



SUMMER ISSUE

Non-Fiction

Second Chances

By Archika Dogra

I never knew that playing the sport you love could be so hard.

I started playing softball when I was in third grade after my mother had initially signed me up just for fun. I remember the first day of practice. Before I even made it to the field, I threw up in the car. You may think that I was just extremely nervous, but it wasn't anything serious like that. I had just had a bad falafel. That's it.

Ironically, that trivial moment seemed to symbolize the rest of my softball "career."

Throwing up may seem to be a grotesque way of symbolizing a passion. Yet over the years I kept on finding myself quietly discarding the comments, while taking the criticism to heart. In other words, every time I was complemented, I threw it up, while every time I was criticized, I digested it. Concerning, no?

I continued playing softball in Little League throughout elementary school, just as a fun way to spend my Monday and Wednesday afternoons. However, once I reached fifth grade, softball started to become a little more serious.

I never really talked much on my team and I definitely wouldn't have called myself a leader. Even today I find myself holding back a number of comments when taking part in friendly conversations or even team discussions. Some people regarded me as timid, some as boring, and others as "too serious." In fifth grade, I was told by my coach to try out for All Stars. It was a one-tournament team of girls from around my area that seemed to demonstrate skills above normal standards. I was elated at the fact that somebody deemed me competent enough to try out for such a team.

I went to tryouts and made the team— which wasn't much of an achievement, considering that basically everybody made it. The everyday practices went well and I received a number of pitching opportunities- which was at the time my favorite position. However, come the tournament, things changed.

I was benched. A lot. I didn't even have a chance at proving myself during the games. The whole tournament I watched other girls happily prance on and off the field while sitting under the shelter of a clammy dugout. It was disappointing honestly- I was a decent player and really wanted to pitch. The only positions I played were some outfield and maybe one inning of shortstop.

Looking back at it, it makes me sad to realize that only at the age of ten I had already begun to lose my confidence.

The next season I excelled at pitching once again during Little League and was ready to redeem myself during All Stars. Come the tournament once again, I was benched more than I would have wished to be.

Was it because I was too quiet?

Should I have stood up for myself?

Was it only because of my hitting, which tended to falter at times?

I couldn't understand why I wasn't getting the equal amount of time that other girls were getting. I slowly started backing myself further into a corner- into a place where my coaches wouldn't acknowledge me, my teammates wouldn't remember me, and the team parents wouldn't remember me. I started believing that I sucked at the one thing I loved to do. I wanted to quit, but never told my parents or my coaches. So I played on.

The summer of the tournament, I tried out for Select. I finally got in and felt accomplished. Training season came and went by and I felt ready to pitch for the season. I was anxious to pitch in my first tournament- my very first select tournament.

We traveled to Yakima for my first tournament and I was mentally going through the pitching motion at least a hundred times. I felt confident; like I had felt at the beginning of every season I had previously played. Fatefully, the end result was almost the same.

The inning for me to prove myself as a pitcher finally arrived. I didn't execute. It was a cringe-worthy inning of balls rolling over the plate, batters being walked, and hitters being given free bases. I gave up about five runs in one inning- five runs too many. I had worked hard the whole season only to blow this one chance. When I walked off of the mound that inning, I knew what my one mistake was. I had exuded fear and anxiety instead of poise. I had thought about proving myself to others, about being benched for the rest of the season, and about not being the best on my team. I never thought about a second chance, even if I messed up. And the saddest part is- there was never a second chance.

Every day after that tournament I went to pitching practice.

Every day I played as consistently as others.

Every day I worked hard on my pitching.

Every day I waited for a second chance.

If you don't get second chances, how are you supposed to believe in yourself? My confidence went from zero to negative. Every time I made a play, I focused on the errors instead of the successes. I slowly started being pushed out of my position at second base, even as a capable player. I didn't even have the confidence to speak up for myself as I watched myself sitting in the dugout while other players took the field every inning. I can't blame my coaches or my teammates. I can only blame myself.

Finally, my parents told me that if I wasn't going to speak out, I would never get what I wanted. I was adamant that my actions on the field spoke louder than my words. Apparently, that was not the case. I had a talk with my coach, showed him the stats, and refuted his excuses. Slowly, I won my position back- but it would never win back the confidence that I needed to push me forward.

This isn't a story about how now I've magically transformed into a confident and improved player. I've stopped pitching and I still don't even have a consistent spot on second base on my select team this year. I've continually performed well, but I feel that all my coaches see are my errors. Maybe that's true if you don't stand up for yourself, don't have a dominating presence on the team, or just worry yourself to an extent of making the wrong plays. However, I've definitely gotten better. I've realized that if I'm going to talk less, I would have to observe more. My coaches and my teammates can't affect how I play. I've realized that the only one that can directly tear you down is yourself. Confidence is the key. And lastly, I've become resolute to stand by the opinion that everybody should have a second chance.

If others won't give me one, I'll just have to give myself a second chance.

Archika Dogra loves to write and read, along with playing outside. She plays select soccer and softball throughout the year. She will be going into high school as a freshman once the summer ends. She loves science, programming, and getting involved with her local theater. She has been recognized for her writing internationally, and also by contests such as Letters About Literature. In the future she would love to pursue acting, writing, and something STEM related, all at the same time hopefully.

Taking the Wheel

By Megan Kane

A decision made at a DMV saved my life.

Sixteen years after the fact, I'm standing in line at the local Department of Motor Vehicles. I begin to bounce on my toes as the line shifts forward—I'm approaching the moment I've been waiting for ever since I motored around in my plastic foot-powered yellow Jeep at the age of five and thought longingly of the open road beyond our asphalt driveway.

I lean to the right to look back into the DMV waiting room. I've already paid my dues there; my back is sore after sitting for hours on the cracked vinyl upholstery of the tacky plastic chairs. I've inhaled the heady scent of sweat and shag carpeting that oozes from the very pores of the place. I've listened to the incessant drone of the intercom as a string of numbers was called out, and endured the anguish of hearing, "Now serving number 182!" and looking down at the little black 291 etched on my paper in taunting black ink. Now, after the nail-biting, spine-tingling task of parallel parking and driving around the block has been completed, I have been ushered back inside to be issued that coveted square of plastic that is more commonly termed "the junior driver's license."

My dad is standing behind me in line. He can make conversation with almost anything, and since I'm too caught up in a daze of happiness, he has turned his efforts to the man behind us. Soon, him and the other dad—they're an easy breed to spot, what with their polo shirts and baseball caps and shadows of anxious teens trailing in their wake—are talking about everything from muscle cars to fly fishing. The teen standing behind the other man exchanges half-excited, half-embarrassed looks with me.

The line inches forward again, and we finally reach the front. The woman at the desk smiles broadly at me. Despite the dull atmosphere of the DMV, her tone is perky as she asks for my paperwork. Then again, she only sees the success stories. Only those who have passed the test go to her. She holds the key to my future, the swath of plastic that will change my world.

She asks me for the necessary details—name, date of birth, address, etc.—and I rattle them off eagerly. I'm already picturing what I will do with my newfound independence. I think of the places I'll be able to go now without becoming tangled in the schedules of my two younger sisters. I think of the few friends I've confided in about my plans for today, just in case I failed, and how I will now broadcast the story to anyone who will listen. I think of the endless places to which I can now drive and the endless things which I can now do.

But then, the woman at the desk asks her last question. She pauses before she does so, and taps a space on the application with a long pink fingernail. Then she squints up at me over her red-rimmed glasses, as if examining something within me that is beyond the surface details of age, height, and eye color.

"Do you want to be an organ donor?" she asks me.

In that moment, I'm not thinking of the future. Instead, I am transported back into the past.

First, I'm four again, squirming against the nurse who is holding my arm on the edge of the cold metal hospital chair. She's armed with a needle she calls a "butterfly," but even this insect euphemism does not completely reassure me.

Then I'm eight, pursing my lips in an oval so the clear liquid medication dribbles down my chin. I'm on a futile quest to keep it from touching my tongue, but my mom just hands me a glass of apple juice to wash the taste away. As I swallow I feel bitter chemicals coursing down my throat along with the tangy, fruity juice I will never completely enjoy again.

But then I'm two, peering down through the soft blue folds of the blanket into the eyes of my baby sister. I'm five and hiding on the soft wood-chip soil under the jungle gym with my friends and our Beanie Babies, and we're on a mission to save the kingdom before the lunch bell rings. I'm fourteen and riding in a pink Jeep over the bumpy desserts of Sedona; I'm twelve and bobbing between the cool ocean waves on a scorching summer day. I'm singing and dancing and laughing and crying and trying and failing and doing thousands and thousands of things as the movie of my life reels through my head. Some are good, and some are sad, and a few of them are just plain embarrassing.

All of them, though, have one thing in common. In all of the millions of memories housed in the scrapbook of my head and my heart, I am very much alive.

And this is because one day, over sixteen years ago, another girl stood at another DMV counter and answered the clerk's last question with a "Yes." And because of that that one simple decision, that girl's liver continues to live on in my body, even after she passed away in a motor vehicle accident.

At six months old, I became the recipient of an organ transplant.

Because of this, I stand in the DMV counter and give the only answer to the woman's final question that I possibly can. It is the only answer that seems right. It is the only answer I hope I would give even without sixteen years of personal experience regarding the perks of organ donation.

You see, organ donors are few and far between. Though ninety percent of Americans claim to support organ donation, only thirty percent check that little box at the DMV that commits them to the task. An average of twenty-two people die each day while on the transplant waiting list (organdonor.gov). Sixteen years ago, I was fortunate enough to be taken off the list just in time. I am incredibly grateful for the liver I was given. Of course I have been subjected to medications and hospital trips and tests for most of my life. I've also been subjected to family and friends and school and travel and everything that makes life wonderful. For me, it's a fair trade. And I think that others deserve the chance to experience life as I have.

So I look the woman behind the desk straight in the eye. Her face is framed with frizzy blond hair, and she wears an unremarkable green polo. Even in such a dull, dreary place, I think she knows, too. I think she knows what an impact one simple answer can have. I think that she knows, as I know, that if enough people answer the right way, there won't be a need for a transplant list. I think she knows that if the generosity of my own organ donor were to be felt by everyone receiving a license today, we could become a society remembered for giving gifts that lived on well after our lives had run their course. I think there is a glimmer of hope in her eye that is realized as I respond, "Yes."

Sixteen years ago, a decision made at a DMV saved my life. Now it is my turn to take the wheel. Who will join me?

Megan Kane is a rising sophomore at Elizabethtown College. She is pursuing a degree in English/Secondary Education. In her free time, Megan enjoys reading, writing for the school newspaper, spending time with friends and playing the violin in the community orchestra. She lives in Clarks Summit, PA.

Man of the House

By Kenny Allen

When my little brother was born, my first reaction was that he was cute, and I'd be able to post pictures of him on Facebook. Soon I found myself watching him sleep every night because I wanted to know that he was safe. I believed that if anything happened to him, it would be my fault. It would hurt me to watch him play with older kids because they would use his toys and he'd be too afraid to tell them no. It took all the willpower I had to not step in when I watched. I was nervous about everything he did. Every time he ran, ate circular foods, played with small toys, or slept on his stomach, I got scared. My job was to protect him. He is the only person on this planet that I would sacrifice my life for.

At the age of twelve I had a funny thought, "I'm the man of the house." It only made sense. As a twelve-year-old, I was the oldest male in the house. As I got older, it made more and more sense. If I wanted to be the man of the house, things had to change. I had to grow up quickly. I needed to be a role model for my brother, and be independent in order to make my mom's life as easy as possible. I went from being a kid that played video games instead of doing math homework, to the person that picked up his little brother from daycare every day. I got a job, picked up my work in school, and tried to become as self-sufficient as I could. I made sacrifices, but that's what was necessary. Picking up my brother from daycare meant that I couldn't always hang out after school, or get dinner with my friends, but I was doing the things that had to be done.

On my way home from work, I look at my phone to see a text from my mom "We got broken into." I couldn't believe it. Everybody always talks about how bad my neighborhood is, but in fifteen years of living here, nothing had happened. I needed to know what was going on at home. I felt all control slipping away. Somebody had broken into my house, now my mom wasn't responding to my texts, and there was nothing I could do. I started to play out all the different scenarios in my head. Would everything we owned be gone? Did somebody get hurt? What happened to my mom and why couldn't she reply to my text? As I started to play out all of the possible damage that could've been done, I found myself running home. The first thing that I saw was my brother playing basketball, and my mom talking to a police officer. Now I'd seen everything I needed to see. Even if our apartment had been stripped to the bone, I didn't care. My family was safe and that's the only thing that mattered. After assessing the damage, we realized the only thing that they took was my PlayStation. The thieves had gone through all the electronics in my house, and the only thing that they had taken was a PlayStation? I'd never felt so relieved. Now it felt so unimportant that I didn't even feel like I should even tell anybody. My mom kept asking me questions and saying things that made me realize how on-edge she was. She asked me if I was feeling okay, if I felt safe, if I thought we should stay in a hotel for the night. Throughout all of these questions, I was visibly happy. However, I knew that the feelings wouldn't last.

A common theme after somebody experiences a break-in is that they don't miss their belongings, but they miss their sense of privacy and security. As I lay in my bed that night, it began to hit me. I felt that no matter how hard I worked, somebody could just kick my door down and take everything away from me. Everybody's home is supposed to be the place where they feel comfortable. My room has things on the walls that illustrate who I am. But that day, my home felt like it belonged to more people than just me. It belonged to the people who kicked my door down and took my things. Before my house was my safe-haven, now it felt like anybody that wanted to have access to it could have it.

Not only did I feel like they had access to me, but they had access to my family. The way I used to watch my brother sleep, the thieves could do that now if they wanted to. As the so-called “man of the house,” I had taken on the job of protecting my home and the people in it. After they kicked down my door, I knew that as a protector, I had failed.

Kenny Allen is a rising Senior who lives in Boston. He’s very passionate about politics, and his writing typically reflects that.

Poetry

Fishing on the White River

By Emily Dorffer

We could see the eddies carrying algae
downstream where some fly fishermen
had recently gone to whip their rods.

She said, "I'll catch a brook trout this time.

It'll be a lunker. You'll see."

I said, "Of course you will, after I do."

My dad would be arriving soon, dangling
worms in our faces. In the amusing way
of this place, rainbow trout leapt into the fog
before splashing down to tempt us to travel to
the end of the rainbow with almonds and parsley.

"Powerbait," she said, "is the best way
to get a few nibbles." I said,

"Which color works best: pink, yellow, or orange?"

We had known each other for ages
so my love for her, like a patchwork quilt
draped across me, reflected my experiences
in a simplified way as if they were viewed
through fragments of stained glass
collected from a church's floor and whose edges
had been sanded into smoothness. "Your luck,"
she whispered, "your skill, your instinct

will lead the way.” Her forehead glistened
with diamonds of sweat. “You’re the expert,”
I said, but I pointed to the jar with the
highlighter yellow balls. The raindrops
were drumbeats. “You’ve got this,”
she muttered, “I’ll bet there’s a hungry fella
eyeing your bait.” Trolling is the process
by which one trails a baited line
behind a boat but how, how?
With the current’s help. I know that now,
as long as the line doesn’t snag, anyhow.

Emily Dorffer is a current undergraduate at Johns Hopkins University. She has previously had a short story published in *Breath & Shadow*.

Study of the Back Door

By Imani Davis

I am sick of courage. I grit my teeth into diamonds. You a good father, making me spit sawdust like a working thing and all/ feminism of the plow and sweat. I erode my eyes against your absence of mercy. You raised your girl right. Granite enough to chisel into like renewable resource. I ain't never runnin out on you, Pops. The same way every Cadillac gon have gas till the end of time. Whatever I gotta tell you to get your eyes to flutter somewhere Georgia summer soft, sometime before you forged your God into an unlocked handcuff dangling at your wrist like the trust of a girlchild. I'm the youngest of your mistakes. Which is to say I have not had time to heal away my being. I am a scar ready to peel off the mystery of its face. I'm erasing my body until all that is left is a handful of chipped teeth. I invent a new word for gone every time we lock eyes. Teach me the ease of cowardice. I do not know if the grass is greener on the other side, but I know the ground here is tired of conjuring fruit from barren blood. This is the story I guess: a man the shade of lumbered and labored oak claims the night as his overcoat. Every star implodes in his synapses. Cuz back in the day, children used to respect they parent's trauma. They was seen and not swallowed. And they knew better than to come home after certain darks.

Imani Davis is a student of many things, most often her Blackness. She's currently studying at the University of Pennsylvania. Her poetry has settled down with Rookie Magazine, Brain Mill Press, and other homes. She was also awarded a Silver National Medal from the Alliance for Young Artists and Writers. She is a member of Urban Word NYC's Slam Team. Her life is grounded in "despite" and New York. She can be reached at imanid@sas.upenn.edu.

Shirtless

By Joseph Christensen

My pale frame rests under a dark V-neck

Skinny some say

Yes, I suppose...

Guys loll in easy confidence

Gifted with lines and shadows defining them

Chiseled features, six-pack abs, sensitive yet strong

"No, no, I think I'll keep my shirt on."

"I'm cold," a lie

I shiver for effect

They effortlessly roll their golden shoulders, "Whatever"

Perfection doesn't care

I'll wait an hour

Dusk will help hide my skin and bones

"It's fixable," I say

"I'll work out," a false promise

Ten push-ups after nine p.m.

Behind locked doors in a narrow space

Chiseled features

The ground comes up to meet me, number ten

Trembling arms pull me under sheets

My V-neck will never stretch to accommodate my bulk

Girls won't giggle at my strength

When the shirt comes off, what am I?

Skinny some say

Human I say

Joseph Christensen will be a senior this fall at Bellevue High School in Washington. His hobbies include: pondering the perplexities of life over bowls of chocolate ice cream and pretending to be professional.

A Petrified Conversation

By Anna Lund

The word Love

like a pebble under my tongue

It takes a second of awkward maneuvering to dislodge

and tumbles to your feet

We both stare for a moment

I turn my gaze back to your face

and bear witness to a stone of your own pressing against your cheek

You scoop it out

let it rest on your tongue

Then slowly reveal

my undoing

The word Sorry

Anna Lund is a writer and artist attending high school in northern Minnesota.

Lines for someone who disappeared from poems I never wrote

By Archita Mittra

half-lit classrooms/ january sunlight/tasting new words on my tongue/ words i will later make poems, out of
this, this is not a love letter/i love you the way one falls in love with a painting/ across time and space, endlessly/though mythologies of longing/ letting go is a kind of slipping
half-finished conversations in shadowy corridors/ my claustrophobic stories like ghosts in summer heat/the tragedy in being so close..yet invisible/ even in dreams, i am colourless
and your voice, a cantillation and the sound of my name (something beautiful) and the bell ringing like a knell/ (all i ever wanted was a universe where time machines exist)
waking up in a dreamed-up world, a mythical venice or a strange arabian city stolen from postcards or ancient stories whose endings we have lost, over the centuries, so we invent new and better ones/ false alarms/ in that universe, we are not so distant, you and i
confession/ i never stopped to realize just how entangled i am, with vines of identifies and whims and dreams clinging onto the rusty, crumbling walls of my heart/ desperation, (i)solation, death/ i, the lonely half of a hyphenated word
i sometimes speak of myself in the second person, only to lose myself/ if you and i/ if you were i/ the way words lose their meanings when you repeat them enough times/doors opening into doors opening into doors you were closing all the while/ not you, i meant i
if i (not you) write a suicide note, it would read: i cry because i cannot make myself understood/ i who yearn to write love songs to the stars
autumn playgrounds/swinging to strange heavens on rusty swings or sliding down to dusty hells of fallen leaves and memories/ there is no goodbye when imaginary friends die/ does anyone mourn for burnt diaries
trapped in a world that no longer exists/ my loneliness is like an empty train station in the wee hours of night that waits impatiently for something, someone/ to happen;

Archita Mittra is a wordsmith and visual artist with a love for all things vintage and darkly fantastical. A student of English Literature at Jadavpur University, she is also pursuing a Diploma in Multimedia and Animation from St. Xavier's College, Kolkata. She has won several writing contests and her work has appeared in numerous online and print publications including Quail Bell Magazine, eFiction India, Life In 10 Minutes, Teenage Wasteland Review and Tuck Magazine, among others. She occasionally practises as a tarot card reader.

You can read more of her work on <https://thepolyphonicphoenix.wordpress.com/>

Fiction

Deja Vu

By Ellanora Lerner

When I back into the driveway dust flies up and I grimace as the underside of my car scrapes on a mound of dirt. Mom's old black jeep was suited for this, but my new silver car, which I bought with my first paycheck after the raise, is used to city life. I walk up the green steps, pull open the screen door, and step into the empty mud room. As soon as I enter my breath catches and I reach for the doorframe to steady myself. It's not just the lack of old cookbooks and Martha's old rocking horse, though that's striking, what throws me is the utter lack of life that made this house what it was, made my childhood what it was. There's no laughter that echoes through the hallways, no one to interrupt my journey with a call of my name. Instead I'm left alone to stroll around the edges of the room until I reach my corner. It was always filled with shoes, lined up and organized. Martha's shoes, on the other hand, were never organized. She would toss them off as she rushed inside, probably after her curfew. She never untied her sneakers either, just shoved them on as she rushed out the door, probably late for something. People made fun of her for her constant movement and incessant tardiness but at least she had places to be. They made fun of me for the hours I spent in the backyard poring over my fantasy novels and the careful moments I spent arranging each shoe by color or by type depending on my mood. Now I slip off my loafers, taking a moment to line them neatly so they make a ninety-degree angle with the wall, a practice of mine ever since Ms. Jasetti taught us right angles in the third grade. They look strange, too professional and too grown-up to be here. But that's life, dress shoes replace sneakers.

Nostalgia crowds this house like dust but it's not until the kitchen that it slams me in the chest. The stove is off, pans are sitting in boxes on the counter, even the smell is fading. In my mind that smell is always the same, fresh bread and chicken soup and my mother's perfume. But in reality it was always changing, a reflection of what was for dinner that week and which family members had helped cook on Friday night.

I leave that room as quickly as I can and find myself in the dining room. Great- Aunt Esther's mahogany table is gone, along with the sideboard that got picked up at a tag sale. The radiator looks strange without the other furniture and the omnipresent flowers. When I close my eyes I can see the blue vase filled with pansies but they're wilting. For a moment I am shocked because Mom would never let the flowers wilt. Then I remember why I am standing here, then I remember that the flowers aren't even there anymore, Martha must have taken them. I'm glad she did, I would have given them fresh water and left them for the next family. That's what Mom would've wanted me to do.

My room is right at the top of the stairs on the left. It got sealed off after I went to college and it always made me uncomfortable when I came back to visit. The layer of dust made me feel old and out of place, so I would dump my stuff and go downstairs- to people who made me feel young and right. Now the old bed, desk, lamp, are gone. The green paint I picked out at seven is still there though, I wonder if it will still be here in another twenty-five years or if the new owners will paint over it.

When I place my hand on the wall I can feel my heartbeat pound back at me like a recording. I open the closet and see my teenage years locked away, the worst parts stuffed in corners. I am tempted to root around. Re-read Tolkien and re-watch Bill Hienk beating me up in front of the multiplex. Instead I slam the door then lean against it. Breathe in, breathe out, some things are better left alone. I head back down the hallway.

The hospice bed is still in Mom's room. Martha wants it out but when she called Jones's Hospice Supplies all she got were automated tellers who tried to explain how to raise and lower the seat. Martha hadn't wanted her to come home, if it were up to Martha she would still be on life support at St. George's Hospital. If it were up to Martha she would still be alive. I think Martha blames me sometimes for her not being here. I know Martha blames me sometimes for her not being here. I won't try to tell her how much I wish she were still alive too. I won't try to tell her how much I blame myself too. But I know this is what she would have wanted. She wasn't the kind of person who would've wanted to be kept alive by machines. She wasn't even the kind of person who would've wanted to sleep in a moving bed.

The bed is the only thing left in the room except for the hatbox. I've never seen inside the box. I didn't even know the box existed for years. I'm not sure how much she looked at it, or how much she thought about my dad. The box is still here because no one wanted to take it. No one even wanted to look inside it. I could look inside it now, I wouldn't even have to tell anyone. But I honored what she would've wanted to the point that it caused her death, I will honor it now.

I pick up the box, bring it downstairs, out to my car. It goes under the seat, the keys go in the ignition and I pull out of the driveway.

I'll probably never go back to that house. Martha says it's going on the market as soon as that bed is gone. Martha's the one who's taken over the project. She's the one who talked to the realtor. I just showed up, signed some papers, and took the box no one wanted. Just like always Martha is the one with the plan, with the drive; that's okay I have a well-paying job and some spare time.

I make it halfway down the highway before the road begins to blur. I pull over at the McDonald's, the same branch Mom used to take us to when work was bad. I loved those days because she gave me the money, finally an acknowledgment that I was the older one, the more responsible one. For a moment I could lead Martha by the hand and feel like an adult while she made both of our Happy Meal toys run in circles. Of course she was the one who stood up and pulled me out of the linoleum booth and back to the car. Of course Martha always won the power struggle in the end. If she was here right now she would be the one taking charge, telling me whatever I'm doing isn't healthy. I almost wish she was here to make me get a salad and go home but she's somewhere outside of Boston with her numbers-minded husband and their kids who think I'm vaguely interesting.

I think about Martha and her nice suburban home for a long time. I wonder if she is happy with her life, I wonder if my mom was happy with her life. I wonder if I should try harder to be happy with mine or if I should leave well enough alone and settle for content. I sit in silence for a long time watching commuters and tired families rush in and out of the restaurant until the tears start to fall. I'll miss that house, it holds the last vestiges of my childhood. But the tears are for my mom.

Ellanora Lerner is an eighth grader who loves books and feminism and poetic things like sunsets. She hopes to write a novel that is both chillingly dark as well as enjoyable and direct a gender swapped Broadway revival. She has been previously published in Stone Soup and Teen Ink and her work can be found at: sometimesithinkimpoetic.tumblr.com

Ghost

By Rachel Husk

The sound starts off quietly, and I barely even hear it, a gentle swish swish. David stirs next to me, and I slap his arm, mumbling at him to shut up. He continues to steal the covers and swats at me halfheartedly, barely awake.

Another swish swish a few minutes later, followed by a sound similar to nails against a wall.

“David shut up...” I say again, burying my head in my pillow. “For God’s sake.”

“I’m not making any noise,” he whines.

“Your nails are clacking against the headboard,” I say.

He mumbles something under his breath, but buries his hands under the covers nevertheless.

Eeeeeeeek.

Okay, that definitely wasn’t David.

Eeeeeeeek. Swish swish.

“Nat, you’re doing it now,” David says, shaking my shoulder.

“No, I’m not.” I turn the lamp on. “There’s something else making that noise.”

David moves to lean on his elbow, eyes looking still blurry from sleep, but he takes my hand. “It’s probably just the house. It’s old.”

Eeeeeeeek. Swish swish swish swish.

I look over at him, eyes wide. “Houses do not make that noise.”

He starts to look a little worried. “Uhh, maybe it was wind.”

“David this is how every single cheesy horror story starts out. ‘Oh it was just the wind.’ Next thing we know, we’re dead,” I say.

“Nat—”

“I’m serious.”

“Well, what do you think it is?” he asks, skeptically.

Swish swish swish. Eeeeeeeeeek.

I pull the covers up over my face. “Oh no. It’s a ghost.”

“What?”

“It’s a ghost!” I stage whisper. “What else swishes into the night?”

David rolls his eyes. “Ghosts don’t make noise.”

“How do you know that? You ever seen a ghost before?” I glare at him.

“That doesn’t even matter because they’re not real,” he says.

I freeze. “Not real? Not real? You have got to be kidding me...”

“Ghosts do not exist. And to prove it to you, I’m gonna go downstairs right now.”

David moves to get out of the bed, but I pounce on him before he has a chance. “You are not going anywhere!”

“Yes I am!”

“No you’re not! How are you going to survive all by yourself?”

He stops struggling from me for a moment. “What?”

“We don’t know how many of them are down there. And even if there is only one... you’re not exactly the most likely to get out unscathed.”

“Unscathed?”

“I hope you know that if I wasn’t here right now, you’d be dead.”

“Natasha, I swear to God—”

“Please please please don’t go down there. I’ll never forgive you.”

He sighs. “Fine. Fine, I won’t. But know I’m not doing this for you, I’m doing this for me.”

“How are you doing this for you?”

“I really don’t feel like getting up anymore.”

Swish swish swish. Eeeeeeeeeeeek. Swish.

“Is the door locked? Oh no, we’re gonna die,” I say.

I’m still clutching to him, and he rolls his eyes, but pats my back reassuringly. “There, there.”

“Shut up. You think this is a joke.”

David squints at me, suspiciously. "Is it a joke?"

"No," I say.

"Why are you even afraid of ghosts?" David asks. "I mean, if they're invisible, how can they even hurt you?"

I swallow hard. "They can move things without touching them. They can pass through walls. They can create wind and set things on fire."

"Why?"

"Because ghosts are vengeful, that's why."

"Do you know anyone who's dead who'd want to kill you?" he asks, thoughtfully.

"Not that I can remember," I say. "What about you?"

David shrugs. "No one dead, anyway."

"Dang it."

"Perhaps this ghost just simply forgot to bring something with him into the afterlife and is asking if he can have it back in the nicest way possible," he says.

Swish swish. Eeeeeeeeeeeek.

I scoff. "Yeah right. I bet they've got everything in the afterlife."

"Maybe they forgot their diary. That's something you would do," David suggests.

"This is your fault anyway," I say.

"My fault?"

"Yes. I told you this land might be haunted."

"Are you actually joking right now?"

Swish swish. Eeeeeeeeeeeek. Swish.

"No, I'm not," I say. "We're going to die and it's all because you wanted this house."

"You wanted this house too!"

"Yeah, but I would've been fine in another one. You were pretty set on this, weren't you?"

"Just because the people who lived here before us died, doesn't mean that it's haunted ground."

“Just listen to yourself! They died here!”

“That’s generally what people do, Nat!”

I groan. “This is ridiculous.”

“You’re the one who thinks there’s a ghost in the house,” he says.

“I’m being reasonable...”

“Generally, I don’t think reasonable people believe in ghosts.”

“You’re just saying that because you only hang out with reasonable people.”

“We have the same friends.”

“That’s beside the point.”

“Don’t you think that if there was a vengeful ghost, then we would’ve already been dead?”

I listen for the noise, but it doesn’t come back. David, looking very pleased with himself, tells me to please turn the lamp off so he can get at least a few hours of sleep, and promptly turns around, burying his body back underneath of the covers. I don’t fall asleep, and I don’t go downstairs the next morning until David wakes up. It’s not the last time we hear the noise, but David buys me earplugs, so it works out okay in the end. For a ghost haunting, anyway.

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Doodles

By Ujwal Rajaputhra

She was so focused.

Sapphire eyes stuck to the marble notebook like they were meant to be. Every time she looked back up at the white board, I'd stare at the graphite doodles dancing across my beige desk. One was of King Kong, except he wasn't rampaging on the Empire State Building; he instead had an apparent affection towards the Eiffel Tower and very, very large berets. I don't think there was anyone who wouldn't want to see a mutant, French-gorilla movie.

My fingers gripped my pencil lightly, turning and twisting it between the blue grids of my paper. Today, it was going to be French King Kong vs. British Godzilla. A cup of tea in his talons and Union Jack scales would do the job.

She looked back down.

Okay, I wasn't really sure when she was looking at the board or not. I had to look out of the corner of my eye so I wouldn't come off as creepy, even though I probably was. Our legs were touching so slightly it shouldn't even have been noticeable to anyone sane. But of course, to me, it was the biggest deal in the universe. My thigh was as stiff as a branch, and every breath I released shuddered as it slipped past my lips.

She looked back up.

My head ducked so quickly my forehead almost slammed into the tabletop. I could barely register the incoherent babbling my teacher was letting loose. It had something to do with numbers, I was pretty sure. My No.2 twirled in my fingers and I fed Godzilla some fish n' chips.

"Andy," a voice boomed ahead.

I almost didn't look. If I did, she would notice me for sure. This wasn't a good first impression.

Figuring that acting like even more of an idiot wouldn't help me whatsoever, I looked up. "Yes, Ms. Birch?"

My teacher balanced her frail weight on the board sill. "I may be old, but I'm not blind."

"What do you mean?"

She rolled her eyes. "Just pay attention and actually write down some math once-in-a-while."

And with that, her back returned to my view and class resumed. A couple of curious eyes lingered on me for a few seconds, but everyone gets bored eventually – I was the epitome of that principle. And King Kong was begging for a croissant-club.

By the time the clock struck two and metallic ringing echoed throughout the humdrum halls, I had a whole sci-fi, action-packed, romance-induced movie scene planned out. I wouldn't have hesitated to get out of my seat in any other class, but I had to make sure she left first. Any eye contact and I

would probably melt in my Converse. I crumpled the paper in my palms like playdough and made my way towards the door. Stray beams of buttery, spring sunlight had managed to infiltrate the gray barriers of this prison, lighting the room with an uplifting-but-solemn aura. My hand swiftly tossed the international-monster extravaganza into the cerulean recycling bin.

“Don’t forget about the other one.” Ms. Birch eyed me from her chair.

I gave her my signature, clueless expression. She sighed, extending her finger towards the desks – her desk. My eyes locked onto the egg-white sheet slumbering on the table next to mine while my feet quickly shuffled towards the mysterious object. The paper shivered between my fingers.

It was everything mine wasn’t.

The silver bricks and cream mortar of the walls were sketched so perfectly I had thought it was a photograph. Sunlight was obtusely shaded with motley hues of gray. Even the pencils were silhouetted against deft shadows with sharp strokes of graphite. Everything was so detailed and realistic – on point. But I paused when I spotted the bottom-left edge, and began to crease the corner of the sheet.

Hunched over and intricately shadowed was my lanky self, a sly, shadowy pupil staring at me from the corner of its eyes.

Ujwal is a junior at Montgomery Township High School in Skillman, New Jersey, where he is the president of the Planetary Conservation Club. When his fingers aren’t thundering upon a keyboard or suffocating a ballpoint, Ujwal loves to watch movies a little too late at night and loop his Spotify. He aspires to attend film school and manifest his stories on screens big enough for the world to see... with a nice, generous bucket of popcorn, of course.

The Last Bus to Trayton

By Katie Sarrels

I pride myself on being an observer. The beautiful things in this world, natural and man-made, have never ceased to amaze me. I love watching winter transform into spring, seeing a train pull into the station, smelling chocolate chip cookies fresh out of the oven, and listening to the dialogue of two sparrows at the crack of dawn. I love it all, but I enjoy observing people the most.

On this particular day, I was sitting at the back of a near empty bus traveling from Otega Bay, a seaside tourist hub, to Trayton, a rural town on the other side of the mountains. The bus had just made its last stop on the edge of town and it was now making its way towards the mountain road. On a normal day, this trip would take an hour and seven minutes, but it was raining and the bus was expected to arrive later than usual.

I watched as water droplets ran down the window to my right. Some of them fell straight and fast while others took their time, sometimes getting swept up in another droplet's path to the bottom. Looking past the rain, I could see the road start to slope upwards and the roar of the bus's engine signaled the start of its climb up the mountain.

This trip was the last run of the day and there would be no other bus until the next morning. The bus driver was tired and ready to end his ten-hour shift. He was looking forward to spending his weekend off with his wife and watching the fifth season of *Mad Men*, one of their favorite shows. Since it was raining, his wife would expect him a little later than usual and have a nice cup of tea waiting for him upon his return. Though it would be eleven o'clock and well past dinnertime, a warm meal would be placed on the dining room table, because his wife insisted that he eat a proper meal, not one from a paper bag. The bus driver was especially excited for tonight because he had finally saved up enough money for he and his wife to go to Hawaii and was planning on surprising her with the plane tickets over dinner.

This bus trip was not popular by any means and functioned primarily as a commuter route for the residents of Trayton. However, on this trip, a tourist couple sat two rows back from the bus driver and their six-year-old daughter lay sleeping across their laps. After much disagreement, they had elected to stay with relatives in Trayton rather than pay for a costly hotel in Otega Bay. The woman insisted that the long bus ride was a small price to pay for saving a hundred dollars a night and the man soon gave in.

The woman didn't want to stay with her relatives either, but she realized too late that she had underestimated the cost of the trip and they could not afford to stay in a hotel for the next week and a half. She knew that if her husband found out, he would want to end the trip early and she would have to tell their daughter that she couldn't see the dolphin show that she had very much been looking forward to. The woman planned on telling her husband about their financial trouble after the trip was over and then working longer hours so they didn't have to worry about the money that they had overspent.

The man might have noticed their savings slowly disappearing had he thought to check, but he had other worries on his mind. He had been fired two days before the start of their trip, but by then, the

trip was already planned and paid for. He knew that his wife needed a break from work because her accounting firm had just finished a busy season and she was exhausted. If she found out he had been fired, the man knew she would cancel the trip and insist that she work even more. He also didn't want to disappoint his daughter who had been looking forward to seeing the dolphins for weeks. When planning the trip, his wife assured him that they had saved up enough money and he decided that they would be fine until he could find a new job. He resolved to tell his wife that he'd been fired after their vacation, and had already lined up several interviews for when he returned home. For now, he just wanted the three of them to enjoy their family vacation.

The bus was nearing the top of the mountain and the rain had started to pick up. The bus's headlights forged a path through the shadows that clung to the rock wall and the mountain's inhabitants vanished into small crevices to avoid the bright light. I found myself thinking that I might like to follow them and explore the mountain, but the thought was fleeting and vanished altogether as the bus rounded the corner.

There was a person, a woman, sitting at the middle most row on the left side of the bus. She had been there since long before I arrived and was a mystery to me. She sat quietly, gripping onto the backpack in her lap, and stared out the window into the rain. I did not know where she came from, why she was here, or what business she had in Trayton which was unusual for me, but I wasn't one to give up easily. I managed to gather, from the pins on her backpack, that she loved marine animals and, from the faint song fragments coming from her earphones, she loved listening to classic rock.

It wasn't much, but I was content with knowing that and turned my attention out the window. We had reached the top of the mountain and a view of the town of Trayton was barely visible through the rain. Lights from the town shone through the darkness in place of the moon and the stars which, on this night, were covered by the storm clouds. Most of the residents had gone to bed, and the few that hadn't were either on this bus to Trayton or waiting upon their return.

At the last stop before the mountain, a lone man got on the bus. He had a tough appearance complete with an unkempt beard and weathered clothes. These features caused most of the passengers to shy away from him in discomfort. Noticing their gazes, the man had chosen to sit towards the back of the bus as to not disturb the others. It was amusing to me, their weariness of this sailor, because out of all those on the bus, he was perhaps the most kindhearted.

The sailor had been traveling up and down the coast of Peru with his shipmates bringing aid to civilians after a devastating earthquake. His disheveled appearance was a result of a mild storm he and the rest of the crew ran into on their way back up the coast. He had battled the storm all through the night and was looking forward to reuniting with his wife and son after three weeks of separation. After a good, long sleep, he was planning on taking them camping at a little cove in the mountains. There, the sailor would point out the different types of trees and, just like every time they had gone before, he would listen to his wife tell them about the different species of birds, and watch as his son attempted to catch squirrels that got too close.

The bus driver, who had paid special attention to the sailor to make sure he paid his bus fare, would never know that the sailor also loved watching *Mad Men* with his wife or that he too understood the allure of a warm meal waiting at home. The couple, who shifted in their seats as he passed, would never exchange pleasantries with this man, or ask about his family waiting at home. They would never consider that this man could understand the selflessness behind the secrets they kept from one another, or know that he had a child the same age as the little girl who lay sleeping in their laps.

The bus started its descent and I turned my attention to the pine trees whose tops barely reached the edge of the road before dropping off down the side of the mountain. The rain was almost blinding and the once tiny droplets were now buckets of water pounding the side of the bus. The rain weighed on the branches of the pine trees, dragging them down, and the wind, which was starting to pick up, made even the strongest of trees sway. The bus's metal walls had previously hidden the wind's presence, but now the windows shook and the roar of the bus's engine was lost in nature's fury. It would be a stormy night in Trayton, but even then it was beautiful.

Otega Bay, where I had just left, was full of hazards, crime, and drunken mistakes. Though I visited often, I knew I would not like to live there. Maybe I was biased. I often visited larger, more chaotic cities, so maybe I relished the peaceful, isolating nature of towns like Trayton where nothing ever happened that would make headlines. Or maybe these small towns really were more beautiful. They always seemed more peaceful and inviting. Their sky always looked clearer, their birds more cheerful, and the people less burdened. Maybe one day I'd have to stick around and find out, but as for tonight, I had work to do.

The storm had by now turned violent with claps of thunder and streaks of lightning. The little girl had awoken with a cry and now sat wailing on her mother's lap. Her father stroked her hair softly, whispering words of reassurance in her ear. The mysterious woman clutched her backpack tighter and was now looking at the road ahead. Maybe she often got car sick, or perhaps she wasn't used to taking bus rides, especially in such conditions. I couldn't tell. The sailor seemed the most at ease. He had been through many storms on open water and the events outside didn't seem to faze him. Instead, he looked towards the couple comforting their daughter until he caught the attention of the little girl. The girl stared back at the sailor, rubbing her left eye with her fist. The sailor grinned, making silly gestures with his eyebrows, until the girl laughed and smiled back. The girl's father looked back at the sailor and nodded his thanks before turning back to his family.

The bus driver had done his best to stay vigilant, but the ten-hour shift, combined with his restless sleep the previous night, slowed his reflexes. Lightning cracked above them on the cliff, illuminating the night sky for a fraction of a second. In the next instant, a large tree, with burn scars across its trunk, dented the road fifty feet in front of the bus. The driver slammed on the brakes, but the road, wet from the rain, refused to grip the tires. The bus slammed into the tree and was forcefully turned towards the guardrail. The little girl was crying again and suddenly, we were airborne. The family's suitcases flew down the aisle towards the back of the bus where I was sitting and hit the wall to my right. The mysterious woman and the sailor gripped the seats in front of them, but slowly, they began to rise up off their seats. The bus driver was knocked out cold from the impact with the tree and would not wake.

After the bus hit the ground, it was about twenty seconds before it stopped rolling. By the time the bus had reached the bottom of the mountain, it had been completely destroyed. The windows were shattered, the right side was dented in, and the passengers lay scattered across its interior. I got up from the floor, though technically I was standing on the roof now. I walked over to the little girl and tapped her shoulder. She stirred and looked up at me.

"Who...who are you? I didn't see you on the bus."

"I'm sorry, the bus crashed. Come with me," I replied and held out my hand. She hesitated, but finally placed her hand on mine and I pulled her to her feet. I said, "Let's go get the others," and

began walking towards the front of the bus. The same thing happened each time I approached the others. They'd ask, "who are you?" and, "what happened?" and I'd tell them, then reach for their hand.

The bus, twenty-three minutes from town, would never arrive. The little girl would never get to see the dolphin show. Her parents would never know each other's secrets, nor care to remember their own. The warm meal waiting for the bus driver's return would eventually grow cold. The sailor had, unbeknownst to him, already visited his family's camping site for the last time four months earlier. And despite it all, each of them would take my hand smiling.

That's the strange, beautiful thing about death. Everyone, when their time comes, accepts it. They grab my hand and only a few ever look back upon themselves. If they do, it is only for a moment.

As I was leading the group of people away from the bus, slight movement to my right caught my eye. The mysterious woman was lying outside the bus and stirred as if waking from a troubled sleep. It all made sense to me now. I was not meant to know her story, at least not yet. Sometime in the near future, I would return to Trayton and see the mysterious woman again. On that day, her story would become clear to me, but not before.

I turned back to my companions. For today, my duty was to them. In life, people never stop and notice the little things. In death, I'd like to think they start to understand the beauty I see in the world, and I always take a little time to show them. I show them the beauty of the howling wind, the chilling rain, and the flickering lights of town from up above. I show them, then I move on, to another town, another group of people, and a new, beautiful day.

Katie Sarrels is a freshman at California State University Long Beach where she majors in both Film and English. She hopes to work as a producer for a major TV show, but her biggest dream is to one day write an original crime novel.