Fall 2017 | Volume 10 | Issue 1

A biannual collection of poetry, prose, and visual art created by the students of Middlebury College
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Letter from the Editors

We have been honored to watch the culmination of this magazine and, now, to present it to you finished and bound. Blackbird prose, poetry, and visual arts boards have been meeting weekly for the last two months, reading and enjoying the countless submissions we received. Here, we’ve compiled work from the artistic minds of Middlebury in an effort to celebrate what students create, what they put onto a page. We are so grateful for the way people have put themselves out there, sending us their poems, drawings, stories, paintings, photographs, and so much more.

Blackbird publishes a Fall and Spring publication, and receives and judges student submissions anonymously during the creation of each issue. We cannot wait to present to you the Fall 2017 issue of Blackbird Arts Journal. Thank you for submitting, supporting, and reading!

Sincerely,
Zoe ‘20, Nick ‘17.5, and Maya ‘20
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Millie von Platen

I’VE BEEN UP SINCE
SEVEN I AM MORE
ACCOMPLISHED THAN
YOU LAZY BASTARD
We swam in the saltwater pool until your mother brought us platters of neatly chopped fruit.

I remember her as a fidgety woman, very small teeth and always asking if we’d please remind ourselves to keep tidy, reduce splash as not to wet the cat. I never liked cats out of jealousy mostly. That morning she’d heard on the radio there was to be a movie filmed downtown, a few names she recognized from the hours spent with her couch, the convex push of it upon her making something of a pursing lip, the ambling credits mistaking the room for an object of importance. You were still rich back then although you couldn’t understand it the smell was like blushed powder for all that time in which it still was. She left us in the water and snapped a picture of a well-known head on a man on a sidewalk by the deli with the sign. The composition was lovely. The lettering read “Oven Gold” and aside from this, all I recall now is a thin string of hair lodged in the rim of the shot. I forget if she noticed we did not drown ourselves. We were so proud of that.
Eighteen, Education
Noah Sauer

Sitting on the bench, watching the rain,
watching the others, sitting alone
next to others on the bench.
A certain color orange, I noticed,
rectangles of new construction,
right angles, metal roof:
wash sounds above me as
I must strive above everything.
If I could, learn to act, as in a film,
old enough for a serious self,
linger slowly on faces,
reflect the orange walls,
and wear a character’s outfit.
Wear a type, wear natural choices,
wear a slow face and wear the rain.
Alvordton/Pioneer
Dorothy Punderson

Past cows
and corn
And pallets of onions heading East
She drives,
Playing a child’s game to pass the time:
River, river, road.

Omaha is lost to the prairie
Chicago, a blink on the horizon—
Denver was gone before she even saw it with the sun.

I-90, she thinks, the river Styx—
Full of thoughts too slow to keep up with
Their owners,
Tossed out the window or
Lost in transit.
Only a keychain, a polaroid, and a braid of sweetgrass
Are still with her,
Tucked safely in her bag in the back seat.

River, river, road.
Forest, road, campground.
Sunrise mountains home.

Now she sits on her front porch waiting
For the memories to catch up.
On Dining Alone
Hayley Jones

I was expecting crepes, lacy licked
with honey. Peaches, solitary sunshine.
And it would have been ok.
Not good but ok, blue-rimmed tiles
because I miss my legs and my seal sleek chest
but I can’t ever be missing me the way I miss you.
I’m ok you’re ok this morning is copper pan bright.
I thought I was meant to be alone
but I’m not meant to be alone
so I’m lonely now.
You asked
would we be ok if
and I threw up in the shower

because I would 100% spilled milk
not be ok.

You see I have rules
rules about almond cakes, the high cross.

I bite my pillow and burn my ankles
because otherwise I will eat my own hands.

Most days are copper pan bright
but I am fig sticky with waiting

slick gilled scooped out concave.
Always I’m the wishing well the oil
smoking, burned up for the crepes

I should be eating with you.
Summer Squash
Ellie Eberlee

I thought it would be different when I got back to school, but it isn’t. It’s the first week and already I’m fraying, sleeping late or not at all. Pausing to consider the question too much when people ask how my summer was. It was fine, I say, but only then after weighing my options. I was in Toronto, for most of it. Toronto, not “home”. Home doesn’t feel like a place for me anymore, just an idea to breathe heavily over. I don’t know when that started: last winter, probably, when I flew back to Toronto and found my father depressed and my mother flailing. That was the Christmas my brothers refused to call my mother and my younger sister cried while unwrapping a new pair of slalom skis. It stuck around this summer, at dinner tables where forks hit the plate hard and there was no conversation to stop me from reflecting on how we’re quickly becoming a bad novel, the six of us— my father and mother, my two older brothers, my younger sister and I. The kind of cheap paperback someone buys in an airport bookshop to feel better about their own family during their flight home for the holidays. Not the kind which makes you feel grounded at school seven hours away. Like I said, it’s the first week, and already I feel myself fraying out at the edges. I need a family, and fast.

On Thursday I text my friend Sophie, tell her I need to get off campus. She meets me up by my residence in her new car— a shiny, silver thing, the wheels a little too tricked-out for my liking— and we head up Route 7. Middlebury, Vermont becomes a thing of rear-view mirrors, if only for the present.

It’s five-thirty, and somehow still twenty-six degrees out (Celsius; any enthusiasm I had to figure out Fahrenheit dwindled early in freshman year). I’m sweating, but I put my seat warmers on. I have a funny thing for seat warmers, no matter the season: I like what they do to my lower back, make it soft and receptive, as if to say, Listen, loosen up for a minute. We’ll hold you.

We speed along with the windows down. Sophie’s yelling, going on about the boy she’s been seeing since freshman year and how
he’s leaving her. I know I should be yelling too, but I’m losing interest. He’s been leaving her for a week now, and mostly I just want to tell her to beat him to it. Still I nod a lot, thump the dashboard once, do it again with what I hope is more verve. I’m not listening, really. I’m looking for mountains: the maternal, perspective-granting kind. The reason people talk about Moving Out to The Mountains and getting It All In Order, planting bean-sprouts and raising three kids (two girls, one boy) who never put their elbows on the table. I laugh, but I’m as guilty as the rest. I came here for college in search of those same mountains, the Green Ones; left Toronto and the possibility of an education forty-thousand dollars cheaper for scraggly peaks I too was banking on to suffice as family, or, at the very least, put it all in Perspective. Today especially I’m hoping my mountains come through.

We’re driving aimlessly, circling farms and small craft shops. I point right down a road that looks promising and Sophie turns the wheel. We wince through the angry transition between pavement and dirt road, pull over by the side of a field. To our left there are as many mountains as I could have asked for, spanning out in a vast blue interlude between Lake Champlain and the sky. Sophie and I get out of the car, look like we’re supposed to—it feels respectful—and wait for epiphany.

In this light and heat the mountains look like watercolor, painted in by someone with a brush. Makes me feel hopeless, a little on edge. I want to scream, stand up straighter—stand up stronger, dammit! Affirm me! I try harder, trace their silhouettes with desperate care, try to tease out perspective from each peak.

I can’t help but glance to my right, wanting to ask Sophie, “Is this doing it for you?” She’s twitching again, looks like she might start sobbing at any minute and I can’t take it right now, the hysteria, the whole-body heaving—I grab her hand, start walking up the road. A few yards along there’s a woman bent over, gardening. It’s a precarious-looking vegetable patch, one which was definitely not planned; as though someone was seeding with their head down and kept going haphazardly along the hill until they hit gravel and, forced to look up, said “Shit, there’s a road here.” The woman doesn’t seem particularly concerned by this, though. She’s busy pulling up squash, turning
them over in each palm and slapping the dust from their rumps. She straightens up when we stop, a squash in each hand.

“Tough day at school,” Sophie says, by way of explanation for parking on her property.

She nods. “You kids up at the college?”

“Yeah,” we say, not unapologetically, and she nods again.

“Alright, then. You just missed them baling,” she adds, pointing across the road. I follow her finger out to where a couple of tractors are toting hay across the field, heading in towards a series of long, low barns.

“Aw,” I say, and mean it. There’s comfort in the sight of those tractors, in how much dust is involved.

“What’s your name?” Sophie asks the woman. I think that’s a pretty bold thing to do, considering we’re the ones parked on her property, but she doesn’t seem to mind.

“We’re the Millers,” says the woman. “I’m Ada, and this—” she stoops low, grabs the back of a t-shirt I hadn’t noticed before, “is my grandson Monson.”

“Hey Monson,” I say, “I’m Ellie.” Monson looks about six, and very solemn. “Is that butternut squash?” I ask, suddenly overcome by the desperate desire to insert myself, to shove Monson aside and belong somewhere between Ada and the bean-rows.

We used to grow butternuts, on our old farm in Caledon, Ontario. Granted, I always feel guilty calling it a farm, especially faced with an operation like this. Really it was just an expensive game of make-believe, staged an hour outside of Toronto with a two-kilometer long driveway. My parents’ last ditch attempt to save their marriage, as I’d later find out. That realization wiped the shine off some of my memories, but most still made it through: coaxing fingerling potatoes out from the dirt an hour before dinner; running barefoot across grass and barn-board alike; standing atop paddock fences and bellowing, laughing when the horses lifted their heads in mild annoyance. All of it anchored in knowing the day would finish with the six of us, safe around the kitchen table, happily bickering over which kid had claim to the coveted seat between my mother and father. That was home: me, sitting slack and relaxed in knowing I had already
made the day’s meaning.

I miss it all so profoundly that it feels stupid to voice. I miss it so much the absence has come to form a constant part of me, like a limb, and there’s no more point in talking about it at any given moment than at any other; it would be as useless as saying “I have an arm”, because of course I do. I will in five months too. I’m scared I’ll never have a home like that again, or any home at all. That the very concept of “home” is a naïve one.

Monson doesn’t look scared about anything, playing with the waistband on his basketball shorts. The squashes aren’t butternuts, as it turns out, just the last of the summer squash. I’m not too disappointed. I always liked summer squash; a good, practical name. “Going to skin them and have them for dinner,” says Ada, “and pickle whatever’s left.” Here she gets excited. “—Did you know that? That you can pickle summer squash? Any kind of squash, really, and it doesn’t taste half bad. Big relief too, what with our cucumbers not amounting to anything this year, been so damn cold…”

I wonder if Monson will taste the difference between pickled cucumbers and pickled summer squash. I want to laugh, or vomit: this kid has no idea how suddenly, violently jealous of him I am. I’d play with my waistband if it got me a seat at that dinner table. I’d do a lot more than that. To sit there and eat butternut squash? To have Ada tell me to take my elbows off the table? It’d be so self-contained— in that white clapboard house, right there, I can see the thing— so safe. I look at Ada while she’s walking me through it (the process of pickling squash) and I wonder if she can sense it, the pleading. Ask me in for dinner, I want to say. Ask me in for dinner, or I don’t know what I’ll do. I can’t go back to my one-window dorm room, can’t sit in a starkly-lit dining hall and listen to Sophie shovel back rice between sobs. I need a family. I’m fraying out, and fast.

She doesn’t. She finishes her spiel, picks up the last squash and sniffs at it good-humoredly. Looks up at us expectantly. Time to go.

Fuck, I think, look back at the clapboard. There’s a home in there, and it isn’t for me. That’s hard. That hurts. I let Sophie say
goodbye to the Millers, make like I’m looking at the mountains and getting something out of it, like all the literature promised I would. I don’t really know what to do as we walk back to the car. I’m fraying, letting the evening collapse around me.

“It’s quarter to seven.” Sophie says, “Want to head back to school?”

I don’t want anything. I want to curl up in that coarse field and wait for the second harvest, wait to be taken in as aftermath along with wrecked bits of wheat and weed.

“Yeah,” I say, after a minute. “Let’s head back.”
Matt Gillis
Sleep Paralysis
Nick Kaye

The wind is whipping, whipping, whipping
A void sits on my chest and I cannot breathe
I try to move the corner of my mouth
But I make no noise
And you are outside smoking a cigarette
Or in the corner of my brain
Laughing

I run ten miles on the beach
A kaleidoscope of raindrops suspended in air
But I cannot breathe
And I am not running
And I am not on the beach
And the wind goes, shhhhhhh
Do not resist

I try to wiggle my big toe
Like Uma Thurman in Kill Bill
But I cannot move it
Because this is a world without movies
Where Uma Thurman does not need to kill Bill
Because Bill was never alive

I imagine footsteps in the other room
But the wind says, she is still outside smoking a cigarette
And you are still outside smoking a cigarette, I think
And I am on the couch where I will oversleep
For four hours
And get to work five minutes late
Without eating lunch

Sometimes
When I am seized by fear in the night
My heart breaks free from the scaffolding within my chest
And spins on every axis
And it is not horrible
But wonderful
And I am not paralyzed
But more mobile than ever

Or – at least – that is what I will think tomorrow.
You look so sad when you sleep
like you planted yellow tulips and they died
after the first rains.

No one ever asks because no one wants to know.
I knew because I know push pins, crosshatched,
uncuffed sleeves. All the soft places.

I don’t know what to say because
you look so sad when you sleep,
yellow hair wilted like tulips in the rain.

But you are not a clock melting
you are not a country song. You are a swift
fingerted crow foot alphabet, divine.

I don’t need to know the soft places
to know you walking late to class, ten past
sheets still wrinkled around your rain-drenched eyes.

Your rucksack is splitting at the seams
yellow sailboats with college-ruled wings.
How is that you carry poems so softly in your arms.

We buried the tulips, yellowed from the rain
but one day you will have snapdragons,
red orange overflowing the windowsills.
Elsie came to me in foul illumination. Under her skin, a dim, slimy light radiated outward and lit her up like a fluorescent bulb, bathing the porch in a sallow glow. She’d never looked sicker.

I almost didn’t let her inside because the sight of her stung my eyes, but I did. She asked if my parents were home. “You know they’re not,” I said, because if she had, she would have never come. My parents didn’t approve of medical school dropouts. They didn’t approve of me, either, a grown woman still lurking here like a specter, but I was their only daughter; I was different.

Elsie nodded, then asked if she could sit down. I pulled out two kitchen chairs and sat across from her. Her chest began to shudder like she was crying, but her eyes were dry and unblinking as they stared at me.

Around her, the metallic kitchen appliances seemed odd, like she was a vintage photograph held up against reality. What I mean is that she didn’t look real.

“Want to raid your parents’ liquor cabinet, like when we were younger?” she asked shakily. It was supposed to be a joke, but it wasn’t really. It made me think of a thousand girlhood nights huddled against the counter, buzzed and agitated for life to begin.

I went to the fridge and poured her a glass of milk instead. By the time I’d handed it to her, she had stopped shuddering like a branch under weight. She looked at me with curious eyes over the rim of the glass. “You look really, really good,” she told me.

I sat down. “I went cold turkey.”

“On the pills?”

I nodded. “But I’m thinking about starting again.”

She sipped her milk, placed it down hesitantly. “Oh.” Then, “Can I crash here for a little while?”

“Yes,” I said, feeling her brilliance extend to suffocate me
like the good old days. “Yes.”

I tried to guess her illness by watching her move. The first day, she’d stumbled everywhere she went, her hands dragging along the yellow wallpaper as if to keep her balance. The immediate area around her buzzed with a murky sort of sunlight, like we were observing everything through a moldy film. I wanted to scrub her aura clean.

Instead, I gave her my bed and set up a sleeping bag on the floor for myself. We tucked ourselves in without fanfare. In minutes, she’d crawled in beside me.

When we woke up, she was no longer shuddery or clumsy, but she refused to move. She lay on her side and didn’t respond to my voice. I retrieved my brush and stroked her hair as she lay there, and eventually she sighed, almost like relief.

We ate cereal in the kitchen, using yogurt instead of milk and glass mason jars instead of bowls. I turned on the news, and we watched a bomb explode. After that, there was nothing of interest, so we shut it off.

Elsie’s unhealthy incandescence hadn’t diminished. She went into the bathroom, my favorite room in the house; it looks like a white palace, illuminated by a slant of light from a rectangular window near the ceiling, everything porcelain and scrubbed. A few minutes later, Elsie called me in. She was reclined in the tub with the soapy water up to her chin, glimmering along with every surface around her. Her eyes were closed.

“Remember when you tried to kill yourself?” she asked.

“I never tried to kill myself,” I told her, sitting on the acrylic edge near her head.

“Oh,” she said.

I gently washed the shampoo out of her hair.

“Should we chop it all off?” she asked, examining the strands between her fingers.

“You won’t like yourself with short hair.”

“I don’t like myself now.”

I loved her so much it hurt, even as I knew she was lying, even as I knew there was nothing better in the world than being Elsie.

On the porch, we smoked joints and drank orange juice.
The combination made us scrunch up our faces at each other, over and over in the seedy smolder from the lamp above. Elsie’s bilious glare had dimmed to the point that any sort of light overshadowed it now, so the only way to see it was when the lights were off, like a week-old glowstick.

Elsie noticed the cat before I did. “Isn’t that Melonball?”

Our family cat who had managed to somehow look like a mangy stray all throughout his pampered existence had sidled up the steps and was weaving around the porch, just out of reach. I nodded.

“I thought Melonball died.”

“He did.” He strutted up to my legs, and I could have sworn I felt the wet lick of his matted fur against my calf. I wasn’t surprised, just high. “He comes back sometimes.” For a moment, Elsie and Melonball’s combined glow cast away all the shadows on the porch.

Elsie put her glass down and watched as the cat disappeared into the garden. It left a misty, ephemeral trail behind it. “There are so many things I don’t understand.”

I took another hit and watched where Melonball had disappeared; it wasn’t the first time I saw him, nor would it be the last. “This is a hard place to escape from.”

Elsie looked at me as if she understood, but she didn’t really, because she was always leaving. She wasn’t like me, or Melonball, or anyone else. She didn’t have anywhere to go back to.

After Melonball, Elsie didn’t talk for another week. Finally, she said, “I want you to cut me open.”

Without thinking, I said, “Okay.”

She looked surprised at how easily I agreed but quickly seized upon it. “I’m going to take some of your mom’s pills and once I pass out, I want you to cut me open and sew me back up like how they do to a cadaver in an autopsy.”

I hadn’t started medical school like her, so I asked her to draw me a picture.

She drew a body, androgynous. With her pen, she traced a v-shape coming down from both shoulders and meeting at
chest. From there, she drew a cut all the way to the hips. “Like this. It’s called a y-incision.”

As I examined the picture, trying to imagine it as a real body, I asked her, “Why do you want this?” It looked so crude there on the paper.

“I just need it. Feel free to take anything you like; it’s first come, first serve.” When she saw that I was close to backing out, she placed a hand on my arm. “Let me tell you what I learned in school: you need to separate the idea of the body from the person. You just have to find a mantra that can slow your breathing, and pry the two ideas into separate entities in your head; a body is just a body is just a body. Don’t worry about the person, worry about the body. Okay?”

I flattened Elsie’s drawing with nervous hands, over and over. “What mantra did you use?”

She smiled. “Inhale, hold, release.”

As I inhaled, Elsie washed my mother’s pills down with milk. Within thirty minutes, she was passed out on the sleeping bag on my floor. She’d removed everything from the waist up, but her legs were swathed in one of those jersey knit skirts she used to love to wear. She looked like some sort of perverse mermaid. Beside her, she’d laid out a meat knife and some hand towels. I felt calm as I settled into the lie I was about to tell her.

I suppose I was never actually going to cut Elsie open; maybe that was why I agreed so quickly. My fatal flaw is that I will never be able to let her go.

I took a pen and drew a dotted line exactly where she’d showed me. I imagined it was easier to do on a dead body because the chest wasn’t always rising and falling. When the y-shape was done, I held my breath and dragged the knife through my palm. I let the blood drip and coat the metal, until the whole thing was sticky with it. I left it on one of the towels and went to the bathroom to bandage my hand.

I returned with a red marker. Elsie was unmoved where I’d left, and for a second I feared she wasn’t breathing, that she’d sensed my betrayal. Then I wondered if there actually was something inside her, something we both needed to see. I could keep
her stomach in a shoebox in my closet.

Instead, I used the red marker to connect my black dotted lines. When I was done, it almost looked like the blooming of blood, my hand was so shaky. I lay beside her, grateful that I wasn’t dead yet.

When Elsie woke up, she was no longer illuminated but pallid as a corpse. The first thing she did was examine her naked top in the mirror, tracing the smooth red skin where it should have been puckered. Her face was blank. Gravely, she asked, “How did it look, doc?”

I folded my hands behind my back and answered with the same solemn inflection. “I’m afraid there’s nothing wrong with you.”

Elsie approached the mirror slowly before placing her finger on the reflection of the incision. She traced the glass all the way down, fingers blocking scarlet skin, stopping between hips over a sickness undiscovered. Her finger followed itself back up to the reflection of my face, watching her from both sides. I felt the warmth along my jaw.

She held my gaze, and I knew we had reached an understanding. This was only respiration; this was the realization that we were both holding our breaths. We released.
Art School Kids
Abbey Green

After, sweater thrown to skin, listen
for the snap of green limbs: fresh flesh,
favors from him;
above the bed, paintings hang black-eyed
with shadows, yet the afternoon sun cuts, makes her
muscles, veins, mistakes, spill out—

He watches, smiles,
lies sidling between the slits in his teeth
pulls her in by the neck
laced in drugstore chains and tells her to
stop, said I wanted someone strange;
l’appel du vide
look down, into me—

tip-toes bruise the carpet, in blotches.
Before the going,
stitch his words to her lips;
ruby red jewels round
the wrists: cold chamomile tea drips,
always yellow, on her skin.

She smudges his eyes with a forgiving green, agrees
with him, with those minced mint leaves—
why does she do that.
Down the jasmine-flowered steps, under the deck, lay a collection of things discarded — on shelves, in boxes. Wrapping ourselves into its crevices, Ben and I formed the Basement Club. We visited every week. Scratched in charcoal on the back wall: the rules, a date, our initials. We wrote ourselves into a landscape of our own trash, gave it our flesh. The basement said yes, eating out of our hands.

It gorged itself on the scraps of our lives, basked in the molding tables it swallowed. It enveloped our bony bodies, greeted them, covered them in its dampness and rusted metal. To the spine of the pile we said thank you.

We made a game of burrowing through the damp books, their pages stuck together. The stroller fit for twins, the kitchen chairs with green plastic seats to wipe applesauce from, Mom’s dress form pierced with pins, its headless body dancing in my nightmares — taken alone I would’ve hated each thing.

But still, we returned. Yes, said the basement. We dumped the litter and crowned it with our limbs.

The sun slanted through that doorless space, defined as a room only because it could hold our bodies like the bones of furniture. Still, I seek a version of this smallness, the lit-up spaces we could fit through,

which say yes, swallowing us back.
Surya Tubach
When the Commander Comes Home
Rajan Cutting

My grandma used to remind me a lot of those thumb figures from the movie Spy Kids because of the way her mobility was limited. She was a woman of medium size and overall was in good shape but over the years her bones had expanded the way concrete does in the summer. But as they expanded they hardened and contorted to an odd shape that to me didn’t resemble a bone. She wobbled and groaned when she thought no one was looking.

She would attest to her youth in everything she did, though. She was careful not to go to bingo night with her few remaining friends too often because she thought it made her less appealing. She didn’t let anyone do her laundry because to her that made her look weak. When my family went out to barbecues and parties she had to come because otherwise she feared people would conclude she couldn’t come because she was dying or something. She even collected soda cans and every month or so would put them all in a cart and push them down to the grocery store to get her five cent refund. In the end, she would use the money from the soda cans to buy more soda, which she drank with her feet up as if it were celebratory of a day’s hard work. My mom begged my grandma to let her help push the cart or something but each time my grandma refused; she insisted that even though she was retired she still had to do some things on her own. Everything she did was a calculated tactic to convince the world that she was still young, and I loved it, and I even believed it.

My parents were big believers in me being active. When I wasn’t in school, or wasn’t sleeping, or wasn’t eating, I was always doing something. I was forced to read, forced to take gymnastics, forced to take music lessons, I was even forced one summer to go to gardening camp. But of things I did in the name of forced activity, I never felt forced to practice vocabulary with my grandma; that came naturally.

We had a special corner in our house that she designated
as the “vocab area.” She would make these flash cards with words that she wanted me to know and we would routinely practice until I could fluently say every word on command. Some of the words were: so, is, if, scared, sand, and toys. One of the happiest days of my childhood was when I finally pronounced funny correctly.

The “vocab area” was in our basement next to my play pen and protected by the imaginary castle we built around it. The castle was designed like a bomb shelter and so it had a strong emphasis on foundation. Its base was made up of large steel cylinders that were intentionally planned to withstand any and all attacks. The ceilings were low, but it was important to my grandma that we decorate it with paintings of my family so that she wouldn’t get home sick if we ever needed to spend the night. There was no visible entry point from the outside, which is what made it purely genius. In order to enter we had to crawl through a hole that ran directly under an active volcano that we anticipated at any moment could erupt. We had to move quickly to avoid the possibility of instantaneous death but also cautiously to evade the razor sharp spikes that lined the tunnel walls. When we finally made it into the castle, she would take out the notecards and we would start our practice for the day. The castle was under constant attack, and we could hear the sporadic sounds of gunfire and the terror of screams that followed. My vocabulary was the only defense between us and total death. Every word I pronounced correctly was another soldier who got to go home to his family. I was a commander-in-chief, I had responsibility.

To the outside world the notecards were lifeless and completely blank save whatever letters had been written on them. In the castle they were secret codes that needed to be unscrambled to produce missiles, which would destroy our faceless enemies. They were care packages bearing food that could provide much needed nutrition to our soldiers. They were anything my grandma could think of or that I could dream of.

On the day that grandma died my friend had invited me to see Chiddy Chiddy Bang Bang; ironically this was the last showing before the play left broadway. My Aunt Diane drove my dad
and me to the theatre. Along the way my dad got a call from the hospital, telling him that her final moments were near. He dropped me off with my friend and then rushed to the hospital. She died a few hours later. I imagine a few doctors standing over her after resuscitating her for the last time. Some nights, I try and empathize with them and imagine their inability to quit, to see death; or their inability to let seeing death stop them from seeing life. Then some nights I wonder if they feel guilt, if they could have done more. Maybe they weren’t even in her room—some underpaid overworked nurse came to check my grandma’s bowel movements only to find her rotting corpse. I wonder when she died if anyone blinked or if they just threw the white sheet over her face and moved her lifeless body to some dark corner in the basement. I wonder what my dad thought, sitting in some waiting area, his own life flashing before his eyes, unable to control his approaching future. I thought of the day where I would take my father’s place and sit in the same waiting room on the same flimsy chair and wait to hear that my mother had died. I still to this day try really hard to forget that feeling.

Over the years our castle has rotted away like every other thing in my basement. The paint that outlined my loving family has chipped away and its quality and elegance has faded. Rupturing and tearing from the inside out, gravity has pulled the walls in closer and closer to the ground. I can no longer find the tunnel and can’t even tell if the volcano is active. But occasionally I allow myself to think of where my troops are in the world. I like to think they’re out there somewhere, with my grandma, building our new home—waiting for their commander-in-chief.
Airport
Noah Sauer

Same store,
selves of books,
different people,
same looks.

Same halls
already seen;
altar to
a copy machine.

Jolting trains,
shifting feet,
sharing shoes
with different streets.

Shifting bodies,
downcast views,
same expressions,
same tattoos.

Thumbs and fingers
 glued to phones.
Yes, dependent.
Same, alone.

Darting eyes,
ride is rough;
feel invisible,
not quite enough.
Michelle Lehman
Cider Pressing
Leo Stevenson

Watching yellowjackets
cast themselves to their sweet deaths
languidly half-trying to crawl out from aromatic foam
or hazy in the cold floral air
then stickily buried in the ground-up stuff of their deep desire
and crushed, slowly

to want something so bad
so singly
and to be so satisfied
however briefly
The News
Jordana Solomon

A shingle fell from the house where we once lived and it remains a fact that there are birds for which wings are absolute weight. How doomed, feathers measured against bricks, children and their fingers dashing through any metal which can be touched. Ode to ostrich like corrosiveness, the manilla folder a floor below with its grassland cover. Mr. Abenforth with his fondness for raisins, their small cardboard beds with the lights left on. In case of, in the case of. Here it is he says as the rent changes hands, every dog I’ve ever kicked. And it is so easy then to see them fly, the final touch of boot, the mange propelling ribbed bodies to sky, that bruise taking on a certain softness as it moves above the towers of a city you will never know me in.
It was the year of Asian food.
Things I could hold in my hands and take into myself,
pushing pot stickers in my mouth as he spoke,
knowing my fingers would smell for hours.

That night, the glory of our sneak-out reeked of pork
and moistened the windows.
I drove to school the next day with grease
lingering between the leather seats,
believing us beautiful.

I would never eat chow mein again
after the love I’d felt leaning over a bowl of it.
That year, I swore it wasn’t him that smelled
like ramen. Twisted words into apologies:
for being too loud, ordering too many string beans,
wanting to hold hands past those boys with skateboards.

Two years later I peel off my jacket and with it an oily,
fingerprinted receipt for two bowls of noodles, disgusted
at how I could stain something so thoroughly,
thinking I knew it was me who reeked of Asian food
that year, how I must have cradled its grease in my hands,
clung at something to hold.
I’m looking for the crossword when I happen across his obituary. Alfred Apps, it reads. Died on September thirtieth. Fifty-eight. Former Toronto-based speech writer for the twenty-third Prime Minister. Suicide. I lay my fork down on the table. Pick up my napkin and work at the corners of my mouth, even though I know there can’t be anything there. I haven’t eaten anything yet.

“Anything on your mind, Cath?” Rob asks.

“No.” I say, when really there are two. The first is that Alfred lied about his age when we started dating. He’d said he was thirty-seven, but this would put him well over forty. The second is that I may as well have murdered him.

“Any more coffee left in the pot?” Rob asks, rubbing his chin absentmindedly.

“Let me check.” I say, pocketing the obituary section. I want to vomit.

On the August morning of his daughter’s wedding, Alfred turned the stove burner up too high. I remember worrying he’d singe his moustache. That was Alfred at his most vivid: hunched over the stovetop, frying eggs in a pink bathrobe. Well aware that his ex-girlfriend had materialized—for the first time in almost a decade—in his fortieth-floor Toronto apartment on the morning of his daughter Grace’s wedding and completely unconcerned by it. Amused, even.

“D’you know,” he said, talking as only Alfred could, “there must’ve been fifty people here last night? Fifty. And they weren’t all Liberals, I can tell you that much. Have to say, I was a little disappointed when the Prime Minister didn’t show, this is the second time he’s—”

Tired by the familiar narrative, I turned and sized up the apartment. Not surprisingly, little had changed in the decade since I’d left. Drafts littered the coffee table, stamped by the sad seals of coffee cups and late-night sweat. Cat litter broadcast beneath the television like larvae. Actually, I was fairly certain that had been there ten years ago, which was especially confusing considering he hadn’t had a cat then either.

It was no small miracle Alf had managed to keep his job so
long, living like this. Surely the Prime Minister couldn’t help but no-
tice Alf’s pudgy fingers were a deep yellow, or that he wore the same
black turtleneck so often that the collar had grown stiff with sweat. I
suspect if asked he’d have said the same thing as any of us who had
fallen under Alf’s old-world boozy, nicotine-stained spell. Alfred was
Alfred— and therefore irreplaceable.

“Erm, Cath?” he said, straining, “Would you pass the vegetable oil?”

I snorted and lay my jacket across the countertop. Rooting
through cabinets, I remembered why the two of us never ate in. An
army of bottles stood to be sort through, and the smell of liquor
soon became oppressive.

“Some good stuff in here.” I said, turning over a bottle of
vermouth in my hands.

“Huh?” asked Alfred, looking over his shoulder. “Oh—that. I
cook with it, mostly.”

“Right.” I said, and handed him the oil.

“You look great, by the way.” Alfred said, procuring a ciga-
rette from behind his ear. He proceeded to size me up while lighting
the thing. “—really.”

I allowed myself a thin smile.

“Shit.”

“Jesus, Alfred.”

The cigarette had fallen out from his dry lips and onto the
eggs. Alfred sighed and turned off the burner. He placed the pan—
est, cigarette ash and all— into the sink. Turning to face me, he
didn’t seem the least bit abashed.

“Can I get you anything, Cathy?”

I looked at him. Running fat fingers through what was left
of his hair, I wondered what it was that I’d once found so attractive.
I’d been hard at work on my doctorate in political science when we’d
met. Alfred wrote brilliant speeches, sure—we’d all heard them, been
moved to both tears and ballots by them—but after we’d broken
up I could never watch the words emerge from the Prime Minister’s
polished lips without hearing something hollow. Sometimes, for
shock value, I look at old pictures of the two of us together: him in
that crusted black turtleneck, me twenty years younger and smiling
shyly, naivety powdered thick and pink onto my cheeks like blush.
I emerged from our relationship relatively unscathed, but with the
vague, irrevocable sense that some shining political illusion had been shattered. I knew what the people didn’t: that the words supposedly worthy of their country were written while nursing a hangover.

“Get dressed Alf,” I said. “I’m parked out front.”

Twenty minutes later we were seated in a breakfast joint uptown. Alf was rambling on about his daughter Grace, about the wedding that night and whether they might not reconsider and let him make a speech. He was excited, and eating like it— chasing after slippery sausages with infallible good humor, applying generous amounts of ketchup to his eggs with the flat of his knife. I cast around for a distraction, and found myself studying his forehead. I’d always been in love with the ruddy, intelligent thing: used to spend hours watching those overworked ridges, massive folds of thought falling slowly over onto one another and layering like glacial melt. The whole construction dangerously close to caving in and covering his face.

“Can you believe it,” he said, shaking his head in wonder, “Gracie? My Gracie? Married, good god.” He picked up his coffee, took a sip and made a hasty, grimacing retreat.

“Boiling,” Alfred said cheerfully, “and brutal. We’ll ask for milk.”

“Alf,” I said softly.

“Mm?”

“—Alf.” I said again, and he looked up. “Grace sent me to ask you not to come.”

Alfred’s tongue worked its way around inside his mouth. “To the ceremony?” he asked, after a minute. Voice taut and quivering.

“To the whole thing, I think. She’s worried it’ll only make things difficult, and she’s stressed enough as it is—”

Alfred pulled hairs from his moustache.

“— and I have to say, it doesn’t make much sense, Alf. You’ve only met Mark twice—”

“He’s marrying my daughter, isn’t he?” Alfred interjected, searching my eyes wildly. His own were pink and strained. I don’t have it, I remember wanting to say, whatever it is that might save you. I don’t have it. Instead, I looked down. I killed him.

“So,” Alfred said, chest heaving, “my family sends you like some sort of messenger? Where the fuck is my daughter to tell me this?”
“She’s busy,” I said, but half agreed. I’d been skeptical when Grace asked me to pass on her request. I hadn’t seen Alfred since I’d come to my senses and left him ten years ago, standing outside the island airport, baggage in hand. Still, as Grace pointed out, I mattered to him. As Grace pointed out, she mattered to me. Like my own daughter—and I didn’t blame her for not wanting him there, not really. Visions of an estranged, alcoholic father wrestling the microphone from the maid of honor’s hands came all too easily.

“Not invited,” Alfred muttered, “not invited. I’m always fucking invited. I had the fucking Prime Minister over last night, almost—”

The waitress placed the milk on our table, smiling apologetically.

“Cath,” Alfred said, leaning forward, “this is my daughter. Fingers crossed, she’s getting married once. I can’t miss it…”

“It isn’t my call, Alfred.”

“Oh fuck calls. I’ll wear a suit, I’ll be sober.”

“Will you?” I asked.

He might have, had I given him the chance. Called Grace, told her I’d keep him sober for the ceremony. Instead, I killed him. Or maybe Rob did—arriving then. Tanned and muscular. Dressed for the golf course.

“Cathy?”

I frowned. I couldn’t place the voice, but I would, I knew.

“Holy shit. Cathy, it’s me, it’s Rob.”

“No, no of course Rob, I know,” I said, because then I did. Rob Halter. We’d done our undergrads together.

“This is the damnedest thing,” he said, smiling widely, “I just saw your book out on the rack at Indigo’s. Sporting a big Staff Pick sticker and everything.”

I laughed. “No way.”

Alfred leered. “No way.” he said.


Alfred looked at it mistrustfully, and took a long draught of coffee instead. “Alfred.” he offered unhelpfully.

“Right.” said Rob, uncomfortable. “Cath, I can’t tell you how glad I am to run into you. Are you living in the area?”

“Yeah,” I said, “down in the Annex, by U of T. I’m teaching
there, actually. Are you still out in San Fran?”

“Just moved in up the block.” Rob says, grinning again.

“Don’t know a single person. Am actually on my way to buy a coffee pot right now, if you’ve got any interest.”

Alfred guffawed.

I look at the two of them together. Unlike Alfred, Rob was as far as can be from disillusioned: illusion spread thick and obvious over tight brown cheeks. He looked ready to cross out large sections of speeches, or at any moment gather up picket signs and protest with arms that, though thin, were strong. I remember him in college, with his book bag and glasses. A denim collar peeking out from beneath a cashmere sweater. Bounding up the stairs to fiddle with his thesis; bound for the Ottawa, surely.

“Sure,” I said, “why not. We can catch up over your first cup.” Alfred looked at me. He didn’t say a word. Did I know, disengaging from the booth, that I wouldn’t see him again? Maybe. Still, I was going to buy a coffee pot with Rob, that was all. How could I have known he’d never write another speech, that the Prime Minister would ask him to step down a few weeks later and the landlord would seize back the apartment within the month, cat litter and all—

I couldn’t know I’d be reading about his suicide little over a month later. Still, there was something final about leaving him in that booth alone, letting hot coffee eat away at his tongue. Knowing all the while that his forehead was dangerously close to collapsing.

“Anything, Cath?” Rob asks. We’ve been together for a month now. We’re happy. I’m working on a tan of my own. At night, when he reads the New Yorker in bed, I study his forehead, marveling at its careful construction. A sturdy piece of baseboard. Delineated by strong, straight lines into sections like slats, nailed in firmly at either end. No danger of cave-ins there.

“Yeah,” I say, “enough for another cup.”
Calder Birdsey
Daily Occurences
Aidan Calinda

Day 1
Walking under the
Moon, listening to the shrill
Drone of cicadas—

Day 7
Walking at sunset
I look up to the sky to see
Pink cotton candy—

Day 8
Walking in the heat
Through a parted grass pathway
Dodging the crickets—

Day 12
As the night gets cold,
The sun sets early, and the
Cicadas silence—

Day 15
A midnight rainstorm
Comes without warning, forcing
Me to walk back home—

Day 24
An open book, it’s
Pages cream white, floats among
A sea of red leaves.

Day 25
On the sidewalk are
Imprints of the leaves removed
From where they belonged—
Day 26
What was little more
Than a gentle wind transformed
Into a wolf howl—

Day 29
A stone wall covered
In vines, blanketed by a
Layer of red leaves—

Day 31
Early morning sun
Shines through the cloud layer on
The shimmering lake—

Day 35
A torrential rain
Shower clears up, and sunlight
Filters through the clouds—

Day 36
The sun beams down on
Cold stone walls, highlighting the
Burning red ivy—

Day 37
In the rain, the grass
Is peppered with fallen leaves
Dyed black by decay—
Matt Gillis
What Returns...?
Alexandra Scannell

Once, he was young.
Like all the other boys and girls,
he tore through fields full flushed and bright.
He’d smile as soon as stumble fell
and, dusting-off, laugh like lemon notes.

As he grew inches, hubris too,
a child’s pride preformed in deeds
and acts of ‘valor’ growing bold,
his stride stretched longer, feet flew faster,
and still he loved those wheat fields
with all his summer days.

And soon his reckless running shoes
were left in barefoot flat-out sprints.
Though stalks of wheat and dodging quick as can,
he took to leaving with the sun.
When the whole house hushed in darkness,
and he ran the rows with moonlight in his hair,
his heart breathed clarion clear like air above.

Now he’s left and traveled off,
his fields still wave without him.
And later on, eventually,
from the world outside he comes,
and still he walks in summer golden brown,
smiling all the while,
but his heart is gone and the wheat fields,
they howl-mourn their missing man.
How to Write a Cover Letter
Hayley Jones

I know how to paddle in a thunderstorm, lit by chandeliers of lightning. How to tumble into our tent, armpits to ankles and riddles in between.

I know how to love a language That will never whisper my own name.

I know how to speak when I should be still and how to be still when I should speak. How to sit on cold stones with mud across my chin, wishing that I were a moose.

I know how to seed a pomegranate under fluorescent lights, blood seeping from my nose.

I know how to walk tall in a blue dress. How to be afraid of oak and ivy, fireworks, and falling asleep alone.

I know how to carve poems into the hollows of my elbows. How to chain up the daisies and blindfold marigolds.

I know thirteen ways of looking at a blackbird, but only one way to look at myself: everglades, half past five, and the tide is crawling in.
Our Stars
Alexandra Scannell

I know I liked the sky you drew
with words upon a canvas stretched by time.
That sky was stars still in their prime,
white dots, blue space, encompassing view.
I know I liked that sky you drew.

In paint and pencil, black and white,
that sky a silent, breathless night;
each star a word in language tossed,
assumed any real dictionary lost
along with stories ink hands write
in paint and pencil, black and white.

So civ’lization grew and grew
from books to shelves to whole walls too.
We learned and changed our ways of life,
grew “happier”, “removed all strife”.
Grey buildings towered-up towards the sky
and people soon saw how to lie.
All progress made to never rue,
so civ’lization grew and grew.

And with each new lie a star sparked out,
while in each person nurturing doubt;
“We’ve moved past mumbling,” everyone said,
“with speech alone, our books unread,
we’ve come this far - just look! - we say,
now see back then, compare today,
and notice how we talk and shout!”
And with each new lie a star sparked out.

“There are infinite stars up in that sky;”
they said as their clear tears ran dry.
“We’re done with mumbling, sophisticated now:
our speech won’t change, again we vow.”
And they ignore that yawning space
in-between old star-words’ missing place.
They ask, “Who cares if one, or all of us lie?
There are infinite stars up in that sky.”

I know I liked that sky you drew
with words atop a canvas etched by time.
I know you saw what might have been
before our time, before back then,
or even now if we could change
and recall that dream we now deem strange…
If only we ourselves spoke true;
I know I liked that sky you drew.
A Flag
Will O’Neal

Like some cloth Odysseus trapped
On a sea of wind, held back by a god,
It reaches out, pulling, twisting, torqueing:
A cotton contortionist straining always outward.
It is reaching, tips of folds quivering with anticipation,
Whole strips shuddering like a lover on the brink of orgasm
It reaches and with all its might and how it reaches and thrusts and
thrusts and thrusts—
And grasps only air.
Matt Gillis
Too High at 14th Street, Headed Uptown
Anonymous

A man walks into the station and checks his phone. He paces and settles against a green post and checks again.

A train comes and he checks.

He walks out of the station—checks.

He walks back into the station. One last check, maybe. A train comes.

He eats an unripe avocado and throws half of it away.
HOW MANY TIMES MUST WE TELL YOU WE’RE GLUTEN-FREE NOW?

Millie von Platen
That summer was probably the last summer either of us went to the county fair—together or separate—as we both agreed that the games were dumb now and the food was gross and we’d seen too many things on the news about kids dying in accidents to even enjoy the rides anymore. So we ended up leaving early. Above us, the moon hung red as we argued over where to go, Ashley’s house or mine. It was stained red from the forest fires up north, the smoke having traveled over three hundred miles just to settle down with us. While we argued, a little boy cried because his mom couldn’t find a quarter for him to play the fishing game one last time. His eyes were scrunched shut, looking like folds of cloth, pressed so tight I thought he’d never get them back open again.

“Let’s just go to your house,” Ashley said.
“There’s nothing to eat there.”
“Nothing? Really?”
“Nothing.” I should know. Breakfast had been a brown banana and tap water.

The boy was still crying. His mom tried dragging him away by the hand, but he wouldn’t go, and he was too big for her to pick him up and carry him. You could hear the mucus in his lungs rattling around inside him. I must have cried like that too, when I was little. But I couldn’t remember it.

“We’re not going to my house,” Ashley said.
“At least there’s food there.”
“ Barely. My mom’s doing a weird diet thing, all we’re eating is kale and almond milk.”

She was exaggerating. Her house always had food—tucked away in honey-colored cabinets, refrigerated inside mountains of Tupperware, served atop brightly-painted porcelain plates.

“Besides,” she continued, “my parents always make us go to bed at, like, eleven.”

“Yeah,” I said. It was true. They did. They didn’t like how, apparently, Ashley got grouchy after a late night, acting all tired and moody when they were the ones who had to put up with her.

The boy’s cries got louder and higher pitched, sounding like the top note of the plastic recorders we played in elementary school. He sounded like he was being tortured. I didn’t know if I’d ever felt
that sad in my entire life.

“When did you do this?” Ashley asked, pointing to the streak of blue in my hair.

“In June.”

“Really? It’s cute.”

It was our first time seeing each other since school got out in May. We’d been friends since we were six, but that was the summer Ashley edged away from me. She was different that night. Or maybe she’d been different for a while, and I was the one who hadn’t noticed.

She took a tube of Lipsmackers lip gloss from her butt pocket, applied it, then said, “If we go to your house, we can order pizza.”

“We need money for pizza.”

“We can use my credit card.”

“You don’t have a credit card.”

“Yeah, I do.” She took her wallet out from her fringed faux-leather purse—the one I’d helped her pick out last year—and opened it up to show me. Sure enough, she had a credit card.

“Where did you get that?”

“Parents gave it to me, like, three months ago?”

“Why?”

“Emergencies.” She put the wallet back in her purse. “Relax,” she said, looking at my face. “They’re not going to get mad. They said I can use it for food, too.”

“Okay.”

“So we’ll go to your house and order pizza.”

“I don’t want to go to my house.”

“Why not?”

Because Friday nights were my mom’s turn for the late shift, so they were my dad’s night for watching baseball, and one time this summer I came home early and accidentally saw him with his hand on himself, watching instant replay footage of a runner sliding onto third.

“My house is boring,” I said. “There’s nothing to do.”

That was true enough. Ashley blew a stream of air out between her lips, sending her blonde feathery bangs swirling. Her phone, a pink Motorola Razr, went off with the chorus from “Temperature.” We both worshipped that phone like an idol, if only for its built-in camera—still a novelty then. Before checking it, she looked at me and said, “I could suggest the obvious, but I know you’d say no.”
“What?”
“You’re still housesitting for Ms. Mitchell, aren’t you?”
“Yeah.”
She raised her eyebrows at me then turned to the phone. She didn’t need to say anything more.
I looked back at the way we came. All the lights of the fair that were so bright up close looked smudged and dim from afar; they blinked fadingly at you while smoke filtered through the metal skeletons of the rides, swallowing the landscape whole.
I put my hand in my pocket and touched a quarter I forgot I’d found yesterday. I pulled it out and turned around, thinking I’d give it to the crying boy, but he was gone. He was trying to catch up to his mom about a hundred yards away, walking toward the parking lot. He wanted her to stop and wait for him, but she wasn’t going to—you could tell from the way she held her shoulders. She’d forgotten why she’d brought him here to begin with, and now she wanted to teach him a lesson. He tripped in the dirt then got up again, running and crying some more, while I returned the quarter to my pocket.
Ashley laughed at a text someone sent her, and I waited a beat for an explanation that didn’t come. She began tapping out a response, each letter a cascade of clicks on her keypad.
Ashley’s mom picked us up in their silver SUV with the St. Catherine’s Catholic School sticker on the back windshield. Every spring during the donor drive I was one of the kids who got community service hours by tucking and sealing hundreds of those stickers in envelopes to be mailed out. Most of us doing it were scholarship kids—probably by design.
“Frankly, I’m relieved,” Ashley’s mom said as we buckled our seatbelts. “You two are better off indoors. I don’t like having you out in all this smoke.”
That’s how it was that summer. The whole valley was flooded with smoke, and all we did was stay inside. In the mornings ash sprinkled down like rain, and we hid in our houses like dolls.
“I hate it,” Ashley said, looking out the window.
“Apparently this has been the driest year on record,” her mom said.
“The air inversion doesn’t help either,” I said.
“What’s that, Olive?”
“The air inversion. In the valley. All the bad air gets trapped
while all the good air floats away."
  "Why?" asked Ashley.
  "Don’t remember. I think it’s got something to do with air currents."
  "Where’d you hear that?" Ashley’s mom asked.
  "Learned it last year in geography class."
  "Hmm."

Ashley turned on the radio and set the station to KISS 96.1 FM. We didn’t talk after that.

It took forever to get to my house. Traffic on the highways was slow, everyone scared of the way their headlights bounced back at them off the particles of smoke. When Ashley’s mom dropped us off we could hardly even see the house across the street. Not that we needed to. I knew where we were going.

"Why’d she ask you to housesit?" Ashley asked as we walked through the haze.

"Family emergency."
"What kind of emergency?"
"I don’t know."
"Did she say where she was going?"
"No."
"And you didn’t ask?"
"I didn’t think to."
"You should’ve."

I pulled out the key Ms. Mitchell had given me from where I kept it inside the secret pocket in my duct-tape wallet. Ashley went inside without me while I took my time putting it back.

I found her in the living room. She didn’t notice me; she was too busy looking around. We wouldn’t have come here at all if it hadn’t been for my mom mentioning to her mom that I was doing the whole housesitting thing. When Ashley asked me about it, I told her I’d started last Tuesday. I actually started back in June.

"I guess this is pretty much what I expected," Ashley said. "For an English teacher."

She was talking about the living room. There was no TV, only books stacked on shelves sprawled across every wall. Atop the wooden floors lay long, plushy rugs whose colors changed shades when you pushed the fibers one way or the other. In the open space between living room and kitchen sat a small oval table with a teal teapot sitting in the center. I liked it here. It felt like the home I might have
had if I’d been given different parents.
   “Claustrophobic,” Ashley said.
   “I think it’s cozy.”
   “I guess.” Ashley ran her finger along the spines of books on the shelf nearest her. “I heard her class is really boring,” she said.
   “Who? Ms. Mitchell?”
   “Yeah. And that she’s a really tough grader.”
   “Who said that?”
   “Josh.”
   “Meyer?”
   “No, Kim. On the cross country team. He had her for sopho-
more English.”
   “Everyone has her for sophomore English.”
   “Josh said there used to be another teacher, but then he left, so now everyone gets Ms. Mitchell.”
   “She’s actually really nice,” I said. “Sometimes she brought us donuts in homeroom.”
   “That’s cool,” Ashley said. “I wish Mr. Carlson had brought us donuts.” She pulled a book off the shelf, a big one, and weighed it in both her hands. A corner of its paperback cover was folded up on one side. She flipped through it, letting the pages slide over each other like waves, then put it back in the wrong spot. “Do you think she’s actually read all these books?”
   “Why else would she have them?”
   “I don’t know. To show off.”
   “Most of them look like they’ve been read, though.” There were a lot of cracked spines staring out at us.
   Ashley stuck her hand out to balance against the wall while she pulled her ankle back in a stretch. “I guess it doesn’t matter if her class is hard or not. You’ll probably be her favorite anyway.”
   The way she said it felt off. “What do you mean?”
   “You’re good at that stuff.” She switched legs. “And you’ve already had her for homeroom, so.”
   “So?”
   “So nothing. I’m just saying that, you know, teachers like you.”
   I swore I could have heard a straining in her voice, an aural italics on “teachers.” Whether she meant it or not, whether it was there or not, I heard an implication buried in those words. And then I knew why it had taken so long for Ashley to find time to see me this summer.
Her phone went off. Again.

“Who is it?” I asked.

“It’s Kev.” Kev was a boy in our grade, someone who’d dropped leaves on us from atop the monkey bars in fourth grade and smeared dissected frog intestines on my Health Science binder as recently as seventh grade. But he and Ashley became friends last year, though I couldn’t understand how.

She swung the phone up and took a photo, her thumb making a loud clicking sound against the center button.

“What was that?”

“He said he wanted a picture.”

“So you just sent him one?”

“Yeah, why not?”

I didn’t know how to tell her it wasn’t just Ms. Mitchell’s house she’d chosen to share, but the place I’d annexed as my home too. That I spent more time here than at my own house this summer. The moment slipped away from me before I had a chance to shape it into words.

“So what else is there to see?” Ashley asked. “Have you looked around upstairs?”

“Not a lot,” I lied.

“C’mon, let’s go.”

She walked away, not looking back to see if I was behind her. I followed her anyway.

We reached the landing, where the air tasted stale. I’d looked around a good bit, but had chosen to spend most of my time downstairs in the kitchen and living room, sleeping on the couch when I didn’t feel like going home. The rest of the house made me uncomfortable. There were too many photographs with unfamiliar faces, closets filled with the stench of stored clothing, bathrooms with toiletries I didn’t recognize. The second floor throbbed with a life beyond me; you could hear it settling into itself, spitting creaks and moans. It ruined the whole illusion.

I followed her to the door to the hall closet. “Here we go,” Ashley said, opening the door wider. It was full of an angular sea of boxes. She started pawing through them, the harsh sound of cardboard against cardboard ripping through the air. She made me nervous—the way she was doing it seemed ugly. Almost crude.

“Careful,” I said when I heard the sound of clinking glass. She looked at me over her shoulder.
“If you break anything she’ll think it was me.”
“I’m not going to break anything. I’m not even really touching anything, really.”
“I know, but if you do—”
“But I’m not going to.”
“Okay.”
She held my gaze for a moment, then looked back at the boxes around her. “Besides, she said, “It’s all junk.”
“Really?”
“I mean, there’s a ton more books—”
“That’s not junk.”
“And then there’s just weird stuff nobody needs. Like dried flowers, and these old calendars.” She held one up to show me. It was a school calendar from ten years ago, and on the front was printed the school emblem and motto: Living and learning in God’s light.
“What about that?” I asked, pointing to a jacket over her shoulder.
She pulled it down off its hanger and held it up to the hall light. It was an army jacket, made of olive canvas and adorned with patches and pins.
“How old do you think this is?” she asked.
“I don’t know.”
“Maybe from the seventies?”
“Older than that. It looks like it might be from WWII. I don’t know.”
“Hold this,” she said, handing me her phone. She slipped the jacket on over her shoulders and flipped her hair outside the collar.
“Take my picture?”
“Why?”
“I wanna show Kev.”
I took the picture then handed her phone back to her and watched as she typed out whatever message and sent it. Finished, she shrugged the jacket off and slid it back onto the hanger.
“C’mon,” she said. “Let’s see what else there is.”
I followed her down the hallway to the door at the end, where she stopped to turn around to me.
“This is the bedroom, yeah?”
I nodded.
“This is so weird,” she said. “Don’t you think this is weird?”
“Yeah,” I said.
“What’s up with you?”
“What do you mean?”
“You’re acting like you’d rather be anywhere else.”
“No, I’m not.”
“Yeah, you are.”

She stared at me, waiting, expecting me to say something more. But I didn’t, so when she went into the bedroom, she did it with a sigh, letting me know I’d disappointed her. That was Ashley. No matter how much you fed her, you couldn’t shake the feeling that she still wanted more. She was always hungry for something she thought you were hiding beneath your skin, behind your kneecaps, in the tendons and sinews of your heart. Only later did I realize it wasn’t my fault I couldn’t give her what she asked for; I didn’t know how to find it.

Ms. Mitchell’s bedroom contained a queen-sized bed, a dresser, a closet, and more bookshelves. Both sides of the bed were made neatly, corners tucked and edges creased. Ashley went around the room opening drawers, examining bookshelves, fingering the frames of photographs. I tried to rationalize it all by reminding myself that I’d done the same thing—but that just wasn’t true. I couldn’t shake the feeling that when Ashley did it, something wrong was happening. She handled everything rougher. I don’t think she knew it, but she did, and instead of putting things back where she found them, she put them back lopsided, catty-corner to where they’d been before. It felt like something precious was breaking. Like a sort of secret magic was being released and destroyed, and I felt an irrational anger building. I hadn’t felt this way in years, not since the time I dragged Ashley underwater at her country club pool. I felt guilty afterwards when she got away from me and came up gasping and struggling for breath, but in the moment it felt like a raw bundle of nerves had come undone and wrapped their core around me.

Ashley had turned her attention to the bedroom closet, which was hardly big enough to fit the clothes inside. “What do you think that is?” She pointed to a shoebox sitting on the top shelf.

“I don’t know;” I said. I really didn’t know. I’d looked around everywhere else upstairs, but that box was the one place I’d allowed to remain a secret. There was something about it—its obvious age, its dereliction, the way it was falling to pieces—that made me too nervous to get near it.

Ashley didn’t share that feeling; she didn’t hesitate to pull it
down. I wanted to point out to her that it looked like something important, that maybe we should put it back, leave the bedroom, and go across the road to my house, which maybe wasn’t comfortable, but at least it was familiar. I held these thoughts in the hollow barrels of my lungs, and I was about to let them out, but before I could, Ashley peeled off the lid and looked inside.

It turned out to be full of photographs. She picked up a stack and started to flip through them fast. “Mostly other people,” she said. “Not that interesting.”

“Can I see?”

She handed me the stack in her hand and took a new one for herself. I couldn’t skim them like she could. I lingered on the first one I saw, a sepia image of a white clapboard house with a crown of evergreen trees fanning out behind it. On the back, handwriting that was not Ms. Mitchell’s read, Grandma’s house, Maine, Summer 1923.

“Wait,” Ashley said. “There’s something else here too.”

I looked up to see Ashley holding a piece of paper that had been folded so many times it was about the size of my thumb. She unfolded it and read. I moved closer to her so I could see, but she held it at just the wrong angle, blocking me from reading with her. I looked at another photograph while I waited, this one of a family picnic sixty years ago. When I looked up, Ashley’s face was ecstatic.

“Ms. Mitchell had an abortion,” she said.

“What?”

She handed me the paper. “Look.”

The paper was dated fifteen years ago, the year I was born. It contained instructions for her post-surgery recovery. The clinic’s emblem, address, and phone number were printed in the upper-left hand corner. It was in Indiana. I hadn’t known she’d ever lived in Indiana. Underneath, printed in small, black type, was a long list of instructions. My eyes jumped to the middle of the page, where I read a line about bleeding and clotting and cramping, before putting the paper back down on the bed.

“Do you think anyone else knows?” Ashley asked.

“No—we weren’t supposed to see this. This is private.” My breaths were small; they hardly filled me up.

She picked up the paper again, then looked back at me. Her eyes were electric, two blue shots of lightning. She took her phone out, and my heart folded and crumpled, because I knew what she was going to do before she did it. I thought I should do something, but
I didn’t know what; and then the moment passed, and Ashley was staring at a photo of the paper on the screen of her phone.

“You can’t send that to anyone,” I said.

“I’m not going to.”

“Okay.”

But I couldn’t believe her, and I never did believe her. When Ms. Mitchell left St. Catherine’s the following year, she never said anything to me, though she must have known what had happened. I didn’t know what to say either. Not until the house was empty, the smoke had cleared, and all I had left were words burned to cinders.
Because the world is not round
Abbey Green

I will break you like the branches of trees;
weak veins spilling green—

such small scenes, sunset sunrise reflections
on a computer screen, we could go
stay there, celebrate the roman holidays.

It wouldn’t be so bad to die on the 15th floor
of a New York skyline;

do not worry how I am,
tell me how you feel, the past few years as well, we could live
if you want to, softly and breathe our faces onto panes of glass.
Please send submissions to blackbird@middlebury.edu