and sincere. She says she thought I might be taller as we laugh and look squarely into each other's eyes. It's not often that you meet someone the exact same height as you are; there's a certain energy when your eyes meet and you don't need to look up or down to be face to face with them. And this young woman, my daughter from a lifetime ago, someone I never allowed myself to hope I'd see again, is positively radiant and eye to eye with me. I feel electric and giddy. I could hug her and her sweet little baby bump for days.

Instead, we walk, we talk. I narrate and explain our history, answering all of her questions, ignoring the plan my therapist and I had set out to keep some aspects private. Nothing feels too painful with her walking beside me. I only withhold my ravenous desire to interrogate her. I'd like to learn about her in every way, could listen to her every waking moment's memories no matter how mundane, and all of her hopes and dreams as well, but am terrified of scaring her away. I remind myself that she's not mine, I have no right, and settle for first-date style questions. *What do you do for fun? What's your job like?*

When Wendy, my adoption agency caseworker, called to congratulate me the night I gave birth, she said she'd be coming in first thing the next morning, and I would need to be prepared to sign off on some final paperwork before she could take the baby out of the hospital. It was then that I unhappily gleaned that the agency had built in a five-day safety period wherein the baby was temporarily housed with a foster family and would not be with the parents I had chosen. The rationale was that, if I lost my nerve and demanded her back, it'd most likely be within the first five days of separation. If that happened, it'd be easier on the adoptive parents if they hadn't even met her yet. I believed the waiting period was cruel to the baby and to her new parents who I imagined constantly stood vigil over phone and crib, holding each other and hoping I would follow-through. I knew I would; I stated that I wanted her brought right to them, no foster care for my girl. At 17, however, I wielded little power and honestly was probably just turning my sorrow at separation into anger at bureaucracy. Wendy explained that she could not change the agency's policies. I had recently learned from a nurse that I would be staying at the hospital the next day (there was a strange preoccupation with my having to have a bowel movement before leaving). I'd likely be discharged in the early evening. Fine, I told Wendy, if that was how it was, the baby would be staying with me while I was in the hospital and she could come get her the hour before I left. There were ahems and sighs and definite displeasure, but I stood firm, knowing that this baby was mine until I chose otherwise. It

wasn't entirely rational, but I had manufactured an extra eight hours before it was time to separate from this beautiful baby girl. My stand provided a brief glimpse into possible mommy material, but I knew I'd still be saying goodbye.

Back at the Reservoir, we finish our walk, hug, agree we'd like to keep in touch, and part ways. The debt I owe her parents is immeasurable: she has clearly had a wonderful upbringing and flourished from my choice. I drive away without looking back, believing that whatever magic brought us together in her creation and now in her return, will revisit and I'll see her again. I used to believe that I needed to accomplish something amazing in lieu of keeping her; I journalled about investigative reporting and the Nobel Peace Prize. In moments of self-doubt, I've returned to that pledge and felt I may have fallen short, betrayed her and myself, but that's not today. Today, I know for certain that, when I was 17, I gave my baby to someone better qualified and we all benefited from that choice.

When I get home much later that afternoon, the sun is setting in soft gold and rose hues and the humidity has lifted. I notice my neighbor has propped a small circular fan in his window and the last rays of sunlight reflect off the bracing arms which now seem like real arms: elbows on the sill, palms embracing a golden face, blades spinning inside like my mind has turned for all of these years, wondering if I did the right thing for her, for me. The arms could be hers, keeping my whirring mind grounded, while seemingly invisible. Or maybe it's her mind, spinning on who I was, while I held her best interests up. I've just made this connection and think of maybe writing a poem about it when my neighbor's silhouette briefly appears; the fan's blades come to a stop within its circle as the last pale rays rest on the horizon.

WOUND WOOD

JOAN MULLER (SI 10)

He always brought buzz kill
to my enthusiasm
until I became a child
of stumps.
My mother with her nurse's skill
trimmed the toothed edges
of my wounds
so I'd heal
with lesser scars
and to see her so beautiful
you wouldn't believe
what work she'd
already done
on herself.

Between the one parent
and the other
formed an aisle
to my adulthood
slim as an incision
though I
having been made small
and even self-cutting
could finally fit,
spun like light
through a needle's eye
so I might sew my own sutures
like a corpsman in the field.

I prune apple trees now
with sharpened tools
making the lopped places smooth
and understand how old advice
to paint over wood's wounds
isn't true
because the raw spots
have magic
stored in their cells

to grow upward and out
in front of themselves,
despite how injury
remains within the tree—
see the forest congregation,
so many members
with wound wood
but without killing disease
because even
unhealed damage
can still be redeemed.

AMTRAK PRINCESS

JOANNE PELUSO (SI 07)

When I get to South Station
I tell them I'm a deadhead, I tell them I'm your daughter,
and they let me climb on, college girl,
with my index cards and fiction scraps,
spilling out of a fringed suede bag,
and my mother's honeymoon Samsonite
holding my other pair of jeans.
This was before they made clothes for fat girls
and I took what I could get,
grateful for the Wranglers and the tight tight turtlenecks,
and the Quincy boys who came upstairs anyway
and said I was pretty and said I was lucky
I could go anywhere for free.

When I get to New Haven
I say I'm here to meet you, I say I'll have a lite beer,
and they all step aside, handsome men,
in uniforms or linen suits,
drinking Budweisers or shots of Jack,
and they tell me how proud you are of me,
although you never say those words.
This was when teenagers were legal age,
and I'd do anything for you,
grateful for attention from the only man I loved,
so I drank what I thought made me girlish and cool,
and thought I looked pretty and knew I was lucky
I could go anywhere for free.

Not Sylvia's daddy, or Gidget's, but a Goldilocks daddy,
just tyrant enough to make me suck in my gut
and lie about sneaking Quincy boys upstairs;
but hero enough to carry your dead wife's Samsonite
in one hand while your other hand guides me
by the small of my fat back down the aisles
of your steel cathedral, saying
this is my daughter, this is my college girl;
and I have never felt so beautiful
as I did every month on that Montrealer,
deadhead, drop out, Amtrak princess,
with my Bic pen-scribble on an index card,
Dear Daddy, I can't tell you this out loud,
and you looked at me with my own eyes
and said *Come home.*

Joanne Peluso (SI 07)

FREE FALL

JANE COOK (SI 07)

The elevator door clanged shut as she drew in a sharp breath. What was she thinking? How could she pull this off?

Her backpack shifted. She wasn't used to carrying such a weight on her back. She was amazed that the Security Guards had barely glanced inside of it. The threat of terrorists had made the whole country paranoid but here she was standing in an elevator, riding to the top of the Empire State Building, preparing for a free fall ending with a parachute landing. It helped that she looked harmless – a tiny woman with long gray hair, glasses, and knitting stuffed into her backpack. Since the guards didn't look a day over 22, they probably thought that she was just an old lady out for a big day.

A big day. They didn't know what a big day this was. She had always been afraid of heights, ever since she was five and fell out of a second-floor window. She also suffered from claustrophobia. Just thinking about riding in an elevator gave her the chills, remembering when she was stuck for hours in an elevator at work. So, why did she decide to parachute off the top of this famous building, the tallest building in the world during its heyday?

She had recently watched the movie *The Bucket List* about a couple of guys who are attempting to complete a list of things that they want to see and do before they die. After watching that movie, she decided to make her own bucket list. She was only partway through hers, but she knew it was time to attempt this feat.

The express elevator ride to the 86th floor observatory took less than a minute. Her stomach did flip-flops, as if she were riding on El Toro, one of the fastest wooden roller coasters in the world. She stepped out onto the crowded observatory and looked around. Though it would cost more, the 86th floor was not the top and she was determined to free fall from the top. Besides, it would be less crowded there, and she did not want to attract attention.

She headed up to the 102nd floor where her instincts had been right. The elevator to the top floor was much less crowded and almost no one was in that tower observatory. She eased her way around, appreciating the panorama of New York City. She had never seen such a spectacular view. For a moment, she just wanted time to stop. She wished she could spend the rest of her life right there amid the skyscrapers and the bright lights of the city. *But that's not what I came here for*, she thought as she brushed that idea out of her head.

She walked around the tower looking for the easiest way to perform the free fall. Clearly, others had tried to jump off this building before because there were a number of barricades to discourage it. After circling the tower once, she saw her opening. *It's lucky that I'm so small. I can squeeze through a small space that some security guard missed*, she thought. She positioned her parachute on her back, screwed up her courage, raised her arms, and leapt off the ledge.

Thoughts swirled around her brain. *It's happening. I'm freefalling! I can't even describe the exhilaration. The city is surrounding me like a wool blanket. Is this how birds feel? Why did I wait so long to experience this feeling?*

As she flew through the air, she pulled on the parachute cord. But it jammed and didn't open the way it had when she practiced. Her heart started pounding and her hands turned to ice. Terror gripped her body. *This isn't the plan. I just wanted some excitement in my life. I am not ready to die*, she thought.

She watched as her life flashed before her eyes.

Just as she gave up all hope, an enormous gust of wind grabbed her body. It lifted her up and threw her onto a ledge. She was shaken up but miraculously not injured. As she looked around, she could not believe her eyes. No one had witnessed her free fall nor her landing. There she was on the 86th floor observatory, just where she had been only minutes before. She shook herself off, regained her composure, and raced for the elevator. Somehow, riding down 86 floors on an elevator didn't seem so scary now.

SAVING HOPE

JANE COOK (SI 07)

Hope arrived during the middle of the Super Bowl on February 6, 2005, along with her sister Faith and her brothers Jack Frost and Buddy. The kittens were born to Joy, a cat who had appeared in our woods several months earlier begging to be rescued. When we took Joy to the vet to have her checked over and spayed, the vet announced that she was pregnant. We decided to let her have the kittens. The plan was that we would keep Joy and then find good homes for the kittens. Of course, we were deluding ourselves. Once we saw the kittens, we fell in love and knew they were never leaving our home, so we went from a two-cat home to a six-cat home overnight.

Joy looked like an Ocicat, an Abyssinian, Siamese and American Shorthair cross. Her markings resembled an ocelot, and her babies were beautiful. Faith was all black. Buddy was white and gray tiger striped. Jack was white and buff colored, resembling a Ragdoll Siamese. Hope was black and white, looking very much like a miniature Holstein cow. As the weeks and months went by, the kittens grew. Whenever they weren't eating or sleeping together in a tangle of paws and bodies, they played together and wreaked havoc on the house - knocking over houseplants, chewing through cords on blinds so they could no longer be raised or lowered, climbing all over clothes in our closets whenever we forgot to close the doors, and eventually pulling down the closet pole leaving clothes strewn all over the floor. Nonetheless, they endeared themselves to us and the thought of life without them was inconceivable.



I remember when we took them to our vet for their first checkup and series of shots. Dr. Gladue was cooing to each one. When she got to Hope, she held her up in the air, looked her in the eye, and announced, "Watch out for this one, she's going to be trouble. She looks just like my black and white kitty. I don't even want to tell you what kind of mischief she has gotten into."

On September 3, 2005, our lives changed forever. Hope had been chased up a tree, probably by a racoon, during a terrible heat wave and was too terrified to climb down. She cried as loud as her 6-month-old lungs allowed. After three days with no food or water, she was frantic and so was I. Hope's heart-wrenching wails grew weaker and weaker. I called the local fire department, hoping they could bring a ladder truck to retrieve her.

"Lady, have you ever seen a cat skeleton in a tree? We have more important things to do. When your cat gets hungry enough, she will come down," the unsympathetic fire fighter proclaimed.

I was not convinced. I had been putting food out at the base of the tree for the prior three days in 90-to-100-degree temperatures with no rain in sight. Nothing, not even a fresh can of tuna, had enticed her to move from her perch halfway up in the crook of an 80-foot-tall oak tree in our backyard.

Then I thought of our dear friend Chuck, a masonry contractor who had helped us build our living room and master bedroom addition. He had all sizes of ladders. When I called him and explained the situation, he loaded up his truck and arrived within an hour.

As Chuck set up his 36' extension ladder, the weakened kitten became agitated. He realized that Hope wouldn't let him hold her on the way down so he went back to his truck to get a bucket that he could put her in once he reached her.

When Chuck returned to his truck, I turned to Chip and said, "Hope will never let Chuck catch her." Chip agreed. "I'm going to climb up and get her while he's in his truck." Chip wasn't convinced that was the best alternative, but he knew better than to try to stop me when my mind was made up.

I didn't realize that Chuck hadn't finished setting up the ladder and locking it into position so when I reached about 20 feet up the ladder, I felt it moving. As the ladder collapsed, I fell, breaking my calcaneus, shattering the interior portion of my heel, crushing my ankle, spraining my shoulder, and receiving multiple other bruises and contusions. I was left with a permanent disability, and I did not save Hope. But that's a story for another day because this is a story about saving Hope.

The next morning, I was home from the hospital on crutches, my right ankle tightly wrapped with an ace bandage. Though I'd had an allergic reaction to the pain meds I'd been given at the hospital, and I was in excruciating pain, I could not ignore the very weak 6-month-old kitten who was still stuck 40 feet up in an oak tree in our backyard.

I started making phone calls since I was in no position to climb any more ladders. First, I called Joan, a good friend in my writing group who is just as passionate about animals as I am. Joan suggested that I call her friend Karen, another animal addict. Karen suggested calling a tree service since they usually have bucket trucks and ladders.

I had never used a tree service, so I went looking in the yellow pages, back when we still had phone books made of paper. Amid the list of tree services, I found a small ad on the corner of the page that caught my eye. It said "24/7 Emergency Tree Services – WE'RE ONLY A CALL AWAY." Something told me that New View was the number to call.

Though it was the Sunday of Labor Day Weekend, 24/7 means every day so I picked up the phone. Mark Roberts, the owner of New View, answered pleasantly. He told me that he and his wife were getting ready to go to a Labor Day Weekend party but after they dropped off their food, he would come over to our house and help us out.

True to his word, Mark appeared with his wife and dog dressed in a T-shirt, cut-offs, and his high-top work boots but no bucket truck. Chip showed Mark the tree, which wasn't difficult because you could hear Hope's wails from the driveway. Chip had helped me out onto the deck off of our bedroom so I could meet Mark and watch the proceedings.



“Where is your bucket truck,” I asked after greeting Mark and thanking him for taking time out of his holiday weekend to help us.

“I left that at home,” Mark replied. “I couldn’t have gotten it into your backyard anyway. I’m just going to climb the tree.”

We told Mark about our experience of the previous night and cautioned him to be careful.

Within minutes, he was ascending the 80-foot tree. But as he approached Hope, even in her weakened condition, she became distressed. She left the comfort of the crook in the tree where she had spent the past four days, started to climb higher and then went horizontal, venturing out onto a branch that was clearly not strong enough to support Mark’s weight.

As the top of the giant oak tree began to sway back and forth like a palm tree in a breeze on the beach, I called out to Mark. “Please come down. I don’t want anyone else to get hurt!”

“Don’t worry. I do this all the time,” was Mark’s nonchalant response.

His wife affirmed this as his black Labrador romped around in our backyard. I was nothing short of terrified as I watched the scene unfold.

When he reached the highest branch that would hold his weight safely, he called down, “I’m going to do a maneuver now that I think will work but she may fall out of the tree in the process. I just need you to know that.”

“I understand,” I said. “Just please be careful,” I called up to him.

I watched in amazement as Mark unlaced his work boots and fashioned them into a lariat. With the deftness of a cowboy cutting a calf out of a herd, he lassoeed Hope and pulled her in against his chest. She did not resist. Mark swiftly rappelled down the tree, much faster than he had climbed it, and handed Hope off to Chip where she happily purred in his arms. I was in awe.

I called out to Mark, “Thank you so much. That was absolutely amazing. How much do we owe you?”

“It was nothing.” He smiled as he added, “You owe me \$150. The \$100 is for getting me on a holiday weekend. The other \$50 is for the amazing.”



Saying on the pillow next to the cats: “Kittens are just angels with whiskers.”

WALKING MEDITATION

MARY ARCHAMBAULT (SI 22)

I blame childbirth for my early failed attempts at meditation. I was anything but relaxed and calm when my son was born. It hurt and I was unprepared. When my water broke, nature took over at breakneck speed so there was no time to get the epidural I had counted on. Instead, I was offered a giant bouncy ball that I was told would ease my discomfort - it didn't - while the frantic nurse tried to reach my doctor. I didn't even care about the doctor at that point, I just wanted to get my baby out but that wasn't happening while I was sitting on a giant exercise ball. The doctor finally arrived, sweaty and breathless from running down the hospital hallway, moments before my son was born. We were all spent. My infant son looked like Ed Koch and I just wanted sleep and a frozen hand between my legs. I swore I couldn't go through that again.

So when my last daughter was born three years later, I decided to cheat the pain and meditate my way through childbirth using hypnobirthing, a process of self-hypnosis/meditation calling for a woman in labor to suspend disbelief. In other words, I was to use the power of my mind to bypass the pain of a ten pound baby ripping through a hole the size of a grapefruit. Self-whispered affirmations set against a new age soundtrack on repeat were my guide and I practiced over and over and over again, telling my body it was a miracle and knew just what to do, telling my baby she knew how to slip through that absurdly small opening. I figured I'd be ready, and I mostly was. It all worked beautifully until about ten minutes before my child was born and then all bets were off. Tossing the plan out the window, and far too late for meds, I joined in the primordial chorus of mother screams throughout time. My ears rang for days and I didn't get my full voice back for two weeks.

But I'm not a quitter and meditation still held an allure, a promise of peace and tranquility that might help me sleep better, eat better, and be an all around better person. It seemed like it could be the very thing that would bring me down off the ledges I seemed to strand myself on, mostly related to some accumulated losses that I was having trouble moving past. I must have talked about this holy grail of personal transformation until my husband couldn't take it anymore, and that Christmas he gave me a gift certificate for a meditation and writing weekend at Kripalu, the woo-woo mecca of the Northeast nestled in the Berkshires.

I arrived late one Friday night in February, cranky and hesitant. I don't generally have a problem doing things on my own, but I wasn't in a great head space that day and I was feeling a bit vulnerable. It had been a long week in middle school. Knowing that the food at Kripalu was big on whole and low on processed, I'd stopped at Burger King on my way for a burger and fries and was already feeling sorry for myself that I'd have no access to junk food other than the contraband candy I'd stuffed in my bag. Besides, taking an entire weekend for myself felt indulgent. No one at home was making me feel that way, but I was playing old tapes in my head that said I should be doing fifty thousand other things that mattered for other people, things besides this self-indulgent sharma. Luckily, the workshop met that Friday night for the first time - two hours with other people in various stages of bliss. I sat on a meditation cushion, breathed, journaled, and was generally mindful. Finally. Night one felt like a success, and other than the heartburn from my Whopper Jr., I felt like I was in the right place.

The next day started with great promise. A creature of habit, I found my way back to the same meditation cushion I'd claimed the day before surrounded by the same cluster of middle-aged women in yoga pants who also appreciated predictability. When our leader announced that we were doing a twenty minute walking metta meditation, it sounded like balm for my weary soul. I was here to get my juju back, recover from my year of loss. All I had to do was walk and be quiet? Piece of cake. I could breathe, relax, walk, free my mind from rogue thoughts.

But old habits die hard.

At the sound of a chime, our leader lovingly initiated the meditation. Gently bowing her head, she invited us all to breathe deeply, then leave the room, casting our troubles aside as we walked mindfully, returning in twenty minutes connected to our inner selves and ready to write. We'd been practicing our metta meditation all morning, offering love and peace to ourselves, each other, even the ants clustered in the corner of the room feasting on someone's forgotten vegan pumpkin muffin. Nothing was beyond the reach of our good intentions.

At her sign, I leapt up, gracefully and yogically, to lead the pack through the double doors, barely pausing to notice the elegant arches in the ancient panes of glass, the pristine green lawns spread out before us, the wafting smells of turmeric, cumin, and kimchi, relying instead on my instinct to get things done. Scope out a place to walk and get to it. Med- i - tate.

Within minutes I'd outpaced everyone. That wasn't the point, of course, but I couldn't help thinking I was going to knock it out in record time, my attitude a byproduct of the competitive edge nurtured in childhood, where I was always fighting for what was mine and running to keep up, likely part of the problem to begin with. My meditative breath came faster and faster as I congratulated myself on keeping up with my cardio. I never could have lapped these people four months before, and some I was passing for the third time. Swatting flies and dodging bees,

I made grocery lists and planned lessons to the rhythm of my feet.

It took another couple of laps before I realized that no one was paying attention to anyone else, certainly not to me; no one even raised their head as I scampered past. They were all moving at a snail's pace. Maybe drugs were involved. Some type of pedestrian prozac, as they moved heal toe heal toe. A love army in an angle dust haze with arms clasped in prayer. Or maybe they were just letting shit go.

As I rushed, my frenetic pace leaving a film of sweat under my lotus wrap, the prize started slipping farther away. It wasn't about finishing more laps than anyone in a damp sweat, because after all, twenty minutes is twenty minutes. It was about removing myself from the center of my attention until I had no idea how many laps I'd done. It suddenly made sense.

So I slowed down, and started to walk

heal toe
 heal toe
 breathe.

2022 SUMMER INSTITUTE FELLOWS CONTRIBUTIONS

TURNING TIDES

MARY ARCHAMBAULT (SI '22)

The soothsaying started the moment they began hailing teachers as heroes - the brave who kept reaching out to children despite despair.

Celebrated on TikTok and praised in tweets. Parents were humbled by the breadth of what we did day in day out.

A call to wake a child before class: eat, get dressed, see you in twenty with your camera on. Second nature to zoom-seasoned specialists.

One human reaching out to another for connection. Nothing new. Lauded for dedication and saving the nation.

Those of us in the know knew it wouldn't last. Couldn't last. Didn't last.

No one likes a hero when a scapegoat sells more seats.

Now the tide has turned and we're braced before a firing squad, dodging bullets of shim sham patriotism and barely veiled racism,

clinging to our moral obligation to teach truth while contemplating education in a true democracy

as loud voices on repeat tell us what we should be saying doing teaching,

fellow Americans wanting to turn us by force to be protectors of a non-existent, pristine, elite world

some claim is a birthright, a history right, of a history that never existed, protectors of a time that never really was,

land of patriots privileging a few over the toil of the masses, chimera traipsing the surface held upon backs of those hidden in shadows.

One nation under
God help us all.

Mary Archambault (SI '22)

WHY I WRITE

CHRISTOPHER W. BUCK (SI 22)

I write because I am human. I write because I am a work in progress. I write to learn more about myself. I write to ask questions in pursuit of answers. I write to grow. I write to know. I write to be surprised, to wonder, to begin to understand. I write for the thrill. I write because it reminds me that I'm still breathing. Perplexed. Perturbed. Provoked. I write so that my words will flow like a river. I write to make poetry of this puzzle called life. I write because putting words on a page and then sending them into the world is an act of liberation. I write because I am in love. I write so that my voice is heard. I write so that my perspective is shared. I write so that everyone feels like they belong. I write because I can only be me through you, through all of us together. I write to see my ideas come to life. I write because it is the only thing that makes sense when all seems lost. I write because every word, sentence, paragraph is an experiment. I write because writing is part of my identity. I write because I believe in the power of language, of hope, of love. I believe writing truly is power—power over one's life. I write because I am human.

SOULS IN COMMUNION

MICHAEL EWING (SI 22)

White early morning sky, streaked with pale blues and yellows,
Colors the spaces
Left by the shaded green leaves turning away from the new rising sun,
Tangled and woven and sprung from the branches of
Tall trees that line the road, privatizing the tracts
While I run my fingers over the green stones that help me count my prayers.

Then the trees disappear as I follow the road down
And an expanse of bright green lawn is revealed
While the sky glows white.
Two bats dart and dance in the sky, trespassing gracelessly.

Criss cross, dart, soar, descend.
Soar, dart, cross, descend.

Chaos repeats.

Fingers press, caress stones.
Fingers press, caress stones.

The bats tango in aerial ballet,
Waltzing along my path, now jitterbugging.
Cha-cha-cha is the call as they twist through the morning light
Just above my head as we tread the same path.

I make a right turn and the bats follow
Their number growing more
Numbering three or four.
A halo of circling bat dances
Over bowed head, up the hill,
Fingers rubbing silent green stones.

Hover, dive, ascend, descend.
Ascend, hover, dive, descend.

Chaos never sleeps.

I make a right turn and the bats follow
Their number remains the same
And remain above my bowed head
As I maintain my pace
But their mute dance distracts me
I must turn around.

I put up my hoodie.

II.

The bats greet me at the same place the next morning,
Two bats again tangled in their dance
Leaving the lawn for the space above my head.
We drift down the hill together.
Others join us, six maybe seven dive and soar
As we reach the corner
And I make my turn.
But we say goodbye.
No harm to thee.

III.

White early morning sky signals another new day.
No bats.
Pray for lost souls.

WALLS

PATRICK GOSSELIN (SI 22)

Zoe stops the car at the foot of the driveway because she doesn't need to go any further to know that the house is alive. She's late, or early, depending on who you ask, but she's here, finally, along with the memories and ghosts who have been waiting patiently to see her once more.

"You know, I know you're already dead," she says, finding her little brother's deep brown eyes in the rearview mirror. "You've been dead for a while now. You're not fooling anyone."

"Trust me, Zoe. I know." He nods, primly. "I was there. Who are you trying to convince anyways? Me? Or yourself?" Zoe rolls her eyes, tired of answering to all the ghosts. "That's not what this is about anyways," he continued. "You should know that by now."

As she shuts the engine off, she is briefly reminded of her father pulling in the driveway just the same way. He'd honk the horn at the bottom, right above the curtain, the back wheels still resting on the sidewalk. He'd patiently wait for the pitter patter of Zoe's bare feet slapping against the sharp, hot pavement. His smile shined through the glare on the windshield, but his face and eyes remained obscure behind his Ray Bans. When Zoe got to the door, she'd look up at such an angle she could only really see the sky through her squinting eyes. Her father lowered the window slowly and growled, "What's the password?"

Zoe giggled. "Sesame!" Never understanding why her mother's favorite bagel was the key to opening all doors.

She'd reach up and her hands would find his, and he'd open the door, and pull her up by the armpits. It always kind of hurt her just a little, her skin raw from ill fitted clothes and rolling around on the carpet with the dog, howling at the frightened creature. But she never let that be known, for fear that he might never pick her up again, and let her enjoy that rare weightlessness.

Once safely in the cab of the truck, she'd sit on his lap as he closed the door. She gripped the steering wheel harder than what was necessary to make sure it and this moment stayed put. Her father revved the engine as he scratched the rough shadow on his chin.

"Ready?" he'd ask.

"Mhm."

"Vroom, vroom?"

She cranked at the leather of the steering wheel and nodded. Her father hit the gas.

As the car continued up the driveway, she steered accordingly, avoiding the distraction of the palace gardens beyond the side of the house. Lines and lines of tomato plants ran parallel to the faded white garage that housed nothing but tools and the truck she was in. To her right, her father's master work, brick upon hand laid brick of red patio. Each wall piled high over her head. It was her castle, her Taj Mahal, and she protected it from all the red ants, as long as they didn't bite her. After all, it was all that was left of him when he was gone. In the years to come, the town would come to dig it up, looking for rotting oil tanks polluting the groundwater. There was nothing she could do to stop it, her father's work was always viewed as a casualty yet to come. Despite all the destruction and the digging, they didn't even find one. Just some scrap metal, and a broken broom.

To her, her father was a superhero, a god, whom she worshiped with quiet caution, unaware of his true powers, other than his ability to build walls high over her head and occasionally disappear

behind them, a power she was lucky enough to inherit herself. He wasn't really around. He wasn't allowed. Mom remarried shortly after Zoe was born, and soon her father was replaced by her half-brother and her stepfather. She quickly didn't belong. Her father's mysteriousness shrouded her understanding of all he was, and all he could be, but he, like her, was quiet and timid, and that was what made his presence so insurmountable and beautiful.

"What do you want for lunch kiddo?" he'd say when he got into the house. He'd remove the bread from the refrigerator, grab a knife, wiping it methodically with one of the rogue, discolored, dish towels strewn about the kitchen. He'd turn suddenly, open his arms and legs up wide, as if ready to jump or fight at any moment. But Zoe just looked up, arms tucked behind her back, shyly appreciating this man, this stranger. The dog joined her, putting fierce words in her mouth, but she could only crack a smile as he maintained his playful straight face for far too long.

Occasionally, when it was really hot, Zoe would lay down right there on the brown linoleum floor, embracing the cold, hard tile, a snow angel tracing the interconnected galaxies of cracked paint and cobwebs on the ceiling above.

"Turkey," she'd say. After all, she never really liked ham. As a matter of fact, she didn't really eat much, always buried under the self-consciousness of being a picky eater. Sometimes it was easier to not eat at all.

"How about some cheese?" he asked, encouragingly.

She nodded, indecisive, but sure.

And he got to work, throwing a piece of turkey on the cutting board, slicing, removing, and discarding the bits that were not necessary for his creation. He'd carve stars, spaceships, and even Saturn's rings. Large alien-like figures and laser guns. He'd use the contrasting colors of the meat and cheese to create the Earth, cheese for the water, turkey for the land. He'd arrange it all on the bread, tuck it all in as if to say good night one last time, and drop the plate down to Zoe with a smiling piece of cheese on the side. She swore she even saw him wipe his forehead sometimes, exhausted from the effort. She admired his art, eating each piece only after careful consideration and admiration.

Zoe smiled at that, both sitting on the kitchen floor in that moment and sitting in her car in this moment, and wondered whether or not those two smiles were the same.

"You good?" her brother asks. "I thought I lost you there for a moment."

She ignored him. She turned the car off, except for the radio, listening to that live version of that one song where the lead singer struggles to find the syncopation amongst the crowd, the pressure, and the other instruments. They never played it like that again, now just a stripped down piano medley, a shadow of what it once was, on that one day, fully aware that it will never be that again. Something takes over and for a moment she sings along staring into the house's vacant eyes, hoping for a blink, one for yes, two for no, some sort of consent or invitation, a sign of life. But she receives none.

"Do you sleep?" she asks her brother, turning her head slightly. She felt silly facing a ghost directly. "You know, once you pass on and all."

"No. Not really. But I'm not really awake either," he says, looking out the window down the sidewalk towards the intersection.

"So, the whole, 'you can sleep when you're dead' thing? That's a lie?"

"Total bullshit. But, who wants to be an honest person outnumbered by all these liars?"

“Yah, but all the liars and swearers are fools,” she said.

He smiled in recognition.

She rolled her eyes, “Were you ever even old enough to read *Macbeth*?”

“Not really. But being dead’s a funny thing. You see, when you’re alive, you do everything you possibly can to numb it all, to make living easier. But books, and Shakespeare, well, they bring the dead to life. And the dead want nothing more than to live again, and to do better than they did before.”

Silence ensues between them, just as the song was ending, “Stay here,” she said, knowing that a locked car could no longer contain her brother. She finishes turning the key and pulls it out of the ignition. She slides onto the pavement, and approaches the front door of her childhood home respectfully so as not to spook the ghosts within. After all, she was tired of all the ghosts. She grabs the handle of the front door and turns it cautiously, and when the door squeaks open, she falls into it like a fever.

When she comes to, on the other side, she quickly recognizes where she is: the back stairwell of her first apartment. As she looks down through the middle of the spiral staircase, her palms sweat uncontrollably, out of the fear and recognition that she could always just jump. After all, it’s much higher than she remembered, but she knows that it’s no longer an option, now that she’s endured so much already. Why suffer first, and then end it after?

There’s a faint scuffling below, a slow scraping that reverberates along the wooden railing. A tree runs through the middle of the stairwell, its branches hang over each landing, shielding it from the bright window above. On the top floor, the light illuminates what looks like dust or snow, hanging onto the ceiling. Upon closer inspection, she sees the tiny, translucent legs of fresh born spiders, each enjoying the warmth of the sun, and the flattering lighting.

“This isn’t the place,” she says.

“No such thing,” a woman’s voice calls from below.

The scraping below grows louder and closer. Zoe braces herself along the edge of the landing, unsure of who or what was around the corner. She wasn’t expecting to meet people so soon.

She looks down, half hiding, half looking right at the corner edge of the staircase, waiting for the scraping to stop. And it did, just as a slippered foot came into view, amongst the peeling barn-red paint. She looks up slowly. Above her, a beautiful white haired woman looks down, her eyes wide, dragged down by both surprise and the pure weight of the bags that surround them. Zoe is no longer defensive.

“What are you doing down there?” Her voice is clean and fresh, like the tendrils of web above. “You need something?”

But Zoe is frozen. And when she tries to speak it just gets caught and stuck like that dream she keeps on having with the endless stream of gum in the back of her throat. What comes out is a sound she’s never made before, a combination of phlegm and forgetfulness as she tries to clear the blockage.

The woman turns around to descend the stairs once more but Zoe reaches and grabs the bottom of her dress. She holds on for dear life. She didn’t know that ghosts wore real clothes but I suppose she didn’t know ghosts wore clothes at all.

She finally gets some words out. “Where are you going?”

“Well, down the stairs, of course.” She hardly even looks back. “And then back up again. I

always hated stairs, but they really have a way of keeping you alive.” The scraping descends down the stairs once more and then around the corner. Zoe peeks down, over the railing. The top of the old woman’s head just bops along.

Zoe follows her lead because she looks like a woman who knows where she’s going, or at the very least a woman who knows where she’s been, and there’s comfort in that for Zoe, who is so lost and unsure about this moment, and the many moments that have come before.

Each stair feels like a cliff, an act of faith, as she navigates her neck around all the spiders, for fear of being choked by all the web. Some of them even seem to take notice of her, freezing at her arrival, considering what is most likely their first glimpse of humankind. She imagines the spiders might understand more about her, her life, and her purpose than she does.

She continues down the stairs rushing and breathing, but is unable to find a door, an exit, or the woman. She looks down the gap between the railings once more only to find herself no closer to the ground but when she looks up she’s out of stairs to run down. So she quickly turns around and finds herself, well, her younger self in her own arms. Together they feel safe for the first time in a long time as they lock eyes and smile. But then she takes a step to go back up the stairs. She trips. It’s ironic because she’s never felt more stable. She drops herself as she falls into the floor but not before seeing her own brain and blood dashed on the now broken staircase above her. She feels guilty for tripping but more guilty for leaving herself behind in such a place and state, just a child who needs guidance, as the floor continues to give out from underneath and she falls and falls and wonders who might be there to catch her but she knows that this thought is hopeful and misguided and that she will fall clean through whoever tries, lost and formless on impact.

She lands in her childhood bed, surrounded by the same four walls, covered in the same yellow wallpaper that she knows so well. A framed photo of her and her grandmother under a low hanging apple tree peers down. Her grandmother doesn’t smile and neither does Zoe because if smiles were no good in all the old pictures of all her ancestors, why should a fake smile exist now.

The lamp on the desk is on and she remembers just how hot it gets. The first time she knew she was alive was when she shrieked in pain after burning her fingertips while trying to turn it off. Pain is real and only reserved for those who are alive enough to feel it. Her pain has slipped away recently, thanks to all the ghosts.

Through the walls she hears the faint, mumblings of voices beyond. She remembers her mother singing through those walls during nap time. She never napped, just laid there, soothed by the muffled beauty of voices and music coming from other rooms. Even then, she tried to transport herself through time and space, and those damn walls swim within that music forever. But anytime she got too close, the music would stop, or worse, she’d begin to recognize the love that was missing from it.

So she lays in the bed, free from the spiders and the old woman’s scraping feet wondering what comes next. She could just stay here in this distorted concert forever, far enough away from reality and truth to live comfortably and happily, drifting on a never ending raft, far away from land, and the dangers that come with it. But the music from within her begins to block out the music from outside the walls and when she looks around she no longer sees a door where it’s supposed to be so she panics in a way she hasn’t since her brother died.

She runs to the window and tries to open it but it’s the heaviest thing she has ever experienced. Below she sees her mother weeding the tomato garden. Her mother hated weeds more than anything, more than her father, not trusting anything that is so keen on sucking the nutrients from all the life

around them. She turns back towards the desk, weary of the lamp, but fully recognizing it may be the only way to remove herself from this dead moment. But she gets distracted. She looks down at a paper, covered in scribbles. She pushes into the graphite darkness, and floats in the abyss, finding peace in the nothingness, until she drops on the other side, submerged in thick water, unaware of which way is up. She's thought about this moment before, the one where she finally gives up, walking into the water with all the skulls and bones in her pockets to weigh her down, but she never thought it would be so claustrophobic as she reaches around herself to find something to hold, the comfort of something tangible, a leather steering wheel of her own that she can finally use to steer her own life.

The water breaks, above her or below her, and she's not sure what it is but she's grateful for it anyways because it gives her a chance to fight back and stop waiting to be saved. She's heard that the best way to fight a shark is to punch it in the nose or stick a hand in its gills, but it's way harder to be precise when she sees nothing but a blurry shadow coming towards her. And as two hands scoop her up and attempt to deliver her to safety she remembers biting her little brother's arm when she didn't get her way, and the screams of terror that resulted both from her brother's shocked agony, and her own shame. So she bites, and surprisingly tears and this time she feels no shame but there are still cries of shocked agony as the shadowy arm loses its form dissipating amongst the dark blue bubbles. She needs air like she needs freedom, desperately and abruptly. She picks a direction and kicks, forgetting all her swim lessons in that cold rainy water where her stepfather threw her in the deep end claiming the best way to learn was by doing. She doesn't find the surface but she does find an opening, rushing towards it, she squeezes through.

On the other side she finds what she is looking for: the tomato plants, almost fully ripe. Her mother kneels in the third row, a 5 gallon bucket of weeds to her left. Her right arm is bruised and cut as she rips the weeds from the ground. As they exit, the long roots wiggle and groan, detached from their source of life, reaching for one last taste.

"Took you long enough," her mother said. And she was right. This moment has festered and lingered for far too long. "Here, come help," her mother beckons, moving the bucket over to make room for Zoe, who obliges, crawling next to her mother, removing the wiggling weeds one by one. "See, it helps."

Zoe didn't respond, not for a while at least, not until she cleared this row, and the next row, diligently yanking, and killing so that the tomatoes could survive.

"You know Mom, they'll just be back next week?"

"And the week after that. Stronger than ever. There's not much I can do about that. But that doesn't mean I can't keep fighting back." She turns to the back of the garden and points. "Go grab some tomatoes over there. They're not quite ready, but they'll do. Your father is in the kitchen."

"Won't you come too, Mom?"

"No, not this time, Zoe." Her mother continues picking weeds.

Zoe walks to the back of the garden and fills a bucket with plump red tomatoes. When she turns to find her mother one last time, her mother is gone.

When Zoe arrives in the kitchen, nobody talks. Nobody needs to. Zoe grabs a knife, wiping it clean with one of the dishtowels. Her father briefly blanches the tomatoes, boiling them ever so slightly in a pot. Zoe quarters each tomato when they are done, removing what she can of the skin and seeds. Her father snags the food mill and turns the handle as Zoe feeds it the tomatoes. The

remaining skin and seeds stay in the bottom of the mill while the pulp drips into the bowl directly below, separating the bitter from the sweet. They set the pulp aside, grabbing a large saucepan from the shelf above the sink, and cover the bottom in olive oil. The oil slowly drifts and forks across the pan, each drop finding its own path until it all joins to one. Zoe dices the garlic, slowly and awkwardly, and throws it in the hot oil. Her father pours the tomato pulp in, and together they add salt, basil, and a little sugar. Her father stirs every fifteen minutes or so, as Zoe lays down on the brown linoleum floor. The sauce cooks slowly, and Zoe loses track of time, tracing the same lines on the ceiling above. Her father salts water for the pasta, and Zoe hears him add a little bit to the cooking sauce. His final touch.

After he throws the pasta in the water, he grabs two plates, and clinks them on the kitchen island above her, followed by two forks. Zoe gets up slowly and finds one of the two stools. Her father is there, with a dollop of their collective creation. They sit in relative silence, enjoying the meal together, the sticky pasta sings as it twirls. At one point, she thinks he puts an arm around her, and pulls her in slowly, squeezing her gently, but his humanness has faded so much over the years, she can hardly remember what that feels like.

Together they clear the dishes and her father hands her the pot of sauce. She asks, “Are you sure?” And when he nods, she is surprised at how quickly the sauce smells like gasoline.

Her father turns away, and this time she grabs him. “I’m sorry,” she says. But just like her, the words stick in his throat, and are unrecognizable, as if there are walls built up between them. She lets go, and he turns to the sink, washing the dishes so clean, there was no evidence of this moment at all.

She begins to drip, pour, and throw gasoline all over the house. Starting with the kitchen, the counters, and of course, all the walls. She did the same in every room. Her bedroom with the lamp. The living room, with the Great Mouse Detective screaming “Bang, Bang” over and over in the background. She hit the bathrooms, and basement, until she knew it would all catch. She makes a trail of gasoline out the front door, down the brick pathway, until she reaches her brother. They stand together for a moment, admiring the violent beauty of it all. He hands her a matchbook, and she strikes it accordingly.

“Thanks,” she says. But her brother is already gone. She throws the match and watches it ignite, the fire slithering along the trail she left behind. It finds the furniture and counters, all the ghosts and all the walls. She watches for a little while, but knows how this ends. She always has.

She gets in her car and honks the horn, but this time there is no pitter patter along the pavement. No memories to be recounted. She backs out of the driveway and sets toward the intersection, as all her yesterday’s give way to dusty death.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF DIALECTICAL MATERIALISM

ALEX KLEIN (SI 22)

"We have no compassion and we ask no compassion from you. When our turn comes, we shall not make excuses for the terror."

-Karl Marx 1849

The other attaches and I requested that, before the day on which we will be forced to leave Russia, the Reds allow us to attend at least one of the Sanitations we keep hearing about. Commander Rashevsky repeatedly refused. But Rashevsky must have fallen out of favour with Petrograd because he and his men have disappeared.

The ranking officer who replaced Rashevsky is one comrade Lukin. He orders around all the soldiers, yet dresses worse than the lowest Party man, and asserts no title. Lukin takes a relaxed approach not only to the military custom but also to foreign relations; for when I asked to observe one of these Sanitations, expecting that Lukin would rebuff me as Rashevsky had done a dozen times before, he shrugged and said, 'Why not?'

And so we come to the morning of 27 February, 1919. It is a beautiful day- uncharacteristically warm and sunny for this part of the world at this time of year- and two men are at my door.

They wear spectacles and grey trench coats and brogans and look more like clerks or civil servicemen than Marxist revolutionaries. The old German seems to have underestimated the willingness of the petty bourgeoisie to take up revolution.

They put me in the back seat of a Ford Model T and we drive from the streets of Yekaterinburg to the sewage dump on the city's outskirts.

At the dump, Lukin sits on the tailgate of a transport truck smoking a cigar that, back home, costs five pence. Here, five million rubles. A loaf of moldy bread is ten million.

Twenty of Lukin's civil servants pass around a labelless bottle of fluid, twirl their bayoneted Mosin-Nagant rifles, and play quick-draw with the revolvers stuffed in their belts while shovelfuls of earth arc up out of a pit being dug by twenty-nine pale, dirty, and naked men, women, and children.

Once he deems the hole deep enough, Lukin orders all the shivering prisoners to climb out, whereupon the soldiers take back the shovels and bind their ankles -but not their wrists- with spools of cheap twine.

The soldiers force the men at gunpoint to separate from the women. One man refuses. A Bolshevik rewards him for his bravery with a boot between the legs and then drags him by the hair to where he belongs.

The group is now divided in two, and the soldiers crowd around the women, most of whom are clutching one or more children to their breasts. The women are stroking the boys' and girls' faces and telling them there is nothing to fear. 'Everything is going to be alright.' One mother sings a lullaby in her daughter's ear.

There is only one young lady, swarthy, perhaps a Turk or Semite, who is not consoling her child. She holds a wailing newborn in her lap, stares into the pit, and makes no sound.

Lukin shouts something that is in a language that is neither English nor Russian, and, all at

once, the soldiers plunge their bayonets into the children.

The women scream.

Words fail to describe the sound. It's the noise of an animal, primal and wretched and so without restraint it is as if production of the sound will shred their lungs. All that remains in their bodies, in their flesh and organs and blood and bones, is forced through the vocal cords. The Turk woman stares into the pit, makes no sound, and does not look down while her baby vomits blood onto the bayonet sticking out of its chest.

I look away.

Amidst the wailing and amidst the stabbing and the slashing, Lukin approaches, puts a hand on my shoulder, and says, 'It is classic quandary to decide who first. We do child, then female, then male. In order who screams most irritate.'

The women's cries turn to silence and are replaced now by the howls of the men.

Two prisoners get to their feet and try to escape. One of them cannot break the twine around his ankles and has to hop instead of run. He crumples to the dirt with a bullet in his back.

The soldiers aim their revolvers and rifles at the other fleeing man and start laying down bets on who will hit him, but Lukin orders them not to fire. 'No waste bullet', he says.

The man disappears over the curve of a hill.

Lukin and his soldiers do not seem to mind.

The rest of the men are disposed of as the women were. Efficiently. Another job. Another chore. But Lukin leaves three alive. He looks over his shoulder at me and does a little flourish with the cigar. 'These ones special', he says.

He pulls a folded-up piece of paper from a pocket of his old telogrieka, reads it, and tells his soldiers what sentence the Party has decided on for each man. Skin the first one alive. Feed the second one dung, then cut out his bowels. Castrate the third and let him bleed to death.

The soldiers not assigned to torture kick bodies into the pit.

A foundry lorry carrying a massive cast-iron bowl in back arrives partway through the interment. Once the soldiers get all the bodies in the hole, the lorry turns around and backs up so that its rear end is perched at the very edge of the grave. The driver pulls a switch and the great metal bowl tips and pours ferrous slag over the corpses, some still moving. I did not watch the Turk woman die, but I now see her body, the head hanging on by a flap of skin, drowned in molten steel and stone.

Lukin and my two escorts take me back to the Ford.

Between ragged breaths, I tell them I will report this to the press and the ambassador and the Secretary of War and the prime minister, and every single human being in the Western World will soon know what happened here. On February 27th, 1919, a half-mile out of Yekaterinburg.

Lukin smiles and removes the folded-up piece of paper from his coat. He writes his full name on the back, then hands both the paper and the pencil to me. While rolling the stub of a cigar between his teeth, he offers biographical details and tells me I should write them down for the benefit of my superiors. I do.

NIKOLAI ANDREYEVICH LUKIN

Born in Rostov-on-Don. Appointed head agent of 3rd Ural regiment of the All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for Combating Counter-Revolution, Profiteering and Corruption. Fought with the Red Army on the Eastern front and before that taught Russian literatures in Shakhty, where he also coached boys' football and girls' cricket. Has a wife named Inessa and a son also named Nikolai

and a crescent-shaped scar from a mortar shell just above and to the left of his genital region.

My escorts are in fits. They seem to find this all very funny.

Lukin opens the door of the Ford and guides me to the back, and they start the engine.

Just as we are about to depart, Lukin reaches into the cabin and taps me on the shoulder to get my attention. He spits out his completed cigar, points a finger up at the clouds and asks me, 'What colour is sky, you think?'

Not knowing what to say, I state the obvious. 'Blue.'

He frowns, looks up, studies the sky, and strokes his chin like he is in the middle of serious contemplation. 'No', he says. 'I think black.'

'It's blue', I say.

'No', he says, smiling. 'It is black.'

LIGHT ENTERTAINMENT

DAN HEALY (SI 22)

Odiorne Point, a symbol of the sea cucumber
and its pig iron-horizon, state park-symbolic
tuft-grass, crabgrass, crabs and maybe
some rotunda by the parking
area.

Dead rocks loom in casings,
brown like soldier-coffins
roughly hewn amidst explosive ordinance; and
sea-glass-dull-pastel-opaque
munitions for olympic boyishness; and
sea-glass smooth pierce
surface tension
sea-glass smooth pierce
sea-glass smooth
pierce
surface tension,
adds two odds an
adze to oxygen,
an and said primer-Priestley,
shewn his celadon surrounds from
divers dinner-divers roved
the cloven closeness so
enclosed so meted, mete.

The Point cement
as much to big guns, snug,
surrounded, storm surge stored
secure,
agape.

MY PAPA'S CLOTHES

JULIANNA IACOVELLI (SI 22)

"When I was your age I was this big," she would hold up her wrinkly pinky finger. I thought about the rings I would never inherit because my knuckles were too fat from.... cracking them? I told her once I read that was a myth. She asked me why my hands were so big.

Nana and Papa have lived a mile away from my family home my whole life. Nana was daycare, summer camp, baker, caterer, artist, and the keeper of secrets and frozen Mama Celeste pizzas. Papa was the imagination, chauffeur, brother and cousin wrangler, Tony Kurtis impersonator and the librarian. Nana and Papa are also hoarders, but they are white and wealthy enough to be labeled as eccentric collectors. They must have every piece of clothing they have worn in the past fifty years, in addition to Aunt Kristen and Dad's from when they were under their roof. Nana's attic is full of school supplies, old lady bug-themed gifts, and her hope chest. Papa has an office, despite being retired for years, that has Poe, Twain, and Sinatra memorabilia scattered in the small space made almost claustrophobic by two bookcases. My nickname for him has always been "fancy pants," as he is always impeccably dressed in either Brooks Brothers, Ralph Lauren, and the like.

My brother, Nick, got his first serious girlfriend around his junior year of high school, my sixth-grade year. Michaela liked to shop, and Nana liked to dress people up. I was still squeezing myself into Justice clothes with graphic designs of hamsters and cartoon milk and cookies. Nana *hated* the way I dressed and by extension, how I looked.

"If you would just lose five pounds it would look perfect." My Nana inspected my body in the dressing room mirror. I am in the Polo outlet, by force. Shopping exhausts me. Michaela steps out, Nana hates the way she dresses too- calls her "tramp" behind her back. Which makes me smile. But, Michaela has the fashion capital, that certain *je ne sais quoi*, somehow everything looks good on her.

I found out later this is called "being skinny."

Nana could dress her up and buy her outfits that made her squeal. "I would've worn this exact thing when I was your age!" I never fit that picture, despite being the one who looked most like her. The matching skirt and polo sets never made sense to me. I do not play tennis or own a boat.

During the pandemic, I gave up all hopes of clothes shopping. Women's sizing does not make sense- at all. And I was beginning to not make much sense as a woman. Being non-binary does not mean I owe anyone androgyny, enough to make you go wait....what are they *really*, and ask what's in my pants. Despite my overall change, I still did not look the way I should in my mind. People look at me and identify me as a girl. Even when I say I am not. That is when I started wearing Papa's clothes.

I don't remember how I got them, but it started with a pair of Levis.

"I've must've had that pair since 1990," he said as he inspected the pair of jeans, his oval-shaped glasses that give him the appearance of a wise owl slipped down his nose.

"Can I take them and paint them? If you won't miss them?"

"Sure, brighteyes"

Nana took me for paint the next day and I sat on my bed, slathering misshapen flowers down one leg. The next day I went back to look for more clothes. To my delight, Papa had closets on boxes on boxes of clothes to pick. I did not have to stand in a dressing room, sweating, begging that the biggest size in a store made for people who do not look like me fit me. I didn't have

to dig through all the t-shirts to find a size. Everything was sized: Papa. I did not have a reference of him in the clothes to directly compare myself to, I did not know if people called him skinny or fat when he wore these clothes.

But these clothes are *vintage*. If you are not familiar, the girlyies of gen z have brought back thrifting. Well thrifting as in buying ironic t-shirts from the 90s that cost \$400 on Depop. Sweater vests? Back in. Acid Wash? Making a comeback. Oversized crewneck sweatshirts? Say hello. Men's golf shirts? Hell yeah, motherfucker.

"Why do you keep taking Papa's clothes?" Nana asked as we sat at the small table in her kitchen, taking a break from making chicken croquettes. I feel a slight sense of panic, not ready to die on this hill of an argument, but I love improv. "The kids are really into Diane Keaton's look from *Annie Hall*." I am too shocked to believe I have willingly made a Woody Allen reference to even think about gender now.

"Huh," this satisfies her. Plus, I am finally wearing the brands she likes.

There is nothing I love more than wearing Papa's preppy clothes mixed in with my Dad's skate punk clothes from his own youth. The juxtaposition reminds me of my own gender, I am a paradox, I am hard to explain to your parents, I am working from a place of privilege, I am pissed off, fuck the government and fuck you Dad. Ok, not actually fuck you Dad, but like fuck all dads, but thanks for the Monsterland t-shirt (which now goes for \$150 on Depop). I am not a "mix" of boy/girl. I am not your one friend who dated a woman in college but now really loves her husband. I am not your niece who wore a dior suit to prom. I am not Harry Styles flouncing around in a skirt while millions fall to my feet thanking me for finally *f i n a l l y* breaking the gender binary. I refuse to bind my breasts, get a pixie cut, and lose a ton of weight to get a more masculine body for others to perceive. My gender isn't up for debate and truthfully beyond my pronouns, isn't your business.

Sabrina Wu, a comedian I saw recently who is also non-binary and gay said, "Some people get to be gay, but *I* have to be gay twice?" I thought about the process of coming out and the constant gender reveal party whenever I meet someone. How exhausting it is, and how my parents had a friend who went from Steve to Lauren, but then back to Steve in the 90s, my heart breaks for Lauren, and I wonder if she ever got her second chance. Sabrina also said "Jesus Christ, I'm the same gender as Demi Lovato," which also speaks to me.

"What do you think about Roe V. Wade?" is surprisingly not the hardest question my Nana asked me last weekend when I visited her. Nana has always had her views, and I have mine. They mostly don't overlap, but she doesn't vote anyway. She does surprise me though and listens to what I said about the danger, violence, and death.

"I used to work at a gynecologist's office, you know?" I most certainly did not. "And I understand women who get abortions and how it's done," ok Nana's gynecology office also did abortions- *huge*. "But I don't like women who use it as birth control, I would see women on their fourth or fifth round." I was surprised by her reasonableness. "Well, that's why access to birth control is so important..." She is nodding and listening and maybe learning?

I explain to her that my partner Ruben and I got back together. She stops me in my tracks, "I still don't get the theys thems" she waves her right hand back and forth in front of her face. *Ok, a teaching opportunity*. I turned to the bookcase next to me and took a picture of my nephew Luca and a small replica seagull.

"Ok so Luca is boy and the seagull is girl," I put them on opposing sides of a shelf. "This is

called the binary because you have two. Some people go back and forth,” I slid my pointer finger across the shelf “they may identify as gender fluid. And my gender,” I placed my cup on a higher shelf to the right, “is over here.”

My Nana looked at me with awe and a kernel of understanding.

“I didn’t even *know* there was another shelf.”

WHAT MY PLANTS TAUGHT ME

AMYTHEST MASON (SI 22)

Ask for what you need.

Every living thing, at least on this planet, has needs. Plants are no exception. Each one requires varying levels of light, nutrients, water, temperature, humidity, and so on. Prayer plants, for example, will burn to a crisp if provided with inadequate levels of humidity or water containing impurities. One of the most particular plants is the venus flytrap: in addition to snatching and digesting the occasional bug, these carnivores demand nutrient-free soil and distilled water. Anything else is a death sentence.

Too much or too little of anything can be fatal.

When one of my tropical plants was exposed to a freezing draft for roughly 20 minutes, its leaves immediately discolored and wilted. I officially pronounced it dead only two days later.

People should be just as unforgiving when our needs aren't met... or worse, ignored.

Sometimes you need support.

Some plants will grow bigger and faster with something to hold or lean on. Others, without this support, are doomed to perish. If you think you could use a helping hand, even if you might be able to get by without one, ask for it. You deserve that much. In the same way you may need to lean on the people you love, they may need to lean on you, too. Let them.

Give yourself room to grow.

Just like you outgrow your clothes, plants outgrow their pots. Letting a plant remain in a too-small pot is the same as smothering it. If you've ever tried to squeeze into clothes or shoes that were too small, you already know how it feels. All that leads to is stretched seams and blistered feet. In the case of a houseplant, this lack of space inhibits its growth.

Not having the space you need is painful, so make space for yourself. Demand that the world present you with a larger pot. Give yourself the room to stretch your limbs and wiggle your toes. Fall asleep on the couch to the dull hum of your favorite tv show. Order take out. Let that call go to voicemail. Set boundaries. Have limits. Give yourself permission. Give yourself the space you need.

Grow at your own pace.

A cliché, I know; forgive me.

Growth takes time, and the amount of time changes for everyone. Depending on the conditions, some plants will go dormant to conserve energy before resuming growth at a more optimal time. While my succulents grow so slowly that many have remained in the same pot for nearly two years, other plants grow so quickly that they force themselves out of theirs.

So give yourself a break. Your worth isn't dictated by how much you've accomplished or how quickly. Whatever pace you're at is perfectly fine.

Amythest Mason (SI 22)

You won't always notice new growth immediately.

New growth can surprise you, even startle you. When a seedling sprouts or a new leaf unfurls, you might forget about all the growth that occurred beneath the surface of the soil. You might not notice growth until a lot of it has happened: until ivy has climbed and strangled the walls, until a rose has scratched and clawed through concrete, until bark has pressed and mangled something foreign to the point of both rejecting and accepting it as a part of itself.

Most of this growth happens too slowly to catch our attention -- nevermind keep it. Even so, we keep growing. We keep striving to improve, to heal, to move forward. Remember where you've been so you might understand where you are. Only then does the future take root.

Fight pests.

The most terrifying things for a gardener are often barely visible -- if at all. Most are smaller than $\frac{1}{8}$ inch... others are microscopic. But that's only part of what makes them so intimidating. Some, fungus gnats for example, are a harmless nuisance. Other examples can wipe out entire collections within a matter of weeks, potentially even days.

In the years since I began gardening, I've encountered most of them. Though their methods vary, all pests are really just parasites bent on sucking the life out of something. If the host plant is stressed or if the pests go unnoticed ... the damage starts to mount, and fast.

There's plenty of options when it comes to fighting pests. If the infestation is small, you might be able to wash them off or even pluck them from the plant one by one. You might also retaliate with more aggressive options like pesticides or beneficial insects. Even then, survival isn't a guarantee.

If fighting these little villains has taught me anything, it's this: don't let anyone suck you dry. I don't care who it is. You can't help anyone if you don't help yourself first. No one deserves to be taken advantage of. Only the absolute worst scenarios will require you to burn it all down and start anew from the ashes.

Know when to give up.

There have been many times where, despite my best efforts, one of my plants has died. Sometimes it feels sudden; other times they'll cling on for months at a time. I'm not saying you should give up after the first, fifth, or even hundredth try... but there are times when the stress of trying to save something you can't get to be too much. When that happens, steel yourself, give up, and throw whatever remains outside. I call it a mercy killing: it ends both the plant's suffering and mine. My point is, shit happens. Hold steadfast to hope and don't put too much blame on yourself.

Don't be afraid of pruning.

Pruning is the process of selectively cutting back a plant to remove unwanted growth and direct new, healthy growth. Think of it like giving a plant a haircut. And just as I resented getting haircuts when I was little, I resent pruning my plants. There's something about shearing away growth which leaves a bitter taste in my mouth. Despite this, I keep pruning, because I know it's for the best. Pruning

is an opportunity to do away with what's been holding you back and encourage growth that's new and strong. We are no different. So shave your head if you want to. Cut toxic people from your life. Pruning can hurt, but you will be better for it. You will grow back.

Notice and appreciate a flower.

Save my lilies and marigolds, I don't grow very many flowers. The blooms are often too fleeting to make up for the weeks, or even months, of effort that go into them. Despite this quiet resentment, I keep a close watch on the few flowers that I do have. So much so that I flew into a panic-filled rage when I discovered that half of my lilies had been chewed off at the stem overnight. I was fully prepared to buy a shotgun and stand guard over them until each of the buds had bloomed and fallen.

Because flowers are so rare and ephemeral, I prefer selecting plants based on their foliage. The best part of this philosophy is that sometimes I get surprised with a bud. Almost every plant blossoms (save moss, ferns, and pines), and there's something remarkably serendipitous about finding a bud when you stop expecting them.

In both cases, flowers are rewards. Trophies awarded to only the most dedicated and vigilant. Evidence of being nurtured.

So take the time to notice all the small things. Protect and shelter a bud so that one day, when it's ready, it can bloom. And if it does, appreciate it. Smell the roses, if you will. Because it won't be long before that blossom wilts, shrivels up, and blows away with the wind – much like everything else in the universe, which also happens to be a temporary and seemingly insignificant collection of stardust. Everything deserves to be nurtured so that it can bloom... just as much as it should be acknowledged before it quietly fades away. Watch yourself blossom with the universe.

There are different kinds of beauty and talents.

Most people agree that flowers are beautiful. There's something humans find compelling about the symmetry, the color, the perfume. But too often we are limited by this commercial interpretation of beauty; we forget to appreciate the mundane, the asymmetrical, the strange and unusual. Just like everything has needs, everything is also inadvertently both beautiful and talented. Some plants can go without water or endure subfreezing temperatures for weeks at a time. CAM plants, such as pineapples or cacti, photosynthesize during the day and breathe at night. The sensitive plant responds to touch by folding in its leaves and drooping, all in attempts to deter potential predators. Take time to celebrate every difference.

Stay imperfect.

There are some pretentious collectors out there who claim that each and every one of their plants are in peak condition... they're all liars. Sure, their plants are surviving, maybe even thriving, but perfection is unattainable. Even if it was attainable – it's fragile and temporary. If the temperature or humidity shifts even slightly, that semblance of perfection can vanish in an instant. When that happens, when the leaves start to wilt or develop dark spots, all you are left with are feelings of shame and inadequacy. In all aspects of life, if you cling to perfection too dearly, you'll only end

up disappointed.

So take the time to consider what your definition of perfection actually is. What is it that you are expecting? Why is that your ambition? Think long and hard over this.

Then let perfection go. Abandon the entire concept. Aim for the only actual option: flawed perfection. Appreciate resilience against hardships. Admire growth despite every limitation. Cherish imperfection because it is within our flaws that perfection even exists at all.

JUST ANOTHER DAY

ASHLEY TAYLOR (SI 22)

The flick of a switch causes
the pandemonium
to stop.
The fluorescent lights high in the ceiling
Go from bright yellow
To a dull gray
As little children dilly dally
To their small blue plastic chairs,
Some of the kids bumping
into each other.
Intentionally or not, the mouse
Of a girl doesn't know
Or care.
All she cares is what's going on
In the world between the pages
Of the book in front of her.
It isn't anything special,
Just a paperback picture book
From the classroom library.
The afternoon sun's rays pool
From underneath the half-closed shades
In the wide open kindergarten room,
Giving the mousy girl ample light to keep reading.
Indifferent to her surroundings:
An exasperated teacher,
Impish kids who let out a muffled giggle
every so often.
Indifferent to why most of her class
has their heads down at their tables.
She knows it has something to do
with behavior or noise level,
And is secretly glad
For this outcome
Since she isn't affected by it
And relieved that
she isn't roped into this waste of time
Away from whatever world
She's currently in.
To her, this is just another day.

A POTLUCK FOR THE GHOSTS YOU'VE COME TO KNOW

JOE TARANTINO (SI 22)

I. You arrive in a ghost town

A wooden sign greets visitors but with age it has lost
its adjectives. All you can make out from the original text is the word,
Town,
and tacked above it, scribbled in colored pencil on cardboard, someone has written
ghost.

You've been here before.

You don't know this at first but your body does. Step by pebbled step,
your heels recall the traces of something grassier and greener. Then
the taste of dust on your tongue, and then the
smell of rot echoes around your nostrils.

Whispers curl around corners, indecipherable to you now, but the voices find something
familiar in your ears. Shadows seem to just rest against walls, even though
you can't see the shapes from which they're cast. Everything here is
dusty and is made of dusty wood and is familiar.

A ghost in a bikini sunbathes outside an old library ahead. You ask them
how to get to Motherwort's Home for Wayward Souls, and your cadence dances
around the question because you are curious and frightened but
you want to seem cool. But the ghost in the bikini doesn't
respond. I don't think the ghost
was ever listening.

A tapping behind you, and you turn to see a ghost rapping against a broken window, you
try to find their eyes, but you don't know if
they want to find yours or where their eyes even are. But they
extend a silver finger toward a stately home on a hill, and you thank them.
The ghost shimmers a bit differently. Was this in response?
You don't know what this means or if it means anything
and so your feet crunch and crunch on.

Leonor Motherwort, Headmaster, reads a
plaque, carved elegantly and nailed outside a sturdy front door. There
the headmaster greets you personally.

After all, it would only be you two and the little ones
in the house while you stay here.
You've accepted that.

II. You make sure each ghost is where they are supposed to be

“*Little Ghost Roll Call*” you almost ask but mostly say as you read off the cover of the pamphlet Motherwort has slid to you from across the wide wooden desk. Motherwort’s eyes meet yours like family do on holidays. “Every night you will check in with your wards and make sure that they’re where they’re supposed to be. You will take care of many things while you are here.”

You nod; after all, you came here to take care of things.

Motherwort adds: “They will be in their rooms.” You then express concern about opening doors that don’t want to be opened and disturbing those who haven’t asked for disturbance. “I wouldn’t want to bother,” you state. “Then you haven’t met many ghosts.” Motherwort smirks knowingly. “Little ghosts love disturbance.”

Up the sturdy spiral staircase to Lavender’s room first. The pamphlet recommends that you visit Lavender first since you’ll leave smiling and, as the pamphlet says, *Little ghost role call can be taxing. Consider starting in a pleasant place and filling your well.* In Lavender’s room you hear the birds that only chirp after the sun comes up. Lavender is in their little bed because that’s where they’re supposed to be. You introduce yourself and Lavender is smiling but you suspect that Lavender might just always be smiling.

Hawthorn’s room smells like wine and raspberries and also you smell salt. Maybe the air is heavier in Hawthorn’s room, and it seems that Hawthorn likes to play records. You make a note of this. For bonding. The walls are covered in portraits and portraits and some of them are covered in splashes of wine and others appear to have been slashed with a box cutter. Your introduction here is brief. You smile and say your name and linger longer than you need to and so

you move on.

You knock twice on the door to Licorice's room,
as the pamphlet directs, before opening without
permission, as the pamphlet directs. Licorice's
room is unlit. Licorice crouches on the rug
and whispers about themselves and whispers just the
most horrible things. I honestly don't dare repeat. "I'm
here because I love you, little one. I hope we can be
friends," you try and reassure, but Licorice aches such
aches that now they ache for pains that never came and
you feel more out of place here than you did inside
Hawthorne's room so you say "Goodnight
my dear," and you make your exit.

Down the hall, the last room, and the pamphlet
says that this is the Scary Ghost's room, *Just do
what you can do*, the pamphlet reads, and scratched
in colored pencil along the margin someone has
written *don't kill yourself*. You knock once
and hear nothing and retreat to your room.

You take a seat and sit
with your elbows on your knees and your chin and your heart
in your hands because it's your first night on the job
and you are for sure a failure.

III. You try to engage with the ghosts, really get to know them

After weeks of failed attempts at conversation with the ghosts, you
hang up a chalkboard in the dining room and you
even bought colorful chalk so everyone can choose their favorite color.
For bonding. You leave your little ghosts little prompts like *What's
your favorite food?* and hope that
maybe this they'll want to respond to. And you write your answers to the prompts
to let them get to know you. For bonding. You choose the blue chalk usually
but today you are feeling white and you write

*My favorite food is cheese (just not
goat cheese I hate goat cheese!)*

And you are the only one who responds to the prompts.

The ghosts never respond to the prompts.

But as your fingernails grow, you do notice comments
on the board left by your little ghosts.
And you notice these because your stomach somersaults since
you're finally really getting to know them, and also they scream at you
because the ghosts always write in red. They still don't respond to your
prompts but they answer their own.

*one day it reads
there are some feelings that destroy us*

and then that afternoon
like the regrets

And that last one was Hawthorn, you're pretty sure. And so you start to
recognize them by their penmanships. Lavender's
effective careful strokes and Hawthorn's pompous curls.
Sometimes it isn't hard to tell at all, like the morning
you enter the room and filling most of the board is scrawled,

Everyone hates Licorice.

And then more added little by little over time,

*...and I know that everyone hates Licorice and everyone
knows that I know that everyone hates Licorice and I
know that everyone knows that I know that
everyone hates Licorice and...*

When you see this you consider taking the board down. *They're not even
doing it right*, you think to yourself and
it is then that a ghost you don't recognize enters
the room. They pick up the red chalk and scribble

yes they are

And they turn and face you and you both stay there for
a little while, shackled in position for the first time since you have arrived and
then they exit.

But you can't. Your
muscles tense and
in that moment you

know what they know
and what this is.

The Scary Ghost.

Motherwort enters the dining room and finds you
still standing there, having started to sob. "I just met the Scary Ghost," you weep. "What
do I do?"

"Well you start by calling them
by their name. Call them Fennel," Motherwort states. "I've been meaning
to reprint the pamphlet.

Always make sure to call your ghosts by their names.
Every ghost."

And you feel now like maybe you don't
know the first thing about taking care of things.

IV. You remember when you were here last

You start awake one night while you sleep and
cough up a pebble

at last you remember this town before
it was full of ghosts

When blood flowed through this town it pulsed with potential
and was colorful and so were you. This place was full of finding
spirit that you have since forgotten, spirit to
speak with giants, spirit to bare your entire burdened
soul to those you thought you loved, that that was what it
meant to know them, but all along you knew
nothing of love trust you
let the ones you think you love slice you open taste your heart lap at your
ventricles suckle at your pulmonary artery
you found the kinds of people who would poison your blood
and allowed them to invade your peace
you thought you loved this and you loved them and
you knew nothing

So one day you salted the earth.

You had unlearned to love your own bones
so an estuary of sand sounded nice.
Gnarls of grass retreated beneath pebbled walkways

Hived off, you learned to suture, to
unknow the unlearnings about your skeleton,
wrote little love notes to your
scapula, blessed your
femur, fell to your
kneecaps and
trusted them and
wept
gently embraced your muscles and meat, caressed your
blood

trusted that one day you could come to
trust this

You get out of bed and make your way to the window, looking
down the grounds of Motherwort's Home for Wayward Souls and
down the hill you hiked when you arrived. You wonder if ghosts
also retreat to lick their wounds, if a ghost
of greener days lurks on every lawn here.

A ghost of your greener days echoes
with hollow pain but
carries with it memories of grass, and you sit and rest on
these memories of green hills with affection.
Flickers of fondness flash as
you recall splaying out on verdant mounds with family you chose,
and how meaningful it was to simply sit and sit.

A precious little ghost this memory is,
sweet and plumeria-perfumed.

V. You revisit what it is you came here to do

Once you get to know a ghost, more and more
you find ways to know them further and now
you are getting to know quite a few.

So one night you decide to make your evening
rounds a bit early, make sure each ghost is where they are supposed to be.

You enter Hawthorn's room first and ignore the
pamphlet. They are listening to records and you
find a soft armchair and sit. You listen to the tune
and say nothing. Hawthorn recounts stories of
golden rings and flowers.

You knock on Licorice's door three times. The
door opens itself and Licorice lies prostrate and
still is whispering about themselves. You sprawl belly
down on the rug next to them. Licorice curls into
the crook of your arm and soon is calm.

Lavender and you stare at each other for a while.
They are confused why you didn't visit them first,
and they sob. You sit on the edge of the bed and
reassure that things that love you will usually come
back, and that you love dear Lavender. But they still
are sobbing after you leave.

You visit Fennel last and enter without knocking.
Fennel's room is delicate and bare. You stare back
and forth for a short bit, saying nothing. "Goodnight" you
say and turn to exit. *Fennel is so fucking weird*, you think
as you descend the staircase.

Enter the dining room still smiling, choose the red chalk and scrawl
across the dining room wall,

Potluck Dinner
Dining Room, Friday Evening
Bring your favorite foods

You take a step back and wink at yourself. Motherwort wafts in, stops,
"I think Licorice will like this," affirmation
settling on your shoulder like dust.
"My sweet aching baby."

In one of the crawl spaces you find a cardboard box, lifting the three
cardboard flaps because one is missing, and within you find fine china.

You feel confident that maybe now you can
come to know their favorite foods.

VI. You host a potluck for the ghosts you've come to know

You stand at the base of the spiral staircase in
the finest finery you brought and catastrophize
the banquet that hasn't happened yet. The chain of your necklace finds
its way into your mouth and you remove it
over and over. You wait
and wait.

Motherwort descends,
strokes your shoulder,
flutters into the dining room and you follow them,
shuffling to the table where you have laid out the china
from the crawlspace and the food
already prepared for tonight's feast.

Lavender is then the next to arrive, of course, and they
sparkle with silver and the scent of sweet pea. They place
a jar of olives on the table and sit smiling

Licorice arrives shortly after and their steps pep and
they decided to wear a tie. They set a chocolate soufflé
on the table with the rest of the food and scurry back
upstairs, to return with a bowl of thumbtacks. They place
the bowl next to the soufflé.

Fennel descends the stairs silently, with a platter bearing
so much goat cheese. They clatter the plate of cheese at
your place and look at and into and through your eyes.
You thank them.

Hawthorn arrives last after the rest of you have already
decided to sit down, with wine and wine and vodka.
They are the best dressed and worst behaved during dinner.

Motherwort clears their throat, and you
meet their eyes once again, and
they ask if you would like to say anything to the ghosts.
"No," simply, and you feast.

“Hawthorn, I would like a napkin,” you say, voice firm, but firm like cement at beachside resorts is, with pretty bits of sea glass in it, and you stand and lean in front of Hawthorn and seize your napkin. You now know not to ask questions of ghosts. Ghosts will not answer . Ghosts were never really listening.

And you know now that you can’t look them in the eye when you address them. You will not always know where their eyes are, or if they have them, or if making eye contact would have any meaningful impact. We don’t look ghosts in the eye. If they let us, we sit forehead to forehead, and lean our noses in until the tips touch.

You know that ghosts don’t come when summoned, maybe the sweet ones. But a ghost always takes their time. They like to be sat with. Polished and placed with intention. Draped over a sofa and allowed to languish like music, and some ghosts like to hate Themselves. You know this now.

You gaze around the table at the ghosts you’ve come to know, grab a piece of chicken off the platter. You chew and chew.

REACHING FOR LOLO

JULIA WARD (SI 22)

My mother found her biological father a little over two years after he had died. Over five decades of wondering had culminated in an obituary and an online genealogy report. I remember that my mother yelled for everyone to come into the living room, and that all of us dogpiled over the computer, and that we all cried, and that my mother shouted “I have four siblings” and that after the initial excitement she had quietly said, “he was a good person.” Later, after making contact with one of her half-sisters over Facebook, she was told that if my grandfather had known about my grandmother’s pregnancy he would have done something. He would have searched until he found his daughter; would have prevented the neglect, the poverty, the abuse. He wouldn’t have left her.

Months after, my mother would tell me that she was content with how things had panned out. She had never wanted to disrupt anyone’s life, and she finally had closure. It was enough. They were not interested in connecting with us. They had their own mother to think about.

No one in my family knows very much about the Philippines. We know where it is geographically: 7,640 tropical islands placing themselves between Southeast Asia and the rolling Pacific Ocean. We know that lumpia is a fried crispy spring roll dipped in sticky red chile sauce, that halo-halo is shaved ice with dozens of sugary-sweet toppings, and that adobo is pork or chicken braised in a stock of vinegar and soy sauce, black pepper and bay leaves. We know that the Philippines have a complicated history with the United States (a complicated history with most of the world, really). We know that the dominant religion is Roman Catholicism (something we share). We know that the national language is a dialect of the indigenous Tagalog. We know that the word they use for *grandfather* in that country is *Lolo*.

Lolo. Whenever I bring him up I say “maternal grandfather” because I feel as far removed from him as the people I’m talking about him to. On its own the word “Lolo” feels intimate and familiar; short repetitive syllables you might imagine bursting out of the mouth of a small child, maybe their third or fourth word after Mama (*Nanay*) or Dada (*Tatay*). The expression feels odd coming off of my tongue, partially because I’m not used to it but also because I’m not used to the idea of him. I’ve screenshotted all of the pictures from his memorial page and I show them to people: friends, teachers, coworkers, asking them to search with me to find something recognizable, a connection between our faces. Someone once told me that I had his chin, but I think they were just trying to be nice. Everyone looks like they have the same chin unless they’ve got a cleft or a dimple. It’s not like I have his mouth, or his nose, or his eyes.

His eyes. They are dark brown and monolid; they crinkle at the edges in the pictures where he is smiling, and one of them creases a little more than the other. In most of the photos he has his head tilted to face the left side of the cameraman. I wonder if he liked one side of his face more than the other. I wonder what he would think of my face, or of my mother’s. “Who’s goddamn White baby is that?” I laugh silently at the soundbite every time it appears across my for-you page; it is the inside joke of a social-media-savvy generation of mixed kids. We would be good at that trend, except my siblings and I don’t have anyone to stand next to and laugh about our skin with.

Our skin. Our race. What am I supposed to put down now when I answer a survey? Asian? Other? Fill-in-the-blank? The last few times I’ve just answered “White.” What right do I have to

say anything different? My mother sent her DNA through the mail and got a rainbow pie chart in return. My day-to-day life has not changed. People do not see me differently, and if they do it's only because I've told them something about myself. Otherwise, I am a remixed version of pale skin and blue eyes, the same features that have dominated this country's middle and upper classes for centuries. I am not an immigrant, and neither are my parents. I have no cultural inroads with this people; there are no stories or mementos from a homeland, no words in any language other than English. I stick out at the Filipino-American Student Association like a sore thumb. What right do I have?

What right do I have when people who look like my cousins (*mga pinsan*) are getting pushed onto New York City subway tracks? When a 75-year-old Chinese grandmother has to fight off an assailant with a piece of wood? When a gunman shoots up a spa in Atlanta because the women working there are Korean and, in his mind, therefore constitute a sexual temptation? My best friend from high school is half-Korean. She believes she looks white enough to avoid the violence. I do not agree. I ask her to stay out of New York. She spends quarantine writing poems about her grandmother's memories of the war, about eating kimchi, about her mother as a toddler getting off of the plane from Seoul, about "yellow fever," about biracial identity, about having a love-hate relationship with Disney's *Mulan*, about passing.

The word "passing" refers to a person of mixed heritage whose appearance gives the impression of belonging to a single race. It is frequently used to describe people whose features allow them to travel in otherwise inaccessible areas of racially striated societies. "Passing" is also the title of a 1929 novella written by Nella Larson, a Harlem Renaissance figure whose work largely focused on the ambiguities present in social constructs of race and gender. In "Passing" there are two main characters: Clare, a trophy wife to a rich, White banker, and Irene, who embraces middle-class domesticity with her husband, a Black physician. Both women are Black, but they can "pass" for White, their skin light enough to walk through society as Mexican or Italian or something not-quite Nordic. They hover between racial lines; light enough to keep them from getting kicked out of the hotel bar, but dark enough to remain "exotic."

Exotic: unique as to be coveted, tamed as to be desirable. Irene knows Clare is desirable. She stares at her for half of the book admiring her; her once impoverished childhood playmate now elevated to the elite circles of upper-crust American society. Elevated...and to Irene's ire, reaching backwards to the people she left behind. Clare sees Irene (purely by chance, on a rooftop restaurant) and spends the rest of the book sticking to her like gum sticks to hair: the more Irene tries to get her out of her life, the tighter Clare seems to hold onto it. In Irene's opinion Clare has made her bed and should lie in it; reconnecting with her roots not only crosses dangerous social lines but serves as an insult to those who, against many odds, have managed to not only live under racial oppression but to thrive in it.

And yet in spite of this, Irene can never bring herself to tell Clare "no." Cannot turn her away from a visit, cannot deny her a ticket to a social committee dance, and cannot bring herself to reveal Clare even as she endures a racist tirade from Clare's banker husband. There is, Irene reflects, an unsevered racial tie between the two women that survives even while Clare has shed herself of her racial constraints. Irene pities the other woman; she acknowledges her loneliness and bends to her desires again and again while tensions mount and boundaries between their lives blur. Clare desperately grasps for connection; she clings to Irene even as Irene loses her mental footing in her own

social and familial spheres. Irene's internal debate towards Clare is the central conflict of Larsen's book and (spoiler alert) it ends in blood.

I do not claim or pretend that my situation is even remotely similar to that of Larsen's fictional characters. I had no idea I was bi-racial for the first nineteen years of my life. I have not had to live with any of the social baggage and trauma that comes with being a minority in the United States. Asian-American identity, history, and oppression are fundamentally different from Black-American identity, history, and oppression.

Still, I see Clare reaching towards Irene and her blackness and I wonder if we (my mother and I) are Clare. Or something like her. I wonder if my aunts (*mga Tiya*) and uncles (*mga Tiyo*) feel like Irene; looking at us and seeing a distantly familiar group of strangers. I wonder if they've discussed our pictures, searched through the ancient history of my mother's Facebook albums. I wonder if they take the subway anymore. I wonder what my Lola's adobo tastes like. I wonder if I should even call her Lola since we are not blood-related. I wonder if her children look at my mother's messages and wonder why we want to talk, wonder what we are asking for, wonder what letting us in means for them. Wonder why we have the audacity to try when this is what our country looks like.

I can't take a side in this novel. I know something of Irene's sense, and loss, of control. I know something of the missing piece Clare tries to find in Irene. I know something of the question between the two of them, the silent query of "what could have been?" They are all things I felt looking at that obituary in 2018, of knowing that if my grandmother had said something, or that if my grandfather had been stationed at that Naval base just a little while longer, our lives could have been completely and utterly different.

Instead of ballet, I could have learned to dance cariñosa or tinikling. Instead of *D'Aulaires' Book of Greek Myths* maybe I would have read *Biag ni Lam-ang*. Instead of listening to *Grimms Fairy Tales*, perhaps my grandparents would have told us bedtime stories about Mariang Makiling, the benevolent mountain spirit, or Sarimanok, the many-colored bird that brings good fortune to the Maranao. I reach for Lolo and I do not find him. But I also know that pushing when people are not ready to be pushed is exactly the reason Larsen's novel ended the way that it did. It was never Irene's job to usher Clare back into her blackness; that was for Clare to wrestle with and find herself, with people who were willing to do it with her. So for now I'll do what I can to connect with my grandfather's spirit, and wait to see if someone grabs my hand while I do so.

Work Cited

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2022 WRITING RETREAT PARTICIPANTS

HISTORICAL CONTEXT: ENOVID

THERESE WHITE

Around the time Nixon was sweating under hot TV lights,
The birth of the pill circled in gossipy cliques.
Did you hear? Did you see? Did you ask your doctor?
Wearing high-necked sweater sets and skirts below the knee,
Imitating Jackie, not the first to remind us how ladies behave,
Her round sunglasses mirroring the image of a woman,
A girl, trying to be grown up and missing the mark.
Missing the mark? But it was only natural, she flirted,
Felt the pang of desire and got in the family way
Out of wedlock, no pill in sight, she rode to Virginia,
Her mother behind the wheel, rotaries traversed,
Twisting back home after the illegal abortion.
Had she heard? Now there was a pill to prevent pregnancy.
She could have missed the shouts, the crying,
and slammed doors instead of missing her period.
Enovid, it was called. Void the ovulation. Avoid the baby
And the mess of a hasty marriage or a botched abortion.
Freedom and independence or guilt and shame.
Take your pick. Thank Katharine Dexter McCormick.
As Kennedy's slogans said, "A Time for Greatness 1960"
And (still for women oppressed), "We can do better."

OUR AUTHORS

Mary Archambault

Mary Archambault is a middle school reading specialist in Pomfret, Connecticut who is passionate about connecting with students through writing. She is the advisor of her school's literary magazine, *The Eagle's Eye*, which operates in concert with the school writing center she facilitates. A graduate of Fairfield University, she earned her Sixth Year in Curriculum and Instruction from UConn's Neag School. She's the mother of four mostly grown children and lives in Northeast Connecticut with her husband and cat.

Diane Ayer

Diane Ayer teaches English at Lyman Memorial High School. She graduated from the CWP SI in 2005 and the CWP SI for Leadership in 2006. She is a proud founder of and facilitator for the Willimantic Writers and is the editor for their online magazine. She is very grateful for this award and thanks her family for their support, the judges for their recognition, and the CWP for their efforts to keep writing teachers writing.

Christopher W. Buck

Christopher W. Buck is a doctoral student in the Language, Literacy, and Culture Ph.D. program at UMass Amherst. He currently teaches first-year writing. His research interests include collaborative teacher inquiry, portraiture, and adolescent literacies.

Jane Cook

Jane Cook has been working as an educator for over 40 years and as a Literacy and Technology Coach for over 30 years. Since 2007, Jane has served as a Teacher-Consultant for CWP, serving in various capacities including Co-facilitator of the CWP Summer Institute, CWP Technology Program Leader, and CWP Grants Program Leader. Currently, she works as an Educational Consultant providing workshops and support in curriculum, literacy, and technology. Jane began writing for her high school newspaper and has never stopped.

Patrick Gosselin

Patrick Gosselin is an English Teacher at Ellington High School where he teaches Sophomore English, Creative Writing, and Contemporary Literature. When not teaching, he is probably coaching, attending a concert, yelling at his favorite Italian soccer team on the television, or out and about with a camera snapping abstract photos. Sometimes he even likes to read and write things.

Alex Klein

Alex Klein is a recent graduate from the Neag School of Education and a first-year teacher at Killingly High School.

Daniel Healy

Daniel Healy is a graduate student and the current Assistant Director of Creative Writing at the University of Connecticut, Storrs.

Julianna Iacovelli

Julianna Iacovelli (they/them) is a graduate student at the University of Connecticut in the Neag I/BM program for Secondary Education English. Their article “Queer Joy in the Classroom” was published in NCTE’s English Journal in their May 2022 edition. They are passionate about equity-centered, trauma-informed, anti-racist, and culturally sustaining teaching; as well as advocating for the neurodivergent and queer community. They currently live just outside of UConn with their handsome and violent cat, Mr. Dorian Gray.

Amythest Mason

Amythest lives in Manchester with their spouse, Ben, and their two cats, Mala and Tigre. They are a 7th grade Language Arts teacher with a passion for equity-centered, trauma-informed pedagogy. They spend their free time gardening, listening to music, watching TV, playing video games, reading, writing, and working on various art projects.

Joan Muller

Joan Muller received her BFA from The Hartford Art School and master’s equivalent combining art and writing from U of New Hampshire and Rhode Island School of Design. Her career has included teaching (Visual Arts and Designing Minds Gifted Program teacher at Eastford Elementary School PreK-8; 2002 CT District Teacher of the Year), exhibiting her fine art at numerous juried shows, and attending forums in many disciplines such as the Connecticut Writing Project 2010. Though still working seasonally as a museum educator at Old Sturbridge Village, she is retired and at the mercy of her muses now.

Joanne Peluso

Joanne Peluso is a 2007 graduate of the CWP Summer Institute. She is an English teacher at Bristol Eastern High School. “She writes because there is a voice within her that will not be still” (to quote Sylvia Plath).

Ashley Taylor

Ashley Taylor participated in the Connecticut Writing Project’s Summer Institute in 2022. She graduated from UConn in 2012 with a Bachelor’s degree in English and Classics & Ancient Mediterranean Studies. She continued on with her education and earned her Master’s degree in Teaching from Sacred Heart University in 2017. She is currently certified to teach Secondary English and is a substitute teacher in the Griswold school district since 2017. Ashley loves to read, write, and spend time with her family. She loves reading fantasy and is now reading *The Lord of the Rings* for the first time, having watched the movies multiple times. She lives with her family and nine-year-old Shih Tzu named Wookie in Norwich, CT.

Joe Tarantino

I’m a graduate of the Neag School of Education (‘08 and ‘09), and am newly back in Hartford from a six-year sojourn teaching in the Bronx. I teach 9th and 12th grade (ECE) English at University High School of Science and Engineering. Whatever of my money the government doesn’t require goes to saving up for Beyoncé tickets and merch.

Julia Ward

Julia Ward graduated from UConn in May 2022 and received dual Bachelor of Science degrees in English and Applied Economics, with concentrations in Teaching English, International Development, and Environmental Economics. She currently works as a bookseller at The Book Barn in Niantic, CT, and hopes to teach creative writing after pursuing a Master's program.

Therese White

Therese White's work has been published in *Caveat Lector*, *Smoky Blue Literary and Arts Journal*, *X-R-A-Y Literary Magazine*, *River & South Literary Magazine*, *Adelaide Magazine*, and the *Cottonwood Journal* out of the University of Kansas. She received her MFA from Lindenwood University, St. Charles, Missouri, and she makes her home in Connecticut where she writes on a little laptop, by a little stove, from a little stool.

CULT READS INTO THE SILENCE

