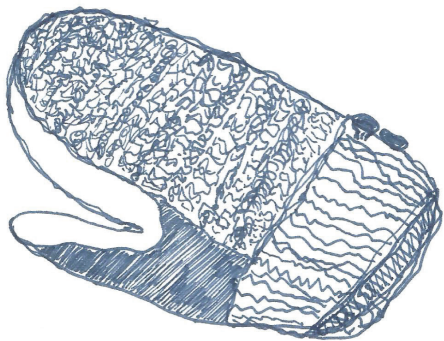


UN BOUND



FALL 2019 | VOLUME XI | ISSUE I



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Unbound Journal is run exclusively by undergraduate students and biannually publishes the prose, poetry, and visual art of students at the University of Oregon. Submissions are selected for publication by editorial board members through a double-blind review process.

We receive funding from the Associated Students of the University of Oregon and the English Department.



LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

It may have been a while since you've seen an Unbound issue! I am happy to announce that this issue promises a revival of the regular publications of Unbound this year. To new readers, welcome, and to longtime readers, welcome back. My name is Olivia Atmore and I am the new editor-in-chief for Unbound's 11th year at University of Oregon.

I accepted the position of Editor-in-Chief for my love of writing and storytelling. I wanted the ability to shine light on the hardworking authors behind these stories. What I found was not only a rich community of storywriters, artists, and poets, but also a truly talented staff that has a passion for editing and publishing.

This is also a special year for Unbound because this is the first ever "Fall Edition" of the magazine. Works were collected last spring and put through the editorial process this fall via our brand new editorial team. This special edition of Unbound took great care and consideration and I extend my gratitude to everyone on the editorial staff who put their hard work and time into this edition.

Due to time and budget constraints, this Fall Edition goes back to Unbound's roots, as an online publication. This gave us the freedom to design the layout of the journal however we wanted, and we are so pleased with the final result. I would like to extend a special thanks to our Creative Director, Billy von Raven, for the tireless and amazing work on the layout, cover, and design of this entire publication!

From snowdrifts and lost mittens to superpowers and Martian landscapes, this edition is packed with the best writing from our university students, friends, and peers. We are so excited to share this special publication with all of you and prepare for a full year of unique stories. I hope you are, too!

Warmly,

Olivia Atmore

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HOW TO SUBMIT A POEM TO A MAGAZINE:

PAUL HERMAN

1. Google “what is infinity?”
2. 902 million results
3. Set head on desk and feel time rain down your neck
4. Write the first thing you want to do (as if you were made of rain)
5. Trick people into thinking it’s normal (confidence is key)
6. Next thing you know, the weird is the scene, pushes old-normal off stage
7. Go to sleep (infinity has a looser hold)
8. Dream and drip away
9. Try not to lose sound of clear sounding words (like rain)
10. There is a leaf, do not fall off
11. Go where your next word takes you
12. Evaporate
13. See what the world looks like from the back of a cloud
14. Fall through the sand to another kaleidoscopic land
15. Get where you’re going by falling downhill
16. Take bone hands, take them in yours
17. Try to understand the dripping away (but don’t do it it’s not worth it, just laugh it off, just laugh it off—rain isn’t understandable . . . or maybe . . .)
18. Submit.
19. Profit big time baby \$\$\$

NO SPEED LIMIT

JULIA LIU



BENEATH THE SNOW

SAMANTHA RUBIN

Her frantic legs move so fast that in order to balance herself Briana clutches the kitchen counter. She presses her ear against the shared wall with her neighbor and discovers the origin of the sound is there. She walks so fast into the bathroom that her arms make the motion of a train, quickly moving back and forth. She pastes her ear against the sterile white wall. It's louder in here. The small space. No windows. The sound is trapped. It reverberates off her own walls and bounces into her sanctuary. She groans. She stomps back into the kitchen and clamps onto the counter, gripping it so hard that her fingers turn red. Her brain is imbalanced. She needs the countertops to stabilize her. Her quick movements knock over a vase.

Her neighbor's dog is the small yapper kind. The kind that is quiet when her neighbor is home but deafeningly loud when they leave. Briana assumed it is probably lonely without its owner, and small dogs are notorious for barking for extensive amounts of time. But what was she to do? Her neighbor wasn't home for her to ask to keep it down, and it was distracting her from her job.

Drawers open and slam in her bedroom. Her hair is wiping across her face and into her eyes as she struggles to find her noise cancelling headphones. She places them firmly over her ears. But she can still hear it. She's not satisfied. Her heart pounds so hard that she can feel her pulse in her fingers and in her toes. She removes her headphones and bites her nails as she rummages through different solutions. She walks into her bathroom and validates that the sound is the loudest in there. She slams the door hoping that this will muffle the sound. Then, she does the same with her bedroom door, but she can still hear it, although it isn't as bad as before. She places her headphones on once more and tries to resume her work.

After working on a customer's graphic design for several hours, she removes her headphones. The bark is just as piercing. She wonders: is this dog abuse? She grew up around breeder's dogs, and she doesn't remember them barking this much. She nervously bites her nails and clutches her forehead. She needs a walk to clear her head. Her feet glide into the snow boots almost as if they want to

escape the sound too.

It's been snowing for three days consistently. Dangerous and unfamiliar driving conditions stop her from commuting to the office a few times a week, so she works from the warmth and safety of her apartment. New to the area, she's inexperienced at operating a vehicle in the inclement weather.

On her walk, she notices the blankets of snow that go untouched by people. The sunlight glimmers off of it. It is pure, tragic and beautiful. The beauty will soon melt without a trace of it ever being there. As she walks around the park, she sees couples holding hands and taking pictures of each other, friends making snow angels, families having snowball fights. And then there's her, just walking through. Whoever would have thought that snow creates such bonds between people she thinks. People are giggling, smiling—in their pure, tragic and beautiful form. This feeling will also melt as soon as they return home.

"Hey! Can you take a picture of us?" says a girl in a group of nine.

Briana walks up to them and no one hands her a phone.

"I need a phone to use."

A guy extends his phone out to her.

They pose with three people on the backs of their friends, three others align the floor of the frame, the girls smile showing their teeth and the guys grin hiding theirs.

She motions her right hand to the group on the end and waves her hand in, "Move in a little more."

"Yeah get over here!" One of the other girls on someone's back teases.

She snaps the picture several times. Once standing and next squatting; if it was her picture, she would want different angles. She extends the phone back to the guy that handed it to her.

He says, "I want to look but the water on the screen is in the way, but from what I can see they look good. Thanks!"

They all huddle around him as he slides through them. As she walks away, two other girls thank her.

Briana twists around the snowy bushes and sees that her neighbor's

lights are on. She imagines they must be around her age. Possibly a sorority girl alumna with perfect hair. Probably has a curling iron and a straightener lying on her bathroom countertop. Makeup brushes collecting her imperfections. Briana thought this because she always sees her pretty dog stand on the windowsill—only someone obsessed with themselves would own a dog that pretty and that annoying.

The neighbor's windows are lined with orange curtains. They're usually open—she must like the natural light, so does Briana. She clenches the railing as she walks up the snowy steps.

She bangs her fist against the door three times.

The neighbor opens the door, but it was not what Briana expected. She was older. She looked like she was in her mid to late 60s. Just around her mother's age, she thought, maybe a little older. She had a bob haircut with wavy hair that looked messy; it was a brown and gray color, very natural she thought. She wore a tunic grey top with an orange scarf laced around her neck that stretched as far as their apartment staircase.

She has her French bulldog in hand. She thinks the dog is cute, although it did look like an ewok from Star Wars. It was a grey with dark blue eyes. In a way they looked alike: gray/brown hair and dark blue eyes. Almost like a child and its mother.

"I live next door," Brianna says, "and whenever you're gone your dog barks a lot and it's really distracting."

The neighbor opens her mouth in the shape of a perfect O of shock. "I'm sorry, I didn't realize she was causing such a raucous—but yes I will try to train her more."

Briana looks at her door and starts to walk away.

She extends her hand out for a handshake, "My name is Kathleen, and this is Lola." She picks up her dog's paw and orchestrates it almost like Lola is waving at Briana. "It's nice to meet you," Kathleen smiles, "And what is your name?"

"Briana, and you too." She grins, doesn't show her teeth and walks back to her door wiping her feet on the green mat.

It's quiet that night. Luckily. The moonlight glimmers off of the white snow, which makes the night sky seem as bright as the early evening. She sits in front of the TV and watches *New Girl* and devours a whole bag of popcorn, kernels align the couch and parts of the floor. She picks them up and places each in her hand and tosses them in the trash. She makes her way back to the couch and checks her phone. No messages. She folds the blanket on the couch as she folds her lips and then walks into her room.

She pulls the white covers down and lifts herself onto the high bed. Her four pillows are used strategically—two pillows to sleep on depending on where she rests her head on her full mattress. This leaves her with two other pillows, one which she clutches as she sleeps and an extra that leans against the wall behind her sleeping pillow. She does just that, laying on her right side and clutching the pillow—but then she hears the barking. She rises out of bed in a fury.

Places her feet firmly on the ground almost like she is absorbing all the sound herself, which confirms her belief that the sound is coming from Kathleen's dog.

Once again, she dashes to her bathroom and places her ear against the wall. But that's not where it's coming from. She runs into her kitchen area and fixes her ear to their shared wall. As she listens, she looks around at her kitchen. Hand towels folded and resting on the counter.

Dishes put away. The popcorn bag left out. She realizes she forgot to throw away the empty bag.

Instinctively she jumps across the kitchen and tosses it. The sound is still alarming. She opens her front door and sees Kathleen at the bottom of the stairs talking to someone as she throws away her trash. Of course the dog is barking, Kathleen isn't in there with her.

She bites her nails as she waits by her door for Kathleen to notice her. She says goodbye to her friend and waves at Briana. She trots up the stairs only to hear her own dog barking.

"How is your evening?" Kathleen asks with pink cheeks and smile wrinkles.

"I heard Lola barking again. It's really an inconvenience to your neighbors."

"I didn't realize how loud she was I'm sorry."

"I grew up with dogs, you should crate train her. I work from home and I

hear her a lot.”

“Yeah it is a shame that I am gone a lot throughout the day, I’m a volunteer art teacher at Oakwood community center.”

Briana furrows her brows and glances around, she’s thinking something, and soon her eyes sparkle with power. “I have an idea.” She unfolds her arms. “I barely know you, but I don’t mind being with Lola throughout the day while you’re at work. That way she wouldn’t be alone all day.”

“Uh...” Kathleen scratches her head this was not what she was expecting. “Sure, why not, I don’t see why we can’t try it out.” Kathleen’s face lights up which ignites her crows’ feet.

“I’m gone from 7:30 until 3:30 Monday through Friday. Tomorrow I’ll give you my phone number for emergencies when I drop her off.”

The small baby hairs dance around Briana’s face, she feels like she’s in control now.

7:33 and no sign of Kathleen. Briana paces and bites her nails. Veins are bulging out of her forehead. Kathleen’s late. Briana disregards her boots and coat as she runs out the door to bang on Kathleen’s. Being on time is important she thinks. It shows people that you are orderly and punctual. Once again, she places her hand in a fist and knocks on the door three times. She is about to knock again, when she hears Kathleen yelling to her from inside.

“Oh! Briana is that you? I’m running late, just one second!” She opens the door and places Lola in the nook of Briana’s right arm and her food, leash, and phone number on top of the dog bed in Briana’s other. Kathleen rummages through her red purse looking for her keys.

“I know this is our first day doing this, but tomorrow can you be on time? I need to get going on my own work.”

“You’re right, I’m sorry. I’ll work on that.” She says as she hunts through her red purse still unable to find her keys. “Oh golly, I must have left them inside, you both go get out of the cold.” Kathleen kisses Lola and thanks her again. Lola sleeps in her orange dog bed as Briana works at her white desk. How can she sleep on a color like that? That color is an attention whore, you can’t help but

notice it she thinks. She studies her room only to find that Lola's bed is the most colorful part of her room. She would rather have the orange bed than a barking dog.

It's 3:45 and Kathleen hasn't picked up Lola yet. Lola seems happy to be with someone, but there's a loneliness to her dark blue eyes. Briana grabs her phone and swiftly walks to her kitchen window looking for Kathleen's red sedan. Lola follows her with her little nails tapping on the laminate.

Briana looks at the sheet of paper and carefully dials Kathleen's number. Ring, ring, ring, ring, ring. No answer and no voicemail. How does she not have a voicemail set up she thinks?

She urgently walks back to her living room. Her feet stomp so loudly that one would think there are multiple people in her unit. Lola follows and the sound of her nails disappear as she trots onto the carpet. She places her fingers through the blinds looking for the sedan, but she still doesn't see her car. Briana grabs her phone and proceeds to call her eleven times in the span of five minutes. Still no answer. Still no answering machine.

Briana sends her a text without any greeting: "When are you coming home? You're late."

"Well Lola," Briana sighs so loudly she could blow down a straw house, "I guess we wait for your mom to come home."

Briana plops down on the couch, and Lola jumps up next to her and nestles her body next to her babysitter. Briana wouldn't normally want Lola on the couch, but she knows the dog must be allowed to do that in her own home, and she doesn't want to confuse her. Also, Briana feels bad for Lola, her owner practically abandoned her. She turns on the TV and pets Lola's beautiful gray coat.

Together they watch a half hour comedy waiting for Kathleen to come home. The TV hums, Lola has rolled onto her back, and Briana is still petting her. Briana lifts her phone from the couch only to see that Kathleen still hasn't returned her calls or her text.

It's 4:09. Briana rises from the couch and looks out her window and sees the

red sedan. How long has she been home she wonders. Lola's collar makes a jingle that startles Briana.

"Lola, I'm very angry with your mom. Let's get your leash on and your stuff together so I can take you home." She feels like she has shared custody of this animal.

Briana slips on her sneakers and her coat, grabs Lola's leash and her bag with toys on it. She slams her door behind her. Her fist bangs four times on Kathleen's door.

Kathleen opens the door and says "Hi! Thank you so much for watching her, how did she do?" Lola wiggles, so happy to see her mom.

"She was perfect. I had a problem with someone else."

"Who?" Kathleen looks flustered.

"When were you coming to get her? It's almost 4:30 and you said you'd be home at 3:30."

"I got home just a few minutes ago."

"I called and texted you and I never heard back. You're telling me that you didn't have two seconds where you could have texted me back that you were running late."

"I apologize for any inconvenience, but I had a meeting that went over time, usually I'm very punctual."

"Are you though? This morning you were running late too." Briana's veins are bulging, and frustration rattles in her voice. She bites her nails.

"You're right, I'm excessively late, and I should've called or texted you. Let me make it up to you with dinner."

Who could deny free food? Certainly not Briana or anyone for that matter.

"Don't be late again." Briana says with her arms crossed. There is an awkward silence, both of them refuse to make eye contact leaving their eyes to wander. Briana looks up at her, "What are you making?" Kathleen puts her hand on Briana's back and gestures for her to come in and closed the door behind her.

Kathleen's apartment resembles the love child of mid-century modern and bohemian, Briana thought. Kathleen's apartment was the same floor plan as Bri-

ana's except the layout was the opposite. Her living room had a caramel brown leather couch, with a white silicone rocking chair next to it. On the other side of the rocking chair sat a basket with knitting materials inside. Perched behind the couch were three canvases of abstract painted art. On the far left were two windows, just like her own, there were plants hanging from the ceiling that absorbed the natural light; they looked healthy and thriving. An easel stood in that corner as well. Along the wall there were canvases of multiple proportions that were painted over and over again. When looking at them there was almost a one-inch thickness of different colors of paint. The coffeetable was also brown with tapered legs. On the table there was a used mug of coffee that had a coffee ring on the bottom of the mug. No coaster Briana noted. On the other side of the table there were coffee table books about art. A TV hung on the wall opposite the couch. The wall next to that one, with the kitchen on the other side, contained a large bookcase. Briana looked at the books that ranged from art to literature to science to math to self-help books. The books were arranged in no particular order. As Briana stares at the wonders this apartment holds, Kathleen steps into the kitchen and prepares the pasta and the meat for the spaghetti.

"Do you want any wine?" Kathleen yells when she doesn't need to.

"What do you have?"

"I prefer red, but I have white too."

"Red is fine." Briana says as she walks into Kathleen's kitchen. Briana stares in fascination at the shiny navy-blue cabinets and the colorful decorations around the kitchen. She has an assortment of vases that are all different heights and colors. In the corner is another plant with a hand painted red vase. On the refrigerator is an assortment of magnets from different places around the world. The eat-in kitchen table is the same brown as the coffee table, except it has hair-pin legs and is arranged with orange silicone chairs. On top of the table rests a weaved bowl with a mixture of fruit. Another empty cup of coffee sits on the table with a bowl of half eaten cereal. Was this left here all day, Briana wonders. That makes it so much harder to clean; she looks away in disgust.

To Briana the apartment seems messy, but to Kathleen it's full of life—it's home.

Kathleen opens the cabinet to reveal two wine glasses. She uncorks the bottle and pours a glass for both of them. Kathleen extends a glass to Briana. Her hands are durable.

“What kind of plants are these?” Briana points to the three hanging from the ceiling in the living room.

Kathleen sets down her glass on the coffee table and motions toward the plants. She frames the plants with her hand and bends her front leg like she is showcasing her plants to a live audience. “This one is a spider plant, his name is Ralph, and this one is an air plant and his name is Terrance, and this last one over here is a maidenhair fern and her name is Fanny.”

Briana smiles as she takes a sip. She also likes to name her plants.

“Fanny the fern,” Brianna says. “That’s funny.”

Lola sits in the kitchen beneath Briana’s feet hoping to get some food drop-pings.

“So, you’re an artist then?” Asks Briana. “Did you paint those pictures behind the couch?”

“Yes, and I painted all the vases for the plants, and I also weaved the bowl that the fruit resides in.”

“It’s all very...colorful.” Briana says. “So, if you’re an artist, why do you have books that are so outside of the world of art?”

“Well, everything is art to me. The way we drive, the way we type, the way we solve math problems, the way we research, the way we read, how we read, why we read. To me everything is art, because everything fascinates me, inspires me and resembles beauty. These everyday tasks require a system to complete them just like painting, and usually the finished product or how we finish it is beautiful.”

“That’s a loose definition.”

“When you’ve been around as long as I have, I’m certain that you will agree.”

Kathleen stirs the pasta.

“Here let me help,” says Briana.

“No no, you just sit there and relax. I was late today, let me do it.” She grabs the wooden spoon and laughs.

“Also, it took me 14 years to finish my undergrad because I wanted to learn everything. I think it also made me appreciate different subjects and see how valuable they are. Through all those years of taking different classes, I noticed my art started to take on a different meaning because of my new perspectives.” She smiles and shrugs as she drinks her wine.

“Do you have kids?”

“Yes, I do! Lola, Ralph, Terrance, and Franny. Oh shoot!” She practically jumps up. “I forgot to introduce you to my arrowhead plant in the corner, his name is Arron.”

Briana chuckled. “No, I didn’t want kids, I have a big family and all my siblings have kids and it just was not for me. Do you?”

“I have three,” Brianna says.

Kathleen cocks her head at Briana in confusion and then they both chuckle and drink their wine.

After they finished the bottle and ate their dinner, Kathleen handed Briana Tupperware full of spaghetti. Oddly enough the Tupperware was just as colorful as Kathleen.

“Do you want me to watch Lola tomorrow?” Briana asks.

“I thought you’d never ask!”

The next morning the sunrise flickers off of the snow making Briana’s room so bright that it is almost as if the sun sits on her bed. She rises from her slumber in disbelief that her room is that bright. She stretches her limbs extending them so that her body forms an X across the sheets. Stretched, energetic, and ripe she goes to the bathroom and then prepares her breakfast. Dehydrated she slurps her morning cup so fast that she misses her mouth and the hot tea falls onto her pajama bottoms—but Briana does not flinch—instead, she gracefully seizes a napkin and wipes up the mess. She looks up from the disorder to see the clock on the stove is at 7:20.

Behind schedule, she is confident in her ability to get dressed within the time allotted. She pulls one pant leg on one leg and then the other and pulls

her pants up and does a funny dance as she gets them over her hips. Next is her sweater, one arm and then the other and she lifts the red sweater over her head.

The loud bell jolts Briana, and she skips to answer the door.

“Hi Briana! How are you?”

“I’m feeling different but in a good way, how are you?”

“I am wonderful, thank you for asking! I brought over Lola and her things.” She places Lola in Briana’s arms and puts one hand on each of Briana’s shoulders staring directly into her eyes and says, “I will be on time today, I promise.”

“I appreciate that, thank you but it also wouldn’t be so bad if you made me dinner again.”

They giggle. Kathleen kisses Lola and waves goodbye to Briana.

“See you later today!” Kathleen says as she hurries down the stairs trying to avoid any ice, then hops into her red sedan and drives off.

Briana stares at the dog that rests at her feet and says, “It’s just you and me. Do you want to go on a walk in the snow?” Lola barks in response.

Briana removes her coat off the rack, steps into her knee-high boots and attaches Lola’s leash. She leaves behind her unmade bed and her dirty dishes on the table.

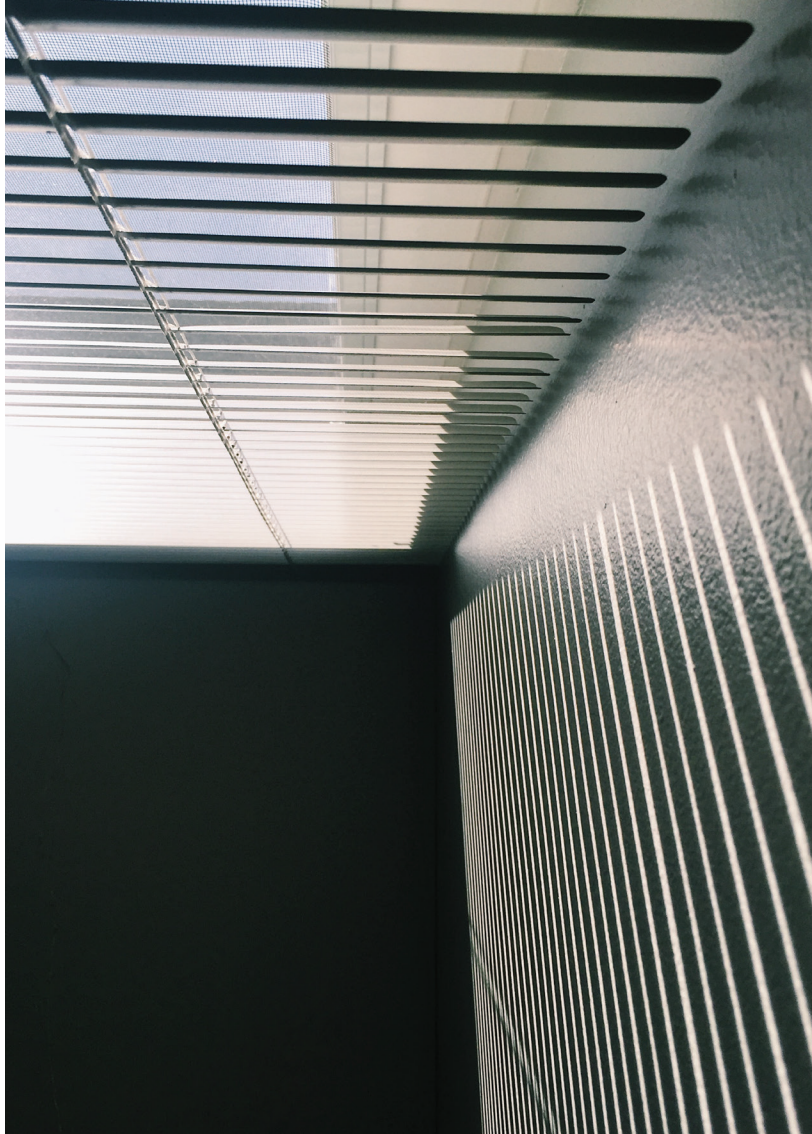
The snow is deep enough where Lola needs to jump in order to move forward. Three jumps for Lola is one step for Briana. She walks slow because she notices how much energy it requires of Lola to follow. Slowly, very slowly, they continue to the park and Briana sees different couples holding hands and taking pictures of each other, different friends making snow angels, different families having snowball fights.

A bean with ears is branded into the snow as Lola squirms around happy. Briana laughs at the odd image and lays down next to her. Her jeans, shirt, her hair, are overcome by the snow and it slides into her boots and consumes her clean warm socks. Her whole body is cold and wet now, just like Lola—but she feels like she is one with the snow. One with the world. She digs her fingers deeper into the snow until she can feel the grass with her fingertips.

SARAH LAMARCHE
BRINGING MEDICINE IN THE DARK

my cheeks
were window panes
dotted with rain drops
and my fingers,
stuck deep in pocket,
traced
a hole.
at your garden fence
I was alone and wet—
an intruder
lifting the latch.
I crept up the stairs, to your room,
and there you were;
sleeping,
wrapped in blankets
laying in bed
golden in the dim
of the lamp
you were glowing
inside the lightbulb,
burning—
encased in glass,
cradled by that tiny wire.
your soft eyelashes trembled
with dreams
and I wished for nothing more
than all you had.

BLIND LINING



JULIA LIU

WHEN
WE
FIRST
LEFT

PHILLIP TRIPLETT

FADE IN:

AERIAL VIEW - MARS LANDSCAPE - DAY (SHOWN ONSCREEN) TIME:
1200 HOURS. DATE: 20491202

The Martian landscape, foreign and cold, a stark red color disrupted by a human colony. FERMI 1 is surrounded by an environmental shield. Within, lies cold, metallic, grey, and white structures.

(SHOWN ONSCREEN) "FERMI 1, EST. 20441201. The transformation of Mars has been underway for 5 years. The operation has been more successful than NASA could have dreamed of. The efforts of their terraformation team far surpassing expectations."

MONTAGE SEQUENCE - FERMI 1 COLONY

The environmental shield shimmers. It is transparent but not invisible. It hums gently, as it slowly expands outward.

The human colonists, going about their everyday lives. Tilling now usable soil, harvesting vegetables, running machinery. It is routine for them.

The human colonists, cleaning the gleaming grey and white metallic living quarters and common houses.

The human colonists, providing maintenance at the Terraformation Center. It is an exoskeleton structure surrounding a wondrously glowing bulbous device at its center, with multiple control panels and video screens attached to its many support beams and steel girders.

END MONTAGE SEQUENCE

INT. COMMAND CENTER - DAY

ROGER DAVIS, the scientist in charge of FERMI 1. Stress lines from lack of sleep highlight his otherwise approachable, non-threatening demeanor gives an order to the Terraformation service team to report in and give a status update. His eyes dart quickly over a readout on his computer. 90% POWER. Shaking his head, he scribbles something quickly into a notebook. He removes his glasses with one hand, his face in his other. He looks up, back at the screen and then over to...

JENNY FOX, the doctor assigned to Roger's team is charismatic, and understands how socializing works, unlike Roger. She is good natured, laughing with her nursing team. She is bookish and shares a passion for science with Roger. She does not miss Rogers' glance her direction.

JENNY
How's your headache?
ROGER
GAH!!! I'm missing something! Take
a look at this power readout.

Jenny moves to Rogers' desk. She turns the computer towards her and focuses on it. After a brief scan of the computer screen, she gives Roger a hard look, and points to her medical office door, next to her vitals station.

JENNY
NOW.

ROGER

I'm fine. It's nothing.

Jenny does not move, and continues to point. Her face is stern, almost like an angry mother.

JENNY
5 minutes, my office.

She turns on the spot and moves back to her medical station. She disappears behind her office door.

Roger sighs, and slowly gets up to follow her. As he heads towards the door, suddenly the room goes dark, he hears an extremely high-pitched sound that penetrates his skull.

MYSTERIOUS VOICE
Roger...

He grabs his head with both hands. Roger goes down on one knee, before all of the sudden recovering from the episode.

No one in the Command Center reacts whatsoever. He stands up, acting like his shoe was untied.

INT. JENNY'S MEDICAL OFFICE - DAY

Roger enters the room, and sits down on the medical examination table. He removes his glasses. Jenny sits at her own computer station, with a medical form in front of her. She begins a neurological examination on Roger.

JENNY
Look, you're not wrong. We've been
losing power for, what? 2 weeks?
I'm sure it's just the anomaly. The
numbers will bounce back.

Not answering immediately, Roger's eyes follow the little light in Jenny's hand, with difficulty, back and forth and in and out. He cringes a little from the pain, but tries to hide it.

ROGER (CON'T)

What? Oh, right...

No, this has to be something else...

Jenny completes the examination, and fills out something on her medical form.

JENNY

Your pupil dilation is slow. When did you develop a light sensitivity?

Roger puts a hand on his head, and shakes his head.

ROGER

It's nothing.

Jenny frowns and glares at Roger.

JENNY

I'm going to put you on bed rest if this keeps up.

Shaking his head, Roger stands and puts his glasses back on.

ROGER

I can't afford to rest.

Roger leaves the medical office and heads back to his station to study the readout again. Jenny completes her medical form and files it before following him out.

INT. COMMAND CENTER - DAY

Roger reaches into his desk and grabs a pill bottle. He takes two pills, swallowing them without water.

COLONEL JOHN DUGAN enters the Command Center doors. He is an Air Force Colonel, in charge of security at FERMI 1. He is overly large with a square jaw and a permanently furrowed brow. He looks at Roger with a frown, but nods at him.

Abruptly, Roger stands and starts to pace back and forth.

ROGER

Colonel. What've you got?

COLONEL DUGAN

Just finished my patrol. We found something.

Roger tries and fails to process this information. He can almost hear his brain pounding against the inside of his skull. He takes much too long to respond.

COLONEL DUGAN (CONT'D)

Don't get too excited.

Roger suppresses the resurgence of pain as he tries to take in what he has just heard.

ROGER

What was it?

COLONEL DUGAN

A bug of some kind, possibly a SPIDER. It was at the power converter.

Jenny did not fail to notice the grimace of pain on Roger's face.

JENNY

What?! You can't be serious!

COLONEL DUGAN

It was a SPIDER, from all I could tell.

Roger finally processes what he just heard.

ROGER

Life? Here? How did we miss that?

Roger turns to his computer and makes a data entry. Colonel Dugan simply shrugs at this, waiting expectantly for more from Roger.

ROGER (CONT'D)

We can't assume anything at this point. I'm going to take JOHNSON and KIRI to the Terraformer and see if I can verify that.

Roger says this more to himself, than to anyone else. After a few moments of silence, Jenny gives Roger a sharp look. Roger takes the hint and finally responds to Colonel Dugan.

ROGER (CONT'D)

Colonel Dugan, I want you to go back to the converters with a security team and Dr. Fox. See if you can collect a sample. Jenny, I know I don't usually ask you to do field work, but...

Colonel Dugan nods and turns toward the Command Center doors.

JENNY

Roger that, Roger.

Roger blinks stupidly at Jenny, as he turns back to his computer station and blushes slightly.

Roger absentmindedly plays with the strap on his glasses. He moves to his computer desk and opens a drawer. He takes out a small earpiece and hands it to Jenny. As she takes it, their hands brush together, slightly.

ROGER

Be careful. Something feels strange about all this. Report in as soon as you get a sample.

JENNY

Roger what is going on with you?

ROGER

I don't...I don't really know. It's just...a feeling, it's almost like...dread without cause maybe? It seems foreign, somehow...It doesn't make sense. A few minutes ago, I....I think I heard a voice....

Jenny stares at Roger, concern painted across her face. The same stern motherly look returns as she puts the earpiece in her ear.

JENNY

When I get back, you're going straight to the MRI machine.

Roger puts in an earpiece of his own and nods. Jenny turns and heads toward the Command Center doors.

ROGER

Whatever you say, doc.

INT. COMMAND CENTER ENGINEERING DEPARTMENT - DAY (SHOWN
ONSCREEN) TIME: 1300 HOURS.

Roger enters the Engineering department and walks slowly over to the shared work station of his engineering team. RAINY JOHNSON is a shit, but she's one of the brightest on Rogers' team. She is taller than Roger and holds an air of superiority in her presence. She knows she's good at what she does.

RAINY

Uuuuggggghhhh...you again? What do
you need this time? You look like
ASS.

Roger ignores her comment but looks straight at her. She balks slightly and shrugs.

ROGER

I need you and Mahalia to get your
gear together. We are going to do a
level 1 diagnostic on the
Terraforming Unit.

RAINY

Fuck you Roger!

Rainy begins to gather up gear without any hesitation.

MAHALIA KIRI is even smarter than Rainy, but she doesn't act like it. She is humble, quiet, and friendly.

MAHALIA

A level 1? Boss, are you serious?
Is this about the power
fluctuations we've been
experiencing?

RAINY

You know this is fucking going to
take all fucking day, right?

Roger ignores Rainy yet again and hands them both earpieces.

ROGER

This has to happen. Colonel Dugan
discovered a life form out there.
We know nothing about it, and I
plan to change that. I have a hunch
we might find something at the
reactor.

Roger waits for a response from his engineering team.

RAINY

Fuck you again Roger! Shit, life
fucking changes our whole fucking
mission on this goddamned dust
ball!

Rainy speeds up her preparations, and Mahalia assists her.

MAHALIA

It won't take that long, Rainy. You
know that.

Mahalia looks over her shoulder towards Roger.

MAHALIA (CONT'D)

Sir, if we haven't detected them so
far, that means they can somehow
fool our scanners.

Roger nods in approval of the brilliant deductive reasoning
of his subordinate.

ROGER

Correct, and we need to find out
how.

Rainy continues to get the gear together. Mahalia grabs the
scanners from the bag that Rainy continues to pack.

MAHALIA

Hang on just one second...

She produces a screwdriver, as if from nowhere, and opens up
the back panels of each of the scanners in rapid succession.

Rainy zips up the gear bag, grabs a .50 handgun from her desk
drawer, loads the magazine, pulls the slide to make sure the
weapon is chambered, checks the safety, and holsters the
overlarge weapon. She gives Roger a swift nod.
A few deft movements come from Mahalia's desk.

MAHALIA (CONT'D)

That should do it.

Roger takes one of the scanners from Mahalia and examines the
settings.

ROGER

Excellent! BUT...if you mess with
the isotope TOO much...

Roger takes the scanner back to the table where Mahalia was performing the modifications, and makes a few adjustments of his own.

ROGER (CONT'D)
And....NOW, these will work even better.

A crestfallen look dawns on Rogers' face.

ROGER (CONT'D)
.....shit....

Rainy rolls her eyes and shoots a scathing look at Roger. Mahalia looks slightly crestfallen. Rainy gives her a look of understanding. Roger fails to notice this exchange.

RAINY
It was a good idea, Kiri. Don't look so down. SHIT what, Roger?

ROGER
I should've come to you first Mahalia. I didn't even think to modify the scanners before Jenny left. C'mon.

He turns toward the exit and signals them to follow. Mahalia's frown is turned upside down. She is bouncing out the door behind him. Rainy hefts the heavy gear bag and follows them out.

RAINY
Don't worry about it. I'LL get it.
It's FINE. You're welcome "TEAM".

Neither Roger nor Mahalia hear Rainy's grumbling.

EXT. POWER CABLES/ POWER CONVERTER UNIT - DAY (SHOWN
ONSCREEN) TIME: 1400 HOURS.

Jenny, Colonel Dugan, and a security detail search the power cables and the power converter. Unnoticed, the Martian soil seems to shift in the background. Jenny prowls along a cable with her containment rod in hand.

It is a menacing looking 4 foot long metal pole with an electric containment field on the end. She spots a hint of movement near fuse box on the converter.

FUSE BOX

THE CREATURE looks like a type of disproportionate spider. It is the same color as the power converter unit, less than an inch in diameter, with overlarge fangs and eyes. It is grotesque and alien.

Jenny has never seen anything like this before. She motions for Dugan to flank the fuse box.

The creature reacts almost instantly, much quicker than a spider should. It leaps at Colonel Dugan! Dugan dodges!

The creature remains the color of the fuse box it just leaped from. It turns and looks directly at Jenny.

Its overlarge eyes fix with her gaze and she feels a wave a fear that nearly overcomes her senses. She resists the feeling and lunges at the creature as it turns the color of the Martian soil.

COLONEL DUGAN

You got it!

Jenny is surprised at her own dexterity. The feeling of dread is still present within her. It is just how Roger described the strange feeling from before.

JENNY

Look! It's changing colors! Do you feel that?

COLONEL DUGAN

Feel what now?

JENNY

Nevermind...What could this mean?

Colonel Dugan gives Jenny a confused look and motions for his security team to head back to the Command Center.

Jenny activates her private communication channel as Dugan heads off in tow of his men.

JENNY (CONT'D)

Roger, come in. Do you read? We've got one.

The Martian Landscape seems to shift in the background, and it catches her eye. She looks toward the shifting soil. Dread threatens to overwhelm her again, as she rushes to catch up with Colonel Dugan.

EXT. TERRAFORMER UNIT - DAY (SHOWN ONSCREEN) TIME: 1410 HOURS.

Roger, Rainy, and Mahalia connect the diagnostic equipment to the largest of the computer terminals.

Roger goes to the terminal and enters a complex array of keystrokes. He is absorbed, reading the computer outputs.

ROGER

Okay 1.7.43 x 7.45 ^172
...good....that looks normal...okay
mass to energy ratio is fine...
okay, fine I guess. Slackers...YOU
GUYS DO KNOW HOW TO REPLACE PANELS
RIGHT!?...grrr...okay...

Rainy and Mahalia scan the area with the modified scanners. It takes them very little time to detect something out of the ordinary.

RAINY

Roger, we've got something. Check
this out.

Roger pulls out his own scanner and looks at the readout. Mahalia takes over the diagnostic at the computer terminal.

ROGER

Hmm, there seems to be a strange
fluctuation on the reactor itself!
Nothing from the diagnostic so far,
except that we have lazy
technicians.

Roger points to the Terraformers' nuclear power core, not taking his eyes off his scanner.

RAINY

We can't get much closer.

Roger ignores her obvious comment, and grabs a pair of electronic binoculars from the supply bag. He looks through them, pointing them at the base of the reactor. He is careful not to look directly at the glowing power core. Rainy does the same.

ROGER

Take a look at that...

Rainy sees them. The creatures' fangs, even at a distance, are clearly piercing the sides of the power core. Thousands more of them attach themselves by the second.

Suddenly the creatures turn, as one, and look straight at their observers. Roger feels the same strange dreaded feeling as before, but this time it is much worse.

Suddenly, Roger is drowning, deep under water, with only darkness above him. He will never reach the surface. He is going to drown...he cannot breathe.....

MYSTERIOUS VOICE

You.....us....

RAINY

FUCK Roger, you didn't say they were spiders. I fucking HATE spiders.

Rainy shivers as she lowers her binoculars and hands them to Mahalia. Roger holds his head in his hands. Neither Rainy nor Mahalia reacted to him being suddenly gone. He must have stayed standing this time...

MAHALIA

That proves it without a doubt. The fluctuations are happening because of the creatures, but what now?

ROGER

This is bad.

JENNY (V.O.)

Roger, come in. Do you read?

ROGER

Go ahead.

Roger, Rainy, and Mahalia silently listen to Jenny's report.

ROGER (CONT'D)

Let's go.

As Roger and his team hurriedly pack up the equipment, the soil around the reactor seems to shift. This goes unnoticed by the team.

INT. COMMAND CENTER - DAY (SHOWN ONSCREEN) TIME: 1500 HOURS.

Colonel Dugan and Jenny enter the Command Center in a rush with the security team in tow. Roger and his team arrive only just ahead of them.

ROGER

Here. Bring it here.

Roger rushes to the medical station and sweeps the table clear.

JENNY

Ah! Seriously Roger!?

Jenny throws her arms up, but her anger is swiftly overshadowed as Dugan fights to get the creature into a glass lab container.

ROGER

That may not matter for much longer. The power is down to 40%. We're going dark.

The creature is violently throwing itself against the lab jar repeatedly as Roger points at his computer screen readout.

JENNY

We have to sedate it.

COLONEL DUGAN

Easier said than done...

Roger rushes into Jenny office and returns swiftly with a large syringe in one hand and a jar labeled 'Trichloromethane' in the other.

JENNY

Give me that.

Jenny takes the the items from Rogers, and draws the chemical into the syringe.

JENNY (CONT'D)

Hold your breath.

ROGER

Dugan, get ready.

Colonel Dugan grabs the jar, poised to release the lid. Roger motions '1', '2', '3' with his fingers, and then points.

The world freezes for a split second as Colonel Dugan cracks the jar open. Jenny shoots the chemical into the jar. Dugan closes it before the creature reacts. Everyone lets out a breath in unison.

JENNY

We are really not equipped for this...

The creature begins to move less and less, as more and more of the chemical touches its skin. Its color changes to a black opalescent sheen and it falls unconscious.

Warning lights begin to flash within the Command Center. And an automated message plays over the intercom.

COMMAND CENTER PLEASANT VOICE

Power at 20%. Oxygen levels will reach unacceptable limits in T-minus 15 minutes. Don environment suits immediately.

The message repeats as a countdown timer shows on everyone's computer station. The Command Center is a mad scramble of activity.

ROGER

Rainy, Mahalia get your suits and get to the shuttle as soon as you can. Get her ready to fly.

They give Roger curt nods and rush off to put on environment suits. He points at the jar.

ROGER (CONT'D)

That comes with us.
Jenny grabs it off of the table.

COLONEL DUGAN

SECURITY TEAM! GET THE CROWD TO THE SHUTTLE! MOVE!

All of the sudden, the dread feeling returns to Roger and he is thrown into a great pit of fire. The pain is unreal, as he sinks further and further into this hell, but then...

JENNY

ROGER!!! ROGER!!! Snap out of it!

Jenny and Colonel Dugan are both standing over Roger. Holding his head, Roger slowly gets to his feet.

He looks at the creature within the jar. It is awake, and it is staring directly at him not breaking eye contact.

ROGER

I'm fine, I'm fine. Let's get the hell out of here.

Colonel Dugan runs to the back of the Command Center and retrieves environment suits.

COLONEL DUGAN

Hurry.

Roger grabs the suit from Colonel Dugan as he struggles back to his feet.

EXT. NEAR THE ESCAPE SHUTTLE - DAY DAY (SHOWN ONSCREEN) TIME: 1510 HOURS.

Roger, Jenny, and Colonel Dugan are sprinting towards the shuttle, bodies of colonists too slow to board the shuttle obscure their path.

Corpses of the creatures are scattered around each of them. The environment suits have holes dotting them.

A wave of the creatures pursue the trio. The dread feeling is again growing within Roger. Reaching its peak, suddenly Roger is plummeted into the deepest darkness. He is falling...falling...falling...forever it seems.

MYSTERIOUS VOICE

....one....

Jenny tries to drag Roger the last 10 yards to the shuttle, but he is rooted in place, standing and not budging. His eyes roll uncontrollably in his head. Only the whites are visible.

When he comes to, he is facing the onslaught of hundreds of thousands of the creatures. Jenny is wrenching his arm, as the jar slips from her grasp.

A moment seems an eternity as the jar smashes against the ground. The creature, faster than their eyes can follow darts up Jenny's environment suit and poises itself to bite, but it does not.

The security team and Dugan reach the shuttle. Dugan turns to look back. 10 yards away from the shuttle, he sees Roger and Jenny facing the creatures.

ROGER

NO!!!

Unbelievably, the creatures abruptly stop. All of their attention shifts to Roger.

ROGER (CONT'D)

Please...

The creatures remain eerily still. A voice emanates from all around in a harsh, click-clacking, terrifying, alien language. Rogers' feeling of dread reaches a peak and he finally understands.

 DISEMBODIED VOICE OF CREATURES
 (ENGLISH SUBTITLE FOR ALIEN LANGUAGE)
*We are Scaligni. This is what we
are. Only one is welcome here.*

The brutal language fills every sense that Roger possesses and he falls to his knees. The speech now comes from within Rogers own head.

He is in physical agony. His body shakes uncontrollably, and he fights to keep from screaming.

 SCALIGNI (V.O.)
*You are needed. Your knowledge. Our
knowledge...You become us. We
become you. Your progress. Our
progress. Others are not welcome.
Others are not needed.*

Roger looks up at the creature on Jenny.

 ROGER
Please, let...her...go...

Rogers' speech is manic and lucid, but slow. He fights for every word that he is able to get out.

 SCALIGNI
Only one is welcome here.

Tears begin to roll down Rogers' face as he looks up at Jenny. She looks back at him, terrified.

 ROGER
If...I...stay...willingly...you...
let...her...go?

Every word is a struggle for Roger as the dread and pain threaten to overwhelm his consciousness. He struggles to stay awake.

Slowly, the dread feeling becomes more subdued and relief shows on Rogers' face. The creature poised to bite through Jenny's environment suit drops to the ground and scurries to join the swarm.

ROGER (CONT'D)
Thank you.

The creatures swarm over Roger. He no longer resists them, and his pain subsides. He is calm. Jenny is safe.

Jenny runs as fast as she can towards the shuttle, but the creatures do not pursue her. She rushes through the shuttle door and Dugan closes it behind her.

The shuttle lifts off, and makes its way towards the atmosphere. Roger remains on the Martian surface.

SCALIGNI

*Your knowledge. Our knowledge...You
become us.*

Roger no longer resists the dread feeling. Now, every inch of his person is enveloped in the sea of creatures.

One of the creatures pierces his environment suit. A hiss of oxygen is heard, as the creature enters Rogers mouth.

The oxygen tank expends completely. Roger takes a deep breath of the Martian air for the first time. The creature does not exit his body.

INT. SHUTTLE - DAY

Jenny, Colonel Dugan, Rainy, and Mahalia stand paralyzed with fear. The horrible, indecipherable, penetrating, alien language continues to fill the comm units along with the unmistakable hiss of an oxygen leak.

JENNY

ROGER! No! We're coming back for
you!

COLONEL DUGAN

We can't, not without back-up.

ROGER (V.O)

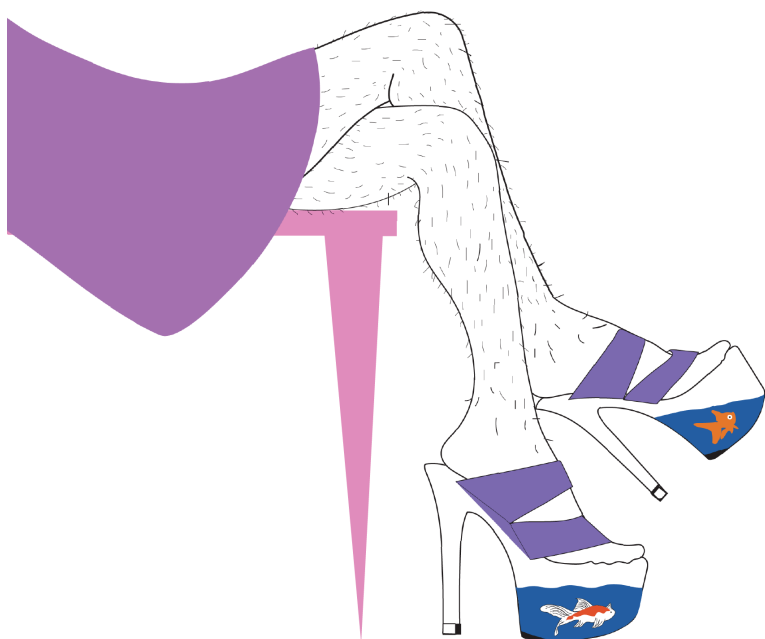
What...ever....you....say...doc...

Tears streak down Jenny's cheeks as the fire of the upper atmosphere can be seen behind her.

The shuttle breaks through the upper atmosphere. Cries of Roger in pain swiftly follow, and too soon...an even more terrifying....silence. Colonel Dugan works the ships' radio.

COLONEL DUGAN

CODE RED. Emergency situation on
FERMI 1. CODE RED. I repeat, CODE
RED! Request immediate retrieval!



A WALK ON THE WILD SIDE
CALLIE SWEET

We say someone is 'deep'
when their true self is reaching higher
Me, I felt my depth close to the stars
my continued trials to breathe, think, meditate, find
Ascend
cavities of me that lent themselves to the universe
deeper than the daily and the chaos

I scaled your temple steps with withered knees
wheezing spirals I knocked
but realized I'd only made it to your kidneys)
you swung the door on its hinges despite my shortcomings and
we meandered up your vertebrae
we spoke patterns until our mouths
hurt and i rambled that I'd hoped to reach you for a long time
You, my higher self
thin tendrils of heart stuff connecting us
I tugged them often, hoping to bring you close

VISION

SMART

You led me
serpentine
your insides were noxious, but still I inhaled
your smile cracked sweet and savory at me as we traveled your
somatic shrine
You and I, one. I knew we'd always been that way, but with chests open the veil felt thinner

I found myself lagging between the lungs,
your full breaths overcoming
but cheeks smiled
palms gripped and you pulled me
up
left me
sat atop your shoulder
peering up to your pineal eye and
breaking my own shoulders until
they felt something

SUPERPOWERS

ALYSSA PETE

The speckled blue-green carpet dissolves into a blur of cerulean waves that crash against the walls and spray icy water onto their faces. Auburn planks, scratched and worn from coastal rocks, line their ship. Three gaps in the siding allow the canon noses to poke through. Wooden masts tower above them with flowing sails and propel them towards an enemy barely visible in the raging sea.

“Go to the cannons!” Eliot takes charge as usual. He twists the helm, furiously battling against the wind and water, to turn towards the target. His usual shorts and Marvel tee are replaced by a loose button down and black britches whipping in the wind.

Billy’s hand shoots up towards his hat when an especially strong gust catches them both off guard. The thick metal of Billy’s sword hits his left leg with each step.

Billy stands at the ready, three cannons loaded, pointed at the growing beast.

“Billy, fire when I say so,” Eliot’s words are barely audible above the roar of sea and sky.

“Aye, aye, Captain!”

He peers through the telescope at the great monster, watches its long, flailing limbs propel it closer and closer.

“Ready... almost... wait...” he elongates each word before commanding “Fire!”

Billy’s flame catches onto the first fuse, then the second and third before he covers his ears in preparation for the thunder of cannonballs. Eliot stares through the telescope at the fast approaching creature. They wait.

Eliot watches what Billy can only hear: the crash of iron against flesh. Billy can picture the hole pierced in its side when he hears the sound of the second cannonball strike the target.

“Two hit! Arrrrrr, prepare for battle!”

“Aye captain! The creature is ours!” Billy emphasizes the ‘r’ at the end for dramatic effect.

Eliot steers the ship faster towards the enemy, but the creature’s limbs slow as blood seeps into the sea.

“Arrrrrg the beast is dead!! We did it!” Eliot exclaims with a wide smile. A

giggle escapes Billy's mouth as Eliot jumps up and down on the ship in celebration, propelling himself higher and higher.

"Eliot! What did I say about jumping on the couch?" Their mom scolds from the kitchen for the millionth time.

"But Mom, we beat the sea monster!" Eliot calls during his descent from the couch to the carpet that splashed icy water only seconds ago.

"That's great honey, but still no jumping on the couch," she says and peers around the wall with a grin. "Now, it's time for lunch. Eat up so you can fight off more dangerous monsters."

With a wink, she walks over with two plates filled with the colors of the rainbow: ruby red apple slices, oozing orange Mac n Cheese, chopped yellow bell peppers atop deep green spinach, a handful of plump blueberries and purple grapes. Setting the first in front of Eliot, she fumbles with the second, her eyes flick between the seat to the left of him and the one to the right. Eventually, she places the plate to his right.

"Mom, that's not where Billy is. You do this every time," Eliot says, his voice trickling off with disappointment in the downturn of his brow.

"I'm sorry sweetie, I just can't see him as well as you can. Here you go, Billy."

She slides the plate to the left and in front of Billy. She looks through him at the crooked paintings on the wall. He thanks her with a gentle smile, but she turns and leaves wordlessly.

They plot their next adventure between spoonfuls of food. Eliot clears his plate, while Billy still has the full rainbow scattered around his. Eliot's mom takes their dishes, scoops leftovers into four full Tupperware with an exasperated sigh and scrapes half dried cheese into the sink. Billy notices her smile fade into a grimace after every meal, but he's confused as to why. They eat their food, say please, and ask to be excused. He shrugs it off, must just be an adult problem. They spring from the table, hollering a quick thank you as they move onto their next adventure: Lego city.

Billy feels the snap of Legos snapping together as the multicolored walls grow taller than the boys. Skyscrapers block the sunlight from reaching the citizens as they walk through the bumpy streets and below wobbly bridges.

"Why can't mom ever see me?" Billy asks, eyes focused on the shaking tower in front of him.

"Cause you're invisible."

"Why can you see me?"

"Cause I've got superpowers," Eliot says with a smug grin. "That's what mom says."

"I wish everyone could see me. Then I could play with your friends at school. It's no fun when no one passes to me."

"But then you couldn't keep sneaking into the movies like a ninja."

After he says this, Eliot lets out a growl. His hands fly about, smashing and crashing their magnificent multicolored towers and sending a spray of Legos across the room. As the city lies in ruins, the two boys giggle through the pain of plastic pieces jabbing into their feet.

"How long can we let this imaginary friend thing continue?" Stephen asks, his deep voice resonating over the sputtering of the chicken on the stove. "I said I'd wait until he was in school and made some friends. Mel, he's going into third grade in a few days. I think we've waited long enough."

She fiddles with the steaming broccoli, stabs one with a fork and nibbles from the stem.

"It's just a phase, a lot of kids go through it. He'll grow out of it."

"You said that last year."

"Let's just give it some time." She flips the chicken. The sizzle amplifies.

"He isn't making friends! Real friends! Living friends! He isn't even trying because of Billy."

"Shhh!" Mel turns to face him. "Stephen, do you want him to hear you?"

"Yes! That's my point. It's time to tell him."

"You want to tell our son that his best friend doesn't even exist?"

"Well—"

"You want to tell him that the boy he thinks is his brother is just in his head? That he's crazy?"

"No, not that he's—"

"It would be worse than telling him Santa doesn't exist, and you see how happy he gets on Christmas morning."

"Well, that could be because of the gifts."

Mel glares at him before turning back to take another nibble from the broccoli. She clicks the burner off and flips the chicken again.

"I can't crush him like that. I can't be the one he associates with the loss of his innocence."

"I think you're exaggerating the importance of this friend. It's not going to be the loss of his entire innocence. There's still Santa," This brings another glare which he ignores. "Besides, he'll forget all about it in a couple years."

"I just want him to stay a kid for as long as possible."

"I know," he places a hand on her lower back. She turns to face him again, "but it's starting to get unhealthy, Mel. He's nine."

"Eight and ten months."

"Okay, almost nine. But—"

"We aren't telling him."

"Okay." Stephen takes a deep breath. "How about this? We sign him up for after school soccer. He loves playing, and maybe it will force him to make real friends."

Plates clink together as she takes them from the cupboard. She silently scoops rice and broccoli onto four plates followed by the slim chicken breast.

"Really?" he groans after noticing the fourth plate.

"We can sign him up for soccer. But until he makes other friends, nothing is going to change. Deal?"

"Fine. This is the last year, Melanie." He turns his attention to the staircase. "Eliot, dinner!"

That night, Billy is tucked tightly between Eliot and the wall as their mom reads them a bedtime story from the edge of the bed. She snuggles up close to Eliot, one arm cradling his head while the other holds open the pages of a book. Sticky stars situated in a distant galaxy glow a mint green from the ceiling in the dim light of Eliot's room. Billy's eyes start to flutter closed with the lull of his

mom's voice, as do Eliot's.

She closes the book with a soft thud and slides her arm out from beneath Eliot's arm. She watches him for a moment. He tries to keep his eyes open, murmuring for more stories. A soothing smile stretches across her face.

"No, sweetie. It's bedtime," she coos and reaches for the lamp. "Should I turn your night light on before I turn off the lamp?"

"No, mom," he says, scrunching his face.

"Okay," she says and clicks the lamp off. "Are you sure?"

"I don't need it," he mumbles.

"Okay, goodnight Eliot. Goodnight Billy."

She reaches down and plugs in a little robot. A creamy blue light outlines each limb, button, and smile. Eliot does not protest as his mom slides the door closed; his chest slowly rises and falls with the light rumbling of his snore. After crawling out of Eliot's bed, Billy fumbles around in the dim room and falls into his own bed Eliot made for him against the other wall. He curls into the nest of pillows and pulls one of three layered blankets up to his chin while the other two cushion the carpeted floor. He joins Eliot in sleep.

On the second day of school, Billy stands on the sidelines while uncut grass tickles his ankles. Coach didn't give him anything to do. He watches the other boys pant up and down the field, passing the ball and occasionally crashing into each other. He can never quite tell if it's on accident or on purpose.

He joins in the cheers when the ball slides into the net and out the gaping hole in the interlaced rope, especially when Eliot is the one to score. The coach stands to his left, sometimes leading dribbling activities and sometimes watching as the boys kick the ball around in a circle. He doesn't acknowledge Billy, no one on the team does; it's one of the downsides of being invisible. But Eliot smiles at him when he gets a drink of water.

"What're you looking at?" another boy asks, staring at the empty patch of grass below Billy.

"My brother, Billy," Eliot points and waves. The other boy pours water into his mouth and brushes sticky hair from his forehead. He squints at Billy, who

grins widely at the two boys and waves enthusiastically. Maybe the invisibility can't keep up if his hand is moving too quickly for it.

But the boy just gives a puzzled look through Billy.

"But, there's nothing there," he says

"Oh, he's invisible. You won't be able to see him."

The boy's eyebrows scrunch towards the center of his face until they remind Billy of hairy, wiggling worms.

The coach blows a whistle, sending a stampede toward the field. The boy doesn't go near Eliot anymore. Never before has Billy wanted to turn off his invisibility this badly, even for a moment, just to prove he exists.

Four place settings greet the boys when they get home, and Billy sits quietly as Eliot describes in great detail the goal he scored in practice. Their mom asks if he enjoyed soccer. As Eliot nods in response, their dad interjects: "How were the other boys? Were they nice?"

"Yeah! There were a few people from my class there."

"Like who?" Their mom asks. She twirls spaghetti around her fork.

"Uhh, Sam was there. And Thomas. Oh, and Noah and Alec."

"Who's Noah?" Their dad asks, scooping noodles onto garlic bread.

"He was the one with the birthday at Sky High," Their mom answers. Their dad's face stays blank. "The trampoline park. Everyone in the class was invited. We both had to sign that waiver for Eliot before he could go."

"Oh, right." Their dad takes a large bite of his spaghetti topped bread.

Billy spins noodles around his plate, creating designs out of the sauce streaks.

"How are they doing? Did they have a good summer break?" Their mom prompts.

"I heard Thomas talking about Hawaii. He said it was good but that it rained a lot. And Alec saw his grandma and grandpa in Colorado. He hated it because his grandma made him help with the chickens."

"Oof, poor Alec," Their dad groans, "my mother made me do that too."

"Yeah. Justin didn't wanna talk to me, but everyone else was really nice."

"Another boy from class? Why didn't he want to talk to you?"

"We were getting water and I was waving at Billy. He asked who I was waving to and I told him Billy. When we started playing again, he didn't talk to me anymore."

Their dad frowns at their mom as he gathers another scoop of noodles. It seems like he's about to speak but is interrupted by their mom's light voice.

"Well, he probably didn't believe you since Billy is invisible, that's all," she says, stabbing into a meatball and waving it around a bit while she talks, "Maybe Billy could stay home when you go to practice. He doesn't do anything, right? You wouldn't want him to be bored all the time."

"Yeah, he just watched." Eliot turns to Billy with a sad smile, "Can we play at home after?"

Billy nods and continues to slide his spaghetti around the plate. He doesn't mind watching.

After dinner, the boys head upstairs as usual. Mel stands at the sink, swishing dishes in soapy water.

"You almost spoiled it." she says, rinsing red sauce from the sponge.

"I didn't say anything." Stephen gathers up dishes and brings them to the sink.

"You were about to! And then you just kept grumbling."

"I never said I would play along with this whole thing. I just said I wouldn't tell him, and I didn't." He inadvertently clinks the salt and pepper shakers together as he sets them back in the cupboard.

"Can you at least try and act like Billy is real?" Mel's hands fall into the soapy water as she sighs.

"No, Mel, I can't. I don't think it's right to keep lying to him. That boy, Justin, probably thinks he's crazy and he's going to tell the other kids. Everyone is going to think he's a freak!"

"Just like you do." she retorts. She slams a plate into the drying rack.

"I do not think my son is a freak."

"Yes, you do."

"I just... I don't..." He pushes the cupboard door closed with a thud. "It's weird. It's weird that he is still so attached to Billy."

“Hopefully, if Billy stays home, Eliot won’t be considered a ‘freak’ anywhere else.”

Stephen puts the butter back in the fridge and lets the door swing closed.

“Everything is off the table. Need any more help?”

“No, I’ve got it covered.”

His shoes squeak on the tiles as he walks out. Mel dunks a pan into the sink, scrubbing off dried, crispy sauce. She lets go of the pan and presses her hands against the granite counter. Her fingers grip the edge of the sink tighter as she wonders if he’s right. She indulges in this thought for only a moment before pushing it from her mind. She resumes wiping the plates clean.

“Take your cleats off at the door! And take a quick bath before we go!” their mom calls from behind before Eliot can burst into the living room. Clots of dirt fall from his shoes with each step, lining the driveway. As soon as his shoes thump against the ground, Eliot swings the door open and heads immediately upstairs for a bath with a slight groan.

“Wanna play ninjas?” Billy says, back pressed against the wall of the staircase. He peers around the doorway to the bedroom ensuring they won’t be ambushed by the enemy.

Eliot must not have heard him.

“What about Legos?” Billy tries again.

“Huh? Oh, I can’t. I’m sleeping over at Sam’s tonight.” Eliot struggles to pull his jersey off on the way to the bathroom.

“Oh, okay. That’ll be fun.”

While Eliot packs his bag, Billy reaches for the Legos with an image of the perfect car filling his mind. His fingers slip against the plastic. He tries over and over to grasp hold of a red one, then a blue, and finally a white block. But he can’t; he can’t feel the blocks under his hand. He tries with two hands, thinking that maybe it is just a stubborn block. Finally, he picks up a lime green Lego. But he can’t move it far before it slips from his fingers. By the time Eliot leaves, Billy has barely clicked four Legos together.

“Bye!” Billy smiles up from his cross-legged position on the floor. He must

not have heard again.

“Bye Eliot!”

“Oh, bye!” Eliot calls back on his way down the stairs. Another Lego slides out from between Billy’s fingers and bounces onto the floor.

“We’re home!” Their dad calls from the doorway the next evening.

“How was the party?” Their mom calls from the kitchen.

Dinner’s steaming from the thin cardboard box with two dominos imprinted on the lid. Billy hears the clatter of plates as they settle on the counter, but only sees three stacked up. He waits for Eliot to ask where the fourth is.

“It was awesome! Justin has the coolest mini-Jeep that actually drives and he would try to run us over with it. We were all too fast for him to actually hit us, but his mom made him stop anyway.”

“I hope you were careful. Did he like the gift?” She asks, handing a plate to Eliot.

“Yeah, he did. He didn’t have that Skylanders character yet.”

Their mom and dad share a smile when the three of them sit around the table. Eliot keeps babbling about the party while Billy stands in the background, the mingling scent of pineapple and Canadian bacon tickling in his nose.

That night, Eliot reaches for Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone and plops down on his bed without a word to Billy. He flips through the pages to find his spot and silently slips into Hogwarts.

“Wanna play Legos?” Billy reaches into the tub filled with rainbow blocks. He tries to pick one up with one hand, then two.

“We could build a racetrack! Or another city. Oh! What about a spaceship?!”

He waits a moment, then quickly plunges his hand in, going for the sneak attack on the Lego pieces.

“Eliot?”

Eliot jolts up and drops his book. He looks around the room for the source of the sound before he notices Billy and relaxes a bit.

“Wanna play Legos?” Billy asks again.

“I’m kinda tired. Tomorrow?” Eliot opens his book, flipping through pages

in search of his place.

“Okay.” Billy sighs. He moves away from the tub, retiring to the comfort of his makeshift bed. At least he can still feel the plump pillow underneath his head even if he can’t pull the blankets to his chin like before.

“Goodnight, Eliot.”

Eliot celebrates his ninth birthday with those friends that didn’t travel for winter break. Orange and blue Styrofoam darts fly from various directions as they all duck behind couches and around corners. Stephen bursts through the doorway that connects the kitchen to the living room, firing his Nerf gun at the kids. The screams from the three boys cover the thudding of bullets against their backs as they scurry away into Eliot’s room to devise a plan of attack.

Mel sits at the laminate table, her computer casting a slight glow on her face. Her fingers click away as she promptly answers unread emails. Stephen saunters over, plastic gun in hand, and plops into the chair next to her.

“So...” he says, a smug smile playing on his lips.

Without looking up from the screen, Mel asks, “So?”

“Eliot seems pretty happy, doesn’t he?”

“Yeah, he does.”

“Even without Billy.”

“Yes, even without Billy.”

“So, we didn’t completely destroy his innocence?”

Mel looks up from her computer with an eye roll, “No, I guess we didn’t, what’s your point?”

“So, what you’re saying is...”

“No, I’m not saying that, I think he just—.” Knowing exactly what he wants to hear, she tries to force a frown, but the corners of her mouth start to turn upwards, betraying her.

“...I was right!” Stephen says, grin widening.

“I still stand by not telling him. He grew out of it, just like he will with Santa.” She says, turning back to her emails.

“Yeah, about that... he may have heard some friends talking and asked me—”

The boys burst into the kitchen. A pop, pop, popping fills the space as they fire at him. Stephen leaps up and starts to run from the soft bullets. Mel throws her hands up over her face, unsure of whether to scold the boys for playing in the kitchen or her husband for letting Santa's secret slip.

Billy stands at the base of the staircase, watching as bullets whiz by him. He tries to pick them up for Eliot, but his fingers are slippery again. The boys rush past him, the air from their movement ruffling his shirt. He follows them upstairs and into the bedroom as they whisper about hiding places and ambush attacks.

"We could corner him in the living room," Billy whispers, peeking out from behind Eliot.

"Oh, I have an idea! What if we corner him in the living room?" Eliot exclaims and Billy smiles, thinking that maybe Eliot heard him.

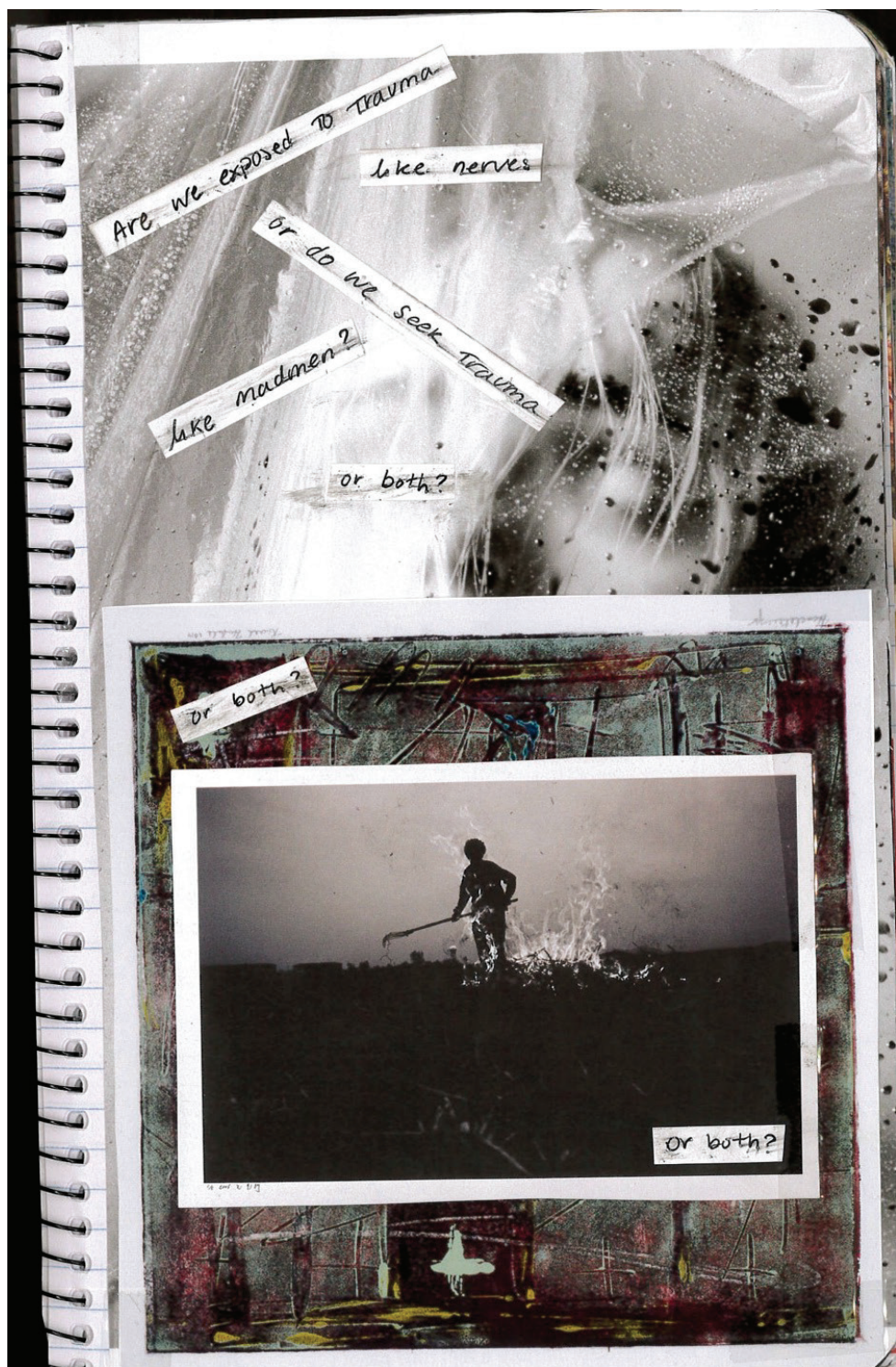
The other boys nod in agreement and slide Styrofoam bullets into their neon orange guns. Breaking loose from the pack, they begin to tiptoe out of the room, peeking around each corner before making a break down the hallway and to the staircase. Eliot pauses, scouring the ground for any extra ammunition.

"Eliot?"

He doesn't look up.

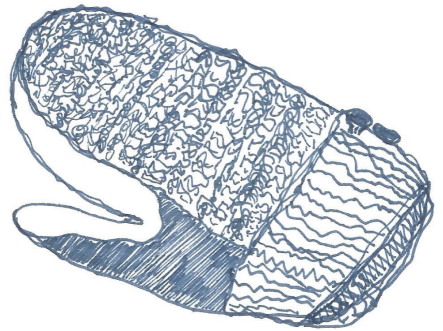
"Hey, Eliot!" Billy moves his body to block the doorway. Eliot looks through Billy and to his friends now sidestepping down the stairs. Billy squishes himself into the doorframe as Eliot bursts forward to catch up with his friends.

"Must have lost his superpowers." Billy says to himself and meanders down the stairs behind them, following the sound of tiptoed footsteps and suppressed laughter.



COLLAGE

FOREST ROLNICK-WHITOL



MY SMELLY MITTEN
CALLIE SWEET

Each month,
I stood in the bathroom,
And you sat in a chair
And I cut your blonde hair.

The scissors fell through your curls,
Sweeping the split ends
Hair falling to the floor
Dancing in the air.

After each cut,
I swept the bathroom floor
Imagining each strand
Was a star.

Millions of tangled constellations,
And no matter how much I swept,
I always found more of you.

I found hair in every part of the house:
Kitchen, couch, sink.
I was never lonely
Because I had your hair
As company.

You come to me now,
Stars shining in the corner
Of the bathroom
(i must have missed those last month)

Your hair is not nearly as bright as before,
Your eyes look down.

And you don't say anything,
And I begin the ritual cut.

Dim stars fall
From your head
And soon
The cut is over and you leave me
With your starry mess.

I sweep the floor,
Trying to get rid of the stars
(your stars)
Glowing so bright
Burning my hands when I touch.

I will always find more of you,
Until I move
Out of this stilted house.
The night sky
Full of stars,
Sits above my head.

I haven't had a haircut
In so long.

THE STARS

HANNA MASON



FARMHOUSE
CALLIE SWEET

COMING BACK FROM SCHOOL

SARAH LAMARCHE

the walls
of my house
trembled with stillness,
swelling—
the way a veil
shifts on a bridal shoulder.

their wedding pictures say
my mother
braided her hair
in the dark,
that she was serious
where my father laughed,
that they were
different, but as
happy as wild horses.
you could see it
in their teeth.

over years I learned
the kinds of silence
that hum before interruption.
how to leave drawers,
cabinets, open.
what it's like
to be trapped between walls
that paint a family Picasso blue.

I stayed in my blue room,
wishing it was a carriage I could ride away on.

I didn't think of their blue rooms,
I didn't think to bring them with me.