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# Table of Contents

1. *Umbrella*, Zoë Haggard ‘17  
6. *Kodak Photos*, Julianne Freeman ‘17  
7. *Blue Stars*, Nate Handleman ‘17  
8. *Fortune*, Nate Handleman ‘17  
14. *Insect Studies*, Chichi Wu ‘18  
15. *Sestina: Salt-Water Faerie*, Laetitia West ‘18  
17. *Girlhood*, Laetitia West, ‘18  
18. *No Tomato*, Eric Andrews ‘17  
24. *Bird*, Michaela McCormack ‘19  
25. *Marionette*, Julianne Freeman ‘17  
35. *Flower Study*, Richard Fu ‘20  
36. *Yellow*, Celine Pak ‘17  
37. *In Nomine Patris*, Laetitia West ‘18  
41. *At Sunset*, Laetitia West ‘18  
42. *Seated Figures*, Caty Maloney ‘18, Nelly Lin-Schweitzer ‘17  
43. *Broken Smile*, Nate Handleman ‘17  
47. *Efflorescence*, Julianne Freeman ‘17  
50. Shakespearean Sonnets: Annie Burgett, Grace McDonough ‘19
51  *Monkey*, Ryder Comollo ’19

52  *A Perfect Night at Orange Tree Bus Stop*, Zoë Haggard ’17

56  *Dear Mrs. McClellan*, Laetitia West ’18

57  *Giant Shoulders*, Laetitia West ’18

58  *Masks*, Anonymous

59  *Window*, Nikola Dobrev ’20

60  *A Short Poem about Poetry*, Max Agigian ’19

62  *For Tabitha*, Allison Pellegrino ’19

64  *Wrong and Right*, Nate Handleman ’17

65  *Dark and Final Dive*, Laetitia West ’18
Editors’ Note

Dear Readers:

It is our pleasure to present to you the 2017 issue of The Muse, an annual literary magazine that is the product of the creative talents of the students of BU Academy. We have worked hard to bring you this year’s magazine, and we’re thrilled we managed to pull it all together just at the year’s busy end.

We would like to thank all of our fellow Lit Maggers for making this year a success. Without their commitment to the club, their hard work, and their incredible literary talent, all of this would not have been possible. Next, we would like to thank Dr. Proll for everything she has done for us. She has gone above and beyond to give us the best year possible, and it has paid off. We would also like to thank Julie Gallagher for putting together all of the beautiful magazines she has created for the club over the years. Finally, we would like to thank you, our readers, for all of your love and support. Without you, this magazine would have no meaning.

Although we have only been with the magazine for two years, it is more than safe to say that our BUA experience would not have been the same without Lit Mag. It is sad to say goodbye, but we know that the members of the grades below us will do a great job in future years. We hope you enjoy this year’s edition of The Muse.

—Nate and Julianne
Rain, rain. It never seems to go away.

I check my phone. 8:37.

Another day of overtime, huh. Maybe the second--or is it the third?--time this week. Recently, I haven’t been able to remember anything too well: yesterday, or the day before, last week, or two weeks ago. September has slipped by in a blur of sweat and clouds. I guess it just doesn’t feel like September. It’s too green, too hot, and too rainy. This September doesn’t have the crispness of fall. July lingers too much over this city: over its people, its trash cans, and its freeways. The air, over-steeped and bitter, is a mix of ozone, steam, and salt. There’s no wind to come and blow it away.

“Too much rain,” “It’s going to rain tomorrow, too!”, “Floods? That much rain? Must be the second coming.” Rain, rain, rain: that’s all anyone ever talks about now. The weather reports, for one, are everywhere: at work, at cafés, on the radio. The news revolves around meteorologists; every story is strangled by the rain: “There was a robbery on Fifth last night; two were injured,” “More showers tomorrow,” “A landslide took out two homes last night, but no one was seriously hurt,” “More rain to come tonight,” “Rosewood Animal Shelter to shut down due to lack of funding,” “Some thunderstorms arriving this evening!” It’s all I ever hear.

Above the city—above me—I can make out the moon attempting to rise above the mist. Its grey beams shine and refract through the veil of water, creating a diluted moon, a nebulous salt-and-pepper image.

I haven’t seen the moon clearly in a long time, thanks to this rain and these clouds. You never see the stars in the city, so I don’t miss them. But the moon’s almost always there. It’s nice to look for it every night, a scavenger hunt of sorts. It’s a surprise to see it, shining above buildings, when I had forgotten about it during the day.

But, I guess, at least it isn’t pouring.

It had rained—well, down-poured—in late-afternoon. Lucey had gotten stuck out without an umbrella for the twenty-second time this week. She ran back in through the glass doors, hands over her head, yelling all sorts of profanities. Her hair was plastered to her forehead and her limbs were noodles,
overcooked and salty. She thundered through the office, livid, telling everyone about the “damn rain.” It was funny the first time it’d happened.

The ground’s still soaked from today’s showers. “Plonk,” “plip,” “pop!” My sneakers slap against the concrete, stomping in tune to “Ballet of the Unhatched Chicks.” The beat doesn’t stop; puddles are everywhere. My jacket rubs against my damp skin and sticks to my arms. The salt and humidity of the air sours up my eyes and mouth. My hand picks at my face and eyes.

I need to buy medicine. Hell isn’t ice. It’s rain. And humidity.

The chicks stop dancing, and I’m on the ground, swimming in a two-inch puddle. By the feel of it, my butt’s bruised all colors of the rainbow. My elbow stings, too. I prop my body up and pull on my jacket. My face and clothes drip into the pool: drip . . . drip . . . I wipe my face, but only succeed in making myself more wet. I sit there, in the kiddie-pool of a puddle: a wet towel hung out to dry in the rain.

I sigh.

Water’s everywhere: on my shoulders and legs; in my lungs, throat, and my ears. My socks slip against my soles. As I struggle up, a soft drip-drop-drizzle hits my hair.

Just my luck.

You can’t escape this rain: it’s persistent, stalking. Just when you think it’s safe, high tide comes and sweeps away your castle to sand, stone, and seaweed.

My hands search my bag for my red umbrella. No luck. I must’ve thrown it when I fell. I scour the sidewalk of the bridge. I look into the steel supports, over the railing, and into the river. Nothing. Nada. There’s no sign of the red, pocket-sized devil. There’s only the dark, the haze, and the choppy waters a hundred feet below.

My head rolls back.

That was an expensive umbrella: $30.99. I got it after work one evening because it was going to rain the next morning. I had broken down laughing when I saw it on the shelf. It was scarlet and covered in plastic sequins. A disco-ball for the modern age. I took it to work the next day, to show the office. A few noticed. Becca laughed, then returned to her work. Shu shook his head and sighed. Peter looked at it, blinked, and scurried away,
muttering something I couldn’t hear. Every day since the rain started I’ve used that umbrella. The joke has just become my umbrella.

My nostrils twitch and then sting, detecting a sharp smell in the air, mingling with the water, fumes, and heat. It’s a hot, burning smell, and kind of vinegary. Like formaldehyde and wool put into a fireplace. Something’s on fire: that much I can tell. Plastic, maybe? The fumes coat my tongue, sour and cottony. Disgusting. This city is going to ruins. I cover my face and make my way across the bridge as fast as I can.

Then I see her: a ghost under an LED canopy. She sits on a bench, holding a lighter and something—red? Burning something?

I squint. Lord, she’s burning my umbrella. This city really is going to ruins.

My feet splash over to her.


Her shoulders dart up and she looks me straight on, surprised. In the lights, her face is a mix of shadows and blue. She holds a lighter in her left hand and my umbrella in the other. A sour and biting smell permeates the air and rain.

Her voice echoes across the puddles.

“Is this your umbrella? It’s hideous. A nine-year old’s heaven.”

“It is . . .”

My eyes fall to the melting sequins. They are smooth and frayed at the edges, like badly cut nails, and bathed in the same blue, shadowy light.

She pats the seat next to her.

“Sit down, if you want. This’ll take a while. I’m fixing it. The fabric was ripped from the spine when I found it near the bench. I’m mend—well, trying to mend it.”

She goes back to her work. The flame licks the plastic, melting it back around the umbrella’s limbs.

I sit down next to her and my hands weave together.

“Thanks.”
The flame, flickering like a moth, burns away at the umbrella. Water rolls around us, sluggish and heavy.

Drip . . .
Dri-p . . .
Dr-o-p.

She interrupts the rain.

“So do you live near here? I live just down the street, near the highway. Kind of noisy, but the rent sure is cheap.”

“I live down near Little. I’m walking home right now.”

“That’s a nice neighborhood, right? Lots of grass. Dogs—yeah—lots of dogs too. Do you have a dog?”

I glance at her and shake my head. Her eyes are trained on me, but her hands still work with a flash of red.

“No. No, but I wish. My apartment doesn’t allow dogs. Also, I work too much to be able to take good care of one. If I could though . . . I’d get a big retriever. A honey colored one. Probably name it something stupid, like Periwinkle, or Madison, or Papaya.”

“Papaya?” She snorted. “Have to be honest, though, that name really is neat.”

The pitter-patter of rain reaches my ears every odd moment, like the quick footfalls of a cat running off to hide behind a couch, only to emerge seconds later.

“The rain is very nice today, right? I’ve always thought it sounds like birds clicking along to nursery songs. ‘Row, row, your boat’ kind of stuff. It’s kind of funny, once you think about it.”

I see her mouth up-turn and she begins to hum something familiar but out of tune; it’s something out of early school days: a time when everyone sat on multi-colored mats, cheering and clapping, but slightly out of sync and off key.

I shake out the rain from my hair and turn to my hands. My feet are sopping, my pants and jacket chafe, and my eyes burn from the humidity. All around us, the air smells of pickled melon and sour patch.
Out of the corner of my eye, I see a glimpse of her and my poor umbrella. That thing’s a monstrosity. It looks like a sequined red house spider.

I can’t help but laugh.

“Huh, what an idea.”
Kodak Photographs

Kodak photographs: scattered remnants of abandoned specters shrouded in dust. One innocent face, familiar, foreign, beams through the gateway to her fate.

Curled hair, a trove of spun gold, tangled, bedraggled, beautiful. Won’t be long before it is torn and split by sharp bristles, willing it to be as it ought.

Blue eyes twinkle, wide, wondering: cerulean torches painting porcelain sand. When was it that the camera first betrayed a hint of ash in those sapphire embers?

Flush lips curve upward, parted, revealing tiny crooked chalk-white teeth. Won’t be long before they close forever, ashamed of the imperfection they reveal.

Naked little body, exposed to the world with unabashed pride, plump and free. When did that confident air first begin to crumble in the face of its own reflection?

An array of expressions, each unique, disclose their mirthful origins in a lively display. Won’t be long before that vibrant girl becomes nothing more than a “used to be.”
Blue Stars

For near an hour I sat alone
on those taller rocks,
those regal branches
jutting out and over the vastness of the sea
until I no longer needed silence.
So I pointed at the blinking stars
in the water, glowing
blue in the waves that bashed
the rugged barnacles below,
reaching their liquid fingers to me.

I tried to wake our old man, friendship,
with a question whose reply I did not need.
He spends a waterfall asleep,
and only creeks awake,
but that night when he rose to catch a Star,
Island magic still clung to East Rock,
pulling its sacred questions to us,
and filling the hour with more than the sea.
Ron stepped off the train and into the early morning smog of the city. A tall man in a tan suit and fedora pushed past him, hitting him in the shin with his silver briefcase, sending a spike of pain through his leg. He winced with each step. He had a moment of 

*deja vu,* but it passed quickly. As he limped across the street, the sign for Madam Kronöble’s little shop came into view through the fog. He smiled through the pain. This was his last chance for guidance. Maybe she could lead him down the right path.

The sign was mostly purple. Its letters were a rusty brown, faded from red over the years. The “ö” in her name was a crystal ball with two yellow eyes above it. The eyes stared past the ball, returning his gaze. He walked up the steps and knocked gently on the door. “Com een,” a strong yet fragile voice called to him. A bell chimed when he creaked the door open. The store was narrow, squeezed between the two adjacent buildings as if it were going to pop out at any moment. Shelves lined the walls on either side, making the place even more claustrophobic. There wasn’t an inch of unused space. There were jars filled with strange, squishy things, books written in languages he wasn’t sure existed, unlit candles, old brass jewelry, various rocks and gems of different colors. On one shelf sat two eyes that looked suspiciously human. The place smelled of smoke, which was undoubtedly due to the countless sticks of lit incense. Despite the excessive smokiness, Ron had no trouble breathing. An old woman sat behind a counter at the far end of the room. She had a black robe on. On either hand she had a ring on her thumb. The one on the left was white, the other black. She wore no other jewelry.

“No, actually. My friend, Ted—Ted Swanson—sent me. He said I’d settle a debt you two had.”

“Aha!” Madam Kronöble smiled, “then so you do! He called me not but a day ago, saying you would com. Quite a friend. Quite a friend, indeed.” Her eyes gleamed for just a second, then returned to normal. “What iss it that you seek, Ron?” She casually sorted some papers and adjusted some items that were set about the counter.
“Well,” he spoke softly, “I’m seeking guidance. My future is currently… ‘Unclear’ felt like a bigger understatement than ‘house fires are too bad.’ “I need a fresh start, and I’m looking for a place to begin.”

“Wonderful, darling, wonderful. Sometimes the only way to deal with grief is to leave it all behind.” Ron fiddled with his ring and looked down.

“Oh. . . I didn’t realize that Ted—”

“Don’t be silly, darling, Ted told me nothing.” She smiled at the look of awe on his face. “Come with me, darling.” She unlatched the hinged portion of the counter, and walked past him to lock the door and flip the sign at the window to ‘Closed.’ Then she walked into a back room behind the counter and beckoned him. He followed her in. It was a large square room with one shelf in the back. On it were a number of boxes, some labeled with things like ‘Ouija’; others were unmarked. In the center of the room was a circular table with a black tablecloth that almost touched the floor. In the middle sat a crystal ball held in place by an intricately decorated silver base. A fan whirred in the corner. He wondered why. It wasn’t particularly hot, even in the other room. “For the smoke, darling,” she said. “Makes it hard to concentrate.” Ron nodded. She gestured to a seat he hadn’t noticed before. He sat down across from her. She clapped and the lights dimmed. Waving her hands over the now glowing sphere, Madam Kronöble began to mutter to herself. The swirling mist inside the ball cast strange shadows on the table. She frowned and opened her eyes. “Perhaps something else, darling. Give me your hands.”

“I’m not sure that will work, Madam.” He showed her his burnt and blistered palms. She frowned.

“Forgive me, darling. Perhaps we shall try the cards.” Ron nodded in agreement. She walked over to the shelf and retrieved a small white plastic box. She handed it to him. “You must open,” she said, waving her hand at him. He did. She took a stack of cards from the pile. Their backs were decorated with a wizard wearing a blue cloak. His sleeve was covering half his face; the other half was smiling mischievously. She spread the cards out in ten stacks of five. “Pick any ten, darling,” she whispered as if she didn’t want the cards to hear her. He picked one from the fifth pile and turned it over. It was a Grim Reaper. Its sockets were pitch black, and it held its scythe in the most cartoonish, least menacing way possible. Ron looked up at her, concerned. She tried to reassure him: “that isn’t necessarily a
bad thing, my dear. It’s all about the order.” He nervously picked up the
next card. It was a baby wrapped in cloth. It was held in a faceless mother’s
arms. Her sleeves were pink. The next card showed a pile of gold. The next
was a weeping man with a knife in his back, his body thrown over a rock.
Next was a phoenix, newly risen from a pile of ashes. When he turned over
that card, Madam Kronöble gasped, “I wonder . . . .” She saw that he had
stopped, and waved him on, almost too eagerly. He turned over the next
card slowly. There was an intricately detailed depiction of an hourglass. It
was clearly in the middle of being turned, slanted, all the sand at the top. It
was golden, with a triangular base. Each corner had a claw-like hook at the

“I thought you said—”

“Don’t you think I know what I said, boy?” she snapped. Ron was taken
aback. She leaned over the table, and her eyes gleamed yellow above
the crystal ball, just as in the sign. “The fates have granted you a rare
opportunity.” Ron raised an eyebrow. “I must warn you: it may cost you a
great deal more.” He shifted uncomfortably.

“I only have enough to pay you for this and the train.”

She let her head fall back as she laughed. “No, darling, not like that.” She
walked to the back of the room, removing a box from one of the shelves,
but not opening it. She reached back and pushed on something. A series of
metallic clicks came from the wall. Then, she replaced the box and removed
another from one shelf down. She reached back and retrieved a small metal
case, about the size of two decks of cards stacked on top of each other. It
was locked with a combination, which she put in, and the lid swung open.
Immediately the ceiling was ablaze in dancing blue, like light reflecting
off a swimming pool. Madam Kronöble turned off the fan in the corner,
and the room was submerged in silence. She carefully placed the case on
the edge of the table, then removed the crystal ball, and put it on one of
the shelves. She returned to the table and pushed the case to the center.
“Go ahead,” she whispered in a small voice, “take a look.” Ron leaned over
slightly to see what was inside.

It was a blue cube. On each edge there was a small golden rim, as if it were
a cage holding back the power that so eagerly swirled about inside the
cube. And there was power in the cube. He wasn’t trained in any sort of
mystic arts, but he didn’t need to be. Each side was black, with a glowing
blue design in the middle. “Like a die?” Madam Kronöble nodded, then quietly said, “A very special die, darling. You came here seeking guidance, but I can offer your future more than that.”

“What do you mean?” He was intrigued, but the power pouring into the room from the die terrified him.

“Do you think I am a fake, Ron?”

“I sure hope not, Madam.”

“Let me tell you something, child. The powers I use come from far beyond this world. I do not create them. I harness them. This die. . . This die contains power I cannot control. You may roll it, but if you do, your fate is in your hands. It will do much more than guide you. It is the creator of future, but it can destroy just as well.” Ron considered the nearly empty wallet in his pocket.

“I don’t have a future to destroy,” he said grimly, as he reached for the glowing cube. She caught his hand, then looked at him, almost with sorrow.

He made a weak attempt to smile and asserted, “I’m not afraid.” He picked it up by the golden trim, and examined each side. There was a skull, a baby, a pile of coins, a knife, a phoenix, and an hourglass. He weakly let the die fall from his hand. Time seemed to slow down. It bounced once—coins—and the past flashed before him.

***

Ron’s heart was racing. Just minutes ago he had bought a scratch ticket, and now he was staring in awe at the winning numbers. With this much cash, he and Julie could finally buy a house; they could start their family. Hell, he might even quit drinking.

It bounced again: baby.

***

He stared into the crib, holding Julie’s hand. He couldn’t remember a happier moment in his life. “She has your eyes,” he whispered.

“She has your nose,” she whispered back. They kissed once and then just smiled.
“Call 911!” She screamed as she ran into the blazing house. He picked up his cell phone, dialing madly. How could this have happened? They were only gone a few minutes. The neighbors were rushing out of their doors, gasping.

“911, what’s your emergency?”

“My house is on fire! 85 Smallbrook Lane. Please, hurry.”

“Are you inside your house, sir?”

“No, but my wife is, she’s getting our daughter out.”

“Firefighters have been dispatched, sir. Please remain calm, and don’t go in after your wife.” The call ended. He pocketed his phone and began to pace back and forth frantically. Wood creaked, and he could see that part of the upper floor would fall soon. Racing to the door, he shouted his wife’s name. The doorknob was hot, but he frantically pulled at it, ignoring the pain. He felt his neighbor’s hands pulling him away as he heard the top floor collapse.

Bounce: the knife. Ron recalled the card with the man sprawled over the rock, knife in his back.

Then he saw something that wasn’t a memory, at least not his. Ted was sitting across from Madam Kronöble. Blue light filled the room, and the die lay on the table with the knife facing up. There was a violent voice, not Ted’s, and not quite hers, but similar. “You must betray a friend, or be mine.”

“Your friend?”

“No. Let me show you.” She pressed her finger against his forehead. Almost instantly he began screaming.

“Okay,” he said. “What do you want me to do?”

“Try Madam Kronöble,” Ted said, as he handed Ron her business card. “She pointed me in the right direction.”
Ron’s eyes widened as the die finally landed with the hourglass facing upwards. He slowly turned his gaze up to meet her glowing yellow eyes. “You were right, after all. You have no future,” she hissed in the voice from the vision. Tendrils of smoke slithered in from under the curtain, wrapping his wrists and ankles tightly, immobilizing him. He didn’t struggle. He was tired of fighting this impossible battle. As the smoke engulfed him completely, he recalled eternity, but it was too late to scream.

***

Ron stepped off the train and into the early morning smog of the city. A tall man in a tan suit and fedora pushed past him, hitting him in the shin with his silver briefcase, sending a spike of pain through his leg. He winced with each step. He had a moment of urgent *deja vu*, but it passed quickly. As he limped across the street, the sign for Madam Kronöble’s little shop came into view through the fog. He smiled through the pain. This was his last chance for guidance. Maybe she could lead him down the right path.
Insect Studies
Sestina: Salt-Water Faerie

He cried: oh, lost changeling boy,
Fare thee well upon the bitter marshes,
Or ‘neath the roots of long-lived dying woods,
And leave this place beloved long of man.
Go find thy home among the forest fae.
Thou hast no place below the church bell’s ring.

Does he hear elf’s laughter ring—
Could I be the long-lost foundling boy?
’Twas heard he headed East to find the fae,
Hid in the salt seas and dying marshes,
And long subsumed his memories of man.
He found himself a kinship in the woods.

Why run East to the North woods?
There one hears the devil’s laughter ring
In gleeful, aching, mockery of man.
Could they save the ageless chaos boy
From the home he built along the marshes
There in that strange country of the fae?

Save this poor child from the fae,
From the things that walk in night-time woods,
Bring him back from the saltwater marshes,
From that strange and fleeting fairy ring.
He is but a queerly well-misguided boy.
Coax him back into the company of man.
Guide the elf. Make him a man.
Remove the eldritch lessons of the fae.
Then, you will find that hidden human boy
Who lies among the creatures of the woods.
Ignore his mocking of your shepherd’s ring,
That is but the sickness of the marshes.

I say: there will remain, in marshes,
The devil’s son; I have no kin in man.
I scorn the land of the hypocrite’s ring,
And need no rescue from the gentle fae.
Stay gone, old men, from mine own field and woods,
Where ne’er again there be a godly boy.
Girlhood

i.
a doll with cracks in her pale china face
sneers in miniature lace and finery. her painted-on eyes
gaze with gleeful envy on the other forgotten,
and she plots futilely to steal her double’s hair,
for hers has gone all knotted, matted, dirty now,
without a dutiful child to brush and braid it pretty.

ii
a wilted plastic flower sits in an empty vase,
and the cherry checkered tablecloth has long begun to fade,
yet the moldy dinner setting is so beautifully displayed
that who can understand why her daughter ran away?

iii
i can see her asking santa claus,
“who changed my girl to a toy soldier?
this is not what i asked my mother for.”
she would i wore dresses still,
did my hair in bows,
and found joy, not terror,
in clothes laid out in rows.
i am the doll she ordered;
she’s unhappy with her lot.
she chose for me to come to be,
a truth that she forgot.
No Tomato

I’ve hated February ever since I moved here. The sun can’t quite decide whether it wants to come or go, and it hangs in the sky teasing me with whispers of summer to come. There’s never enough snow to justify closing the shop, but there are never enough customers to make it worth opening. Its gloom covers the town, dragging even the happiest of moments into the gutter to be beaten into submission by the hard heel of the planet’s motion. That February sun filters through windows I’m always too bored to clean, coming to a dreary end on the dusty surfaces of tables I can’t muster the energy to wipe down.

“I’ll have a BLT, no lettuce, no tomato,” he said, breaking me out of my meditations. My ears picked up on the order, and without consulting my brain, my hands went into action assembling his sandwich. The whole time I worked, his eyes watched from beneath a mountainous brow. The bacon was done by the time my brain came to, firing off orders to hands that were still acting a couple dozen seconds ahead of it. By the time the two were aligned, the sandwich was done and in its basket. I knew I’d fluffed the order, but the last thing I was going to do was waste ingredients on a new sandwich. They’re scarce enough as is. With all the care of a neurosurgeon after a twenty-four hour shift, I peeled off the top slice of bread and extracted the soggy plants. I proffered the sloppy result to the man behind the counter and was met with a subtle smile.

“I’m sorry: I seem to have forgotten my card at home. Is cash all right?” he said, hushed. “You’d understand,” he added with a look. His accent was hard to place, but it was far from local. I nodded and cajoled the cash register into opening. It squealed in protest, but offered no real resistance. I suddenly became nervous that some other customer might walk in while I performed the cabalistic ritual of counting out physical change, but for once February worked in my favor; we remained alone in the store.

I closed up shortly after he left. There was little point keeping it open once the Finders started rolling through streets long since abandoned by the feeble sun. Their presence spooked even the most upstanding of native citizens, the tortured howls and foreboding figures sensed through the deep-set windows of their massive rattling wagons stirring a primal instinct to flee that bypassed entirely any notions of a fight. Their constant
motion set a melancholy tone for the city, the dirge of ever-turning wheels a backdrop for fearful nights.

The next day it snowed, a miserable grey excuse for snow. What it lacked in luster it more than made up for in quantity; from my room above the shop I could see the deep ruts the wagons of the night before had carved through the snow, speckled with blood and fear and the broken shards of their occupants’ hope. I contemplated just staying in my room, keeping the shop door locked and my quilt pulled up around me, an impenetrable bastion against the evils of winter and the world. Habit, however, is never so easily put down by comfort; I found myself dressed and behind the counter as the bells stumbled their way through nine dismal clangs.

The man from the day before was back early that afternoon, eyes performing a valiant vanguard action against submitting to sleep’s embrace. He placed the same order as before, and on a whim I made it the same roundabout way. He chuckled a little as I furtively hunted down his change.

“You know,” he said, “You’re the first person to have ever made one of these damn things right.”

That was our longest exchange in the year he frequented my shop. He always placed the same order, and I always made it the same way. He always seemed far more tired than anything else, and I wondered what robbed him of his sleep, but it wasn’t my place to ask; he gave me money and I gave him food in the sacred rite of commerce, never exchanging more than pleasantries. He ate his food and vanished before the sun dropped in its inevitable cue for the Finders to fire up whatever infernal engines powered their grisly wagons. I never even caught his name.

The other thing about February is the bitter inescapability of it. There is no victory against an enemy who will not give up; eleven months can go by, and at the end of them, the wretched month is back again for another spiteful outburst of intolerable drudgery. It was back again that year, just as regular as my nameless customer. He was always tired, but that day he seemed on the verge of collapse, stumbling through the door with a flurry of yesterday’s snow. Had I not known his order, it would have been imperceptible over his slurring; I was unsurprised when he fell asleep at his table. I was tempted to roust him, aid him on his way to wherever he hid in the hours of the night, but habit kept me back; I take their money, and they take my food. Nothing more, nothing less.
The light started to fade, the sun making its weak retreat after a pathetic day’s work. Off in the distance, the groans of the wheels began, and outside my grimy windows the silhouettes of citizens started to hurry, setting their heads into the cold and their course for home. I was on the verge of going to wake the man, but he seemed so peaceful that it would be a shame to.

The Finders were out in force that night, heavy wheels slicing slushy ruts in the snow. Once more my instinct was to wake the man, show him the back door where he could escape Them. Some awful perversion of the will stayed my hand, caught my voice in my throat, and I went upstairs to my soft warm bed. As I drifted off, I sensed the presence of one of those wagons outside my door, wheels still and silent.

I have never slept more soundly than I did that night.

Morning came again, dragging me out of bed into a strangely cold room. I checked the windows—sometimes they come loose in the night and swing wide of their own accord—but they were shut fast. I tried to pretend everything was normal. I dressed, and, as the bells sounded their dolorous notes, went downstairs.

I had been expecting a scene of utter destruction, with blood and cloth and betrayal flung everywhere. My shop, however, was unchanged; the tables and chairs were all laid out as neatly as they had been the evening before and the pale morning light trickled through my filthy windows as it does every February morning. I sat down behind the counter, and watched the sporadic shadows of people flit past my windows. Each one made my heart leap, set my hands into action reaching for the bread and bacon, but they all passed by. As the shadows grew long and the wailing of the wheels sounded out across the city, my head sank to the counter where it stayed for a sleepless night as the wagons trundled by.
You were the pigeon perched on my window sill;
You were the dove nestled in my garage,
Cooing and cooing in your particular way,
With paper-thin murmurs
And orange marmalade whispers.
You had quite the tart tune.
I thought you needed another;
I thought you wanted to be a duet.

You were the stray dog sniffing at my door;
You were the cat sleeping under my porch,
Demanding my attention, my sympathy.
So, I loved. I let you into my home
And joined your song,
With warm, embracing rhythms
And intervals of ginger honey tea.

You became the book at my bedside,
You became the laughs in my rooms.
We were perfect—well, together, that is.
You no longer had that lonely, sad tune.
You had me. You had my everything.
I had made you happier.
You smiled. I smiled.

But then you flew from my window sill,
And you abandoned my garage.
You left my door and fled from my porch,
No note, no call.
You aren’t the laughs in my rooms;
No, you ran away,
Leaving me with a bitter echo.

Your song’s the ghost in my attic;
It’s the pictures wrapped and hidden in my closet.
It clings to me—
Like saltwater to concrete—
And seeps into my bones,
Fuming and pooling there,
A stagnant mix of ammonia and bleach.

II.
I was the pigeon on your window sill,
I was the dove nested in your garage,
Cooing and cooing my special tune.
My voice was tinged with paper-thin notes
And slathered with bitter orange jam.
I must’ve seemed lonely,
Singing there by myself.

You then decided to let me into your home
And your rooms became ours.
You listened to me and assured me
With beautiful notes and rhythms.
I was enveloped in your confidences:
Your warm embraces, your honey-suckle smile,
And your fresh ginger tea.

We were the perfect family.
We were happy in a way.
We’d become two sides of a penny,
A duet in close harmony.
You’d ask me as we sat having coffee,
‘Are you happier now?’
I’d always smile and hum in agreement.
Your rooms were so bright.

But one day I noticed, looking out to the window sill,
That I couldn’t remember the tune I once sang there.
It was lost, under your laughs and smiles,
And hidden somewhere in your rooms.
I searched all through the house,
In books, in closets, in the kitchen.
I was gone.
So, I left.
Or, rather:
Your song chased me away. It clung to me much too much—
Like saltwater to concrete—
And seeped into my bones and blood,
Fuming and pooling there,
Noxious and silent as ammonia and bleach.
Bird
Marionette

Cast of Characters

YOUNG JAMES: 7 years old, an imaginative young boy who loves his sister more than anything in the world. Unremarkable in appearance, with a short and pudgy build and plain features. His only talent is his ability to write, much to the chagrin of his parents.

MARINETTE BURATTINO: 16 years old, James’ sister. A tall, lithe, and graceful ballerina. Extremely kind and loving, especially towards James. Dies at age 16 of cancer. She haunts her brother in the form of hallucinations.

Place
Salzburg, Maine.

Time
Present day.

Set: A large black room. Empty picture frames, all gold but of varying shapes and sizes, are suspended at uneven heights throughout the room. There is little to no furniture, regardless of what part of James’ life is being shown, with the exception of James’ writing desk. A massive clock hangs from the back wall, overshadowing everything else in the room. It is ornate and gilded, a lovely piece of craftsmanship. The second hand never ceases moving. At the beginning of the play, the hour hand is set to three.

ACT 1
Scene 1

Setting: A grassy clearing in the middle of the woods. A cypress tree rests upstage left, a piece of pink hair ribbon wrapped around one of its branches. The hills stretch on into the distance. Despite the area’s lack of notable features, there is still a distinct charm to the lopsided hills and yawning expanse of mottled sky. This place has seen much love over the years, a secret nursery embedded among the wilds, the crisp taste of freedom lingering on the dewy air. A treasure in the eyes of a child.

At Rise: MARINETTE and JAMES run on stage, racing.
MARINETTE
C’mon, James! Hurry up!

JAMES
Marinette, slow down!

(JAMES stops near the edge of the stage, wheezing. MARINETTE zips past him.)

Hey, no fair.

MARINETTE
(Running to the ribbon tree and tapping it.)

I won! I won!

(JAMES collapses to the ground with a dramatic thump. MARINETTE walks to him and bends over his fallen form.)

MARINETTE
Let’s play again.

JAMES (Groaning.)

No, no more.

MARINETTE
Okay, then how about we play Girl-Dog Rose? Come on . . . I know you want to! We could be pirates, and—

JAMES
No, I don’t want to. Just leave me alone.

(JAMES rolls over to face the audience, away from MARINETTE.)

MARINETTE
Aww, don’t be like that!

(Placing a hand to the top of her head as if in distress.)

O woe is me! I’m James, and all I ever do is sit around reading and being sad. I hate being happy and having fun, and when I grow up I’ll be a grumpy old man who never—
JAMES
Stop it, please.

(JAMES pulls himself upright and sits on the edge of the stage.)

JAMES (Cont.)
It isn’t funny.

MARINETTE
It was just a joke . . .

(MARINETTE sits next to JAMES.)
What’s gotten into you? You’re all mopey lately.

JAMES
’S nothing.

MARINETTE
Like that’s gonna fool me. What happened?

JAMES
You know how I got my report card back yesterday?

MARINETTE
Yeah?

(Realization dawns.)
You don’t mean . . . ?

JAMES
Yeah. ‘S no big deal for me. I never cared about my grades in the first place.

(Pause.)
But apparently it is for Momma and Papa.

MARINETTE
They lectured you again.

JAMES
On and on . . . saying the same things over and over: “You’re such a disappointment” and, “You’re a Burattino. Start acting like one.”
MARINETTE
They just want you to be successful. They don’t want you to waste your life sitting around doing nothing. It may seem harsh, but they’re doing it because they love you.

JAMES
Easy for you to say! They think you’re perfect.

MARINETTE
That’s not true. They get mad at me too.

JAMES
No, they don’t. You don’t know what it’s like to be constantly criticized and looked down on.

MARINETTE
What are you talking about? I get criticized all the time!

JAMES
Ugh. I shouldn’t have said anything. You’ll never understand,

(Mockingly.)
Princess Perfect.

MARINETTE
So that’s it. You’re not angry about them. You’re upset because of me, aren’t you?

(Pause. MARINETTE reaches out to JAMES.)
James, if you want to talk—

JAMES (Shaking her off.)
Stop! Just stop pretending already. You don’t care what I think. You don’t care about me at all.

(JAMES stands, walks to the tree, and kicks it.
He refuses to face MARINETTE.)
You never do anything! You just sit there, that stupid smile on your face, and you take everything they say. You never say no, just grin and do as you’re told.

(Turning finally to look at her.)
JAMES (Cont.)
You used to play with me. We used to do everything together, and you didn’t care if it was right, wrong, whatever. We just were. Just the two of us. But you changed.

(MARINETTE stands and begins to walk to him.)

MARINETTE
James—

JAMES
When did it start mattering, huh? Your grades, your image, Momma and Papa . . . You were something, once. You were fun, you had a personality, you were real—

MARINETTE (Weakly.)
Stop—

JAMES
Who are you Marinette? Are you really my sister? No . . . I see it. There’s nothing left of you. You’re just a lifeless—

MARINETTE
No! I’m not! I’m alive!

JAMES
No you’re not! Living for the sake of others isn’t living at all—

MARINETTE
Then what am I supposed to do? Rebel against everything, against the world? What would I have then?

(Defeated, MARINETTE walks back to the edge of the stage and sits down.)
I thought, if I could just make them happy, be obedient and boring and unoriginal, then maybe they won’t even notice when I disappear. And you . . . James, you are the only person worth living for, the only reason I have stayed so long. But I can’t stay much longer, as much as I wish I could. I wanted to help you when the time came by slowly making you hate me. But I can’t! I worked so hard . . . but how could I? When you asked me to come play with you today . . . when you cried. . . .
(Pause. JAMES slowly walks back to sit beside MARINETTE.)

JAMES
What? So . . . you aren’t really boring?

MARINETTE
I was just pretending.

JAMES
That’s awful! Do you know how much it hurts to watch you being like that?

MARINETTE
I know. I’m sorry.

JAMES
And what are you talking about, leaving? I don’t understand.

MARINETTE
No, of course not. You were never meant to.

(Pause.)
I love you, James.

(MARINETTE hugs JAMES.)

JAMES
Me too. I’m sorry I yelled at you.

(Pause.)
Wait, so how is your being boring supposed to help me? You wanted me to hate you?

MARINETTE
I just told you; it will make it easier.

JAMES
Make what easier?

MARINETTE
James.
JAMES
What?

MARINETTE
I’m going away soon.

JAMES
Where?

MARINETTE
Somewhere very far away.

JAMES
Are you ever coming back?

MARINETTE
No.

JAMES
Can I come with you?

MARINETTE
No, you can’t.

JAMES
Why not? I hate it here. Momma and Papa always yell at me, and there’s no one to talk to. You’re my only friend. Please, let me come with you!

MARINETTE
I’m sorry.

JAMES
Please, Marinette!

MARINETTE
James, when I go, you must promise me that you will not try to follow me. Do you understand?

JAMES
But—
MARINETTE

Please.

JAMES

... Okay.

(Pause.)

You’ll be all alone. Aren’t you scared?

MARINETTE

Yes. I’m ... so scared. I wish I could say that I’m not, that I could be the strong big sister that you think I am, but . . .

(MARINETTE cries softly.)

I will never go to the park with you again, never see the ocean again, and ... I will never dance ... again.

JAMES

But, you love to dance! You can’t go. I won’t let you.

MARINETTE

No, it’s okay. I’ll still dance, just not here.

(Pause.)

James, look at me. I want you to promise that you will live your life to the fullest. Follow your dreams. Don’t let anything stop you. Do all the things I will never get to do. Live, for both of us.

JAMES

Okay.

(JAMES suddenly throws his arms around MARINETTE.)

I don’t want you to go!

MARINETTE

I know. But as much as I want to stay with you, I can’t.

(Pause.)

But, I’m not . . . really leaving. I’ll be gone, but not completely.

JAMES

What do you mean? That makes no sense!
MARINETTE
Listen to me. My body will no longer be here. But that’s okay; a body has
to leave sometime anyway. People grow old and rotten, others become sick
and disintegrate into nothing, and some just leave, just like that—poof—and
they’re gone.

JAMES
Will that happen to me?

MARINETTE
It happens to everyone.

(JAMES begins to cry.)
And it’s okay.

JAMES
It is?

MARINETTE
Yes. Because your body isn’t real. What you see, touch, understand of
yourself isn’t you at all. You just think it is.

JAMES
Then what am I? What are you?

MARINETTE
Music.

JAMES
Huh?

MARINETTE
Well, not exactly, but I think we’re like music. You can’t see music, right?

JAMES
. . . right?

MARINETTE
But that doesn’t mean that it does not exist. It’s something in between, a
thing that is and yet isn’t all at the same time. It is intangible and free, life
at its most beautiful. Just like music, when we leave, we become something
that is and isn’t. We become beautiful.
(Pause.)

MARINETTE (Cont.)

I will always be with you, James. It may not make sense now, but I promise you that it will someday. Believe me. When you feel alone, just close your eyes and listen. You’ll find me.

JAMES

Promise?

MARINETTE

Promise.

(MARINETTE cradles JAMES’ head, rocking him softly back and forth. JAMES begins to fall asleep.)

It’s okay. I promise. No matter what, I’ll always be here for you. Always. . . .

(Lights fade to black. The wail of an ambulance pierces the silence, then fading into the sound of an ECG monitor. The monitor beeps normally a few times until the heartbeat becomes irregular, finally ending in the sound of a flatline.)

JAMES

Marinette?

END SCENE 1
Flower Study
Yellow

The smell of stale coffee languishes in this weary room. By the window sill, a thin layer of dust forms a delicate tapestry for the occasional visitor scurrying by, scavenging the desolate landscape in hopes of some scanty meal. When cocksure sunlight strides in, its bravado vanishes as it cowers into a pale, musty yellow. The roughly plastered walls seem to sag, too weary for even the delicate cobwebs that decorate their surface. The wooden floor has been beaten into a rag of bruises and broken bones.
It was morning. The sun had only just stopped bleeding into the sky, and the birds were silent except the one crow that had been watching them from the gravestone marked “Branwen” since they’d arrived at the cemetery on their bikes. Eamon left his helmet hanging off the handlebars by the straps. Marie-Jo cradled hers in her arms. The baseball he’d found in the bag attached to the handlebars hit the headstone marked “Barrens” with a dull thud, dropping to the small patch of bare earth just beneath it before rolling a few feet. Eamon leaned over to snag it. It was falling apart and grayish with dirt.

“I don’t know if that counts as respecting the dead,” Marie-Jo said from her spot behind the next headstone.

“I don’t know if he’s worthy of it,” Eamon said. Marie-Jo stared at him.

They’d intended to go to church. “Do you think it would make noise for them?” she asked, changing the subject.

Eamon turned to look at her. “Don’t tell me you believe in ghosts,” he said. He tossed the ball again, this time not bothering to pick it up as it missed the headstone and came to a skidding halt when it hit the one marked John Doe. That one had dates on this side, too, not just the name: 1980–.

“Hey, someone who isn’t dead yet.” They’d both tracked the ball to the gravestone, and Marie-Jo pointed, getting up from her headstone and walking over to Doe’s. She stood in the space where a coffin would be. She jumped once, a little kid smile on her face. “I wonder if he felt that?”

Eamon sighed and shook his head. He still wasn’t sure whether she was serious or not. He got up from where he was sitting to stand next to her and stared at the writing. “John Doe. 1980 to blank. It’s good he’s not dead, I guess.”

He watched Marie-Jo do the subtraction in her head. “That’s thirty-six years old,” she said, “so yeah, good he’s not dead.”

They stared at each other for an awkward moment of silence neither of them intended.

The crow cawed.
“Do you think we should have gone?” Marie-Jo asked. “I mean, we haven’t ditched for a while.” She looked out over the playground at the Baptist church. Its service wouldn’t be for another few hours.

Eamon sighed. He sat down next to the baseball at the base of James Smith’s grave and ran his fingers over the lettering. The font was respectable, and very, very ugly. “I don’t know,” he admitted. He was sitting with his back to her. “There’s the guilt there, you know?”

He heard Marie-Jo’s exhale as she sat down next to him. She would stain her khakis, some pointless part of his brain noted.

He dropped his hand from the inscription. She ran her fingers over the lettering. Her “yeah” was more of a breath than a word. “Even though I hate it.”

“The guilt?” The nagging kind, that tried to tell him that he was betraying his family, or his name, or something else entirely, in preferring conversations like this and anything else, really, to the supposed comfort of mass. “Or the service?” He added the second part almost as a joke. They both hated the services, of course. That was why they were both here, out in the cold, instead of listening with faux politeness to yet another underwritten sermon.

“Yes,” she said to answer both. “I got sorta dressed up and everything.” She grabbed the baseball. She stood and stretched. Eamon stood. He watched her chuck the baseball at the other side of the gravestone, the side marked “Richard Barrens, 1932-2015.”

The baseball fell just under the cross carving. As it hit the ground, Marie-Jo walked over to pick it up. She looked at it, turning it in her hands. Her expression changed slowly from nervous boredom to genuine surprise. “Eam,” she said, finally, holding it up like some kind of prize, “look at this: it’s split even more.”

She backed up a few steps and threw it at the gravestone again. This time it hit just on the “Richard.”

“Why were we doing that anyway?” Marie-Jo asked when Eamon picked up again. He shrugged wordlessly, turning away from her. He walked away from the stone toward their bicycles. “Are you going back?” she called after
him. “It’s more than half over, now. You might as well not go. There’s no point to us trying.” I don’t want to be the only one ditching, she didn’t say.

Eamon stopped walking for only a few seconds, not a complete halt, just a stutter in his steps. Would you hate me if I did go? he almost asked. He put the baseball back in the bag. Something like wool scratched against his fingers as he did. He placed his helmet on his head. He didn’t do anything else. He just stood there, still not looking at Marie-Jo.

The crow cawed again.

“He said I ‘looked too queer’ once,” Eamon said, turning around to look at Marie-Jo. She’d run to catch up to him. Or catch him, in case he really did want to go to church this morning. If he did, she wanted to stop him, or at least to know why. “It’s the only reason I noticed when he died. You know, when they list the dead at the end of mass. I wouldn’t’ve known his name, even, otherwise.”

“You’re the straight one,” Marie-Jo said.

Eamon shrugged, “Doesn’t matter to as*holes,” he said. He hadn’t thought of the old man in ages. Before his death, Mr. Barrens had mostly been known for his habit of sitting on the bench by the fire station under a smoke cloud of his own making, passing judgement on any teenager he saw.

“Oh.” Marie-Jo looked at their bikes. “Are you going back?”

“No,” he said with almost certainty. He looked away from her. “Are you?”

She shook her head. “I think I’d be sick.” She grabbed the baseball out of the bag on Eamon’s bike. “Did you play?” she asked, feeling the seams with her fingers. “It’s old.”

“Maybe,” he answered. “I don’t remember if I did.”

“I’m going home,” Marie-Jo said after more silence.

“Can I come over in a bit?” Eamon asked. “I should probably—” He sighed. “Mom isn’t going to be thrilled I ditched.”

“Of course,” Marie-Jo said. “You’re not going to follow me?”

He shook his head. “I’m going to wander around here a bit,” he said. “You don’t actually believe in ghosts, right?” he asked her, partly to check and partly to reassure himself.
“Of course not.” She laughed. “I’ll see you in a bit then.” He watched her bike away until she turned left behind a Victorian house decorated for the Fourth of July.

The bells at the Episcopal church on the other side of town marked the hour with hollow gravitas. The Catholic church, despite its steeple, made no sound.
At Sunset

I am distracted as we end up on the roof again.  
It’s evening and the house is dark for the most part,  
Big enough that shadows play in corners.  
We’re talking, and I haven’t thought yet to look up.  

The night air is warm enough, as humid as one expects  
From the ocean, not seeable from here but always near,  
A side effect of a city made of hills and former harbors.  

You interrupt whatever thought you or I was having to look up and  
Point out that the clouds grow bright above the skyline of the city,  
A sort of sunset I have never seen before.  

For you, of course, this sky is commonplace.  
This is your house, your roof, your city made of dust and dreams,  
But for me the sky is new. The suns I know fall to their deaths at sea.  

I want to show you the sunsets I know, someday,  
Though you’ve of course seen more than I have,  
Over ocean islands and faraway lands.  

The sun dies, as it does in every place.
Seated Figures

Caty Maloney ’18

Nelly Lin-Schweitzer ’17
Broken Smile

When the doors of the train opened after a three-second delay, everyone filed out. Everyone except Alex. There were still two stops left, but most people were already where they needed to be by now; past this stop lay miles of country, and it was the quietest part of his ride home. Screech! The quietest part, with the exception of old wheels whining against the steel tracks. His mouth scowled more than normal. The train emerged from the tunnel, and the noise ceased, leaving only the lonely hum of the engine and the laughter of the wind against the walls. He stared across the gentle hills. The moon painted a grayish-green desert down their slopes. He remembered the summer nights he had spent there back when the world was simple. He closed his eyes and pictured the last time he had sat on the tallest hill.

* * *

Two nineteen-year olds were holding hands. In three weeks, they would have to leave for college on opposite sides of the country. The girl sobbed on his shoulder. The boy tightly wrapped his arm around her. Tears filled his once-stoic eyes, and he wiped them away before she could notice. He was remembering the first time they had held hands, their first kiss together, the first time they had spent the night. He wondered whether he would remember this moment years later.

He opened his eyes after only a few seconds. That was gone now.

* * *

One broken headlight, a loud thud, and a crunching noise, followed by a crack as her head hit the pavement. Then the engine roared.

The train halted and things went dark. Alex looked around. Without the lights, the only illumination came from the dull moon, whose beams barely shone through the scratched and graffitied windows of the old car. The intercom clicked, but only static came through. It had been doing that all night. He looked back out at the still-shadowy hills. Something stirred, but it was probably just a deer. The lights flickered, then one row came back to life. The static from the intercom made it seem like the train was gasping for breath. Then the grunt of the engine put him back on his way. At the next stop, the doors opened, and a tall character skulked onto the train and
hunched over across from him. Alex couldn’t get a good look at him under his hood, as he was sitting on the half of the car that had its lights out. A piece of bright pink gum was hanging down just in his line of sight. The man must have noticed him looking at it, because it disappeared back into the hood.

There were still six minutes or so until the next and final stop. The hooded man didn’t shake his leg or scratch himself, and there was no whispering, so he wasn’t too worried, but he still stayed alert. He never listened to music at night. He preferred to be aware of his surroundings. There were all kinds of people who would gain your trust and stab you in the back, creeping around and only revealing their true nature when it was too late.

* * *

He listened intently with his ear against the wall to see whether anyone inside was stirring. Her father was snoring loudly. He opened her window, excited to surprise her with freshly-cut roses for her birthday. He heard her moving about frantically inside. One swish of the curtains swept away his heart. Another man’s shocked face fractured his smile.

A gentle chuckle from across the aisle brought Alex back. That pink gum—or something—bobbed down and was quickly slurped back into the man’s mouth. Maybe it was just pink-tinted spit. He couldn’t tell. A distinct voice slid through the silence.

“That is where it starts.”

“Excuse me?”

The man’s voice was much lighter than he expected. In fact, he wasn’t even sure it was a man. The voice was calm and smooth and stressed ‘s’s in a serpentine way. He just laughed.

“Sorry, I don’t quite—” the train screeched to a halt, “. . . follow.” The figure across from him stood up. Instinctively, he did too. The lights above him began to flicker. He pulled out his smartphone and shone it on the other man, but he stood still. The hood seemed to fold perfectly to conceal his face in the shadows. Even when he shifted his phone slightly, the shadows twisted to keep him concealed.
“Hello, Alex,” he said, allowing the ‘s’ to roll slowly off his tongue, ending with an upward inflection so that it almost sounded like ‘Alexxa.’ “You don’t know me?” He shuddered. What an odd question.

“I can’t really see your face, so I wouldn’t know, would I?”

“Silly, silly Alex” (“Sssssilly, sssssilly, Alekssss.”) “Perhaps not in such a way as this” (perhappss not in sssuch a way as thisss), “but you know me well.” He chuckled.

“Look, I don’t know if you’re some kind of stalker or just took a lucky guess at my name, but I suggest you stand back, asshole.” He mimicked the man’s signature pronunciation, saying each word as if it had twice as many s’s.

“There’s the Alex I know. The anger.” The snaky inflections were gone, and now there was a more charming, chipper, almost British-sounding way about his voice. It was also deeper, which made Alex quite certain that he was, in fact, a man.

“I still don’t know you.”

“Oh, come on, I know you’ve been thinking about her.” Alex winced, and his eyes widened.

“Screw you. Who are you?”

“I just want to talk! Is that too much to ask?”

“I don’t know how you know my name, and I don’t know you. Stay away from me. If you take a step I’m calling the police.” The train lurched forward, and Alex lost his balance. His phone went sliding across the floor, face down. As he started up, he heard heavy footsteps, too heavy to belong to the man making them, like something huge was hiding in those clothes, in the shadows they cast. He stood above Alex and spoke again, his voice much deeper and filled with brutish malignity.

“You repaid vice with vice.” The depth of his voice sank with each word. The lights flickered, but he was staring straight down, so his face was still hidden. The hood seemed to expand as if horns were growing from the top of his head. Alex never saw his fully illuminated face, but he saw shining yellow eyes, and the flick of a long, pink, forked tongue.

* * *
“I need to fix that damn headlight,” he thought as he drove seven above the speed limit back to her house.

“Oh. It’s you.”

He chuckled. “Go ahead, Alex, tell me how it wasn’t your fault.”

“If I could change things—”

“You never even let her explain!” His voice boomed about the cabin, echoing on the vast hills outside.

“I KNOW!” The force in his voice surprised even him. “If looking you in the eye every day isn’t enough, then I don’t know what is, because I am so, so sorry.” His voice cracked and he once again mimicked the exaggerated ‘s’s.

“Sssee you tomorrow.”

* * *

Thud. Crunch. Crack. On another day he might have gasped, cried, or stopped, but today he didn’t flinch. His eyes remained forward, and his permanent scowl was the second corpse that night.

The train stopped. The figure stomped out of the train and disappeared with the wind. Alex was wet. He quickly wiped his eyes and blinked six times. “. . . final stop,” he heard over the intercom. He drenched his sleeve with the sweat and tears from his face and walked to the doors of the empty train car. He listened to the ridicule of the wind.
**Efflorescence**

A dreamy panorama, lush and sweet,
Extends before our rippling silhouettes
In delicate cascades of color. As
Alluring Nature in her gossamer
Gown weaves shimmering sunbeams through our hair,
We stroll along the cobblestone pathway.
We talk of summer plans and cheap facades
And admire gleaming glass-floored balconies.
He smiles and says “beautiful,” though I know
That he did not mean me. But . . . What if, Oh—

*What If He Meant Me?*
But, of course, he didn’t.
*Yet couldn’t he? Would it be so wrong?*
But he won’t.
*Did I say something wrong? Does my smile look fake?*
If you’re pretending to be something you’re not, then everything is fake.
*Oh.*
Sweet golden eyes that cherish my flushed gaze. . . .
A gentle smile, his hand caressing mine. . . .
A modern Adonis, he is lovely,
And I, the cityscape Cinderella,
Merely an impostor playing the part:
I, brass pretending to be gold;
He, truly the most exquisite of gems.

*He must feel something. He said yes, didn’t he?*
He did, but remember his kindness.
*But even so, he gave me attention! He listened intently to me, remember?*
He’s like that to everyone. You’re nothing special.
*Aren’t I?*
No.
*Oh.*
Dim chandeliers and dulcet melodies
Await us inside, where delightfully
Ornate columns and gilded fountains keep
Their silent vigil over lavish halls.
Rich bustling gowns converse with black ties in
Hushed whispers and demurely buoyant laughs
That complement the softly tinkling glass.
We dance the night away in splendid grace,
Until my glass slippers begin to crack.
Then, all too soon, the clock strikes midnight, and
The curtains of our night draw to a close.

The days flew by . . . Or did they crawl? It is
Of no great consequence. They came, they went.
Five days elapsed, and I resolved that I
Should once again return to that fair place,
And (being a true sentimentalist),
Might then endeavor to remember my
Now evanescent memories of that
One special night we spent together. But,
As I stroll past the selfsame things we saw,
I start to think my perception of
Him was flawed. How could I believe he
Was less a man and more a deity?
Did I attribute such a rank because
I could not bear to face the likelihood
That I might love one who is surely flawed?
But what a selfish thing to do, to place
Such pressure on a teenage boy, all for
The sake of my desire to pretend
I could be loved by love itself!

No. I was wrong: he is not Adonis,
No god, no angel, and no gallant prince,
Just . . . human. Remarkable, but human.
When love becomes worship, is it not love?
You already know the answer.
But, if he is so perfect, he deserves to be treated as such, right?
Yet he is not perfect.
Isn't he?
No.
Oh.

I walk that path and try to feel again
The laughing breeze that toyed with my skirts that
Day, or to taste the words of longing that
Deftly swallowed my tongue and stopped my heart
While he smiled lovingly . . . No, not lovingly!
I stop and shake my head. The image fades,
And I no longer see those whimsical
Surroundings that so blithely entranced me.
I can see orange cones and rusty cranes,
And now my tired eyes are damp and red.
This world is real. That world is not. I sigh.
My love is wrong. It is not real.
No . . . That is not the truth. I know this much:
My love is real. My story is what’s wrong.
He is no angel, but he is human.
I was mistaken once, but I can change.
For I am human too, and I can love
Him just as well as one of the divine,
While still acknowledging that he is not
Divine at all. Not being right does not
Mean you are wrong, and misguided thoughts
Are not a lost cause. I now know that I
Was blind. I shall learn once more how to see.

Does this mean I will get a happy ending after all?
Maybe.
But I still have a chance, don’t I?
Perhaps.
It can’t hurt to try. Care to join me?
Yes.
A Merchant’s Love

A lonely merchant sails to distant piers,
To lands of balsam, bronze, and blossoms bright.
He hears sweet music drop upon his ears,
His senses finding fleeting, fresh delights.
But neither myrtle trees in forests old,
Nor milky blue lagoons where lovers meet,
Nor mighty mountains capped with snow so cold,
Can e’er be fair as his love dear and sweet.
Thus, neither awe of nature’s beauty raw,
Nor joy at sighting land from choppy seas,
Nor even lust for beauty without flaw,
Unlocks his heart as she who holds the key.
Ah, golden treasures given from above,
Are nothing to a heart consumed with love.

When I am lonely, battered, sad and torn

When I am lonely, battered, sad and torn
Like an old garment to the edges frayed,
When by the world too oft I have been worn
So that I feel so faded and so grayed,
When everything around me seems so cold
And too long have I stayed out in the rain,
When with my frame the icy winds make bold
And in the lap of frost I oft have lain,
When men with their cruel words have weighed me down
The milk of human kindness flows not free,
When heavy life bestows too cruel a crown
And Fortune’s favor does not fall on me,
Then, knowing good is never from you gone,
I think of you, my friend, and carry on.
Monkey
A Perfect Night at Orange Tree Bus Stop

At the Orange Tree bus stop, a lone woman slouched onto the bench and dropped her duffel.

The moon had just risen, wavering in the atmosphere, left-right-left-right, a drunkard stumbling across navy-tinged skies. Dust danced and lamp-lights flickered, bathing the smooth concrete in a clear blue. Nobody else was out at this hour; it was much too late. No bus would come, at least not for a while.

An uncharacteristic quiet permeated the air. No sounds. No wind. Just the heaviness of a towel hung out to dry. During the day, the Orange Street bus stop’s a hub of activity. School children, swim instructors, accountants—all sorts of people—frequent its ragged orange bench. Often, without his or her parent’s notice, a little child will fiddle with the bench’s peeling paint, exposing patches of rough, splintered wood.

The City will soon re-paint the bench, that much is sure, hiding once more its rough underbelly in a coat of orange, an Orange Tree sort of orange.

Her hand reached for the duffel and ripped open the clasp, setting free its contents: a young girl’s picture, a hastily written memo, a container of strawberries, and an orange bottle of pills. The pills spilled, rattled, and whirlpooled to a stop. The woman made no move. She only stared at the child’s frozen face in front of her.

The girl was smiling in the picture. Absolutely beaming. She wore pink overalls and ducky rain-boots. A hand grabbed the child’s tiny one, but the owner was unseen.

She tensed and ripped a fragment of paint from the bench.

It was cold, getting colder by the minute, in fact. The woman had forgotten a sweater, but she sat there still. The lamps shut off with a buzz, bathing her in the dark. The stars were risen and peeked through the night. When exactly they had gotten there, she couldn’t remember. The lamps had washed them out before. Every night the stars rise: up-up-up-up, and every night they fall: down-down-down-down. Repeat and repeat and repeat.
But only when the lamps are off does she ever see them twitching and blinking down at her, like millions upon millions of eyes.

A scene comes to her mind. It was the 4th of July. That year, her family had rented a cabin in the Sierra Nevadas. Her father talked of homemade fireworks and hotdogs. Bored of his antics, she and her sister resolved to chase the mountain fireflies, and soon, her father joined. The little bulbs zigged and zagged about the air, always just out of reach of the children’s grubby hands. Her father caught one, though, and put it in a Tupperware cage. He showed the girls. They named him Grub.

But Grub was trapped. While they were laughing, having fun, he died. The children were confused and cried.

Later that night, after the crying had ceased and tears were wiped away, the father told his girls what happened to Grub. He pointed up at the stars and little eyes followed his finger. ‘Up there, that’s where he went, to the great fireballs in space. They sit there, alone; alone in a huge empty land!’ He stretched his arms out for emphasis. ‘They just want company, a friend. Everybody eventually goes up there. That’s why the stars never really go away, because all of the bugs and people are up there, and they help the stars light the sky. The people make the stars happy.’ Both she and the sister laughed, smiling at their father. He gave a goofy smile, all grin, no eyes, and shooed the children off to play. Her sister ran forward but she stayed behind.

She still didn’t understand: Why did the stars have to take her friend? They should have many friends by now. She thought she and Grub were the best of friends. She thought the stars were being greedy, mean. She began to cry again.

She felt sorry then.

Sharp breaths splintered the night. The woman’s eyes were wet, and her mouth was twisted into a toothless grimace. She picked up the spilled container of strawberries. That summer night, oh so many years ago, lingered in her mind. She could almost taste the sweet air, almost hear the chirping of the crickets. She could almost see the stars: those stars so fond of picking up friends.

Years later, the stars gathered up her father, just when she was about to leave home for the first time. It was a happy day. The car was packed, and
she and her sister were waiting for their father to see her off. He never came home. The reporters said it was a work accident. The wind was strong that day, after all. Must’ve just blown him off the scaffolding. Unfortunate. Unimaginable. Out-of-the-blue. Her father was a good man, everybody told her, and they were sorry he had passed.

Sorry, sorry, sorry. That was all she heard for many months.

She felt sorry, too. She had found a hastily written memo, a stack of unpaid bills, and a timesheet. They were hidden in a French cookbook, stuck between a recipe for cheese and ham quiche and egg toast. She came across it when her sister was at work.

With a sigh, she picked up the note, the bill, and her pills and put them carefully back in her duffel. The photograph remained fixed on the pavement, watching her. In the picture, the little girl was grinning because she finally got to wear her new rain-boots to school. It rained that whole week; but it was a whole week of those beautiful smiles. The girl never grew tired of the yellow faces or the rubbery soles. She’d go, “Quack, quack, quack, Mommy!” then move her hands like wings. She loved to do it in the car: every morning on the way to school, and every night on the way home. She’d sit in the back seat, hands waving, giggling and quacking, while the woman drove.

She could still hear those quacks. They were sunk and burrowed into her skin and bones and brain. Every second, her heart seemed to beat, “Quack, quack, quack . . . quack, quack, quack.” She felt quacks in her ears, throat, and wrists.

Above her, the stars blinked and blinked and blinked. The night wrapped around them, swirling into fingers, hands, wrists, and whole arms. Limbs reached out, grabbing, grabbing, and grabbing.

She shook out her head. She needed to relax, that’s what the doctor said. She reached for her bottle and removed a single pill. He prescribed them for the stress. That’s what he called her quacks: stress. He said that it’d fix her nerves right up; that she’d be right as rain by next week. Clear of quacks and all. But she couldn’t get the “quack, quack, quack” out of her head. She couldn’t get them out of her head.

She swallowed her pill and stood up from the bench. Doctor’s orders, after all. Doctor’s orders.
A rattling—the sound of a hot engine and burning rubber—rang through the air. Her bus was here, and right on time, too: 7:15 AM on the dot. Her sister was expecting her for 8:30 breakfast at the Hamlet. She couldn’t be late. The woman said goodbye to the orange bench, the orange canopy, and the Orange Tree bus stop. She walked up the steps, paid her fare, and sat down. Through the window, there was the beginning of morning: the sun, just sliding over the horizon, its first rays tickling the sky to a warm blue. The sun didn’t flicker or blink like the stars. The sun just blurred everything to salt-white.
Dear Mrs. McClellan

Ten years hence a fireball might take
Down an automatic home as tapes
Whir on gently into oblivion.
2026 is an eternity away for an
Author who died five years ago, at ninety-one,
So of course, he sets his fears about the Bomb
When I’ll be twenty-six.

We do not have clean up mice,
But no author could predict
The pocket spider webs
We quickly take for granted.

Mrs. McClellan? Your shadow waits for you,
Suspended near your husband’s.
I fear my ash will join yours, and still
The rain will fall.
Giant Shoulders

Let us go then, you and I
To when that was written
Or a little beforehand
And throw rocks at writers
Who wrote better than us.
Masks

My therapist once told me my mother wore a series of masks. Her masks were like those of ancient Greek tragedies: there was the comic fool, the bitter villain, the doomed hero. They were painted lurid colors to match; some hand had added a frothing yellow to her demeanor, a hysterical red to her eyes, a screaming blue to her lips. They were never-ending—if she managed to take one off, we would discover a dozen underneath. Sometimes, the next would be decayed, with the rotten wood growing little fungus atop its chipped-away paint. At other times, it would be a stronger one: the features more pronounced, and the colors bright enough to send us into panic.

Eventually, we learned not to touch. To touch was to invite danger: some masks were glued on, true, but others fell mercilessly to the ground at the tip of a fingernail. We knew the current mask well; there was no telling what was underneath. There were simply too many, and we were growing tired. We gave up—not because of the futility of it all, but because we lost ourselves among her woodchips and dust.

***

When I was younger, I climbed up onto my mother’s knee. I was too little to get up to her without help, so I grabbed onto the holes she had for eyes and pushed myself up—all the way up so that my feet balanced on her knees and my face stared into her face. I thought—in a way only a child can—that if I just touched the bottom mask, that if I just pulled on it hard enough, the entire thing would go away, and I would have my mother back. I thought I could see her eyes—too far back for my arms to reach. So I daringly poked my arms out to the farthest mask I could reach, triumphantly grasped the roughly hewn wood, and pulled until I felt my nails break the skin they were supposed to protect and the hordes of splinters overwhelm my palms.

It wasn’t me who stopped. My mother gently put my hands aside and set me down on the floor. She walked away—not in the frenzied scurry of a worried mother, or the purposeful stride of a knowledgeable one—but simply and slowly, aimless in direction and impervious to consequence.
Window
A Short Poem about Poetry

How do you write good poetry?
Some people say that it’s difficult.
Those people are liars.
Some people write poetry.
Those people are frauds.
Perhaps you too would like to be a fraud.
Perhaps you would like to take advice from a professional.

Step one:
write some poetry.
Remember
to have line
breaks.
It doesn’t have to rhyme.
If you want,
you can move the words
around the page
to make your poem look good
or to prove a point.

Step two:
give your poetry meaning.
All good poetry is either metaphor,
commentary,
or literary allusion.
Some poetry is more than one.
Read your poem.
Do some of the things you say
look like they’re talking about something they don’t mention?
That’s metaphor,
whether you meant to put it there or not.
Do some of the things you say
look like they’re offering your opinion on something important or well-known?
That’s commentary,
whether you meant to put it there or not.
Do some of the things you say
look like they’re referring to older and more famous writing than yours?
That’s literary allusion, 
whether you meant to put it there or not.

Step three: 
revise your poetry. 
(This step is optional.) 
If you want to revise your poetry, 
first look at the parts that aren’t metaphor, 
commentary, 
or literary allusion. 
Are you sure they aren’t? 
Are you really sure? 
Make absolutely certain. 
If you’ve quadruple-checked, 
and you’re still sure, 
then those parts might not be necessary. 
Does removing them make the poem feel incomplete? 
If not, 
then maybe you should take them out. 
Unless you can find an excuse to keep them. 
(Here’s a hint: 
you can do this with any poetry, 
not just your own. 
You’ll find that if you stretch your imagination enough, 
there’s almost nothing you can’t fit inside those three categories.)

Step four: 
get recognition for your work. 
Now that you have a poem, 
you need to win fame and/or prizes. 
Submit your poem to a local contest 
or journal 
or magazine. 
If it does not win or get published, 
go back to step one. 
If it does, 
go back to step one anyway. 
Step five: 
repeat until satisfied.
For Tabitha

It was 4:00 PM on a crisp Friday in April. The sun had begun its descent from the sky for a good night’s sleep. The air was dry, but a cool breeze made the blades of grass glitter in the golden light. The glassy water in the pool scurried as the wind blew. There would be no soft April rains for just a little while longer. Only a few days of sunlight remained.

We sat on the rooftop, overlooking the land below. It stretched out like a carpet from underneath our dangling feet, folding into the horizon line. We were in awe of the view from above, where we could have picked up the houses and trees and placed them in the palms of our hands. We had been sitting there for a while and would remain for hours, talking, as best friends do. We watched the sun implode and set fire to the horizon before the moon stole some of its light and emanated a pale glow. Just as a current keeps its pace, our conversation flowed continuously as nature repainted the backdrop. We never thought it would be our last.

A few days later, I learned I would never see you again. You died a peaceful death that Sunday, but I was not nearly at peace. To think that you had been abducted from the world after only thirteen years of life. Yet someone who is abducted can escape, or simply be found. But you could not escape, and neither could I.

I do not know what the truth is. I do not know whether the soul is immortal, or whether the soul is not expressed without the body. I do not know whether death is a transition to another life, or even the afterlife. I do not know whether you will be judged and rewarded for your amazing spirit. I do not know whether you are watching from an even higher perspective than my rooftop, taking in the view. I am not sure whether your consciousness still exists.

But I do know that energy can neither be created nor destroyed. Even though your heart no longer beats and your lungs no longer swell and collapse with the breath of life, your energy did not die. You are still here on Earth, just as I am.

As I sit here on my rooftop, I think of you. I see you in the blossoming trees, whose delicate limbs hold up the willowy clouds. I see you in the flowers, whose petals peel open in the warmth of the sunlight with the
morning dew of spring. I see you when the birds soar in the air in a perfect pattern.

I can hope you are in a better place than I am, but there is no way for me to know. Someday I may join you, whenever, wherever, or if ever that may be. But until then, I know I will never lose you.
Wrong and Right

There’s something in the hole. The hole outside? The hole outside. What is in the hole? Something. What thing? The thing that by definition fills the hole. Does anything fill the hole by definition? Of course. What? Nothing. Nothing fills the hole? Nothing fills the hole. So what is in the hole? Something that is nothing. How can something be nothing? That’s the wrong question. What’s the right question? That is a good question. What is the right question? How can nothing be something. How can nothing be something? That’s the right question. How can nothing be something? It fills the hole; it has being, and things have being, so nothing is some thing. Is some thing something? Of course. So something fills the hole? Yes. And nothing fills the hole? That is the right question.

There’s something in the hole. Nothing? Something else. What else fills the hole? Darkness. What is darkness? Darkness is the absence of light. If darkness is the absence of light, how can it be something? It fills the hole. If it fills the hole then is it nothing? No. Then is it something? Yes. Then how does nothing fill the hole if something fills the hole? That is the right question.

There’s something in the hole. Is it darkness? No. Is it nothing? No. What is it? Sound. So something is in the hole? Yes. Then it is not a hole, is it? That is the right question.

Is something in the hole? You mean the hole outside. Is there another hole? No. Is something in the hole? Yes. What is in the hole? Something that is wrong and right. What can be wrong and right? That is not the right question. What is the right question? That is not the right question. What is in the hole? Something weak that fears itself. What weak thing would fear itself? That is the right question.

Are we the hole? No. Are we in the hole? That is the right question.
Dark and Final Dive

Beneath the saline depths where murk and dead ships lie,
Where sailors, cracked by wind, cast weary, sunken eyes,
Lies Leviathan, who, once thought great in life,
Has long since made her dark and final dive.
She sleeps on for eternity as other beings’ homes,
Her skeleton and rotting flesh an all-new strange biome,
Which no man has ever seen or known with his own sight,
Those living graves down beyond the reach of light.
The burrow-things, with gaping mouths, quite blind,
Will crawl inside the decayed and bloated rind.

They feast, they feast, on this gift from above,
For creatures of abyss, this death to them a trove.
Long will she feed these things, this long-dead crone,
And when she’s gone, they’ll find some other bones.