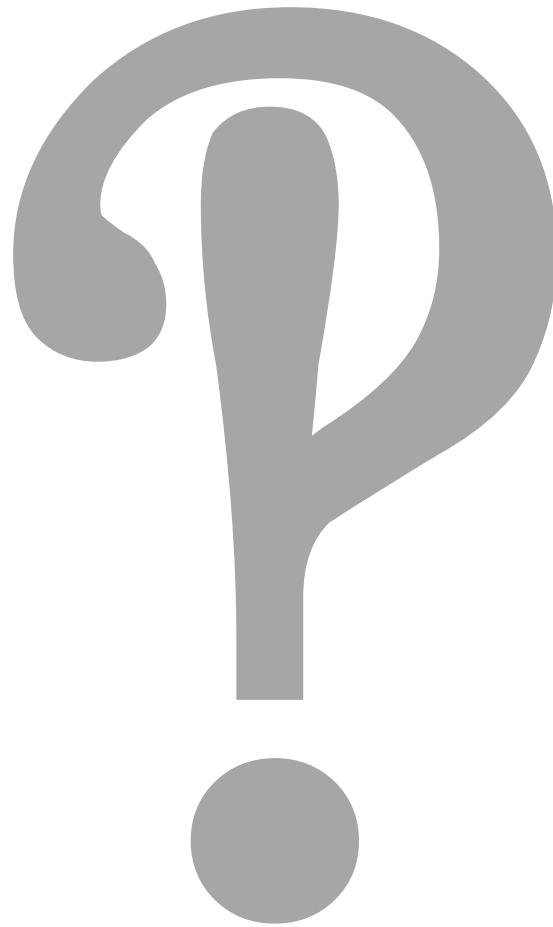


Volume 9, Number 2

Spring 2020

Interrobang



The Literary Magazine of Kirby School
Santa Cruz, California

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Interrobang publishes excellent poetry, short fiction, creative nonfiction, drama, and comics written by the students of the Kirby School. *Interrobang* appears twice yearly, in winter and spring. Share your original, proofread work with our staff at interrobang@kirby.org anytime between August and May. Contributors need *not* be on staff. Submission guidelines available upon request.

The staff of *Interrobang* meets Friday mornings in Room 314. We always welcome new members with interests in creative writing, art, literature, and ideas.

Interrobang Literary Magazine

Kirby School

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May 2020

Dear Readers,

Faced with the closure of our school building and the shelter-in-place orders, the staff of our student-run literary magazine adjusted amazingly well. Meetings that used to take place in person in room 314 moved to a virtual meeting place. Fortunately, our essential business—reading and discussing the work of Kirby’s excellent writers—has continued unimpeded. In our Spring 2020 issue, we are proud to present poetry, short fiction, and memoir. Two personal essays by Michelle Nazareth and Tyree Milhorn emerged as especially eloquent and moving responses to the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects on our families and community.

We thank Kirby’s student writers for their interest in creative writing and their love of ideas. Kirby student writers are essential to the life of *Interrobang*. We urge all Kirby creative writers, from middle school to high school, to submit poems, personal essays, comics, and short stories to interrobang@kirby.org by email or by sharing a Google doc. Contributors remain anonymous until publication.

As always, we are grateful to the administration and teachers of Kirby School, whose continued support makes publishing *Interrobang* possible.

Onward!

—The Staff of *Interrobang*

The Clocks of Sherman Lester

The bedsheets rustle as I flip onto my back. It's been so long since I've changed them that they're not itchy anymore, and they've started to smell of sweat and aerosol. Like a child pressing her nose against the window, the sun peeks through the blinds, and I pull my blanket over my face to shield my eyes. *I could stay here forever*, I tell myself. *No one would find me*. Times like these are the reason why I question my achievements.

"Morning, babe." The sound of Sherman's voice breaks my trance. I turn to feel the dent in the bed, moving under the blankets to where he was lying a few moments ago.

"Morning," I reply, looking up at him. He rests his hand on my face, stroking my cheek softly. I move my hand to his as the calluses on his palms catch underneath my jawline. "How's rock climbing going?"

"Fine." He smiles. "What time is it? Aren't you supposed to be up already?" I check the clock on the shelf behind me.

"It's 7:45. And I don't know why you couldn't check. It's right in front of your face." We giggle, but Sherman raises his eyebrows. "I was supposed to be up at 7:30. But my back is killing me," I say as Sherman sighs, our fingers still interlaced. I know my way around every part of each of his hands, the mountains of his blisters, and the valleys of the lines on his palms.

When I finally make it outside, a rush of cold air envelopes my lungs. My fingers are almost numb by the time I wrap them around the car door handle. Although it pulls out easily, the door doesn't budge. I yank it again, and again and again and again, but the door stays closed.

"Lloyd, sweetheart, just take a breath. The car is not unlocked," Sherman says.

"Oh...yeah." He takes my hand.

"It will be alright. I'll be right here when you come back. Nothing is going to happen to me at home," he insists.

"Promise?"

"With all my heart."

I clock in to work exactly one hour, sixteen minutes, and nine seconds late. After a few minutes I go to the break room to grab a cup of coffee, where Abby is sporting a v-neck that shows off the ugly scabs across her chest. She turns to me and smiles sadly, opening her mouth to say something, but then closing it again. I stand in the silence for a few minutes, taking in the lack of sound. Finally, Abby speaks.

"Hi, Lloyd." I check the dishwasher as my coffee brews. "How are you doing?" The red mug looks interesting, as does the green one. It's a hard decision to make. "I noticed you weren't in on time today." The milk from the fridge smells slightly off.

"Lloyd. Look at me." I don't. "Lloyd. Please." I turn to her.

“Can you just leave me alone, please? I never asked you to check up on me,” I snap. Abby stumbles on her words, trying to put into words how she was just making sure I was OK. “I’m fine. Leave me alone.” I put my hands over my ears.

“Lloyd, it’s going to be alright,” Abby says, but my brain does something and I hear it as “It was your fault Sherman died” and it’s all getting too much and the clock is ticking *tick-tock* the seconds of my life are tick-tocking away—the clock of Sherman’s life has already stopped. *Please, Sherman, I am afraid of dying, tell me what it feels like to die.* And Abby is still telling me that I’m going to be fine but I can barely hear her over the ringing in my ears and my chest hurts and there’s this funny tingling in my fingertips and I can’t breathe *I am afraid of dying* and Michael is coming in and telling me “You killed Sherman” and our supervisor is waving her hands at me and then suddenly I’m walking down the street with the wind blowing in my face and yowling in my ears.

I stop. I close my eyes.

“Take a deep breath, Lloyd.” *Thank you, Sherman.* I know I promised him I would never drink again, but it’s hard sometimes.

Squeaking, the door opens. As I walk in, I notice the serene feel the air has to it, the exact opposite of the chill outside. A piano trills behind me as I sit down at the bar. The sweet sound of a human voice washes over my shoulders, running down my spine and through my legs. I close my eyes again and take a deep breath through my nose. After a few minutes, I open them to see a man standing in front of me.

“I’m sorry mate, but if you’re gonna sit here, you need to get a drink.” I nearly jump when I look at him. “Look, I know it’s rough, but a bartender’s gotta do what a bartender’s gotta do and if you don’t get a drink that means calling security.” The man snickers slightly. My mouth is trying to form words, but none are coming out. “You alright, mate? I was kind of joking about calling security,” he says. I snap out of it.

“Sorry. You just...remind me of someone I used to know.”

“Alright, mate. I get it. Keep taking deep breaths and I’ll grab you a beer. I’m Murray, by the way.”

“Uh, I’m Lloyd.” Murray nods at me, and I notice how he carries himself as he walks away. He carries his left shoulder slightly higher than his right. The white shirt he’s wearing is raised in certain areas, lumps and bumps sitting under the material. He grips everything in his left hand as if it could shatter to pieces at any moment.

I stay in the bar for a while longer, gulping down the beer Murray gives me. It’s slightly overwhelming—I haven’t drunk in a while. By the time I get to the bottom, it’s warm, the bitterness mixing with the taste of dehydration on my tongue. Murray waves goodbye to me as I leave to find the sunset painting the sky lavish colors of red and gold.

And suddenly I get the feeling that I’ve met him before.

He reminds me of you, Sherman.

The next day, the weather is glorious, and I don't bother turning up to work. This means spending the morning with Sherman and pretending he's alive, tracing the curve of his back and his scars. We avoid the elephant in the room—how I'm a ghost of a person and he's...well.

"Can I come with you today?"

"No." He asks me why. "It's not safe."

Strolling into the downtown area with my duffel, I wonder why he never comes with me--or rather, why I never let him. But then I remember that he's a figment of my imagination. I made him up in my head so he can be here with me. He's not real.

He's gone.

I end up in a secluded gym at the end of some mysterious alleyway. The building is falling to pieces, its paint peeling off the walls, some of the windows striped with crime scene tape. It seems like the kind of place where you might find people shooting up next to the weights.

At the front desk, two bored women cackle at their favorite Reddit posts. They almost look surprised when they see me. One of them has a deep scar on her hand: a burn. Often they come about during childhood. Often, they heal. It feels smooth when I pass my card over to her and touch it, but I can sense the pain underneath her skin. I know the type of trauma that causes that scar.

When she tells me she's charged me for two hours, I nod, drifting past the front desk. The men's changing room is empty, but it still reeks of hard work and BO. As I set down my duffel on the bench, I try to remember the last time I opened it.

"It was before Sherman died," I murmur. Unzipping the bag, I am suddenly hit with the immense aroma of something dark green—mold. "Dammit," I say under my breath, sifting through the deodorants and old granola bars and pairs of headphones to pick out my clothes and throw them on the floor. My red tank top is ruined, and my gray shorts are probably unwearable. When I take them out of the bag, there's a piece of paper underneath them. I frown, picking it up, but I turn it over and drop it like a bomb.

I sit myself down on the bench, Sherman's face staring up at me as his photo falls to the floor. I will not be afraid of dying, Sherman, *I am not afraid*, please don't tell me what it feels like, *I am not afraid, I am not afraid*. I'm trying not to go to that place, where oxygen is the color of impossibility and the clocks tick endlessly inside my head--I'm trying but it's hard and it gets harder every day and Sherman made it easier but now he's gone and *I am not afraid* but there's the thing I am. I am. *I am...*

In a world where suffering isn't physical, I imagine people cling onto trauma like they cling onto books, or memories or bike-riding or photos of their loved ones. It seems easy when it's invisible as air. I imagine that there's this baggage that everyone carries around with them, but they act like they're fine, because what do you have when you can't see pain?

I wonder how easy it is to ask for help, or if help comes, or if anyone cares even when it's obvious that life is getting too much and someone is falling to pieces. I wonder how people talk

about pain or how people treat it or if people just pretend like none of it exists and avoid it all completely.

Over the past few months, I've become completely desensitized to everything—the sympathetic smiles on the train, the random acts of kindness, the fact that everyone is suddenly concerned for my wellbeing. People assume that something terrible happened, like a shooting or an attack or that I was a soldier. They tell me that they will heal with time, that trauma always heals with time, and that the scars will fade.

I don't believe them.

I don't understand how I'll ever get over killing my boyfriend.

I grew up existing. When I met Sherman, he let me live again.

He had to drive that day. He had to, because I made him come and pick me up from work. It was my fault he was at that intersection. It was my fault he was there with the drunk cyclist—but it wasn't my fault she was drunk and *I don't drink any more*. But it was my fault he had to swerve so that he didn't hit her. It was still my fault he went into that river.

They pronounced him dead. And it was because I made him. Anxiety told me it wasn't safe to drive myself home, and anxiety told me it would kill me, but I guess it's useless because it didn't tell me it would kill him.

When I met Sherman, he let me live again. Now I don't know if I exist.

“Mate, we have got to stop meeting like this.” A man is standing in front of me. “Just take a deep breath. We've met literally twice and you're always having a breakdown.” The man sits next to me. He's breathing loudly, but slowly, surely. The pain in my chest slowly subsides. My vision returns to normal, killing the black spots brought on by the dizziness of my panic.

And then I realize that I'm sitting with Murray, his shirtless torso exposing one of the ugliest scars I've ever caught sight of.

It's hideous, a vile monster snaking from the back of his shoulder all the way across his chest. Protruding from his front, it bares its menacing teeth at me. The flesh around its boundaries is a rageful red, giving the impression that something about his body wants to keep the disfigured flesh *in*. A missing chunk of flesh creates its mouth, a bottomless pit against the perfection of his body outside of the scar.

I've never met anyone with scars as bad as mine.

“It's okay, it's gonna be okay,” he reassures me. Again, I'm getting that same feeling that he and Sherman are related. He's talking softly, almost inaudibly, like Sherman used to when I panicked like this.

“I think it's okay now.”

“Yeah?” Murray steps over to his clothes as I nod, picking up a black AC/DC shirt. “That was pretty rough, huh?” I don't answer. “You lost someone.” I look up at him, frowning, locking eyes with him for the first time. Sherman's were the same—an ethereal blue, like the line

where the ocean meets the cloudless sky. “That scar,” he says, pointing to my chest, “it’s a keloid scar.” I glance down at myself like I don’t know what to expect.

“There’s a name for this?”

“I mean, yeah,” Murray snorts. “There’s a name for all of them.”

“I never really paid attention to the names of scars. I was taught them in school once when the teacher was trying to instill ‘empathy’ in us. Least engaging class I’ve ever had,” I say, which makes Murray laugh, and I smile back at him.

The bench creaks as he sits down next to me, handing over the shirt I was wearing when I came in. I guess I should have known that I’m not the only one like this—not the only one with a body ravaged by scars.

“Murray,” I whisper, “what does your body say about you?” He doesn’t answer me for a moment, just staring at this one spot on the ground. When he does finally speak, he stumbles across his words like each one is causing him physical pain.

“This one,” he says, pointing to the monster under his shirt. “This one is from my parents. Beat my little brother to a bloody pulp.” Murray buries his face in his hands. “And I couldn’t save him.” I reach out to touch his shoulder, but I pull away at the last second. He turns to me, telling me a story of two brothers hiding under the stairs, of screams in the endless darkness of the night.

“And then I left—I just left him alone with them. I left my, my little brother—Sherman—I left him all alone with them.” Murray is breathing hard. I can barely hear his words through his tears. I know that story, though. I know that name.

“Sherman?” He nods, sobbing. “My boyfriend was called Sherman. The person I lost.” *He reminds me so much of you. I didn’t know why I trusted him as much as I trusted you.* “I loved him.” I’m crying now, tears sprinting down my face. “He looked so much like you. He told me his big brother left.”

“He’s not dead. No. No, he’s not,” he argues.

“Murray...I don’t know.” I’m at a loss.

“It might not be him. We might just be wrong. Mate, how likely is it that you really dated my brother?” I shrug. “What was his last name? Mine’s Lester. I’m Murray Lester.” My heart almost skips a beat. I was hoping that this wasn’t real, that I was dreaming or hallucinating or I don’t know, anything.

“I found a picture of him, Murray. That’s why I was panicking,” I tell him quietly. Murray looks at me for a second. “This is my Sherman Lester.” I hand him the photo, and when he takes it from me, he is silent for a while. It’s from the rock climbing competition he won a few years ago.

“He loved climbing things,” Murray murmurs.

“He was beautiful. But the hands on his clock stopped ticking too fast.” I place my hand on Murray’s back.

“Is there anything left of him I can see?”

I take him to Sherman's grave. We quietly enter the cemetery, Murray clutching the forget-me-nots we bought in the weird store behind the gym. I haven't been here in so long that I never realized how big the yew tree behind Sherman's headstone has grown. He always had a thing for cemeteries—he said that they were gateways to heaven.

It took me a long time to realize what that meant.

We slowly reach his tree, hugged by the shade it brings. For a second, we both just stand there, staring. Murray places the flowers on the headstone. As he crouches for a second with his hand in the grass, I turn around to see the hill just outside the cemetery—with Sherman sitting on the side of it. Glowing in the sun, his watch reflects its brilliant rays into my eyes. He looks down at it, smiling.

"Sorry." Even from this far away, his voice rings inside my head. The ticking of his watch fills my messy mind, *tick-tock, tick-tock, tick-tock*.

It's okay, Sherman. He sniggers, just as Murray gets to his feet and asks me if I'm okay.

"Huh? Uh, yeah." I look back at the hill.

Sherman is gone. And then I realize, my back doesn't hurt. I stick my hand up the back of my shirt and find smooth skin. "Murray?"

"Yeah?"

Tick-tock. Tick-tock. Tick-tock.

"I think my scars have healed."

Untitled

The well surrounded by the moss
is my eye to look at the stars.

Vision

My lonely eyes penetrate your
endlessly long frontier,
adding an annotation for you and me.
If there is a limitation for my vision,
let it be one billion light years.
It penetrates the vacuum, penetrates all,
just to have a look at your face
one billion years ago.

The Wrong Cards

One would think that working seventeen hours a day at two jobs might be frantic, exciting even, but that's before the monotony sets in. Three hours of work, break for coffee, three more hours punctuated by a sandwich, and so on. After a while all the faces fade away. All that remains are words and programmed actions. "What would you like today," "Your total is \$4.36," fetch food, "Have a nice day sir!" Repeat. This was his job, they didn't pay him enough to smile for the customers. But he was also a bookkeeper. Hours are spent adding and subtracting numbers that someday might be used to buy something. Money starts to mean less and less. Days pass like the wind, barely noticed. All that's left is routine. It's ironic -- money is what started everything and now it's just numbers.

Cigar smoke lingers in the air, cards are thrown down in resignation or triumph. Excitement, another win! Can't stop now, must keep going. Nothing but a stack of glazed and stiffened paper determining a life. Smooth card backs, unreadable, bright lights reflecting off the sheen. All of it down the drain.

He doesn't talk to anyone anymore. The only person who matters is the one who signs the paycheck. "Every day another memory," was the motto. It hung on the wall across from the counter, so they could always remember it. Every day another memory. Well, he remembered—he couldn't forget—the mistakes he'd made, the people he'd hurt. She hadn't known about the gambling, but she'd found out—oh, she'd found out all right. It had been spectacular: one day a cheerful morning kiss and a smiling face, the next a stormy look and a raised voice. Her smile was the reason he kept working, kept living; he hadn't realized how much he needed it until it disappeared. That's when she'd gone, gone with the money.

He opened his eyes, snapping back to reality. The glaring screen was garish—his senses were all too tired. Raising his eyes, he looked over to the coffee machine, the pool of tepid liquid on the floor where everyone spilled, the coffee machine steaming up into the air to lure in unsuspecting accountants. A quick bounce of the legs and he was out of his chair, although there was a worrying crack from his right knee. Picking up his dark blue lucky mug, he walked over to the coffee dispenser. Why was the mug lucky? Well, it had stuck with him this far, more than could be said for most friends and family. It had started to become a bit of a companion, watching over him as he worked. The satisfying

sound of the hot brown liquid filling his mug was music to exhausted ears. The small bubbles formed by its creation explored the edges of the coffee mug. He could practically feel the impending alertness that would come with a few sips.

Two nameless employees walked past; one mentioned something and then they both scrutinized him from head to toe before moving on. He strolled back to his desk, revitalized by the black, bitter coffee, and heard two more employees talking. He wasn't trying to eavesdrop, but he heard a few words before they moved on: gambling, money, fired. Fired? He quickly backed into his cubicle.

He sat down in his chair and felt sick to his stomach. They had discovered his past. He had thought that he had escaped the shadow of his mistakes; he had even been working to fix them. But now he would be let go and he wouldn't be able to get a new job. This had been his chance, a way to move on. The gossipers hadn't confirmed that he was being fired yet (they were speculating right?); that left some hope. He tried to find a way out. He could make a run for it, just leave and stay "sick" for an indefinite amount of time. But then he would get fired and that would go on his record, making it even harder to find a job. He could try to bribe his boss to keep him, but he didn't have that kind of money—no, not possible.

The rest of the day was spent trying—madly—not to think about anything except work, just staying distracted. Two more hours and then home, or whatever the cheapest apartment in the city could be called. His boss even walked by and looked right at him as he passed—an assessing glance worked wonders to accelerate his breathing.

Focusing on his desk, he noticed for the first time in months how messy it was. There were papers strewn across every bit of the surface except for the keyboard; the keyboard itself had coffee stains all over it. The mouse sat on top of heaps of papers. There were no personal items like some of his colleagues had—no photos, no objects of personal value. Only the blue coffee mug was left.

Looking into the computer screen, he caught a reflection of himself. Black hair and shockingly white skin with a strong nose and jaw, he had piercing blue eyes that some of his friends had said bore into their soul. He might have been handsome before the bags under his eyes had appeared, leaving a haggard visage that glared out of the reflection, just another melodramatic pair of eyes, nothing new. A bead of sweat trickled down behind his ear and dripped onto the back of his neck. Slowly it traced a path down his collar and at last came to rest at the bottom of his spine. He watched the hands on his watch and listened to it tick away: minutes, then hours passed, and the day was over.

Getting up, he walked quickly out the door without saying goodbye to anyone, only stopping after he was outside and around the corner. He slid down the wall until he

was leaning against it and realized how much he needed this job, how crippled he'd be if he got fired. But for now he told himself to put a good face on, keep walking, keep working, keep droning on. Pretend that nothing happened, that no one knows, that everything is the same as before. Sitting up stiffly from the wall, its ridges and marbled surface imprinted on his back, he realized how late it was getting. It was dark now and the cold was settling in. Hurrying home, he skipped dinner and took his sleeping pills; he sunk into a restless sleep for five hours.

Waking up the next day was like trying to swim in cement; he did not have the willpower to go back to work and face the fact that he might get fired. Suddenly, he decided something: one day off couldn't hurt him that much and three months of this relentless schedule punctuated intermittently by coffee breaks and minimal sleep had done him no favors. Looking bleakly around at his room, he noticed—for the first time—how small it was, even at home he couldn't escape the confined office. Oddly enough, it wasn't messy or disorganized since all of his possessions, except for a few necessary ones, were gone now, sold for a penny on the dollar.

Walking through the door and into the kitchen, he realized that he had not once cooked anything here; a combination of Chinese food and pizza had sustained him. This left the cooking area with the look of being unloved, unused. Actually, the entire two room flat could have been uninhabited for all intents and purposes. Three weeks back, in fact, someone had accidentally walked into his apartment. They assumed it was theirs until he walked in.

He had decided to stay home and now the waiting game began; staring down the old phone he had left on the table, he waited for the call that would end his career, or whatever was left of it. This uncertainty was like being in purgatory. He had gotten the phone recently, realizing that one couldn't get by in the world without some mobile device. It was a brute of a phone, dirty and slow. But it received calls, and that was all that mattered right then. Watching, waiting for that ring, that sing-song voice that precluded his fate.

Instead, he heard a knock at the door, a cheerful sound in the silent morning. Sighing, he extracted himself from the chair and walked to the door. Looking through the peephole he relaxed, recognizing a friendly face. He opened the door and was welcomed by a sight for sore eyes: a friend, the last one. A bright orange jacket, paired with green pants. Some would say it was a sight that created sore eyes, but they didn't know Daniel. He was a bike messenger, a busy one, but he found time to check in on his down and out friend every so often. Bustling in the open door, Daniel looked around, remarking on how little the place had changed.

Daniel was a character but he had always stood by Freud when he was down, now more than ever. Daniel knew when Freud didn't want to talk. Without having to say anything, the friends sat down at the table and watched the phone, Daniel munching on some chips all the while. After an hour, Daniel was satisfied that Freud would survive for another week or so; he said his goodbyes and left. Daniel had offered him money and had even offered to let Freud stay with him, but charity was for when he'd given up all hope. There was a light—small, admittedly—but a light nonetheless. There was the possibility of a future with sleep and family and friends.

The phone buzzed. Shaken from his daze, Freud snatched it up and hit "Answer." The harsh tones of the boss's voice rang over the phone. He moved slowly, hung up the phone, and walked out the door. His flat was on the third floor of a densely packed apartment block, many apartments on each floor. Three stories—fifty feet—enough to die on impact. Looking down to the ground below, he contemplated what would happen if he jumped. Daniel or somebody who lived nearby would see a body on the ground—lifeless, maybe some blood. They would call the police and the police would find his family and tell them the news. His family had abandoned him when things had gotten desperate and they had started pretending he didn't exist. They would probably just ignore the whole thing and move on. Little Lessie, his niece, might shed a tear or two. She had always been the loving one. Daniel would mourn for a while, and then would be swept back up into his busy life of delivering documents around town and being with his new girlfriend. Within a few months, he would be forgotten—the world no better or worse than before, only one lost accountant in a million. One crack on the ground, and then silence.

Taking his eyes off the ground, he looked up into the sky and noticed the light. It peeked through the clouds in little patches, searching for a chance to change into a clear sky, a new life, a new reality. Those beams of light were pure, bright, hopeful. Silently, he walked away from the edge and returned to the apartment. He became efficient and went through his things; he dug up all the cash he had left. As he walked out the door, he looked back and hesitated, seeing his lucky mug, which he carried home from work each day. No, he didn't need luck now, he needed a fresh start. Closing the door decisively, he walked away quickly and straight to the train station. Looking at the schedule, he realized he didn't know where to go; he decided that anywhere far away would work. He asked the ticket clerk for the farthest ticket she had and she gave him a ticket to some town in the North and took the rest of his money. That was the cost of a new life, where things could change. That's all he told himself as he got onto the train, and left his past behind again, maybe it wouldn't be able to find him this time.

Middle Earth

Hand in hand, knife and fork,
strands of gold atop her head.
She brings and peels the oranges,
I bake and cut the bread.

Flying by the riverside,
dirt under my fingernails.
This is where our love begins,
tall trees and sleepy snails.

A cold plunge into fairyland,
with spots of speckled sun.
We hide up on the train tracks,
before we have to run.

Two bikes stand tall below us,
and we dream of flowers we'll pick.
To make our crowns, we're royalty now!
Middle Earth is fantastic.

Honey Turned Sour

When she closed her eyes, she could imagine Mora. A soft brown, comforting and warm, yet with a sort of strength only she could see. She could smell her hair, short and light, shining like honey. Mora smelled like honey. And vanilla. It was sweet. She could smell it now, floating into her nose and weaving itself deeper into her memories. Except it was now joined by the sound of a microwave, a persistent sort of buzz that irritated her all over. She peeled her eyes open and saw the familiar sight of her cracked white ceiling. She and Mora had moved there five years ago after college and it had been cracked even then. She groaned and pushed herself off the bed, untangling her sore limbs from the faded sheets. Slowly she eased the dangling strands of hair from her face and, pausing, she finally got up and walked out of the room towards the kitchen.

She yawned, the memory of Mora still sweet in her mind. Once in the kitchen, she was greeted by the familiar purr of her cat, Valentina and the smell of nachos.

“Hey Valentina, what’s up?” Ari asked. Valentina meowed and ran her head into her ankles. Ari grinned wearily and ran her hand through her hair, only to have it stop a couple inches in because of the multitude of knots.

“Great.”

Valentina pipped happily, but Ari couldn’t help but feel a pang in her heart after glancing at Valentina’s collar. Ari and Mora had adopted Valentina for their three year anniversary and, while Ari love the cat, sometimes the pain was inevitable.

It had been six months since Mora had died. One day, she just felt absolutely fatigued, like a major cold or the flu, but it kept getting worse to the point where she was unable to walk or move out of her bed. The doctors diagnosed her with severe muscular dystrophy and informed her that it might be fatal. Mora had always been positive, and very much enjoyed games, especially those involving clues, but, despite her laughter, she got worse and worse, until she passed away, holding Ari’s hand as they both cried. Mora had always been beautiful when she cried, Ari thought. She remembered seeing Mora’s still body, the flatline buzzing in the background while her tears carved lines down her cheeks. Her head fell into her hands. She’d been so distraught over Mora that she hadn’t cleaned out her old things from the room that they had shared. Ari always said she’d clean out the closet, but she never had. She wasn’t sure why. Maybe she thought it’d take Mora away from her. Or maybe she thought it was disrespectful to her memory. Either

way she hadn't touched any of it since October. It was April now and the light leaned through the windows in a watery kind of way.

Valentina pushed the cracked door slowly open and walked quietly over to Ari. She nudged her and mewed softly, as if she knew how Ari was feeling.

Ari turned her head away and covered her face with her long hair to hide the welling of tears in her eyes. She welcomed Valentina into her arms and they sat there in silence; Valentina purred calmly and Ari's heartbeat slowed.

Valentina eased herself onto the bed next to her and slowly moved her hand towards Ari's face. She softly lifted Ari's head and looked into her eyes. Valentina pushed herself up towards Ari's face and licked her nose. Ari tried to laugh, but it came out like she was choking.

Ari remained still, silent tears streaming down her face. She pulled the cat in closer and kissed her head before releasing her. Valentina jumped down from the bed and slipped out of the room.

Ari felt like the weight in her chest had been growing since Mora's death, but this time it felt lighter. Maybe she could move on.

She sat there for what seemed like years but was actually just a few minutes, before slowly standing up. She eased herself off the bed, the springs creaking loudly. She winced, but continued with her task. She raised her head and her vision was full of the pale blue of Mora's closet, placed into the left wall of the bedroom. She sighed and reached out a tentative hand to open the closet door. The handle was thick with dust and the wheel tracks screeched, making her groan. Slowly she was able to open the door, despite the thick layer of rust coating the inside of the wheel tracks due to some sort of thing that Mora had spilled once and never cleaned up. Her memories instantly came back: going to a movie with Mora, eating dinner with Mora, sleeping next to Mora, kissing Mora. Mora, Mora, Mora. Mora.

Ari sagged against the doorframe.

God, she missed her.

"Stop it, Ari," she said to herself. "Mora would want you to move on."

She reached into the closet and pulled out a sweatshirt on a hanger. The sweatshirt was old and beat up. Mora had gotten it at some local rock concert and had worn it every single day until there were holes all through it, at which point she'd tucked it away as a token. Ari hugged the sweatshirt to her chest and reveled in the fact that it still smelled like Mora. She carefully folded it and lay it on the bed, grabbing another thing from the closet, this time Mora's old prom dress. They'd met in high school, immediately fell in love, and had been together ever since. Mora had been so excited to

wear it and had made Ari take so many photos of her in it. It was made of a white chiffon with tinted pink spots and Mora had embroidered it with small green leaves. There the photos were inside an album, carefully tucked behind the dress on a shelf. Ari didn't give herself the pleasure of seeing them and instead removed the photo album from the closet and placed it next to the other clothes on the bed.

On and on she went, picking clothes out of the closet and placing them on the bed. Her pace quickened, and she started forcefully grabbing handfuls of clothes from the closet and throwing them onto the bed. On the floor of the closet were several boxes that probably contained other items of Mora. Ari heaved these out of the closet and roughly put them on the floor.

At long last the closet was empty. Mora was always a hoarder, Ari remembered nostalgically. There was one time where she and Mora had attempted to spring-clean and, twenty minute in, their plan fell to pieces because Mora didn't want to get rid of anything, no matter how old and broken it was. Ari felt as though a weight had been lifted off of her chest from the cleaning, but the indent was filled with grief and doubt and, strangely, relief. Maybe it was the right move to clean out Mora's things, she hesitantly thought.

Her emotions suddenly turned to surprise as she glanced into the closet one last time and noticed a piece of paper stuck between two of the floorboards. She cautiously pulled it out and opened it. It read, "Ari- are you ready to play one last game? Here's the clue. If I wasn't feeling well, this is where you'd be in a flash."

Ari stood there, her mind spinning. She knew exactly where to go. All of a sudden her body moved and as if possessed she bolted downstairs. She leapt the last three stairs and swung around the banister, almost slipping on the rug in the hallway that led to the kitchen. Valentina screeched as Ari barreled into the kitchen, and darted to the other end of the house. Ten seconds later Ari found a second note, leading her to the garage. She took more care this time, as the garage was full of random junk that she could trip on. It was a miracle that she didn't fall; her mind was empty, her ears were ringing as loud as a gong, and it felt like she'd fallen into a pool of ice.

Behind the washing machine was a third note. It said, "We danced like no one was watching and I was incredible."

The feeling suddenly returned to Ari's body, and she was immediately aware of her lack of air. Her eyes welled up with tears and, gasping, she fell to her knees as her body was overcome with a sort of pain that was indescribable. She attempted to raise herself up but her legs couldn't hold her weight, so she collapsed again. Everything flooded back.

Ever since she and Mora first got together, they talked of getting married, but the world had decided that they weren't allowed. Ari regretted not marrying Mora when she had the chance, despite it being illegal. Maybe if I'd tried harder, it could've worked, she thought remorsefully.

After several deep breaths, Ari slowly eased herself up to standing, and made her way up the staircase. Each foot dragged as she tried to wrap her mind around what was going on. Mora had... left her notes... to find something. What would the prize be? Mora always used to love scavenger hunts, she thought. Most people only loved scavenger hunts and puzzles and games for the prizes but Mora loved the game. Now that she thought about it, Mora had given her hints about this when she was sick. She'd joke with Ari, saying that they would still be able to play after she was gone. Ari had always been incredibly confused whenever she said that but it made sense now.

Once back in her bedroom after what felt like an eternity, Ari staggered towards the bed and collapsed onto it, the bed squeaking in protest. Ari racked her brain to decipher the clue. 'We danced like no one was watching? What does that mean?' Suddenly she vividly remembered their first big dance together: prom. Ari leapt up before carefully rifling through the clothes until she found Mora's prom dress at the bottom of the pile. She carefully lifted it up and turned it over, trying to find a clue, a hint to Mora's goal. Ari felt that if she found the clue, something bad would happen. Maybe it was her curiosity overtaking her grief and fear and paranoia, but finally she found something: a small hard object in one of the pockets.

What was inside made her almost leap away with surprise, although she was able to catch the dress before it fell onto the ground. She flipped the dress over and was finally able to remove the object. It was a small flash drive, painted with a little rainbow. It had clearly been painted quite a while ago, but the paint hadn't chipped.

Ari couldn't believe what she was seeing. 'What on earth could the hard drive contain? What was more precious than a reminder of their prom?' With a reeling mind Ari clumsily plucked the flash drive out of the space, and, placing the dress on the ground, plugged the flash drive into her laptop.

It contained a single video. She opened it without any emotion at all; she was an empty box. The screen was a black rectangle out of which Mora appeared. Ari's heart leapt uncontrollably.

"Hey, baby," Mora said in her familiar honey-glazed voice. Ari relaxed without even noticing, but her heart tightened as if a fist was wrapped around it, gripping it hard. "If you're watching this, I'm probably dead." Mora laughed but her eyes were sad. "Wow, that's so cliché," she said with a smile, her eyes crinkling. Mora had obviously

filmed this during her sickness, Ari thought, which meant that Mora had known she was going to die. Ari's guts jerked. Mora had always been the happier of the two, even when she was stuck in the hospital. Every day she'd told Ari that she would get better, but she'd kept getting worse, until she died.

"I hope you'll forgive me for leaving you alone. I am so sorry. I wish I was with you. I wish that we were able to get married. Also, don't worry about the photos. They're in one of the boxes." She laughed and Ari doubled over away from the screen, suddenly feeling nauseous. "I'm sorry for all that," Mora's voice continued with a smile, "I hope that you aren't mad at me for making you clean our closet." She paused. Ari could hear the pain in her voice and almost on command moved up to once again face the screen. Mora was silently crying. Ari's body responded and she started to cry, at first quietly and then growing louder until she was sobbing, complete with voice cracks, hiccups, and a runny nose. In between breaths she became aware that Valentina had reappeared. Ari could feel the animal's breathing, steady and unwavering. Ari's breathing slowed and without wiping her face she turned her attention back to Mora.

"I hope that you didn't find this after too long. I do want you to move on, you know. Even if you're not comfortable with finding someone else yet, at least move on from me and don't be stuck in a rut." Without Mora, Ari felt as though a part of her was missing. It was as though after Mora died, the real Ari left, leaving behind an empty shell of a person.

"I love you, you know." Mora smiled and Ari melted into herself. "I don't want you to forget that. Ever. Please." At this point, Ari had reverted to her completely broken self, crying and grasping at her hair as if it might make Mora come back.

Mora winked at her through sudden tears, her eyes still clear, and blew a kiss, causing Ari to reach for it without thinking.

The video ended and she dropped her arm to the table, mindlessly moving the mouse and exiting from the video. She stared without seeing at the background picture of her and Mora.

Ari was frozen like a statue. After what seemed like years to her, she stood up and placed the flash drive carefully into the drawer next to the bed on her side. She slid the drawer closed and, opening the cardboard boxes until she found them, she clasped the photos to her chest and vowed with all of her heart that she would try to do as Mora wanted. She wasn't going to forget Mora, not by any means, and there would be bad days, of course. But Ari knew that she was going to be alright. Mora was a part of her that would never leave, and she didn't have to worry about it anymore. It was okay.

Yunqi (Nick) Zhang

A Love Letter or His Last Words

I want to be sissy
to be his boyfriend
I want to have sex with him
to grow old with him
This is the only way I can live
Sorry, my dear mom and dad

In Between

Over a cup of tea, Tara ruminated. She guessed she wasn't *really* opposed to the idea that ghosts might exist. If they did, it's not like they had hurt her, right? It's not like they had even made contact with her at all. She only saw them out of the corner of her eye every now and then. Maybe a figure passing behind the blurry plastic walls of her greenhouse or a shadow in the steam of the water bath she would use to seal her jars of preserves. It might have been because of her eyesight. God-knows how many years had passed since she had seen a doctor, let alone an optometrist to update her prescription. Really, it had been god-knows-how-many years since she'd seen *people* in general.

Tara wasn't the kind of person to really keep track of a calendar; only the seasons and the years. Actually, she used to collect calendars. She used to plan everything in her life, down to the hour, the minute. She was obsessed with perfection, precision, promptness. She had meltdowns when things were out of place or time. It had gotten to the point that she would turn people away, decline invitations, and stay in her square and freakishly clean apartment for days at a time. She hadn't missed people. She couldn't even think about them. They were loud and late and mean. Impatient. She liked being on her own, where she could do whatever she needed to do whenever she needed to do it. So she read up on farming techniques, preserving methods, and looked into finding a house far away from any people. A Zillow ad had finally spoken to her, minutes before she was going to give up. A small, one-story house about forty miles from Humboldt with two hundred acres of land in front of it, perfect for a small farm and a greenhouse. She decided that she would say goodbye to the life she knew, full of pain and unhappy people. She didn't need them. She would make her own Earth. She would sustain herself. She packed up and left her home state of Colorado, only telling her mother where she was going and that under no circumstances was anyone allowed to visit her. Consider her dead, she said. And, in a sense, she really did believe that she was dying; at least that version of herself. She would only exist for herself after that.

Tara's tea had gone cold, and she was done thinking. Maybe too much rumination, she thought. She didn't even get anywhere with her ghost problem.

"Oh, well," she told herself. "Work to do anyway." She rose from her spot, washed out her mug in the sink, and gently placed it to dry on the rack on her counter. Once every other year she went into town to steal new sets of clothes, and sometimes

commodities like the rack. It was always during the dead of night, making sure that she was seen by no person or camera in whichever 24-hour store she went to. She hated to do it, but couldn't think of any other way. She needed clothes, she wasn't able to make them herself, and wasn't able to face seeing or being seen by people. She could barely stand the excursions themselves, being under the unnatural, fluorescent lights; surrounded by sights and smells that used to be so familiar. Sometimes she waited for two years to pass before she went out again, but her clothes wouldn't last much longer than that.

When she turned away from the sink to make her way outside she thought she saw one. A flicker, a wisp of an image, a face. It had been right in front of her--she saw it through her hair. She blinked, looked around, and shook her head minutely.

"There's no ghosts, Tara. There's none. No ghosts," she said to herself. She tended to speak out loud, and to repeat herself. Despite her previous nonchalant attitude toward them, the hair on her neck began to stand up. Tara rubbed the spot to get rid of the feeling. "Maybe I'm just, maybe I'm just going crazy. Going crazy. Ha! Already am crazy," she laughed to herself. She used to be hyper-conscious of her behavior, as if another person was there to witness her. What another person would think if they were there to witness her, back in the beginning, but as time passed, that idea didn't even occur to her. She started voicing her ideas out loud, to the air, just speaking her thoughts out, though they often weren't in cohesive sentences. She had noticed this, but didn't really see a need to change it. She did create an inside joke with herself about it, though, calling herself crazy, because she knew she wasn't. She shook her head again and walked off into the garden, muttering something about using the sunlight to finish weeding the almost-grown pumpkins.

Tara always woke with the sun. Her house had come with shades on all the windows, and one of the first things she did was tear them all down. She never kept track of time anymore, except by where the sun was in the sky. So, if it was up, she was too. She got out of her bed and walked outside to her water faucet. A nearby stream that branched off the American River supplied the faucet as well as a place to wash her clothes. It also supplied the water in her sink and shower, though only the sink water was filtered. Before she had left Colorado, she had set up a bank account that her disability checks would funnel into, and used that money for paying the water, gas, and electric bills. She used the filtered water for drinking, but she liked to use the unfiltered water for the farm and especially for washing her face. It was something about the feel of it, like the minerals added smoothness to the water, like the sheer *clearness* of it made the experience much more cleansing. It satisfied her skin much better than the filtered, bland water she drank. It was colder from the outside faucet, too.

She splashed her face with the cool water and scrubbed at her eyes to rid them of their fatigue. Then, just for a second, she hesitated to open them, thinking that she might see another face. As soon as the thought crossed her mind, she pushed it away.

“No ghosts, Tara! Not afraid. No ghost, no fear. Let’s go eat,” she said, trying to distract herself. But she still had that feeling on the back of her neck, like someone was blowing there. She decided to keep her hair down that day.

After grabbing a couple of eggs from her coop, she romped back to the kitchen, trying almost subconsciously to make noise to scare whatever creatures might be there, ghosts or not. Sometimes she had to share her food with mice, but this time she still couldn’t shake the feeling of someone being there, no matter how ludicrous the idea was. She shivered once more as she turned on the burner and placed a pan on the flame. She went through the motions, cracked the eggs and poured them onto the hot pan, then flicked it around with her fork, trying to distract herself. The smell of fresh eggs began to rise around her, but not even that could break the cold spell that had descended on her. Tara hadn’t felt like this in a long time. Her breathing started to speed up, her skin began to crawl--she was having a panic attack. The first one since five and a half years ago, when the attacks had finally tapered off after living in her house for half a year. She stepped back from the burner shakily, unsure what to do. It had been so long since she had to deal with those feelings of overwhelming anxiety. Her vision began to blank out, and she stepped back far enough to bump against the island in the center of her kitchen. She turned around and leaned her weight on it, burying her face in the crook of her elbow. She tried to calm herself by counting her breaths and keeping focus on that one task. Eventually, she felt calm enough to stand up straight and open her eyes. When she did, all of the adrenaline in her body flooded out and she leapt back, throwing her arms out in front of her. There was a transparent pair of eyes staring at her.

“Ahh! What! Who? Who are you?” Tara could barely get any words out in her confusion and unfamiliarity with talking to other people. Her heart raced again, and she felt the sickening adrenaline still rushing through her veins.

I am... Amelia, the apparition said. It didn’t quite speak; she didn’t open her mouth, and Tara couldn’t tell if the sound was out loud or in her head. She couldn’t decide which was worse.

“Why are you here? Get out! Out!” Tara was becoming hysterical. She felt like she wouldn’t be able to stand being with someone for another second, ghost or not. She grabbed her fork from the stove, ignoring her well-burnt eggs, and scooted around the island. She brandished her fork at the ghost, whose feet were floating above the ground, and a disjointed thought flitted through Tara’s mind: *Huh, Hollywood got that right*. The

ghost didn't seem threatened by Tara's makeshift weapon or ferocity, but it still faded out of sight, expressionless.

"What... who... ah," she mumbled. Tara couldn't wrap her mind around what had just happened. She had not seen a *single* human being, living or not, in six years. It was only her own reflections in the river and her bathroom mirror. The adrenaline was still jumping under her skin and she decided to sit down. She slid onto the stool behind the island and held her head up with her hands, this time not daring to close her eyes. She could still feel her heart beating wildly, but it seemed to be winding down.

"What was that... god... maybe, maybe I need a shower. Get outta here. Down to the river, yes. Wash it away." Back when Tara was living in Colorado, a surefire way to calm down was to take a shower or bath. Something about the water running over her skin and warming her made her feel safe. Now, she either washed off in the heated shower or bathed in the river, a nice cool shock to reset her system. She grabbed an old towel that she had stolen the year before, and after a second, decided on a knife, too.

"No ghost'll get me, for sure. None," she muttered. It only occurred to her down at the river that a knife might not work against something that wasn't there. She then decided to definitely get back as soon as she could.

The next evening, Tara decided to sit on the porch with a mug of warm tea. Sometimes, in early autumn, the wind picked up, so Tara brought a blanket with her. It was fleece, and her mother had made it for her as a goodbye gift before she left. Tara wasn't usually the kind to reminisce, but after her experience yesterday with the ghost, she couldn't help but think about people. The ghost looked to be about her mother's age, around sixty-five. There really weren't any other similarities between the two, but Tara was still thinking about her mother. When Tara was young, she was extremely shy and found it difficult to make friends. Her mother never pressured her to do anything she didn't want to and always listened to Tara when she wanted to talk to someone. Throughout the years that Tara had spent alone, the only person she ever came close to calling was her mother. She never did, but she always thought about it during her yearly nighttime thievery. She thought about what she would do. Finding a few quarters on the street, picking up the payphone and dialing her mother's number, which was the only one she still remembered. Hearing her mother's voice, even if Tara herself didn't even say anything. A solitary and surprising tear fell from Tara's eye and into her lap. She swiped under her eyes and shivered, suddenly cold. She wrapped her blanket around her shoulders and shivered again, though this time the hair on the back of her neck stood up as well. Almost without thinking, Tara knew what was happening. Perhaps that's why she

wasn't so scared when the ghost materialized in front of her, this time much farther back, as if it was also afraid. They both hesitated to speak.

I am... sorry. The ghost offered. It seemed to be equally as unfamiliar with communication as Tara was. *I didn't expect to frighten you.* She spoke in the same way she did before, not opening her mouth but somehow transferring her thoughts straight into Tara's head. Tara was disconnectedly shocked that she wasn't panicking like she did last time. She wrapped her mother's blanket around her like a shield. She smiled slightly.

"I'm not afraid," Tara said, almost as much to herself as to the ghost. "I don't know you. I don't know anyone," Tara's words sounded disjointed and vague to herself, something that she was not used to. Explaining herself was not something she had to do in the past. Talking to others was a long lost skill that she was just realizing was lacking. "Why are you here?"

I ask you: why are you here? This is not a place many have been. I am only here because of you... Amelia said enigmatically.

"Here? At my house? People have been here..." Tara discovered a new skill that she had lost: deciphering what others mean when they speak.

No. We are... in between. Not awake. Not asleep. No one else to see us, no one else to see. You arrive. I wake up. Why is not a question I can answer, nor one I ask. Who would answer? Only you are here with me.

Tara was silent, going over Amelia's words in her head. It took her longer to comprehend other's speech than she thought it would. She realized that this was the first time she had heard herself be made part of a "we" in six years.

"What should I do?" she asked. She wasn't even sure about what she was asking. It was simply an all-encompassing question at that point.

Stay here, swim in the river and grow your food. Or... leave. I cannot tell you where you go. There is no 'where.' Existence is not so physical.

Tara was slightly overwhelmed by the idea. "No," she said. "I like the river. I don't want to leave. I don't understand." Amelia didn't look angry, nor did she look disappointed. She wasn't very expressive at all, which strangely made Tara self-conscious. There was silence again for a moment.

May I come back? Later? Amelia asked, sounding more alive now, even though she didn't make sound.

"Later? Tomorrow? Or when, a long time?" Tara asked. She almost wanted it to be sooner rather than later, though she didn't understand why. Talking with Amelia wasn't as frightening as talking with real people. Amelia's brow furrowed ever so slightly, as if she was thinking deeply.

I am not familiar with time. I am sorry. But, tomorrow.

“That’s okay. Tomorrow.” Tara said simply. Amelia didn’t say goodbye, she only faded away again. Tara was left with a warmth around her shoulders as she felt her blanket again. When she went to sleep that night, she brought it with her.

A few days had past, and Tara smiled to herself. Amelia *had* warned her that she wasn’t familiar with time. She wasn’t angry, though. Just waiting. She spent a lot of time thinking, just sitting on her porch or by the river, thinking. Things like chores, cooking, and cleaning seemed trivial now, but she couldn’t place why. Then, on the morning of the fourth day, Amelia appeared again. Tara was standing at her counter, watching the birds outside her window. Autumn was progressing, and the air was getting cooler.

“Hello,” Tara offered. The greeting was familiar on her lips, a simple pleasure of hers had been greeting the plants every morning over the years. She smiled.

Hello, Amelia returned the greeting. It seemed more unfamiliar to her, but she was more animated this morning than Tara had ever seen her. Her hair seemed to blow in a non-existent breeze, and her facial features had more definition.

“What would you like to talk about?” Tara said. She felt strangely confident, the ability to maintain a conversation was never her strong suit, and doing it so smoothly now made her feel incredibly proud.

I would like to ask you a question, Amelia answered. She looked serious, though not stiff. *Did you consider my offer? Do you want to stay in your home, or come away with me? Your presence is pleasant to me, I haven’t had a friend in a long time.* Tara was struck with emotion. She had not had someone call her a friend for so long. Tears welled up in her eyes, but she blinked them away. Tara wasn’t sure how to properly express her emotions, so instead she asked a question back.

“What about my house? My plants?” Tara was concerned about them, but some wild part of her wondered what her house would look like overgrown and left to nature. All the squirrels and deer and rabbits and birds could live in her home. Amelia seemed to understand the thought that just ran through Tara’s mind, somehow.

What will you do? She asked simply. Tara stood straight and walked toward Amelia.

“How can I go with you?” She asked.

Come with me.

Tara followed the ghost outside and around her house, toward the water faucet. On the ground next to it, a body was lying down, its back toward the pair.

“What...” Tara said, confused. Who was *that*? She walked up to it slowly, and placed her hand on its shoulder. As she turned it toward her, she saw her own, pale face staring back at her. “Oh... that’s... me,” Tara didn’t know how to feel.

You had not eaten. I did not understand why, either. Then I remembered. You had not eaten since I saw you for the second time. Tara almost didn’t believe it. How could she have done such a thing? How could she have let herself die? And how did she die so fast? A small pocket of sadness opened in her chest when she thought of her mother. For a while, she had entertained the wild idea that she might see her mother again someday, but she knew now she wouldn’t get to do that. And her garden, how could she have left it?

You were in between, Amelia said, like she could read Tara’s thoughts again. *You were barely alive before. Your body stopped speaking to you. Now, you are here. On my side.*

A feeling of peace washed over Tara. Amelia stretched her hand out to Tara, and Tara grasped it. Like putting her hand in the ice-cold river, the feeling spread from her fingertips to the rest of her body, and she saw that her skin became more transparent, like Amelia’s.

They walked as friends, hand in hand, toward the river.

Yunqi (Nick) Zhang

Gift

(It is said that these three gifts are considered rude and offensive in Russia)

I send you a clock

to measure your own time

I send you a knife

to end others' life

I send you a handkerchief

to wipe all the tears

Then I'll send you something else that you'll never use

I send you

myself

Heartwired

Rain lashed furiously against the windshield as Kate Marshall drove through the growing darkness towards her childhood home. Her parents were holding a celebratory dinner to welcome her back from the gap year she had taken before going off to college. Kate smiled as she thought about seeing her family and all the friends she had left behind. She could hardly wait to share the stories of her travels. As she drove, Kate began to recognize landmarks around her, letting her know that she was close to home. She passed by the park that she used to go to every day with her mom, and the vibrant orange playground where her dad would push her on the swings.

Kate pressed her foot against the brake, gently slowing as she approached a sharp turn. At the sudden screech of tires to her left, she whipped her head around just in time to see a speeding car swerving back and forth across the road, sliding towards her. Time seemed to slow. Kate locked eyes with the driver of the car, a twenty-something guy with an expression of muted surprise. She heard the groan of crumpling metal as the two vehicles collided—and then she was weightless. She was dimly aware of her car flipping over and over, and then there was a deafening crunch, accompanied by incomprehensible pain.

“Taylor!” It was Chris, my favorite nurse in the hospital. “You’re back again?” By the time I was thirteen, I knew what it felt like to be loaded onto a gurney and rushed to the emergency surgery wing to have my heart pierced by a scalpel for the tenth time. I knew what it felt like to have anesthesia tug at my consciousness as I heard the doctors whisper that they might be too late. During the course of those thirteen years, I spent more time in the hospital than I did anywhere else. The doctors were very skilled, and they were always kind; but I hated that place. I despised the harsh, sterile light of the hospital room, the thin cotton blankets that covered the beds, and the overwhelming, sharp scent of sorrow. I gave up trying to make friends, even temporary ones, at the hospital the year I turned ten. By then, I knew that even if the person accepted my invitation of friendship, it wouldn’t last. They would be moved to another room, or discharged, or the worst of all possibilities: they would go into surgery and never come out. Chris, the nurse who usually worked in my wing of the hospital, was the only one

whom I considered a friend. He wasn't everyone's favorite person, as he seemed strict at first; but under that tough shell he was kind and funny. He often helped me see my struggles from a different perspective.

I had been on the heart transplant waiting list for over a year, with preliminary surgeries along the way to keep me alive. Being in the hospital for so much of my life taxed my mental health, but I tried to push those feelings aside and focus on staying alive. Still, I knew that I could talk to Chris as well as my parents when I began to give up hope. My parents were exceptionally supportive, but I knew that their courage sometimes wavered as well. I heard arguments late at night that were supposed to be whispered, but the words crept out from under their door and into my ears. I heard my mother's broken sobs as she leaned against my father, begging for me to be alright. It frightened me.

One night, I woke up screaming with pain, my chest constricting. I took a laboring breath, straining with effort, but it felt like an elephant was standing on my chest. My parents, hearing my screams, rushed to my room and leaped into action. As she dialed 911, my mother stuffed two tablets under my tongue. Bitterness flooded my mouth. I was dimly aware of her yelling into the phone, "Ten minutes for an ambulance? Too long! Tell the hospital ER that we're on our way." She grabbed the emergency bag that she kept by the door and bolted for the car. Wool scuffed my face as my father wrapped me in a blanket and hauled me after her.

The drive was a complete blur. I could barely think through the fog of pain that burned through my body and tinted the world in a reddish haze. Eventually, I gave in to the darkness, slipping in and out of consciousness. Random details registered in my brain: my mother's tear-stained face, the glare of the traffic light reflecting off my window, the way the wind tore relentlessly at the trees outside. Those thoughts finally joined the rest of my consciousness in a muddled, murky pool as everything went black.

When I regained consciousness, I was disoriented, although the bright glare of the hospital lights was all-too-familiar. My entire body pulsed with a deep aching, like a pinprick in every cell. I looked around, expecting to be in my usual recovery room with the nurses I knew, such as Chris. I wasn't. This place, Cardiac Intensive Care, was unfamiliar and confusing. I felt relieved to see my parents and to feel their hands grasping mine, but I was surprised to see several new doctors hovering over me with intense expressions. Then the room began to spin, blurring in and out amid the clamor of the medical specialists barraging me with questions. My exhausted brain could barely keep pace with them.

"Taylor!"

“You’re awake! How are you feeling?”

“Are you in pain?”

“Taylor, what do you remember? Anything?”

“Taylor?”

I tried to sit up, but my muscles gave out and I flopped back onto my pillow.

“What happened?” I croaked. The doctors stopped talking, all at once. The doctor closest to me, her hair in a perky blond ponytail, smiled kindly and sat down in a chair beside my bed. Her ponytail bobbed at her shoulders.

“You were rushed to this hospital by your parents two days ago. You were unconscious by the time we got you inside. We were all so worried. You stayed that way for thirty-six hours—in critical condition—before we got the call.”

“The call?” I asked, still unsure of what was going on.

“A donor heart had just become available, and the surgeons thought it would be a good match. We brought the heart over here and performed the surgery as quickly as possible. We had to work as fast as we could to...” The doctor stopped herself, but I knew what she had been about to say: “*To make sure you didn’t die.*” I took a shuddering breath as I began to realize what had happened.

“I finally got the transplant?”

Tears flooded my eyes as I heard her reply.

“Yes. It was a good match!”

A warm feeling rushed through me, dimming the pain that wracked my body. I knew that there could be a risk of transplant rejection in the future; but despite this awareness, I was overjoyed. I was free! Free of the endless hospital stays, free of the constant surgeries that left me and my family exhausted, free of the whispered conversations about my demise. I was giddy for several minutes before I began to consider what the actual circumstances of the situation were. The joy that had flooded me faded as I realized that someone, someone close to my age, had died for this. I asked the doctor what had happened to the donor, but she said she couldn’t disclose the details of the girl’s situation.

The girl. At least I knew that much about this unknown person who had given her life to me. A tear traced its way down my cheek as I thought about her. Although I knew it wasn’t my fault that she had died, I couldn’t help feeling stabs of guilt every time I thought about the fact that someone else had to die in order for me to have the life that was awaiting me. I thought back to what the doctor had said earlier, when she was explaining what had happened to me. “*A donor heart had just become available.... We got the heart over here ... as quickly as possible.*” As if that heart hadn’t belonged to a human

being with friends and family who loved her, who would be devastated at their loss. For several minutes, I felt caught in an emotional whirlpool. Shame, grief, happiness, fear, relief, and even anger swirled in my mind in a clashing dance. Exhausted, I shut my eyes against the hurricane of emotions and fell asleep.

A few days later, Chris showed up in my room for a visit. Although he worked in another unit of the hospital, he'd heard that I was here and why. We talked for a while, and then Chris offered some thoughts about heart transplants and living our lives.

"Now you're heartwired with another person for the rest of your life," he told me. "I've never liked the term 'organ donor.' It misses the importance of the gift between the person who gives the heart and the person who accepts it. I prefer the term 'life sharer.'"

I squinted at him. "What does that mean for me, Chris?"

"Some recipients learn about who their donors were as people. Some never have that information. Either way, when you are heartwired you can never forget that your life is shared with another and you would not exist without the other person."

"I can already sense that, Chris. But I don't know exactly what to do."

"There's nothing *exact* about it. Just live your life aware that you have a connection only people with transplants can understand. Being heartwired is a gift, and you will always have the chance to honor that gift."

Seven Years Later

The blaring of my ringtone reached out and yanked me from my dreams. I groped around on the bedside table for my cell phone, and answered groggily.

"Taylor! It's Louise Scott." Mrs. Scott, a family friend, had worked for years as a volunteer with an organ donation advocacy group. She was so excited, she barely paused. "I had a remarkable coincidence yesterday, and I'm desperate to tell you about it."

"I was staffing an information table at the city street fair, and I recognized another volunteer whose daughter had died in a terrible car accident several years ago. We started talking about her and about their experience."

I heard a catch in Mrs. Scott's voice. "Taylor, the girl donated her heart. *Your heart!* If you'd like to meet them—only if you want to—I could help them connect with you. What do you think?"

I got off the phone with Mrs. Scott, my head spinning. I knew it wouldn't be entirely my choice to make. I also knew it would be a difficult decision for the parents of the donor. I imagined that the loss of a child is not something any parent could ever get

over, and that meeting me could bring back awful memories. I would understand either way, no matter what decision they made. Even though we weren't sure they'd want to visit, excitement and hope filled my chest. I wanted to meet them. I wanted to know the people who had given me my life back. If they hadn't made that crucial choice, I wouldn't be here today. I would be dead.

As I thought more about meeting them, a darker emotion crept in around the edges of my excitement. Even as I imagined my donor's story, guilt intruded—layering my vision of her profound generosity and the connection between our lives. Our heartwiring, as Chris had put it years ago. I pushed away those feelings for the time being, telling myself I'd deal with them when the time came.

Two days later, Mrs. Scott called again. "Katherine and Matt want to meet you, Taylor! I set it up for next Saturday morning at your house. I hope that's okay."

"Thank you, thank you, Mrs. Scott!" I cried. "I'll have to get ready. I've had a busy week, and I was *almost* able to block it out of my mind. But now that it's real, I'm completely nervous."

"Taylor, I may be as excited as you are. It's a huge moment! Let me know how it goes."

"I'll call you the minute we've finished talking," I promised. "And thank you again for helping make this moment happen."

Saturday arrived in a rush. I scanned the living room, checking to see if I'd forgotten anything. A sweet, calming aroma wafted from the frosted cookies on the table, as if they were trying to calm me down. All of a sudden, footsteps echoed on the front stairs and across the porch to the front door, jolting me from my anxious thoughts. The normally sweet chime of the doorbell sounded deeper pitched, almost ominous. I shakily got to my feet and moved towards the door, pausing for a moment with my hand resting on the knob. I inhaled deeply, turned the knob slowly, and pulled open the door. Before me stood a middle-aged couple. They were wide-eyed and looked anxious; but when they saw me, their faces split with big smiles.

"Taylor?" the man asked. I nodded mutely, staring at them. "I'm Matt, and this is my wife Katherine." I nodded again, feeling numb, and gazed at them for another couple of seconds before coming to my senses and remembering my manners.

"Of course! Please come in." I ushered them into the living room, where we all resumed staring at each other. After what seemed like a minute or two, Katherine broke the silence that had been roaring in our ears. She walked towards me as if in a trance, and brushed her fingers across my face.

“I’m sure this sounds crazy, but I sense Kate’s spirit in you.” She tilted her head, gazing at my face. “It’s the look in your eyes. Like a kaleidoscope. All different colors and going in several different directions at once.” We laughed. She was right, my brain often did go in many different directions at the same time.

“Kate always had that look, up until the day she died,” Katherine continued. My grin faded at the mention of Kate’s death, and I looked up into Matt and Katherine’s eyes, returning their clear, steady gaze.

“Tell me about Kate. Tell me her story,” I pleaded. Katherine’s eyes drifted shut as if she was combing through the memories of her daughter.

“We adopted Kate after a long, hopeful wait. From the moment we saw her, we knew she was our child. The bond between the three of us just immediately clicked into place, even though she was only an infant; and it only grew stronger. We were always so close. She was our entire world.” Tears ran down her face as Katherine paused.

“I remember the exact moment it happened,” she continued, pushing through the words with effort. “We got that horrible call saying that our daughter had been in a drunk-driving accident. Kate had been rushed into the emergency room, and we arrived at her bedside shortly after. She was still alive, but barely. I was shocked that she was still conscious. Kate looked straight at Matt and me and whispered, ‘I love you guys.’ Then she was gone. I remember the doctors grabbing at the machines and shouting things back and forth to one another, but all I could hear was the shriek of the heart monitor flatlining. A doctor came over and took my hands. ‘I am so sorry.’ Her words echoed in my mind, but they didn’t make any sense. Then I heard Matt scream, and the truth ripped through me. My only child. Gone.”

As I pictured the scene described by Katherine, I brushed the tears from my cheeks. We were all crying at this point. “I am so....” Matt cut me off, smiling despite his tears. “The only thing that got us through the horrible weeks after her death was knowing that at least something good came out of it. Kate always knew she wanted to be an organ donor. The first time she asked us about it was around the time she got her driver’s license. We explained what it was, and her face lit up. ‘I want to do that!’ she said. ‘I want to change someone’s life.’ Seeing you here today, we know that she was right.”

I reached over and placed my hand on his arm, now smiling through my own tears. “Kate didn’t just change my life. She saved it. A friend once told me that when you receive a heart from a donor, you are heartwired with that person. I’m heartwired with Kate, and her heart is beating for all of us.”

We continued talking for hours, sharing laughter and tears, as if we had been friends for a lifetime. Finally, the time came for them to head home. As they got up to

leave, I stopped them and looked into the eyes of the people who had helped give me my life back. I felt so close to Katherine and Matt that I knew there was one more thing I needed to do before we went on with our lives. Taking a deep breath, I reached into my bag and pulled out the stethoscope that I carry in case I need to monitor my cardiac status.

I turned back to Katherine and Matt. “Do you want to listen to our heart?”

My Little World

The first told tales of orange cats.
His shoelace had a piece of someone else's shoelace
tied to it. A well-known entity
whom you could always count on for a joke
that you should not have laughed at.
He was the wind, always on the brink
of stirring up trouble.

The second, quiet,
yet surprisingly knowing.
The only one of us smart enough
to carry an electric pencil sharpener.
Fascinated with beauty
that he saw in everything.
He was the earth, dependable
and sturdy.

The third, the nerd, a hurtful word
said only to himself.
Talent radiated from him; his body
could not hold it all.
He was always one joke away
from wearing that smile
of happy over sad.
He was the sun, bright
and blinding.

The fourth had a mind that spun so fast
his body could barely keep up.
You could almost hear
his creativity, creating
thoughts around the clock.

He could never hide it.
He was a rainbow, unintentionally
wearing different shades that express
to the world him, truly himself.

The fifth, a newcomer, an unknown entity.
A smile, a laugh, an irony unmatched.
He was never on task,
but he always did what needed to be done.
One earbud in to listen
to himself.
One earbud out to hear
anything he was told.
He was the sea, beautifully chaotic.
However, what lies beneath remains unknown
for now.

Just a class, a small group
that will adjourn a final time
and never gather again.
Would that make them insignificant?
If a shooting star passes and is never seen
again, is it insignificant?
If a flower dies, never to bloom
again, is it insignificant?
Little bits of momentary happiness
are the most significant of all.
The wind, the earth, the sun, the rainbow, and the sea
make up a world.
Treasured.

Lemon Meringue Pie

“Hilda, be reasonable,” Grandpa pleaded as he looked across the table in my Grandma’s general direction. He didn’t, however, look her in the eye. “We’ve been happy here for twenty years, but it’s time to move to a smaller place.”

I could see her face turn from pale white to pink to red as if he’d ignited a fire inside of her that might eventually explode. Clearly this was not the first time they’d discussed this topic, but my presence seemed to aggravate the tension.

“But Michael needs us,” she exclaimed, as she looked at me as if expecting me to side with her. Instead I avoided looking at either of them and focused intently on the slice of lemon meringue pie in front of me.

“We moved here to take care of our grandchildren and until Michael goes off to college, we need to be here to help him!”

I could see Grandpa was frustrated, as if he was tired of repeating the same argument over and over. “Michael is not like his brother. He’s always been independent and mature. Don’t treat him like a little kid. He’s over six feet tall, gets good grades, and knows how to take care of himself! We’re both getting too old to keep living here. It’s too hard for you to clean the house and they have good cooks at the facility.”

She looked as if he had suggested they move into outer space. “Those cooks are not good! They use pre-packaged meals that are full of preservatives, salt, and fat! Maybe we can get a housecleaner, but I’m not moving when the kids still need us.”

Both turned to look to me as if I could settle the argument. If only I hadn’t made that face after taking a bite of the damn pie! She had mistakenly added salt instead of sugar to the lemon ingredients. It was, truthfully, quite awful and I had spit it out without thinking of how it might hurt her. Baking had always been a source of great pride to her. She made everything from scratch and even squeezed the lemons instead of buying the filling in a can. She had a whole library full of cookbooks and each one had notes written in the margins with her comments on how to “improve” the recipes so that they became her own unique version. Next to the cookbooks were an impressive array of cooking trophies she’d acquired over the years. There was a porcelain cake trophy for the elaborate wedding cake contest she won, a tiny metal chef’s hat for the best recipe contest sponsored by Betty Crocker, and a painted pie tin mounted on a stand for her lemon

meringue pie recipe. The same recipe that had won her awards and endless compliments now sparked this argument between her and Grandpa.

Grandpa had been lobbying for weeks now to move to an assisted living facility. They'd bought the house after my brother was first born because they wanted to help raise him - and me - after I came along seven years later. When my father died, a little more than a year after I was born, they played an even bigger role in raising both of us. He and my eight-year old brother had been snorkeling in Saipan when they got caught in a riptide. He drowned but somehow my brother survived and was rescued by some fishermen. I'd heard my grandparents whisper that my dad died trying to protect my brother and that my brother survived by holding onto his body, but my brother has never told me what really happened. Given that he had a breakdown in high school, attempted suicide multiple times, and spent a year in a therapeutic boarding school, it's not a subject anyone feels comfortable raising. As my mom focused all of her energy on helping my brother, my grandparents played an even bigger role in taking care of me. I lived with them for weeks at a time, they helped me with my homework, drove me to and from school, and, of course, fed me Grandma's delicious baked cookies and pies.

But now I had my driver's license and I didn't need anyone hovering over me to make sure I did my homework. Grandpa still helped me prepare for regattas by repairing the boat we stored at his house, and after a race I'd often stay over for dinner and dessert. Grandma would then mention that "my room" was always ready for me if I wanted to stay the night. The walls of this room were covered with photographs of my dad that showed him as a smiling baby, sailing in high school, graduating from Stanford, and pioneering medical applications with lasers. Photos of me as a baby were framed on the nightstand and stuffed animals I used to love still sat on the bed even though I hadn't played with them for years. I didn't have the heart to explain to her that I now preferred staying in my own room at home when my mom went out of town.

"Michael needs us," she insisted. "If we moved, who would help him with sailing? Who would take him on tours of colleges? Who would teach him how to cook?"

"You know, his mom knows how to cook," Grandpa stated.

She looked vaguely outraged as if my mom's version of cooking, heating up Trader Joes' dinners, was nothing short of child abuse.

"I mean real cooking. Something that doesn't go into a microwave."

"You know, some of that microwave food isn't half bad now," he smiled.

"Don't be ridiculous," she muttered. "It tastes awful and it's bad for you."

I couldn't help but glance at the disgusting lemon meringue pie I had just tasted. Nevertheless, he and I looked at each other and silently agreed that further discussion was pointless. We ended the conversation, at least for now...

Yunqi (Nick) Zhang

A King or a Hero

I wish the ballad of sorrow is sung,
but only for me.
For others, I command you to return with triumph.
When drinking, use my skull as the cup.
Who drinks, must drink my blood.

Family Dinner

My Uncle Mike's house is surrounded by a deep chasm, with a small stream at the bottom. The water is a murky grey, though the sunlight that shines through the redwood canopy makes it glimmer like gold. Around us, the air is cold in a slow, dull kind of way, that makes it all the more clear that we are standing outside, instead of in the warm house only forty feet away. Ages ago, someone built a bridge over the chasm, wooden slats placed too far apart to feel safe, with moss growing in the cracks. On the side closest to the house there is a chain link gate, and behind that my little cousin, Kaliya, has pressed herself up against it. Her mother, my aunt Karen, stands beside her, still dressed in her pajamas, her arms wrapped around herself against the cold. My uncle stands a ways behind them, his sleek black phone clutched in his hands as he shoots a melodramatic photo. My family stands on one bank, while my uncle and his stand on the other. It's such a strange picture, the two groups separated by the bridge, my family by the twisting road, my uncle's family draped in the shade of the redwoods.

We used to have dinner every Sunday with my Aunt and Uncle's family. In fact, we would have had a birthday dinner for my aunt on the 15th if the worries of the virus hadn't scared my mother into putting it off indefinitely. Now we've come to them, to stand on the other side of this strange chasm, and talk in slightly loud voices about anything. As I stand there, I realize that we aren't here to just drop off some food and leave. This is a social call, some pale facsimile of the dinner we used to share. My mother is telling my uncle about the new recipes we've been trying, and my uncle tells us all how the family dog, a black lab named Beau, has started responding to the crate-training. The conversation is one that should have happened over a dinner table, not a bridge.

My father and I stand by the car. I say a few words to my little cousin, but through it all I can't stop thinking about how this space feels like a time loop. Everything, the conversation, the expressions, the way we stand, has this grey feeling to it, like the moment a cloud covers the sun. I feel like I'm perpetually on the cusp of something new, but the moment just before keeps repeating. Every day there is a new bit of news about the virus, some new statement or death or trend, but they blur together until the novelty of information becomes a routine all on its own.

In my arms I'm holding Teddy, an eleven-week old bundle of teeth and soft fur. He squirms around, so I set him down on the rickety bridge. Kaliya stares at him like a

prospector hitting the jackpot. Teddy toddles across the wood slats, and nudges his wet nose against the chain link fence, rubbing his short muzzle to Kaliya's hand. She grins, and I realize that while I'm missing a bit of my sophomore year, she's missing her first year of kindergarten. While I barely remember my own first year of kindergarten, it has to be important, right? Some kind of formative experience involving storytime, arts and crafts, and learning the law of the jungle gym. After a few minutes, Teddy scampers back over to our side. As my father bends over to pick him up, I find myself wondering about contamination. Dogs can't get the virus, but what if Kaliya hadn't washed her hands? What if she touched something at the gym her father owns? What if that something hadn't been washed? It's an endless cycle of worry and contamination, but as my father picks Teddy up, I push the thoughts away and rub the puppy behind his ears. It's better not to concentrate on that, and for now, to pretend that it's a normal Sunday afternoon, and in a few minutes we'll head into my uncle's house. We'll sit on the couch, and Beau will try to jump on my lap, and my little cousin will demand that I pass judgment on her newest crayon creation. My uncle will ask me about Marvel, the only thing we have in common, and my father will start working on whatever new issue has arisen with my uncle's printer. But for now I can pretend that we're just waiting, and that soon, everything will go back to normal.

Good-byes Behind a Mask

In the midst of a pandemic, it's hard to remember that the roses still bloom and the sun still sets. Having been a UN producer in New York, my mom's favorite nighttime activity is turning on the news, only to be bombarded by crisis updates. On the large scale, the economy is sinking into a depression and thousands are dying alone. On a small scale, schools may not start in fall, prom may never happen, and graduation may depend on your computer's ability to connect to Zoom.

Before COVID hit, I didn't know how I was going to deal with the change of my senior friends leaving. Call me overly sentimental, but I brainstormed how I'd say goodbye to each of them. How could I not? They're the ones I've shared math classes with for years, walked countless roof-deck laps together, and pulled shenanigans on Mr. Tropp with, hoping to be bribed away with lollipops like kindergarteners. My brother and I, only 18 months apart, had gone to the same school together for every year except one. It never really mattered that I was a year younger than my brother and his classmates, but now with all their college acceptance announcements, I couldn't ignore the fact that they'd be off in the world, while I, to put it bluntly, would be stuck without them.

Even up until March, it seemed like we'd have the picture perfect, coming-of-age movie goodbye. Driver's license in hand, I pictured spending the spring months driving to and from school every day with my brother, me making fun of his loud AC/DC and him groaning at my mopey 1975 songs. We'd go to the beach just because we felt like it, and pick up our childhood favorite root-beer float ice cream from Marianne's to share with my mom and dad. Liza and I would have driven up to Pescadero's goat farm, and we'd savor strawberry shortcakes from Swanton's before driving down sunset-blazoned Highway 1 in the evening. Micah and I had plans to bake together, or to put it more accurately, Micah would end up baking lemon squares while I would try to chase down his demonic rabbit Snurt.

Now, with COVID, it's suddenly clear that those hopeful thoughts were only that: hopeful. Saying goodbye in the ways I had perfectly planned in my head don't fit into our new reality. Heck, there's a chance I might not even get to see them before they fly off to college in fall. And that's assuming they will go to college in the fall, which, who knows because now nothing can be certain anymore. But, that said, maybe that's okay.

This crisis, stay-at-home, quarantine, whatever the media wants to call it, has brought positives that I'd never thought about before. The whole year I've tried to make sure I spend as much time with my brother as possible before he leaves, whether that's through playing Red Dead Redemption (I cannot work a PS4 controller for the life of me) or baking key lime pies. Friday nights I hit myself with the question: Go out with friends who'd be here next year or spend quality time with him, who'd be leaving soon after July? Now, we have all the time in the world, spending evenings meandering through the hilly backroads talking under the blanket of the pink-hued sky. So far, no arguments over rock music, but we drown the sounds of crickets with Phil Collins at our daily family dinners in the backyard. So I'm grateful, because none of that would have happened sans COVID, given science fairs, APs, and everything else that goes on in our lives. Micah and I snap pictures of our baking creations back and forth, and I've hooked him on drying fragrant, delicate roses. Liza and I compare our recent developments in our Minecraft worlds, and while it's not much, some would say our Minecraft daisies and sunsets compare to the ones we would have seen driving down Davenport after a long day with baby goats.

Getting used to some of the main people in my life leaving presented a huge change no matter what. It's safe to say that more has changed than I could have expected, but all this time aimlessly laying on my bed, staring at my ceiling, has helped me realize that maybe these goodbyes aren't so bad after all. Change was coming anyway, this is just an unexpected kind. Maybe adjusting to it is all I needed.

Interrobang

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