

The Pen 5th ed.

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THE ORANGE LINE

CAMILLE GALVANI

Natasha watches people on the subway. She sits tucked into the most isolated corner she can find, normally at the end of the train, if she can, but a lot of the time she ends up leaning against the wall or clutching the cold pole with sweaty hands. She plays her quiet music, or rock from the 80s, or a podcast, some kind of noise to quiet her mind. Sometimes she braids her thick black hair if she snags a seat. She worries her lip and cracks her knuckles, attempting not to make strange eye contact with anyone when she stares straight ahead, unblinking. Then she observes girls that climb on with leather jackets and chunky black headphones, with nice bags or bouquets of fragrant, beautiful flowers. She watches little kids toddle around or squirm in nannies' arms, that blink at her. She smiles at them when they grab her hair and giggle. She sees businessmen with leather briefcases that spill ruby tomato soup in bleeding stains onto their nice suits. She watches teenage girls (although she supposes they're only a little younger than her) cut their nails or laugh with their friends, stumbling around in hysterics. She watches little old ladies carry giant grocery bags and always feels a pang of guilt when she doesn't offer to help them- but there's a clenching feeling in her gut of anxiety, of overstepping some line. She doesn't know how to talk to people, so she just observes.

She listens when an old man brings his beaten-up speaker onto the train, playing Etta James and singing along.

He, too, sits alone. Everyone in the train toes the line of politeness. Who wants to sing along? Not most of them, they tell themselves, though they know the lyrics and wouldn't mind if there was no one else nearby. The unsaid words settle like a fog in the traincar.

She watches them, girls with running eyeliner around their eyes, boys with their heads slumped onto the seat in front of them, staring at the ground littered with random, untraceable trash. Some summer days she happens to be wearing sunglasses and she watches clearly, without furtive glances from the corner of her eye. She wonders, too- will she one day be one of those girls with smeared makeup? Will she have friends she laughs with to the point of tears, days where her food is streaked down nice clothes she bought for a job that she'd been trying hard for but now is ambivalent about, will she hold a baby on the train and apologize, blushing, when it touches another person? Will she hold bouquets and wear designer clothes or ripped up backpacks, read tattered paperbacks and not miss her stop, be the kind of person who paints her nails fire engine red or says awful things about her coworkers when they annoy her? Will she grow into a little old lady thinking

about her grandson and her wasted life, or get soaked in the rain and wring some of the water out of her hair when she sits down? She watches and sees their lives, painted out like a picture book, pieced together like a mosaic. She wonders if anyone watches her and thinks that logically probably some people do, but she reasons that they quickly look away. And she doesn't mind- she's alright with wondering. With observing.

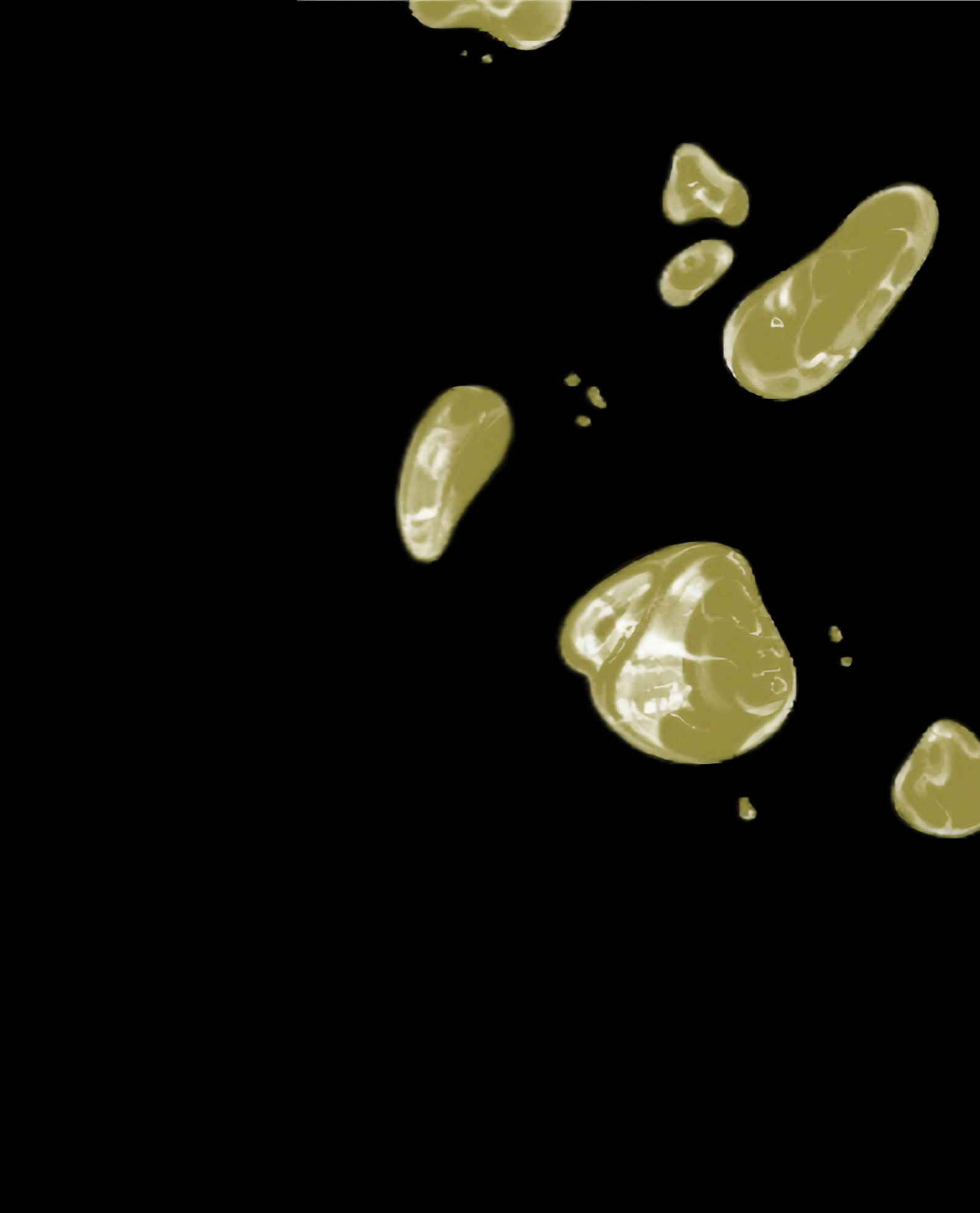
Mostly she observes that people don't mind being messy- strange- un- seemly, on the train. They do their hair

or scratch their backs or make stupid, lifeless expressions. They shrug or swear or stumble, unembarrassed. Sometimes they even sing along to an old man's radio, crooning Etta James. They don't care. They are strangers. They can be vulnerable, intimate, and allow their fellow passengers to see them honestly. They don't hide the shine of their eyes. What does it matter? They will never see each other again.

Winner of The Pen's Best Writing Winter 2023 Competition.

"The Orange Line is an observational piece based around everyday experiences in the Washington, D.C. Metro. It is inspired by casual people watchers and the people they observe."

Camille Galvani is a ninth grader at School Without Walls. She is a member of Walls' creative writing club, The Inklings. When she isn't writing, she is reading. She hopes to become a magazine editor and sees writing as part of her future.



THE UPENDED

CIERA HAMILTON



Winner of The Pen's Best Art Winter 2023 Competition.

Ciera Hamilton is a senior at Walls.

A CLAUSTROPHOBIC INFINITY

ZOE BECKER

Esther was weak, so she kicked at a rock. She tried to convince herself that it moved. It threatened to tear into her canvas shoe. To stretch one fiber a millimeter too far. The shoes wouldn't quit though and until they did, she was tied to this pair.

This pair where her sock always stuck to the inside because of that one time, that felt like yesterday and never, when Liam had just turned thirteen and spilled cherry soda inside her shoe while pouring a drink during his birthday party.

The pair where that sticky note with a once legible to do list including: lip balm, get it together, dentist had fused itself to the sole.

Esther walked on autopilot. She would not take out the phone or make a call until the shoes quit. She could not be the one who couldn't hack it.

The fog just sort of lingered over her, the green-gray blending into her flyaway hairs. Perhaps the fog was moving quickly, but it felt that Esther was walking with a slowness that would have been foreign to her a mere two months ago.

Each step was anguished, the slow strike of a match was Esther's foot against each sea studded rock.

Hating the way it felt but not being able to stop, a compulsion that often overtook her, Esther inched her toes back and forth, faster than the beat of her own heart, to rub her sock against the scaly bottom of her shoe between steps. She balanced it out by every few steps, grating her heels on the rocks beneath her.

The tide was rising. Or Esther was also walking sideways. The rocks were getting softer. They gave an illusion of pliability when wet. Like if Esther hoped enough they would melt away into the sand that years later would provoke the masses to the beach once called ugly.

It felt like the clouds were falling a bit.

If you close in on yourself like Esther did, rubbing your toe against your shoe, your shoe against the ground, picturing the water, the top layer of stones you can't quite see, it's easy to make infinity feel claustrophobic. One minute you feel

infinite, and the next, you are nothing.
A stone smashed into a million specks of dust.

It was an illusion but illusion was a powerful thing, and Esther was no stranger to that.

So, as she walked, with a building intensity behind each step, the grinding of the rocks growing louder beneath her, she let the illusion take her. A trench coat pulled over each arm by a phantom assistant.

She wasn't sure when it started or how long it had been going but it was raining. The hair that Esther had brushed dry before leaving the house that last time was wet now and the subtle waves which could never quite decide if they'd commit to being curls were reappearing, organic yet refined in their definition.

It wasn't until her shoe was soaked all the way through, not defeated yet but incapacitated, that Esther sat down.

The rock beneath her was damp too, it seemed everything was and there was no point in searching for a covered area when she would lose more of what she had left in the process.

Esther sat and pretended to look out at the water, in a pensive but almost charming, deep and raw human way.

Pretended because there was nothing to see. Pretended because the fog blurred the line between here and there. Pretended because when was the last time she had let herself truly look at something for what it was without thinking of what could be?

She continued the staring gimmick for some time and as the rain picked up she squirmed a bit. And that was when she felt it. A crack of plastic case, a crunching of nylon pieces.

The phone.

She took the shoes off. The word 'quit' held a new weight. But now, she could not, no matter her resolve; the resolve that sustained her life and nursed others to health, she could not quit. She felt a vicinage, rope to a tree, with the inescapable infinity of it all.

"Claustrophobic Infinity is my exploration of how the length of a story impacts its telling. This piece began as a list of everyday items: a shoe, a post-it note, a phone, and morphed into a complete piece. Starting with that level of simplicity, I find, is the best way to explore themes that feel otherwise too big to even consider. By opting for a short, flash fiction piece, I was able to test the limits of how few words I can use to say a whole lot."

Zoe Becker is a Creative Portfolio student at Writopia Lab and a freshman at SWW. She has recently had a poem of hers adapted by the Isadora Duncan Youth Ensemble.

*Winner of The Pen's Best Writing
Winter 2023 Competition.*



ELEVATOR
LIYA JOHNSON

“In Elevator, I explored capturing an everyday occurrence (someone carrying bags in an elevator) through a different point of view: a bird’s eye perspective. I wanted to draw something fun, and hopefully you find it as interesting as I do.”

Winner of The Pen’s Best Art Winter 2023 Competition.

Liya Johnson is a senior at School Without Walls. She works with pencil and colored pencil, primarily drawing people, buildings, and interior designs. For Liya, visual art is a hobby, but she plans on studying architecture in college.

SPOT ON THE CEILING

ANONYMOUS

Look at the spot on the ceiling.
It is white and cracked, a slow creep of darkness pouring
from it
Think about it.
It is 11:45
owls are howling
people are laughing
foxes are hunting
You are alone.
the way you have been left is cruel
the way the world loves is despicable -
it breathes simply enough air to resuscitate you
and lets you gasp forever more.
Did they ever tell you?
When you reach for the stars
You may burn your fingers.

CORVUS SAPIEN

ANONYMOUS

Seven years ago I broke a promise
It cracked like an egg between my teeth
The yolk went down my throat burning
The membrane lives under my tongue
and I've carried the shards in my jaw ever since

WORRY, HOPE, AND FEAR

LIYA JOHNSON



THE TALE OF THE SCALY EEL

KATRINA TRACY

The Goldfish was swimming around his bowl. Every turn was twelve seconds. Five of these a minute and so on and so forth. At Four o'clock sharp the Codfish and the Eel came.

"Oh good," said the Goldfish. "I was getting tired of swimming in circles."

"So are we," said the Eel and the Codfish.

"I have news," said the Codfish. "I saw the Angelfish today. He had lost two scales."

The Goldfish flicked his fins and turned to look out of the bowl. "This is the start of something bad."

"I know," said the Codfish. "But we all know that the Angelfish is no angel."

"At least none of us here lose scales," said the Eel. The other two looked at him crossly. They all knew the Eel had no scales to lose.

"Besides, Goldfish, you are here in this bowl. There is no way you will lose scales. The Codfish doesn't engage in that sort of thing (though he certainly could if he wanted to) and I, I don't have any scales to lose," The Eel carried on, oblivious to the look the Goldfish and the Codfish exchanged.

"Oh well. I am sure you two must be off. Same time tomorrow?" The Goldfish gathered their things, and the Eel and the Codfish were off.

The next day the Goldfish couldn't swim straight. Or rather round, since his bowl was round. He startled badly when the Codfish and Eel came in, complaining of the cold.

"Any news?" He asked. The Codfish nodded his head gravely.

"Two more fights," the Codfish informed him. The Eel abruptly slithered his head up.

"Did you hear! It was the Anglerfish and the Clownfish! What a spectacle that was." The Goldfish did not like the glint in the Eel's eye.

"Eel, fish should not be fighting. It is truly disturbing how people are willing to lose scales in such a way." The Eel turned away and disinterestedly said, "Scales are lost everyday."

"Friends, the reason I am in this bowl is to preserve my scales. I would never lose my scales. And you two swore you would not either!"

The Codfish spoke up. "They are only losing a couple. It isn't that bad."

"Still. The Anglerfish? I haven't seen him in so long. For him to be losing scales makes me want to vomit."

"Alright, alright. We won't talk about it. Besides, Eel and I would never lose scales," said the Codfish. Soon after the two left.

The water in the bowl seemed to churn even after they had left. Long into

the night the Goldfish could not sleep, even as he added more bubbles to his bubble nest and closed his eyes.

The Goldfish's fins dragged as they greeted the Codfish and Eel the next day. The Goldfish blinked, was the Eel covered in scars?

The Eel grinned, "I got into it with the Saddelfish today." The Codfish said nothing, his fins hanging limply at his sides.

"Eel! Didn't you say you wouldn't lose any scales!"

"What?" The Eel's grin faded. "I didn't lose any scales." The Goldfish sneered, "What do you call these wounds?"

"No scales lost, Goldfish. I am an Eel, I cannot lose scales," said the Eel.

"Clearly not," said the Goldfish. The Eel leaned in real close.

"Scales are for Fish. You hide up in this bowl all day and forget how the world works."

"Get out of my house," The Goldfish said primly, fins shaking.

"As you wish." The Eel said with a little laugh. The Codfish said nothing.

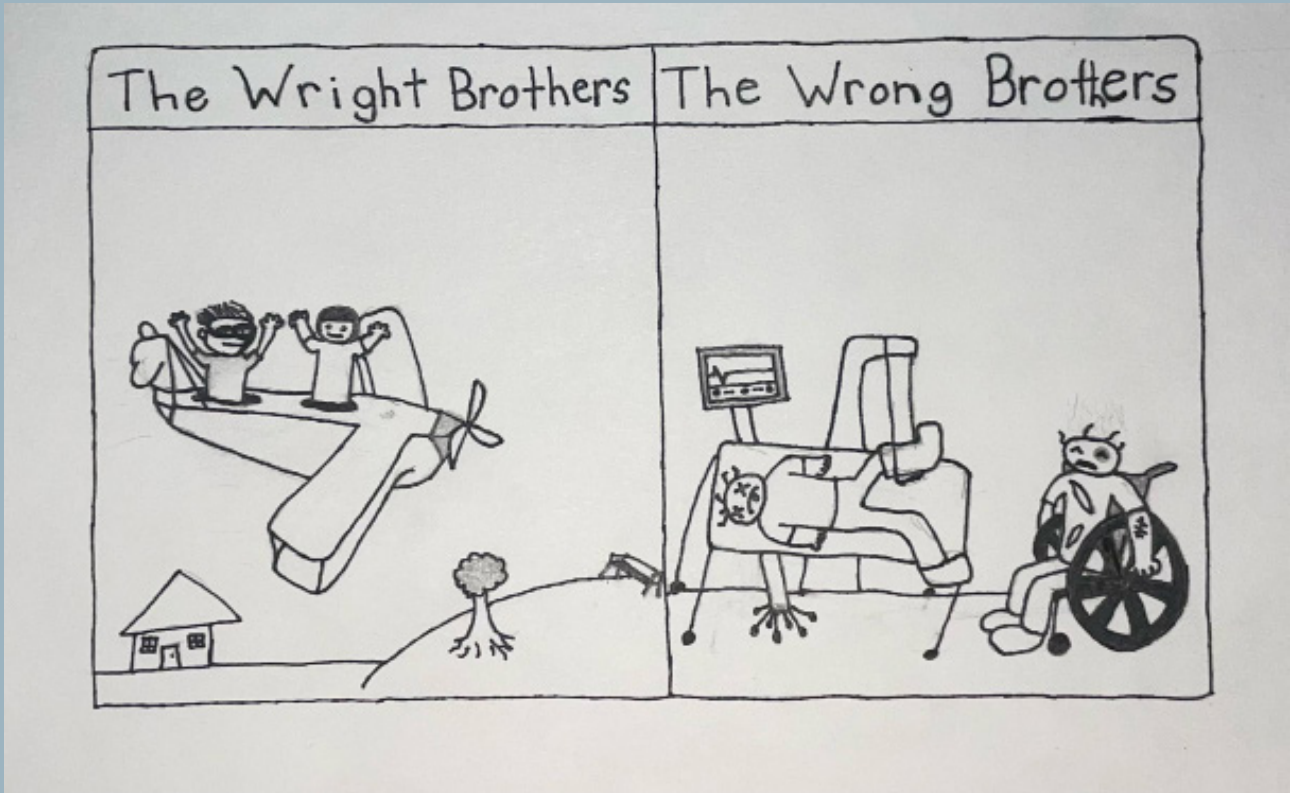
They turned to go, but not before the Goldfish felt a flash of pain, and looked down. The Eel had torn off a scale as he had left.

PLAYFUL PENGUINS

NICCOLA LAUREN



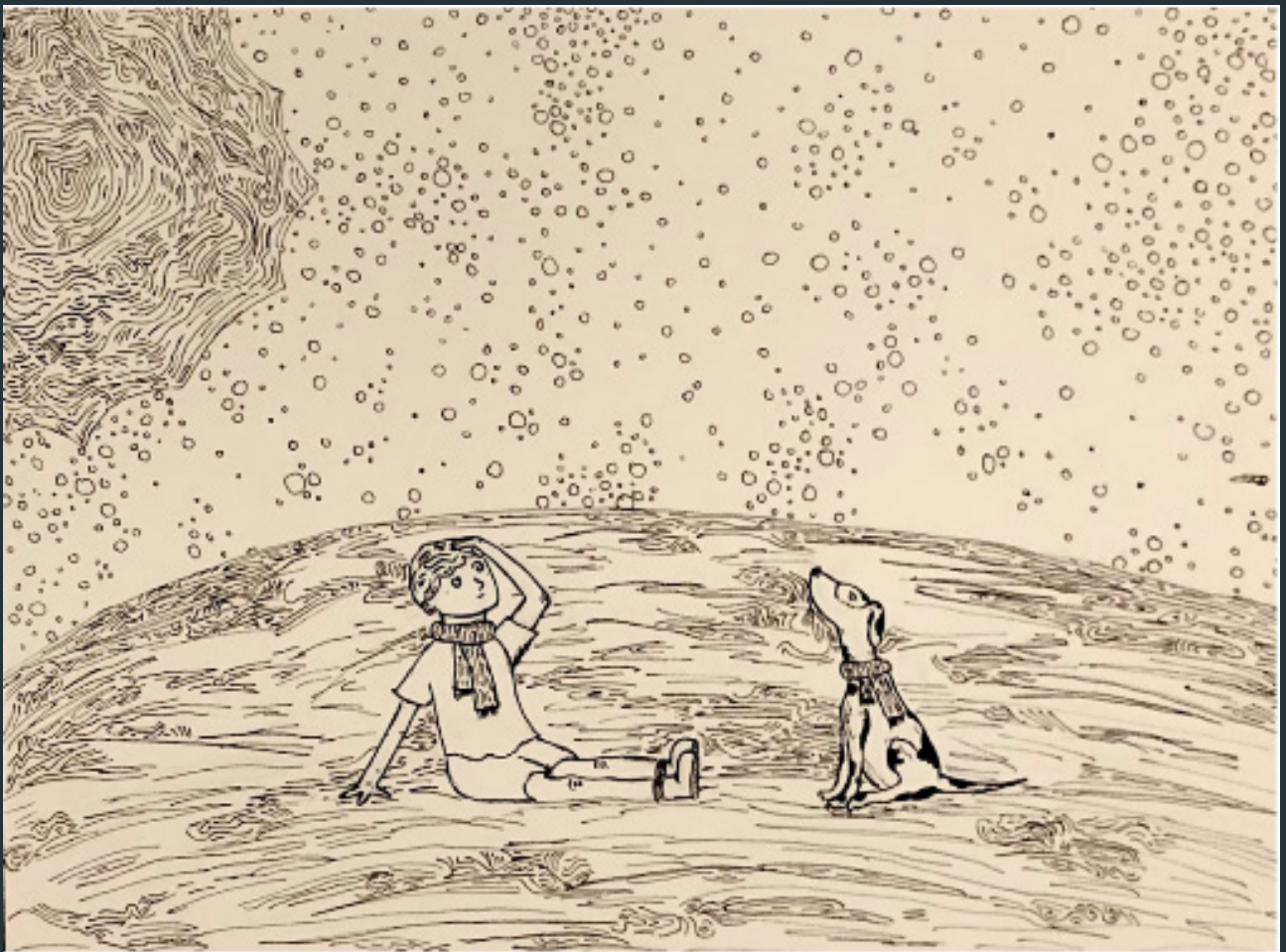
THE WRIGHT BROTHERS
MATTHIAS DOMINGUEZ



TANTALIZED
JAIYA JOUBERT

I am Tantalus,
Here I am prone and reaching up,
Up towards what I do desperately desire,
Yet when the most beautiful fruit is almost in the palm of my hand,
It pulls away,
Grief stricken and melancholy I lay,
I lay and I lay,
Though my mind wastes away,
My body does not,
And I am forced to live this hell for eternity.

SELENOPHILE NO. 2
NIAHM O'DONOVAN



BLURRY CANDY APPLES

ANONYMOUS

I was 7. Or 9? I wore brown pigtails over a pink cotton dress. Now I wear a sleek bleached ponytail over black pantsuits and inside pockets. I don't even wear my own face anymore. I put on cream and dust and just become someone else and drift away and away from that festival so long ago.

I held Father's hand through a crowd of people in animal headbands. There were tigers and elephants and rabbits all perched like territorial city pigeons on the heads of their affluent buyers. Father was staring at me with his sparkling green eyes and that swollen salt and pepper lumberjack beard. Father was the man you thought of when you thought of the word "Man". Except traditionally the man of a household is supposed to take care of a family, and he was a single father who didn't have anything to give. Hell, he nearly tore the house to shreds looking for dough when I told him I wanted to see the circus. But he sure looked like "Man".

I looked past Father at a little boy with a candied apple. He struggled to open his mouth against oozing caramel gripping his lips like a slimy harpoon, forcing them shut. Father spotted the apple through the bodies and vacant smiles. His mouth moved but I can't remember what he said. Isn't it funny how with memories you either remember how you felt or what happened? Anyway, we walked past the boy, looking for the apple stand. We found

it past a row of festival-goers, and approached the owner

I glanced at the boy over my shoulder, smiled, and pointed at the caramel apple with M&M's dotting its glistening surface. The owner and Father talked for a while. "Man" tried handing her money, but after she took it she kept her hand out. He started to raise his voice and she started to raise hers.

I remember only the last few words. "Please, it's her birthday and this is all I have."

"You know how many saps come in here trying to get a free discount with that line?"

"Ma'am, if it wasn't my girl's birthday then I just spent all the money I have on a nothing day to make her happy. It has to be her birthday today. Please."

The woman looked down at me. She winced. She handed me an apple. We walked off, my ecstatic father shaking my shoulders. I looked at the boy. He glanced up at me. He was wincing too once he saw my M&M's, and that made me smile a little. I turned around and looked past the colorful tents at the owner of the stand. She was staring wistfully at me. I smiled. I laughed. I forgot quite what happened next, but I do remember getting the feeling that people are supposed to get at the circus. Maybe I was the only one who ever got it.

OF WITCHES

ZOE BECKER

I was born a child of the pogroms
Of Yizkor services where the candles
Glow, emanating all that slipped away
Felshtin in my blood, more lost than present

Not a daughter of witches they couldn't kill
But of unlucky serendipity
Handpicked for a savage battle uphill
Ancestral pains turned to propinquity

Heavy hearts, the only ones I know to be full
Death and love meld as one into tradition
Memories not mine embrace me in cold
Stews and babkas work as incantations

Through Bubbes unknown that I can't forget
Not galvanized by loss but chained to it

SHIELD
GEORGIA MURPHY



I HOPE I REACH YOU

JESSIE MOSS

Anna,

I'm writing to you because it's gone. You probably don't remember what I mean when I say this, so I'll tell you the story. I adore stories, mostly because you used to read them to me.

Anyways, do you remember that day when I was six? I do. It was the day I liked best that year (I don't think you liked it very much, though). It was December tenth, a truly fun Sunday, and Lina, as usual per her arbitrary nature, wasn't home.

You said we should go out and have meaningless fun. I knew you were worried about me but you never said anything because you didn't want to burden me with that knowledge.

We'd just eaten cold store-bought lasagna because Lina had broken the microwave when she put her metal fork in on Tuesday. I liked store bought lasagna because they added too much cheese, but it was the kind of cheese that Dad filled his special raviolis with. We hadn't made his raviolis since Connecticut. That was a time so long ago that I yearned for nothing but for it to feel shorter.

You didn't need to tell me to put on a coat; it was California winter now, and palm trees were the latest pine.

It took us longer than usual to get there because you had to tie your con-

verse and then the left one felt tighter than the right one so you had to tie that, too.

Contrary to my initial conjecture, the playground was almost empty. I guess most people had developed the sense to realize California was not a place anyone would feel a genuine longing to exist in.

By the swings there was a girl younger than me playing with her mother and there was smoke wafting through the air near where the teenagers were sitting on a bench, but that was all.

I didn't like to play those types of games (I still don't, but you know that). I had played hide and seek once the year before because Lina said it could be a way to make friends. I thought I had one when I hid behind the water fountain that doesn't work and no one found me for an hour. I had to find my way home that day, but it was nice because I found a quarter in the grout of the sidewalk and that meant I only needed four more to pay for a Snickers at the pharmacy.

Before I got ahead of myself, I was telling you about that day when I was six. You sat with me by the water fountain that didn't work because next to it there was a little library. You and I read Harry Potter and I didn't under-

stand why Harry and Ron were so mean to Hermione before they fought the troll together. You laughed and said it was just a story. I wondered if trolls were real (because if they were, I could make friends by fighting them). I never told you that part but it's okay because I'm saying it now.

I remember your laugh because you snorted sometimes and I thought that was silly.

When some friends joined the teenagers and called out to you that you were pretty (I didn't understand why they were telling you this since it was completely subjective and you didn't like other people's opinions), you said we should go home. I asked if we could race which was a stupid idea but I never have good ideas so that's okay. I don't like running; I could list a multitude of exhibits verified by data as to why but in the fourth grade Amelia George said it was annoying when I did that so I won't.

This is now the second time recorded in this piece of writing that I have gotten off track. The idea is that we were running and I fell.

You screamed but I didn't cry because crying doesn't make you feel better (that was something I internalized growing up under Lina's roof). In fact, I think that crying makes a person feel worse but that tangent would be the third time I got side tracked when writing this to you.

I remember that you dialed a

number into your 2010 BlackBerry Pearl and talked to a woman on the phone who didn't seem very helpful because you had to say the same thing three times. I remember you kept looking down at me and then looking away because a bloody lip and a tooth on the sidewalk is not a view generally appreciated for its conformity to western beauty standards.

We didn't have a car but an ambulance came.

When I was little, I was fascinated by ambulances. I think every little boy is told to like ambulances, though, because they help people when in actuality this notion serves to promote male savior ideas. You used to talk about those sometimes when I asked if you could read me Snow White.

I don't like ambulances anymore.

I felt important. When the ambulance came for me, I mean.

I wasn't used to having a team of people devoted to my comfort, but this effect was diminished when I got inside. They made me lie down and the ambulance was loud, so loud, from the inside and the lights were so bright and my mouth was starting to hurt too and all of the paramedics were looking at me from everywhere as if I stood alone in the middle of a mew at the zoo. In case you didn't know, a mew is a special enclosure for hawks when they're molting. I feel like I'm molting too, but since you left I'm not sure if I'll sprout new growth.

But I wasn't alone because you were there.

And you held my hand the whole way and said it would be okay.

That day that I fell, the best day of year six, I got a scar on my lip. Its shape was mildly reminiscent of a lighting bolt and I thought that made me like Harry Potter. I didn't like being with Linas after you left so I thought maybe you would come and take me away from home like Hagrid brought Harry away from his mean aunt and uncle.

It's funny the fantasies we create in our mind to avoid acceptance of reality.

Yesterday, after five years, I noticed the scar on my lip had gone away; I guess it had been on its way out for a while. It should be something to celebrate, but it reminded me of that day and I liked that because it was the day someone held my hand and told me everything would be okay.

I think this means you won't come back and take me away. I don't blame you.

Always yours truly, Auggie
P.S.

I couldn't find any stamps but I hope the postman sends this letter anyway. More than I need to speak to you, I want you to hear me. I hope I reach you.

BURNING HOUSE

ZOE BECKER

While the house burns down
I climb the rickety stairs to the study
As flames ascend from the floor below

I keep doing my homework
Fending the heat from my wretched
body
While the house burns down

I make dinner at six pm like clockwork
Dancing through spice aromas convincing myself I'm lucky
The flames are taking me

I go outside to do yardwork

The scorched grasses mix with dirt
turning my feet muddy
While the house burns down

I call out "Fire!" but passersby meet me
with smirks
When these cries are commonplace I'm
a replaceable understudy
The flames are taking me

Everything is fine though the world is
going berserk
For it is all some wretched literary study
While the house burns down
I allow the flames to continue taking me

BLUE
CIERA HAMILTON



GONDRY

CIERA HAMILTON





IF A TREE FALLS WITH NO ONE TO HEAR, DOES IT REALLY FALL? - ELENA VOL

The water spiraled with a song akin to a lone soprano's note, rising over a chorus of lower voices, clear and resonant. Like the soprano, the river was one of the quietest among the sounds around it, but it was the first to be picked out due to its ringing purity. In the clear blue of the rivers reflection, reeds that had just begun to lose color danced with the light bending across the rippling waters. Beyond the reeds, deeper into the image, the occasional small cloud floated by aimlessly, trailing bits of wisp behind it. One such cloud, in the shape of a cat curled in on itself, ambled across the waters surface when a black dot sliced through it. In the sky, a black-winged man adorned in well worn black clothes, blinked moisture from the cloud out of his eyelashes, wings continuing their steady beat as his feathers ruffled in harmony with the inky locks on his head. The man's obsidian eyes flicked downwards, scanning the river, but the rhythmic sound of air being pushed through his powerful wings did not falter at the beautiful scenery.

In little time, the river was behind the man and through his dark lashes fields of wildflowers emerged. They formed a sea of green dotted by vibrant splashes of color that both clashed and resonated with each other. The man

was level with where birds would fly, but the grass was tall, and the man's wings had flown far and grown strong. So strong in fact that the gusts they created played with the flowers, scattering petals, and bending the stalks of grass. A delicate feather or two got lost amongst the whirlwind of petals, their fragile strands tangling with colorful petals. Soon however, the feathers were left behind in their descent, gravity directing them in a rocking motion towards grass now adorned with petalless flower nubs.

Continuing onward, the man dipped in the sky, closer to the mountains he approached as the temperature caused small bits of frost to settle amongst his spindly lashes and long feathers. The bits of white accumulating on the mans features were pale imitations of the sprawling scene below him. Untouched snow covered the ground as far as the man could see brutally reflecting the sun back into his midnight eyes. The white was so uniform that the land blurred together, seemingly flat despite what the man knew were towering peaks beneath him. Biting wind and the pockets of air pushed down by his wing beats did not budge the snow which remained fastened to the ground by a thin blanket of ice that bore a

blurry image of the black figure zooming above. Just as a similar layer of ice had started to glisten on the man's skin highlighting the paleness of his skin in contrast to the darkness of his hair and wings, the ocean came into view.

Ice and snow dripped off of the man creating a trail of small holes in the otherwise unmarked sand beneath him. The sun hid behind a cloud for a while, creating flowy shadows that gave imitations of life to the expanse of sand. Sand stirred up by the man's movements, grains settling in crevices as if returning home. Before long the man crossed a smattering of palm trees which swayed in each others directions. Their trunks bent, and their leaves reached towards each other, the long fingers of green stretching but never quite touching each other. Soon after the palms, the golden grains of sand dipped into the ocean, darkening as the water lapped at them rhythmically. The ocean beyond fought with itself, sending a warm spray up to the man as it rolled and tumbled, but the only movement below the waves was that of untethered seaweed, and tricks of light.

After a while, the ocean began to narrow, its waters slowly taming.

Leaves littered the river creating golden reddish hues, leaving behind bare leafless trees on the bank. Seeing final leaves detach themselves and float down to rest on the ground, the mans steady wings faltered and slowed depositing him among the rapidly dulling reeds along the blue water. The man's legs collapsed underneath him, years of flight rendering his legs weak and useless. Sitting back on trembling calves, he cocooned himself within his wings, bracing against a wind that this time, he had not created. Once the wind died down, done with rustling leaves and whistling through thin branches, quiet dominated again. The man opened his cracked lips slowly unsticking them and sang a single desperate note. Though his vocal chords were dry with disuse, the note that escaped his throat was clear and mournful. If only there were another being on Earth to hear him.

I THINK IT FINALLY IS/I
HAVE A CRUSH ON A BOY
ANONYMOUS

It's easy to have a crush on a boy, sometimes it's even fun. Because when you pass them in a hallway your stomach flips and for a split second you forget that they're not yours.

And I always wanted to love a boy with sad eyes but his were happy. By the looks of it he has no tragic past, he never lay awake at night just thinking about how sad he was or alone he felt, never yelled in the mirror.

I've been told that happiness isn't as beautiful as those empty minutes, well why not? Maybe his sanity could balance my insanity.

"Cope with what things?" He asked me. I wish I could have said, "Not having you." And the funny thing was when I lay awake at night feeling sad it was because he never kissed me, and when I felt lonely it was because he wasn't holding me. When I yelled in the mirror it was because I wasn't pretty enough for him. Perhaps it's ignorant of me to assume his life is spotless, or even good, considering a picture perfect front doesn't have to mean a thing. But, I don't know, I guess it felt genuine.

I never said I liked him to his face. And I regret that I never did, because now I know I'll never have him. Even through all of that guilt I still can't say a thing (even though he's still here.)

I know that if I had him I would probably embarrass myself every time I was with him. But I embarrass myself anyway and at least his heart would rest in my chest and he would smile when he saw me.

I wish for him on every fallen eyelash and he sees me in the between classes sometimes. He wills me to wake up in the morning and to him I'm probably just that girl he had a course with last year (though I like to imagine that he has some secret unending love for me, who knows?)

I guess I just really want him to need me. And I liked his happy eyes.

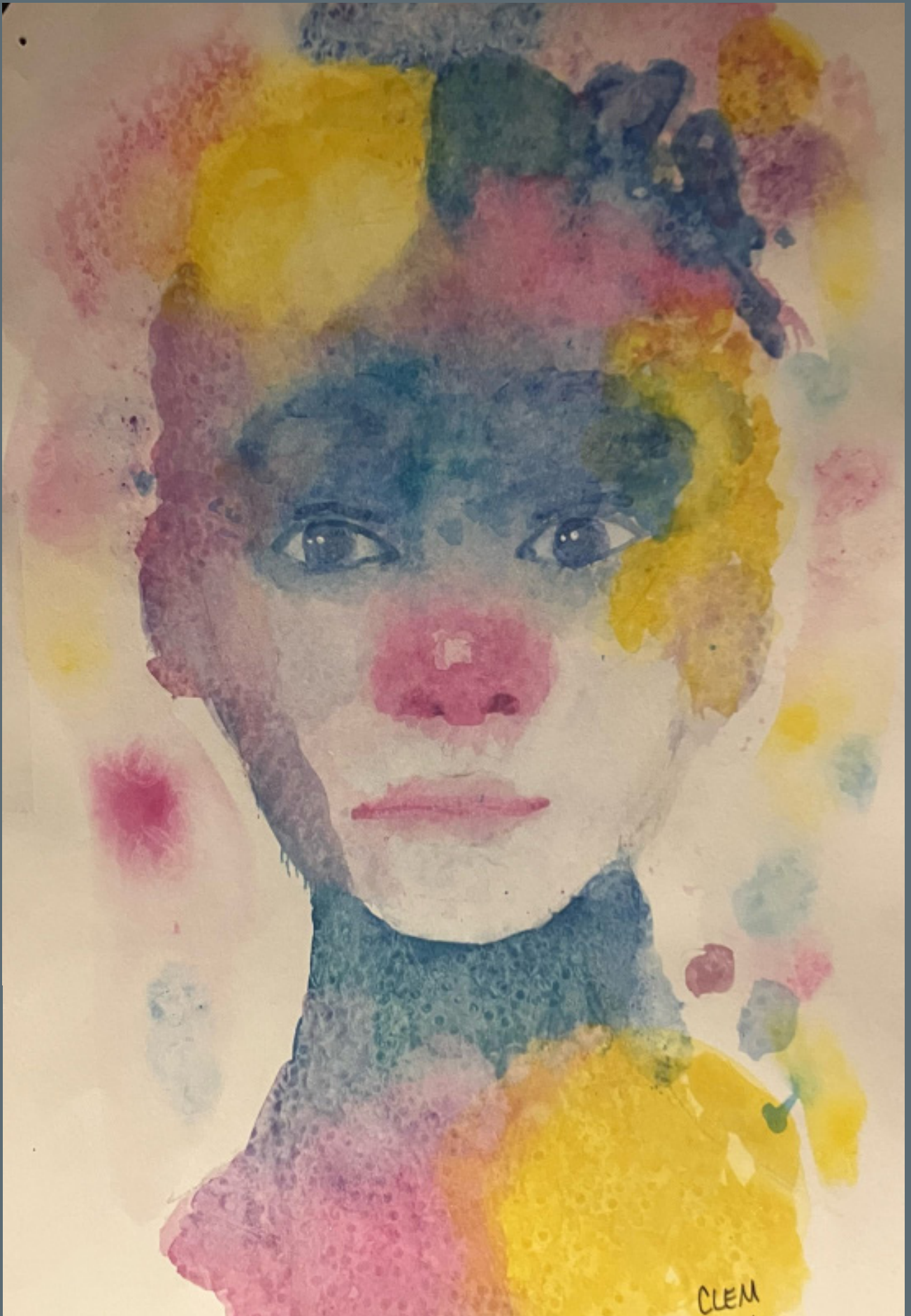
GREEN TEA
CIERA HAMILTON



THE MIRROR
ANONYMOUS

If the mirror could speak, what would it say?
Would it confirm your doubts?
Or would it reveal the beauty in your ‘flaws’?
If the mirror could speak, would the voices in your head soften?
Or would it reinforce the torturous thoughts roaming in your mind?
If the mirror could speak, would it tell you that you are worthy of love?
Or would it remind you that you are unlovable?
This mirror does speak
It tells you that every ‘broken’ bit paints a story
Every part of you is beautiful
“But I’m just average?”
And to that I say
There is beauty in both the mundane and extraordinary
You are an intoxicating blend of both
A mosaic of passion and magic, absorbed from the universe around you and reflecting within
If the mirror could speak, this is what it would say.

THOUGHTS
CLEMENTINE KOVACS



WHAT THE PAPER SAYS

FELICIA OGUNDIMU

Ugh I am going to the doctor today
Avoided them for years but now I must face my fear
A Fear??? No My fears because today the paper is here
That paper is my worst enemy, it just beats me down and all I can do is frown
Take your shoes off and stand on the scale the doctor says,
I abide but I could see it in her eyes, I am not like the last girl who stood here
She was so slim and tall and not like me at all
We are led to a room the 4 walls of doom
Of course they take awhile, same thing every single time
Anxiously I wait for moments ahead
And all I could do was stare at my phone just waiting to go home
She comes in and asks me questions about my body and how I feel
I am fine, Thank you, I respond but inside my feelings are way beyond
and then she finally gets to the point
So do you eat fast food? she asks. Yeah I do, it's really good I reply.
And you drink soda?, Occasionally I said
You should cut back on those things because they have a negative impact on your
health she says
Yeah, I am really trying my best, Her smirk divests me of my dignity
Boldly, I said What do you suggest I do? Drink water and eat vegetables
Because I already do that, or maybe I should walk more or run more.
But at the end of the day, I get nothing but pity stares at the mall
It eats me up inside but it's just a stranger's eyes
She has no reply.
And I know it's not easy to get motivated but staying that way is even harder
And you give me no useful advice except this single paper.
I leave with just another suggestion and now I start to question my direction
Maybe if I was born with just a little more determination
I wouldn't be in this situation until it hit me, as I stared at that paper, the paper
doesn't define me
I can change, maybe not at a fast rate but I can get there right???
My Health is My wealth and who knows better about me than Myself
So maybe with a different approach and a little more hope
I can achieve my goals, I will work hard and try to stay positive

And not closeted within my own thoughts.
Healthy eating is now okay for me because I have decided what healthy is for me
Retreating is not for me, not this time when I can finally get to meet a better me
I do this for myself and those who care for me because in the end
They will be there for me. I stare at the paper and swear I'll make a change.
I know I said that before but this time oh this time it will be different for sure.
1 year later, when I will look at that paper.
I will be happy, I became a shaper of my own success and not a Hater
To the ones who progressed.

CRACKED BUST OF A MAN

SOPHIA DESAI



THE EIFFEL TOWER

KAMTOYA OKEKE

What is it like to know love and never be loved?

It's like looking at the Eiffel Tower, with all of its delights, that perfect triangle, such a stable shape, the sprawling structural metal mass of it, strung with lights like the largest Christmas tree ever. Architecture. It's like being the true tourist and walking the stairs to the top, not like those too lazy for the experience, willing to wait for the ding! of the elevator that will take them there. It's like taking the stairs and almost regretting it, but no, you've come too far now, it'll take more stairs going down than it will going the rest of the way.

You persevere.

Count the steps and watch as it becomes tiring, the ache of muscles that are no longer young, the monotony of raising one foot up to place it on the stair above and pull the other up as well. It's boring, almost. Beside you, your partner: hissing out each step under their breath, 423, 424, 425, hands braced against their knees, just as your hand is pressed against your back. The people ahead of you doing the same lifting and dragging of feet, mindless, engrossed.

This isn't the true tourist; this is everyone.

You thought you were special. You

are not.

You look outside, and it's a little disappointing, honestly, but you promise yourself it will look best from the top. When you reach the top, yes, those are the golden years.

It's like these steps, circling and circling and narrowing and climbing, and still yet circling. You lean on the person beside you, because you can't lean on anyone else. Why did you come here? You shove when they lean back on you. Can't they see you're exhausted? This ugly codependency. Such a thing as this should not exist. They call this love? Pah. That fled at the foot of the stairs. But, no, it does not die—it is waiting for you at the top. The climax. The peak of love, the peak of life. The best is yet to come.

So circle. So climb. So narrow.

Bicker. Pay the taxes. Watch the children. Make love. Pay the mortgage. Have dinner.

So circle.

This life you live, like the tower, like love, you hold out for the top. When you get there, you will marvel at the lives you've led— what great fortune has brought you here.

It is like looking at the Eiffel Tower and seeing its beauty and climbing its stairs, saying, oh, the view, how beautiful, but thinking, I'm getting old

and my shirt is sticking to my back and my thighs are burning and itchy, but when we get to the top—

You get to the top.

And it's crowded. Of course it's crowded.

Everyone wants to be here; the height of life, of love.

You look, hear yourself gasp, just as rehearsed, the view! It's not much different than the climb up. City lights, city people, city things, city stuff.

Not a single person speaking French, did you notice? English, yes. Spanish, Russian, Chinese, yes. A dialect of Arabic, something that sounds like Igbo, yes. But no French.

What is it like to know love and never be loved?

It's like watching it from afar: you see, perhaps, your parents, laughing in the kitchen, cooking together, eyes crinkled with happiness. You see: friends falling in love, getting married, having kids, becoming settled, and when you come for dinner you watch, envious at the subtle signs of their love. Look: how his eyes soften when he looks at her, how she hands him the child, whom they both kiss, how they interact like one. Those strangers, holding hands, unaware of their surroundings, tripping over each other, but unwilling to move even an inch apart.

You know like and lust, but you do not know love.

The French are natives, they are not enveloped by their Eiffel Tower any

more than a New Yorker is bedazzled by the Statue of Liberty or the picturesque Central Park or the ceaseless buzzing of the city. To them, this is life. They do not need to visit.

But you do. You need to fall in love, you must know love and be loved. You do everything you need to— you find the One, your One and Only, you get married. You flash the rings at your friends, at your family, at strangers. Love, you say, triumphantly, the way Christopher Columbus would have said, America. But the others, they sigh, shake their heads, correcting, marriage.

So you have kids too, go to dinner with your spouse, surprise them with gifts, insisting, love, love, love.

But they never told you about bills and mortgages and debts and jobs. The tiring children, the lost job, the pointless sex. The silence at the dinner table, the way you become quick to argue. They never told you that, did they?

The idea of it is so consuming— from the ground, it looks so enticing, so beautiful, and necessary, so you build your whole life around it, making a checklist of your life, making your way to the top. Some end up turning around, others are properly awed, even more never go in, because they know what they will see. And the rest, they are like you.

You say, my god, this was worth the flight.

You think, my lungs are killing me, my legs are killing me, and I

thought there would be more.

They say, most definitely worth the flight, but they look worn out. The idea of it is better than the actuality. The Eiffel Tower looks better from the ground.

So you look. Look. Look. Then turn around and head back, for what more is there to do?

So this is Paris; so this is the Eiffel Tower; so this is love.

How boring.

A MESSAGE FROM THE PEN

Thank you Walls students, for submitting your incredible art and writing to the fifth issue of *The Pen*!

Special Congratulations to Zoe Becker, Camille Galvani, Cierra Hamilton, and Liya Johnson for winning *The Pen's* Winter 2023 Writing and Art Competition; their works are featured in the beginning of the magazine. Congratulations as well to our Honourable Mentions: "Blurry Candy Apples," "The Eiffel Tower," "Selenophile No. 2," and "Thoughts."

We accept submissions year-round at swwthepen@gmail.com.

THE PEN LITERARY MAGAZINE

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