

Full Circle



2022 Huron High School Literary Magazine

Full Circle is a publication of Huron High School in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Writing pieces printed in this magazine are selected from submissions to the River Rat Writing Prize. Authors retain all rights to their own work.

The River Rat Writing Prize and The Mischief Arts Prize seek to provide a creative outlet and authentic audiences for students. We believe that the student work produced at Huron High School deserves to be celebrated within our school community and with the community at large. Winners receive public acknowledgement and financial reward for their inspiring work. We encourage all students to enter the competition.

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My Own Head / Anonymous

Who would've thought
That it would be my own head
That was the killer of my body

My own head
Full of numbers and percents
From nutrition labels I read
Like a calculator I couldn't escape
Telling me I'd be prettier
better
skinner
If I were to skip a meal here or there
Even just one less slice of bread

It wasn't only my head
That made me starve myself til near dead
It was the people around me
Telling me I looked thin as thread
Adding fuel to the flame
Encouraging me to cut my portions to shreds
They saw it too
Not only my own head

My pants dropped sizes
10, 8, 4, 2
Tight shirts became baggy
No one had a clue
starving myself and throwing up daily
And no one even knew
Cause my own head was telling me
This is what I must do

Every day I wake up
More desperate than the last
To not eat a meal
Or have one smaller than the past
To skip a meal
What a thrill
an accomplishment even
To simply deny myself food
an achievement?
At least that was what was happening
In my own head

My Own Head / Anonymous

What they don't tell you,
What you ignore in your head
Is the dizziness,
hair strands falling out,
wanting to be dead
Looking in the mirror
Only imperfections ahead
Things to correct
Or so my head said

Going out for ice cream
Was no longer a treat
But a punishment in my head,
I never ate sweets
Thinking about eating anything extra
Made me sick
A cone of ice cream:
285 calories
Only 25 for a lick
Numbers etched into my brain
an odd party trick

You wouldn't know until you've been there
Until it truly is your own head
From favorite snacks and treats
To mealtimes I would dread
No longer were candies and cake treats
But things that if I ate
Would make me feel
bulging,
bulky,
bovine,
Like lead
Was it all in my head?

Who would've thought
That it would be my own head
That was the killer of my body
Forcing me underfed



My name is not something you can look up in a dictionary, a typical school year book, or a directory. It's not a name you hear in everyday talk. Books don't have characters with my name. A name that starts with an L should roll off the tongue like a lollipop, but instead, it tastes bland. It's a sound that reminds me to go "huh?", it's a sound that is invisible, even though sounds can't be seen. As many days have passed, I really do wonder, who am I? When people see me, do they see my name? Or is it just a sound?

Li -- Anne . Li, it was my Mom's choice, my Mom's last name. Anne, because I was born in Ann Arbor. I guess this is supposed to represent me -- but when does a person know who they are? Is a name not just a sound, a ringing tone? When I think about my name, I think of my Mom, my beautiful Mom, who traveled far away from her rugged hometown to a town of full of trees. Yet I am not my Mom. I don't think we are similar. She is like a strong tree branch, where I am a small budding green leaf.

When I was little, since my first months in the world, my name was Bei. It's my Chinese nickname. Except, it's not really a nickname anymore, more like my real name. Those who call me it are my Brother, Mom, and especially Dad. They don't call me anything else. It has nothing to do with my English name. It feels like a reminder, a reminder about my childhood, my past. At school, a few years ago, my friends called me Lu. Even the teacher did. It was sweet to hear, one syllable long. Sometimes I was Lulu or even Luuu with the U's drawn out so long, I felt so important. Now, right now in the present, I only have memories of this. Once in a while, an old friend who we've grown so apart mentions this and I just melt into the past. Right now, in the present, I am not really Lu anymore. When old friends say my name as Lianne, it feels so unfamiliar, so foreign, so not me.

Now, I'm Lianne, Bei, and Lu. Three different sounds. Three different personas. They draw me close, and make me wonder, reminisce, imagine. Lu, the past me. Bei, a sound that will always be a part of me, the comforting feeling of home. Lianne, the me right now, an unknown sound.

Names can represent anything. Every person in this world, on this Earth, has one. I wonder if my parents deliberately chose my name thinking of who I might become. Do they hope or not care?

When I think of this, I like the sound of my name: Lianne. I'm the only one in my family that has an English name. It has so much to do with who I am, the path I am starting. My future kids will probably all have English names, maybe even Chinese names. So many names. This represents the future's uncertainty and marks the past. But maybe, it's up to me. If God has let me wonder on and on, shouldn't it be my choice, my choice to say who I am?

She leans over you, a warm smile illuminating her features. Her hands are cold, so you take them in yours, reciprocating the smile as she visibly relaxes. “Hey, do you wanna take a walk? It should be really pretty with the new snow,” she says, eyes glittering with excitement. There’s no way you can say no to that, so you agree and take out your winter gear, bundling up with her at your side. Minutes later, you’re outside, the cold air refreshing compared to the just-too-hot temperature of your apartment.

She loves hearing the crunch of untouched snow under her boots, so she wanders off the trail every so often, creating new tracks that you follow carefully, stepping into her prints like children always did. You glance up from your stepping to see her running off into the distance. “Wait up!” you call out, forgetting about the silly game and racing after her.

The two of you haven’t been in these woods in ages, so you have to wind your way through the trees and hidden roots that trip you up. It’s slowing you down, so you scream her name, trying to get her attention. She doesn’t double back for you. You feel sick as you realize there are no more footsteps crunching in the snow. You try calling out for her again as you follow her tracks, but to no avail.

You come to a stop as you see where she slipped on snow-covered ice... where the tracks stop. Right in front of you is a thirty-foot drop. You lean over the edge, praying with all your might that she is hanging on the cliff face, trying to climb back up. But even as you do, you know that she couldn’t have grabbed anything in time.

As a wind kicks up that blows snow over the hollow underneath the jutting cliff and hides the crumpled body you don’t want to see, you take a step back. And another. Another. Until you’re running back to your apartment, into your bedroom, where you think she must be waiting for you. It’s impossible for anything else to be true. Nothing else is true.

She isn’t there. Maybe in the kitchen? No. Oh, she must be taking a shower. Nothing. You head outside again, pacing in the snow. You blindly stumble back to the woods, following her tracks and yours. Memory after memory shoots through you as you recall the

hundreds of times the two of you had wandered through here before.

You come to a stop at the base of the cliff. Just a few feet away are her final steps before her slip. Everything inside you is telling you to run, faster faster faster until you can escape the grief that's crashing over you from head to toe. Yet you stay there, frozen in place and waiting to hear the crunch of footprints in the snow.



Crows perched upon the church's threatening walls, their gloomy caws reverberating through the chillingly dim morning. Darkness snaked across the rows of seats, shadows jerking at the legs of the shivering, hushed group inside as if beckoning them to sleep. Lit candles upon the windowless walls sparkled weakly, illuminating the expressionless faces of the seated audience, all resolved firmly downward. Before them was only a podium and a single open wooden box—the morning's attraction. Uniform melancholy enveloped the space, disrupted only by a singular soul seated front and center—a single wilting flower in a barren field. His familiarity with this room was disheartening, his despair: immeasurable, and his loss: unbearable.

The undisturbed stillness of the room was shattered as the man unhurriedly rose. All eyes swiveled quickly upon his hunched back as the room drew a collective breath. He retrieved a wrinkled yellow paper from his jet black pants, and if one searched closely enough, they would observe that it was oddly damp. The man appeared to linger for a moment, preparing himself for the task before him.

Familiar. Despair. Loss.

Apprehensive, he trodded heavily toward the foreboding podium and clumsily straightened his paper upon it. The man carelessly brushed aside an oddly shaped object obscured by the shadows, almost knocking it clear off the platform. Leaning now upon the stand, he allowed his back to sink forward--commensurate to his bent head. The candles seemed to direct their spotlight upon his figure—a pitiful attempt at combating his barricade of murk.

Wrinkles lined his aged forehead, a prelude to his graying hair. His once piercing gray eyes had become less vibrant and bleaker with time, having been overwhelmed by endless tragedy in a war of attrition. A single tear loosely escaped him, rolling beyond his sunken cheekbones and curved nose, descending upon his rictus and slipping between his lips.

He began to speak.

“Thank you all for attending at this early hour.” His usually gruff voice echoed with an unfamiliar tremble.

He bitterly remarked, “I would love to say this was my first time standing here, at this hour and for this reason.” The man lingered to appreciate the irony of his predicament, took a deeper breath, glanced more firmly at his paper, and continued speaking.

“On March twenty-first, precisely eighteen years prior, my daughter, Tulip, was born. From the moment Talia and I saw her... ” He seemed to falter as if recalling better days. “From the moment we saw her, she radiated this aura of love from her; it was as though she had felt her mother’s pregnancy too—felt her ache—and was soothing her. She was a mere few hours old and already understood my wife of a decade and a half better than I did.”

A fleeting smile danced across his face as he felt her warmth reach him from worlds apart.

“I must say, once mother and daughter locked eyes, they were inseparable. Brooke, my wife, was her earth, her everything, as she was to Talia. They required neither mouth nor word as they often communicated through their gazes; each seemed to transcend the physical plane, as they danced in endless meadows of feeling.” The audience was wholly enraptured by his monologue, as he paused to consider:

“I mean, I had no idea what on earth was happening. Do you realize how challenging it is to be a parent and husband to a wife and daughter who can communicate like that? They would soundlessly decide what to eat for dinner in five seconds, as I sat there looking like a complete clown.” His smile returned stronger now, as he remembered far too many evenings of asking for meal clarification and their benevolent shared laughter.

“But, by the same token, as a parent and husband, I could not ask for anything more than their joy. If they were happy, then so was I.” His voice trailed off, indicating that things may not have been as such.

“Her antics aside, Tulip quickly bloomed into a curious, compassionate girl. Sometimes too much so. How many of you have seen a child walk intentionally toward a beehive, not to poke it with a stick, but to spread her short arms towards it, beckoning?” Silent, reassuring smiles rippled through the sea of listeners, mirroring that of the unabashedly proud man before them.

“That’s right. My girl, seven years of age, tried to hug a beehive.” He grinned earnestly now--his childish grin similar to that of his once curious, compassionate daughter, always delighted by nature.

He sardonically added, “Talk to me once you have to sleep through who knows how many nights in a house echoing with the caws of a bird infirmary! Literal birds, okay? Birds that Tulip had rescued scattered across makeshift bird dwellings. I swear, she tended to those birds better than she did herself, and those cocky suckers knew it, always cawing in the middle of the night to remind me that they would take their dang time healing!” He spoke louder now, the purported irritation in his speech entirely inconsistent with its overwhelming warmth and pride.

“And as she kept growing, so too did her compassion. Compassion which, in Tulip, quickly flowered into love. She was never truly sure what her, ah, preferences ...” he awkwardly mumbled that final word, cheeks blushing, “... her preferences were.”

The man’s entire figure appeared to relax as he audibly exhaled. “But,” he continued, “she managed all the same.”

Regaining his composure, he quickly added, “Not that she needed any help. That girl was already familiar with the birds and the bees!”

The audience sincerely chuckled with him now as the burdensome shackles of sorrow were released for the shortest of moments, replaced with a magnificent web of shared empathy. It was as though the church walls had crumbled and the luminous sun had risen from its slumber, as the man stood straighter, more confidently than before.

Not entirely willing to ruin the atmosphere, the man remarked, “However, as we are all aware, growing is not all sunshine and rainbows.” The crowd, detecting a shift in mood, immediately quelled themselves once more. The man was uncomfortable once more, yet he merely inhaled and continued.

“As parents, we like to dream that our child will be the one who never grows up. And yet, stubborn as we are, we are invariably disappointed by the outcome.” He steeled himself now, gathering air for what would be the most prolonged breath of his life.

“No one finds that kind of growth easy. We are battered, bruised, splintered, and scratched. We hear every treacherous whisper, feel every stare of disappointment, and taste the salty tears of loss. And when we emerge, we emerge not victorious but surviving. We have achieved nothing, yet everything in that we have proven our ability to weather the roughest of storms—a sort of natural selection.” His voice had become steadily quieter as the audience leaned forward to register his every word.

Solemnly and directly to the crowd, without hesitation, he added, “However, sometimes we do not survive. Every treacherous whisper darts through our ears to our mind, haunting our sleep. Every stare of disappointment becomes one of rejection, one of unwelcomeness, and one of ultimate loneliness. And every salty tear of loss puddles before us, crescendoing from a trickling drizzle to an ear-shattering, mind-numbing, suffocating waterfall. Incapable of withstanding the pressure, we listen for words of encouragement and look for glances of reassurance. None is to be found. And so we cry. We cry and cry until our eyes become empty canyons. Until our heart becomes an emotionless void. Until our lungs fill with the liquor of sorrow.” The man’s voice penetrated the otherwise still air as the contents of his heart spilled before his audience.

“I still remember...” he faltered now. “... still remember...” his words slurred as he clumsily brushed the tears welling at the corners of his eyes.

“It wasn’t fair!” He burst, “Both of them, so young.” The pools his sleeves had just

emptied were inundated again with a forceful cascade of torment.

“I’m sorry,” he gasped between agonizing tears, “I’m so terribly sorry.”

And the audience watched him without speaking, once strong, once brave, once proud, collapse. It mattered not, for all present had sat there, in the same seats, roughly three months prior, for another funeral. They had watched as a young girl, just shy of eighteen years of age, had stood before them. They had watched as she delivered her speech. They had watched as she cried. And they had watched her, once strong, once brave, once proud, collapse.

She had tried to speak, tried to look forward, tried not to cry.

She had failed.

And so she ran. The candles had illuminated her unimpeded escape through the center aisle, the air equally unmoving, barring the gentle patter of her black dress shoes and broken sobs.

And on she had fled, the two doors before her swept aside by her river.

The crowd realized all this contemporaneously, united at once by the human sorrow that joined them. Eyes swiveled imperceptibly, silently toward the door in memory of the girl who had run.

A soft knock at the door rang suddenly through the church—a startling disruption to the continuous tune of a man’s grief.

“Delivery, delivery!” A young girl’s eager voice sounded outside the hall as she proceeded to knock once more, “Flower delivery!”

The man brushed the puddles from his face and peered up as someone pushed aside both doors. The church was instantly bathed in the sun’s soft morning rays, brightening the room as those unimpressive candles of the windowless church had failed to. A beam of light shined directly through the center, narrowly reaching the man at the podium. A delicate spring wind initiated a sweet-sounding symphony of wind chimes that filled the still somber

church.

Standing before them was a young girl, barely ten years of age. Dressed in a sunshiny yellow dress and gardener's hat, she carried a magnificent basket of flowers so plentiful that it obscured her undoubtedly grinning face.

The audience shuffled uneasily, caught between the two diametric moods of the church. The person who had opened the doors hastily moved to take the flowers; however, the girl bounced quickly onwards, following the illuminated path before her. Her vision impeded, the heartache surrounding her went unnoticed as she continued announcing, "Flower delivery!"

She radiated like a glowing sun in a lonely solar system, and those in the aisle seats failed to contain their gentle smiles. Slowly, inexorably, her glow expanded until the entire church felt the blanket of her warmth. The man followed her movement with eyes suddenly sharp despite the cascade impeding their sight.

The girl finally reached the podium, breathing quick breaths, as she exclaimed once more, "Flower delivery!" The man gently bent downward and extracted the wicker flower basket from her hands, placing it on the podium and revealing the girl's radiant grin.

"Hello, sir!" She paused to catch her breath, apparently still oblivious to his tears. "I have the flowers you ordered!"

She looked up as the man silently gazed wistfully at her innocence.

As their eyes quietly connected, the man's entire room melted away.

Together they hovered above a field of glistening meadows, in no way tethered to their prior physical existence. A soft summer glow surrounded them, matched only by the sweet scent of flowers. Under any other circumstances, the man would have simply dismissed himself as crazy and certainly dreaming, yet something precluded such rashness.

He inquired, "What is your name?"

"Daisy!" She eagerly responded.

“Well, Daisy, thank you for the beautiful flowers.”

“Only the best, sir!” She seemed to hesitate and cautiously asked, “do you really think so?”

“Of course.”

Visibly relieved, Daisy responded, “Phew! I hope to one day become a flower lady like my mother!”

Gently smiling, the man said, “My daughter was a flower lady too, beautiful like you.”

Daisy’s grin blossomed as she warmly blushed.

“I know,” she said, and before the man realized that she could not have possibly known, the bright glowing fields beneath him began to spin. As the man looked downward, he realized he was moving in tandem with her.

Dancing.

A soft drizzle, strangely comforting, descended from the sky above them.

“Come and dance any time,” Daisy said with a joyous smile upon her knowing face as she planted a soft kiss upon his forehead.

Daisy quickly evaporated into the man’s drizzling reality as he floated, bewildered, while the world reformed around him.

The church was suddenly silent once more, the doors reverted to their closed state, and the only light source was, as before, the flickering candles upon the windowless walls. The tears the man had just wiped from his face had reappeared, yet he stood now strong, brave, and proud.

Ready.

The audience keenly watched as he straightened himself, not bothering to wipe the flowing tears from his moist cheeks. He deliberately reached, without looking, for the flowers upon the podium and found the somehow familiar wicker basket. The man strode quickly toward the large wooden box before him—the only other item visible in the obscurity of the

room—and set the flowers upon an adjacent table.

Reaching into the basket and peering inside, the man found what he had always been searching for.

A singular flower, in hand, he approached his daughter's motionless, tranquil figure. Tears blossomed comfortably across his cheeks as he planted his two lips upon her forehead.

Gingerly, he placed a single radiant yellow flower between her rested hands.

A single wordless flower.

A tulip.



e) All of the Above

We just wanted to go to school.

“Another shooting today...” blares across the news.
People are angry. People demand change.
“New Gun Laws.” They promise. “Safety.”
But promises left unfulfilled are empty, losing credibility.
How many more lies can we take?

Sandy Hook, Parkland, Columbine, Oxford...
History. Mere statistics in the realm of time.

28. 17. 15. 4.

- a) Families torn apart.
- b) Schools forever broken.
- c) Communities shattered.
- d) Lives lost.
- e) All of the above.

It's easy to brush it off.
After all, it's such a distant reality.

Until schools across the state close down for days.
Until students skip school to stay safe.
Until we have to face this reality everyday.
How many more will it take?

We just wanted to go to school.



The fire roars in the hearth, tongues of flame battling the dancing umbra of worn chairs and discarded bottles. It's bright and warm, a ward against the moonless night. Light crawls onto worn garments strewn on the floor and backs of chairs, earthy tones of verdant green and brown. It frolics on the plaid chartreuse of the walls, across a tattered rug of a bygone time. Blows tenebrous strands from the corners. Brings life to a still world.

There was laughter here, once. He doesn't remember when. Who. The memory has faded, a pastel painting left out in the rain. Soft colors give way to muted gray, pigments dripping, lost; the room is no longer the objects inside it, but the space between them. The fire groans and shadow encroaches on the glow of the flames.

Maybe it's the softened hew of the beaten floorboards or the faint scent of a childhood home; perhaps the blanched drawing on the mantle, a long-faded caption in a loopy font. He feels safe. Some atavistic part inside tells him that this is home. And they start to come back in flashes.

He paces the room, relying on a wooden cane of his own making. It taps gently but firmly against the floor, and with every tap, small things return. The scintillation changes with every step. And suddenly the monochrome memories turn a beautiful, rich sepia, long-forgotten emotions powerful enough to span the decades. The table, in the same place as always, but where there once had been heartwarming meals lay only a thick coat of dust. He does not remember those meals, but knows they have happened. And when he breathes in, he can almost taste it, though he knows not what it is. What it was. What it will never be.

The coat rack used to have two coats. He remembers more, but it is not remembering, it is knowing that this was where they played games, drew together, laughed together. It is knowing every word of a song he cannot remember the tune to. Knowing he has lost too much.

But it is too late. There are no memories left, only a yearning, a sense of homesickness. It's familiar. Intimate. These things are less knowledge, now, and more belief; the fire

crackles and the logs creak, spits sparks and flares before settling down. The shadows burrow deeper.

He stumbles over to the threadbare mattress, set upon a once-ornate frame. It's still soft, to his surprise. Slowly, carefully, he lowers himself onto it, and he can see it — a fleeting glimpse of the past woven into the threads of a patchwork quilt, still colorful, still comfortable. The patterns feel cool to the touch, and he begins tracing the needlework. The texture soothes his rough hands, and he can almost feel an embrace.

The fire is finally dying, desperately hanging to the coals, but there is little heat and even less light. He cannot find the strength to arise and kindle it, to keep it going. It's dark now, and he can no longer see; everything is hidden. Devoured by the night.

The air has grown frigid, cinereous wood reduced to ashes. The man feels cold, quilt and memories doing little to stave the chill. And as he lies there, something breaks and he cries.

And he remembers.



I walked leisurely down section 77b of the infinite hallway as I often do before breakfast. The bright white lights above me gave a gentle hum as they glinted off the huge glass panels allowing us to see into each room display. That hum was the only other sound besides the echoing of my footsteps through the hallway and the occasional passer-by. As per usual, room 224, where my friend Jen lived, looked impeccable. I stopped to peer in, her trophies were freshly polished in their display case, pictures of her with her friends and family lining her dresser and bedside table, and of course, the Room Two door covered up by a large mahogany bookshelf. The only evidence of the door even being there was the otherwise inexplicable space between the wall and shelf. After my brief pause, I walked on, nearly back to my own room. Some of the rooms I saw made me shrink back in repulsion, papers in disarray on the desks, dirty laundry scattered across the floor, and completely bare walls. I didn't understand how someone could stand to show such a horrible impression of themselves to the world. Finally, I reached room 256, home sweet home. Once I had settled down I started to work on my daily tasks, as mundane and meaningless as they were. Everything was neat and orderly, as it should be, and I waved hello to people passing by as they inspected Room One displays in their free time, just as I had done that morning.

The day passed slowly, the hands of the bright blue clock on my wall dragging themselves through the vast sea of time. Once all the lights went out, I lay in bed for a few moments before eventually getting up, fixing my sheets, and walking over to my huge display corkboard, strewn with photos and newspaper clippings, all arranged in an orderly fashion of course. I removed the board as quietly as I could, only making a small *thwack* as it touched down on the floor and leaned against the wall, revealing my Room Two door. I turned the handle slowly and retreated into my second room.

This room wasn't as harshly blinding as the rooms of the hallway, the colors, soft pastels in contrast to the vibrant primaries. There was a beanbag chair sitting in the corner

and a small minifridge on one side of the room. Looking left and right, I saw my friends' second rooms, some strewn with video games and computers, others, like Jen's with paintings hanging on the wall, some with the paint still wet, gleaming even under the few fairy lights hanging around her room. For many, this is where most time was spent, a more comfortable alternative to the display rooms of the hallway. A place only you and your friends ventured into.

But when even these lights flickered out some went further. Beyond Room Two was a place you rarely wanted to go, a dimly lit place where strange things began to happen. You began to lose control of how the room looked and acted, faceless figures lurked in the shadows, forcing your hand to work to their will. You could no longer see any more than one or two other people, your truest nature exposed to them. You weren't always ashamed. You felt glad you weren't the only one seeing the strange things happening around you, and there was comfort in knowing that you weren't completely alone. But then you felt selfish and guilty for wishing that pain onto others instead of bearing it alone, as you should have, for the good of everyone.

Tonight was like any other, and as these lights dimmed I felt the cold pale hands of the faceless figures wrap around my arms and pull me out of my chair. As much as one hated Room Three, once your journey had begun, there was no going back. I had learned that the hard way, after many nights descending into terror. I tried to scream but my efforts were futile, as always, my mouth wiped from my face leaving no mark of ever being there to begin with. The figures reached for the door and threw me in.

Room Three didn't feel so much like a room as a vast desert, mostly barren with things scattered around every once in a while. What you encountered there may be new or it may be the same nightmares that have been haunting you for years. I slipped through the inky blackness and felt myself start to lift off the ground as if I was floating at the bottom of the

ocean. I looked around but I couldn't see anyone. I swam in the direction I thought was forward, unsure if I was moving at all in the pitch black. Finally, I heard a baritone voice coming from right beside me.

"Good to see you again," it said as the lights flicked on and I fell to the ground.

Towering above me was a man in a suit and hat with only a mouth, my mouth. My eyes went wide and I looked around. I was in an empty train station that seemed to stretch on in either direction as far as I could see. I had been here many nights before and I would likely come back many nights after.

"I think we've wasted enough time tonight, don't you?" he asked, and as if on cue, a train came seemingly out of nowhere and rolled to a stop, its wheels scraping against the tracks and crying out as I wish I could.

I blinked and I was in a cabin of the train with him, tea platters in front of us beginning to shake as we started moving again.

"Doesn't that smell good?" he asked, taking a deep inhale of the tea through *my* nostrils before taking a sip. The tea I was somehow able to smell was like a rotting corpse. I rubbed the smooth lower half of my face, tears burning at the corners of my eyes, fighting to try and escape as I held them in. I saw this man most times I was in Room Three, and every time I hoped it would end differently.

It never did.

I wanted to punch and kick, scream and shout, but I was frozen. The only thing I had control of was my tears which were now salty streaks running down my cheeks. Even those, it seemed, I was too weak to control.

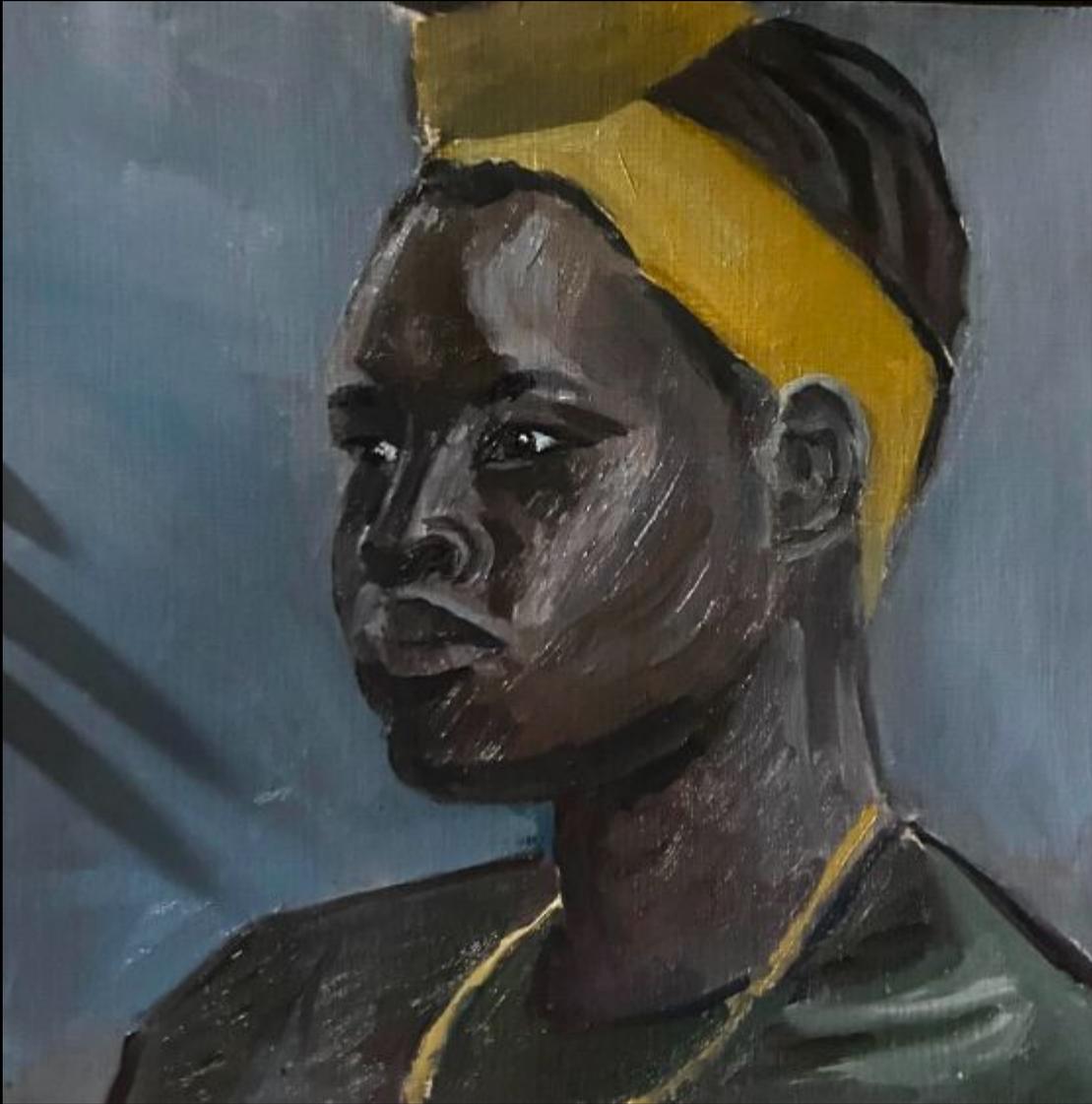
“Don’t cry,” the man cooed, “you know it’ll all be over soon and you’ll be back to your miserable little life just like always, as I stay tucked away back here, waiting.”

I looked out the window just in time to see the train go through a huge door leading out into the vastness of space, curving around like a ring of a planet. When I looked back, the man had my ears and his voice was booming - my ears, now attached to the same body as my mouth.

“Nice view isn’t it? Hand-selected for tonight,” he laughed. And with another blink, I was staring down at the body of a small faceless child, my body. “See you again soon,” the man smiled, smashing the glass window as I was sucked out into the vacuum of space, my one remaining sense, touch, on fire as I felt every pain imaginable as if I was collapsing in on myself, drowning, and burning all at once.

And then, as if it had never happened, I was back walking down the hall the next morning. I waved at Jen, smiling. She smiled back, but I could see a small falter, a sign that maybe everything wasn’t as her room showed, pretty and organized. But no matter how bad things get in Room Three, we never talk about what happens there, nobody does.

Tell me
Does my rage surprise you?
Does it compare to your hatred?
Do I scare you?
Was I not supposed to notice?
The staring eyes like daggers meant to cut
The way your pace quickens when I walk behind you
Tell me
Do you despise me?
Do I frighten you?
Is it my broad shoulders?
My matted fro?
My beautiful brown eyes?
Or could it be, possibly maybe,
My skin?
You had a gun
But I was unarmed
Or maybe not I guess
Melanin seems to be the most dangerous thing around
So it makes sense why you're scared
Why you'd pull the trigger
But tell me
How would you feel if I told you that
I'm scared too
Scared to wear my hood up
Scared to stand up straight
Scared to be out past dark
Scared to put on my durag
What if I told you about my little habits
About how I make my voice higher
How I don't hold eye contact
How I always put a smile on my face
How I rarely show anger
How I never display real aggression
All these things are done so that I
Don't make anyone scared
So I don't spook someone into thinking
That I am a threat
Because I am not
I'm just a person who wants to live
So tell me
Do I scare you?



Judging eyes. Subtle murmurs. Quick glances. They were directed at me and it was all because of my pathetic clothes. I pulled at the collar of my scuffy shirt, trying to smooth out any wrinkles. My faded blue jeans weren't doing anything to help, either. I hated these clothes and I hated myself for being too poor to buy better ones. I was the center of all this unwanted attention because of it.

Cautiously looking around me for any demeaning stares, I darted through the hallways, trying to get to my classroom as quickly as my legs allowed. 'Just a few more steps', I thought, nearing my classroom. I was about to grab the doorknob when I felt a heavy arm on my shoulder. I jumped, barely stopping a sound from escaping my already tightly shut mouth. Quickly glancing around to see if anyone noticed, I turned and glared at the person who gave me a miniature heart attack.

"Why so serious, Jayden?", he joked, his disheveled brown hair falling over his eyes as he stared at me in an attempt to imitate The Joker. I looked at his shabby white t-shirt and raggedy khaki shorts, with an old pair of rubber slippers to top it all off. Narrowing my eyes, I pushed his arm off and scoffed. "Are you serious, Bill...", I muttered, putting a few feet of distance between us so that it looked like we didn't know each other. The last thing I needed with these stupid clothes was someone else who made me stick out even more.

Bill wasn't exactly the best person at fitting in. He was loud, drew a lot of attention and naturally also drew a lot of criticizing gazes. Exactly what I didn't need or want.

"What's wrong?", he asked, following me into the classroom. Ignoring him, I plopped onto my chair and swung my bag off my shoulders onto the floor. Shrugging, Bill went over to his seat, which was thankfully across the room, far, far away from me.

I was about to take out my work when I heard more whispering around me and looked up to see what the commotion was about. I watched in awe as three people strode in. They had everything I could never even dream of. Money, nice clothes, and most importantly....the respect of the people around them. I had nothing. Just imagining what it was like to have what they did made me feel elated, but I could only entertain those fantasies for so long. The bubble of hope slowly growing inside of me was popped by the pin of cold, harsh reality. These desires could never be fulfilled outside of my dreams.

But I was desperate. I needed to have at least one thing they did. I scanned them from head to toe as they walked in and took their seats. Could I get the same phone? No, it was too expensive.... Maybe their clothes...? Forget about it.

Realizing I could never be like them, my gaze dropped to the floor where I saw...their shoes. They were eye-catching, at the same time subtle. Sleek black with yellow laces. Yes, those would work. I needed those shoes.

Those shoes were the only thing I could think about for the rest of the day. Bill's constant nagging and everyone's stares didn't even faze me. I had a new goal. If I couldn't get new clothes, I would get new shoes.

I slumped onto the soft, brown sofa at home, contemplating how exactly I would get those shoes as I stared up at the blank ceiling. Those shoes had been on my mind all morning. I ran over to my mom, who was typing away at something on her computer. "Mom! Mom!", I yelled, frantically trying to get her attention. "Yes?", she replied, too preoccupied with her work to look at me.

“ So...I need a bit of cash...”, I asked, sheepishly swaying back and forth.

“For what?”

“Well...my shoes are really old and the soles are really flat. There’s barely any cushion left!”, I exclaimed, trying my best to persuade her.

“If they aren’t torn, they’re still good. Besides, you know designer shoes aren’t a luxury we can afford right now, hm?”, she mused, her fingers flying at a mile a minute across the keyboard

“But-”

“No buts.”, she firmly declared. Now, why don’t you go upstairs and finish your homework?”

Knowing there was no purpose in arguing further, I turned around and started trudging to my room...when something caught my eye. It was small, black, and right within my reach. It would take 5 seconds to snatch it from the countertop - no, it’d be quicker than that! Realizing what I was about to do, I tore my gaze away from my mom’s black wallet and went up the stairs ashamed at myself for even entertaining such a thought.

I woke up in a cold sweat the next morning. I couldn’t help but start panicking. I stared at the silver clock on my wall, watching the second hand slowly tick. I didn’t want to go to school. Not without those shoes.

I threw on my clothes and ran downstairs to the kitchen. And there it was. The small black wallet. I looked around for any trace of my mother, and when the coast was clear, I reached out and grabbed the wallet. I shoved it into my pocket and was about to walk out the door when I felt a firm grip on my arm. I turned around, eyes wide, to face my mother.

Almost certain I was caught, I threw my hands up ready to get on my knees and beg for forgiveness. “Don’t forget your breakfast”, my mother smiled, placing a banana into my hand before going back to her computer. My heart dropped. How could I do this to my own mother? I wanted to turn around and put that wallet back on the counter, but the murmurs I would hear from the students around me at school was enough to convince me otherwise.

“I’m sorry mom...”, I murmured, making my way to the shoe store after making the decision to skip school. “Just this once...”.

I needed those shoes more than anything.

I stared into the store, my hands pressed against the glass, scaring the customers inside. This was all going according to plan. I would walk in, get the shoes, spend the rest of the day at school, then go back home. I kept my eyes glued to the shoes on display the whole time, scanning the room for any other potentially interested customers. I would not leave this store without these shoes.

5 minutes later, shoes in hand, I walked to school with a grin plastered across my face. Today my life would change. No more whispers, gazes, or stares. I hastily slipped on my shoes and strode into the classroom.

Finally relieved that I got rid of their stares, I started minding my own business when I heard someone from across the room whisper my name. I spun around trying to find the source of the sound and made eye-contact with Bill. Oh no. Not him. Whenever he was

involved, a mess would almost surely follow. He started mouthing words from across the room but I couldn't make out what he was saying. Making the decision to ignore him, I went back to my work but was interrupted again by louder, much more obvious whispering.

I looked up and saw Bill waving at me, trying to get my attention....but getting everybody else's attention in the process. This is bad. Everybody was staring at me again. I could feel their eyes on me. I knew they were all whispering about me. Why was this happening? I worked so hard to fit in - to be normal despite my pathetic financial state. I could feel anger bubbling inside me as I glared at Bill, silently urging him to stop. It was a feckless attempt. I needed to stop this, now. Without another word, I turned around and walked out of the room.

I could feel my face burning from embarrassment. I heard footsteps behind me and silently swore as I realized who it was. "What happened?", Bill asked, as I turned around to face him. "Just mind your own business and leave me alone", I snapped. I was wracked with guilt as soon as I saw the expression on Bill's face. He had never looked so downhearted. "I want to help you, just tell me what's wrong!", he pleaded. I heard the bell ring and students started filing out of their classrooms into the hallways. Uh oh. If everybody saw me with Bill...what would happen then? "Jayden?", Bill asked, trying to get my attention by waving his hand in front of my face. I swatted it away and glared at him. "Just leave me alone. Don't talk to me again.", I seethed, quickly walking past him.

As I went to my next class, I couldn't bring myself to turn around and look at him. It would only weaken my resolve. Now that he's gone...the only thing left to do is fit in and I'll be normal again. People won't look at me with disgust anymore. I'll be admired. I'll be respected!

For the next few weeks, the only thing I could think about was how to get the latest phone, or the coolest shoes. Every night my mom's black wallet would be on the counter and every night I would take just a few dollars. No harm done there. Just a few dollars to spare.

My neglected homework kept piling up and my grades... well they could definitely be better. But who cares about that useless stuff? Once I get this new jacket, everybody will finally be looking at me for once.

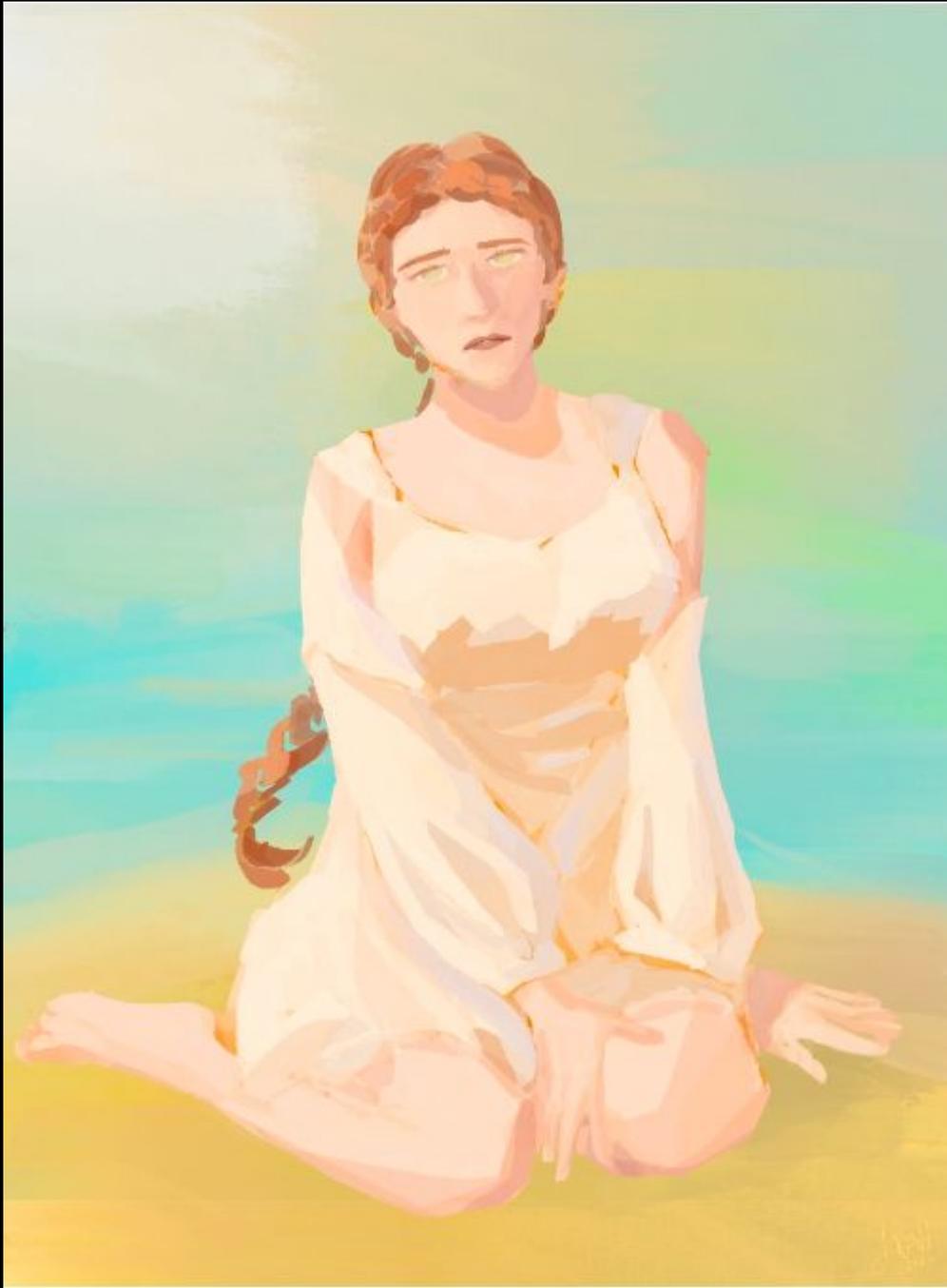
I was feeling great. Everything was going according to my plan. I just got air-pods yesterday and Bill was completely out of my life. One of the guys in my class even complimented my shoes. I was done being shunned by society. I sat down, about to start working when the teacher called me over. Yes, this was a great chance to show off the new shoes I got last week. They were the highlight of my outfit. I got up and walked over to the teacher.

“We need to talk about your grades.”, she said, her voice tinged with disappointment. She wasn’t being loud but I knew people could hear her and my heart sank. “Is there anything going on? Your grades used to be fine but now you’re barely passing. If there’s something bothering you, you can always come to me, okay?”, she said. She was ruining everything. The reputation I had worked so hard to build came shattering down. “Just mind your own business.”, I snapped, realizing how badly I messed up only after the words escaped my lips. I could feel everyone’s eyes on me, astonished at how someone would say such a thing to a teacher.

Disappointment filled the silence that hung in the air. And during that heavy silence, I realized something. All eyes were on me... just as I had wanted when I bought the latest phone or the newest shoes. But instead of their eyes being filled with admiration and respect like I dreamed, the only thing I could see in my classmates’ eyes was.....pity. Pity and shame. I could look at them no longer. I hung my head down and stared at the floor, glancing at my sneakers. The sneakers I had been so eager to show off. The sneakers I had shoved studying aside for. The sneakers I stole my mom’s money for and the ones I had sold my best friend for. I stared at them for what seemed like an eternity.

I had done so much for it, but they had done nothing except blind me. These shoes

were now the center of attention, but the wrong kind of attention. I felt everything crumble and realized that nothing had changed. It was all the same as before. Judging eyes. Subtle murmurs. Quick glances.



“Sssss...” goes the sizzling sound of oil on the plate as Amma* cooks mutton curry for dinner. Suri Pillai had just come home from another day of school and the smell of curry for dinner again disappoints him — he was expecting burgers for dinner today. Attempting to move on from this subtle inconvenience, Suri lets Amma know he’s making his way upstairs to do some “homework”, which is basically code for playing on his PS4. Hours pass as he plays until he hears the muffled sound of voices amongst the sounds of *Call of Duty*. He swiftly takes off his headphones to hear his parents fighting...again. Suri had just been reminded of a common occurrence in his Tamil household.

Ever since he could remember, his parents had fought. Not like those parents he heard about on TV or from his friends at school. No, Suri’s parents didn’t even “fight.” From what he could eavesdrop on, it seemed as if his parents only let out slight, quiet outbursts of their impatience for one another — and he never seemed to understand why.

It seemed like a perfect Tamil marriage. Suri’s parents, Tanvi and Raj Pillai had fallen in love in Sri Lanka, right before the civil war started. They had a beautiful, grand marriage in the city center of Colombo, and then had him. Although the war broke out very soon after, Suri had little memory of what had happened to his family during the war and before Appa* moved the family to America. All he knew was that it seemed as though as soon as his family moved, things weren’t the same.

**Amma: Mom in Tamil; *Appa: Dad in Tamil (language spoken by Tamil ethnic group in Sri Lanka)*

Suri decides to go downstairs to see what the hushed commotion was all about. However, as soon as he arrives, Suri is welcomed by Amma, quickly wiping tears streaming down her face and calling for him to sit at the table for dinner in a broken voice. Rice, mutton curry and lentil gravy were placed across the table with a large glass of beer in front of

Appa as the family of three sat for a tense meal. “How was your school day?” Amma blurts. Suri didn’t know what to make of this very obvious shift of topic. “Good,” he answers awkwardly. The table feels still, almost lonely, as if nobody but Suri was sitting at the table at all and his parents were simply shells of who they truly were.

Suri could not take it anymore. Day after day, his parents sat like this, acting as though nothing — something — was wrong. He knew this wasn’t how normal families act. Lucas, Suri’s best friend, and his family certainly did not act this way during their family dinner. “What was wrong with his?” he thought.

After a fulfilling dinner and yet, empty conversation with his parents, Suri sits by the television in his living room. On the bottom of the bookshelf next to the noisy television is a stack of photo albums. Suri remembers how fun it was to look at old photo albums at Lucas’ house, and wonders why he has never opened his family’s own. With the sudden urge to skim through them, Suri picks up the first one on the stack. He goes through photos and photos of wedding photos. “Amma and Appa look happy,” he thinks. In one of the photos, he sees a picture of his old house in Sri Lanka — *60 Chapel Street*. Although Suri remembered little of his life before moving to America, he still vividly remembers his small beige-pink house like it was yesterday. This monument of Suri’s life in Sri Lanka was smaller than his American apartment but was filled with paintings, toys and 2000s Bollywood movie posters. While nostalgic images flourish in his mind, Suri is suddenly confronted with the feeling of heat, like the hot Sri Lankan air on a dark night.

The heat still stings on his back as Suri is taken back to his childhood in Sri Lanka. He’s in his old backyard with the family dog, Idli - named after Suri’s favorite Tamil dish. It’s nighttime and the bright stars are out. The sounds of crickets chirping calm him as he plays with his dog in the yard. All of a sudden, Suri hears a bang on the brass gate of his house. He approaches the gate to hear a man, his neighbor, speaking to him in Tamil: “Suri! Where are

your parents? They're burning the entire block down! Get out now!"

Suri, stunned, stands paralyzed. At the age of four, the words his neighbor told him were ones he could not comprehend. Feeling lost, he does not listen to his neighbor but instead, runs the other way and hides underneath the covers of his bed. Soon enough, the sound of a tank approaching his house wakes up Amma. In a panicked whisper, she grabs Suri out of his bed and begs a drowsy Raj to get up. Another bang on the gate was let out, but this time, from a tall man in green, camouflage suit - a soldier. He screams for Suri's parents as he breaks through the gate. Suri watches as his mother is taken by yet another soldier and his father is pushed into the back of the house. Suri is left, now alone in his parent's room.

A few minutes of yelling, watches and jewelry being thrown across the room and paintings crashing off the wall, feel like hours as young Suri cries. Soon, Raj comes back, with Tanvi in tears, to collect Suri. The soldiers are gone, but the house is ransacked. All of Raj's most prized possessions, including his honorable stamp collection, are gone. Raj explains to Tanvi that he gave everything to the two men in exchange for minutes of grace. "They'll be coming back soon," Raj hurriedly exclaimed, "we must leave now!"

Suri suddenly feels shaken into place by Amma. She has tears in her eyes as Suri had seen years ago, but they are shallow and weary now. Amma takes the photo album out of Suri's lap and puts it away. She tells Suri to go back to bed, appearing exhausted—but still wide-awake. As Suri walks up the stairs, obeying Amma's orders, he thinks about his family and understands. He understands why his family never talks about home and the turmoil between them. Why Appa drinks every evening and why Amma can't ever seem to fall asleep. He understands why the Pillai's will never return to 60 Chapel Street.

Am I good enough for you?

I ask as mountains of papers tower on my desk,
mindless hands working endless hours;
Fingers prance the keys as digits pour out and
Strained eyes watch the blue screen in pitch black.
With an incoming headache, I sigh
Glancing at the clock which looms before me
Front row seats to my adolescent years,
Plunging through the cracks of time.
And so I watch as another hour of my life passes by.
And another,
And another,
And another.

Am I good enough for you?

I ask as an anxious mind works with apprehensive hands
Gliding across the strings of carved wood.
Note after note, strung as silk,
Performing a tune as old as the instrument rehearsed
Before piercing the melody with a disarranged note.
Oh so discouraged, a frown overtakes my passive face
So I play again,
And Again,
And Again.

Am I Good Enough for You? / MiRan Bogedain

Am I good enough for you?

I ask as chants of “more” reverberate through my mind, and

A lost passion fills my schedule.

My body collapses into my desk, eyes scorning foreign words that should feel familiar

Shaking hands thumb through worn textbooks,

Flashes of bright highlights and scribbled notes peek through the pages.

Korean eyes look at Korean words with an American heart

So I try so hard to understand, to learn, to speak

I try,

I try,

And try.

Am I good enough for you?

I ask as disheartened eyes peek at the figure before me

Same downcast eyes, same disheveled hair, same furrowed face

Same reflection of regret and never ending anxiety

I try to rub away my tiredness like I rub away my makeup

I closed my eyes and try to disappear, but

When I open them back up, head spinning from the fluorescent lights

I find the same look of daze as before.

Will I ever be good enough for you?

I ask instead, and

I await the answer

I wait,

I wait,

And wait.

But it never comes



Time was nigh brutal in its utter lack of stagnancy. The perceived injustice lay, perhaps, in the notion that it would be. Only once it had slipped away, lost to a strange mirage one may wearily refer to as “the past,” would there be any resolution. Resolution, however, was not absolution.

Unfortunately, this was where Vincent Cavelridge found himself, sitting in a disgustingly comfortable blue chair, rocking back and forth, back and forth.

I am a son, he wrote determinedly, glass fountain pen swishing over crisp parchment. In his boyhood, his mother would tie his left hand behind his back, ensuring that he would learn to write with his right. His handwriting still looked quite atrocious, however, and he had never quite taken to it as she had hoped.

But boyhood passed, and with it, so did a piece of him. What piece, he wasn't quite sure, but that probably meant he was unworthy of it.

After all, he had failed his mother, just as he had many others.

He hastily crossed out the words, spilling ink all over the once off-white color of the parchment. Sometimes, he wished memories would be as easy to be rid of, *swish swish*, and then gone. Then again, he had little else left, so where would he be without them?

It took a few moments to figure out what else he could be. It was more or less like assembling a picture: he no longer knew who he was, just a broken sack of bones and flesh on a too-warm patio, and so he'd take shattered remnants of his past and piece them together. Perhaps he'd even end up with a semi-functional human being at the end.

He snorted at the thought, but continued nonetheless. He didn't know whether it was desperation or true enlightenment that made him press forward. Oh, who was he kidding? Within the confines of his own mind, what had he to hide? The former was true, and the latter a thought of pure folly and nothing more.

He sighed, and re-dipped the pen in the inkwell, knowing it likely that the ink had already partially dried. This was the price for his preference in writing utensils.

I am a soldier, he wrote, just beneath his previous statement. He even underlined it twice, in the hope that his feigned firmness would somehow make him into the fighter he had once been.

And what a fighter he had been! Or... that would be what he would prefer to believe, at least.

He had been far from the frontlines, in all honesty. The war he had fought had been on a political scale, with icy detachment his only shield. He'd gathered intelligence for his nation then, a spy of unparalleled skill.

When he wasn't so terrified he was on the verge of wetting his pants, he had felt like a fraud – which he was. That, and a mustache-twirling villain – which, unfortunately enough, he was not.

He had most certainly pretended he was, back then. He'd sit in the privacy of his room, swirling a glass of wine for hours and petting his imaginary mustache. But alas, all good things in his life came to a rather abrupt and unwanted end.

Vincent had been forced to flee that country after a revolution that shook its hierarchy to its very roots. He would not wish, after all, to have his head spiked on a spear. What vicious countrymen!

He would not, however, deny that the monarch and nobility had absolutely deserved it. Their cheese was atrocious, and that was to say nothing of their seemingly arbitrary taxes!

On a much lighter note, he had – after many years of effort – eventually grown a mustache, though it drooped sadly at the tips instead of popping up and defying gravity.

With what would have been a pout on any other man, Vincent crossed out yet another statement. Perhaps part of him had wanted to be a soldier at one point. But wanting and being were not one and the same, just as being and having been were not the same.

I am a husband, he wrote instead, underneath all the phrases he had crossed off.

Indeed, he had been. He'd met the woman he would one day call "wife" as a haggard young man, fraught with nightmares and half-buried memories. Escaping a crowd that called for one's blood tended to have such an effect.

No matter how he tried to blame that awful cheese for his trauma, he still couldn't quite leave the gut-wrenching fear behind.

She had found him empty-eyed, having lost something deep, deep inside that would make someone truly whole. His Alina had not been a gentle woman. She did not try to sweetly coax him out of his shell with honeyed words that never would have reached him. Instead, she'd pulled him to his feet and demanded he perform chores around the inn she'd inherited from her father. He had been aghast at first. After all, who would ever force a customer into menial tasks?

But strangely, it pulled him out of his stupor faster than anything else could have. The work gave him purpose again. It became his distraction. A reason for continuing.

For though Alina was far from gentle, she had been wiser than any he had ever known, and kinder by far. She saw things, he soon realized, things that he would never have thought of; would never have even considered.

There had been... an *intent* behind her every action, and he had found that entrancing.

They had been married in a chapel overlooking the sea. She had playfully rolled her eyes at the unnecessary ceremony of it all, but there had been a joyous thrum to her that betrayed her true feelings on the matter.

Then his nation had come for him, to dispose of a now-useless spy. He knew too much, and they were better off without the looming possibility of his interference. He'd lost a wife that day, though he supposed he had also lost himself.

I suppose I am more widower than husband, he thought to himself.

But something... something stopped him from writing those words. His father had once told him, all those years ago, that when someone died, he was mourning the piece of himself

that he had given over to them.

He wondered how much he could lose and still be considered alive. What did that mean, anyway? Were a beating heart and working lungs enough? Or was it something deeper, more conceptual in its existence?

He gave a humorless, near maniacal chuckle. He supposed that was why he couldn't bear to write the words: he was a dead man walking. If he'd died that night, how could he be a widower?

So, violently digging his pen into the previous words, he wrote instead: *I am a corpse*. Immediately, he crossed the words out.

How dare he? Alina had spent so much time piecing him back together, how dare he toss back that gift?

He crushed the pen in his grip, glass shards flying everywhere. The day had slipped away from him, and the sun had set. Cold seeped into his bones, but it was no match to the cold that had seeped into whatever shriveled thing remained of his heart. And the heat on his palm. The slippery warmth of his own blood as it dripped down his hand and onto the patio.

Drip.

Drip.

Drip.

He was not alive. He was not dead. He was neither son, nor soldier, nor husband. Not any longer. He just... was. There should have been a beauty to it. To the simple matter of survival.

He found only shame.

If he could not live with what he is, perhaps, instead of looking at what he was, he could look at what he could be. He felt he understood, finally. This. *This* was the reason why he remained. For without simply being, without a breathing body, he could not move

forward.

Time was, after all, far from stagnant. Neither, it seemed, was he.

He wrote the last statement in his own blood, bringing surprisingly steady fingers to the wound.

I am still here.

