

An abstract painting featuring a central hand in shades of orange, red, and yellow, holding a plant. The plant has large, rounded blue leaves and long, thin, reddish-brown stems. The background is dark blue with various brushstrokes in teal, orange, and yellow. The overall style is expressive and modern.

ROOTS

SOLE MAGAZINE

Vol. IV

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LETTER FROM *THE EDITORS*

Dear Reader,

Hello! Welcome to the fourth issue of *Sole Magazine*, Brown's home for all things creative nonfiction.

Before you turn the page, we ask you to take a second. Hold this issue in your hands. Consider where you are—on the Main Green, tucked into the quietest corner of the Rock, yapping at a Thursday *Sole* meeting with your friends. Think about how you got here and where you came from.

Because this edition of *Sole* is about roots, and not just the kind that peek through cracks in the sidewalk. The kinds of invisible threads—people and places, histories and inheritances—that hold us steady and shape our lives even when we don't notice.

In this issue, we reflect on missing teeth, geography tests, and the landscapes of our childhoods. We pay homage to the natural world. We take pride in our names and the languages that tickle our tongues, questioning what it means to belong to a place and whether that belonging can ever be truly lost.

Roots are not static. They grow, intertwine, resurface. Most importantly, they remind us that home doesn't just disappear—that the experiences and relationships we build here at Brown continue to ground us long after we leave.

So turn off your mental egg timer for a moment. Let yourself sink into these pages. And if you're wondering what our amazing staff writers think about roots, check out our Collections piece on page 14!

With love,

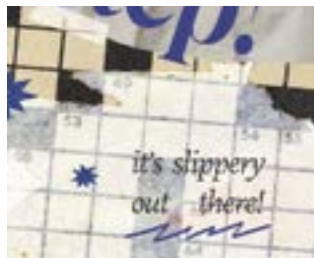
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Deeya, Kate, Elsa, and Desi

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Cherry Picking

By Elsa Eastwood

Edited by Kate Rowberry

Illustrated by Elsa Eastwood



I AM A truly awful baker. But it's a fact I and my mother have long accepted, so when it comes to preparing family favorites like cherry tart, I've managed to take on a peripheral role.

Once a year in May or June, we wake up early to drive through the arid farmland region of Southern California to Villa del Sol, a 25-acre cherry orchard open to the public during harvest season. Before we leave we don our hiking boots and big hats. When you're cherry picking, it's good to feel slightly silly and mom-like. Or, as mine says, prepared.

The road to Villa del Sol is one long stretch ending in a bustling parking lot. Then you're in the trees, squatting in the soil between tight rows of prickly branches, eyes squinting into a dense green-and-red-speckled ceiling. Sunlight filters through the canopy. We've learned it's wise to come in small, trackable groups, as the farm has shoddy cell service and the trees are low and monotonous in color. We spent the majority of the afternoon shouting "Sue!" into a leafy abyss that one time we brought my grandmother.

Deciding where to begin picking is almost overwhelming. But with the first off-the-stem pop, the first plunk against the floor of the bucket, comes a sudden rapacious need to strip the whole place bare. A single cherry tree can hold up to 7,000 fruits, enough for 280 cherry pies; Villa del Sol has over 3,000 cherry trees. If you've only ever

seen them come in ones or twos or on

the top of sundaes, you've been done a grave disservice.

Over the years, we've learned the four West Coast cherry varieties by eavesdropping, choosing Brooks or Bing, Rainier or Tulare based on the farmers' murmurs of the season's best. Brooks bloom early—big, swollen, and semi-tart. Eating one once, I could've sworn I tasted blackberry. Tulare are heart-shaped and a deep, blood red, their flavor a sharper mix of tangy and sweet. Rainier cherries, after Mount Rainier, are the sweetest but more of a yellow-orange, a funny sunset. The most popular is the Bing, a cross between Black Republican and Napoleon cherries bred in the 1800s, named for the Chinese foreman who helped develop them. When ripe, they're fat and firm and nearly black. The tourists come in droves for Bing.

We've been visiting this orchard since I was ten. Each year, I smile at the same pig-tailed employees who stand at the entrance to pass out red buckets, tell people which side of the yellow string to stay on, remind them not to eat until they've paid. When we line up by the exit, I watch them weigh and bag the

little bulbs that will soon be placed carefully on our tart and less carefully on my brothers' tongues. We return home after these annual excursions with enough cherries to last until the next—or at least to try every cherry-dependent dessert recipe in *The Baking Bible*—but I always wish to have had a few more hours.

Each time we go to Villa del Sol, my mom suggests I live and work there for a season. Keep some dust in my nose for a while. I picture myself in pig-tails and overalls of my own, rattling off cherry facts from atop my crate pedestal. *Cherries get their color from powerful antioxidants. The George Washington story is a load of crap.* Mounting my bike, riding home down the lone desert street.

But each year, the local employees send us away with a quick chirp: "Enjoy!" We return home to recount the day's adventures in our kitchen. My mom sets to work on the tart. When it's done, I place cherries in neat, concentric circles across its surface, each time convinced it's enough to say we made it together.



In Memoriam Iuliae

By Luca Raffa | Edited by Tyki Cantu-Wang | Illustrated by Kamsi Nwotite

I

IT WAS A late afternoon during mid-March in Toronto. I remember the grey clouds brought rain-drops, and puddles, and stillness into the world so as to reflect the quiet miseries and mysteries of life. Gloom hung in the stench of the muggy air and clung to the back of my mind. The heavy lake clouds acknowledged our melancholic mortal condition and the curse of suffering we each bore as trespassers in the ailing world. The indifferent pour of rain and the growling roars from above prophesied tragedy. Beauty was melting. Beauty, like the way the golden sun loved the sky, was as brief as perfection and drowned in tempests. Yet beauty was also like the fleeting touch of calm rays, the emerging yellow after misery. I was six years old and did not understand neither misery nor beauty. She was sleeping peacefully on Mom's lap, Dad beside her, Gabriel and I sitting on the floor. Mom said that her heartbeat did not rhyme with its usual rhythm, and she soon lay as heavy as

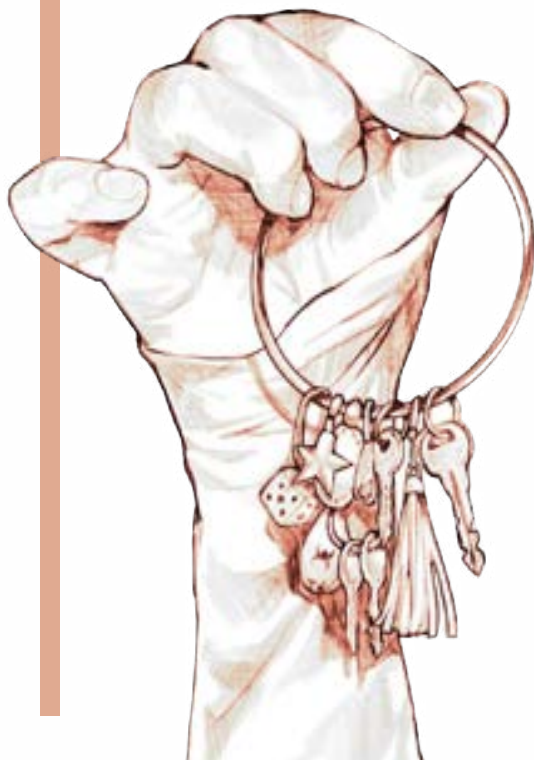
marble in her lap. Mom was so young. She sent me and Gabriel upstairs to wait, and we watched in the dark as blue and red lights brought us to the windowsill. An ambulance arrived, and I remember the funeral smelling like lilies.

II

I could never understand you. All you could say was *ma*. The thoughts which you could not speak would rupture into your violent yell, but your hands tried speaking to me a million words: you would put your hand to your mouth as if to blow a kiss, as if to say *I love you*. I wish you could have seen the smiles on my face. You were rough and free and would rock back and forth in a trance, shattering ice or a glass cup on the living room floor when you were happy. I remember you as biting, vomiting, and moaning. But you were also the clink and clatter of keys which you would jingle and the glow of carols on your radio—you were the scratches on those CDs. You were laughter when Mom read Robert Munch's picture books, the hums of *Silent Night*, and the sweetness of cream of wheat, the things which you loved most. You were the familiarity of the green couch and drowsiness. I remember you as soft blankets, pink sweatshirts, and stretchy hair-ties. Your long, black hair was wild against the stillness of your cold white hands. You were syringes, and medication, and wheelchairs—the nurses' only patient. You were never-ending doctor's visits and hospital visits, Christmases that brushed against death, the numb headaches and tears of your loved ones. You were youth, and joy, and beauty, and sickness, and misery, and death. You were my confusion.

III

Mom and Dad fled the life where Julia lived for sixteen years and brought me and Gabriel to America, this continental haven where families could be reborn. Time kept me away from the places of the past, and the vividness of Julia's memory rusted inside me. I would begin to forget her. But her presence would never leave me. At the bottom of the eighth inning of my first Red Sox game, the happy crowd's chant *bum bum bum* resurrected Julia: the memory of a happy little girl on her father's lap singing *Sweet Caroline* appeared in my mind and wet my eyes. This pleasant twinge of Julia's memory in my heart comforted me, though. Today when I feel this strange tickle and think about Julia's story, I remember that I have witnessed a miracle. In her short life, Julia illuminated beauty and defied the weary miseries of the world. As a proud brother, I am compelled to follow this light and to seek beauty in the world.



LOST

By AnnaLise Sandrich

Edited by Chloe Costa Baker

Illustrated by Autumn Tilley

SOMETIMES IT'S EASIEST to screw up the things that look simple. Sunday afternoon, in Brown University's orange-hued Riley Hall, mid-rehearsal of an arrangement of the Lord of the Rings soundtrack, I find myself lost in a series of slurred whole notes. Not a progression that is in any way technically difficult, but as I pull the bow across the C string, joining the rest of the cello section in a prolonged, contemplative low F, I realize I have no idea which measure we are playing. Too much of the same thing, the same note tied too many times over. I've completely lost track.

Counting is critical in music. This is something we learn early: we position our stands high enough so that we can watch the conductor in the periphery while we follow the math on the page. We count the downbeats in our heads, sound out the rhythms, bring a pencil to rehearsal so that we can circle a reminder to look up when the tempo changes. We count the rests carefully so that we don't come in too early. There is no such thing as right notes at the wrong moments.

Even with years of practice, counting doesn't come as easily as it should. One moment of lost focus, a single wayward thought, can knock you off track: the distraction of—

I should have really gotten that assignment done before I came here

and

I haven't been applying to enough internships and opportunities are closing

cascading to

How can I start applying when I have no idea what I even want to do?

harmonizing with

I should have practiced more

and

Is the cello out of tune or is it just me?

then

I wish I was more like my brother so on top of things while I'm so lost professionally—

And then—*Shit.*

I realize I've been playing without paying enough attention. The whole notes weren't sufficiently demanding. And while this section of the piece we are playing has been liberal with its reliance on the long low F, the measures of continuous droning will eventually run out. And when they do, I will have no idea where we are in the music, like a ballerina who has fallen a step behind in the choreography, a singer in the spotlight whose words have come out of sync with the band, an actor in a play who doesn't know when to walk onto the stage.

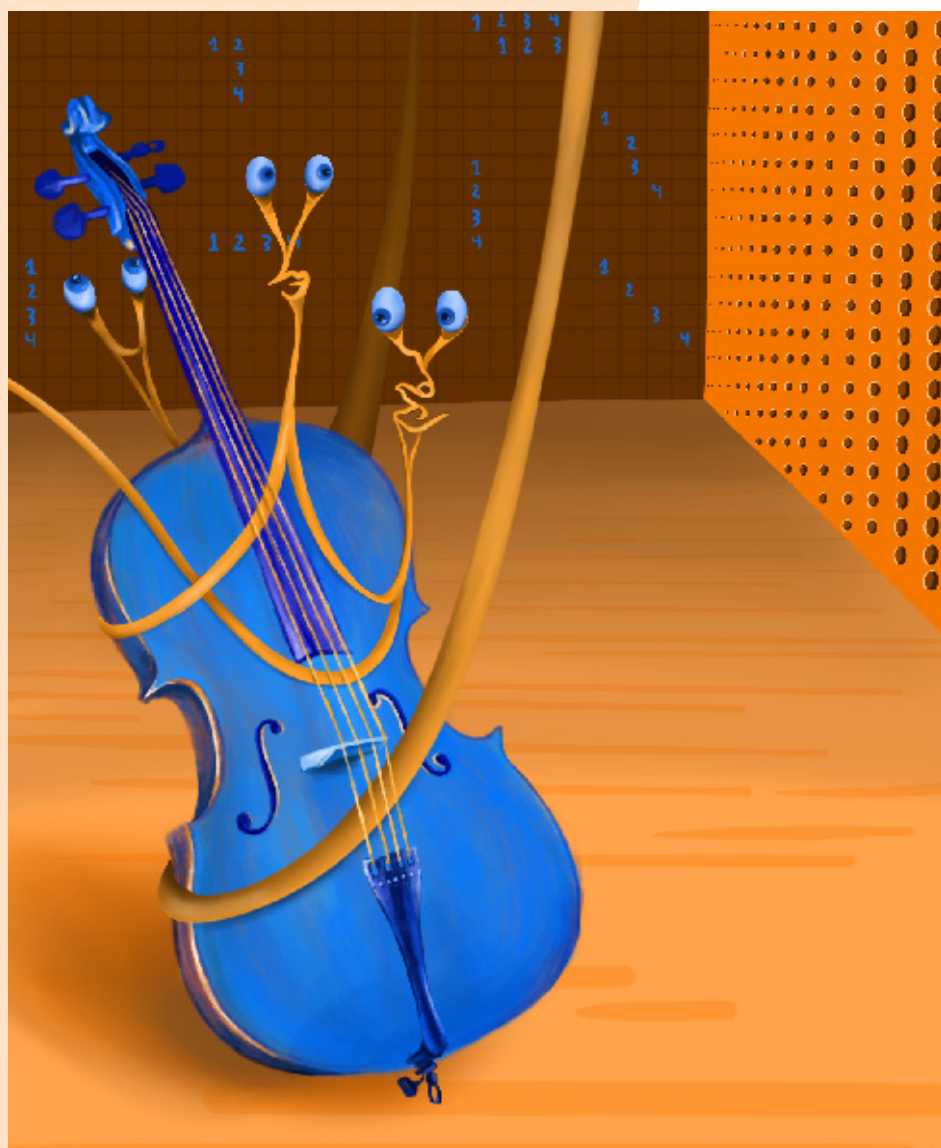
I rented a cello the fall of my sophomore year. Took an Uber to the shop fifteen minutes away, picked it up, Ubered back, placed it down in the center of my spacious Minden double where it sat untouched for the rest of the semester. Didn't even open the case.

Avoidance is a cruel offense to inflict upon an instrument. Guilt gnawed dully as the cello slowly became another piece of decor, akin to the rug I'd bought at HomeGoods, or the poster of Van Gogh watching from the wall. Instruments aren't meant to sit unused. They fall into disrepair.

The wood expands and contracts with the changing humidity, in turn altering the tension of the strings. Slack strings can translate to a whole host of other issues. A certain tautness is necessary to keep the bridge in the right place, to keep the sound post in the instrument's hollow center from collapsing.

The bow yearns to move, even if in the wrong direction, poking stand partners, to fake difficult passages, to be the lone voice coming in during a rest, to lay with the tip in the air and the screw on my knee, and, very occasionally, to play the right things. Very occasionally to create vibrations that dissolve into the triplets of the rest of the section, the section itself in harmonic vibration with the rest of the orchestra, to become Les preludes, or the second movement of Beethoven's fifth, or New World Symphony. Or even to contemplate in the solitude of my room the haughty chord progression in Saint Saens' cello concerto in A minor. But the only sounds that would reach the bow for months were muffled and unmusical.

I began playing cello when I was ten or eleven years old, so bad at the piano that my teacher had gently suggested I might try something else. One lesson, instead of reiterating the same old motions of clumsy fingers on keys, I borrowed one of her cellos, just to see how it felt. Before I had so much as memorized the names of the four strings, let alone fingerings, thumb position, tenor clef—before the cello was even properly in tune—I sat there with its wooden body lying against my chest and knew it was something different. The tense metal strings dug into my fingertips as I pressed them onto the fingerboard, my left hand slow and graceless as it slid up and down, learning the first few notes in a D major scale. But the cello sang like a human—smooth, deep, melodic in an almost narrative way. Or like something above humanness, a voice that squeaked and moaned for my first few weeks, but



held the promise of an elevated ballad.

Cellos, however, are difficult to transport. I didn't touch the instrument once throughout my gap year—a matter of practicality, given my travels and the constrictive size of the instrument. In most cases, you have to buy a plane ticket to take your cello with you, and they don't exactly fit in your average hostel locker.

But then I came back home, cello waiting patiently for me in my childhood bedroom, and didn't pick it up there, either. The time between us stretched larger than any physical distance ever had. As it turns out, Sevilla to San Francisco is less than August to April.

When I did finally open the case up in the spring of my sophomore year, I was confronted with my carelessness.

The cello was so out of tune that the strings were nearly slack, the tuning pegs unwilling to wind them back into place, coming unstuck every time I tried to fix the flats. I snapped an A string trying to get the right pitch to stay.

The bow, at least, showed no obvious signs of neglect. It was, however, thinner, longer, ill-suited to the thick cello strings—a bow meant for violins. Dennis, my cello dealer, had mistakenly given me the wrong kind. It seemed far too late to call and tell him this now.

There are a few things you can do to try to recover when you are lost.

You can pray that the conductor will give you a cue—a nod, a slight flick of

the baton in your section's direction—to let you know it's time to transition to what comes next. But cues are more often given following long periods of rest rather than a series of whole notes tied together. In any case, we won't get one today.

You can try to play more quietly while you gauge the position of your fellow cellists to pick up wherever they come in—assuming they aren't just as lost as you are.

My stand partner flips the page. More whole notes. Should I be right at the top, or did she turn a few bars in advance?

I have no idea. Still lost.

The last thing you can do is resign yourself, accept the inevitability of playing the wrong things, disrupting the collaborative magic that is the chamber orchestra. But this perhaps also means accepting a broader incompetency, maybe one fueled by a long period of absence. Or accepting an even more terrifying character flaw.

Is it a question of figuring out where to pick up where you left off in the music, or a question of how to pick up the cello again at all? Is it a question of how to get back on track with the right quarter notes, or how to get back on track to avoid a full-blown quarter-life crisis?

What to do when you are lost in music, what to do when you are directionless in life?

The music camp I attended the summer between ninth and tenth grade was large enough to get lost in the first couple of times you walked through it. This was something of a marvel to me at the time, an entire 1,200 acre campus dedicated to the arts. Nestled in the woods by a lake in Michigan, we were frequently told to let our surroundings inspire whatever it was our classes instructed us to create. The ballet studio overlooked the water; the visual arts building sat across from the picturesque woodsy Writer's House; the acoustics at the

camp's three indoor and outdoor theaters nearly acted as instruments themselves, the finishing auditory touch tying symphonies together.

Lost on the walk to class, we could hear everyone practicing scales, excerpts, arpeggios in their outdoor practice huts. Past the art building and the artists, the writing building and the writers, the various indoor and outdoor theatres, the cabins where we slept in bunk beds, twelve to a room. The crunch of twigs beneath our feet and the chatter of excited students and the flute drifting through the trees.

I was one of the weakest cellists there. My first three weeks that summer, I was seated second to last. I got the sense that I'd barely gotten into the program at all. I found my ego crushed by how difficult I found the music, how short the distance between first rehearsals and performances felt, my moments of bad intonation, my poor understanding of theory, my disharmonizing, my inability to conquer the measures the way my peers could—triumphantly, like the final chord progression of confident horns at the end of a 16-minute symphonic poem about life itself.

About three or so weeks into the program, the director handed out parts for Igor Stravinsky's *Petrushka*. I had long adored Stravinsky's ballets for how cleverly dramatic they were and yet—the second I stared at the pages I would have to perform in one week, the black notes seemed to blur before my eyes, an overwhelming onslaught of rapid time signature changes, accidentals, technical chord progressions. Impossible for me to master before the concert. Just looking at it, I knew—I don't belong here.

Still, collaboration was encouraged—at the end of the summer, all of the music students would come together in a combined orchestra to perform Franz Liszt's symphonic poem *Les préludes* at the Interlochen Bowl, one of the camp's large outdoor amphitheatres.

The musicians would play beneath the open gable ceiling facing the audience while all the dancers leaped and twirled with ribbons on the roof of the auditorium. To this day, it is my favorite piece of classical music. It starts out soft, quiet, almost tentative. Unified pizzicato in the strings—we rehearsed the opening countless times to get us all together, making sure dozens of us plucked at the exact same moment. And then, the introduction of the first theme, slow slurred arpeggios, rising and falling like a question. More pizzicato. Transitions into a sentimental longing section Liszt composed to embody love, and then faster, frantically, *allegro tempestoso*—storm.

“WEAK LINK OR NOT, I WAS RIGHT THERE WITH THEM, BURIED IN LES PRELUDES, BREATHING IT.”

Chromatic triplets on repeat, such a strong evocation of desperation that when the brass section finally declares the triumphant finale, we feel as though we've battled something and won.

I didn't play it perfectly, but it enveloped me just the same. When we hit the right notes on the chromatic triplets we'd spent hours practicing, it wasn't just the music ascending. We climbed with it. When us cellos got the romantic legato melody of the “Love” section, we dissolved into it with each long bow movement; the resonance felt like being in love. More than that, the skill and expertise with which the notes around me were played reminded me that the girl sitting four chairs up from me was determined to study music, and the boy a chair or two up from her would go on to play professionally, and the principal—well, he was just brilliant. My friends are prodigies—how cool is that? Weak link or not, I was right there with them, buried in *Les préludes*, breathing it. I

was playing in their midst.

The conductor—a student himself—taps his baton against the stand carrying the score and we stop playing.

The inevitable has happened—we've come apart. Not just me mistepping through the measures; confusion has spread through the entire section. None of us are in the same place. I've moved on from the whole notes to the eighths, unsure of whether or not I did so too early or too late.

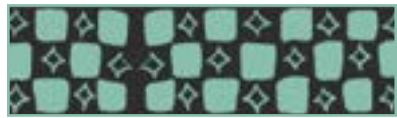
In a concert, this would be a disaster. But today is only a rehearsal.

It's only a Sunday afternoon in the Lindemann. It's a casual group, so I am surrounded by musicians of varying levels of experience. Some music concentrators. Some relative beginners. We are united for this hour in Riley Hall by only our love of music and dissolution: we are not a group of cellists, but a cello section. Not a cello section, but a chamber orchestra.

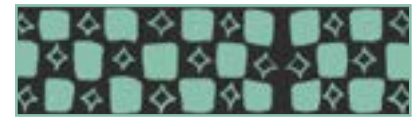
Several weeks earlier, I bought peg drops to help the tuning pegs stay in place. I had my bridge adjusted, got a cheap new A string and twisted it gently into place, put rosin on my bow, tuned. I play imperfectly, but then, perfection is not why anyone in the orchestra plays.

“I think we got a little lost there,” the conductor says. “Let's try it again from measure 180.”

He picks up his baton and we pick up our bows, and after two measures of preparation, we count more carefully and play again.



Entrance



By Sara Harley | Edited by Lucy Kaplan | Illustrated by Ina Ma

SECOND FLOOR, END of the hall on the left. As I turn the dented brass door knob, the wooden door creaks open, revealing the narrow expanse of my high school door room. It's just after seven o'clock on the night of my eighteenth birthday. Setting my ratty canvas tote aside, I find a seat on the old carpeted floor and wait for the day to spoil.

The silence feels like another reminder of the passage of time. Only seniors can live in single rooms. After spending my early teenage years sleeping next to strange roommates with foul-smelling microwaveables, I usually cherish privacy. But today, I'd shower in shrimp-flavored ramen for propinquity. My roommates and I almost never spoke, but I wish for closeness.

I moved away from the hills of northern California to go to boarding school a few months after I turned fourteen. My high school is only a three-hour drive south—two and a half, if you're lucky—situated in a little beach town. I left because I loved school perhaps a little too much. This is my fourth year living in dorms. Surveying the walls, the dark wood and cream-colored paint are dotted and scratched with age. Decades of Command hooks and adhesive sticky tape marks cover the walls. I had tried to cover the age by hanging family pictures and post cards from

art museums, but they don't quite fill the gaps. I know that when I try to gently pull them from the walls next month, they'll just add to the defaced paint—an enotropic right of passage. No more than a hundred square feet, it's a shoe box, but transitively mine.

I wander over to my beige vinyl desk. Opening the center drawer, I peer down at the names Sharpied onto the wood: Callie Harris from '07, just-Maggie from the year 2000, and dozens of other signatures from women who have lived in this very

blending shades of the blue-ish black, red, green, and pink into monolithic brown. Pushing away a stack of Post-it's, I uncover the signature of Sharon Wallager '90 written right in the center with big, calligraphic letters. Who was she? I almost Google her, but decide against it. Better not to kill the mystery.

The way somebody signs their name can tell a lot about a person. Personal marks that seem to say I was here. During middle school, many of my friends practiced theirs like a

mantra on scrap paper. Every time my dad pays for dinner, his pen makes the same scratching noise—slow and curled, and then finishes with a lick. Whenever I sign documents, I gulp and try to write my first name in haphazard cursive as quickly as I can, hoping to make a

“

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”

room. Over the years, signatures have accumulated all over campus—written inside gym lockers, carved into the wooden tables in the dining hall, and even painted in acrylic on secret cervices in the art room—from students trying to make their mark. Some signatures are more elaborate than others, with flourishing cursive capitals and consonants; others write over previous students' names with bold, confident letters; but most of the inscriptions are small and neat like good Catholic school girls. The ink on my drawer is beginning to bleed from accidental splashes of water,

similar noise as my dad. The desire to create a signature feels so masculine. My unquenchable desire for a gold star makes me nervous to sign my name, and yet, I feel compelled to do so anyway. It's times like these that makes me regret never designing a signature. The permanent pen feels permanent, too irreversible, without an autograph. Except for a handful of dorm faculty, like my Welsh world religions teacher, I doubt anybody will see the signatures but those who will live here after me. One of these days, I'll find a secret spot and sign my name to the drawer like a yearbook



that will never be finished—a lineage that I’ll never know but feel everyday.

Across from the door, a mirror and a window hang over my desk. There are fingerprints on both from careless mornings. Peering into the mirror, I often like to imagine the reflections of previous tenants looking back at me. My high school—a Catholic college prep school for girls—opened in 1950. I can see my hair cut into a little gauche bob curled at the bottom. My plaid uniform kilt is a few inches longer, but my collared shirt still has the same little embroidered crest on my left collarbone. I think I would’ve been more graceful had I been born then, but I would’ve despised home economics. Making up stories makes me feel less guilty for forgetting to buy Clorox wipes. Sorry, dad. Seeing myself now after another year under the beating sun, I notice how my reflection has changed: my jaw appears narrower and the skin around my cheeks grows drier from the chlorine at swim practice. The inertia of my fleeting youth and the inevitability of getting older scare me. Rubbing the delicate skin around my eyes, I wonder where time has gone. The friction against the glass proves pointless. My physics teacher pops into my mind and reminds me that *an object in motion stays in motion*.

The sun is beginning to set. Looking out the window, the light begins to fade in the distance from golden to pink and orange. At least the sunshine appears to be doing the plants some good. Leaning against the side of the window between bookends are miscellaneous copies of Dover-edition Shakespeare plays, a highlighted Camus, my diaries, a little whiteboard for Spanish verb conjugations, a few old print copies of *The New Yorker*, and about a dozen classics that I

hadn’t read, but made me feel smart for owning. The curtains around my window are barely worth mentioning, except for the fact that they’re light blue, come with the room, and just a little too ugly to be cute.

I cast a glance at my two ferns, a pothos, and an old ivy sitting in front of the glass. They’re beginning to take up more space than I can manage. My newest addition is a baby fern from my biology teacher after the national exam. No larger than an espresso mug, I have a bad habit of smashing its little stalks between the pages of my colossal biology textbook, so its pointed leaves have dried yellow and brown spots, instead of dark, judicious green. The rest of them are from a bookstore with a plant atrium in the back. I loved going there during my freshman year on the weekend shuttle—a school bus that looks like half a stick of butter—going south toward the beach to pick out their pots from an eclectic selection of cat heads and funky colors. I picked out white ceramic ones because they had little drainage holes in the bottom, and I have an overwatering problem.

I grab my neon orange water bottle named Jamie from on top of the dresser beneath the mirror, unscrew the leaky cap, and divide whatever’s left between the four pots. It couldn’t hurt. I thought the ostentatious color would help me not forget him places, though my swim coach and the upper school office would say otherwise. Evoking moans and groans from my friends, he became a micro campus celebrity as a result of the many places I’ve left him—leaning against classroom desk legs, sitting on the edge of the pool deck, hiding under a pew in the campus chapel. Covered in stickers, I can just make out one from a coffee shop nearby—a little tandem

bike with a rainbow surfboard. There’s another from a family trip to southern California, one from an affirmative action political protest with flowers in the shape of ovaries, and a few gifted—and a couple stolen—from friends. After dropping Jamie in the rain, bonking him on the side of desks, forgetting him on the pool deck, and letting him fall out of the side pocket of my equally defaced Northface backpack his once-smooth surface has become disfigured. Even so, his scratches and dents make him feel like mine.

I decide to return to the floor. Grounding myself beneath the sterile ceiling lamp, I slouch against the linoleum drawers below my sleeper-sofa twin-XL. The cold artificial, blueish-white hue is dissatisfying. Through the semi-translucent light shade, I can see a spotted graveyard of dead moths. Only a month before graduation, I felt the room had already begun preparations for my departure. I notice a thick humid haziness gathering in the cubbyhole-sized space. I couldn’t help but feel the room was moving on without me.

If I really squint, I can see the brownish carpet is composed of different shades of blue, maroonish, and mustard threads, hiding decades of soda stains, hair, remanence of crumpled pastries, and loneliness. Leaning my head against the mattress, I feel the arms of my dad’s old sweatshirt graze against my back, sticking out from the plastic drawers from below my bed. I have a bad habit of chucking soiled clothes in the closet when I’m in a hurry, which pull my neatly hung dresses down with them. Toss in damp, miscellaneous pool equipment from swim practice and you’ve got a party.

The soft cotton stitches of my





multicolored hippie quilt pull tighter. After a long morning of celebratory phone calls and texts chock-full with emojis, my phone finally stops glowing. My friends are retired in their rooms to prepare for our last round of exams. Bending my knees toward my chest like a child with a stuffed animal, I settle my phone in my lap. Scrolling, I look up at the popcorn ceiling and back down again, waiting. For what, I wasn't quite sure—everyone I hoped would text or call already had. Swiping between videos from politics to celebrity drama to cute dogs in little hats, the distractions weren't distracting enough. Finally, I open my photos app instead, and begin to look at old photographs from my childhood.

I was born on the first of May—May Day—a holiday marked by flower crowns and ribbons. I remember that time of year best during elementary school. The school year would be almost over, the blacktop would begin to make a mirage again from the growing heat in the afternoon, and the grocery store watermelon would finally stop tasting so mealy. I share my birthday; I have a twin sister, but boarding school is so not her thing. Since I left, we haven't spent a birthday together for years.

My dad loved to throw shared birthday parties for my twin sister and I. Shared cake, shared cards, shared friends. We both secretly wished we could have separate celebrations, as if to somehow prove we were, in fact, separate people. Luckily, we're fraternal. I remember sitting side by side at the kitchen table while our family sang happy birthday off-beat—two names instead of one. She hated the song, but I loved looking at how our dad smiled when he sang to us. As kids, I think we both believed sharing

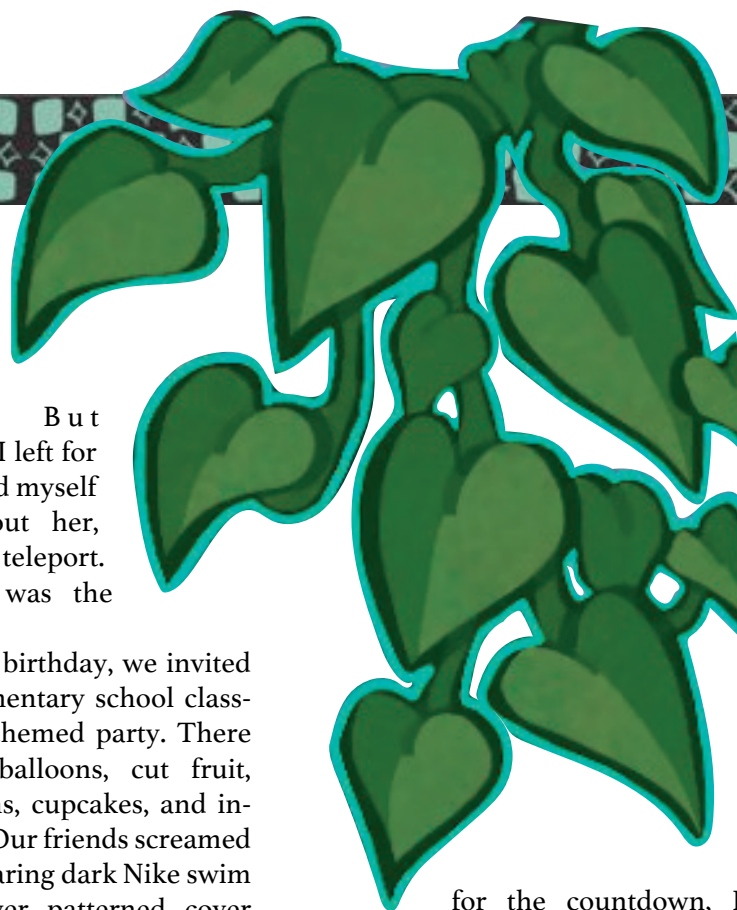
a birthday somehow meant we were half as celebrated. But every year since I left for high school, I find myself reminiscing about her, wishing she'd teleport. I realized she was the celebration.

On our eighth birthday, we invited both of our elementary school classes to a tropical-themed party. There were rainbow balloons, cut fruit, heavy water guns, cupcakes, and inner tube galore. Our friends screamed and laughed, wearing dark Nike swim shorts and flower patterned cover ups. Rays reflected off the pool and made our skin glow. As the afternoon sun waned, it was time for my dad's *pièce de résistance*: the watermelon relay race. I loved being competitive, but I had, and still have, terrible stage fright. Standing at the ledge, we were divided into two teams and organized into lines.

"Sara, why don't you go first?" My dad asked, smiling. He still has the pink polo he was wearing then.

"Do I have to?"

"Come on—it'll be fun! Here, take this." While he was trying to downplay it, my dad asked me to go first because, well, nobody else wanted to. I can't remember who started the other team. But then, materializing seemingly out of thin air, he handed me a gargantuan watermelon. Hugging it to my chest, my arms ached from its weight. I prayed my melon wouldn't split in half and put on my best game face while my dad walked to the other side of the pool to referee. Yelling, he told us to *swim—there and back!* The victorious team won stickers and first dibs on dinner. Raising his fingers



for the countdown, I prepared to jump.

3...2...1...

But looking back at cupcakes and sun-kissed cheeks on the boundary between adolescence and adulthood, getting older feels like nothing to celebrate. I remember when I thought my childhood would never end, when I thought being seventeen would mean lockers, boyfriends, and house parties until three. My seventeen looked more like study hours from 7:30-9:30 monitored by the dance teacher, Accutane, and mandatory mass on Sundays. A transitory age, the ordinariness makes me feel like I took the fast track to adulthood.

The curve in my spine begins to ache against the bedframe. Setting my phone aside, I watch the setting sun's rays stretch through the window like a cat arching its back. As I reach for the door, the aged wood shines. After so many years of chipping, knocking, and jamming, the ridges of the smoothed trunk still glow bright beneath the worn varnish. Sliding on my dad's rubber sandals, I wander back down the hall again.

Gemini Season

By Elaine Rand

Edited by Hannah Park

Illustrated by Cameron Bly

BEFORE THE WORLD was big, before Benefit Street and Big Bend Boulevard, before Achilles tendonitis and all the awkward annual apple pickings, before I was worried about mono and mold, I had the impression that every summer would be the same. And that's because, for a while, they were.

We used to drive up into Benzie County in northern Michigan sometime during Gemini season to get some time by the lake. There was the wooden platform under the cottage we'd stay in, home to roots and rodents, a bunker of sorts. The windy bike path around the lake that led to the gift shop full of beeswax soaps and honey sticks. The caramel agate and grey Petoskey stones, freshly tumbled, their patterns like tectonic plates trying to shift around one another.

The vacationing family in the next cottage over, whose kids made me a little nervous (they crushed at shuffleboard). When I first came, I avoided the other kids and their pavement games—too much pressure to make a good impression. I preferred skipping rocks and paddling out to the bobbing wooden rafts alone, lifejacket chafing at my neck. By my final visit, I'd gotten brave. The tetherball pole became my purview. It stood at a lean, barely secured under the lakefront sand.

But were all those summers really the same? There was the year I came a day late, voice hoarse from the strep throat, digital thermometer and

bubblegum pink antibiotics double-bagged in brown paper; another year, with strep again, this time missing out on two days in the cottage. There was the year my dad left early to go to a friend's funeral, and my mother drove us home at six in the morning to get the rental car back on time. I sang loudly to keep her awake, occasionally pinching her cheeks at her request—was I allowed to sit in the front seat that young? I dipped my fingers into a crushed Ice Mountain bottle and



touched my cool, wet hands to her temples as she drove through the dark.

The first Michigan summer I can remember, when I was five, a golden bee stung the tip of my big toe while I sat in the sand, and I spent the rest of the day inside. It felt like such a waste. Silly me, getting a sting at nine in the morning, before I'd even gotten in the water. I wore hot pink water shoes from then on.

I'd look forward to our Michigan trip all year. The state itself became my obsession, the lakefront the setting for each of my daydreams. I thought I'd find true love there by the bonfire.

I looked for signs in the face of any sweatshirted teenager who passed me on the beach to see if they saw anything in me. I thought I could swim to the other side of the lake, if I tried hard enough. I didn't know it was eight miles long.

There was another family who overlapped with mine for only one summer, whose toothy twins I continually mistook for each other: Caroline and Kelly. They were nine, I was seven. We'd roast marshmallows together under the stars and try to match the constellations to the ones printed in my well-worn library book. Gemini was barely visible, but we found Ursa Major just fine.

The twins rode horses back home in Kentucky. We stayed pen pals for a couple years. Their mother addressed the envelopes with loopy flourishes and big circles to dot each "i". Their town was one of those hit hardest by the tornado last May.

Now the planets have shifted positions a million times over and the shoreline is disappearing and I haven't visited the lake in nine years. New starscapes, new summers, new lakewater levels. New families at the bonfire, new rodents' nests under the cottage. But how would I know?

So, you see, without the anticipation of the annual trip, without the routine of it, the guarantee of new faces for daydream fodder, the water's placid constancy, it's easy to prickle when Gemini season rolls around. No more whistling lakeside breeze for me, just the pitter-patter pattern of the rain on the cement. The tropical levels of humidity haven't arrived just yet, but they will soon. There will be signs.



A Sole Collection

Illustration by Hadley McCormack

This article is the fourth edition of our Collections project, in which we ask some of our staff writers to write a short blurb in response to a prompt. This edition's prompt: write about roots. What are yours? What do they say about you now? Or perhaps we should delve into those of the trees, the teeth, the problems, the cause. From the patios and porches of California to the comfort in cartography, our staffers probe their own archive and get to the "root" of this semester's collection.

By Sara Harley, Luca Raffa, Maison Teixeira, Elsa Eastwood, Isabel Reed, Kate Rowberry, and Anika Weling



Cartographic Cavities

By Sara Harley

Our first exam in eighth grade American History was a 50 states quiz. I thought New York was above Massachusetts, swapped New Jersey for Rhode Island, and completely guessed where Iowa went. When we received our grades, my friends joked that they found the test easy. I hid my score with my palm.

Until my sophomore year of high school, my history teachers gave map quizzes like clockwork. After the states, I graduated to drawing the rivers in China and ovals around the perimeters of mountain ranges, spreading from Italy to surrounding miniscule European countries in freshman year world history. The class was taught by a small, old man who decorated his Ford truck with conservative political stickers. Every Monday morning, I watched him draw with a red marker where to find the Ural Mountains and ancient trade routes in the Eastern Hemisphere. For homework, he filled my three-inch binder with blank maps for practice. I'd slouch at my desk for hours trying to differentiate the Baltic Sea from the Black Sea, wondering why lower Egypt was above upper Egypt.

The vastness of the world's geography—and my inability to remember it—tortured me in school. I think what frustrated me most about maps was their inexplicability. I realized that I cared less about the grades than the questions that arose from them. Why do borders exist? Why do they matter? Why must people be separated? My teachers would respond with history: war, politics, trade, and

anthropology. I knew the differences between countries were vast, but the semiotic ambivalence of maps, using signs and symbols to differentiate people beyond politics, felt like a tautology—they are because they are. Why is belonging knotted with place? These questions excited me more than a score of 50/50.

After I moved from California to Massachusetts and finally to Rhode Island for college, I began to take walks by the ocean. Looking at the interminable horizon, the water helped me feel connected to both coasts at once. I find solace in its boundlessness.



Nonna's Garden

By Luca Raffa

Mom and I spent a lazy August afternoon once torturing my grandmother's backyard. Armed with kitchen knives, shears, and shovels, we razed the flowerbeds from the roots. The terracotta pots and wooden barrels where parsley once grew were gone. We yanked the smallest dandelion weeds emerging in the cracks of the concrete porch. Thorny branches and roots began to fester like corpses after a massacre. The garden looked like a skeleton.

Though it has vanished, my grandmother's garden would live on as the perennial memory of my childhood. I remembered that I would play in her oregano till summer twilights, and I would pluck the fresh tops and assem-

ble sprigs for a glass jar on the kitchen windowsill. My mischievous hands would steal fruit from the blackberry bushes, my lips becoming dark purple and my tongue becoming sour. Hornets and dragonflies battled in the air as I would collect snail shells, my fingers kissed with ooze. I remembered marveling at my grandmother's roses, the queens of her magical kingdom of flowers.

Sara Harley

Maybe this garden was the root of my grandmother's own memory too. This root clenched tight to the long-lost place and peoples she came from. She was the descendant of humble Italian farmers who retired their rusty spades in the wheat fields and rotting ladders in the olive groves, who abandoned their sterile towns and helpless families, and transplanted themselves to the fertile continent. I imagine that my grandmother left behind mazes of pungent basil, swaying lemon trees, and fantastical fennel bulbs that enchanted her childhood and enthralled her with belonging.

The following spring, I buried the seeds I stole from my grandmother's last harvest. I waited for the roots to roam wild and for the peace of a lazy August afternoon beside a familiar jungle.



Teixo

By Maison Teixeira

The tree in my front yard stood tall,

or at least it did in my memory. We called it Granddad's tree. Just like the tree, my Granddad stood tall in my youthful eyes despite never growing past 5'5". The tree died shortly after he did.

For a while, a lowly stump remained where Granddad's tree once stood. Now that stump has been torn apart by budding mushrooms. The roots, however, still remain, somewhere beneath the barren grass of our front yard. If they are still there, is the tree truly gone or just waiting to be born anew?

My Granddad's life took root on the Cabo Verdean islands of Brava and Fogo. I first began to dig up his roots—and my own—a year ago, when I visited the Cabo Verdean island of Santiago, becoming the first of my family to return to the fatherland since he took his last steps off Brava and onto the boat that would bring him to England. Before going to Cabo Verde, I didn't speak a lick of Kriolu, his native tongue; during and after the trip, I found myself having full conversations in his language. Even though Santiago wasn't the island he hailed from, I felt my Granddad's roots buried beneath every busy street, every golden beach, every rocky knoll that I walked upon during my trip.

I once felt closest to my Granddad when he'd take me into his bustling kitchen, and I'd watch as his chefs rushed around and chopped, clattered, stirred, all while I sat there on the counter blissfully eating some vanilla ice cream he'd prepared for me. Now, strangely enough, I feel closest to my Granddad when I'm in line at the dining halls, and the hard-working cooks look up from their chopping boards, smile at me, and say "Oi, Maison, bu sta dretu?" to which I smile back and say, "N sta dretu, e bo?" in my Granddad's Kriolu. One of these cooks, Maria, whose smile lights up the Andrews dry noodle bar, was a friend of my Granddad's back in Brava. Another, Laura from the VDub, reveals to me that her vovó and my

vovó knew each other, and that they weren't just best friends, "they were like sisters". A few months later, she takes out her phone and shows me a photograph of my great grandmother, my very own vovó Aurora, smiling and standing next to her grandmother.

My last name, Teixeira, which I inherited from my Granddad, is derived from the Galician Portuguese word *teixo*, which means "yew tree". Sometimes, the yew tree's roots are visible above the ground, sprawling and crawling over each other. For years, I bore roots that I never knew were there. Now, they lay bare at my feet, like the roots of the towering *teixo*.



Back Porch Blues

By Elsa Eastwood

In the years when our swingset still stood and Tuesdays meant popsicles, my dad played guitar from the back porch most nights after dinner. I'd roll in the grass until my skin prickled and my clothes stained as the sky turned that hazy orange-pink, listening to the same three chords of a twelve-bar blues go around and around like wheels. Every day, every day I have the blues.

My dad raised me and my brothers on a small collection of songbooks he'd accumulated in his twenties as a musician in San Francisco. Some evenings we sang chestnuts like *I've Been Working on the Railroad* and *My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean* from "Come Join the Geri-tones". Our favorite songbook was one he'd compiled himself—all kinds of Great American Songbook cuts with chords and lyrics—that he claims to have since misplaced.

The songs he taught us tucked themselves into my mind before I knew anything about roots music or where it came from. How did a language so remarkably distant from my experience reach me, a white

daughter from Southern California? Now, as a college student studying music, textbooks and lectures have begun to fill the historical cavities: gospel and the blues traveled to my state during the Great Migration, folk during the Gold Rush and again after the Dust Bowl, jazz from New Orleans in the 20s. But how it took root so deeply in my soil, in the imagination of a girl naive to a world beyond her backyard, remains a mystery.

As a gift last year, my dad bought and shipped me my first guitar. I carried the human-sized box across campus to my room, closed the door, and learned the twelve-bar blues. For hours I turned the three chords over and over in my hands, seeing in my closed eyelids the fading sky from beneath my ginkgo tree, dreaming with a child's misguided patriotism about the wide, mythic America that once felt like mine.



My Other Mother

By Isabel Reed

I might as well write the word "Roots" with a capital R. I think of one tree, and I am back to that summer; the one where I began to appreciate the stream, on the banks of which lives a tree, roots twisted wildly.

I think of that summer and I think: collecting stones and tossing them at the roots, trying to get them to land inside a specific nook, and celebrating madly when they did. I think of wading waist-deep in water to clean the trash off of my tree, her brambled wooden body that she could not clean herself. I think of this tree as my other mother.

To her left is a fallen soldier—a tree that fell so long ago I can't remember ever seeing them stand. I am terrified for if this day ever comes for my tree.

I have seen that piece of stream change like skin, like sky, like a butterfly. But, whenever I finish weaving through the forest, get to the

bank, and see a change—the water more shallow or more deep; another fallen soldier; more and more trash, never ending, everflowing—something pulls inside of me. I suddenly feel guilty, it's my fault, if I'd never left the tree, she never would've changed. But I take off my shoes, roll up my jeans, and tie up my hair nonetheless, easing myself into the water and towards my roots.

“ I THINK OF THAT SUMMER
AND I THINK: COLLECTING
STONES AND TOSSING THEM
AT THE ROOTS, TRYING TO
GET THEM TO LAND INSIDE
A SPECIFIC NOOK. ”

Isabel Reed

objects approached my mouth. The hygienist flossed too hard between my top incisors. I was also attended to by a young, nervous dental somebody in her white coat. Water everywhere as she cleaned around my brackets.

I deduced that it was her first time on the job. I tried to be gracious.

I find that I'm still perceived

as a well-behaved patient. At every cleaning, the hygienist compliments my flossing. I cautiously confess that I never wear my retainer, haven't for nearly two years. It's fine, though. We make small talk about college. I am inevitably reminded of wisdom teeth. Then I envision fifty years from now, when I might need mine.

I had almost forgotten the youthful horror of a wiggly tooth: pink specks on my Eggo waffle and a subsequent quick yank, or a sudden enamel chunk in my Fruit by the Foot, or my tooth knocked onto the carpet. At night, I would tuck these lost teeth into the pocket of a small, angel-shaped pillow with red yarn hair and stripey green clothes stitched on. Then I would write messages to the Tooth Fairy. In the morning, a dollar and a note in response.

Where are these twenty missing teeth now? I pose the question to my parents.

“You'll just have to ask the Tooth Fairy,” Mom says.

Let's Avoid Dentures

By Kate Rowberry

I have no wisdom teeth. This fact I have regarded with indifference, except for those passing moments when friends commiserate about their own impending removal surgeries. I don't feel left out, though. My teeth have ignored rites of passage from the start: I had a front tooth pulled before starting preschool. That gap in my smile! The envy of my whole class.

In the lobby of my childhood dentist's office, there were game consoles fixed to the wall on which I would attempt *Lego Batman*. In the treatment rooms, fish were painted on the walls—certainly a play on Dr. Trout's surname, but perhaps a subliminal, untoward homage to *Finding Nemo*. I wasn't afraid of the dentist's office, though. It was a space in which I could present myself as well-behaved. I wouldn't squirm. I wouldn't even try to watch the movie playing on the screen mounted in the ceiling. I would just close my eyes and follow the dentist's directions. Easier that way.

The final time I visited my childhood dentist, I was in eighth or ninth grade. I had braces. As usual, a papery bib was tucked around my chin. Sharp

placed safety pins that left behind little tears, and elicited memories of my mother, too many time zones away to call for help. I tried to embody the way her hands wrapped around me, gathering the fabric, tucking it into my skirt and casting the rest over my shoulder so that it always perfectly cascaded to the floor.

My *Aaji* is the perfect role model. Every day for the last many decades she has swathed herself in the complicated procedure that is a sari. Every day in her surgical residency in Canada, every day as a doctor in India, every day to the temple, and almost every day after. I can see how it comforts her, hugs her in tradition and familiarity wherever she is. The second time I ever wore a sari was for her birthday dinner. The odd looks I received and the inability to walk were worth it for the pride on her face. She was beyond ecstatic to see me follow her custom. She will always remember each fold, pleat, and pin she must place, even if she doesn't remember doing it, even if she doesn't remember my name.

I've been an adult long enough that it should be my second nature, but I can never seem to remember all the steps of wearing a sari. My great-grandmother taught my grandmother, who taught her daughter too. Embedded in the lessons of the drape were another dozen messages to remember, ones that haven't yet reached me. I can feel them when my *Aaji* takes my face in her hand. I can read the lines etched in the weathered skin. The roots I'll grasp on to for her when she can't hold on anymore.

These roots sprawl and stretch, touching depths I didn't know I had, growing from seeds I never knew I planted. They keep me moored against waves, the kind that break when I close my eyes. They reach across oceans to keep me connected to homes long left behind, entangled with every word I say and decision I make. I can't see them, but I know they're there.

Intertwine

By Anika Weling

Last week, I spent an hour trying to drape my friend in a *sari* for our formal. The silk objected every time we tried to create a pleat, the creases unfolding as if they were never there. I made do with an amalgamation of strategically-

When to Say Amen

By Lucy Kaplan
Edited by Ashley Park
Illustrated by Anna Reed

I CRIED ON Christmas Eve. I certainly had not prepared myself: my pockets held no tissues, something a more experienced churchgoer would have anticipated. Instead, I sat helplessly alongside my mother and grandmother as my eyes welled uncontrollably and my fingertips buzzed. Eyelids tightened to a close, my heartbeat firmly between my brows for eight, then sixteen, then thirty-two counts of music. I put words in time to the mighty organ that flooded the pews with sound. *Not my people. Not my worship.* Not my turn to cry. But when the chorus broke, so did I.

The song that drew my peculiar tears was “O Holy Night,” a classic Christmas carol with a less than conventional past. It was 1847 in a small French village when the local priest made a strange request of the town’s wine commissioner, Placide Cappeau. An academic with a penchant for oversized peacoats and weaving legal jargon into his merchant practice, Cappeau was not a pious man—but, on a bumpy carriage ride to Paris, he browsed the small Bible he kept buried in his briefcase and mindlessly penned “Cantique De Noel” into existence. Three verses, nine lines each, soon after put to music by his dear friend Adolphe Adam. Neither could have predicted what their patchwork hymn would become, or that someday, nearly 200 years later, a Jewish girl in a Presbyterian church would unwillingly cry to its tune.

Though she may not recall the Hebrew she spoke at the bimah—the altar—every Jewish girl can conjure an image of the dress she wore to her Bat Mitzvah. Navy blue or shell white, cut off right above the knees, chosen after weeks of quibbling with mothers, aunts, grandmothers, because none of the options were just right. She will also never forget the prayers she stumbled over, the unfortunate hotel her grandmother was put up in, and the bagels that were a touch stale by the time the service came to a close. “We were so proud,” her parents will say over family dinners for years to come. “Just so proud.” They praise their daughter, of course, but also covertly themselves for keeping their heads on straight throughout the whole production.

My own Bat Mitzvah was no exception. The occasion found us on a rare sunny Seattle morning, a delight that left us cheery but admittedly a little disappointed to be spending our unicorn of a Saturday inside. When I stepped inside the sanctuary, long before the first guest would arrive, I found myself embraced by the unexpected warmth of the room. Pools of light spotted the ground, filtered through dramatic stained-glass panels. The scene evoked a holy assuredness, which I commanded myself to embody as I paced the room.

An hour later, relatives, classmates, and friends of my parents—some of whom I barely recognized—filed through the twin oak doorways. Already perched atop the stage, I watched them roam the pews, settling into familiar clusters. Suddenly, a gentle hand laced its fingers through my own. I recognized my mother’s soft palm even before I turned my head.

“You ready?” she asked. Sensing my nerves, she spoke with a leisure that

comes naturally to neither of us.

“Guess we’ll find out,” I joked, countering her sincerity with a practiced nonchalance. My gaze averted hers, glued instead to the ever-present scab on my left knee. I tugged at the hem of my dress.

“Here, look at me.” My mother’s voice was gentle. She reclippered a rogue shoulder-length curl behind my ear. I rolled my eyes and turned to face her seated frame. Her sandy pin-straight hair was just a touch lighter than usual. The result of a recent dye job, perhaps, or a mirage that brought her color one shade closer to mine.

“Breathe,” she reminded me, as she so often did.

The service was, frankly, nearly indistinguishable from the seven other B’nai Mitzvah my seventh-grade class sat through that spring. Besides, the melodies that once rolled from my tongue now escape my memory. But I promise that I hit the canonical moments. My dress was blue and lace and itched at the seams. I forgot the words to at least two prayers and confidently continued in a language that was certainly not Hebrew, but far enough from English for anyone but the Rabbi to notice. And, in a most compelling addition to the classic proceedings, I strummed “Tikun Olam” on my ukulele, accompanied by my musically gifted and relentlessly improvisational father. He accidentally knocked his guitar into the bimah a couple of times.

As the service closed, my mother cried, my father tried to pretend he didn’t, and I went home for an afternoon nap—hungover from a self-important glamor that was rapidly diffusing with the daylight.

That evening’s events also proceeded in the traditional fashion. I sat at the end of a pristinely laid

banquet table, one of many lining our neighborhood's Russian Community Center. My mother and I had toured the venue three months prior, awkwardly interrupting a Slavic line dancing class to inquire about rental fees. She had done wonders to the place since, the walls now blooming with ribbons and florals instead of flyers for poorly attended youth talent shows. My mother now looped through the aisles, proudly attending to the buffet in a sparkling champagne v-line gown. If she'd been equipped with a clipboard and a pen to secure her updo, I could've mistaken her for the thirty-something party planner she had hired as her right-hand woman.

But if my mother was in her element, I was far from mine. My face flushed with embarrassment as a slideshow of childhood photographs put to The Beatles' *Abbey Road* rolled on a rented projector for all to see. A boy in my middle school class—who I swore I was hopelessly in love with—jestingly poked my side when my nude toddler self was broadcast onscreen.

"Ooooh, whereee are your clothesss?" he teased. "Why are you nakedddd?"

My classmates, arranged along the banquet table, giggled between contented bites of roasted summer squash and bacon-wrapped dates. I squirmed in my seat and whispered a futile prayer that the slideshow would end immediately. Desperation made a believer out of me—briefly.

Thirty minutes later—when the dancing commenced—I was in the spotlight again, no longer a grainy image of the childhood I was so eager to outgrow. For the rest of the party, God didn't cross my mind.

The end of the night was punctuated

by my mother's drunk best friend, Laurie, who compelled me through haphazard scribbles in the guest book to "dance my ass off." That, I most certainly had. For two nonstop hours, I was spurred on by a dizzying mishmash of ABBA, Maroon 5, and the Jewish Orthodox Maccabeats. With the DJ now long gone, my father helped Laurie into our family Mazda, halfheartedly insisting on escorting her home. As he drove, my mother held his hand over the center console, tracing circles with her thumb as an apology for the raucous middle-aged

chipped wooden bimah to calm my nerves, forgetting the Bibles that were carefully concealed in its belly.

That morning, when my half-Christian family ducked through the sanctuary's unassuming doors, ready to bear witness to a Jewish girl's coming of age, had they noticed the sign tacked onto the brick façade? The one that read "Madrona Grace Presbyterian Church" in blue and yellow letters.

Too young, too innocent, too exhausted to consider the contradiction, I wandered into an untroubled sleep.

“**DESPERATION
MADE A
BELIEVER OUT
OF ME—BRIEFLY.**”

I had never before witnessed such an outburst at the mention of Jesus Christ. The letter came as a shock to me, a simple postcard hand-delivered to my family's cabin door by Aunt Daisy, my grandmother's sister, during our annual family reunion at *Silver Lake Resort & Campground*.

Aunt Daisy is the faux Texan of the family, a woman you'd never nail as a Los Angeles native. After spending the past several decades with her wife in Austin, she is armed with all the southern classics: a closet full of checkered button-downs, a deeply Christian spirit, and an unabashed love for Donald Trump. Her character sheet reads like a stand-up routine, as did the letter I thumbed carelessly over breakfast, which went something like:

Dear Lucy,

I am so proud of you and your coming of age as a young woman. It was an honor to watch you deliver such beautiful words and melodies—you were a powerhouse on that stage. I also hope you someday let Jesus into your heart.

May God bless you,

Your Aunt Daisy

liability in the backseat.

"Turn the music up!" she exclaimed, starting for the radio dial.

"No," my parents said in unison. If I had been awake enough to speak, I would've cheered at their refusal.

I watched Laurie's glasses slip down her slender nose as I melted further into my seat. Kitten heels loose around my ankles, I soaked in the residual bloat caused by one too many Italian sodas. I replayed the day—or a partial version of it—behind bleary eyes.

I conjured the rows of smiling faces beaming at me from my gleeful audience, but not the crosses that hung from so many of their necks. When my aunt, a quilt maker, complimented the woven tapestry that hung behind the Torah ark, I hadn't mentioned it hid a ten-foot crucifix. I massaged my fingers where they had clasped the

She certainly also slipped in a verse from the Gospels in closing. I asked my mother if she remembers what it was. Her retrospective summary delivered via iMessage: “She was trying to connect with you and wanted you to find Jesus. I think I blocked it out!”

But seven summers ago, when I ambivalently brought the letter to my mother’s bedside, her response had yet to develop any humor about the situation. Slamming the screen door behind her as she marched across the campground to Aunt Daisy’s cabin, she vibrated with fury.

My mother’s family has reunited annually in this corner of the Eastern Sierras for over a century. My great grandfather’s favorite fishing spot—to my dismay and amusement nicknamed “Grandpa’s Hole”—has backdropped generations of Smith family engagements, cookouts, and parties with no motivating occasion except for a shared amazement that we still do this every year. And, for as long as I can remember, Aunt Daisy and her wife have staked their claim to Cabin 12 at *Silver Lake*. Every day, they welcomed the early risers with griddled pancakes and greasy bacon. The smell wafting from the kitchen never failed to entice my uncles into a lazy morning meal, even if the trout they meant to catch were hungry for their own breakfasts at those very same hours.

The one-story cabin nestled unassumingly between those of my third cousins and second cousins twice removed. It was now—likely for the first time—being raided by a very angry Jewish woman. I perched barefoot on the plastic Adirondack chair out back, half-listening to the muffled confrontation that ensued, a little shocked but amused.

“Heather, I meant only to inspire her to think, to choose, to ask the important questions. You know this, of course. You know our family.”

“Daisy, please, this is so inappropriate. I—”

The wind picked up, rustling the

acacia leaves and interrupting my poor attempt at eavesdropping. In the stillness that settled, I was left mapping out my family geography.

My father: raised in weekly attendance at a New Jersey synagogue, whose mention evokes complaints about the insipid tedium of his Jewish education. Not quite religious in his adulthood, but protective of the time our family sets aside for our weekly Shabbat dinners.

My mother: raised as a member of a close-knit Presbyterian church in a Seattle suburb. A former altar girl and avid Bible study member, she outgrew her religion in young adulthood, stubbornly cutting her hair short and travelling the world to the tune of her mother’s protests. She had converted to Judaism the summer before, electing to pursue a Jewish education every Wednesday evening after she finished charting her oncology patient visits for the day.

And finally, me: Bat Mitzvahed only two months prior at Madrona Grace Presbyterian Church—which our synagogue rented out on Saturdays—reciting Hebrew prayers that I could barely translate before a split audience, half of whom were wearing their yarmulkes inside out. Currently spending my summer in eastern California, fishing, barbecuing, and sneaking sips of beer under the table with my mother’s dubiously evangelical extended family. At the moment, a passive listener to a heated custody battle over my faith.

We gathered around picnic tables for our annual fish fry dinner that night—all twenty-six Christians and three Jews of us—pausing customarily to say grace. My great uncle Carl began the prayer with a zeal channeled from his round belly: “Dear Father who art in heaven, please bless us and the meal before us, which we are about to receive from thy bounty, through Christ our Lord.” The hem of Uncle Carl’s oil-spotted tee-shirt rose and fell with a breath that flowed through his stocky frame. As my left hand

linked with my cousin’s rough palm, and my right with my grandmother’s smooth one, I closed my eyes on cue. I mouthed only the first syllable of a practiced “amen” before the word got stuck in my throat.

It felt like catching myself in the act. It was far from secret that I was no believer in the Holy Trinity; what then compelled me to join the fray while God supposedly blessed our picnic table full of fried trout? Respect? Tolerance? Or—the answer I prayed was the wrong one—did I secretly want in?

Most years, I stuffed myself silly with buttery rolls and mayonnaise-y slaw, but this year’s fish fry tasted only of guilt. A guilt that I might envy this religion, a religion I did not claim, more than I cared for my own.

This religion boasted days on the lake, clandestine sips of beer provided by a tipsy uncle, late nights spent listening to older cousins argue about libertarianism and sex and everything else foreign to me. My religion offered tedious Hebrew classes on Tuesday evenings, trips to the humid Jersey suburbs, stuffy Kol Nidre services I spent hoping someone in the crowd would faint just for the excitement.

With his chin tucked and boots planted in the gravel, Uncle Carl could command an audience with praises of his God. I stumbled to explain what exactly the Hamotzi meant, let alone why we always passed a loaf of bread around the table after we recited it. Would it ever feel so effortless? Would it someday just “click?” While I sat pondering if life was easier under a Christian God, Uncle Carl cracked open his fourth beer.

I never discussed the letter with Aunt Daisy, and to avoid aggravating my mother, rarely rehash the drama with her either. Nowadays, I occasionally slip the story into dinner party small talk—but I most certainly never mention how my aunt’s attempt at conversion nearly enticed me, if only for a moment.



After a childhood spent struggling to answer the Four Questions of Passover—the Mah Nishtanah—I was finally given the stage to ask them. Though the Passover Seder has no formal clergy, rarely is it led by the eldest daughter of a family, the duty instead falling to the patriarch. But in my senior year of high school, I nominated myself for the role. My father gleefully obliged, content to relinquish responsibility for the complex twenty-person ritual dinner. My mother, too, offered little resistance. Though my father championed the Seder's theatrics, she was always the one to lay the tablecloths, manage the food, and plan just about everything else.

So, stationed at the head of the table for the first time, I called on my father to answer the final of the Four Questions. The task was traditionally reserved for the youngest child at the table, to highlight why the nights of Passover differ from all others. At my Seder, the responsibility would fall upon the lanky bald man wearing too-short rose-colored trousers that his wife let him pull them out only for special occasions.

"On all other nights, we eat sitting upright or reclining," I began with a grin. "So, father dearest, why on this night do we all recline?"

"Because we are free people," he answered with a flair unstifled by his demotion to a chorus role. "Free people who recline to celebrate

our liberation after generations of enslavement." Awash with a newfound tipsiness, I had a sneaking suspicion the reason we lounged also had something to do with the Seder's divinely mandated four glasses of wine.

By Jewish law, I had entered adulthood five years before, when I clumsily recited Torah in my itchy blue

dress. In reality, today was my very first day on the job. Not as a believer, but as a steward. I was changed by my chosen responsibility to the corporal table of twenty who sat before me. I let the image of the man in the sky untether and float into afterthought, realizing for the first time that the God-shaped hole in my faith had been filled by ritual itself. "Dayenu,"



goes the Passover song of gratitude. "It would have been enough." Tonight, our cacophonous harmonies and shared smiles more than fulfilled that affirmation.

So, despite the Biblical command to relax, I sat tall, reciting the story of Exodus with a tenacity I hadn't felt behind the bimah. Three thousand years ago, Moses parted the Red Sea and freed the Hebrews from Pharaoh's wrath. Tonight, I remembered the correct tune of the Kiddush. I would've weighed them as equally impressive feats. With no rabbi to guide my still stumbling prayers, no divine authority above my own command, I had somehow convinced my guests that I knew my way.

Invigorated by the warmth of my audience's attention, I began to recite the Hamotzi: "Baruch Atah Adonai, Eloheinu Melech ha-olam, hamotzi lechem min ha-aretz." *Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Sovereign of all, who brings forth bread from the earth.* My focus turned upwards as I closed with an "amen," this one freely spoken.

Just over the flames of the waning candlesticks, I locked eyes with Jackson, a dear friend, devout Christian, and always curious companion. Jackson was a good sport, having spent the night with his tortoiseshell glasses and mop of curls buried in his Haggadah—his prayer book—attempting to make sense of our practice. He mouthed the sounds of our melodic prayer, as though chewing on rubber. I wondered if he knew that I too was reading from the transliteration, a compromise of English and Hebrew, not from the traditional text I was perhaps supposed to.

We reached the end of our meal with the sunset, bellies full and hearts at ease. I finally found myself reclining into the expected posture, delighted to relinquish my authority in exchange for quippy gossip

with my neighbors. My checklist was complete: the bitter herbs dipped twice in salt water, the matzah smothered with sweet charoset and devoured in turn. A curiously placed orange now stood alone on the Seder plate.

"What does the orange mean?" my mother asked, a twinkle in her voice. The buzz of the room settled.

I straightened, ready to repeat the story I had heard her tell every year before. "Once upon a time, a rabbi said there's as much room for a woman at the bimah as there is for an orange on the Seder plate. So now, we do both."

Makeshift we were, my Seder and I—woven together with thread stretched thin in a few spots. Uncle Carl, likely watching football from his couch 1,000 miles away, had unknowingly instilled in me the voice of authority—a voice that once

compelled me to recite a Christian grace, a voice I could nonetheless channel before my Jewish people. As we cleared the table of our now empty plates, my father squeezed my arm in passing, as if to say "You kept your head on straight. You carried the torch." My mother flitted around the room as she always did, gathering coats and goodbyes as guests gathered by the door. She chatted freely with my friends, particularly attentive to Jackson, who stood at the doorway in his politely ironed crewneck, not quite ready to leave. I wondered if she was telling him the story of her first Seder, when she too had belonged to a different God.

I cried on Christmas Eve. I should have prepared myself, should have known that the organ's echoes and my mother's damp eyes would make my own misty. Earlier that evening, we had done what we always did—shared a lazy, laughing meal of Chinese food in classic Jewish Christmas Eve fashion. Then, coats tucked and hair smoothed, we followed my grandmother to church, to pray beside her in the same pews where she once sat with my mother in her lap every Sunday.

I wondered if anyone else had come straight from lo mein and egg rolls. I chuckled quietly at the thought and reached for my mother's hand. Fingers intertwined, our flushed cheeks dried in unison as the final notes of "O Holy Night" rang out. A song, written by an atheist and composed by his Jewish friend. In that pew was my entire world: a convert, her ever questioning daughter, and a strange Christmas carol that, against all odds, belonged to us all.

On Foss Hill

By Elsa Eastwood

Edited by Isabel Reed

Illustrated by Hadley McCormack

I AM A California native in the Northeast. It's my first week in the season that I've been told I won't survive, and I am bundled in clothes—a scratchy scarf, two pairs of pants, a big blueberry parka and a knit hat—all newly purchased. The sun has just risen and crisp air burns my nose. A fresh coat of snow sits heavily on the limbs of trees.

Having forgotten to account for the time it takes to layer, I'm running late to class. I glance anxiously at my watch and hurry through the blanketed streets. Out of breath, I arrive finally at the top of Foss Hill, the steep, icy slope that stands exactly between me and the classroom I'm supposed to be in two minutes from now.

I lean over the edge to scout my path. After yesterday's storm the day prior, Foss Hill has been sledded and skied down a great deal. Overuse has scraped any layer of powder clean off, leaving only a frictionless, glistened plane thinned by sunlight. Small outcrops of rock and grass puncture through its marble-like surface, and the whole sheet has been darkened to a murky black-grey. To my left, a paved, well-trodden path winds its way lazily down the incline, doubling back on itself in long, patient curves.

But I hate being late, and straight down is the fastest way. Thinking of Robert Frost, I quickly convince myself that descending Foss will not only get me to Intermediate Spanish on time, but will prove me a true maverick—what was once a choice against all reason becomes one of authenticity, and perhaps even courage.



I take one precarious step forward. It looks worse than it is, I tell myself.

In an instant I find myself skimming rapidly downwards on my butt, my bald-treaded boots flying through the air, limbs flailing. Rows of pine trees and red-brick spires fly past in my periphery.

At the bottom, I'm flushed and shaken. Chill seeps through the pockets of my jeans. I close my mouth, which must have fallen open at some point along the way, and wince as small bruises form constellations across my tailbone.

I look again at my watch. My class has begun. But the urgency that led to my fall seems to have been lost somewhere in it, and in a moment of catharsis and humiliation I lie back

against the hill, laughing awkwardly to myself, not knowing whether to bow or apologize or forget going to class at all.

The world narrows suddenly to the question of whether I'd been seen. I swivel my head. The campus is nearly empty, aside from a stranger wearing a backpack and a hefty red coat. He stands, eyeing me, surrounded by snow like a dot of blood or cranberry juice on white carpet.

"You good?"

"Yes," I reply. "Thanks."

He nods, burying his nose into his scarf and resuming the trudge forward. I lift myself up by my palms and follow him as whatever spectacle I thought I'd made dissolves into the cold.

The Razor Blades and the Mirror

By Luca Raffa

Edited by Kenley Ellis

Illustrated by Anna Reed

I DO NOT remember the first time I shaved my face. I must have been thirteen or fourteen, the dawn of adolescence. I was accustomed to waxing before. The sticky strips that left my upper lip flat would come crashing the way rough waves smooth the seashore. The sprouts of hair that once clung dearly to my skin like barnacles were gone. I did not like this stinging feeling that lingered beneath my nose. When fuzz began to grow from my sideburns and climb my cheeks, I folded to the promises of a razor. This moment soon became a task I observed almost daily as if I was a priest saying my morning prayers. I found ample pleasure in this ritual, and I still do. The sharpness of the blade is refreshing, and the foam from the shaving cream tickles my skin. Prickly hairs disappear with each stroke, though two thick eyebrows remain and a few stray hairs in the creases of my nostril caves. I face myself in the mirror, and the man in front of me stares back and smiles.

Giuseppe Principato appeared to be watching in front of me. I blink. It is me. I think we look alike. I have always seemed to be familiar with this stranger whom I have never met, though maybe in dreams or in photographs. There is a black and white portrait of my great-grandfather that I found once in my grandmother's brown scrapbook. It had begun to rot and was taking on a yellow tone. The young soldier's oval face, straight eyes, and gently combed hair proclaimed a soft confidence which I seem to have inherited. It was 1940 when this photograph was taken, only months before his deployment to Greece. My grandmother told me that her father would come back unrecognizable to

his family, a foolish skeleton figure who had sustained himself on rotten potato skins. Around the same time, another great-grandfather—Santo Salvatore Carino—was somewhere lost in the Sahara. He was a cavalier in the Italian army, though no one ever told me his war story.

The fascist dream was brief. The Allies quickly halted Mussolini's invasion of Greece by the spring of 1941, and by the spring of 1943, the Allies defeated Italy's imperial project in

“MAYBE I LIKE SHAVING SO MUCH
BECAUSE IT REMINDS ME OF HIM.”

North Africa. My great-grandparents were liberated from their roles as soldiers, heroes who fought to restore a dormant empire long lost to the sleeping ages of time. Divorced from their muskets, they retreated to their patient wives and retired to simple work as day laborers. Meanwhile, the fighting in the North continued, as civil war ensued. Antonio Raffa, my grandfather, was barely a man when he became a partisan. His battalion immediately surrendered to the German army, and he was brought to a camp outside of Munich. He spoke little about his experiences as a prisoner of war. Still, there is one story that my father told me, and I remember feeling proud after I heard it. Me and my father chuckled, imagining the musty, confused, pot-bellied old man forgotten at the nursing home as sharp and silver as a knife. Unlike his fellow prisoners, my grandfather did not smoke. He would trade the cigarettes given to him for the few coins others carried and slowly created a quiet business in

the camp. When the war was over, he had enough pocket change and was able to cross the Alps by train heading south. When he ran out of money, he followed the railroads home by foot. It was the first time he ever saw how beautiful his country was.

Pepe Carino, my other grandfather, was only a boy during the war. He remembered tasting chocolate for the first time, a curious gift from a gentle foreigner. Operation Husky brought the forgotten Sicilian town my

grandfather was from under British occupation, and British sailors often mingled with the townspeople. Soon after the war, my grandfather became a sailor in the Italian navy, and seemed to now resemble the aliens who had once arrived on his shores. Despite Italy's disgrace to Europe and to the world, he still seemed to honor a proud nation that was beaten and bruised. He too was proud. In the memories of black and white photograph prints, he can still be seen wearing his white uniform and a round, white hat. He was a handsome man: he had tall legs, a juvenile smile, and a firm demeanor. My grandmother would tell me that he was the greatest man she had ever met. They fell in love when he cut her hair. After his two year service, my grandfather became a barber, bringing his trade overseas as he chased his fiancée on a ship for Nova Scotia. During nostalgic summer evenings in my grandmother's kitchen or hour-long conversations over the phone with her, I remember feeling red inside and swelling with awe.

Toronto was where Pepe Carino followed Maria Principato and where Antonio Raffa followed Maria Ciani. Toronto was the city of immigrants where the fates of the Principato-Carino family and the Ciani-Raffa family became forever intertwined at a grocery store. My father, who was fifteen at the time, would stock the produce, and my mother, at seventeen, would bring my grandmother to the store every Thursday. My parents always laugh when they recall how they would stare at each other in silence on the occasion. For weeks they glanced at each other without saying a word. Once, my grandmother let her daughter and a shy boy meet, pretending not to know what it was all about. They spoke. My mother invited him to visit her at the department store she worked at. He never went, and my mother found a new supermarket to take my grandmother to.

My father's first name is Constantino. This was the name of a nine year old brother my grandfather lost to a lightning fire in a barn. My father's middle name is Michele, or Michael, and it honors both of his grandfathers. His last name is Raffa, a last name

from a line of humble mountain people which I too carry down to my own children one day. He was born a younger brother to two sisters—one was close to him in age, but the other was eighteen years older, and would soon know her own family. His new clothes were often their torn hand-me-downs. The bike he used during his first job delivering newspapers door-to-door was pink. For years, he saved up enough money for a new bike, only to have it stolen the day he finally bought it. My father's childhood toys were his mother's pots and pans until he befriended a few troubled Irish boys at the Catholic school he attended. My father was only a decent student, and his father's beatings expected better grades. At school, he would eat a Nutella sandwich on Wonder bread every day for lunch. At home he might find bits of a rooster's comb in his pasta and often ate the dandelion greens his mother would pick from the side of the road over summers. Nothing went to waste.

Yes, my father never visited my mom at her work. But this moment is not where their story ends. Two years later, they would see each other again when he was getting on a city bus. Again, he saw her and did nothing. When he got off at his stop, he looked through the window at the girl he did not yet know would be his wife, and began to curse at the sidewalk. Yet little did he know that he would see her again by happenstance over the next three consecutive days. Destiny seemed sure. On the third day my father approached her at the beach with a joke, and this spark of laughter set their young romance aflame. Every time my parents told me their story, I relished the golden honey

my heart dissolved into, and I began to dream of finding romance like theirs one day. Their love evolved from casual dates at Dairy Queen to dinner dates at fancy restaurants with red lipstick and cologne, then to a sparkling engagement ring that would dazzle one day with my mother's wedding dress, to a painful chapter of parenthood that begun with a newborn that was going to die, to years of hospital visits, to my older brother's birth, then to mine, to the inevitable death of their firstborn, and finally to a new life in America.

Though my father's prospects in life were never extraordinary, when he became father to an ill daughter—my sister—work became his duty. Promotions came and with them more expensive suits and more frequent dinners out with business colleagues while my mother stayed at home to watch over the children. Still, my father would buy me lemon croissants from a local French boulangerie on weekends and would reveal from behind his back the stuffed animals he would bring home from business trips. He used to have whiskers of hair floating above his head, but now his baldness shines like gold.

The first time I shaved, my father showed me how to do it. Maybe I like shaving so much because it reminds me of him, his aggressive scraping before work, the buzz of his electric razor waking me up in the mornings. It reminds me of the other men I recognize in the mirror too, their features and flaws shadowed in my own face. Searching for the man within me, I find traces of the man within my straight nose, calm eyes, and mysterious lips.

A glimmer of sunlight flashes in the mirror. I splash the cold water from the sink to my face, washing the careless wounds on my neck, as streaks of blood emerge from my pores like lava. I pat my naked face with a rough hand towel, and I am reborn. Inside me, a patient volcano is waiting to erupt.



The Jester's Proposal

An excerpt from an English Honors thesis by Deeya Prakash

WHEN NEETI MALIK starts dating Rajan Prakash, it is a secret. Not in the way that traditional secrets are kept; slinking in shadows, heads around the corner, fingers to your lips. Simply in the way that her family didn't know, and they didn't really need to. Neeti moved about her life as normal, indulging in his company whenever she had a moment to spare. After they met, she would look into his house as she walked to school, waving to him from his perch on the window. Sometimes, Rajan's father would push him so he nearly toppled out, down the three stories and into the vegetable garden. "*Car lena chaahate hain?*" And then for the first time ever, Rajan was allowed to drive the car, a compressed white Suzuki that was reserved only for their driver. He waited for her then, poised at the gate as she strutted by, opening the door for her from the inside. He'd drive her the 8 blocks to the bus stop, and they'd nervously part ways. "That was the only time in my life that my dad let me use the car. He knew, I think. But he never said."

However, when Neeti's mother began looking for grooms, it became clear that Neeti had to show her hand, blanching at the sepia headshots that littered their dining table. Her mother begun sliding them under her

door ("Amish Setty, ophthalmologist in Bangalore" or "Rohan Sharma, engineer in Bombay"), and the only way out was through. What they were doing was a rarity, a small gem in the awning cavern of the mine.

"Hello? Rajan?" Nandita was working as a translator in New Delhi, having freshly thrown her cap from her combined bachelors-masters in Japanese language. She called from her parents home, clad in a pink nightgown, hair done up and out of her face. She grappled with the cord, wrapping it around her fingers.

"Hi." Rajan was working as a junior resident in New Delhi. He had just come off shift, spending hours in an earthquake site heaving rubble off of civilians. There was dust under his nails. He answered from his hostel.

"I think it's time for you to meet my

parents."

"When can I come."

"Tomorrow?"

"Okay."

"Don't be late." He laughed now, and she steeled her voice. "I'm serious, Rajan. My dad will kill you. Whatever you do, don't be late."

That night, she told her parents that

there was a boy she had been seeing, and that she wanted to bring him by. Rita and Brij Kashore interrogated her like a prisoner in chains and she obliged, bowing her head, and no answer was

too detailed, no question too strange. When it became clear that Rajan Prakash was not a street bum who revved his motorcycle at women and modeled for upscale fashion (all of which were things he did, in fact, do) ("women" being solely my mother), Rita Malik seemed to soften, and she squeezed my mother's arm. Doctor



hai? Aacha. And when it became clear that he had a steady income and that they were familiar with his family from their time in the military, Brij Kashore eased the tension in his neck, cracking it from side to side. *Vah Colonel Prakash ka beta? Aacha.* Okay. Step one complete, and she heaved a sigh of relief.

Six o'clock the next day. *Time say aana parna.* Don't be late. Rajan called

was to be here in fifteen minutes, and Neeti's *lengha* wasn't zipped yet. She called for her mother, who was too busy answering the call to help, so Neeti positioned herself in the mirror, tongue out in effort as she attempted to seal the fabric on her own. Halfway up the tracks and her mother barrelled in, cord taut from the living room where the entire family sat waiting, face white.

mother. They listened, eyes averted. *"Tumhen late hone vaalee hai? Aacha, I'll tell my family, just promise to be quick."* She glanced around the room and saw her father stiffen. She tried to hold in her tears because that meant it was over, he was over, they were over. He blubbered on the line and she cut him off. *"Tum abhee nahin aa sakate.* My father won't like it. This is over," and as she said it she tried to accept it. Family



Neeti that morning and assured her that his suit was pressed and his teeth were brushed and that the gauge in his car was full and please do not worry so much, *meri jaan*, I will be there on time and ready for everything your father may ask of me. Her job was to stay upstairs as they talked, footsteps sending dust through the ceiling over their seats, passing her dupatta between her thumbs. But before all of that, as she placed the *jhumka* in her ears and laid the bangles on her wrist, the landline rang, shrill and piercing through their government flat. Rajan

"What's wrong?"

"It's Rajan."

"And?"

"Just speak to him," she said, and my mother ran into the room, snatched the phone, zipper falling down her back. There was rustling on the line, and Neeti knew it before he could say it. "You're going to be late, aren't you."

"I— I'm sorry, *meri jaan*, my tires have burst, I promise, *lekin taayar phat gae hain, main kuchh nahin kar sakata*, I checked everything earlier—"

"*Aacha?*" she elevated her voice, catching the ears of her father, sister,

came first, and from Brij Kashore's posture alone, she knew he would be irreconcilable. Smooth comb over, buttoned dress shirt, pressed slacks. Boots on the ground, 1800 hours, or turn around and go home, cadet. You don't belong here.

Neeti began to calm down, smoothing her hair as she ran into her room, pulling the cord, shucking off her *lengha* as Rajan softened his apologies on the line. Static feedback, signal running low. Two years strung up, a lifetime gone. I'm running, I'll run to you, *meri jaan*, I'm so sorry, I'm

sure I can convince him, I love you, I'm sorry, I'm sorry—

She hung up, and the phone skated on the floor as she roiled in her naivety of choice. The odds had been stacked against her from the start, “love” and “marriage” like strangers in the same sentence. On top of that, it was 5:50pm. She stumbled to her father, relaying the story, watching the minutes count down, down, down. He was unyielding, arms crossed on the sofa, sending her back to her room without so much as a nod in her direction. But as she yanked the gold from her ears, the doorbell rang. Five minutes to six. 5:55. Her father answered the door.

Slim and sleek, poised and pressed, was Rajan Prakash, car parked crooked in the driveway behind him. Perfect condition, full tires, cheeky smile. He nodded, bending down to touch Brij Kashore's feet, pranam, respect. Neeti peeked out of her room, aghast,

be leaving, holding hands with his daughter. Brij Kashore turned briefly to look at her. She waved meekly from her doorway, aghast.

Bilkul nahin. Andar aao. Brij Kashore smiled, because even he was a young man once. The embodiment of jest, zesty for life. He stepped aside.

Not at all. Come on in.

It was nearly Christmas when Rajan was to meet Neeti's father, and he wasn't very nervous. Nearly every authority figure loved him, taken by his charisma and appearance and style. But he was also intelligent, recently accepted at the best junior residency program in the entire continent of Asia, which would give him six intensive months as the primary assistant in patient diagnosis, management, and procedures under the supervision of senior doctors. But above all, he had a job, a secure form of paycheck

that would establish him a good prospect for any young Indian woman around. He was aware of all of this, and rather than let it overpower him he stood, leaning on his back foot,

lowering his height, pausing, listening, nodding. He would be deferent to her father, kind to her mother, sweet to her sister. He was in love with Neeti Malik, and there was not a shred of ego worth messing this up.

The only problem was that he had to look the part; he shrugged on a suit from one of his modeling shoots, combed his hair with the communal hairbrush from his medical dormitories, and checked his teeth in the mirror: perfect. He then set off in

search of a car. The only vehicle that was ever his own was his mo-ped, and it had made it all the way to Delhi, the white Suzuki still comfortably parked in the Patiala driveway. And though Neeti had spent many evenings with Rajan atop the two-wheeler, hands around his waist as he skirted through the streets, there was no class in showing up to the castle of a damsel without a proper steed. Rajan Prakash was the utmost gentleman, and he needed Brij Kashore to know it. His roommate Manoj groaned as Rajan shook him awake. “*Bhaee, mujhe tumhaaree car chaahie*” he insisted, dress shoes contrasting with the messy room at his feet. Manoj groaned, unmoving. “Please,” Rajan asked, sitting at the foot of the bed. “*Main propose karye hoon.*” I need your car, man. I'm proposing.

Manoj blinked his roommate into focus until he could confirm this was the truth, staring back at the crisp image in front of him. He laughed and leapt out of bed then, pulling Rajan into a hug before scrambling for his keys. They shared twin smiles of excitement. Soon enough, the keys were in Rajan's hands, and he drove the hour commute from his dorms in Delhi to Noida, a small suburb in the outskirts of the city where she currently stayed with her family. He was hellishly early, and did a few circles of the street before parking crooked in her driveway, yanking out the keys and swinging them on his finger. Restless, he thumbed the steering wheel, eyes flitting about the property before settling on a payphone, nestled next to the powerline in front of the house. His eyebrows furrowed, then raised. He smiled that perfect, devious smile. He had just had an idea.

She was going to kill him. But it didn't matter, he thought, as he dialed her phone, arm on the box, receiver to his ear. Because he was going to marry her either way.



confused, murderous, relieved. He winked at her

Namaste ji, main Rajan hoon. Jaldee aa gaya. Her father stared, lips curling to a smile.

Hi. My name is Rajan. I hope you don't mind that I'm early.

Brij Kashore paused, taking in the man in front of him. They were mirrors in that moment—upstanding, early. Respectful, poised. In a few months, they would stand at this door again. Only this time, Rajan would

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Illustrated by Hadley McCormack