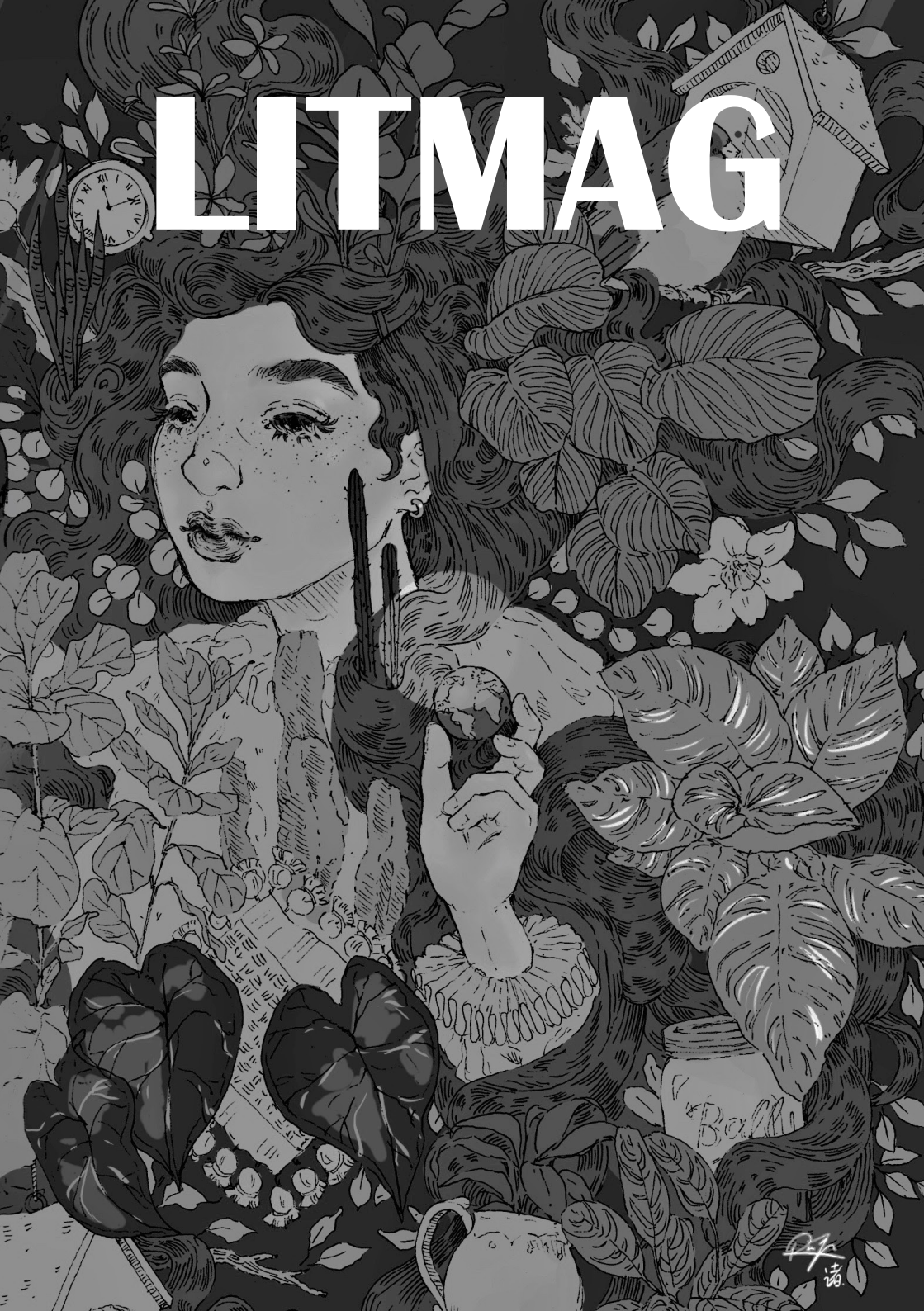


# LITMAG



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# LitMag

Volume One - Spring Issue

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## Made in China

*“Imagine being thrown out of an airplane. You hit the ground and break all your bones, you go to the hospital and you heal and you move on and finally put the whole thing behind you—and then one day somebody tells you about parachutes” (Born a Crime, 31).*

I will never forget the first time that someone called me stupid. I had been invited to my friend Lily Talarico’s seventh birthday party at her country house in Quogue, a small, affluent village in the Hamptons. Lily had been a family friend of mine since as long as I could remember. Although we had wildly different interests, and often disagreed on many things, somehow we found a way to be friends.

Since Lily and I went to different schools, I did not know anyone at her birthday party. After moping around by myself for ten long minutes, this energetic girl—Becky—came towards me and started talking.

Six-year-old me, being the taciturn, slightly socially awkward child that I was, was relieved to have someone come talk to me so that I wouldn’t have to spend the whole afternoon eating cake by myself.

Becky insisted that if two people were born within a few days of each other, they were somehow magically connected. She proceeded to ramble on about how since her own birthday was in only a few days, that she and Lily were basically twins. I thought it was a perfectly absurd idea. Obnoxious me was suspicious of her reasoning, and so I decided to question her and Lily’s birthday connection further, figuring I could trap her into admitting that she was wrong about her birthday-logic.

I asked, “Well, are your adoption days close together too?”

Becky gave me a look that was equal parts confusion and revulsion,

like she was trying to solve some impossible math problem in her head, while simultaneously witnessing me throw up a mouthful of cake.

And then, she said it.

“You’re *stupid*, that’s not even a word!” she shrieked in my face. Her face shriveled up to the point where it didn’t exist, and then she stomped away with her arms crossed, as if I had just offended every bone in her body.

I was completely stunned. That was the first time anyone had ever called me stupid, and at that age, being called stupid was the ultimate insult. But as much as I wanted to chase after Becky in order to defend my pride, more than anything, I was just confused. What the hell was she talking about? Was she referring to the word “adoption”? Adoption is certainly a word! She was the stupid one, not me.

When I got home, I told my parents about that girl named Becky at Lily’s birthday party, and how she had the audacity to call me stupid, even though she was really the stupid one. My parents told me that Becky wasn’t stupid, but that she just didn’t know what the word “adoption” meant, because she probably wasn’t adopted.

*Because she probably wasn’t adopted.* Those words rang in my ears for what seemed like eternity. How could Becky not be adopted? Wasn’t everyone adopted?

At the time, I thought my logic about everyone being adopted was pretty air-tight. I mean, my desk was made in China. My lamp was made in China. My clothes were made in China. Everything in my world was made in China. Hell, even I was technically made in China. Isn’t that where everything came from? I thought China was like Santa Claus’s toy factory except that Chinese Christmas delivers things everyday instead of just once a year. Besides, China was where I, my sister, and my friend Lily came from. What made Becky so damn special?

“You mean, there are people who aren’t adopted from China?” I asked.

“Of course not. In fact, most people aren’t,” said my mom, slightly laughing. “I wasn’t adopted, and neither was your dad. I mean, just look at him, does he look at all Asian?”

I stared at my father, noticing his blue eyes and his rather pale skin. After observing him for about ten seconds, I admitted that he perhaps did not look like a typical Chinese man. And now that I had thought about it, Becky, with her flowing blonde hair, didn’t exactly look Chinese either. But one thing still didn’t make sense to me: if Becky wasn’t adopted, then why was I? Why did I have to go through this if others didn’t? I turned back to my mom, and questions started pouring out of me.

“You mean, I didn’t have to be adopted? So whoever gave birth to me chose to leave me? Why would someone do that? Why wouldn’t they want to keep me? Why did I have to go through all of this if I didn’t have to? Why couldn’t I have just stayed in China with my birth parents?” I asked as my eyes began to glaze over with tears.

“It’s not about why they *chose* to keep you or not. It might not have been their choice,” my mom explained. She proceeded to inform me about China’s one child policy and how it was illegal for couples to have more than one child.

I took it all in, and eventually came to accept that maybe my being adopted was for the better. But it still felt ridiculous—and unfair—that I had to go through all this trouble while someone like Becky didn’t. Besides, I wasn’t completely convinced that my birth parents didn’t have a choice.

“But it’s still totally possible that they could have just not wanted me,” I sulked.

My mom smiled, squatted down to meet my eyes and said: “Alexia, it doesn’t matter if *they* wanted you or not. What matters is that we do.”

Siddiq Nanabawa

## Memory Lane

Grant sat down on the steps of his building thinking about how much his life had changed since he left his home city of Las Vegas. It was only months earlier when he lived alongside his mom and dad in the luxury of their own home. He lived a happy and normal life in Vegas but one day his home was ravaged by a wildfire, taking the lives of his mom and dad. Grant was full of grief and couldn't stand to stay in Vegas and remember the family he once had. As a result, Grant decided to move to New York, where he thought he would find a good job and live a good life. However, he moved into the one neighborhood that he should have avoided, East Tremont in the Bronx- the center of violence and gangs. Grant can't remember much about the first few weeks after moving to the Bronx, but he knows that it completely changed him. The Bronx was too much for him and eventually, he succumbed to the violence that was affiliated with it.

The thought of Vegas and his parents proved to be too much for Grant, and so he walked up the steps and entered his building, exiting the sunlight. The building was mostly empty besides a few people who were drinking and smoking. Grant walked up two more flights of stairs and headed to his apartment which he shared with his friend, Marcus. As he entered he found Marcus sitting at the table eating his breakfast, and so he walked over and pulled himself a seat.

Grant reached into his pocket and pulled out a cigarette, he lit it and began to smoke. "Are you sure you want to go through with the plan you have for today?" Grant asked Marcus.

"Obviously, we need all of that jewelry, we barely have enough money to pay this month's rent," replied Marcus, as he continued to wolf down his bowl of cereal.



“I know, but if we get caught robbing the store then we’ll probably spend a few years in jail and trust me, I definitely don’t want to go back.”

“I’m doing this either way, so either you could help me or you could just stay here doing nothing. But if you don’t help then just know that you’re not getting any of the money.” With that, Marcus got up and headed out the door.

Grant didn’t want to help him, but he needed that money if he wanted to have a roof over his head. So he quickly got up and ran out the door behind Marcus. Grant caught up to Marcus just as Marcus was about to drive off toward the store. Grant opened the door and sat down in the passenger seat. It had been such a long time since he was in Marcus’ car that he forgot just how creepy it made him feel. He looked all around the car and everything seemed normal until he looked in the rear-view mirror. In the mirror, Grant saw an old woman whom he was sure he never met, however she looked so familiar to him. He quickly looked back at the back seat, but to his surprise, there was no one there.

“What’s wrong with you, I can’t take you with me if you can’t even handle sitting in the car!” Marcus told Grant as he began to drive past Knox Street.

“No I’m good, I just thought I saw something in the backseat. Anyway, how are we going to rob the store? I don’t even have anything to use,” Grant told Marcus.

“About that, I brought something along just in case you didn’t have anything. Make sure you give it back though, I paid a lot for it.” Marcus pulled out a gun from one of the compartments in the car and handed it to Grant.

Grant looked at the gun he was holding. It was a lot heavier than he thought it would be, but the main problem he had was that he didn’t even know how to use it. The rest of the drive took about ten minutes,



but it was full of tension and neither of the men said anything to each other. Finally, they made it to 196 street and Marcus parked his car in front of an old run down house. They both exited the car and walked over to a store that was surrounded by tons of shining lights. Grant looked up at the sign of the store, which read “Popular Jewelry.” However, he quickly focused his gaze onto the glass window just beneath the sign. In the reflection of the window, he saw the same old woman he saw in the rear view mirror standing directly behind him. Grant turned around as quickly as possible, but again there was no one behind him. He decided he was just hallucinating and so he entered the store along with Marcus.

They both walked in together and Marcus immediately drew his gun and pointed it at the cashier. He told her to put everything they had into the bag that he gave her. Grant was completely clueless about what to do, he couldn't concentrate correctly with all of the screaming and yelling that was going on, but out of the corner of his eye, he saw someone inching toward the exit. He turned around and pulled out his gun, he pointed it at the person who was trying to escape. Grant was shocked when he realized that this person was the lady who he had seen in the reflection and the mirror, he knew she wasn't real, but he had no idea why she looked so familiar to him. That's when he remembered when he had last seen her.

It was two months after he had moved to the Bronx when he and Marcus had decided that it was a good idea to rob a phone store. It was very similar to what they were doing this very day, but on that day Grant was actually excited to go with Marcus. When they got to the store, Grant immediately pulled out his gun and pointed it at the woman over the counter, telling him to give them every phone they had. The gun tumbled to the floor and as it made contact with the ground, the trigger went off and a bullet shot straight into the woman's chest. Grant saw the blood pouring out of the wound, but he immediately fainted and hit his head on the marble floor. That was why he didn't remember the first few weeks after moving to the Bronx and that was why he forgot all about killing that woman.

When Grant had finally remembered everything and came back to his senses, it was already too late. The store was surrounded by dozens of cops and Marcus was nowhere to be seen. Grant thought about what to do, but with all of the noise, it was too hard for him to concentrate. He went outside with the gun still in his hands. However, he didn't know what he wanted to do. He couldn't live with himself after finding out that he was responsible for the death of an innocent woman, but he didn't want to kill himself. And so, Grant began to raise the gun, however before he could even raise it above his waist, the sound of bullets echoed through the air. Before he could even flinch, Grant was full of dozens of bullets and he staggered to the ground and bled from all the wounds he had just received. He thought about the woman and how she must have felt just like him, angry and sad, yet there was nothing they could do to save themselves from dying. Within a few seconds, Grant bled to death and he died right there, the very same way he killed that woman just months earlier.

## Jordan Ferdman

# Refresh

My sister bought herself a Brown sweatshirt the day she applied which, in retrospect, was jinxing it. She applied early action, her GPA of 3.8 and plethora of ridiculous extracurriculars serving her well as she was accepted in early December. An early Hanukkah present, my father called it. It wasn't his first choice for her; he'd have preferred Yale or Columbia, his alma mater, but Celia wanted to be at least two hours away from New York City. She once told me that she resented the city because she couldn't go two blocks without being catcalled. I thought that's a pretty good problem to have, but I didn't say as much, opting to nod comfortably and pat her arm.

We dropped Celia off at Brown on August 27th. Today is October 6th, and I still have not heard from my sister, with the exception of a text reading, "Chipotle tonight?" followed by "wrong person, sry" seconds later.

I'm wondering what she ordered at Chipotle last night when my computer dings. My fingers fly to the keyboard, clicking the space bar more times than strictly necessary. The thought of a message from Celia is ecstasy.

The notification is not from Celia. Something from CNN. I focus on the feeling of my socks against my toes. My socks against the soles of my shoes. Any feeling other than the disappointment.

*Upper East Side Nanny Slays Children, 5 and 3, Under her Care in Brutal Attack*

The words become blurry after a bit. I read eleven articles detailing the attack. Some of them attach photos. I don't know whether I like being able to put a face to the children's' names. Some display the photos at the top of the article, right when you click on the link. Some embed them in the text. They all use the same picture.

My biology teacher says data can be sorted into two categories: qualitative and quantitative. In the first one, the four family members are at Disneyland. Quantitative. The mom is pretty - she's got blonde

highlights in her hair and a nice smile. She has her son in her arms. He's pressing his cheek into hers, and she's beaming, holding the other side of his face with the affection only a mother can. The little boy has his father's smile. The father is good looking, I suppose, for a middle-aged father. He's holding his daughter's hand. She looks like her mother. They're standing in front of Cinderella's castle. Happiest place on Earth. All qualitative. Observations.

The children's names, the article says, were Olivia and William. They were stabbed to death in their bathtub. William had been stabbed in his sleep. Olivia had put up a fight. The mother, it says, had been in the gym in the basement of their apartment building, at the time. She'd gone upstairs after her workout, went into the bathroom for a shower, and discovered the scene. The article stated that when the paramedics found her, she was shaking and sobbing, hunched over herself. Vomit all over the floor.

"Grace?" My mother pokes her head through my bedroom door. "It's dinner time."

"What's for dinner?" I close my laptop. She glances at me suspiciously, her eyes settling on my closed computer and then me.

"Are you doing something on there you're not supposed to?" she asks.

I shake my head. "What's for dinner?"

My mother runs a tired hand down her face, pausing to rub at her eyes. I love when she does that. It never fails to amuse me how tired she always seems to be, considering she doesn't work. I wonder what she finds so tiring about staying home all day. "We ordered sushi."

My father tries and fails to maneuver his chopsticks as he says, "Did you guys see the news today?"

"About the nanny?" my mother responds. "So sad."

"Brian is Facebook friends with the father. Went to high school together," my dad responds, shaking his head. "Terrible."

"Those kids were so young. 4 and 8, was it? Oh, so awful," my mom sighs, placing a hand over her chest.

"5 and 3."

"I'm sorry?" My mother looks at me over her wine glass.

"The kids. They were 5 and 3. You said 4 and 8."

My mother blinks, unfazed. "Oh. 5 and 3. Jesus, so little."

My father clears his throat. "Grace, why don't you call Celia tonight? I'm sure she'd love to hear from you."

I nod, excusing myself from the table to dial her. Crossing my fingers she'll pick up.

"Hey, you've reached Celia, I can't get to the phone right now but leave a message and I'll get back to you as soon as possible! Thanks!"

I look down as the automated voice instructs me to start speaking at the beep. Reprimand myself for getting my hopes up.

"Hey, Celia! Hi. Um. How was your day? I miss you. I saw, uh, in your Facebook post that you went to an open mic tonight? That's cool. Did you perform? I'd love to see, like, a video if you have one, maybe. If it's okay. Things are okay at home." I pause, thinking of what to tell her. "I don't know if you saw it in the news, but a nanny killed the kids she was watching. They were really young. Like three blocks from here. Sorry, that was probably really a downer. My bad. Anyway. I miss you. I love you. Call me. Or text me. Or Snap me, or something. If you have time. Goodnight. Miss you."

I carry my computer over to my bed and open it, intending to open up Netflix. But the first thing that pops up is the article, from my last window. It's the picture of the family at Disneyland again. I wonder where they got that photo. Facebook, maybe.

The mother's Facebook page is pathetically easy to find. Michelle Davis's profile picture is another family picture from a birthday party of some sort. Olivia's shirt has "birthday girl" printed across the chest, and the little girl has her chubby arms wrapped around her mother's leg. Her father and William are next to them, the father's hand on his wife's arm. His own Facebook is tagged in that photo, but is on the privacy setting. His wife's page is where the photos are. There are a few more, mostly of the the children individually or wedding shots of her and her husband. I zoom in on the birthday photo again, into Michelle's smile. It's so genuine. I wonder if she'll ever smile like that again.

-

Michelle is a very pretty woman. It's especially sad when bad things happen to pretty women.

I am on her cousin's Facebook page. Lucinda. She has thousands

of photos posted to Facebook. Many have Michelle in them. Some have her husband. Some have Olivia and William. But Michelle is in a lot of them. Michelle and Lucinda, at a fancy restaurant. Michelle and Lucinda, at the pool. She seems like a family-centered woman. She's in every group family photo, usually with her arms wrapped around whoever's closest to her. In the next picture, Michelle and Lucinda are at Wicked on Broadway. Michelle's holding her Playbill up, pointing to the stage. I wonder if she'll see another Broadway show any time soon. Probably not, probably has her hands full with funeral arrangements.

Two weeks after the attacks, a vigil is held for the children. It is open to the public, according to The New York Post. It's on a Saturday. My friend Stephanie and I were supposed to go lunch on Saturday, I remember. I'll have to skip it. This is more important. Being there, for Michelle.

None of my outfits feel right. The dress code for the vigil asked attendees not to wear black, but to wear a bright color to celebrate the Olivia and Williams' life. That was probably Michelle's idea. Seems like something she would do. The purple dress I wore to Celia's graduation feels too casual, and my yellow romper wouldn't be warm enough for mid-October in New York City. I wander into Celia's room. She left the majority of her formal clothes at home. She'd yell at me if she knew I was in here, but maybe her rules have changed now that she's away. Her knee-length aquamarine dress is the first thing I see. It's beautiful. I take it to my room, hang it up on my door, and wait for Saturday.

School on Friday seems to drag on endlessly. I scroll mindlessly through Michelle's Facebook. She's turned on the setting where I can't see who her friends are. I click on the profiles who commented on her photos. So cute! So sweet! She looks just like you! Olivia did look a lot like her. I wonder if she keeps the photos of her children up now, or if it causes too much pain. I click on Lucinda's Facebook again. I want to see the picture of them on the beach again, the funny face Michelle's making. Lucinda's posted something new. A photo of Michelle, Olivia, William, herself, and a couple of other women and children.

"As I'm sure a lot of you have heard, our sweet Olivia and William became angels on Tuesday the 6th. We miss them so much already and a future without them is not one that we want to live in. Michelle

and Joshua requested I tell you all that they have received your texts and emails and appreciate them but cannot respond right now. We hope you understand and hope to see you at the vigil tomorrow.”

I’m reading this post and those kids will never learn how to read. Never graduate. Never get married or get old.

I’ve never been to a vigil before. Being here now, I understand why my parents never took me to one when I was younger. I was six when my grandma died. I didn’t attend the funeral. Now, though, surrounded by Olivia and William’s loved ones, I’ve never felt so safe. Safe with people who are grieving their lives, just like me. Safe with people who are there for Michelle, just like me. I see Lucinda. She’s crying, a tissue held up to her eyes. She has her arms around another woman, who I recognize as Rachel, her sister. Michelle’s other cousin. Sitting next to Rachel is her husband, Steve. He likes golf. His entire Facebook page is videos of him playing. Narcissistic, if you ask me. Steve’s sitting next to Joshua. And next to Joshua is Michelle. She’s weeping, hunched over herself and burying her head into her husband’s chest. I can’t really see her from here. Can’t see if she’s okay. If she’s lost weight. I’m sure she has. She’s wearing a pink dress. Olivia’s favorite, I remember. She loved Pinkalicious. There was a picture of her as Pinkalicious for Halloween last year, I remember. Got a lot of comments. So cute. So sweet. Michelle’s favorite color is never stated on the Facebook. She wears green a lot. Green, maybe.

We’re escorted out of the church a few minutes later. Michelle and Joshua weren’t ready, they said. They’re very sorry. They appreciate us all being here. The church is next to a Starbucks. I take the seat closest to the window, so if any of them leave the church I can see them. Maybe I’ll get to see Michelle. To hug her, maybe.

Thirty and sixty and ninety minutes pass. They don’t leave the church. My mother texts, “Where are you?” Across the street from the church is a bodega. Maybe Michelle frequents there. I feel hope rise in me. A chance to hug her. To say hi. To tell her I’m here. I’ll go back tomorrow. I type a reminder on my phone.

That night, I sit in my bed in front of my laptop. I look back at the articles that have attached photos. Those are my favorites. I look back at the article detailing Michelle’s reaction. A pandemic gave the



account. That when they found her, she was shaking and sobbing, hunched over herself, vomit all over the floor. Threw up on herself. Like her kids probably have done a million times. My mom had laughed when Celia had come home drunk for the first time and thrown up all over her. A full circle moment, she'd called it. Michelle will never get that moment. I ache. She's young, probably still fertile. Does trauma affect your eggs? Maybe she'll have other kids. I wonder if she'll name them after Olivia and William. I hope she does.

She does not show up at the bodega the next day. Or the next. Or the next. I check Facebook. The fewer articles the news posts, the more I check Facebook. Nothing. Nothing. She needs to leave the house, doesn't she? At some point. I wait at the bodega. She doesn't come. She doesn't come the next day. I pretend to browse, pretend to be interested in the ten different types of cat food or brownie mix. For days. The cashier watches me sometimes. Don't know if he's suspicious or looking at my butt. Don't know if it matters.

She enters. I couldn't really see her at the vigil. I see her now. The woman in front of me is nearly unrecognizable from the woman in Lucinda's Facebook posts. She'd looked so happy. So full. The woman in front of me looks nothing like that Michelle. She's changed from the Michelle I knew. The real Michelle.

I trail her around the store. She moves slowly, pausing every few moments to wipe at her eyes. The single item in her cart is a box of regular absorbency tampons. Still fertile. Could still have more kids. Could still be okay.

She's moving to go to the cashier when I stop her. My heart's in my ears. I want to hug her. This is my chance. I could make her be okay. She could make me be okay.

"Michelle? Hi. I'm Grace. I just wanted to say that I'm so sorry for your loss. I am here for you if you need anything. I am so sorry."

She flinches like I hit her. "What the fuck?"

"W-what?" My voice shakes with my finger. This isn't Michelle. This isn't Michelle.

"Are you kidding me right now? I don't know you. Can you leave me alone? Please?"

"I-I don't understand. Michelle?"

“How do you know my name?” Her voice shakes. Her eyes fill with tears. I notice her split-ends. She should get a haircut. I feel my socks on my feet. My socks on the soles of my shoes.

“Because...because I know? Because of what we’ve been through? With Olivia and William-”

She cries out like a wounded animal at the sound of her children’s names. She sounds like she is dying. She begins to cradle whatever’s in her arms, like a child. Murmuring something. Something about Mama. Mama’s here, I realize she’s saying. She’s cradling the box of tampons, whispering that Mama’s here.

The cashier and the other shoppers watch in silence. They know who she is. I know they know who she is. She’s Michelle. The cashier eventually moves towards her, his hand on her back. Come on. Let’s get you home. She’s still bawling as the cashier lifts her to her feet. He seems to know her. Know Michelle. Maybe he knew Olivia and William. He glances around his store before holding her weight up as he pushes the door open and goes to hail a cab. She leans her weight against him. He puts his arm around her. She’s still crying. She turns back to me and her mouth forms a straight line before letting out another wail.

I still want to hug her.

Lauren Kim

## Windows

She was a stout woman with short curly hair. Teeth that had once been straight were slowly being unraveled by time. Small eyes were set far back into her head. They seemed to be enveloped in an unnatural shadow, the skin encircling each orb gravely darkened. The difference between iris and pupil could not be discerned without a flashlight, giving her visage a dismal appearance. These eyes had undergone too many surgeries to count, her vision addled beyond physical repair. If eyes are indeed the windows to the soul, I believe she has drawn a curtain. A veil so obscure only splotches of colors bleed through. I have only seen the curtain moved once. A mere flicker to the truth it beheld. Her eyes, once so opaque and heavy with emotion, cleared to the beady pinpricks of a thief. An angry, mad, jealous thief she appeared to be, glaring with the feverish intensity of a madman. Every human horror conceivable seemed to swim in her gaze, Pandora's jar confined to her two tiny spheres of sight. I looked at her, stunned. Her physical vision seemed to be clouded for she made no movement to my shocked expression. I looked away, afraid of what I had seen. Perhaps windows are best looked at covered by the curtain.

Abigail Morse

## The Uneventful Sublime Gathering

The house was always lit by the soft Florida sun, with an empty park across the street giving it the appearance of a remote cottage tucked among the trees. On the occasion that I would go here, I never received a formal invitation, instead I would be admitted on account of possessing a past phone call. The host was my first cousin once removed, Dirk, who my family would encourage me to visit around the holidays. We had an unfamiliar relationship, but I remember him for one present he gave me, a self counting coin jar, which he bought for me in the hopes that I would like it. I remember this because it is such a phenomenal occasion when you receive something you've been wanting for years from somebody who you haven't even seen in years.

"Welcome!" he chuckled, as my family and I pulled our Prius into the soundless sandy driveway, with Matilda, his cat-sized dog, skipping about his feet. And then the familiar meet-and-greet chatter ensued as it always does. We walked onto Dirk's front patio, surrounded by a makeshift dog-fence made of wobbly waste-high wire panels, our sweeping gazes taking in the small enclosure with sandy new pavement, a pretend bamboo tiki-bar, and a collage of beach chairs, porch chairs, and bar stools. To our astonishment, the dog-fence was there to keep dogs out. Apparently a neighbor's german shepherd had tried to run away with Matilda. Dirk only had two other guests, both of which were already there. One was his girlfriend who had been with him for over a decade and was as close to us as family. The second and last guest was his daughter, 30 years old, surprisingly tall, radiating happiness, and single again.

At one point we realized that the dog was missing, and after a quick search we found her looking out the car window at us. Somehow she had managed to hop in unnoticed while we were stepping out. From that, the guests were only on the verge of hysterics, so it was simple enough to fall back into routinely admiring the quaint front yard from the colorful beach chair I sat in. After seeing that my relatives were all

engrossed in conversations with one another, I lamely went around to the scattered side-tables, snacking on tiny appetizers, until I settled down next to a fresh bowl of carrots. The calm sun had a meeting with the back of my blue shirt as my eyes eagerly absorbed the contents of Dirk's beach-garage. After counting over the items for the third time, my dad asked if I wanted some ice water from inside, and this was just the excuse I needed to peruse the interior of the little Florida abode. I stepped into the kitchen right off the porch, and the indigo mid-afternoon light suffused the bright colors strewn by the dishes covering the countertops. Lacking the excitement I was hoping for, I searched for the supposed cat which took up residence there, but to no avail. Rejoining the party outside, my family was getting restless too, so we decided it was time to bring out the gifts we had gotten each other. My cousin gave me a set of colorful mechanical pencils which warranted a closer look because of their near appearance of being wooden pencils. Like always, the last minute gift my parents had bought the host was a bottle of some wine you had never heard of, neither cheap nor expensive, but simply different. Following only half an hour of parting words, I found myself in the Prius again, closing the door on a curious sea-breeze who once again engulfed a quiet cottage.

Rachel Zhu

## Frances Forgets

Frances is afraid of the rain. She is afraid that the water will soak through the bricks of the buildings, which will soften like pound cake in milk and collapse. And so when it begins to drizzle Frances takes the bus (the bus is safe, because it is waterproof) into Central Park (the park is also safe, because there are no buildings) and she waits by the reservoir with a red umbrella until the storm passes. Sometimes it is a long storm, or there are multiple thunderstorms, and on those days she brings a beach chair and a blue blanket so she will not get arthritis by standing in the cold and the wet for too long. Sometimes when it rains for days she has no choice but to go home, and lies in bed, and is afraid.

When home Frances takes the little white bus tickets (the ones that look like receipts, for the cross-town buses), folds them in half the long way, and slips them into a jar she has on the ground by the mirror across from the door. She says she will send them all to the mayor to show how environmentally harmful he is being. After this Frances re-opens her red umbrella which she closed in the lobby, and sets it out to dry on the terrace, where there is a black cat figurine. Frances knows it is bad luck and has been the source of many troubles in late years, but is afraid to throw it away in case it was a gift from her daughter. She does not remember. The beach chair is left propped against the cat, as kind of a curtain to obscure Frances's fear. But in reality she is not afraid of very many things; only the rain, black cats, and the feeling that one day she will forget her daughter. She knows she is very forgetful already; this is because every month she finds a new dried plant on her windowsill that she has forgotten to water. Sometimes she lets things stay on the stove too long and they burn, but she is not as afraid of fire as she is of rain because the bricks in the building are not flammable. Besides, her kitchen walls and floors are of granite, which ought not to burn either.

But fire is not what Frances thinks of most of the time after she steps back into the apartment from the terrace. Most of the time, she thinks about if her daughter is going to visit, and then she thinks about

her grandson. Then sometimes Frances goes to take the garbage to the compactor room and sees the man who lives across the hall, except she has forgotten about him. He has lived there two years now, and she has welcomed him with brownies almost thirty-four times. He has helped her pull the Monet print off the wall and then put it up again almost ten times, because she keeps forgetting and wondering why the Monet is not on the wall, or why it is still on the wall.

She is not so terribly lost, though. She still reads the newspaper and does the crosswords in the bathtub and hangs her rose-printed sheets out on the balcony so that at night they smell like Park Avenue sunshine. Sometimes when she is bored she sits on the couch and pulls the comforter up to her chin and thinks about nothing, but thinks that she is thinking about everything. Sometimes she thinks about the man who owns the pickle shop two blocks away who talks to her when she pays for her sweet marinated red peppers, and then she thinks about the doorman who has the night shift downstairs, and sometimes she only sits and stares at the little mark on the wall from twenty-some years ago where there used to be a nail. Frances is sad when she does this, but barely realizes it, and instead considers it a routine time to ponder the world.

Maybe Frances is also sad when she goes to sleep, when she pulls her blanket up to her chin and stares up at the ceiling. Occasionally she stares long enough to remember what it was like staring up at other ceilings. She remembers pink walls (hers at six years of age), gray walls (his at twenty-seven), yellow walls (theirs at thirty-one). She wonders what color he painted his walls after he moved out and moved in with someone else. Usually while staring at those walls she remembers the feeling of smiling. She does not really smile because the lift of her lips takes too much energy, and besides, there is no one to smile to except for the ceiling light. If Frances looks at it for a long enough time it begins to look like a face.

She is not afraid of death, really, only afraid that when she goes to heaven she will not know anyone there. She is not sure of what she will do if no one speaks to her. What if it is crowded, and there is no place to sleep, no beds for her to lie in and no walls for her to stare up at? She has said this to the drunken man on the street corner whom she



lets sleep in the living room (this is safe because she knows him and does not forget him like she does the man who lives across the hall. This drunk man, his name is Joseph and he is an actor). He repays her for her kindness by knitting her scarves and sweaters.

There are few events in Frances's life, unless one counts the flowering of one of her succulents every few years. Otherwise there are events such as when she takes the piggy banks, stuffed with change, to the bank down the street, or when the young woman above drops cigarette butts onto Frances's terrace (they often land in the aloe plant). Every couple of years her daughter and grandson visit from California, and Frances invites them to dinner and they eat roast pork and beans and tomato gazpacho in silence, because there is nothing to say. Frances's daughter asks how she is doing, and Frances says she is doing well, how about you? And then the daughter says she is doing well, too, and William has just started his first year of elementary school, and William looks outside at the black cat figurine that is sitting on the terrace because he has nothing to say either. There are minutes of silence, and then Frances asks how Emily's husband is, and Emily says he is busy and could not come, but did say hello. Frances says hello back, and then they sit and wait for William to finish so they can sit some more. William is bored and he looks at the cat and then he looks at the Monet and he looks at the old television in the living room and then he looks at the plaid jacket that is hanging on the tall, ornate coat rack. If there is nothing else to look at William will look at the shoes under the bench and the jar under the mirror and maybe into the mirror, but never at his grandmother because he has nothing to say to her. Sometimes Emily hugs her mother and pretends to ask her to come to California, but both she and Frances know no husband wants his mother-in-law in the house, and so Frances says that she is too old to leave New York, and Emily insists that she is young, so, so young. William looks at the carpet and holds his mother's hand.

Sometimes when it rains and one of Frances's succulents is flowering she brings it into the park with her. The people on the bus wonder why she is holding a small painted blue pot with a miniature cactus and a long trail of white flowers coming out the middle, but Frances says nothing. If it is night and she falls asleep on her beach chair the small

blue pot tumbles out of her hands and into the mud, where she finds it when a nice man wakes her up. Then she gathers all the dirt that was spilled from the pot and slips it back in on the sides, and then looks sadly at each little white blossom, as if to apologize. And when she goes back she is shivering and the doorman with the night shift tells her, again, that the rain will not soak into the bricks of the building and make them soften, and she smiles and says she knows. Then he asks her why she goes out if she knows, and she replies that she knows but does not really know—that she knows in her mind but her heart, where the fear lives, has not quite gotten the message yet. It may have been lost on the way.

Maybe in a few months or a few years Frances will forget her daughter. So that when there is knocking at the door Frances will open it to an unfamiliar face; she does not know anyone this young, she is sure, apart from the mailman and the new man across the hall. Maybe her grandson will be there, too, and she will wonder if they have gotten lost, or perhaps come to the wrong floor. She will ask who they are looking for, and then her daughter will know. But maybe that will come slowly; she will forget many things before she forgets them. She will forget to take the garbage to the compactor room, to bake brownies for the neighbor who just moved in, to pay for her peppers at the pickle shop, to think about life and heaven and smiling when she sits on the couch or the bed and stares at the white around her. Maybe Frances will forget to be afraid of the rain.

Abby Beckler

## The Wizarding Woes of Harry Potter

I once told myself that if I believed in magic, magic would believe in me. I loved magic and all things magical, and thought that I was obviously a witch and that I needed a pet unicorn who I would name Fluffers and we would travel the world together eating mint chocolate chip ice cream. I even had illustrated a short series which I had also wrote, called *The Adventures of Fluffers and I*. Needless to say, Fluffers was my best friend, total soul mate, BFF, and I would do whatever it took to make Fluffers come true.

By the time I was ten years old, I had read every book on magic (also known as the Harry Potter series) at least three times, and I thought that if Harry could be a wizard, so could anyone. Sure, I hadn't spoken to snakes or made glass magically disappear, but that could be because I was less powerful than Harry, not because I was a muggle (which would be the absolute worst thing in the entire world.) I thought I would get the chance to go to a magical school like Harry Potter and shout spells like "Alohomora" to open locked doors, and "Stupefy" to stun other people. Also, pet unicorns? So when my eleventh birthday came around and there weren't a gazillion owls outside holding letters addressed to "me in the purple bedroom," my disappointment was tremendous. Was I not magical enough or awesomely amazing enough for you, Hogwarts? Was I not the most insanely stupendous witch in the entire magical universe? I had no self esteem issues.

For the next couple of minutes, I was in complete denial. I was sure that my acceptance letter had been lost in the mail. I was going to Hogwarts: I had never been more sure of anything in my life. So I got out of bed, grabbed my Hufflepuff wizard robe and spent a couple hours practicing my spells for when the school year would begin. My first spell would be to unlock a door. I would stare at the front door of my apartment, which was locked, and scream "Alohomora" over and over again until my dad would grab a key, go outside, and unlock the door for me. Spell number one: success! My next spell would stun my opponent

and make them fall on the floor. I would yell “Stupefy” and point my wand at my little sister, who would dramatically fall on the floor and sit motionless for a couple of seconds while my magical spell took effect. Spell number two: another success! I was magical.

So after a few more hours, my acceptance letter still hadn’t come yet, and I had moved from denial to anger. I would run around the house with my robe flying behind me screaming about how Hogwarts just didn’t see the potential in this super amazing witch. I was a pretty eloquent newly-eleven year old, telling myself all about how Hogwarts was a stupid place for farheads and stupid magical wizard people who didn’t deserve to know my super awesome wizard talent. Anger was interesting. I would scream about everything. Somebody asked me to hang out at the park after camp - NO! Somebody asked me if I had gone on the slide yet - NO! Somebody asked me if I wanted a cupcake - NO! Wait, I changed my mind - YES!

I then pleaded with Hogwarts for about an hour, writing letter after letter explaining why I should be admitted into school. Honestly, I had never bargained for anything more in my life than this admission. Somehow, I didn’t think it was suspicious that I never heard back from Hogwarts, not even once. My letters were amazing - on the front of the piece of paper, they would begin with “Please let me go to Hogwarts” and they would end with “You should really let me go to Hogwarts” with a few “I’d really like to go to Hogwarts” thrown in the middle there. Then, I would fold it in half and write on the back in really big letters “HOGWARTS” and then I’d give the letter to my dad to mail for me. When Hogwarts never responded to the good fifteen letters I sent within one hour, I started drawing small squares with pictures of unicorns in the top right corner of the paper because that’s what I had seen on TV when people sent letters places. I still didn’t get a letter in reply. My dreams of my pet unicorn were falling apart by the minute.

Next came my exaggerated depression which actually lasted a couple of days. Since I knew I wasn’t good enough for Hogwarts, I thought I wasn’t good enough for anything. I threw my cape in the depths of my closet, a place I had never gone into before, and I hid my magical wand among the army of stuffed animals on my bed. I was no witch. I was an embarrassment to the wizarding community. I didn’t

want to do anything. I wouldn't stand up and leave my bed, and I wouldn't brush my hair for days on end. All I would do was mope around the hallways and frown. That, and cry a lot. And so I cried my eyes out while watching Ratatouille on repeat for a good couple of days. In the following weeks, I wore a baseball cap every day to keep rats from controlling my brain. Gosh, mind control seemed a lot easier than I thought!

Finally, with the help of a few pints of Ben & Jerry's, I accepted my fate - I was a mere muggle living in a sea of muggles. I wasn't a great witch, destined to lead the rebellion against an evil wizard who had killed a bunch of unicorns to drink their blood (which always sounded disgusting) and I wasn't even a good witch because I wasn't a witch. And so I found my wand, buried between the monkey astronaut named D.J Monkafunk and the stuffed demon bear named Voltwerp, and I rummaged around my closet looking for my robe which I still couldn't find, even with minutes of searching. I took all of my wizard gear and I stuck it in a box. And I took that box and stuck it in the back of a storage unit in the basement. And when that storage unit got too full a few years later, I took that box and I gave it to my cousin, a member of the next generation of wizards and witches in the hopes that he would get into Hogwarts next.

So I didn't get a pet unicorn in the end. Fluffers will forever exist in another realm, never knowing her soul mate (me) and never fully understanding the purpose of her existence (to be my best friend.) And it turns out I'm not a witch, which was a bit of a disappointment, but I adjusted. And so I'm living the muggle life now. It's pretty average - I mean, the portraits don't talk, the letters don't fly, Quidditch isn't a nationally recognized sport, but that's ok - it's getting there. We have smoothies and memes and cell phones so I guess we're almost as cool as wizards. So if I had to give some advice, it would be this: if you still think you're a wizard, know that wizards are elitist and exclusive and really big meanies and you should never want to be one because it will only cause you pain and sadness because you're probably not a wizard, especially if you have to ask.

# Sophie Gordon

## Of Boys and Books

### A How-To

Meet a cute guy in kindergarten. Chase him around the playground at recess, and steal his snacks at lunch. The next day, he will pull your pigtails and take your favorite toy during free play. Become friends with him and have playdates three times a week. You will become inseparable. Soon, your parents will become friends. You'll spend summers at the Jersey Shore together. As the two of you grow older, you will start to have different feelings for him. The type of feelings that make you feel warm and fuzzy inside when he hugs you or touches your hand.

When you start the sixth grade, he will decide that you are no longer good enough for him and will not talk to you in public. He will only talk to you during hebrew school and at dinners that your parents host. You'll try to catch the attention of other boys, but you will fail miserably. Your friends at summer camp will try to set you up with someone, but then that person will change their mind at the last minute and ask out your best friend. So you'll give up on real boys and turn to books.

The boys in the romance novels you read are charming and mature. They always wind up with the girl, and they always say beautiful, romantic things to her. They tell her that her eyes twinkle like stars, and that her lips are the color of rose petals. They tell her that her hair reminds them of cascading waterfalls and that she is the sun to their moon. They tell her that without her, they would be dull and lifeless. They tell her that she lights up their world, and that they could never, ever leave her. Ever. And you will expect that the boys in real life will be the same. You expect that every time a guy looks at you, he is admiring your eyes. In reality, they're just looking at the ketchup stain on your shirt.

So when boys in real life continue to fall short of your novel-based expectations, you will turn to writing. You will start by writing short, seemingly romantic stories during your history classes. Your friends will read them, and they will say that they are good. You will poetically decide that writing is now your passion, and that you will become a famous author when you grow up. So you put your emotions into complex, passionate stories about people who fall in love under odd circumstances. You will begin to mix up what is happening in real life, in your stories, and in your dreams. And then the boy you were best friends with until sixth grade will show up.

He will come to your house, knock on your door, put his hands on your cheeks and pull you in and kiss you. And he will tell you that he loves you and that you're the sun to his moon. That he is dull and lifeless without you. And that you literally light up his world. And then you will wake up to the sound of your alarm clock yelling "BEEP. BEEP. BEEP." You will open your computer and write a 9,674 word story about someone just like you, who falls in love with a person just like him, exactly the way you did. And you will remember that you love him and can never have him. And you will continue to be a hopeless romantic, and you will aspire to go to Columbia for a literature degree and become a romance writer. And you will then give up on that boy from kindergarten. Because he is nothing like the boys that you write about.



## Benjamin Hu

# The Wall

I found a magic set at the peak of the Great Wall of China. I was eight, standing atop one of the seven wonders of the Medieval world, and the highlight of my excursion was an one inch thick cardboard box with metal rings hidden inside. It was by no means a brand-new model. The box stuck to the ground when I picked it up. A piece of spit out milk candy cemented the cardboard to the once grand fortification. Dirt and cigarette ash tracked in by footprints were splattered all over the box. I picked it up and walked to mama. I was still shaken, but I wanted to make amends.

“Look mama, I found this by the flag pole. I get it for free now!”

“Bieeeee, son. You’re going to get bacteria on your hands.”

“No, I won’t. I’ll hold it with a tissue.”

“Do you want to go to a hospital here? Remember when you got sick, you had to spend the night in that Zhengzhou infirmary?”

I shuddered. The skin welts were unbearable, but the hospital was worse. I remember being wheelchaired past the overflowing ICU and seeing patients situated in makeshift beds along the hallway walls. My mother flashed my American passport and gave me a room that could’ve been for one of the elderly men lying on a sheet next to the bathroom clutching their stomachs groaning in pain.

“Fine.”

“Good. I’m sorry we fought before, *baobao*. Let’s catch up to Hannah.”

...

The buick left Beijing city and made it way to the countryside at six o’clock. My *jiujiu* skipped work in order to take us, he wanted to make sure my mother was ok. I thought it was funny that he was driving an American car in China, but I was too tired and crabby to make any joke. Hannah and I shoved each other in the backseat, both fighting to conquer more legroom, but I was losing.

“Get your foot off my side!”

“No! I have to sit in the middle seat. My butt can’t even fit cuz you’re too fat!”

I scoffed and looked away, trying to seem like I didn’t care. Hannah knew I cared though; she’s made me cry before.

“Mamaaaa, Hannah’s taking up my leg space. It’s so hot and I’m sweating and it’s sticky and gross under my knees.”

“Aiya, can’t you two just calm down. I swear, I always have to fix everything but neither of you are appreciative. Son, just wipe your leg with a tissue. We’re almost there anyway.”

Hannah and I both shut up. I rest my head on her shoulders, but she knocks it off as soon as my prickly hair makes contact. I try again multiple times. Eventually, she gives up and rests her head on mine, her eyes shutting.

We get to the entrance. There are two different “great wall” signs, one pointing straight ahead and the other pointing to a path veering off to the left. Hannah wakes up and slaps my scalp.

“Get your enormous head off me!”

After ten more minutes on a gravel path, we reach the base of the mountains. I can see the outline of the wall.

“It looks gross and old.”

Mama snaps her head around like a switchblade.

“Shut up. Be grateful. We’re going to the easier part of the wall to climb so you don’t get too exhausted. So if the *changcheng* looks ugly, it’s your fault.”

I keep my head down while we walk up to the cable cars, thinking that pinching my chin to my chest would stop my eyes from watering. Endless rows of dusty tents and tables line the streets as we walk; it’s obvious a lot of tourists decide to take this route to the wall. Each vendor had purple cardboard boxes, nearly as flat as a chinese pancake, scattered among lukewarm bottles of water and tiny purses made from “100% silk”. “FUN MIGIC SET” was plastered in English in bubble letters across the front. I had yet to know the contents of the box, but I was intrigued. One vendor was playing with it as advertisement, effortlessly connecting and tearing apart three closed metal hoops. At one moment, there is three-fourths of the Audi logo and a second later, three perfectly round, separate entities emerge. The sight was magnificent, it captivated

my eyes. The rings looked like they were made of the highest quality-shiny, stainless steel shaped into three circles of pure magic. They were in sync, in complete harmony like yin and yang. I could feel my insides brighten as I watched the vendor conduct his sorcery. I pulled on the side of mama's linen shirt.

"*Qing ai de* Mama, can I please get the magic box?"

Mama raises her sunglasses onto her dark chocolate hair and cocks her head back.

"How much does it cost?"

The old vendor man looked up with a smiling face.

"Fifteen yuan."

"*Aiya*, for this piece of trash? I'll give you eight."

The man's smile disappeared.

"Thirteen."

"Pleaseeeee mama, I really want it. I'll stop fighting with Hannah."

"Eight."

"Twelve."

"I said 'eight.'"

"Ten. Final offer."

My mother glared at the man, as if she could control him and force an "eight" out of his throat. She turned to me.

"We're not getting it. Let's go, son."

My feet stayed planted in the sand. I wasn't moving.

"Mama, please. I won't ask for anything anymore. I've been so sad lately."

"Stop whining, it's been worse for me. You should be happy that I even took you here."

"Jiujiu took me here."

"What did you say!?"

"Nothing."

"You know what, I don't care if you move or not, we're leaving without you."

She grabbed Hannah's arm and marched like a fresh soldier.

"But mama, please I real-"

"I swear to God. For the last time, you're not getting that."

"If dad were here, he'd buy me it."

"*BI ZUI*, YOU SHUT YOUR FUCKING MOUTH. DAD'S NOT HERE, I AM. I'M THE ONE WHO'S WITH YOU, WHO'S ALWAYS WITH YOU. HE WAS THE IRRESPONSIBLE ONE. HE'S NOT EVEN YOUR DAD ANYMORE."

Mama trudged away, ramming old ladies and toddlers out of her path and into the dust. She grabbed Hannah by the elbow and shoved her into a cable car. They went up without me.

...

Dad was supposed to come with us to China. A thousand dollars were already spent on his Air China ticket when mama found the letters. They were vivid, graphic, more romantic than anything dad had written or said to her. My mother shut her double-lid eyes, her unusually high cheekbones rose. No tears escaped down her face. When dad came home that night, he was greeted by the smell of burnt paper. I stayed in my room, Hannah covered my ears with her hands. At much as tried, I could still hear their screams.

"How could you do this me!? To your children!? God I'm a *shabi* for trusting you, for marrying you!"

"*Laopuo*, just calm down. She means nothing to me. Just relax."

"You think I can relax when you're out screwing some whore?! When was it, huh, when you were in Miami? In New Delhi? In Tokyo?"

"*Laopuo*, you're being ridiculous. She's clinically insane. I didn't end it because she would kill herself, or maybe even our kids, if I did. It would've been wrong if I stopped seeing her."

"*Tamade*... *zou*, get out!"

"Honey, plea-"

"Get out!"

"Just list-"

"*CAONIMA*, GET OUT!"

...

I sat in the dust, my faces covered in tears. Crying children aren't comforted in China, they're punished. We received the singeing pain of indian burns, and the sharp stabs of pencils penetrating the skin. So I covered my mouth, trying to prevent my sobs from getting in the way of the passing families. I bet the mothers were whispering into their

childrens' ears, "I hope you're never like that boy. He has no *chuxi*, no *limao*."

Through the distorted vision of my drenched eyes, I see my *jiujiu* waiting for me. I wasn't completely lost. I thought he would bring me comfort, it's not your fault, your mom is just going through a rough time, it's hard being alone. Instead, he just spent the entire cable car ride breaking me down even more.

"*Ni zhen shi de*, you are so spoiled. We never got anything when we were kids. We played with wooden blocks. Our parents hit us with those wooden blocks. Your mom is amazing. She's tough, you should be grateful. Why aren't you grateful!?"

...

We walk up a large, steep part of the wall, an incline of at least sixty degrees. The wall is made up of gray bricks, no doubt crumbling over the years. Bird poop and lichen line the top. Every few hundred meters there are bamboo ladders stuck to the sides, but they're too high-quality to have been real. The feeling of Chinese pride remains, but the once great defense system of *zhongguo* has aged into a place of desperation. We get over the hump and Hannah and mama walk forward. I stay behind, tearing open the box, accidentally getting milk candy on my hands. I feel the shiver-inducing touch of the rings on my fingertips. I take two out and close my eyes. Suddenly, a high-magnitude force strikes through my body like the recoil of a gun. The rings don't come together. They don't link, they don't connect, they don't match. What the old vendor advertised was a lie. It wasn't effortless, it wasn't given. The pain overwhelmed my body, my ears turned dark crimson. I spin ferociously and throw the rings into the East Eurasian Steppe. I knew dad wasn't coming back.

I see mama ahead, leaning over the edge and looking outwards at the bare, untouched plains. I walked to her and grab her hand. She doesn't turn her head, but squeezes my fingers to let me know she's there. She exhales.

"God, he would've loved this view."

Julia Goldberg

Jay

It had been a long day. Well, no, it was the same length as any school day— seven and a quarter hours, to be exact. It just felt like a long day. *Was that ridiculous?* Jay wondered. How could someone live through a set amount of time on varying occasions and just once have it feel as though more seconds had elapsed? Then again, was time even more than a feeling? His sister, older by exactly 4 years and 2 months, had been droning on about how time was simply a dull social construct. Jay hadn't been listening, but then again he never was; her every word infuriated him. Their conversations always consisted of a seemingly endless monologue from her for every one or two words of Jay's. She believed his opinions were practically worthless compared to her own, and at some point, though he could not recall when, Jay gave up on trying to convince her otherwise. Maybe, though, he should've been listening to her, at least just this once, because now he was actually curious as to what she had been saying. He had said she was older by 4 years and 2 months, but how did he even know that was true if he hadn't been alive? Does time even pass if—

“Jay?” *Oh, shit.* Through the reflection of a somewhat dusty rear-view mirror Jay could see the questioning gaze of the bus driver, one of her eyebrows raised ever so slightly. They'd arrived at his stop; he could see the entrance to his somewhat humble house through the window on which he'd been resting his head. He clearly hadn't noticed, though; he was just staring off into space, and now had absolutely no idea just how long the bus had been waiting for him. Hot with embarrassment, Jay immediately stood, yanking his beige backpack up and over his shoulder. He rushed down the aisle, and hopped off the steps with just a murmur of a thank you.

In an attempt to distract his mind from his own stupidity, he began to sift through the pockets of his oversized jeans for his keys while approaching the concrete stairs that led to his home. Still, though, he was all too aware of his flushed cheeks. Was this what life would be

like until he turned 20? Would all of his teenage years be wasted, consigned to a gulf of embarrassment? God, he had allowed his mind wander again. Well, at least he knew with fair certainty that his keys weren't in his pockets. He slid his backpack off of his shoulders, standing it upright on the front steps. He rummaged through it in vain until his hand slipped between his math and history folder. There they were— but how had they even gotten there? If he had to guess, he'd say his sister had probably stolen his keys after her losing her own. Jay wouldn't put it past her; she was about as responsible as a toddler. She probably avoided confrontation by shoving them back into his bag, fully aware that apologizing for yet another mistake would only worsen their relationship (as if it could actually get any worse). Though Jay enjoyed practically everything more than he enjoyed crediting his sister, in this case, she was right. He didn't want to talk to her today, or ever, for that matter. He had already been giving her the silent treatment for what was going on three months. It sounded excessive, but she deserved it. If it weren't for her, after all, their mom would be still be alive.

His sister had been out partying with friends, at some ungodly hour, and called their mom. Apparently, her ride had left a few hours earlier, but his sister had insisted on staying later even though she had no other way of returning home. Of course their mom came running; she'd do anything for her precious daughter. If you asked her (well, if you could ask her) whether or not she'd do anything differently that night, Jay would bet that their mom would say no, because when all was said and done her daughter had returned home safely. If her own life was the tradeoff there, so be it. If a moronic, drunken driver would slam his car straight into her body just as she shoved her daughter out of its way, so be it. If every person she'd ever known, every thought she'd ever had, every emotion she'd ever felt would be gone in a nanosecond just to protect her more-than-tipsy daughter, well, so be it. The irony of it all infuriated Jay tremendously.

At least he was finally inside his home, and alone for the time being— it'd be a few hours until his sister and father arrived home. Jay made a beeline for his room, where he rolled his backpack off of his shoulders and sank into the cushy blue chair by his desk. He knew he needed to relax, and moreover, he knew how he could. Jay carefully slid



his laptop out of his bag and ran his fingers over a few keys until the screen lit up, bright enough to make him squint. He typed in his password, fast, and slammed his finger on the return key. He didn't even need to pull up the document he wanted, as it was already open on his screen, his cursing blinking at the end of the sentence he had finished the night prior. He scrolled to the top of the document:

*It was 3pm when Jamie finally breathed a sigh of relief. This had taken her what felt like an eternity, but it was done. The world was spinning quickly enough to cause her motion sickness... or was it was spinning just fast enough to be calmer than she had ever experienced? Either way it had reached some type of balance, an equilibrium. Well, it hadn't yet, but it certainly would— though now she was getting far too ahead of herself. She'd have to start from the beginning, or nothing would make any sense:*

*Every action of Lily's was snarky at best and vile at worst. When they were five, Lily had stolen Jamie's favorite crayons and placed enough pressure on their tips that they all snapped. All the very best colors were useless, from the aquamarine to the hot pink. At ten, Lily had convinced Jamie to spend her own birthday money on a new cyan blue scooter, one which they'd take turns riding on the way to "their spot" in the park. That's what Lily had suggested, at least, but Jamie hadn't had a turn any time after the first month. So with Jamie on her dull pink scooter (which she thought she had replaced), and with Lily on the brand new one, the shine of the fresh paint gleaming in the sunlight, the two would often scooter deep into the park. "Their spot," to which they referred, was the very top of a steep, grassy hill. They faced the far steeper side, which overlooked the woods, oak trees swaying in the wind far below. Their backs faced the playground: a multitude of shallow sandboxes, a set of monkey bars, and of course, a line of six creaky swings. Jamie and Lily never could see if they were in use, but it didn't matter; either way, the swings creaked endlessly. It was the perfect spot for anyone who wanted a moment alone; the playground was mainly for younger children, but parents rarely allowed their kids near such a steep ledge. The two would sit together and talk, far enough away from the ledge that they wouldn't risk the possibility of falling to their deaths, but probably*

not far enough that their parents would have approved, had they even known there was a ledge in the park. So they sat there, chatting, though sometimes Jamie would allow her mind to drift off, pretending that next to them there were two matching cyan blue scooters, with metal so bright it scattered the rays of the setting sun into a thousand pinpoints of light.

A little more than seven years later, when they were sixteen, Lily convinced Jamie to snatch the answer key for their math final from the teacher's lounge. Until that point, Lily's manipulation had somehow convinced Jamie she could not succeed on her own. So, the two had remained friends, if one could call them that, despite Lily's vile behavior. Now, though, it had finally become apparent to Jamie that the exact opposite was true: she would have been much more successful on her own. She confirmed this the moment she began the application process to potential new high schools, finding it exceptionally difficult to explain her own expulsion. Her dreams of Brown, of becoming a biomedical engineer— whatever. They were gone. Worse than that, though, were the looks she received from her mother and father. Her parents seemed more frail and tired now, as if they had aged another decade. How could you sabotage yourself? Jamie knew they wondered. How could you throw away everything we've given you at sixteen? they yearned to ask her, though they never did; they never asked her anything anymore. At first the situation sparked hot anger within Jamie, and her body urged her to crack pencils in half and shatter plates on her tile kitchen floor. Over time, though, that had melted into a cooler anger, which then dissipated into mere nothingness. Now there was a sort of void where the anger had been, a hole that neither filled with anything nor healed itself. A void that just gaped.

It was so simple. Jamie would call Lily. "I think I can forgive you," Jamie would say. "I was wondering if we could talk." Lily would cling onto Jamie's every word. "I might be transferring to boarding school, so it'll be okay," Jamie would say.

"Maybe we can meet by our spot near the park," she'd suggest. Lily would. She wasn't nice in any sense of the word, but Jamie knew that somewhere deep inside, guilt was brewing.

So Lily would come, and there Jamie would be: already sitting

*on the ledge, one hand on the ground, the grass tickling her palm. The other hand would extend, ready to help Lily as she too took a seat. Lily would balance upon Jamie's hand, but Jamie's hand would... slip. Just like that, Lily would be gone. Nothing else would change. The swings would still creak and the oak trees would still sway.*

*She must've fallen, her parents would say. A terrible tragedy, the town would agree.*

Jay was satisfied with his story. He added just one more sentence to its end, the perfect conclusion, the line he'd thought up midway through Geometry this morning, the one which he'd liked so much he hadn't even needed to write it down:

*The world would have its peace.*

Jay shut his laptop, and pushed it to the back of his desk, his final edits now complete. He picked up his cell, dialed his sister's number, and waited for an answer.

"Lily!" he exclaimed, with such artificial glee it sickened even him. "Listen, I think I can forgive you. I was wondering if we could talk."

