

THE MOODY NEW YORKER

VOLUME 2: #PANDEMICSUMMER



PEN WRITERS IN THE SCHOOLS SUMMER WORKSHOP 2020

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A NOTE FROM THE EDITORS

For four weeks in July and early August, a group of high school students from all over New York City came together—virtually—for PEN’s annual summer workshop. Responding to creative challenges from faculty and visiting artists, these students made beautiful and exciting new work. In the midst of a global pandemic, national unrest and personal uncertainty, these talented and committed young writers have emerged triumphantly.

We're thrilled to share a small cross section of that work here. We know you are going to enjoy it as much as we have.

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THE LOST WALK

TAHSINA SUKUR

As I passed by the window, from the edge of my eye I saw an infant sparrow and I became envious. All I did was look out the windows in my house because I was told not to open them. Although we were aware of the virus it seemed that nature wasn't. The roses in front of my porch bloomed, and I found myself thinking about the path I took to school.

At 7:50, I stepped out of my door, screaming at the top of my lungs,

"Hurry up we're going to be late! There are nine minutes left!" I hoped my cousin, Jamena, would hear me over the shrill spring wind. Although there were ten minutes left, by force of habit I made sure to subtract a minute, hoping her footsteps would work at lightning speed. Jamena followed behind me and gave me a calm look.

"Tahsina there are nine minutes—we'll make it in time." I squinted my eyes and gave her a look overflowing with skepticism as I hoped the silent gesture motivated her to walk faster. As soon as I stepped outside of my house, the atmosphere was livelier and sweeter. The stuffy feeling I had since I woke up seemed to fade and left no traces behind. I forcefully pushed the metal reflective gate door closed, simultaneously eyeing my appearance to make sure not a single fold of my hijab was crooked. As we swiftly walked down the hill, herds of middle schoolers taller than us walked up the hill, gradually pulling their legs up, having to put more effort.

We turned left, as we both made eye contact with the driver because, as a product of inexplicable government actions, the road by my house lacked both walk signs and traffic lights. The silence rippled and then scattered like an uneven distribution of rain. I began to talk as a means to distract from our impending lateness.

"So did you finish all your homework?" I asked Jamena.

"No, I started at 7pm and stopped at 12. I tried to wake up early to finish but couldn't wake up. I'm going to finish it in my free period," she responded, with droopy eyes that were evidence of the previous night's workload. I gave her a nod of affirmation, which served as a silent sign of solidarity between high school students and their crippling sleep deprivation.

"So do you want to get coffee after school?" Jamena asked, expecting me to accept. The sun seemed to shine on her dark circles. I couldn't help but sympathize.

"If I don't have too much homework, sure." I responded with uncertainty.

“You always have too much work. It’s Friday, you have two more days, you’ll have time. Let’s go,” Jamena said in a blatant attempt to persuade me.

“Fine, fine we’ll go Jim,” which seemed to adequately satisfy her. In excitement, Jamena began to sway her arms back and forth, matching a toothy grin. She looked forward and pointed at a beautiful blossom tree.

“Hey look!” As my eyes followed the direction of her index finger, a sea of reds and pinks saturated my vision. We admired the blossoms. I tried to touch the flowers like a child. The cherry blossom in front of me wasn’t far from my fingers, but I couldn’t reach it.

We crossed the next road and the first sight was enormous porches filled with flowers. Their exotic colors and pungent smell rejuvenated my senses. I took a deep breath, everything else in my presence dissipating. Time slowed and I was in awe. It was silent, but it was not awkward or uncomfortable. I was mesmerized by the different shapes and sizes of the flowers. How can something that looks so simple be so pleasing to the eye? Something as small as a grain of sand can grow a stem, a bud, and petals. Although it was temporary, it made its presence known. I wanted to touch the soft petals, but I was afraid if I put too much pressure the petals would fall.

“Tahsina! How much time do we have!” Jamena’s voice harbored clear panic, and instantly cut through my train of thought like a blade onto soft skin.

“Three minutes left.” We stopped talking and began to speed walk, the adrenaline fueling our pulses and accelerating our speed. I swiftly walk over every crack on the sidewalk without hesitation because my feet have memorized every crevice on the path to school that I’ve taken for five years. As we got closer to the end of the road, I saw more students wearing the same uniform as I, entering the tall building. I heard the bell ring, I quickly entered, and the memory of my journey hung loose in my mind as simple flashes of colorful imagery, and my thoughts instantly shifted to the French quiz I was going to take in five minutes.

I panicked, laughed, smiled, and admired all in ten minutes. Spring is the season I miss the most, the months where I felt like I was walking into a picture-perfect scenery. This spring all I could do is look out the window and hope next spring I can walk to school.



THE DREAM

JULIA WOJTKOWSKI

I miss the pale walls, the way the sun would glare off the endless rows of lockers in the early morning, the faces I would see walking to and from class. I miss hanging out in the Clave (our school's newspaper room), which never had enough room on the couch and always smelled of someone's weird lunch. I miss the promise of junior year, the terror and regret of taking too many AP classes, and the constant reminder of college application anxiety looming overhead. I feel robbed of the experience, of junior prom, of the teenage stresses: *Did I do the homework? Does my lipstick match my outfit? Do I have enough time before class to cram for my Spanish exam?* Instead, I spend my time worrying about whether my little sister is attending her online lessons and whether my parents have enough money to last us the next week.

I have not had meaningful human interaction with anyone outside of my family in four months, not since the news of the pandemic began to spread. My parents put me into a mandated quarantine, which is ironic seeing as not so long ago, they were the ones who pushed me out of my room to get my daily sunlight and meet with people my age. Now, all my communication with the outside world is limited to text messages, as if they fear that the virus can spread through phone speakers. I have lost all track of time because of this; I didn't even realize that it was summer until a few days ago. I only feel the heat of the sun when I go out for groceries every other day, and even then, I do it at the speed of light, not stopping for a conversation with anyone and being hosed down with disinfectant the minute I step back in through the doors of our building.

It's hard not to think of what-ifs in times like this. Had the pandemic not happened, I would have just finished my junior year of high school, the year our teachers had used as a bogey monster when we were freshmen to scare us when we complained that our workload was too hard. I would have been up until unlawful hours of the morning studying for exams and SATs, and I would have begun to nourish an addiction to coffee in hopes of gaining back enough energy to continue the never-ending cycle we are all too familiar with. I would finally be accustomed to the intimidating walls of the school building, and I would have realized that it was filled to the brim with people and experiences that would take the spotlight when I reminisce on my life as an old woman.

But I haven't been to school for 115 days; not since that seemingly normal Friday at the beginning of March.

That's not entirely true; I went back a week later to pick up a few notebooks that I had left in my locker, but I was rushed out so quickly by the hallway monitor that I wasn't even able to take home my gym clothes. I am *not* looking forward to getting them when we reopen—if we reopen.

Last Monday we received an email from our school congratulating us on finishing the year. They

went on for two pages, repeating how brave and strong we are to have made it through and kept up our studies. What rubbish. Most students stopped caring the minute they found out schools were not going to reopen, and those who did their schoolwork did it for one of two reasons; they were pressured by their parents, or they were bored. Bored out of their minds. No amount of weekly planners and minute-by-minute schedules were going to fix that. And we sure as hell were not brave. We were useless in this fight. We could not see our opponent, we could not stop it from entering our homes, our lives, and tearing them apart like a hurricane. But we were applauded for living what not so long ago was every teenager's dream; staying in our rooms, not having to wake up in the morning to go to school, not worrying about what people would think of our newest outfit, or having to make pointless conversation. Yet as I live "the dream," I find myself glancing at my phone, hoping to get a notification that one of my teachers assigned something for me to do—anything for me to do. How quick we were to miss these daily annoyances.

I would give the world to have to climb those torturous six flights of stairs that I used to loathe, to have three hours of homework every night, to stress out about the four exams I have on what seemed to be every Thursday, and bicker with my classmates about what part of the map did we have to memorize for the next geography test and which teacher assigned harder homework.

I miss being woken up in the morning by my mother, rushing me to get ready for the day, as I grumble with half-opened eyes for her to leave me alone. I miss having a fifteen-pound backpack to lug around all day, filled to the brim with binders, textbooks, packs of multi-colored pens—just in case!—and endless bars of dark chocolate (because milk chocolate has too many calories). I miss hating Latin, its endless declensions and conjugations mashing in my brain just as I sit down to take the test.

Instead, blank walls drown my senses, engulfing me in what seems to be eternal boredom. I have memorized every crack on the ceiling of my room, every chip of paint; I know which parts of my wood-paneled floor squeak the loudest, and what time the birds begin to sing outside my window in the morning.

When we first received news that schools were not going to reopen for the remainder of the year, we all cried for the experiences that we lost. We cried for our friends, for the experiences that we missed and could not take back, and for our lives.

Yet we are now a whole new people. If someone would have told us in January that New York City, the city that never sleeps, would shut down completely, that we would be able to drive through Manhattan in under thirty minutes, that we would be eating food from our favorite restaurants in the middle of the street to keep with social distancing rules, we would have not believed them. We were too busy complaining, too busy chasing, too busy not living. We needed something to take us out of that whirlwind, to kick us out of the Clave at 12:44 pm on a Friday afternoon, and to put a halt to our lives. In one day, our lives changed completely. *Our* lives. We are united by this

experience, belonging exclusively to us, there for us all to remember and reflect on. I miss you all, but I know we are all here together.





THE TWO AND A HALF INDIANS OF WEST CONNECTICUT

NIKOLE RAJGOR

“Why do they call Native Americans ‘Indians’ anyways?” my brown brother asked me one evening in my room. His big body was plopped on my mattress, his round head dressed in a silk durag and a beard too large for his face. For a while now he’s had a fixation for black culture. I guess it isn’t cool among his friends to eat chutney and wear lungis.

“Because white people are stupid,” he continued. “When Columbus came to America, he thought that he came to India since that’s where he was sailing toward, so he assumed that they were Indian people. And even though now we know they weren’t in fact Indian people, no one’s bothered to change it since.”

I didn’t respond and kept typing away on my laptop. From the corner of my eyes, I could see that he was playing with the fragile strings of fake ivy I had attached to my walls, but it was better that I didn’t say anything. I wasn’t in the mood for another one of his anger outbursts. This morning, my dad got him an air conditioner, and I don’t know what the fuck about an air conditioner could get him so mad, but he threw it out the window. That wasn’t even the first time he did it either. Do you know how hard it was for me to study for the SAT in my junior year during a heatwave? I was convinced the pages of my prep book were gonna burst into flames.

I thought that when I got to college, life would be easier to navigate. But I’m pursuing a degree in Business when I don’t even like business, and being drowned out in a dorm building full of white people, where my brownness sticks out like a sore thumb. Even when I’m home, I feel stuck. In a suburban town in Connecticut, one of the smallest states, you could imagine that it can get dull. I’ve had every flavor at the local ice cream shop at least twice, and every store owner (and Indian) knows me by name. Yet I’m the one my parents yell at to go out more, while my brother gets to sit home and cloud my room up with the stench of weed.

My mother opened the door of my room. She was in her long nightgown, hairbrush in hand.

“Joseph, Amelia, Maria’s here,” she said, looking more at me than Joseph. She knows Maria isn’t a big fan of his. He used to beat her up when we were kids. Maria is Joseph’s age, which is two years younger than me. We met because all Indians in Connecticut have some weird relation to each other. She lives in New York with her mother, but whenever she comes to visit her father, she always makes a stop here. She’s half white, but we can overlook that part. As far as I’m concerned, she’s a full-blooded Indian.

Maria quietly shuffled into my room, lowering her blue mask and spraying hand sanitizer like it was a bottle of Febreze. I turned in my swivel chair.

“Hi!” I beamed.

“Wassup,” my brother nodded towards her. He was out of my room before I could blink.

“Is Joseph still in his ‘I hate women’ phase?” Maria asked.

“I don’t think it’s a phase at this point,” I said a bit too cheerfully, because Maria raised

her eyebrows. “He threw our air conditioner out the window this morning.”

“Again?”

“Yeah.” I lowered my voice this time so my mother didn’t hear. “He’s also a *stoner* now.”

“Y’all got weed in Connecticut?”

“Hell yeah,” Joseph said, entering the room again, this time with a plastic bag. “Just got these today!” He held up a small, plastic bag that contained a couple of Airhead candies.

“Those are Airheads,” Maria said.

“No, they are—” Joseph spun around and then waved his left hand under the bag for a jazz effect, “—edibles!”

“Okay,” Maria replied.

“What, do you not believe me?”

“No, not really.”

Joseph peered at her with slanted brown eyes. “Well, do you want to try?”

“No!” I interjected. “No one’s trying anything Joseph.”

“Why not?”

“Because what if mom and dad see? And then *I’ll* be the one that’ll get in trouble, not you!”

“No you won’t!” he retorted, scrunching his eyebrows. “Since when do you get in trouble for the things I do?”

“My entire life, Joseph.”

“That’s not true!”

“Joseph, did you start your college essay yet?” Maria interjected, scrolling through her phone.

“No, not yet,” he replied in a calmer voice. “You don’t need a good essay to get into UConn anyways.”

Maria, whose back was faced towards Joseph, looked at me with confusion. *What the fuck is he saying?* she mouthed out to me, the UConn student. I widened my eyes and shook my head with a defeated gesture. I wanted to point out that the school has a 40% acceptance rate and he has a 900 SAT, but I didn’t see the point in trying.

“Whatever, you guys are boring.” He turned around to exit my room, but for some reason, I had a gut instinct not to let him leave just yet.

“Wait!” I called out. As if he expected it, he spun around at my door in a timely manner and made his way back into the room.

“Are you sure they’re not laced?”

“I’m not stupid, Amelia,” Joseph said. Maria raised her eyebrows and looked at me from the corners of her eyes, trying not to laugh. I weighed the pros and cons in my head. I may have gotten rejected from all the Ivy Leagues and disgraced my Indian parents by doing so, but I was still easily the most logical person in the house.

I’d been needing an escape for a while. With the stress of a \$40,000 tuition and no job to pay it, matched with having to be in the house for the past three months with my family because

And so the two and a half Indians marched their way out of the white clapboard home, down the rickety wooden stairs, and into the fields of grass up to the end of the street. Luckily, they lived at the end of the street, so all they had to do was walk right, and the beach would be not even a mile away. Not even a mile away for that sweet and succulent Chicks.

Yet the two and a half Indians had a different idea in mind. If they kept walking straight, there was the woods. Right next to their house.

“Shall we convene with our so-called tribal ancestors?” Joseph snickered.

“Tonight, we are no longer Amelia, Joseph, and Maria,” I declared. “We must now live our lives as the Indians of West Connecticut!”

“Hooray!” Joseph and Maria cried. We surged towards the forest.

We had never been into the woods before. Our parents told us it was a dangerous place to be, considering the size of it, especially at this time of day, as the sun was about to set. They told us that we’d never know what was truly lurking in the woods. But maybe, thanks to the inner-Indian in us, back from when our spirits worked on the tea plantations being whipped by the British master—maybe we would just know.

I felt a euphoric high the more I smelled the fresh leaves of the trees and sank my feet into the dirt and fallen twigs. That oxygen. There’s something so sexy about photosynthesis. Is this what the white people mean when they say go back to your country? This succulent forest of dirt and wood that makes green look greener, our skin browner, earthier?

We slowly trudged, venturing deeper into the woods. Now, we found ourselves in a clearing, with trees that seemed the size of skyscrapers and strange plants surrounding us on all sides. We could barely see the sky that was above us as the tree branches split our view of it into a mosaic.

“Where are we?” Maria asked, having a serene smile as she caressed a trunk of wood. “I used to have a tree in front of my house when I was kid. I called it Treeny. Its branches reached into my kitchen. But then the city cut down Treeny. I was really sad. Hello, Treeny!”

“Come on Maria, you should feel where we are! Where is that Indian in you?” Joseph slapped Maria’s shoulder, making her stagger back. “Whoops. I forgot you’re a stick.”

“I had diarrhea last week and my mom told me it was because I eat Indian food,” she recalled in a daze. “Something about how I’m European so I don’t need to eat it, whatever that means.”

We continued to scour the forest. We heard shuffling here and there, from feet that weren’t ours, but like the brave Indians that we were, we didn’t care. This land of West Haven was our land, too.



I was having the time of my life. It felt like all of the weight on my shoulders was lifted, like I was no longer Atlas holding the sky. I ran in all sorts of directions, spinning around and inhaling the salty, fresh air.

“Amelia, watch out!” Joseph yelled.

I walked headfirst into a tree. I held the trunk with both of my hands.
“*Nannu ksaminncandi*,” I muttered.
“What’d she say?” Maria asked in confusion. Joseph and I snickered at each other.
“Come on, you can’t speak Telugu?” Joseph teased. Maria shook her head slowly.
“*Telupu prajalu!*” he laughed, pointing his finger at her. I wheezed loudly.
“That’s not nice!” Maria pouted. “I am not tell-u-poo proja-loo!”
Joseph and I laughed harder. Tears were pooling in my eyes.
“He’s calling you white!” I yelled.
“Fake Indian!” he snorted.
“My dad doesn’t even speak Telugu, dumbass. He speaks Hindi and Gujarati.”
“Okay, *bevakooph kutiya*,” Joseph responded.
“I—what?” Maria asked, looking just as lost.
“You said he spoke Hindi, so I’m speaking Hindi.”
“You talk so much shit when none of us are even from India,” Maria said, pointing her finger with every word. “All of us have white names!”
“Huh,” I said. She did have a point.



“Haha, hey it’s a dog,” I chuckled, pointing to a brown animal several hundred feet from us. Except, I realized as it got closer, that it was much larger than a dog.
“Uh, I think that’s a bear, Amelia,” Maria replied with squinted eyes.
“Oh yeah, I’m writing an essay on those for my class. It’s a small world out there.”
Maybe this wasn’t our land after all. I felt ready to declare it bear land instead. We were cowering below the trees, clutching each other’s arms, as the bear was on the other side of the clearing. The bear didn’t show any signs of aggression. It simply stared at us as we tried to shrink ourselves.
“Maybe we should’ve listened to your parents,” said Maria. I was too scared to say anything, so I managed a weak nod.
“I know what to do,” Joseph huffed, puffing his chest a little. He took off his durag, a little worn down now from our adventure, and wiggled it into the bear’s face.
“Joseph, no!”
But it was too late. The bear ripped the red cloth from Joseph’s hand and snarled. Joseph backed away from the sudden movement of the bear, but showed visible annoyance.
“That was mine!” he roared.
“Joseph, bro, it’s okay, we can get another one—”
“No! That was *mine!*”
“Well, now it’s the bear’s,” Maria mused dryly.



The American black bear looked at the two and a half Indians in confusion, wondering

whether they were tonight's dinner. It had been a while since he saw kids disobey their parents and dare to venture in his land. Yet it didn't seem like they were entirely there. He saw the red eyes of the brown boy and the dirty clothes of the brown girls. He saw how the boy was the nearest to him, as the other two had the sense to stray further away.

Is this what he thinks being an alpha male is supposed to be? the bear wondered. Pointless courage to receive praise and stroke one's inner ego? The need to challenge when he knows it's already hopeless to try?

The black bear looked at the boy and came to the well informed conclusion that he was simply stupid. And if they were stupid people, they'd end up dead soon enough no matter what he did. No use in wasting energy on fools who live to die.

Without another sound, the black bear turned around and disappeared into the forest.



Joseph, Maria and I shivered.

"What the fuck just happened?" I whispered.

"He knew he was no match for me!" Joseph gloated.

"Maybe if you didn't fucking bother him in the first place, this wouldn't have been an issue."

"I didn't bother him!" he snapped.

"Was Jessica Hoffman's praise so important to you that you were gonna get mauled by a bear?" Jessica Hoffman was the German girl at Joseph's school who he was absolutely head over heels for. It seems like I struck a nerve in him, because he picked up the nearest pebbles on the ground and started to throw them at me.

"Heeeey you should stop that," I said with furrowed eyebrows. "Not cool."

He growled, "if I was anything like you guys when I get high, we would've been dead by now."

"I'm the oldest one here!" I whined.

"Yeah, but I'm the only guy," he huffed. "You're so fucking stupid, no wonder you got rejected from Yale."

"When will you two stop arguing? I'm hungry," Maria said, staring at a leaf she was holding.



The two and a half Indians ran in the direction of the wind. By the time they made it back to Western civilization, their clothes were torn, their skin was bloody, and the sun was sinking into an orange bath in the horizon. Oh, and they were also at Chicks.

"It's finally there," Maria said. We now stood on a grassy hill, just a couple hundred feet away. The diner's name was displayed in white cursive against a pink sign, the beach tables arranged in the parking lot in such a way that you would think they were always meant to be there.

"I'm going to make sweet, sweet love to those curly fries," I whispered.

pointing his fingers violently. He started cursing rapidly in Telegu.

“But Joseph’s sixteen—”

“It doesn’t matter! You’re older than him! You and Maria, go clean this up!” he roared.

“But I wasn’t even here when this ha—”

Maria looked at Amelia’s father and lowered her gaze. “Yes sir.”

“Joseph, what happened to you?” their father asked.

“Oh, I walked into a tree.”

“Come, we’ll get you cleaned up,” he said, ushering the confused yet satisfied boy upstairs. Sumara lingered for a minute, looking at the girls, but then lowered her gaze and followed her husband inside.

Amelia and Maria looked at each other, and the broken heap of junk in front of them.

“What are we supposed to do now, ‘Great Indian Warrior?’” Maria asked.

“Follow the orders of the other Indians.”

ESA BLOODY HOOKAH

YARALEE DE LA CRUZ

On the corner of a Bronx street in front of una bodega was a group of Dominicans doing “Dominican” thingz. Bebiendo cervezas. *Jugando Domino. Bailando Bachata. Fumando la hookah.* Just your everyday Dominican thingz.

La hookah. That vine colored, vase-like smoking object with a snake pipe was the center of attention that night, getting passed around and used like the girl who lives upstairs. With the smoke infecting the air and moving with the music, everyone became its slave. *La hookah.* It took two people’s lives that day. That beautiful, ethnic, hot, sexy night turned dark and red with just one hit.

Los Dominicanos. Those colorful people were the center of attention that night. Dancing their hearts out, poisoning their livers, smacking *los dominos* on the table, *y hablando chismes*, and working for *el diablo con esa hookah.* *Los Dominicanos.* Two of their lives were taken that day. Those beautiful, colorful, joyful, sexy people turned dark and cold with just one mistake.

La Musica. That spicy, *suave*, sensual, Dominican blues was the center of attention that night. Enchanting the innocent with its seductive rhyme, causing them to get lost in each other’s eyes and fall in love, making everyone sweat, *y causando serios problemas para dos mejores amigos y una pareja.* *La Musica.* Ironically playing “*Ella y Yo*” by *Aventura* and *Don Omar*, played out the cause of *un celoso y un traidor* lives being taken away. That beautiful, ethnic, sexy, hot music and dance told a true story one saw coming making the night dark and blue with a hit on every note.

Las luces. Those streetlights blended in with the background when the reds and blues became the center of attention that night. *El traidor* is soulless and cold. Everyone shattered like rats. *El celoso* caught in *la policias’* trap once the ground and sky turned red. *Las luces.* They showed us the future as we lost two lives that night. Those witnesses who were beautiful, joyful, colorful, and innocent will turn gloomy, blue, and *triste* like the night did with just...one...hit of that *maldita hookah.*





MARIE ANTOINETTE—QUEEN

ANNEMARIE ALMS

What the last Queen of France teaches us about cancel culture, revolution, and privilege. And why I love her.

Perhaps no historical figure evokes a more lavish (and misunderstood) image than Marie Antoinette. Scenes of Versailles, gigantic hair and cake make her synonymous with undue wealth. The starving French people are a righteous mob and her death was a necessary evil.

The story is so familiar that we fail to think critically about it at all.

In popular culture, Marie Antoinette is ridiculous. Upon hearing that the peasants had no bread to eat, the story goes, she laughed and said, “let them eat cake.” While there is no evidence to prove that she said this, the phrase is timeless because it illustrates the distance between monarch and peasant. It illustrates her own privilege.

Born an archduchess of Austria, Maria Antonia Josepha Johanna had every advantage. She was born lucky. But to blame an individual for how they were born, something completely beyond their control, is unjust.

Her marriage to Louis-Auguste wasn't her decision either.

Empress Maria Theresa, her mother, was a political mastermind and very ambitious for her children. After ending hostilities with France, Austria's longtime enemy, she sought to cement the alliance through marriage. Maria Antonia would be married to Louis-Auguste, heir-apparent of the French crown.

She was ten years old when her life was figured out for her. At fourteen, she was shipped off to France.

It's easy, and perhaps reassuring, to think that because arranged marriages were normal, everyone involved was content. But to be torn from your family, country, and everything that you know to marry someone you never met isn't an exactly uplifting circumstance.

When Maria Antonia arrived at the French border in May 1770, to an island in the middle of the Rhine River, she was forced to strip and reshape her identity. She had to take off her Austrian clothes and dress according to the French court, leave her belongings behind, and change her name: Maria Antonia to Marie Antoinette (the French spelling). Her homesickness was both potent and tragic, since she would never return to Austria again.

While initially greeted with enthusiasm at Versailles, her foreign status, disdain for the public rituals of court, and inability to consummate her marriage for seven years (Louis-Auguste almost certainly had phimosis, a condition that makes sex painful), made Marie Antoinette bitterly disliked.

A need for escapism prompted her to commission the Hameau de la Reine (the Queen's Hamlet) in 1783, a refuge from court life on the outskirts of Versailles, where she dressed like a peasant and pretended to live a simple life, albeit surrounded by luxury. This unintentional mockery of the poor wasn't helped by the two million francs (six million USD) it cost.

While it angered the public, this cost was nothing compared to the money France lost with the American Revolution—fully 100 million pounds sterling committed to the patriots. Money the infant United States could not return. That, and an inefficient tax system, put enormous pressure on France.

This is an important piece of context, one of many, surrounding the French Revolution. Its sparks began flying after King Louis called a meeting between the Three Estates (the clergy, nobility, and commoners) to resolve the financial crisis. Turned away, representatives from the Third Estate met in Versailles' tennis court and vowed never to separate until a new, equitable French constitution was established. This was the Tennis Court Oath of 1789, the beginning of revolution. Optimistic, and perhaps naive, King Louis relented. He felt that by compromising, he could control the growing situation and maintain monarchy under reform.

Marie Antoinette didn't agree. She recognized, with macabre foresight, that it could mean the end of monarchy in France. As with all movements and revolutions, radical factions tend to form. In 1791, she finally convinced her husband that they should flee. Disguising themselves as a noble couple, they headed to the safety of the Netherlands or, some speculate, to initiate counter-revolution along the frontier. Either way, the escape failed because King Louis was recognized.

While Marie Antoinette had very backwards ideas about the divine right of monarchs—it was the only way of life she knew—I have to admire her intelligence.

But her opposition to compromise isn't as remembered. At least, not as a political conclusion. It's easier to maintain a narrative where Marie Antoinette is completely frivolous. If you have a perfect scapegoat, why would you want to make it more complicated?

It quickly became fashionable to hate the Queen.

A string of pornographic propaganda attacked her virtue, insinuating that King Louis's impotence left the Queen and her sexual appetite unfulfilled. Depicting her in lesbian trysts with court favorites, Princesse de Lambelle and Yolande de Poligna, made her out as a sexual deviant, but drawings with male lovers targeted something more fundamental. Historically, a Queen's most

important asset is her ability to produce heirs, so by suggesting that her children are illegitimate, you question her authority altogether.

There was even a baseless rumor that she molested her son, in this 18th century Twitterstorm of passion, politics, and change.

With Robespierre and the Jacobin Club, that energy turned paranoid as anyone accused of being counter-revolutionary was investigated and likely killed. The bloodbath ensued, but its first victim was Marie Antoinette, who would solemnly reflect that “I was a queen, and you took away my crown; a wife, and you killed my husband; a mother, and you deprived me of my children. My blood alone remains: take it, but do not make my suffering long.”

Nearly three months later, in October 1793, she was brought to the guillotine. The blade was released, her head chopped off, and a jubilant crowd cheered Vive la République! Vive la République!



BABCIA

JULIA WOJTKOWSKI

Nine hours.

I just got off of a nine-hour flight from New York to Poland. Of course, not counting the wait times. Lines to check-in and TSA checkpoints. Lines to board the airplane. Lines to get off of the airplane and to go through security. Nine hours spent cramped up in a filthy seat surrounded by crying children and strangers drooling on your shoulder while they sleep.

It's worth it. I remind myself. It will all be worth it once I see her.

As I step out of the airport, I am forced to take a minute to absorb what is going on around me. I am put off by the changes I see: the coffee shops, the enormous shopping malls, the busy streets. It looks nothing at all like the Poland from my childhood summers, the Poland I live in every day through my parent's tales; it looks nothing like a country that was released from the bleakness and poverty of communism. Instead, there is color, fully stocked shelves, and everything is so new. Every time I visit, the city outside the revolving doors of the airport never ceases to surprise me. Looking around, it all makes the "American Dream" seem like a joke, like a lie.

I struggle to pack my suitcases into the trunk of my uncle's car, though it might as well have been my father's beloved tiny ruby red Fiat from the '80s. In Poland we're always comparing things to how they were *za czasow komuny*, the time period right after the end of occupation. I lean my head against the cold window and am thankful for the relief it provides. Very soon, the lull of the engine drowns out the sounds of my uncle's voice and puts me to sleep.

I rub the sleep out of my eyes, realizing that the busy city has been replaced with my beloved countryside and endless fields that blend together as we speed through. My gaze catches the red spots dotting the curb of the road and my heart flutters as I clench the door of the car to see the delicate red petals of maki, our precious poppy flowers, slowly occurring more and more often, making it known that we are coming closer to our destination.

I close my eyes and breathe in the fresh air, no longer polluted and dense as I have grown accustomed to at home. Very soon I feel the car make a familiar turn and I open my eyes to see the cream walls and burgundy roof of my grandparent's home. As soon as the car lurches to a stop, I nearly run to the door, crouching down to fit through the door frame, and as I walk through the beaded curtain, I am transported to a sight that will never cease to make me smile. I am surrounded by the smells and sounds of my childhood; the hum of old songs, the foul smell of dried mushrooms, and the screech of the ancient kettle; engulfing me to such an extent that my footsteps freeze so that I may take it all in, every detail, as if I was never going to see it again. Because

I very well might not.

“*Kto tam?*” asks a gentle voice from deep within the kitchen.

As she straightens from behind the counter and her gaze catches mine, Babcia runs to meet me, kissing my cheeks and hugging me tightly. For someone with such a small figure, her grip is surprising, but comforting, as if making up for all the embraces we have missed. When we finally let go, I see her tired face, her rosy cheeks, and I take note of the new wrinkles that have appeared on her face from years of worry, and the tear running down her cheek. She quickly begins to turn me around and to pinch my sides, shaking her head and saying how thin I look.

Suddenly, I am sitting down at the family table and have a bowl of hot chicken soup in front of me. *Na zdrowie Juleczko*. It is quickly followed by a plate of *schabowe kotlety* (not to be confused with a schnitzel!), and I eat it all under her attentive gaze, almost daring me not to do so. When she is satisfied, she questions me about my flight, not giving me a chance to answer completely before following the question with another.

Far too soon, the house begins to fill with the voices of my aunt, uncle, and cousins, and Babcia uses the disturbance to slip back into the kitchen unnoticed. I greet each one of them, catching up on the events that took place since I last visited, and making polite, but meaningless, conversation.

They all know that though they are my family and I missed them dearly, I am not here for them. Not while she is still here. They know that as soon as they let me, I will disappear into the kitchen, just like she did, and make sure to spend all the time I have with her.

And I do. I join her small figure in the pantry, helping her reach for a jar of homemade preserves. We fall into a rhythm and move together, dancing around each other while slicing and dicing, yet it is clearly evident that she is doing it all effortlessly, while I am struggling to keep up. Yet she laughs it off, as do I. We walk to the crowded dining room carrying mountains of food, each plate decorated with roses made from fresh steamed vegetables and seasoned with her love.

At the stroke of seven, Dziadek comes home and sits down at the head of the table, just as Babcia places down his plate in front of him, greeting him with a kiss on his forehead. He kisses her cheek, silently asking how her day was, and she smiles and answers him without a word, knowing that he wouldn't be able to hear it anyway.

Throughout the meal, she is slow to join the conversation, speaking up only when need be, opting instead to look around the table every so often with a grin, and encouraging us all to go for seconds. As everyone finishes their meal and goes on to retire to their rooms in an attempt to cool down in the evening heat, we are once again left alone together; me collecting the dirty plates and empty dishes, her washing them nearby. I watch as her hand travels in circles over each plate, me-

thodically whipping its surface with her mouth pulled into a small smile, humming to herself. I think of the amount of time she has done this, how many times she has been left in the kitchen to clean after the thousands of meals she has served in her life. Finishing up, she prepares two cups of tea, takes my hand, and guides me up the sandy driveway and into the meadow in front of the house.

We walk down the middle of two fields, stopping often to pick the pretty flowers near the edge of the path and to check the season's harvest. As the sun lowers in the sky, it coats her face in a golden glow. Her wrinkles disappear from her face, her gray hair glistens and its shadows seem to turn it into a youthful brown. For just a moment, she is transformed before my eyes into the Babcia I remember, the Babcia from the photographs that are stored and forgotten in boxes in our basement.

In the glow of the sun, the memories of her running after me in the park, teaching me to ride a bike, teaching me how to sing patriotic war songs, and how to bake *paczki* (again, it's not a donut!) all come flooding back to me. Her face no longer looks tired but full of youthful zeal and energy.

How much courage it must have taken her to grow up in a war-torn country. To leave school after the eighth grade to help her family on the farm. To marry my grandfather at the early age of eighteen. Eighteen! To sacrifice her life, her ambitions, her goals, to ensure that her family was taken care of.

How much strength it must have taken her to have lived the life she had. To be there for her husband and for each of her children, so often so far away. To ensure that though the life they led was full of hardships, they grew up honest and knowing about culture. To be there for me, the once dubbed 'devil child', too energetic for a sane nanny to take on, dragging me through unknown streets in a country whose language she did not speak to ensure I had access to the education she had not.

As the sun lowers further into its bed, I see her becoming tired, the weight of her life piling back atop her back, making her slouch and lean further into my arm. How appropriate that not so long ago, she held me upright as a baby, and now, I hold her up as she struggles to walk.

As we slowly turn the corner, she takes out a rosary from the pocket of her sweater and we stop at the village cross to pray. Glancing at her, I thank God for giving me the privilege to be with her. To be able to listen to her story and learn from her. Because though she may be but a simple woman, without an education and without great accomplishments, she has taught me the most important lessons of life.

DAYLIGHT

Frida Espinosa

I remember the day starting at the early hour of six
I remember wondering what to wear and staring at a pile of clothes
I remember the stress of missing assignments
And rushing out the door

I remember how gloomy the mornings looked
And how biting the winds of winter were
I remember wanting to crawl back into bed seeking shelter
How cold the day was!

I remember the crowded buses and the flights of stairs
I remember being tired and then alive in conversation
I remember believing that I'd have to come back
The next day



BROKEN HOME

ARIESHA AHMED

My childhood for the most part was an immense blur of switching public schools, moving into my house, and various instances with my family members, especially my two brothers. These memories range from our numerous quarrels, injuries and lying to save each other from our mother's anger. However, it wasn't only the innocence of childhood. There were moments of sadness and anger, as with most people's childhood, such as when my eldest brother experienced a car accident, among others.

One of my earliest memories is of my old living place, which was a basement. I was a few years old, around four or five, and I remember vividly that my family's financial situation was not the best. My dad wasn't present at the time, and my mom tended to household duties, as well as sending us to school, making sure we went to bed on time, etc. My cousins lived only a few minutes away from us, and so they visited us frequently. One day, my oldest cousin and older brother, who were both around seven or eight years old, and I were home alone. At the time, my mother had gone to retrieve groceries from a nearby market. They were playing around with each other, and one of their hands smacked down a glass that fell and shattered on the floor. I remember stepping on a large piece of glass that broke off and the searing pain that I felt, and the way my tears immediately started streaming down my red face. I hysterically started screaming and began clutching my foot, blinded by the white, hot pain. Of course, the other two went to help me, but to no avail, and they told me to stay quiet, not to tell my mom, and I promised I wouldn't. As the door opened and my mom came back in from her trip, I immediately ran to her and told her everything, which I don't regret, and looking back, it makes me laugh. From an outside perspective, it looks as though this was a normal occurrence. However, my mother immediately scolded the other two for their actions, and I asked why. She responded saying that if anything drastic had happened, we wouldn't have the health care to afford going to the doctor.

As a kid, the financial situation of, at the time, a single mother, didn't concern me. I didn't know what health care was and why it was so important, as well as why we couldn't afford it. The innocence I had didn't allow me to sympathize with my mother's concern, and even after her explanation, I still felt confused. I now understand the concept of money and health care, and why at the time my mother was extremely angry with my brother and cousin. My mother got over it quickly and went back to her methodical routine, but the atmosphere of the place we lived felt ominous, as if it were trying to bring us down. I don't think I ever remember myself, my siblings, or mother laughing, which surprises me even now, years after this occurrence. I think when you constantly experience something, like the lack of laughter in our household, you become accustomed to it, and when it does happen, it feels unusual.

The lack of control I had in this situation is what blinded me—I couldn't do anything, so I didn't really care. I couldn't make my parents reconnect, or change my financial situation, so as a child

naturally does, I didn't notice the burden my mother was shouldering. As I grow older, I realize that my mother was not the same person as she is now. During this time of my childhood, she was detached, almost tending to my brother and myself as if it were a routine, more out of habit than love. I never realized the immense weight she was holding, as she was separated from her sister, her closest friend, who was living back in Pakistan. She had no one to turn to, and I'm sure it emotionally and mentally destroyed her. My father's side of the family despised her and would not help her—they were the reason for my parents' separation in the first place. As a child, I failed to see the pain behind my mother's methodical routine—as if she needed something normal and everyday that she could latch onto.

The struggling family dynamic further embedded the fear I have of my childhood because my mother and us children didn't think we were ever going to survive the situation. Fear of the unknown was a constant vibe that was instilled into my childhood—because my mother, nor my brothers or I, knew what would we do to support ourselves, as my mother didn't have an occupation, making the vibe even more tense. I think I associate this heavily with my memories of the basement because of the constant tension I felt in that place, which is where one would feel safe, in their own home, but I knew there was so much wrong with the time we spent there. Even as a teenager now, with my parents reconnected together and having my own room in a house, I still fear my past from time to time, and the broken glass from that day still haunts me as one of the most vivid things I can remember. It is a constant symbol for what I felt at the time my family was broken. Thinking back, I don't think it was right that a four year old felt this way, but the drastic change from then to now only serves as a reminder to me that what's broken doesn't always need to stay broken. However, it's not as though I would take the responsibility to glue all the broken pieces of the glass back together—that would take too long.



RACISM IN HEALTHCARE

FEDIA ARISTIDE

The most disrespected person in America is a Black woman. The most unprotected person in America is a Black woman. The most neglected person in America is a Black woman.

—Malcolm X

Have you ever been in excruciating pain, gone to the doctor's office, and the doctor brushed it off like it was nothing? That happens to plenty of women—especially Black women. During 2015-2017, the infant mortality rate (per 1,000 live births) in the United States was highest for black infants (10.7). Black women are three to four times more likely to die of pregnancy-related issues. Why, you may ask? It's because of racism in the healthcare system. This is a major issue and it's being dismissed.

Serena Williams—we all know her—but did you know that she almost died giving birth to her daughter, Olympia? Serena told Vogue in an interview that she had just had a C-section and was recovering in the hospital when she felt like she was short of breath. She told the nurse that she needed a CT scan. The nurse refused, saying she thought the pain medication was confusing her. Serena then found a doctor who would give her the CT scan, which showed that she had several blood clots in her lungs. The Washington Post published a tweet that read, “I think about high profile, multi-millionaires who have had complications with pregnancy and postpartum (Serena Williams, Beyoncé), and I'm reminded that the mortality of black mothers doesn't discriminate at all,” one user wrote on Twitter.

In 2016, the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene published an analysis of five years' worth of data, which revealed that Black college-educated mothers who gave birth in local hospitals were more likely to suffer serious pregnancy or childbirth-related complications than women of other races or ethnicities who never graduated from high school.

Another study in 2016 conducted by researchers from the University of Virginia revealed that white people are more likely than black people to be prescribed strong pain medications for similar ailments. Doctors disregard or discount complaints of pain by black patients more frequently than they do for white patients. A third of Blacks have experienced some type of discrimination in the healthcare system. Many women, especially those in underserved areas, lack physical proximity to doctors or hospital maternity wards to receive pregnancy care or deliver a baby.

There is a lack of access to health care, and poor quality of health care, among minorities; Serena Williams, a very known person in the world today, experienced pregnancy-related issues and it was fixed, but it was fixed since they had an amazing team of doctors and nurses. But not everyone can have a team like that. Some changes I'd like to see is doctor and nurses addressing the pain that women of color face and bringing more money into underserved communities so that the infant mortality rates for women of color can decrease.



THICCEND WATER | THE PLOT THICKENS

ALEXANDRIA BROOKS

You see, this summer I was just getting my life back together. I bought a planner and was getting back into chiseling away at what is the marble of self. I was commissioned by the giantess that is my heart for the last few years to help others. It was good practice, but it was an autopsy of human nature, heart and desire. My half-done statue became a fainting chair and became worse for the wear. The studio that held my statue was under fire, going diamond. Chisel set, giantess, and statute receiving 1,100 F degrees; at minimum.

Life was always stressful. But it used to be more comfortable. My boyfriend moved in with my dad, hundreds of miles away, and then my dad passed. My mother's stalker situation escalated, we had to flash move. Friendships flop, and lies that feel like fiberglass; all while *keeping it professional* with a cast of villains waging battles. How could I last? If I did not begin to center myself back on me. My dad commended me for going into business before he passed. Searing my heart more, and with all aforementioned. This heat and pressure made me weak. But I knew I had to rise to occasion as much as possible. This stressful sadness made summer days blur together, more than any summer before. I had just started the Summer Youth Employment Program 2020, which was rough for many involved. SYEP's program was jam-packed with stuff to do, and it helped me begin to start tracking the days again.

To live on the edge, proudly. Pioneering through existing, but first I had to be real and heal! I had a fried brain, and with all this above, barely sane. A planner, and journal just to start. I bought Lisa Frank stickers. I, while learning so much, was not actively holding the rings in my mind. It was emotionally based, flowing with the biggest waves of endorphins or cortisol. I had to start being self-centered. Mindfully, logically centered.

It's a Tuesday, sunset reflecting warm hues into my now working world. I'm deep into minding my own business, when my sister came into my room handing it to me. Ominous box, questionable box. For a second, I swore someone just shipped some Corona my way. Ain't nobody tell me to expect something coming. A box of chocolates disguised as an Amazon package. I opened Anxiety's box. Like a bag of chips, more air than product. Not even a fun bubble popping. No, it's AIRSPEED—for those who enjoy mini explosions. More than a few "full" bars. My frantic mind registered them as mini at first; thinking about how companies make things smaller and cheaper for them; ever so slightly where only a caring consumer will notice. I actually just bought some stuff on Amazon; it was not coming this early and was not under my name. What I ordered was sizable, long. But this little box was too small for what I ordered. The box of chocolates just by itself said so much. I felt loved, supported and—deeply worried.

Who the HELL likes me enough to send me something but say nothing? *Aaaand* knows my

address? I was stunned, stumped. Maybe I was jumping to conclusions. But they left room to hopscotch and draw on the cement, where conversation is supposed to be. A select few know my address outside of the companies that were selling my information. The box made me think of one specific person but it could've been someone else. Like anyone else, please.

But I did not want to ask around for who the hell did it. Lest someone take credit for someone's else's deed; because people like that exist. Or fishing for some odd form of attention. Sending off emails, snaps, and messages. "Did you send me chocolate?" Like what? I asked my boyfriend over text, who then immediately called back saying "Don't eat it!" If not the sweetness that he is, THEN WHO!? I never felt so pressed to know. This happened right after I reestablished my claim to sanity. Now gone to the wind.

It took me back to medieval times. A courier, just carrying the message. A confused recipient. A princess, seeing someone's claim to love or war. A recipe for a lifelong mystery. I can't say thank you. I can't even trust the gift. Which only adds on to what happened before.

Way before this chocolate incident, one free book of my choice was offered to me. And around that I was not stroking no egos ENOUGH to get two books. I was not even pushing for two books. I was very excited for the one I asked for. But still, I received two. The one I wanted and the one someone else wanted for me. Once again. No messages were left, not even a sender. Spending money on things like during QUARANTINE? Questionable indeed. And all angles can be anxiety inducing. I even went to dreams I had, profiling real-life people to futuristic blobs of dream people. Dreams do come true after all. And not all of them are good, either.

And way before Corona had our heads, another thing was left in my possession. Without a note, or a quote. Were these just unrelated events? It might not be, but will these keep happening until I say something? I was unsure whether to connect the red thread on the cork board.

Cut to the chase, bub. Is this a love story or is this a ploy to soften me up? Someone is banking on me making it more than what it is. It is in the Art of Seduction. Doing vague things so people can make their own stories; where lovers are victims. Where some are tripping, others are falling, and I'm calling life alert. Because this was anxiety inducing. Someone...plotting. Who knew? I would have to leave it as a secret password to a secret conversation. Even though I write about it and put it out there. It was generic without being simple. Like each of these things could be brushed in either direction, maybe I was already playing into someone's web. Exact, while smudging the lines. And if you are just a platonic person in my life, why the secrecy? Just why? The best thing that currently came out of this was a story to tell, and for that, I thank you. Who knew inanimate objects do speak.

THAT JOKE ISN'T FUNNY ANYMORE

ANNEMARIE ALMS

At a house in the middle of Iowa, cows struggle through the surrounding cornfields. Sweat on their hides, sunlight filtering to their hooves. And inside, Emilie, eight months pregnant, is frustrated with her knees. She never realized this before, but now, they threaten to define her. Baby knees, with terrified looks to their faces. Like babies who know they're about to be stillborn.

— John, she yells. John check your knees!

John doesn't want to hear. He's shoveling cashews between his red lips, hunched over the crossword.

— John!

So John looks at his knees, just out of the corner of his eye.

— I'm wearing jeans, I can't see em.

— But you like my knees, right?

— Sure.

— Look at my knees, John.

— Oh.

— Look at my knees.

— Well, huh. I guess I do.

— Really?

So John kisses Emilie. Yesterday, it was her fingernails. She decided that large almond shaped ones were absolutely deplorable, that hers were close enough to be called repulsive, and that John must want a divorce because of them. John mumbled some assuring thing back, but he was trying to watch football, and Emilie shot him dirty looks all night.

She's not insane, this Emilie. She's just short. A wide, square-cut face with blonde hair. John's got the stomach of a golfer, and looms like a horse over her little head.

Whenever they eat out, John speedwalks straight to the loo, just like a horse would, as if driving was as exhausting as carrying Emilie there himself.

They go to an unremarkably rustic diner. Almost engulfed by the trees that surround it, its little windows are framed by unpolished wood. Emilie's too shy to check in on her own. She stands by the bathroom, fumbling in her pockets for something to throw away. There's a table to her left, there, a woman dressed in black eats a fry by fractions. Breaking into it with increasingly smaller bites. The woman in black stares at a little man sitting in front of her. A man in black looking at his hands, laced on top of a book many hundred pages too long. Tolstoy? Dickens, possibly? It's a car manual. The man sips his coffee, defeated.

“Hi!” Emilie waves at them. The woman in black, her eyes widen, “Hi?”

Emilie smiles, throwing a wrapper away and waiting by the bathroom. The woman in black looks on. “I’m sorry, do I know you?”

Emilie looks up. “Oh, no. Just saying hi, being polite,” she chuckles. Funny how oblivious tourists can be—and they’re obviously tourists, unnerved at complete strangers saying Hello. As if that logic, whatever it was, defied explanation. “You must be travelling, right?” Emilie pursues.

— Yes.

— Where are you coming from?

The man in black looks up from the table.

— New York, he says. The slopes of a British accent roll off his tongue.

— And where are you headed?

“Here,” the woman in black says. Her hands need a cigarette. “Or someplace thereabouts.”

— You’re lost?

— Not in a traditional sense, no.

“Ah, well,” Emilie says. Just as the man in black interjects.

— Actually, you might be able to help.

John finally leaves the bathroom. He doesn’t ask questions when Emilie introduces the couple in black. Or when they invite him to sit down. To listen. With a car manual there on the table, he figures it’s a mechanical issue he could easily solve and, hopefully, make some money with—ever the practical man.

These days, Emilie just likes being spontaneous and sits down with startling enthusiasm.

The woman in black picks at her blacker fingernails, “I’m a poet and my husband is British. A poet too, to be exact. Coming back home, one night, we’re in the subway. Completely alone, I might add. Which is strange enough since it wasn’t even that late.”

The man in black interrupts.

— Yes, and the car, the subway car itself didn’t reek either. Which, I think, is even more incredible. We landed ourselves in a legendary train. A mythos, more than just the stuff of fantasy. But as it is, so it goes, this subway. The stations we stop at, on and on. When, suddenly, we stop. The lights go out too, which is no big deal. This is the MTA after all, to be irritating is its lifeblood. The legendary train must return to its fictional state, really, too good to be true.

— Only, it goes on for too long. The announcer doesn’t say a word, so, we’re sitting there, mired in darkness. A little light from down the tunnel distantly touches the orange seats. In this light, they’re like chrysanthemums. The color of dying Spring, it’s like, we’ve made ourselves a garden alone.

— Metal beauty. You might even call it peaceful. But we want to be home and it’s gone on for too long. 10 minutes. 20 minutes. We’ve been in this purgatory state for half an hour. Maybe this was that same, elongated silence the 7/7 bombers intended. Terrorists wouldn’t target a near-empty train, but it’s an idea. It doesn’t make sense, but with the idea seeded, now, the silence is terror. I head to the doors, the emergency exits facing the next car down. It won’t budge. I’m pulling my

weight against the thing, my fingers almost ingrained within the metal handle.

— But then, all at once, there's that anticipating hum before the engines start off again. Just as the lights turn on the announcer says, in this gruff, classic New York way: "The best café is in the middle of Iowa."

— The train moves on as if nothing happened, and we sit, trying to make sense of it all. If anything can make sense. But, we figure, it's too specific. Too extraordinary to be a joke. It's some command, maybe, some divine advice. Something we can't shake out of ourselves till we act on it.

— So the next day, we fly out to Des Moines. Rent a car and drive around the very middle. Who knows? If anything, we figured it would be an adventure.

Emilie and John look at the couple in black like children in divorce court. Hopelessly bewildered, in every sense of the word. And John can't help being disappointed. "Well, I'm really sorry," he ventures. "I dunno much about cafés. Let alone whatever 'the best' would be."

— Oh.

— You're in my best guess, right now. The coffee's pretty decent here.

— Ah. It is, yes.

The man in black takes another sip.

— That's why we're here. We've been bumming around different places, establishments, trying to find it.

— Does this hit the bar? You like the coffee.

— Yes, it's good. Very good, even. But I'd never call it the best.

So the search continued to consume the couple in black.

It began last week, when they drove a red car out of Des Moines. Due north, listening to Morrissey.

— He was in Indiana once, filming the music video for Suedehead.

The woman's cigarette glowed in the car's dark ambience.

— Are you saying we're in good company?

— No, I don't think so. James Dean isn't buried here.

Cornfields roll past the window, the tops of their yellow heads etched by the car's light. The sound of crickets was almost oppressive. Leaking through, whenever they stopped.

— Go figure. We're insane!

The day before that was the subway incident. And right before that, they were coming from a café. An open mic night revered by all artists, somewhere below 42nd. The woman in black walked on. She wanted to feel her words leap from the page, structured by an audience that would criticize and help her finish them.

That night, the poem felt insidious. Some words, thick and slanted, barely balanced against a wiry phrase. So as she spoke, they collapsed. Her words hit the floor. She wanted to swallow

back the air they travelled with, but poetry should be read aloud. Painful, the principle goes. Her poems were tumors bulging out of her side. Becoming the skilled surgeon, there's the ultimate hope. Carve them out and the world would evaporate in their beauty. But until then, her life was consumed by the poem.

She was an undone poem and tonight was botched surgery.

The audience sipped whiskey, their guests cradled cappuccinos with their polished hands. Snaps. Cheers for the poet. But the man in black wouldn't stop clapping.

— Stop, please.

— Ah, why? You were alright.

She sat next to him. A table that escaped the room's limelight.

— No, that was terrible.

— No, it's just not finished yet.

— Well. Maybe I should make like you do.

The man in black preferred to polish his poems as neatly as he could. A casual performance like this would be insurance, whereas the woman craved feedback.

— But I'm English. You're the American!

— That's not a compliment.

The man in black almost choked on his laughter.

After a while, this tipsy English professor waddled on. He recited Byron but insisted that he had written the verse himself. The audience, the couple in black among them, burst into a clamor of disapproving laughter. The professor bawled his eyes out and refused to leave. Snaps. Cheers for the poet.

John meanwhile, 1,000 miles away, was checking under the hood of a much fatter man. Nuts and bolts, a simple mechanical error. You, sir, you should consider buying a new car.

— Gimme the money and I'll consider it.

Laughter in moonlight.

— \$40, sir.

— Here. You have a nice night now.

A mechanic, John loved the tail end of chatter after helping clients. It was a relieved sigh, exasperated thanks. You saved my ass.

Thank you. Make a little difference. He'd wipe his hands and stare into the pavement below. Just out of the corner of his eye, the red bend of his Chevrolet reflecting streetlamps behind him.

At home, Emilie was organizing laundry. Humming Carrie Underwood like the little song had always been inside her. Pouring out, natural as breath, while crickets chirped from outside in. A constant applause.

A week later and the couples share the same table. Silence had laid heavy since the couple in black explained everything and John failed to help. It was the awkward-winded waiting before

anyone got up. And no one wants to be the first, of course. That meant your voice booming in contrast to the quiet standstill of before, which seemed rude. Trumpian, even.

John helps the woman in black with her fries and she thanks him as if it were a favor.

— Well, uh. Yeah.

Emilie's had it.

— You know, it's so stuffy in here, I think I need some fresh air. I'm sorry, it was so nice meeting you. Good luck with everything.

Yes, yes of course. It was nice to meet you too! The man in black helps Emilie up and there's that general clamor surrounding pregnant women in public.

It's dusk. Outside, the sun's last dying rays puncture the world around them. The cornfields come across as gold. "A beautiful sunset, John. Look!"

"Yeah."

"Isn't it wonderful?"

"Yeah."

Emilie smiles. John's not expressive, she knows, but he appreciates beauty all the same. Cows moo, off in the distance. "And what'd you think?"

"What?"

"About them." Emilie motions to the building behind her, and through a window, the silhouette of a couple.

"Well, it is what it is." The sound of cows grows closer. "They'll go even crazier if they're not back in New York soon." Moo.

Moo. "Ha! For sure," Emilie consolidates. "Or Chicago, at least." Moo, moo.

A dozen cows walk by in formation, two rows of six. A flat building rests on top of their hides, more like a single room with windows on every side. It's an old wooden structure, this mobile building.

The cows' spit drips to the dirt below. And inside, tables and chairs ramble against a floor moving as the cows shift their shoulders. Elastic.

John thought he caught a glimpse of Charles Dickens sipping a cappuccino inside. The foam stuck to his mustache and a small woman chuckled. John looked again and Dickens was smudged. His entire face, an abstraction that spread to his waistcoat and pants below. The small woman had a bonnet, this Jane Austen type. Or Anne Brontë. Charlotte?

Emilie thought it was a puzzling face, whoever it belonged to. But when she tried to break apart its details, nothing was obvious. Everything blended into each other. Into milk, color and skin.

The only consistent form was Lord Byron, who was laying on the roof, passed out drunk. He pissed his pants and the yellow stream was leaking into the room below, that was certain. Empty glasses clinked with his boots in the open breeze. The café moved on, merging with the foliage. Overcome with darkness.



A REFLECTION FOR FAMILY

NAYSA HARRAWAY

I love the feeling of being on the track, as my legs take over and become the main engine of function. Track is something I do just because, with different motivation behind it than I have with other activities. As an athletic person, I grew up on sports. I had a competitive nature, and I liked to be challenged. For me, it was the mental aspect that kept me drawn to track for four years, the ability to get on the track every day and fight out each stride like it was my last. Every runner knows her physical body can give up on her at any moment, but it is how she moves mentally that makes her successful at the finish line. To hear coaches, teammates, the crowd, and even competitors screaming every time your foot takes a step makes you feel alive and awake. Your body is locked and loaded, but it is your brain that has to go faster, pass her, and cross that big white line.

We are a small team with about 40 girls. We go toe to toe with teams of 60 boys and girls, and that is scary, but we dominate the Queens Public School Athletic League for Track and Field. We are a force to be reckoned with. All through the fall and early winter, we spent Monday through Thursday practicing in any weather: rain, snow, cold, heat, even hail. It took perseverance, grit, and hard work to practice in these conditions. We fought every day to keep going, to push ourselves to the limit no matter what it cost us in the end. And in the end, all we have and had is each other. We are the ones who hold it together for our teammates when they don't have any motivation, when life is taking over and pushing track aside. We cheer the loudest for one another, even those who are in last place—not because we have to but because we want to. It's who we are: we show up for one another in every way possible.

As one of the leaders of the team, our fate is in my hands. But in March of 2020, COVID-19 took away my team. What really hurt was that we weren't just coaches and teammates, we were a family. Now, COVID has strained our bonds, not only within our team but in our larger community as well. I don't hear my parents and siblings saying "MOOOOVVEEE" from the bleachers anymore, or rush to get me and give me food and water when I am tired after a race. I don't see my coach's kids running to the car with us just to see who is faster. My teammates and I don't have the connection of being in each other's presence, and it affects our bonds as sisters. Our lives, our athletic careers, our team, our sport, and our family is uncertain, and that's something that frightens us the most about COVID; it is taking away things from us that has taken years for us to build.

We are in a war against this virus, but I refuse to let this virus determine our fate. Due to COVID, we have lost our way temporarily. So the question is: how do I lead a team that is up against all possible odds? I have the responsibility to make sure the team returns in the fall and to make sure we can recruit a new set of girls to add to our team and our family. No matter what we go through, we have the ability to weather this storm because our bonds and relationships with each other as sisters will always conquer. These are the times we need each other the most. Though we will need to rebuild the structures of our practices and competitions, I know we are prepared for the challenge to make sure our family will prosper for years to come.

PHOTOGRAPHS FROM QUARANTINE







MIDLIFE PANDEMIC CRISIS

MAHAM RAHMAN

I've been living within my room's four walls for far too long. I know every inch and crevice of it now. The lonely corner between my door and wall where I sit and pretend I'm being embraced by another human being. Holed up here, I've lain on every flat surface, from the bed to the cold hardwood floor to my table. I am trying to see if I can erase my unhealthy feelings about myself by just listening to my breathing. I think it might have made it worse. I see the sunshine seep into the corners of my bed and floor as I lay still, unable to sleep, unable to focus on one single thought. Why is it that light—something so pure—makes me feel like crawling under the covers and never getting up, craving to ignore how life has become nowadays, my life? When we see others thriving, happily living their lives, it's enough to make us realize how disappointing and pointless our existence really is.

I've always been a homebody, never one to go out every night, but I had a circle that understood me and respected what I wanted. I never realized how lucky I was until all of a sudden no one was there and I was encompassed by deafening silence and loneliness. Going from having these people as constants in my life to mere names behind a screen. I now see nothing but my delivered texts in our once active chats. The three little dots that I once jumped for are at this time nowhere to be seen. These people who I've given myself to are gone and I don't know what caused them all to go away. How did our life together just fizzle away? One person in particular, who I thought was my best friend, has simply disappeared. I thought I had found someone whom I could talk to about anything. I thought she would always be there for me. I was mistaken. Without the current state of the world, I would have remained oblivious to the toxicity of our relationship.

When people address Covid-19, they usually say it's the worst pandemic to have hit our world after the SARS one, in 2002. Would it be insensitive to believe the pandemic is a blessing in disguise? Considering all the lives lost, the families ruined, the businesses gone, and the current state of our world right now? Yeah, I thought so. No matter, thinking of it as a glass half full may make sense. I've learned who are my true friends and who are the people whom I need to stay away from. Being lonely can be healing. And being lonely is not necessarily a bad thing; it's just a reality for most folks, especially now that this virus is embedded in every aspect of our lives so deeply.

If the family that is stuck in a house together for over five months has not gotten any closer, you might finally come to the conclusion that blood doesn't always mean family. The love we supposedly feel might only be an obligation to people who couldn't care less if you live or die. This virus has shone a light on things that I've always tried to hide. The feeling that perhaps the people I love don't deserve the love I give. The idea that I have an obligation to myself, to seek and be put first. Just as the virus cleansed many places of the Earth from pollution, it has cleansed my psyche and enlightened me on what I have to do and what should come next.

I was happy before the pandemic, or, more specifically, I was stable. I may have unraveled a bit after being by myself for so long. But it was something that needed to happen for me to realize what I've taken for granted and what I've put way too much weight on. The past me probably would be disgusted by how I live my life now, and I wouldn't blame her. I definitely believe I peaked in middle school, if that's even possible. My life was at an all-time high when I knew what my purpose was and what I was working towards. Once you get older, your priorities change, and who you are is not always crystal clear. All I know is that I'm not the same person I was before, and I'm not entirely sure if that's a good or bad thing.

Time is a human construct and I promised myself I wouldn't let life pass me by anymore. That is kinda hard to do when you are stuck at home all day, when night and day seem to have lost all meaning. But if you stop making yourself the protagonist of this story called life, then life will pass you by with nothing to show for it. If you care about that sort of thing, you know, leaving a legacy for strangers to remember your name. I never used to care about others knowing me, but ever since I've seen how fleeting everything can be, I think it could be better to be in a room full of strangers who adore you than to remain with a few people who truly know you. Maybe, just maybe, you will be able to ignore that nagging feeling that they don't necessarily like what they see. Are we really that evolved? Even after surviving a global pandemic, I doubt I will have the confidence to put myself out there, with all my lingering insecurities, as I try to take the first step and get pulled back the moment before I step down.

OUR EDUCATION, OUR VOICES

OLIVIA LEON

In New York City, a school year spans across ten months. One hundred eighty days of school, and two months each year to plan, and still we find ourselves unsatisfied. The curriculum in New York City schools encourages analysis and deeper understanding, then skids around ‘tough’ topics. It advocates for inclusivity and diversity and dismisses underrepresentation. It has teachers worrying about political biases and feeding students only half the narrative. With this, New York City public schools have one of the most diverse student bodies, and yet manage to get away without diverse representation in the curriculum.

“The Yellow Wallpaper.” A story used in classrooms across high schools. A story to be heard by the women of any generation. The beginnings of feminism. The short story receives raving reviews from teachers all over the country, and students applaud author Charlotte Perkins Gilman for writing her brave piece in such a conservative time. The first time I read this text, I was writing essays about it in my high school AP Language and Composition class. It being a feminist literary theory class, we were analyzing her rhetoric and idolizing her character. It was the perfect representation of feminist issues. We like to read texts like these—texts that protagonize, texts that antagonize, texts that are black and white. But in reality, issues this significant are never so straightforward. Gilman was known for advocating for feminist issues, but less commonly known were her exclusionary feminist ideals. She advocated for the rights of white women but turned her back on women of color. Now, given the time period, this was not uncommon—unjustifiable, but not uncommon. And while this does not invalidate any of the struggles Gilman spoke to, this should warrant the discussion of exclusionary feminism in the classroom. It should warrant change. We cannot use a text published in 1892 and discuss it in the same manner for over a century. We can only initiate change for the future once we acknowledge the flaws of the past.

Not only have the discussions around texts been limited, but so have the texts themselves. When we look at the materials students are given in schools, we must ask: why this text? Why was this text chosen over thousands of others to set the standards for our understanding of the world? With one hundred eighty days of school and such limited time, why was this chosen as the most beneficial example? This not only applies to English classes and novels, but to history classes and textbooks as well. The true narratives are not those of fiction, but real life. Approved by the College Board, *The American Pageant* has been used in Advanced Placement United States History classes dating back to the 1950s. The book uses biracial slurs and sugarcoats African enslavement, and it is still deemed appropriate for teaching U.S. history. Brant Zheng, a high school senior, said, “I wish that the US History curriculum wasn’t that white washed or presented America like a star dish on a platter or something. All of my teachers thankfully, have kept it real and gave us additional information beyond what the curriculum is. I want more teachers to do the same. Like my US history teacher consistently brings up the side of history, the way it’s written, then talks about

it from the perspective of various minority groups such as women, black individuals, and LGBT, and some Asian and Indian groups, as well.” High school senior Lauren Chin similarly said, “In AP US History and other history classes we don’t really learn about other groups of history. We need to talk about other stories from other people of color.” Teachers should not have to stray off the beaten path to teach their students about diverse perspectives. The curriculum should be able to reflect that in itself.

Surpassing humanities classes, these exclusionary and misrepresentational teachings are woven throughout various subjects. “In astronomy, we only learn about white men. We don’t learn about



the contributions people of color have made to astronomy,” Lauren continued.

Our schools’ ultimate goals are to prepare students for the ‘real world’ and to better the next generation. Education is all about perspective, which makes it exceptionally difficult for students to make informed decisions in the ‘real world,’ without ever having been given the full picture. Topics such as exclusionary feminism are necessities in a feminist class. With such diversity in New York City schools alone, our classes should represent those diverse voices and issues. According to the New York City Council, only 15 percent of New York City public school students were white, making 85 percent of the student body people of color. Student Eric Liu emphasizes the diversity in his school. “I had a project in my history class where people talked a little about their family history or culture and everyone had a unique story. Everyone had their own distinct story about their family’s immigration, family’s culture, family’s cuisine, and even music. Everyone had backgrounds from across the globe,” he says. It’s important for students to feel represented, as well as to understand other people’s cultures and histories. Diverse stories and voices need to be actively taught and displayed throughout classes, and throughout the year.

Education should not be an exclusionary process. Exclusionary feminism, or exclusionary history for that matter, is such a major issue even to this day, in order for the next generation to take action against such issues, they cannot not be excluded nor dismissed. Students across the city look for more in their classes. “Exposure and understanding is the best way to prevent racism intentionally or subconsciously (through how we intake society’s messages). Of course, history class highlights it, and I feel privileged to have such awesome teachers who constantly talk about diversity in history class, but it’s lackluster if existent at all in most classes,” New York City High School senior Nafsa Raisa says. Even without such content, curriculums should be responsible for facilitating discussions surrounding these issues. Diverse representation should not have to be a privilege.

In a popular video, Prince Ea shows pictures of a phone, a car, and a classroom 150 years ago and today, with the classroom being the only one that still looks the same. “Now ain’t that a shame in literally more than a century, nothing has changed. Yet you claim to prepare students for the future? But with evidence like that do you prepare students for the future or the past?” he says. Schools across the state tell the histories of the winners, the struggles of the privileged, and the voices of the heard. It’s time to flip the narrative, and truly educate the next generation of students.



WAVERLY TAKAYAMA

6:30 p.m.

She was getting anxious. She scared herself into thinking that because of what she had done, she wouldn't get any options. She wondered if the person, thing or whatever it was that gave these options knew that she did what she had to, to survive.

“The Jacobs.”

“Close your eyes stupid.” The voice went on, but this time Rose felt force on her body it felt like she couldn’t move at all. Her eyes got heavy without even being tired. She was in her own mind, with some voice?

“Who are you?!” Rose screamed. All she saw was darkness, not even her own hands.

Rose nodded, although she wasn't sure if the woman sounding voice could see her.

Rose tried moving even her legs, she didn't want to talk about this, and not to a total stranger at that. It was because deep inside she knew the Jacobs were harmless, sad and grieving. The guilty feeling ate up at Rose, but she tried to forget it, forget them.

“Was there any more to this story of yours, anything more you would like to say to the

Jacobs if you could?" The voice asked. Rose felt her heart beat faster, she felt her palms sweat and hairs stand up on her neck. The guilt, the fear of having to see them again after leaving them even when she knew how hurt they were. She didn't know if it made them feel like they lost two children.

"I'm sorry," was all Rose could say. "I'm so sorry."

8:30 p.m.

She woke up on the road. Her head spinning with confusion. Where were her options? Where was that voice and who was it? The rain was still falling, and the day didn't get any brighter. A car was coming. She moved on the sidewalk, but it was still coming straight for her, until the headlights came so close she had to shield her eyes.

The car never came in contact, and she no longer felt her wet clothes on her body. Her eyes opened, too scared to see if she was in heaven. The ground around her was dry, somewhere in a rural area, not completely countryside but not in the city. Then she saw the sign:

Sunshine Foster Home

Her knees went weak. She covered her mouth as her legs hit the ground. Why was she here, out of all of the places, why here? Hands touched her shoulders. Rose couldn't turn around. It was like there was a force not allowing her to.

"You know this place, right?" it was that same voice. She knew it was a woman now. Her long black hair and pink painted, slender nails were one of the few things Rose could see of her.

"Please take me away from here," she cried. The woman pointed, and three children came out of the home.

"Tony and Jessica, and little you," the woman said. "Today is that day."
"No." Rose tried to run to her younger self before she could pull out those stupid papers, but the women wouldn't let go.

"I just found them, and I thought... well I thought you should see them," her younger self stuttered.

Rose watched Tony's face drop as he read the papers. The documents that showed his real family: killers, murderers, psychos. She was so young, and she didn't know that when being a foster kid, the idea of what your real parents were like was all you had at first. Now, Tony had just been told he came from evil, he came from monsters. He had nothing. If little Rose knew what she had done, she wouldn't have stopped Tony going out to "clear his head," she wouldn't have told Jessica it was better for him to be alone, and that they shouldn't go after him. She would have stopped every damn car on that road, every drunk driver that night.

"NO!" Rose cried and screamed as she watched Tony walk off into the night and herself and Jessica go back inside. "Go after him! Please go save him. Save him please!"

10:00 p.m.

She woke up, tears running down her face again, hoping that was the last of it. The last memory she had to see, and that she had her options right on her wrist.

"Come on!" she gripped her arm, speaking to it as if it would answer, "please, please give

me something...help me.”

She covered her mouth as those words escaped her lips. Help me. Rose hung her head low now. Memories from times she didn't want to ever remember came back. She wished that, like all the other memories she had when she was seven, this would go away. But this one always stayed burned into the back of her mind.

The policemen, firefighters, teachers, classmates, Jessica and Tony, hell, even the Jacobs told her it wasn't her fault. The same line over and over again:

“It was a fire, sweetie, it's okay, you know it wasn't your fault, right?”

They didn't hear the screams. Rose crawled out of the doggy door as her family burned and cried for help. Her mother, her father, her brother all trapped in that house, forever. Where was the rain then?

“Help me! God please help us!” over and over. Rose didn't do anything. She froze, watching her house burn as her family called for help. Rose believed she was the help. She was the only one who could've done something but did absolutely nothing. She looked around for that woman to come and drag her back to that fire years ago and make her feel guilty, but she never showed.



11:48 p.m.

Her birthday was almost over, in 12 minutes to be exact. By now Rose had convinced herself that she simply did not deserve those two magical options. She had done nothing to deserve them. Rose had decided that tomorrow morning she would just turn herself in. She was so tired of running and was no longer in the age group for foster care. In other words, she was giving up.

“It is easier this way, for everyone” she said to herself, fully convinced that she was ready to give up, but she was still crying. The rain was harder than ever and the day was ending in, currently, six minutes now. She really hated the rain.

Rose shut her eyes, hoping to at least be able to sleep.

“Get Up.” It was that woman.

“Rose wake up.” Rose felt the woman’s hands on her wrist. She looked the woman in the eye and felt this fire sting through her body.

She was looking at herself. The woman was much older, but it was definitely herself. The long black hair, the almond brown eyes, her tiny figure, it was all her.

“What is happening?” Rose’s voice was no louder than a whisper. Her body was shaking with fear, but it made sense now. This woman was so understanding of what she had done to the Jacobs, she wanted her to see Tony and Jessica to remember them, but the fire... that was too painful for the both of them.

The woman smiled like she heard every thought inside her younger self’s head. Her hand moved from Rose’s wrist, and there lay the two options:

“Stop the rain, or Start life over.”

PLUS MINUS

WAVERLY TAKAYAMA

Take one
Lose one
That is the game we play
The game we live

Fight for them
But beat yourself up
The daily routine
You know it

Aren't you tired?
"Can't I save everyone?"
You don't know the rules
Plus minus

You can't win
You survive
Take one
Lose one



THE DEPTH OF LIFE

ALEXANDRIA BROOKS

Do you know how many neurons you're mirroring with your family with us all being so deep into quarantine? Or how many times you've opened your "just checking" app? While you could find the answer to that second question on your phone. The former could also be found on your phone too.

It's interesting that all this is available to help solve our life problems, but many never come to dig deep enough. The internet is something we can still take for granted now, as we are also being granted hours of unlimited novelty. But it has been an ocean of information and passionate people can get their hands on it.

With every idea I have, there truly seems to be an infinite pool of things to do within it. As I try to speak on anxiety, I already feel the need to then explain the human's natural inclination to negative scenarios, proven forms of intuition, and the programming of our minds, along with trauma, attachment styles, and the layers of our mind. And this is in the mind of humans alone.

In my quest for knowledge, I've found the answers to life proven across the board in different ways. The cult in culture and the unconscious and conscious perpetuation of healthy and unhealthy lifestyles. Many cures to things called incurable. The way the educational system is set up as long— as you have an unpleasant experience with learning, there's a great chance you won't come to learn how you could honestly change your life.

There is a depth to life and a price to be paid for its answers. The apps of our phones show us that money isn't the only currency. You can pay in time, money, or whatever fits your self-fulfilling prophecies. The possibilities are endless.



MICHELLE SANDY

I immediately hoped that the cries weren't from Theo's unit. His younger brother, Jackson, relied on medications that aided his breathing problems.

I noticed the outline of this week's box through a little window at the bottom of our door. I poured out my textbooks and my tablet from my government-issued backpack and started sneaking in old dry foods. I froze in my tracks after hearing footsteps in the distance.

“It’s early. I’m getting some cereal ready for breakfast.” I was fortunate enough to have been holding a box of bran as I responded, but Elaine could see through anything. To be fair, this sort of thing didn’t take a detective to figure out. I normally wake up at eight on weekdays, as does everyone in my unit but my father, who leaves the house at three to go to work.

“Do you know anything about who it is this week? I just worry that it might be his family and—”

She brought up a valid point, but it wasn't one I wanted to listen to. I started to make my way towards my room. Although it wasn't actually every week, I often assumed that Theo's unit lacked a supply box every time I heard anything from our cluster. Even if it didn't make that much of a difference, I'd skip my recommended cereal breakfast just so Theo could have more. Just in case. I'd rummage through the larder and our leftovers before leaving at eight. Usually, Theo and I would eat on his backyard porch before heading to school, and after he'd shown me his family had received their own weekly supply box.

I rang Theo's doorbell. I was surprised to get greeted by him, but also caught the supply box from the kitchen island that sat behind his doorway.

"Well, at least I'm not wearing my uniform on no-uniform day, you dork."

Theo took one look behind his door and saw that today was October 6th, 2104. He let

out a groan. This must have been the ninth time this year I caught him with a blazer on a first Tuesday.

“Ugh, I’ll be back in a sec. You can sit by the kitchen table since Jack insists on only eating in the dining room. Don’t get started on breakfast without me!”

Today was rather brisk, so sitting outside was out of the question. I started arranging the food from my bag and found myself looking through the kitchen window. The window faced the house on the left, and I made eye contact with a boy in a black crewneck sweater I thought I’d seen before in school. He immediately reached to the corner of the window and pulled down his blinds.

I remember Elaine instructing me to close our blinds when we didn’t get our supply box a year ago. I took a look at Theo’s family’s box. His household consisted of four people, just like mine, except Theo’s mother was expecting a daughter next month. I figured that half of the supplies I brought could be good for Theo’s family and our breakfast, but the other half could be for the family next door. Could it be that they were without one this week?

I sifted through the food in my backpack. I put aside two boxes of muffins and instant coffee packs and gathered the rest of the supplies in a paper bag. Theo was still upstairs, and the coast was clear, so I went through his backdoor and quickly dropped the supplies over the white fence, into that boy’s backyard. I caught him smiling from his backdoor before I went back inside.

I didn’t want Theo to notice what I had just done. At least not yet. Sure, about half of the supplies that were overflowing from my backpack were gone, but he’d respond better to an explanation rather than the action itself.

“Theo, hurry up! We’re going to be late!” A bit of a lie, but I thought it would be better to get started on our walk to school. For us, school normally started at 0930, but since we’re getting closer to getting assigned our career paths and third schools, we started having school assemblies at 0900.

“You’re exaggerating, but alright.” I started to hear his footsteps, so I quickly packed my bag and started getting our breakfast ready. We could drink our coffee here and eat some muffins on the way to school.

“Woah, what happened to all of the supplies? Weren’t they—”

“I’ll explain later, finish your coffee. We’ll eat muffins on our way to school.” I took four muffins from one of the boxes before placing it in his pantry. I took a quick look to make sure I wasn’t leaving anything important before we got on our way. A while passed before either of us said anything. I’d normally poke fun at how messy his blond curls were or how his shoelaces were untied, but today was dead silent until Theo finally spoke up.

“Okay, so what was that all about?”

“I said I’d tell you—”

“No, now.” Theo stopped me, forcing me to properly recap what happened, or rather what I thought happened. Oh boy.

“I saw one of your neighbors close all of their blinds. Unit 929. I gave them some food over the fence in case they didn’t get their crate.”

“You risked a code violation for the Sherman unit?”

“If that’s the house to your left, then yeah.”

That surname rang a bell, though I couldn’t pinpoint who it was. I supposed that I could be on the lookout for this Sherman boy during today’s assembly.

We walked in silence. This wasn’t like Theo. We’d usually talk about tasks from the day or weekend before, silly things our siblings had said, or pranks we could pull on them.

“We got here way too early,” mumbled Theo as we approached the main entrance of the school building. He seemed far from his usual cheerful self. I don’t know if it was the fact that I gave food away or the fact that I gave it to the Shermans that irked him, but I was starting to get annoyed at him. He usually didn’t mind the idea of giving supplies, even when there were codes written against doing so.

“I’m sorry that your version of ‘early’ is two minutes late.” More silence. I thought I really messed this one up before he let out a laugh and gave me a playful shove as we scanned our badges and made our way to the auditorium.

I took a look at one of the hallway clocks, and we were about twenty minutes early. Theo and I sat in the back row near the entrance. He pulled out some math homework that had last Saturday’s date stamped on the upper right corner. While he worked on the assignment that was due in about two hours, I kept my eyes on auditorium doors hoping to see Theo’s neighbor.

Twenty minutes passed. I didn’t see the Sherman boy, but Theo somehow got his homework done, and we made a bet on how many spelling errors we’d see during this assembly’s slide presentation. The presentations were led by students from neighboring third schools. I remember Elaine telling me how relieved she was when her instructor didn’t pick her to be part of the group in charge of leading the assemblies. Before her instructor conducted an in-class lottery for said group at the start of the school year, I remember Theo begging me for permission to be able to make fun of Elaine if she made any mistakes.

Today’s assembly outlined what our assignments were based on, meaning that Theo and I would actually have to pay attention. The Committee had an elaborate process when it came to one’s future career, and I guess this presentation was made to show that decisions weren’t random. Assignments were, more often than not, related to who you were matched with for your future family. You’d either get the same assignment branch as your parents or you’d get the same assignment branch as your future partner, even if you wouldn’t know who it was until your penultimate year of third school.

Despite the fact that the Committee ensured that everyone knew about the processes behind assignments, there were still families that would fight and want to take their cases to the highest Committee sectors when their children would get an assignment branch other than theirs.

After the presentation, we were off to class. Theo went downstairs for swimming lessons,

and I made my way to my biology class. We got pretty unlucky with class schedules this year, with our only overlapping blocks being lunch and writing process. I had trouble focusing throughout my morning classes. The only class that really stuck was Community History, which might have been due to the fact that it's a required course every year for all schools. I had Mr. Brott again this year, and today's lesson regarding the 2030s was nearly identical to last year's. Today marked the eighth time that I would learn about earthquakes, plagues, and the Northern War.

After hearing Mr. Brott's lecture on how the Northern War could've been prevented, I made my way to the cafeteria. Theo was standing by the double doors when I got there, and I tried to find the Sherman boy in the crowded hallway. I must have been too obvious, as Theo had a bit of a frown and looked...disappointed?

"Why are you still looking for him? You already did what you did."

"Why not? I just want to see if he's alright."

"Even if he isn't, he still has to come to school to avoid breaking the code. Besides, he wouldn't be in the cafeteria if he didn't get a crate. We have these." Theo pointed to his student badge.

He was right. In order to enter the cafeteria in the first place, we had to scan our student badges. If the scanner emitted a green light, that meant that the student's household received a crate that week, and that they were able to receive a cafeteria meal. A security guard stood by the scanner to ensure that students whose scanners emitted red lights were kept out of the cafeteria. To make lunch more secure, there was an additional scanner at the counter where you'd pick up your assigned meal.

As we walked towards the food counter, we claimed the edge of a long table. The line stretched just before the cafeteria exit, and just as we made our way to the end of the line, two watchmen caught up with us and stopped Theo. Everyone on the lunch line turned their attention and got quiet, and I stood frozen.

"Theodore Hall, you are to be detained for the violation of code 7436. Surrender your student badge."

"I didn't do anything wrong. I didn't do anything at—"

"The watch has video footage that can prove otherwise, Mr. Hall. You are being taken into custody, and that's final. The front door's that way."

I watched in horror as Theo's wrists were handcuffed. Code 7436. That was the code that prohibited sharing supplies to a household without a crate. They were taking the wrong person, and no words could leave my mouth. As the watchmen escorted him towards the cafeteria entrance, I saw him mouth "stay." I wanted to run after them, but that would only make things worse. I had to remain in school in order to avoid violating code 2802, which prevented me from skipping any classes without a valid excuse. After eating lunch by myself, I was considering going to the nurse in hopes that I could get sent home, but sneaking off to the watch building would be impossible, and I could get caught.

I was restless throughout my remaining classes and tried looking away from Theo's empty desk in writing process. When the clocks finally hit four, I ran to the watch building to ask for Theo at the front desk. Based on what we learned during our "community codes" classes, I knew

he'd likely be detained until the end of an investigation, which would take at least a week. If he were proven guilty, then his sentence would be anywhere from one to three years, and the code violation could prevent him from getting assigned a career path, or anything for that matter. I put all of my worries aside and asked the guard sitting behind a covered computer.

"Excuse me. Is there a Theodore Hall currently in custody?" The guard gave me a tired look before he began typing.

"Nope." I didn't quite expect a monosyllabic answer, but I reworded the question.

"Was there a Theodore Hall in custody at all today?"

"There are no records with his name."



A LETTER TO MY LOVE

NAYSA HARRAWAY

"A picture is worth a thousand words" but the important missing factor is the eyes behind it
You stare me down with those beautiful brown eyes to tell me how much you love me
Our eyes lock with each other to tell our story of love but
The tension from across the room makes the vibrations of the speaker shake even louder
Our bodies started to sync from across the room and the waves of our movements create a new wavelength only you and I are on
Nobody is able to understand how deep our love really goes, deeper than the roots of nature
We make our way across the room to meet in the center of the crowd
Tuning out the distractions, your hands curve out the imperfections of my body
Your fingertips worship my face over and over
Soon enough our bodies inch closer and closer to the false lie we've been living in
Our melanin lips crashes creating a magical and electrical high
My exploration of your mouth fools me into the trap of your twisted and mysterious ways
The tunnel of my deep rooted love slaps me in the face for being foolish
To think I could love someone
To think I could be loved by someone
My savage instinct pulls me away from you
Running and stumbling into an empty hole that catches my jaded heart from your hurt
Quick on your feet, you run after me in hope it will all be okay again
As I stop you collide into me from your fast paced running
I stare you down with my beautiful scared eyes to tell you how much I love you
Even after the countless times of hurt and inflicted pain
I still hold onto you from a distance
I still love you from a distance
To my love
Our bodies might still long for each other
Our hearts might still be in love for each other
Our souls might still be connected to each other
To my love until we meet again.



RECOGNIZE AND PROTECT TRANSGENDER RIGHTS

FRIDA ESPINOSA

The transgender community is a dynamic and very diverse one that has always been around, but it hasn't been acknowledged enough until recently. Today's media has begun to give transgender people fairer and more thoughtful representation. The entertainment business brought us Laverne Cox, Caitlyn Jenner, Chaz Bono, Angelica Ross and many more. They are finally being given the attention they deserve. This has helped create more open mindedness. I personally have been exposed to the community at a young age through entertainment, digital media, and social media. I have grown to understand and embrace the community that I once did not know or understand. Today, many transgender people have a voice that is being heard. Other people too are beginning to better understand the community and their struggles.

The community's rights are gradually being taken into account in politics and are debated frequently. They often have to fight for legal protection. State legislators across the U.S. are debating whether to allow transgender people access to public bathrooms that parallel their gender identity. Many members of the public are still prejudiced towards the community.

Sadly, narrow minded people like Donald Trump, who holds the highest office in the land, seek to revoke the health rights of transgender people, endangering these citizens' health. There are 1.6 million adults who identify as transgender in the U.S, according to the Williams Insitiute at UCLA Law School. On June 12, The Wall Street Journal reported on a rule issued by the Trump administration to roll back transgender protections in the Affordable Care Act. That would allow doctors to refuse to treat transgender people, disregarding their need for medical attention.

If this continues, transgender people will be denied basic health rights, and not for the first time. Those who identify as transgender have dealt with discrimination throughout their lives and throughout history. Revoking the health rights of parents, siblings and children will not benefit anyone. It is morally wrong to put people's lives at risk. It is also wrong to discriminate against people on the basis of their sexual orientation and to disregard the value of their lives. It is unethical, when these are people just like you and me. Creating disadvantages damages, hurts and only brings suffering. Equality does not bring harm.

The community has fought a long and hard battle for their rights and continues to do so. Right now the Trump administration is moving to allow doctors to refuse trans patients. They will allow medical decisions to be based on ideology instead of science—not necessarily what is best for the patient. This will affect transgender people of all colors and from all backgrounds and faiths. Being treated with the best care by doctors has always been a challenge for them, and it has only become more difficult.

This is particularly true as Covid-19 rampages through our country. With the pandemic we are facing and the many patients who will be turned away, the policy of the Trump administration has already made it harder for transgender people to be treated for Covid-19. They already fear being turned away and it's even more difficult for them to trust physicians. They often face discrimination by doctors and are even treated unfairly. As I write this article, the U.S. has already passed 160,000 deaths due to the pandemic, and yet the government still insists on these policies. The transgender community doesn't deserve to be dehumanized; they need to be able to be tested and treated properly. Not everyone is lucky enough to be born with the body they were meant to be in.



ZOE PRISCILLA DAVIS

I never get a chance to smell the fancy cars. I never even get to walk down Melrose or taste the food at vegan restaurants. None of that—we only come to Los Angeles to drop Carter off at her auditions. This one's a longshot, just like all the others were. But still, I promised Carter that this would be her big debut, just like I do every time. I made sure to remind her how beautiful she is. Her brown skin, brown eyes, full lips and kinky black hair will be her greatest weapon, if not her biggest setback. Blackness is something we share. Our dreams? Not so much. If I wanted to, I believe I could be a model. Maybe. I stand tall at 5'10. I've got brown hair that I dyed green and skin that's a bit lighter than Carter's. My hair is wavy and not very long, it only goes down to the top of my neck. I wear makeup, but I'm no good at it. Not like Carter is after watching her mom do it for so long. In my opinion, she looks more pleasing on camera. Still, it would be a miracle if she landed anything of any importance. After hearing my reassuring words she swore that not taking her to this audition meant robbing her of her one chance at success. Just like she does every time.

Our trips to LA are always fun at first. The palm trees, the anticipation of spotting a celebrity, and the harsh smell of traffic is damn near magical. But then I remember why we came here and I feel guilty. I also don't feel like nursing Carter back to happiness while she mourns the loss of yet another opportunity.

"I haven't got any advice," I mutter. She shakes her head and bursts into a fit of laughter. I haven't said anything funny.

SAYS FICTION POETRY EDITORIAL ESSAYS FICTION POETRY EDITORIAL ESSAYS FICTION POETRY EDITORIAL ESSAYS

“And you’re Carter. You’ll make it. I haven’t got any advice.” Still smiling, Carter clears her throat and takes a swig from her flask. It’s got fake diamonds on it and says the word *Bride*. I hope to God she stops drinking by her wedding day. “You’ve been through this enough times.” Her smile fades.

“And I won’t stop trying!” She screams, startling Jason. She notices and places her hand on the back of her boyfriend’s head. “Awww...I-I’m sorry...did I scare you?” He shakes his head in response and his deep brown eyes burn into mine through the mirror. I can tell exactly what he’s thinking. I’ve gotta get ready to haul her out of that audition, she’ll be too drunk to function on her own.

“Well!” Carter screams as we pull up to the place. It’s got a homey feel to it. “Thank you my love!” She tries to give Jason a kiss before leaving, but he rejects her.

“After,” he says. He looks out at the road, his right hand gripping the wheel. “You’ll need it.”

“Fine.” She stumbles out of the car and I tail her as we enter the building and find the elevator. Our destination’s on the third floor.

“I think this is it,” she whispers as we get in. “It’s...It’s gotta be.” She looks frantic, her hair a mess, her hands shaking. I snatch the flask away from her and comb through her long black hair. I can feel her looking at me. She takes a deep breath and starts mumbling.

“Thank you, Alex. You’re so kind, Alex. I think this is it, Alex. I’m an actress. My character’s a damsel in distress. I’m a damsel in distress. I’m in trouble. I’ve got to look scared. I am scared. I’m terrified. I’ve got to make it believable.”

“You’ve got it. Take it easy.” Once we arrive, I keep my voice low. She continues to talk to herself and I notice a girl turn our way. She’s dark, extremely slim and has dark blue eyeshadow on. Her eyes are green, they match her dress. She shoots Carter a look of annoyance. There’s always one girl. Someone who views her as competition. I mean, part of me doesn’t judge her. There’s only so much room for Black girls in Hollywood. But still, her judgmental gaze is too much for me. As always it doesn’t faze Carter.

“Any words of advice?” She repeats. She’s shaking again.

“You’ll do amazing.” I take her hand and she smiles at me. After an hour of silence they call her name.



“She’s in?” Jason asks me as he cracks his knuckles.

“Mhm. She’s been in there for like...” I check the time on my phone. “Five minutes maybe?” He nods in response. As we sit here, I can’t help but feel like there’s something I’m missing. The intense light radiating from the sun is too bright, too loud, and too intrusive. It turns Jason’s dark skin a nice shade of golden brown. It makes my green hair look shiny. It isn’t until sweat begins to travel down the sides of my face that I realize that he’s turned off the AC. I reach over from the backseat, balance myself on his shoulder, and turn the knob. I’m immediately met with a burst of cold air.

"Why do we keep doing this?" I sigh. He shoots me a look of confusion.

"Doing what?" He goes to turn up the AC. I'm not sure why he turned it off in the first place.

"You know...bringing Carter to these things even though we know she isn't going to make it." I watch as he places his hand on his mouth. They're huge. Carter's told me how much she likes them before. He clears his throat.

"It's not like she's bad."

He's right. She isn't. She could get a role someday. Maybe for a corny Netflix series with Noah Centineo in it. Or possibly one on Hulu. She could make it. But she couldn't win an Oscar.

"She's alright. But that isn't the problem. She's wearing herself thin, Jason. Trying to put herself in places she doesn't belong."

"Who's to say she doesn't belong?"

"You've said it, Jason. Cut it out." It's Jason. The same guy who drives us to every audition and demands she sit in the back so he doesn't have to smell her Vodka breath. The same guy who leaves me to do all the heavy lifting after Carter gets her heart broken by another director. I mean, I'm no saint. We're very similar actually. We're both too scared to tell her the truth.

"Listen. Alex, we both know what she can do. We've seen her when she's letdown or...sad or...whatever. You and I?" He takes a deep breath and sits up. "We can't handle it."

"What? Are you scared?"

He doesn't answer me. I take it as a yes. A few moments pass before I ask him my next question.

"So what are we supposed to do, huh?"

"We're supposed to be there for her. We're here to drive her to the auditions, to nurse her after she drinks too much. We...support her." I laugh at this. We? He hasn't done anything.

"You haven't shown any support other than driving her. You've only seen her drunk like...twice." Once at my party. Once at his house. Both times he left her with me. "Why don't you ever help out. You love her don't you?"

He hesitates before he answers me. I watch as he sits back in his seat. His eyes shift down to his hands and he begins to fidget. I wait for him to answer, but all I get is a shrug.

He has *got* to be kidding. "You're pathetic."

"Yeah? Well, that makes two of us."

I feel my phone vibrate in my back pocket. I pull it out and read the name.
carter.



She's beaming when she walks out. It's not the usual look she gives me after these. Normally, she comes out with dilated eyes and stumbles over into my arms. But here she is, and I think, just for a moment, that maybe she proved Jason and me wrong.

"Alex, dear," she whispers. "I've done it. I've...holy...UGH...I've done it this time." I smile at her. I can't help but feel happy.

"You've done what?" She looks around the room, and I do the same. More than half of the girls are gone now. Two of them have tear-stained cheeks, one of them is reciting her lines, the rest of them are either saying their prayers or staring blankly at the ceiling. I glance outside, and see that Jason is still there. He is looking at his phone, his face emotionless. He's probably expecting us to come any moment now. I turn my head to Carter, who is looking at me while gnawing on her gloss covered lip. She's smiling and her eyes are wide. "You think you got the part?"

She squints a bit. "Well, not this one. But Mr. Taylor says that he thinks I'm good for another role. He thinks I'm great!" Mr. Taylor. That must be the director. Maybe she finally has done it. After so long...

"That's awesome. I--"

"I just gotta go to his house tomorrow and he'll run me through everything! Isn't this great?" It's definitely not what I was expecting, but it's something. "We don't have to tell Jason. Let it be a surprise." She winks at me. I glance over at Jason again, and now he's staring at me, a look of confusion plastered on his face. I'm not sure how he would feel about her having to go to some older guy's house. Let alone having to drop her there. I give him a thumbs up and he motions for us to come over. For some reason I feel disheartened. I wish we'd never come to this place.



The night of the audition is calm. An empty black sky holds no stars, but clouds that are a delicate shade of gray. The trees are swaying gently from one side to the other due to a light wind that's blowing. The streets are glistening, we just got through a two-hour rainstorm. I should be relieved. This audition could put us out of our misery. It could be Carter's big break so I'm sure she's excited. I've always imagined it; she would be surrounded by her costars at an after party. Laughing it up and raising her glass. She'd be drunk, of course. She would probably be one of the only black people there, besides the light skinned girls who were put there as tokens to make the cast more "diverse." How progressive. And to think, she's one step closer to that twisted lifestyle. Maybe I should be worried.

She told me I didn't need to pick her up. I should be relaxing, but I can't get my mind to stay still. Should I apologize to her when she comes back? Should I tell her the truth about everything? My doubt? Jason's shrug?

Jason.

I wonder what he's thinking. Is he nervous for her? Does he feel bad too? Should we even feel bad? Perhaps instead of being annoyed at her persistence, I should have admired it. I don't know. I don't know anything. After a few minutes, I feel my eyelids getting heavy. I can't remember the last time I've prayed, but for some reason I'm moved to do it now. I've always known there's a God. He's shown his face before. But it's been a while since I've heard his voice. Maybe he's been talking to me all along. Holding my hand during the auditions, teaching me self control when I deal with Carter. I wonder if she prays. I say one for her and close my eyes.

Hopefully, I wake up to good news.



I take a moment to look at her. Mascara rests on the bottom of her eyes, which are more puffy than usual due to all the crying. Her lips are dry and close to bleeding from how hard she's biting them. Her small hands are closed into fists as she tries her best to explain why she came into my room at three in the morning. She left the window open and the cold woke me up. That and the sounds of dry-heaving in the bathroom. When she came out, she told me everything—how Mr. Taylor said he had a role for her but wanted something in return. Something she hasn't even given to Jason yet. How she hesitated at first but then, after hearing who she'd be playing (Tiffany, a girl from Brooklyn who wants to be a writer), gave in. How he smelled like red wine and cigarettes, and how his crystal blue eyes got darker when he spoke to her. How her skin got cold after her pants dropped to the ground as well as every article of clothing she had on. The music that played—Herbie Hancock, The Japanese House, and David Bowie. How she got the marks on her neck, why she isn't walking straight. And how much she regrets it.

Now, she's shaking and her lips are quivering as she waits for my response. A hangover would've been easier to deal with. I should comfort her, right? Or maybe I should tell her how stupid she is. Tell her how disgusting it was to give something so precious to a sleazy director whose work probably sucks. Perhaps I should slap her, make the sting do the talking. But then it becomes clear. This is who Carter is. She makes stupid decisions, she drinks too much, and she's desperate. And now she isn't a virgin. It's sad really. I get to my feet. They fell asleep. I didn't realize how hard I had been pressing into them. Is this my fault? If only I'd been honest with her. I force the words out of my mouth.

"Well," I spoke, my voice quiet. "Let's hope you get the role."



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TUTORS

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NELL FREUDENBERGER
FARAN KRENTCIL
RACHEL HONOR VINCENT

PEN Summer Writing program is open to students from across the city on a first-come, first-served, free of charge basis. This summer, participants came from the following schools, to which we are deeply grateful: Brooklyn Collaborative School, High School of Fashion Industries, James Madison High School, The iSchool, The Urban Academy, Townsend Harris High School, Young Women's Leadership School of Queens.

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