A biannual collection of poetry, prose, and visual art created by the students of Middlebury College.
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Since I have been involved with Blackbird, we have often discussed what it is the magazine should be all about. We have often questioned whether there should be a consistent theme or aesthetic that ties together everything we publish.

I have come to believe that Blackbird can best serve the Middlebury community by striving to represent the greatest diversity of artistic creation - by rejecting notions of thematic or aesthetic consistency in order to showcase the incredible breadth of work that Middlebury students create each semester.

In this issue, we proudly bring you a collection of written and visual work that encompasses an enormous range of forms, media, genres, and themes. We have also returned to a larger format in order to better showcase visual art, which has become just as essential as poetry or prose within the pages of Blackbird.

A warm thank you to our contributors and staff members, and, of course, to our readers, without whom this would be a silly and pointless endeavor.

Nick Kaye ‘17
Editor in Chief
Blackbird is always accepting prose, poetry, and visual art submissions to be considered for publication in upcoming issues. We set no limit on the number of submissions per student, and we encourage all forms, genres, and media.

- Submissions should be sent to blackbird@middlebury.edu.

- All visual art should be submitted sized for print at a minimum resolution of 300 DPI. Lossless image formats such as PNG, RAW, or TIFF are preferred. Please contact us if you need help photographing or formatting your artwork.

- If you are submitting a longer written piece, please mark one or more excerpts (under 15 pages each) that you would like us to consider for publication.

- We do not typically publish anonymous pieces or pieces credited to pseudonyms unless there is a fair reason why you wish to maintain anonymity.
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TEA TIME

Roses breathe gray skies,
and swings sigh,
long after Janie has gone home
for tea and crumpets
and mothballs like cataracts
every night at half-past five.

A hobby horse
abandoned by blue eyes
canter through smoke wreaths
and cracked reflections.
Young tongues savor the hiss
of four-letter words
cheap at the corner store.
Last night we picnicked
on peach-fuzz flesh
and unbuttoned pinafores.

Snail trails glisten on the trellis,
and moonlight, frail as lace,
dances with Japanese lanterns.
Ivy smirks, a somber bass,
and the teeter totter creaks,
pining for hopscotch
on marmalade afternoons.
WHEN LONDON BURNED

i washed myself with fog
collected in watering cans
and kissed the tomato plants
that lilted beneath your fingers.
we swallowed toadstools
to waltz in clouds
a pale song of angels.

when london burned
i padded between bluebells
in search of unicorns.
we ate sweet butter on biscuits
and dreamed of chestnuts
hanging heavy on the string.
in the summer, the northern lights
sang us home.

when london burned
i swallowed a goldfish
and remembered when you loved me
on sailboat sheets.
sirens sang to us in voices
torn from schoolboys’ throats
but never shed their scales.

when london burned
i cried kerosene tears
and sang the streetlamp song.
i sifted through the ashes
and the embers spelled your name.
ZODIAC

Boy, she may be fire
but you cannot conjure me
from nothingness. Unlike the spark
of flint on stone,
I am no man’s mistress.
I am the mother of your mother, boy
and I remember the first rains,
so sweet and so soft.

Boy, I have birthed lily pads and pyramids
and the hanging gardens of Babylon.
I hide fish that fly and whales with horns
and squid with blood-red eyes.
Some nights the earth shudders
and I spit out islands, crowned in fire.
You say you can swim, boy
but have you ever been swallowed by a whale?

Boy, you mapped me, sailed me,
said you owned me,
birch canoes and coracles,
so fragile on my endless waters.
You fought me with the very trees
Iwatered, but I tore your wings to tatters
and gobbled up your oars.
You cry for krakens and maelstroms, boy
but my swells roll on and on.

Boy, I sank the Titanic.
Imagine, the night so pale and gleaming,
smokestacks screaming, black hull tilting
down and down and down.
I drowned Atlantis while you stared,
transfixed by my pearlescence,
my heart of green and turquoise.
You had better build yourself an ark, boy
because my fury is a hurricane.
EXIT INTO NIGHT

Man gets up from table. Rubs back of head with sweaty palm. Shuffles chair loudly. Shuffles out bar to taxi cab, slams door and--

They put the New Jersey turnpike in an art gallery but then it lost its beauty, or its *something* whatever makes it click.

Man sleeps, face pressed up against sticky black leather as white lines click by and lanes twist until their knots can’t be--

It was the white walls, I think, too sterile and the fluorescents don’t compare to the night sky.

Driver taps man on shoulder. Man grunts stirs and releases booze-smelling breath. Replaces face on sticky black leather and--

The gist of the gallery thing?

“Sir.”

Well the gist is--

“Sir, you must look outside.”

Well the gist is that you can’t grow angels in petri dishes.

Taxi headlights unfold into infinity, mash with star-matter in space. Tire rubber burns with helium and hydrogen.

Driver grabs man’s shoulder shakes man to life from heavy eyelids twilight of slumber.

“Sir, is this your exit?”
TRUE LOVE’S KISS

As three moons curdle in the clouds,
I wake in your dark caress.
Your breath stirs
my lungs with life and I smell
the dahlias and the daisies
you planted in the mattress a few months ago
because you knew October prophesied
the desecration of your gardens.
My body pulls away from the roots
and I hear your cry pierce
the moonlight.

I stare into your eyes and you bite me on the throat,
your venom taking only seconds
to swim its way to my brain and
suddenly the steeple outside the windows
are torches flaming against the night
and I see the apple trees
along the porch, the apples so red
and bloody dangling
from the dark fingers of the trees.
If you just touched them
with the tips of your fingers
they would drop,
so heavy and teeming.

Red burns away to black
and you bury me in the bed,
like you do every night,
but already I know
I will rise again and there you will be,
beside me, with your breath and your eyes
and my eyes will not let go until
you make them and then the kiss
and then to the mattress and the dahlias
and the daisies.
DARLING DELHI

With your sewage and your smog,
your dogs that rape each other every night
outside my apartment,
with your metro crammed with commuters and young women
in saris who are shoeless and 5-year-olds
that fit themselves through steel hoops and hold out
hands for rupees and old men
with no teeth and no legs who grab at my ankles and look
at me for money,
Darling dearest, you smelly bitch,
your air like hands around my lungs choking
me every time I sip gol gappe on Hudson Lane,
your heat like the enormous black flies
that will only let go after
you crush them with your hands.
After too many tiffins filled with plastic bags
filled with oily gravy dal and oily
gravy rice and oily
gravy lady’s fingers and
hours in the bathroom trying
to poop out the whatever
I ate last night, after so much sweat
that I have no more underwear or pants
or shirts to wear after more than a hundred rides
on the yellow line through old Delhi
as businessmen behind me shout chalo bhai, chalo bhai
so often that I just want to shove everyone
under the metro car because I am so tired
and I haven’t taken a deep breath
in five months and there is only so many minutes you can spend
out in the sun until you feel
your forehead crisp like a samosa.
After so many mornings passing the garbage heap
near KB’s, that feast of odors,
that colorful soup of rotting vegetables
and dead rats and after an eternity
of sleepless nights because the AC is unforgivably broken and the dogs
rape each other outside my apartment,
and so much smog you can stare straight at the sun
for over an hour as it sets beyond the high rises,
Delhi, I need to tell you darling
that I don’t think this is going to work,
I want to run away but
I am stuck
in you, I am trapped
in your traffic I cannot
breathe with all the exhaust and the beeping
beeping beeping I cannot
hear anymore I cannot
sleep because the bruised brown eyes
and the nights that are never dark,
Delhi, my lover of too many months,
you beast of a city,
you labyrinth of odors,
you bitch,
my darling.
WRECKAGE

Smoke still seeps from your lips,
embers hiss in your eyes.

Life has relinquished you,
but the breakage of your body

still burns. Your mangled mouth,
shattered knees: they resist

the body bag.
Your palms will not give up

the pools of blood
that glistened with moonlight.

And I will not surrender you
to memory even after

your fingers and teeth are collected
and counted, even after the scorched

rubber ceases
to scream in my ears,

even after the wheel
is wrenched from your neck.
SOMETHING ABOUT MYSELF

My car has a rattle that burbles up from underneath the driver’s side. Every three days I crawl underneath the car to look for the source, scraping my knees on gravel, but all I ever see is cables covered in exhaust.

Sometimes I make snap judgments of people based solely on how sharp the angles of their faces look under compact florescent lights in library carrels.

I’m not entirely sure I know the difference between a windbreaker and a raincoat, and even allegedly expensive wine tastes like sanguine sweet gym sweat to me. When I drink too much of it I cry.

Last night I stood in the shower after the water stopped running and was transfixed by drops that sprouted from the holes in the faucet. They grew round like flower petals and were still for a glorious moment before careening to the floor.
THE FACULTY GAME

In Pepin Gymnasium time backpedals, 
stumbling clumsily over its worn hightops 
as the ball advances towards it.

The clock reads 12:00 
but the year could be 1975, 1998 or 2003. 
Old men grunt and stomp and sweat 
as they did when their bodies were lithe and young.

Time looks on with a grimace 
as it nurses a pulled hamstring.

They once howled at the moon outside of bars 
and wrapped their arms around soft bare shoulders 
before stumbling down sidewalks 
in shiny black shoes.

On the court they danced, speaking 
in subtle tongues. 
The pick and roll, the drive and dish, 
they lived and loved.

And then they watched 
younger versions of themselves 
rise as they fell 
into the comforting cradle of fatherhood. 
They dance now, but slowly, around Legos 
and loose leaf sheets of spelling homework.

They teach the tongues now, 
in gruff tones bereft of beauty. 
There’s enough beauty in the game already. 
And time packs up its fragrant gym bag 
and heads home.
Hey, Ken Burns, cut out the melodrama and introduce us!
ARMANDE (EXCERPT)

Cast of Characters

Armande Leclaire: 20.
John Carothers: 43.
Clyde Wickers: late 30s.
Miloslav Havelka: late 20s.
Christine Cook: late 20s.
Tony Mulryan: 20s.

ACT I
Scene 1

1910 or thereabout in the large parlor of a moderately affluent home. Among other things, naturally, a sofa, a coffee table, and a small writing desk against the wall. A door to the outside, another to the rest of the house. It is a summer evening and the lights are low.

A post-coital scene: ARMANDE LECLAIRE, 20, reclines on the sofa in her underthings, while TONY MULRYAN, early 20s, also disrobed, fiddles in his drawers.

Tony is rough and nervous. Armande is refined and cool.

ARMANDE
You’re not much with the lights on, are you?

TONY
Me?

ARMANDE
I always thought sailors were a bit more--mmph.

TONY
I’m not a sailor.

ARMANDE
Didn’t you say you worked on a ship?

TONY
I work for W. B. Shippman’s Inks, Paints and Varnishes.

ARMANDE
You sell paint?
TONY
I make paint. Well, I help make paint. You know the factory up on West Elm where they had the problem with the dogs?
ARMANDE
Dogs?
TONY
Yeah, a whole pack of strays got into our disposal and ate fifteen pounds of expired colorant. Nasty stuff. Next morning--dead dogs as far as the eye can see. It took us two days to clean ’em all up. And that’s not even counting all the vomit. But that’s where I work.
ARMANDE
I could have sworn you said you worked on a ship.
TONY
Do you like fellas who work on ships?
ARMANDE
I’d never hold it against them.
Tony finishes his fiddling.
TONY
I never used one of these things before. Kinda nifty.
(He holds up a used prophylactic.)
What do I do with it now?
(ARMANDE gestures to a small wastebin.)
What, in there? Seems awful...public.
ARMANDE
Well, if you’d rather take it home with you, I won’t stand in your way.
TONY
All right, all right.
(He places the condom in the wastebin.)
So, um. Did you have a nice time?
ARMANDE
“Did I have a nice time?”
TONY
Yeah, did you, um--did you like it?
ARMANDE
I’ve had worse.
TONY
I’m not so fancy, but I got some moves, huh?
ARMANDE
That you do.
TONY
Was I better than Pete?
ARMANDE
Who’s Pete?
TONY
  My friend Pete Restelli says he knows you. Moustache, sharpens knives down in Merchant Square?
ARMANDE
  Huh. Small world.
TONY
  So how’d I stack up?
ARMANDE
  Well, I try not to draw comparisons. It only leads to hurt feelings.
TONY
  I hate Pete. I don’t see how you could like Pete either. He’s dumber than a bag of hammers.
  (beat)
  Do you like me?
ARMANDE
  You’re all right.
TONY
  But do you like me, you know...? Cause I like you. I think you’re beautiful.
ARMANDE
  Well, thank you. That’s very kind.
TONY
  You’re welcome. I bet you hear it all the time.
ARMANDE
  No more than anyone else, I imagine.
TONY
  I don’t meet many beautiful women.
ARMANDE
  That’s too bad.
TONY
  Do you sleep with a lot of men?
ARMANDE
  Pardon?
TONY
  It’s just, Pete said--well, you know how fellas talk--he said something to the effect of you know a lot of people. Maybe you know a lot of them well.
ARMANDE
  What do you think?
TONY
  Well, I don’t know. It doesn’t matter, of course. It’s just I never met a girl like you before. And I kinda hope--I kinda hope--
ARMANDE
  What?
TONY
I mean, I sure do like you. And maybe I came here with just one thing in mind but now I--. Maybe if you had a good time tonight we could maybe--go for a walk sometime--or go to the zoo--I can’t afford very much right now but I’m going to be promoted at work soon and I was thinking if you were interested we could...

(pause)
Are you going to sleep?
ARMANDE
Sometimes I close my eyes.
TONY
Oh.

(pause)
I mean I know I’m not so fancy, but--
ARMANDE
Listen, Thomas--
TONY
It’s Tony.
ARMANDE
Tony. We were only having a little fun. Wasn’t it fun?
TONY
Yes, it was.
ARMANDE
And you’re very sweet, and I’m sure you’re a very fine paintmaker, but I’m afraid we’re never going to see each other again.
TONY
Why not?
ARMANDE
(sweetly)
Because I don’t want to.
TONY
Oh.
ARMANDE
Don’t take it so much to heart. And if it makes you feel any better, Peter Restelli came before he could undo his suspenders.
TONY
Could I write to you?--maybe I could call you on the telephone sometime--
ARMANDE
Come on, now, Tony, we’ve had a perfectly nice time. Let’s not spoil it by getting to know each other.
TONY
Look, give me another shot. I’m usually a lot better,
you just have me so nervous. With this girl Agnes from
church I could go for almost twenty minutes.

ARMANDE
An Olympic champion.

TONY
C’mon. If you’re gonna make me go, at least let me give
you something to remember me by.
   A pause. Armande sighs.

ARMANDE
Well, all right. I suppose it can’t hurt.
Tony scrambles on top of her. They are well on
their way when suddenly the lights come up full
and JOHN CAROTHERS, a collected,
distinguished-looking man in his early 40s, opens
the front door and spots them--reacting not with
anger, but professional irritation.

JOHN
Out.

TONY
--Oh! Sir, sir, oh--I--, I thought--

JOHN
Out, please.

TONY
   (to Armande)
   Is this your father?

JOHN
No, I’m her great-aunt Sally. Would you kindly gather
your clothes and get out?

TONY
Yes, sir, right away, sir.
   Tony yanks on his pants, grabs everything else,
   and hurries out.

ARMANDE
   (as he goes)
   Say hello to Pete for me!
   Tony exits. A pause.

JOHN
Really?

ARMANDE
What?

JOHN
In the living room?

ARMANDE
My room is drafty.
JOHN
It is the dead of July. And we just had that sofa
reupholstered.

   John sets down his bag with a heavy sigh.

ARMANDE
Where have you been?

JOHN
At the Sorensons' place. Their son came down with an
terrible fever this evening.

ARMANDE
So did I.

JOHN
I'm not amused.

ARMANDE
Oh, pooh. I remember when you used to laugh at my jokes.

JOHN
I remember when they were they funny. Now give it here.

ARMANDE
What?

JOHN
Come on, hand it over.

ARMANDE
I don't know what you're talking about.

JOHN
Armande.

   (Armande reaches under the sofa cushion
   and produces a tubiform doctor's tool.)

   This is medical equipment, Addie, it needs to be kept
   clean and sterilized and--

ARMANDE
Oh, we were just playing around.

JOHN
You know, there are some people who would find this
type of behavior incredibly troubling.

ARMANDE
I haven't heard any complaints.

JOHN
I mean it.

ARMANDE
I mean it, too. Look, punish me for the sofa, send me
to bed without supper, cut the legs off my hobby-horse,
what have you--"I'll change my ways, I swear."

JOHN
Sit down. I want to speak with you.

ARMANDE
Oh, John, I'm so tired.
JOHN
   Addie.

   (Armande sits.)
These last few years, you’ve developed these...habits
of yours, which I have always attributed to perfectly
healthy youthful impulses.

ARMANDE
   Those pesky impulses.

JOHN
   But I begin to worry.

ARMANDE
   About?

JOHN
   About...the long-term consequences of short-term
   pleasure.

ARMANDE
   That’s what the prophylactics are for.

JOHN
   That’s not what I mean. It is my responsibility as your
   guardian not only to keep you secure and healthy but
   also to see you safely into your next phase of life.

ARMANDE
   Phase of life?

JOHN
   Don’t you ever want to be married?

   A pause, then Armande bursts out laughing.

ARMANDE
   Well, John, you really have out-sillied yourself.

JOHN
   It isn’t silly.

ARMANDE
   What do I want with marriage?

JOHN
   You certainly don’t seem to have any other plans.

ARMANDE
   No, but what do I want with plans, either? Everything
   is all right here. Don’t worry about the sofa, we will
   manage to revive it somehow.

JOHN
   What a young person does defines who she is. When she
   ignores her lessons, she is not a student. When she has
   no employment, she is not a professional. When she
   constantly has men in the house--on the sofa and in the
   kitchen and in the rear courtyard, she is not an
   innocent.

ARMANDE
   Oh, this is me we’re talking about.
JOHN
    Now, all of this business with the sofa is very well; I
would classify it as a minor annoyance if it were an
isolated incident, or even a string of isolated
incidents, but when it comes to your future, my opinion
is not the one that matters.

ARMANDE
    Oh, John, don't be silly! I almost always consider your
opinion before I decide to ignore it.

JOHN
    I mean to say that my own feelings on the matter of
your habits cannot dissuade those of the public at
large. And they have their feelings about you.

ARMANDE
    Then you're ashamed of me.

JOHN
    No. I am only asking you to remember that I will not be
your guardian forever.

ARMANDE
    Well, never fear. When you die, I shall become a coal
miner.

JOHN
    At least it might teach you something about work.

ARMANDE
    (indignantly)
    I work. I'm a tutor.

JOHN
    No, you have a tutor.

ARMANDE
    We teach each other. Christine may know about Assyria
and calculus but in other subjects I remain the eminent
authority.

JOHN
    You are not a fool, Addie, you are not a stupid girl.
But with all your vast intelligence, it seems, you
continue to entertain this notion that I will always be
there to take care of you.

ARMANDE
    But you will be.

JOHN
    Armande--

ARMANDE
    And anyway, what does my marrying somebody have to do
with my habits?
JOHN
    Because you will be hard pressed to find a man who wants to be married to a woman who has had more partners than she has fingers and toes.
ARMANDE
    You flatter me.
    (beat)
    What’s on your mind? I’m used to these lectures but they never go on so long.
JOHN
    Does the name Clyde Wickers mean anything to you?
ARMANDE
    Clyde Wickers?
JOHN
    We knew each other in school.
ARMANDE
    He’s a doctor?
JOHN
    No, actually—he owns a ranch in California. Quite a prominent one, in fact. He’s done very well for himself outside the medical profession.
ARMANDE
    Well, good for him.
JOHN
    He’s coming to town for a few weeks, to see me, and visit with some friends—and he’s very eager to meet you.
ARMANDE
    Me? What for?
JOHN
    Well, I write about you in my letters, of course.
ARMANDE
    What do you write that’s got him so eager?
JOHN
    I say what a fine young woman you’ve turned out to be. Intelligent, active, friendly—a little on the mischievous side, yes, but all for the best.
ARMANDE
    You told him I was beautiful.
JOHN
    I might have mentioned it.
ARMANDE
    And now he’s coming to see how beautiful I am.
JOHN
    He has...expressed an interest in you.
ARMANDE
    To what end?
JOHN
  A wholesome one. Clyde is--has always been--very traditional. Conservative. He comes from one of the most prominent families this side of the country and they have always done things a certain way. And if he knew I allowed you to carry on in the parlor while I’m with patients, he would be very disconcerted.

ARMANDE
  Then keep him the hell out of the parlor.

JOHN
  Addie--listen to me. I am very serious about this.

ARMANDE
  About what? I want to go to bed.

JOHN
  He means to court you.

ARMANDE
  What do I care?

JOHN
  You ought to care quite a bit.

  (beat)

  I don't like to say it because I think it crude to hold expenses against one’s child but at this moment I see fit to remind you that every item you call your own is something I have given you, one way or the other. Your dresses, your books, your jewelry, your cigarettes, money for the opera, the ballet, picture shows, restaurants--I am the sole sponsor of your debauchery.

ARMANDE
  Your point?

JOHN
  Even if you were my own daughter, I could not stand by and watch you get spoiled beyond functionality.

ARMANDE
  I still don’t understand.

JOHN
  When Mr. Wickers is here, he will expect to find a fine, well-behaved young woman.

ARMANDE
  Where will he find her?

JOHN
  You are a fine, well-behaved young woman.

ARMANDE
  Oh.
JOHN
Now, I don't make so much money that I can lay down bricks wherever you walk. Either you can strap on your coveralls and go down to Pittsburgh for some honest work or you can consider the reality that at some point you will have to be married.

ARMANDE
And...

JOHN
Clyde Wickers is a very generous and hardworking man, of whom I am very fond and in whom I place great trust. He is prepared to be fond of you. And if he is fond of you, you will be prepared for everything. But you cannot go on as you're going or he will be put off before he has time to know you for more than your hobbies.

ARMANDE
You want me to stop sleeping around.

JOHN
I want you to take a well-deserved recess.

ARMANDE
Or what?

JOHN
Or you, having demonstrated indifference to your life’s outcome, will force me to consider you an independent.

ARMANDE
I can’t believe you!

JOHN
Don’t consider it a punishment--

ARMANDE
Don’t consider it--! You’re cutting me off, of course it’s a punishment. It’s a threat.

JOHN
It is a request. But if you choose not to honor it then I shall take alternative action.

ARMANDE
That’s what threats are, John!

JOHN
Look--why don’t you try allotting your attention to one man instead of spreading it across twenty. You might find it suits you.

ARMANDE
Suits you, more like.
JOHN
Don’t pretend I’m being unfair. The way you behave
wouldn’t pass a week in another man’s household. I have
been entirely clement when it comes to your
unconventional practices and now I am asking you to try
something new. You cannot be this girl all your life.
(pause)
Addie?
ARMANDE
Don’t “Addie” me, I’m mad at you.
JOHN
You’re not used to discipline.
ARMANDE
I’m not used to tyranny.
JOHN
Ah yes, the little princess, blighted by the evil
dragon at every turn.
(referring to Tony)
I suppose you would very much miss the sophisticated
conversation of the factory boys you rustle up in the
Merchant Square, hm?
ARMANDE
(conceding)
Maybe not.
JOHN
I figured.
(He kisses her forehead)
Go on to bed, Armande. I oughtn’t have sprung it on you
at this hour. We can talk in the morning.
He begins to go.
ARMANDE
At least have a cup of tea with me.
JOHN
(smiling)
I don’t understand you, my dear. One moment you’re
pouting for hatred of me and the next you want tea and
company.
ARMANDE
You’re here so little. In the morning there’ll be
broken bones and punctured lungs and terrible fever.
JOHN
I’ll put on the kettle.
He heads out.
ARMANDE
John?
JOHN
Armande?
ARMANDE
    I suppose I could...give it a rest for a little while.
    If it means so much to you.
JOHN
    I appreciate that very much.
ARMANDE
    And you had just better hope this Clyde Wickers is
    nothing to sneeze at.
JOHN
    You’ll get along famously.
    *He starts out again.*
ARMANDE
    John?
JOHN
    Armande?
ARMANDE
    (measuredly)
    You were very harsh just now. I only put up with it
    because you’ve clearly had a long day and a man at your
    age shouldn’t push himself.
JOHN
    (amused)
    Thank you, Addie, that’s very considerate. Milk and
    sugar?
ARMANDE
    Honey.
JOHN
    Right away.
    *He exits.*
    *Lights down.*
I’LL NEVER FINISH A NOVEL

Age 10: I swear I’ll write a novel once I…
Age 13: I’ll have time to finish a screenplay when…
Age 15: I know I can write a play if…
Age 17: Short stories would be my thing if I…
Age 18: I wouldn’t need an extension for my essay except…
For every long night shedding single-word tears on empty pages; for every grave dug for
corpse of creativity; for pixelated screens of guiding light-our own stars of David; for each
hateful letter inscribed on my inside arm; for finger-painting with fast-food grease; for unfinished
elegies for the lazy Sunday afternoons where night fell before sunlight was appreciated; for an
open mouth, inhaling penny candy or Youtube hyperlinks;

Big bites, small bites, sound bites, bite sized, Fun-sized, not so fun
When vomit fills my mouth leaving Grandma’s cookies unfinished
Like all my self-portraits

Age 19: Never going to finish a novel, but I know if I work really hard I’ll finish…
A sentence.
7 weeks ago I was in love with a boy with cinnamon hair and paprika freckles.
7 weeks ago I was settled in a person and not a place.
7 weeks ago I thought it was ok to feel swirled and confused. afraid.
That’s what love is, right?
These bruises on my wrists, my heart,
they were from holding hands too tightly, I told myself.
5 weeks ago dishes shattered, and bones.
3 weeks ago, I swore I was gone, but I stayed.
1 week ago I took a gulp of air and ran.
Afraid, but light. Empty, but whole.
It rained that day
The sidewalks were cleansed.
I bathed in the puddles too.
BIG MEADOW TRAILHEAD

TAHOE RIM TRAIL
BIG MEADOW
TRAILHEAD
USA!
A forest with foes.
Who came, and labeled, separated,
distinguished.
Intelligence, thy power.
Thy redeeming quality, oh man of few faces.
You created the wilderness!
Oh woman! your kin, they differ—distract.
Like the forest. A threat.
Stop them! Name them as the other,
as you name all that you can.
Name it, conquer it, use it, kill it.
Our virgin lands of destiny.
Rejoice in the merriment of mankind!
The keepers of peace, the makers of war.
The masters of chains, the owners of land.
It is OURS! It truly is!

This world is repackaged,
for my easy consumption.
I am hungry,
I am tired,
but I cannot take from this hand that feeds.
I must walk on until I find something better to eat.
am I an empty shell because I
shared my bed just to
quell my insecurities?
a body is so empty
but I am not empty,
though I spent the night empty
like dry, white air.
touching is ok,
and that night was ok,
when we did what we both felt like doing
but didn’t feel anything that gave us shivers
or brought warm life into our cheeks.
but I should have known
that touching without love
would be so empty.
I should have known that I would miss
having a body flowing with warm liquid love
instead of just beer and vodka.
and a body is like plastic
though her eyes, which I didn’t look into,
must have been like stone.
ADMISSIONS?

“Let us settle this silly dispute with our swords! Begin!”
Jud turned the corner very confused by the conversation going on inside the radio booth. Two boys stood opposite one another, headphones on over their ears and three feet of steel in their hands. Jud laughed and they turned to him, puzzled.
“What is it?” one of them spoke with a bit of a lisp.
“A minute ago you were arguing about which shirt to wear and now you’re going to die over a polo?”
The pair stood with eyes wide.
“Die?” The one with the lisp said.
“What on Earth are you talking about?” The other said. “It’s just a little duel. You won’t tell our prefects will you?”
“Pre -?” Jud paused and shrugged. He didn’t care too much. “No, I’m not going to tell your prefects. Come on, have it out then.”
The pair clashed, their swords threw sparks. One slid to the guard of the other and suddenly the sword came up and the hand dropped to the ground and blood splashed onto Jud’s clean white shirt. The one with the lisp lay bleeding on the ground, his partner posing over him taking selfies, bloodied sword in hand.
Jud stood awestruck and terrified for a moment before he turned and emptied his stomach as best he could into the trash can beside the door.
“Are you alright there, friend?” The victor came to pat Jud’s back.
“You just-” Jud retched again.
“What’s wrong with him?” the lisped man spoke.
Jud looked between his legs. The man was rubbing his wrist where it had been severed and rolling his head in circles. Jud leaned against the wall.
“What? But you just -”
“He lost the duel, big deal. You aren’t gonna change your mind, are you?”
“No,” Jud said. His voice was hoarse with bile. He backed away slowly from the pair.
“Could you boys point me in the direction of admissions?”
“Sure, just down the hall to your left. Follow the blue signs until you reach Biv’s office. She’ll know what to do from there, if she isn’t sick.”
Jud nodded. He had only to find Biv, then. He thanked the boys, who promptly shared the results of their duel on the air, inviting listeners to view the triumphant photos at their website. Jud went down the hall to the left.
Jud passed by the office of Roy Archibald Gains. He heard a low rumble. He popped his head in through the open door and waved to the very large man tucked into a ball in the corner. He let out another moan.
“Do you need any help, Mr. Gains?”
“No ...uuuuuhh... call me Mr. G ...uuuggghhh.” The man stood and rolled from one foot to the other. “How ...unh... how can I be ....ooh... of service ...ehm... to you?”
He sat down at his desk and settled in behind piles of loose paper and off balance books. The chair opposite him was covered in dust and crumpled tissues.
“I was just looking for admissions. The boys in the radio booth told me to come down
“Oh... mmh... those two. Every... ah... week at this time I... agh... I get one of you. They
tell... hoo... you to find Biv?”

“Yeah, they said to ask her what’s next, but I heard your moans, and stopped in. I hope
I’m not bothering you.” Jud stood shyly by the door, staunchly ignoring the chair at the desk
that the man overflowed onto.

“No, I’m Biv. They think... mmm... that they’re clever. My fourth... grade bullies... hem...
got that one. You said... hmmm... you want admission?”

Jud nodded furiously. Ever since he was a child he had wanted this, he felt it in his
bones.

“Yes sir, absolutely, Mr. G. But, there is just one thing I’m curious about.”

“Heh... you wanna know... eh... what?”

“What is admission, exactly?”

“You. Here.” The man furrowed his eyebrows. His whole face rippled.

“I know, and I want that, please, I just don’t know what here is.”

“You want... hiinh... a tour?” The man stood slowly, with effort, fighting the earth itself as
he pushed out of his armchair.

“Uh, no, no, I think I’ll be fine. Maybe just how to find admissions.”

The man pulled out a tall book and sent papers scattering. He thumbed through it, then
muttered the date to himself over and over (“April 15th... unghh, April 15th, Tuesday, hm... April
15th, 2025.”) He nodded and stopped muttering. His finger followed his eyes as he spoke.

“Twelve point eight... hmm... percent chance direct... uuh... admission, thirty two
percent chance... hnnn... wait list, fifty five point... haahhh... seven percent chance of heavy
snowfall. And that... heee... leaves eighty one and one sixth percent that you... blehh... find
admissions. Pretty decent odds... hrrrrh, for someone on their own.”

Jud thanked Biv and opened the door to go. There was a light sleet falling in the
hallway. He turned back to Biv. Biv fell from his desk sidewise and started to groan loudly
again. Jud stood, paralyzed, then left the room and slammed the door. As he passed the radio
booth again, the victor was being nailed to a cross, and both boys were whistling along to the
melancholy tunes coming from their headsets.

“Did you find Biv?” The victor asked.

“Yes, thank you! A little confusing. He is a man and Biv isn’t his name, but thanks
nonetheless.”

“Oh you’re very welcome, only we weren’t meant to be much of a help. Say, would you
like to help nail me up? I know Louis could use it.”

“Shut up, Victor!” The boy with the lisp hammered faster, working the nail through the
delicate webbing of veins and bone like a blind man gutting a fish. “I don’t need his help.”

“I’m just gonna go on. He said I had a decent chance of finding admissions.”

“Not in this snowfall. Look around you,” Victor said, gesturing with a flick of a finger. The
air was white, and Jud was already up to his ankles. “You won’t make it anywhere.”

“I have an eighty two percent chance!”

“Wow. That’s pretty good odds, for someone on their own,” Louis said. He stood back,
triumphant, and photographed the crucified Victor. “Would you mind getting one with both of
us? It’s a bit hard, the cross is so tall and I don’t want to look like I’m hogging the shot.”

Jud stepped up and photographed Louis as he lay in front of the cross, as he straddled
it, and even as he climbed up next to Victor. When Louis was standing atop the cross, the
camera began beeping at Jud.
“What should I do about this?” Jud asked. He held the camera above his head. “Oh, just throw it. No one ever looks at those anyway.” Jud shrugged and threw the camera. It hit a wall and fell to the snow with a thud and a crunch. The boys hardly seemed to notice. Jud watched for a minute longer as Louis celebrated his victory, then backed towards the door. An unease had settled in on him. Louis had lost his human shape, had begun to twist and writhe in a way that joints cannot to climb the cross, and Victor glowed like a second sun. Though he’d never witnessed such a transformation before, Jud had heard enough stories to know he shouldn’t be around for the whole event.

“Admissions?” He said, but got no answer. He didn’t wait long, and then he ran from the room and continued down the hallway on the left.

“I’m sorry,” a voice said from within a room as he passed it. Jud paused. Not many of the rooms were occupied. “We just cannot allow the sanctity of this institution to fall into question because you want - this thing, here. You know we can’t allow that.” The voice belonged to a stern woman with grey roots and a sharp nose, who sat stiffly in a tall chair. Opposite her was a small round man with dark hair. Jud could see the sweat on the back of his neck. The woman was clearly winning the moment. Jud knocked on the door as lightly as he could.

The woman’s neck snapped around. Her eyes fixed on Jud. She glared for a minute, during which time the little man turned around. He had beady black eyes and a bulbous nose. Jud shrank in the doorway.

“Can I help you?”

“Yes,” Jud said, with what he could muster of a smile. He was shivering from the snow collecting on his head. “I’m looking for admissions.”

“You’ve found it, come in out of the cold, there’s a waiting room through that door,” the woman said. She motioned at a door on the opposite side of the room. Jud walked on his toes to it, shoulders hunched. He could feel her eyes watching him, cold and impassive, while the little man went back to staring at her. “Why are you still here?”

Jud turned to apologize but saw her attention fixed on the little man who had not moved. He glanced at Jud from the corner of his eye, and Jud shut the door behind him. The waiting room was warm. There were three others in there with him.

“Excuse me,” Jud said. He sat on the couch directly between a grey transparent blob and a large green lizard. “Do either of you know what it is we are being admitted to?”

“THE REALS, THAT’S WHAT I HEARD FROM MY FRIEND TONY. TONY KNOWS A LOT OF THINGS.” The sentence came from the transparent blob beside him and hung in the air for a few seconds. Jud shook his head. He had no idea what that meant. Even if Tony did know what he was talking about, the reals were just a myth to scare news into behaving.

Jud nodded, took the pen, and wrote back, But doesn’t that seem unfair? The lizard, which had begun to growl when Jud took the pen from his hand, let out a bark of laughter. The pen vanished.

“I THINK YOU AMUSED HIM. WE’VE BOTH BEEN HERE THREE YEARS AND I NEVER ONCE SAW HIM LAUGH LIKE THAT. HE’S A WIZARD, YOU KNOW.” Jud nodded. It made sense, most of the lizards were nowadays. That, or dragons. The
door to the admissions office opened.

"-the hell do you mean? You’re gonna let one of them in? My boy is the closest chance you have, these are a bunch-"

The woman slapped the little man once. He was spent spinning, rebounding off doorways, and then he crashed through the transparent blob and stopped. The lizard’s tongue flit out of its mouth, and the little man fell through the couch.

"Jud, you’re next."

"Oh, me, already?" Jud stood and, with a quick backward glance at the unconscious man on the floor, stepped into the admissions office. "Thank you for seeing me so quickly."

The woman smiled at Jud and sat. She looked him up and down. She started to write. Jud craned his neck, but he had never been a good reader. Upside down, he was useless. The woman turned her body around it, as if it to guard it. Then she pushed it out at him.

"So, Jud, you’re ready to go."

"Excuse me?"

"You can go into the real world anytime you like, so long as you check back in here at least twice a month for more than an hour," the woman said. She stamped the page and handed it to Jud. The top read FISA. Jud pretended to understand, and she stood.

"I’m sorry, no, I don’t understand. Aren’t I being admitted here?"

The woman smiled and nodded. "Yes, you’re now welcome to wander the halls, make use of the radio booth, speak to any of the administrators, and make yourself comfortable. You also have access to the real world, if you like."

"The real world?" Jud was pretty sure his world was real.

"Yes. This is where the fantasy and reality overlap and you can practice being normal. You are a very FISA-able character. You’re even humanoid!"

Jud scratched his head. He looked as thoroughly confused as he was. "But that last man was similar to me."

The woman’s stern expression returned to her face. Jud almost cringed. They had been getting on so well! "The last man eats only clementines, cantaloupes, and blood. He was advocating for his satyr child, which my predecessors have not allowed for more than a thousand years! Why he thinks that now, just because there’s a woman in charge, he might make some headway, who knows."

"So... what does this mean?" Jud asked, holding up his FISA.

"You exist now."

"Oh."

"You may go."

"Oh. Thanks."

"You’re very welcome," the woman said, and led Jud to the door. He stood looking out at the cold. The snow was knee high. "And close the door behind you."
Resting in the shadow of a low jutting rock, speckled grey and white, lonely—or, perhaps, just alone—the cottontail’s ears flutter lightly. Bringing his paws to his face, he brushes the tip of his nose and replaces his small hands on the dusty ground. His nose twitches. It must be ticklish, the girl thinks, watching him, to have all that dust in and around his nose all the time.

The shadow from the overhanging orange rock (layered with so many years!) is small; the just-past-noon sun hangs high above. The girl steps closer and dips her toe into the edge of the semi-circle of shade. For a moment, the rabbit does not budge. Then, suddenly, it is gone, the shadow empty, just a shadow. She looks up. Around her, the rocks loom tall, taller than the walls of any room she’s been in, curving in on three sides. She steps closer, presses her hand into the rusty layers at eye level, and watches the way her fingers split into v’s, the strange creases of her knuckles, the ridges of veins in the back of her hand like blades rising from beneath her skin and converging at her wrist: thin, breakable.

Far behind her, her mother calls. Her voice echoes off the towers of rock, the vowels like an owl, or the wind.

“Cora,” her mother calls. “Cora.”

The girl looks at her hand, presses her fingertips deep into the rock, hard enough to mark the soft pads of flesh, and pulls away. Tiny constellations imprint her skin. She would like to stay in this little space, the tall rocks enclosed around her like her own tiny house, the space under the overhang a perfect bed. She would like not to return to her mother. She turns around.

Her mother stands on a rise of rocky earth. Around her, the land is ruddy, craggy, wide, the formations of rock like a natural obstacle course—chasms here, arches there. Her mother is looking out at all of these structures and shapes, heels together, legs together, her hands gripping tightly to the straps of her backpack, which holds five foil-wrapped tuna sandwiches and as many water bottles, and is heavy, winding the muscles of her neck into tight balls of fiber and acid. She can feel them (the knots themselves) constrict like a snake around its prey. A feeling she knows well—like a child’s mouth on her breast, like ringing out a wet sponge over the sink, like the grip of her husband’s hands around her ribs. Her daughter, far away, who does not want to be hiking, does not want to be in a park in Utah (perhaps does not want to be in any park anywhere), does not want to be with her brother—farther away, up ahead—is pressing her hand into the tall rocks, as if trying to push them over, or perhaps to keep herself upright. Her mother watches. Cora does not seem to have noticed that she called. She stands still, now looking at her mother, blurry with distance. Small, smaller than usual (a rail thin girl, a breath of wind could knock her over, but her insides strong as hell, stronger than her mother’s,) up against that tall wall of rock, striped layers of time and weather. She would like her to come here, stand next to her mother, hold her hand perhaps, would like her to take a strap of this backpack or perhaps the whole thing, though it might break her tiny spine, fragile as a new sapling. But who could say it wouldn’t break her mother.

Now her daughter walks toward her. She must have heard, then. Her steps make no noise, surprising in a land that feels like an echo chamber—a whole world built by rocks, dry,
preserved land, a thick river through the middle (they hear it, the river, only from time to time; perhaps the space swallows the sound instead of amplifies it, the mother wonders.) No one else but their little family in sight, hiking, just for the day, a day to visit with their son, who walks so far ahead of them now. They’d picked him up this morning from the center—the home? is that what she should call it? (to her friends, her relatives, his grandparents even, it was ‘boarding school’ in northern Arizona: not too far from home, and just for a while)—she doesn’t really know what to call it, in truth cannot be exactly sure what it is, but it is where the doctors said, where he can be clean, be away, wane himself off, get himself out, get better. Her daughter walks toward her.

As she gets closer, the girl can see the sweat stains on her mother’s shirt, the neckline rimmed darker than the rest of the lavender cotton. The skin on her neck looks loose, ringed by wrinkles, which remind the girl of those women in other countries who make their necks grow taller by adding another necklace each year. They always looked so beautiful to her, the stacks of gold, the thin stems of the women’s necks—like an art sculpture. Her mother, she thought, was beautiful too, in moments like this one, standing on the small rise of land looking out over the rocks, up to where her father and her brother walked. Her face looking the way it does when she dresses, gently watching herself in the mirror, her daughter seated on the edge of the tub, eyes grazing her mother’s profile. Her mother holding up two different earrings to ask her daughter’s advice, then two different shoes. Both—either—it doesn’t matter, the daughter would say, and the mother would smile and look back at her reflection, hold up one earring then the other. It frustrated Cora, the way she acted so indecisive—so insecure, she could tell. To Cora, confidence is the most important thing out of any of them—out of any of the things you could be. She has it written in purple marker on pink construction paper above the mirror in her own room: CONFIDENCE. Sometimes, when her mother comes up to say goodnight (rarely, now, though Cora can tell she’d like to come up more often—again, holding herself back!), she looks at the word and smiles to herself.

She reaches her mother’s side.

“Look how far up they are,” the daughter says. She stands next to her mother. Their feet are the same size, and she wonders if they look alike then, standing there the same way, her mother with smoother, softer skin, but their hair in the same tight curls, their eyes the same near-perfect round shape. She has always thought of her eyes as her best feature. Sometimes in class she draws them in the margins of her notebook, adding a little penciled glint in the corners, though she knows that is never how they truly look—confidence, she tells herself. One day someone will think so—think her eyes are sparkly, find them beautiful, find her beautiful. The things her father must have seen in her mother, once, a long time ago. (She can’t tell if he sees them now, anymore.)

“Should we catch up?” her mother says.

“Yes,” the daughter says.

They walk ahead. The shadows of the clouds make it look like the ground is moving below them, instead of the clouds shifting above. They have never been to a place like this, so far from cities and buildings (their home a crowded, well-mowed suburb), outside for an entire day. It would be good for them, the mother had thought, to have some space from the rest of things, to be together, just them. Even if it were difficult. And it was. It had been already. Not in a loud, angry way. In a quiet way. Just—tense. Now they walk in their separate pairs, but soon perhaps, the mother thinks, they’ll have a moment, sit down all four of them, eat a sandwich, play the Miles make-believe game (his impersonations so amazing—one of the others would give him a character and he’d act it out until the other two guessed)—though it occurs to her,
suddenly, that he might be out of practice, that they might not play games and charades and pretend in the place he’s living now.) Perhaps they’ll just rest a moment, enjoy the rocks and the dry wind. The desert.

Her daughter points ahead at her father and brother. They are bent over, looking at something on the ground.

“Hm,” the mother says. Her daughter lowers her hand.

“Do you think he’s having fun?” she asks.

“Miles?” She looks ahead at them. “I think so.” She brushes a hand over her hair, checking that everything is in place. “Are you getting sunburned?” she asks.

“I don’t think so.” The daughter touches her face lightly, running her fingers over the skin of her nose and cheeks, rough with spots of acne and scabs from where she’s picked. “No.”

“Okay,” the mother says. They are walking slowly, a nice pace for the two of them, side by side, which they never are, in step. On impulse, the mother lets go of the backpack straps and reaches for her daughter’s hand, or starts to, but then tucks her hands into the pockets of her shorts—too tight across her hips: her daughter is too old and the moment is nice enough already.

The father is still squatting over something, the son next to him, bent, looking where he’s looking. A puddle, which the father runs his finger across, making soft ribbons in the water, rimmed with the silky slime that so often lines still shallows like this. He wonders, for the first time perhaps, what it was, that sliminess, that coagulation of plant matter and dirt and fur and the disintegrated carcasses of insects, molded by the stagnancy of water in a puddle in the middle of a desert. How stagnancy, stillness, can sculpt and shape and create—the father wonders at this, squatting over the puddle of water, his son at his right shoulder.

A chipmunk lies in the water, face up, drowned. It’s eyes are open and shiny. This is why they stopped to look in the first place. The son, bent at the waist, flicks water at it now, making its stiff body pitch slightly. The father’s fingers rest on top of the water. His son’s breathing comes in his ear, heavy, fast. Intrigued. He squats now too, and his father turns to look at him and sees his cheeks up close like an open canvas, his eyes dark and focused, intense, as if they themselves were reaching in to the water. Leaning forward on his toes, the son reaches a hand out, finger pointed, moving for the chipmunk. Suddenly, abruptly, the father’s arm flies out, smacking the son’s out of the way and Miles looks up at him, at first startled, and then, in an instant, venomous. Eyebrows heavy, a mocking smile on his lips. He gives a small laugh through his nose—at him, his father knows. Laughing at his own father. He reaches out again and jabs his finger into the dead chipmunk, jabs again, again. The body glides toward the far side of the puddle, rocking like a small canoe on a creek. Miles laughs again, this time in his throat, and looks at his father, smiling, cruel. He flicks the water from his fingers and stands, wiping his hand on his jeans, looking down at his father still squatting by the puddle. He walks away.

The father stands. His knees crackle as they straighten. In his chest he feels the acid of bitterness, anger—small, a teaspoon at most, but he knows that if he gives it another moment, it will grow and overflow. He swallows it down. Forgiveness, understanding, a deep breath. His son is his son. No matter how difficult—how infuriating. His son is his son.

He is facing the direction from which they all came, and now he watches his wife and daughter approaching, in step. It makes him proud, watching these two women, both tall and thin, hair that shines in the sun, their mouths moving in small shapes, speaking to each other—these women to whom he has given his life. Behind him, the crack of rock on rock, and he turns to see his son throw another—small, baseball-sized, orange—in a smooth arc.
landing several yards in front of him, splitting in two, perhaps three pieces. How much anger and distress he must have, the father thinks. It was pity that he felt for his son, really. The poor kid was ruined. But there was nothing he could have done, as a father. The kid was bad—‘troubled,’ they’re calling it now—from the beginning. It was no surprise, that night in the bathroom, his vomit all over the clean white tiles (she’d worked so hard to scrub them the next day, hands and knees, the smell of bleach), his eyes white, fogged, his body limp, unconscious. Nearly gone. He looks better now—not like the waste he had become, but fuller, and this is what’s important. Forgiveness—the only way, they say. But how his son had looked at him, challenged him, demeaned him—so rude, so ungrateful. After all he had given him. Everything he had. And he repays him with this attitude, this outright disobedience, disrespect. As if he were at fault—his father! He feels a cold acid beneath his ribs, growing again.

The mother and the daughter are close now. He turns to look at them, to restore his faith, his pride. This, he has done right. He feels an urge to run to his wife, grab her waist, hold her up high as if to say, “Here! My work! My life’s work.” To the sky and the rocks and the rest of the tourists. But there is no one around. No one to see them, his greatest pieces. His wife and his daughter stand next to him now. Their foreheads glint with a brushing of sweat. They will need to shower, all of them, when they get back home this evening. They will shower together, he decides, he and his wife: steam, skin, water—a touch they need.

His wife wipes her forehead. A smudge of dirt appears on her temple. He can smell her sweat, sour.

“What did Miles go?” she asks.

The father turns. Their son is walking ahead of them, kicking rocks with the toes of his shoes, sending dust into the air. “What do you mean?” the father says. “He’s right there.”

“Did he—?” the wife starts. She wants ask him what happened, he knows. And without even listening, she will assume it was his fault, it was his doing, that he said something rude, something not gentle and sweet enough—the way she speaks to their son: as if he is still a toddler, as if her breath would shatter him, as if he were made of thin shreds of paper. The father knows what she will ask.

“What,” he says. He can feel the gravel of his voice in his throat.

The wife drags her hand under her nose. “Nothing,” she says.

“Nothing happened,” he says. “He just has to be—” he says. He looks out at his son.

“So fucking,” his wife tilts her head down. “Difficult.”

The wife watches her son too. She notices her daughter leave her side, walking back toward the upright wall of rocks.

She wipes her nose again, then lifts the hem of her shirt to her face, wipes. “Jeff, please,” she says, her voice almost a whisper. He can barely hear her at all. So quiet, all the time. He wants to shake her until her voice is forced out of her body, yell at her until she yells back. “Just let it be,” she says. “For me, at least.”

The father sighs. For her. Fine. For what is right, for obedience, for the way a father should be treated by his son—that will have to wait, won’t it. For her. Fine.

“For me.” It sounds so silly coming out of her mouth. The last time anything happened for her. It feels like decades. For her—he would never imagine, never imagine. Her nose is running faster now. Strange in all of this dryness, this dust. She sniffs and wipes with her finger. She looks up at him. For a moment, for today, she will forgive. As she has done in so many moments, so many days. His bitterness. His superiority. Everything for him.

For today, they will all be equals. They will all be family.

The mother and father stand looking at their son. The father clears his throat. The
mother tilts her head and motions forward with her chin, forward toward where their son is walking, kicking rocks.

“Cora,” the mother calls. Her daughter turns. There are her parents, shoulder to shoulder. Her mouth tastes of dust and her eyes are dry and feel like crying, but they can’t because they are too dry, and besides she would never let her parents see her cry, not right now. They will never know she cries because of them, cries because of her brother, cries because of the bumps across the skin on her face, the way her tongue has such trouble moving to make words in class and at lunch, the way Amos Shinkle never even looks at her (confidence!), the way the windows in her bedroom let in all the cold. Standing next to the big rock wall, she hates them. Suddenly, hotly: like if she exhaled her breath would scorch the millennia of rocks at her feet. How they stand next to each other, like everything is okay and nice and happy. A gust of dusty wind strikes her eyes and she shuts them quickly, blinded by the grains. In a second, they begin to well, wetting from the corners and seeping through her clenched lids, pushing out the heap of dust particles that grind against her lenses like claws. She tries to unclamp her eyes, peel them apart, stinging, pulling, blinking, blinking, blinking, and at last flutters them open blurrily and from behind the smog of dust and tears (not from crying, just a reaction of her ducts), she can see two figures in the distance, vague like reflections on water—her parents. Hand in hand now, one lavender and pale, the other deep tan, tall, upright, in blue. Blinking, the image becomes clearer, and farther away by the moment. They are walking away from her, in slow, deliberate steps, her parents, leaving her behind in all of these old, sharp rocks, she begins to walk, then to run, toward them, “Mom! Dad!” and they turn, their faces nearly bumping each other’s, there, together, her parents. She runs.

Their daughter is running to them, and reaches them quickly; her long stem-like legs were always meant for speed, her father thinks, has always thought. But she doesn’t like to move much. She paints, he tells his friends. Paints, he says, to fathers of swimmers and field hockey players and gymnasts, fathers of college athletes-to-be (his children had never wanted such lives—had never cared about his own past on the field—two national championships!) Beautiful paintings, she’s very talented, he tells them. One of them hangs on the wall outside their bedroom at home—a purple flower, or maybe it is red, now that he thinks about it. He has never really noticed.

They walk together, three abreast. Ahead, the daughter can see her brother, his steps slowing, the clouds of dust from his feet growing as he kicks harder and harder with each step. Slower and slower and then he stops altogether, stands balanced on one leg (skinny, so skinny, almost skinnier than hers), and shuffles the other foot across the ground. His head is bent so far down he looks headless, standing there in his white t-shirt—the same kind his friend was wearing when they picked him up. The brother hadn’t introduced him really, just jabbed his thumb toward him and said, “This is my friend,” before he got in the minivan, which they’d driven from home. In the back row with his sister (the middle space empty between them; they hadn’t even hugged), he’d smirked at the book of word search puzzles in the pocket of the front seat—“Not much changed around here, huh” he said. “What did you say, honey?” their mother had asked. The brother had only laughed through his nose, sat back, and looked out the window, his mother in the front seat pursing her lips, taking deep slow breaths in and out.

He hadn’t said much since, at least not to her. He’d answered questions about the place they were going—had he been there before, had his friends; had the weather been nice around here lately—but nothing to her, no questions about her life, her friends, her schoolwork,
her painting, the spring dance coming up (he knew, he had been to the same middle school, four years before she went,) nothing but a blank face, turning his head to look around the place, reactionless, dull, as far as she could tell. Now that she thought about it, she hadn’t said much to him either. No one had said much at all, except their mother noting how nice it looked, how beautiful all the orange and the rock, and their father saying “Are we all ready?” when they’d reached the beginning of the trail. But what would they talk about? She did not know: what he did all day, what the place was like, did they feed him good breakfast, did they let you watch tv, did they teach you math and science and history, were the other boys nice, did he have a locker and a desk and a bookshelf and a computer and a good pillow? But what would she ask? She hardly knew. She wouldn’t. And maybe that was okay—for today, for now. One day, when they grew up—or at least, when they’d grown some—maybe then they could put it all into words. Today, maybe it was okay to be quiet. Quietness, she thinks, has maybe as much in it as words do. A certain weight, a heft, that is lost when sounds, distracting sounds, aimless sounds, small sounds—the sounds of small talk—come out too. Maybe it was that: the density of silence. Maybe that was enough. The river in the distance.

Now, her parents didn’t say anything either—maybe this was enough too, maybe this was everything, everything at once—even when their son stopped moving forward and stood in place, kicking the dust with one foot, and they got closer and closer to his thin, pale body. Quiet. Cora wasn’t sure what they’d said to him even before he left to go to the place where they’d picked him up, if he wanted to go, or had liked the way it looked in pictures (she’d thought it looked nice enough this morning, red brick and a fountain in the front, though she hadn’t seen the inside—her mother had gone in to sign him out—sign him out! of the place that was supposed to be his home!) or if they even knew what he did there. He looked better, and she could tell her mother thought so too. When they’d walked out of the building together, she’d been holding her hand on his shoulder, her eyes all shiny. He looked more alive, his face without the big dark circles around his eyes, and his neck not so thin and stringy. He was skinny though, still. The daughter could tell from his upper arms, dangling out from his sleeves like pipe cleaners.

Miles looks up at them. He smiles a tiny smile. The sister finds herself smiling back, and then laughing as he begins to walk in a slump, shuffling his feet, his back bent and arms hanging low like a Neanderthal—imitating them.

“Hey, we aren’t that slow!” the sister says, laughing more and more as her brother goes on with his imitation, grunting, dragging his feet across the earth. “Hey!” She is laughing, hard, and she can feel the dust in the back of her throat.

Her mother is laughing too. Giggling, in her soft way, her uncomfortable, embarrassed way, as if she wishes it would all stop. She covers her mouth with her hand. She does not particularly like to laugh, hates to feel out of control of her body—but he does look so silly. And it brings her such joy to see her children together, having fun. The father walks up to his son and grabs him by the shoulders, giving him a teasing shake. “Now you just let your old parents be as slow as they want. What can we say, our muscles are breaking down as we speak!” The mother’s giggle slows—her husband’s humor always puts some sort of damper on things—and Cora coughs through the last traces of her laugh. Miles stands up straight again, a slight smile, looking at the ground, kicking. For a moment, they all stand, in a shape almost like a circle, and then their mother says, “Should we eat these sandwiches now?”

Cora nods and says, “Over there?” pointing toward a formation in the rock that looks like a bench. They walk toward it and settle in, the mother reaching into her backpack and passing out the sandwiches. It feels easier to be quiet when there is food—you can just eat and keep
your mouth full and look around, Cora thinks. A light breeze brushes across their faces. They sit quietly for a few minutes, soft crunches of sandwich, sips of water. The father finishes first. He reaches for the water bottle that sits between his wife’s legs—why open his if she is already drinking from one? She watches him take it, sip, and replace it, a hunk of bread and tuna in her mouth. The way her thighs jiggle as he tries to fit the bottle back in. The way he notices her thighs, jams the bottle harder. Her thighs, and the way her husband thinks about them. She can feel this feeling—no name for it, just a flavor, or perhaps a faint echo—deep in her stomach.

“They never have this kind of bread,” Miles says, suddenly, “at Pathway.” She has never heard him say the name of the place they’ve sent him. “It’s always white, white, white. The kind that gets all stuck to the roof your mouth.” He scrunches up his mouth and his nose, “Gross,” and takes another bite of his sandwich.

Does he mean his mother’s kind is best? Does he like this sandwich more than the ones they give him there? “This is better?” the mother asks. Her son nods through a bite, his cheeks full, swallows, and takes another one, his hands on his knees, his face turned out to the landscape. Something in her chest stills, as if someone has stuck a tiny bit of putty over a small hole in her ribs. It is hard, so hard, not to have her son at home, not to know what is going on, not to understand why he has done the things he has done, what he is doing now. Not to tell him—or anyone, really—how much it has punctured her, tiny holes across all her ribs, her lungs, her bones. Her husband takes the water bottle from between her thighs again and she crosses her legs, closing the space where he would have been able to fit it back in. It is a wonder, the amount you can steal from someone without them noticing. It is a wonder how much has been taken. Her children, her husband—everything they have taken: her thoughts, her afternoons, the firmness of her body, the bread from the pantry. My, isn’t it a wonder. All that she could have done, all that she did, all that she did wrong, quietly wrong, helpless in her silence, failing her children, indistinct to her husband. All they have taken, silently, piece by piece. But the bread—this bread. That she can give. And it feels different to give than to be taken from, she thinks, there on the rock for a moment. Very different.

His wife has closed her legs. He holds the water bottle in his hands. She has a bite of sandwich in her mouth and a shred of tuna at the corner of her lip. She has closed her legs. Selfish, he thinks. Weak. A weak, weak woman, she is, never using her legs for anything—no movement, no energy, no vigor. How strange, that this is where he has ended up—he, a man of power and boldness. To find oneself with a small wife, cowering over her sandwich now, cowering from her own son. What he thought they could have been—how did they get here? How did he get here? How did anyone get anywhere? How would they keep going? He looks at his wife’s legs again, jelly-like and pale. Now they carry less than they ever had. He stands the water bottle on the rock next to him.

The wife looks down at her closed legs. They press together like wet ropes. At once, she scolds herself for thinking so—shouldn’t she love her body, all it has done, all it has made—and knows she gets this from him. She looks at her husband. If he doesn’t love them, how possibly could she? She looks away. When this is over—this day, this hike—she will look at her thighs alone, by herself, in the bathroom after he has gone to sleep. She will love them. She will love herself. She does not look back at her husband, but she notices in her periphery that he has set the water bottle on the far side of his body. His body—here is a thought she has not had in a long time: his body. She takes another bite of her sandwich.

The husband takes another sip and sets the bottle back down on the rock. Next to his wife, his daughter holds her sandwich daintily in two hands balanced across her lap, the
sunlight illuminating the small hairs on her upper lip, his son on the other side, his food gone, his chin resting on his fists, his elbows pressing craters into his knees. His profile—strong, sturdy, like his father’s. From her thighs, he supposes, came these two—human bodies, human minds. That was an incredible thing, if you thought about it, which he does, for a moment. Life—had it never occurred to him in this way, so up close, right there sitting in front of him? A powerful thing. They did it together, he supposes. She, too. He feels a sudden moment of pride, and an urge to pull them all closer to each other, grab his wife under his arm, hold his little girl in his lap. Perhaps there would be a moment later, around a campfire in the evening—a national park must have a place for a campfire, right? They could sit in a circle. Perhaps later, by the campfire, his daughter sitting in his lap (isn’t a girl never too old to lie against her father?), her mother looking into his eyes from the other side of the flames, looking at him with love and admiration—a fine man and a good husband. And he was. What could he have done better?

In the distance, he notices a figure. A man, he can tell as it comes closer, with a hat like a safari ranger, or a gardener. The kind with the wide brim, beige. He’s walking quickly, purposefully, like a man in a newsroom with a hot story, and he sees the family sitting and begins to veer toward them. His daughter looks over at the father—she looks to him, to him—with her mouth full and her eyebrows raised, looking to him. Looking from his daughter to the man—approaching, quickly—he must know and explain who and what, he must give the answer, he must tell her why—why all of the things (all of these things!) why so many things, but so many he doesn’t know, so much he cannot tell her, cannot say. Looking back and forth, his lips try to form words—

“Look,” his daughter says. She is not looking at her father anymore. The man is only a little bit away—maybe ten yards, maybe twenty (she has never been good at estimating things)—and he is walking straight toward them, not fast, but determinedly. She notices, as he gets closer, that his eyes are locked on hers, he is staring right at her and suddenly she wonders what he sees—really sees—freckles, frizzy hair, the spots of bad skin across her nose, the art inside her, the brushstrokes and colors, her soul, her density, her love for Amos—true love in its own way, though he has never noticed (she thinks, hopes). The man is staring at her in a way that no one has before, not her parents, not her friends or her teachers or Amos Shinkle, definitely not her brother—like she is real and there and something to see—something, is all she wants to be—something, the way her grandmother says it: “Isn’t that something.” Isn’t she something.

“Howdy, folks,” the man says. He takes a look at all of them, the four of them sitting on that rock bench as if to have their picture taken.

“Afternoon,” the father says.

“You all been here all day?” the man asks.

“Since mid-morning, just about.”

“Mm.” The man tucks his thumbs under his backpack straps and looks from left to right.

“Seen anyone come through with safety gear, or emergency stuff? Any, you know, rangers or someone?”

The mother looks at the father. The daughter looks at the mother. The son looks out at the rocks. “No, nothing,” the father says, the corners of his lips downturned, his eyebrows raised, hands flat on his knees like a statue. “Something going on?” he says after a moment.

“Kid killed in the river.” The man is looking out at the land. “Rafting. Just wondering if you all saw any of the guys that came in. Couple of rangers, fire truck, ambulance. Not sure how they got in. But they sure didn’t get out in time.”
“Oh my god,” the mother says. Her hand covers her mouth.

“Jesus,” the father says. “A kid?”

“Yeah, teen. Young teen. With a whole group on some trip, all boys. Just, fell right out I guess. Musta hit a rock or somethin.” He wipes his face with one hand. “Anyways. Thought you folks mighta seen the action. Or wanna know, if you hadn’t.”

The mother is looking up at the man. “Well. Thank you,” she says, bending her head down, sniffing. She looks up again.

“Didn’t mean to, uh. Bring down your nice family time.” He laughs a little. “You know what they say. Good and the bad always come hand in hand.”

The father smiles in agreement.

“Well. You all have a good afternoon, now,” the man says. He nods and is gone.

The mother wraps up the last bit of her tuna sandwich in the foil it came in. She looks as if she is about to cry—she feels as if she is about to cry. But what kind of thing would that be to do in front of her children, what kind of mother would she be if she broke down right there at the slightest bit of sadness—it would show her son, her husband, all of the weakness, all of the fragility, all of the sadness in her. Her son would think her pathetic, and her husband too. She sniffs again and looks out at the horizon. She can hear her daughter’s breathing, and she puts a hand on her small knee—so warm, so alive. Her son is still sitting the same way—his face in his hands, his elbows on his knees, stoic. He is so precious, she could never begin to say how much. She wants to hug them both, deeply, but she does not move. What a tragedy. An inexplicable tragedy. Beside her, she can feel her husband stretch his back up, grow taller, expand his lungs with a deep breath.

“We’re close, no?” the father says.

He stands. The rest of his family follows.

“Yes, we are,” the mother answers. She takes the water bottles from her children, and the balled up tin foils, and puts them in her backpack.

“We should get going. Get Miles back before dinner.”

For the rest of the way, they hike in silence. They stay in a line, the four of them, sometimes stopping to adjust a shoe or take a water bottle from the mother’s backpack, waiting for each other. It is nice, the sister thinks, the way they step together, she next to her brother, whom she wants to hug more than anything now—the dark shadows in his face have come back with the fading light of the afternoon. Once, she brushes his shoulder, telling him she’s gotten a bit of dirt off, but really wanting just to feel him. His bony shoulder. The father keeps his hands in his pockets. The mother grips her backpack straps so tightly the fabric leaves an imprint in her palms.

In a while, an hour or so, they reach the minivan again. They get back inside.

“We ready?” the father asks before he turns on the car.

They drive to radio static. It is only about 45 minutes. The father hums along. “That was nice, wasn’t it?”

“Beautiful,” the mother says.

Cora nods. “Yeah,” she says.

There is silence for a moment.

“They were from Pathway,” Miles says. He is looking out the car window.

“What, honey?” his mother says from the front seat.

“The kids on the raft, the kid who died. There was a group of Pathway guys going out today, rafting.”

“Oh, Miles,” the mother says. “Oh, sweetie.”
Miles looks out the car window. His mother reaches back to put her hand on his knee and he moves it away—not flinching, just moving.

“Son, I’m so sorry,” the father says. “I know how hard that must be for you.”

“Well,” Miles says.

Cora says nothing, but puts her hand on the empty middle seat between them. She hopes he knows what this means, and thinks he does. He says nothing else.

Soon, they reach the center. They get out of the car and hug Miles in turn. Christmas, they say—we’ll see you then. Soon. Yes, he agrees.

Miles goes inside, and his family drives away.