

NONFICTION WRITING PROGRAM

URSA

01

22-23 PRIZE WINNERS

The Casey Shearer Memorial Award

02

FIRST PRIZE

YUZHEN ZOU

06 — 19

SECOND PRIZE

CAELYN PENDER

20 — 32

The David Rome Prize

FIRST PRIZE

DYLAN INES

33 — 41

03

SECOND PRIZE

ALLISON CHANG

42 — 50

The Barbara Banks Prize

FIRST PRIZE

ELIZA BERMAN

51 — 58

The Betsy Amanda Lehman Memorial Award

FIRST PRIZE

GAYA GUPTA

59 — 62

05

SECOND PRIZE

BENJAMIN GLICKMAN

63 — 73

2022—2023

The Casey Shearer Memorial Award

06

FIRST PRIZE

YUZHEN ZOU

for Excellence in Creative
Nonfiction

Grandfather

In mid-February at the age of fourteen, I stand alone in Grandfather's patient room at Ningbo First Hospital. He has difficulty breathing. His eyes are shut, his mouth half-open, his pale angular face drenched in sweat. Under the thick, blue-striped comforter, his chest rises and falls like violent ocean waves as air travels through his nostrils and enters his exhausted lungs. Dangling at the angle of his cheekbone is his respirator mask, detached and still wet with breath – it must have been removed by some outer force, perhaps by his left hand that is clenching to the respirator tube like a giant crawling insect. This is not the first time I notice Grandfather seeking to escape from the beeping machines that surround him in the dark little cubicle.

07

The first time he protested being locked up with the medical machines was when he began his hospitalization before Chinese New Year's Eve of 2015, right after he was diagnosed with terminal colorectal cancer. Several days before, Father found him leaning against the bathroom wall, with blood dripping down his mouth and even more blood in the unflushed toilet. We immediately called the ambulance, and the next day he was transferred to Ningbo First Hospital for surgery. He was very aggressive to us for locking him up in the ambulance and connecting him to the respiratory machine.

“You all think so little of this old man, huh?” he yelled, “You think you're gonna lock me up until I die? Never!” With

dried blood on his lips and chin, he protested fiercely, spitting curses onto the faces of everyone on the spot.

He was always this way, so stubborn, so absorbed in his own world.

Grandfather never paid a visit to us until I was five. According to Mother, it was because his yearning for a grandson went in vain, and I was born into this family as a girl. On the day Grandfather made his first step into our apartment, I was crouching on the floor playing with Thomas and Friends. The long plastic railroad extended from below the dining room table all the way to the huge fish tank at the entrance. Just as I was wondering at this short and lean visitor, Grandfather, without even lowering his chin, stepped right onto my railway construction on barefoot. Immediately a muffled groan came out from his mouth as he stumbled into the dining room when his feculent eyes met mine. We both froze. In the awkward silence his eyes rolled up and down, sizing me up, as if he saw a monkey or something unusual.

08

“Gwaai toi.” He grumbled in Cantonese, a word I later learned to be “weirdo”, or “freak”.

Late that year, I learned from Father that this person called “Grandfather” would be living with us for the foreseeable future – that the warm Shenzhen climate was good for his cardiac health. Earlier that week, Father saw the hospitalization of our neighbor’s grandmother, and perhaps that reminded him of his own father, who lived alone in Wu Town, Ningbo, more than 4 hours of train ride away from our home in Shenzhen.

So my three-person family grew to four. At the age of five, it all felt so natural to accept someone as “Grandfather”; it was equally natural to accept the fact that Grandfather

was a piece of cold square marble stone standing on the hillside of my hometown in Wu Town. When Grandfather moved in, he moved in with his chin lifted high up, looking at me and Mother with his dark round nostrils, from which he breathed out grumbles of Cantonese as he smoked his cigarette.

The first observation I made about him was that he did everything his own way. He would sleep in our living room on a bamboo mattress because he didn't like the room we gave him, which faced the north and didn't receive much sunlight until the late afternoon. He would smoke on our enclosed balcony and dig his burned cigarette into the potted Guiana chestnut, for he thought ornamental plants' only usage is to provide free ashtrays. He refused to socialize with other people his age, for he could only speak Cantonese but no Mandarin. He would, however, take a jog once a day during sunset, a time when most people were heading home, and the sky was tainted yellow by the setting sun. He would spend his time outside throughout the duration of the sunset, and when he came home, I would see him sweat-drenched, heavy-breathed, red-faced with a kind of liveliness I failed to capture on his figure during the day.

Sometimes, when Grandfather returned, he would also carry a red plastic bag with him, which contained salt and pepper crackers from the snack store two blocks away. As a five-year-old, I loved any kind of food other than actual meals, so I often waited at the door just so when he entered, I would be able to yell with the greatest volume I could possibly get: "I want your crackers!!" Grandfather, in turn, would yell back at me, with his tight throat in Cantonese I could barely understand, possibly something like "shut up!" or "troublesome little girl." I didn't understand Cantonese

anyway, nor did he understand Mandarin. This volume competition continued until once, when I was reaching for his hand holding the plastic bag, he pushed me hard on my shoulder. I fell onto the ground and immediately began to cry. The next moment I heard the door slam before me, and the bag of crackers was left on the table. From then on, I would sometimes find a red plastic bag of crackers on my desk, bathed in the yellow setting sun. Grandfather never admitted that he bought the crackers for me.

10 Nor did Grandfather ever admit that he didn't like girls, but he emitted the scent of disliking my gender. He disdained any dolls I owned and tried to replace them with models of planes and tanks. He was furious when he heard that I began taking ballet lessons, and he even threw away the first tutu I got. Whenever we had a visitor, he would not refer to me as his granddaughter, but "the girl". An old man with so high a self-esteem unmatched by his height, he had created a whole world where I, as a girl, was not allowed to intrude.

And for all these reasons, Mother found Grandfather's presence in the family extremely unpleasant. "If this man has learned at least the basics of genetics, he would realize how ridiculous this is — hard to believe he's gone to university, no?" Mother joked on the way Father drove us to my elementary school. "Well, you may not know what university is yet. All you need to know is that you should just be yourself."

I always chuckled at her words. Mother was a woman of the city, after all, a resolute decision-maker and rational problem-handler of our family. She possesses the "great wisdom", as Father called it, which would make everything turn out just as fine as one would expect.

“Grandfather is staying here because he is your father’s father. If he makes you unhappy, just ignore him. You never have to listen to someone you feel uncomfortable talking to.”

“Don’t bother with Grandfather, he’s just a bit lonely living in a new environment,” Father added.

I was not sure whether he was actually lonely, though, for he could entertain himself all day by mumbling in his own world. And the four-people family continued to run well.

When I was nine, my sister was born. Her birth made Grandfather struggle even more with our family dynamics. After realizing that he could not make me a boy in any possible way, he began fiercely defending his masculine status by telling me (since Mother didn’t really buy into him), with strongly accented Mandarin I could barely make out: “You know, you girls don’t need to work hard at school. Your aunt, she graduated high school and married a good husband. Now they have a big house in Ningbo and a twin of chubby sons – that’s what you girls are destined to do.” Or: “Your grandmother left me because she thought I was being too assertive – no. She insisted on being a dentist, but how can a woman dentist be compared with those man doctors? Thus she was poor; still so poor when she passed away, but she had the honor of being buried in Wu Town.” And it was often when he was giving his mighty speech Mother would interrupt the conversation and take me away. Thanks to her, I never took his words seriously.

“One day,” Grandfather yelled behind us, “one day you’ll learn that what I said was the right way.” Mother only grinned to his words. She never once gave in to Grandfather’s challenge or bowed to his presence.

Not until his hospitalization.

The second time I saw Grandfather seeking to escape was on Chinese New Year' eve of 2015. Grandfather's surgery was not very successful; cancer cells spread across his intestines and put the old man down into the patient bed, surviving every day on a liquid diet and tubes all over his body. After we were told that there would be only less than three months we could spend with Grandfather, my parents decided to move to Ningbo and spend the rest of the days with him.

12 However, spending Grandfather's last days with him was not as simple as we imagined. Lying in the rural-urban transition of Ningbo, Wu Town was such a different place from Shenzhen. Among the banana farms and rice patties, most buildings were rather ill-maintained, and wall paints were crumbling down. Beneath the dim yellow sky there were temples where incense burned through endless days and nights and where monks with buddha-knows-what beliefs chanted scriptures and begged for alms from door to door. The air was different, too. It smelt like Grandfather's breath.

Because Ningbo was Grandfather's hometown, most of his relatives were there. My family had barely met with any of them, yet they all deemed us to be acquaintances, acquainted well enough to be ordered about. The aunt whom Grandfather always bragged about oversaw Grandfather's house, so even after Father took back the keys, she insisted on checking on us often with her husband, bombarding Mother with all sorts of dos and don'ts about the house, as if this house belonged to them. They spoke Grandfather's tongue.

“You're the wife, so you should cook,” Aunt and Uncle

said. “You’re now given the chance to learn about taking care of the family, so cherish it.”

Mother first turned a deaf ear to their instructions and requested Father multiple times to let his relatives shut their mouths. But Father was already on a whole other planet, engulfed by sorrow, by his only parent’s imminent departure from the living world. It was only a month after Grandfather was hospitalized, yet he already withered into a pile of bones. Father spent his days by Grandfather’s bedside, wiping his dehydrated body tirelessly and feeding him congee with such patience as if he was tending a newborn. They were in their little cubicle of space, and Mother’s voice was, for the first time, completely unheard.

Back in Grandfather’s place, Aunt called us to join a family dinner she had arranged to celebrate the end of the lunar year. In their old yet spacious brick house, dozens of unfamiliar faces gathered in the dining room as the windows turned foggy from heat. People pushed back and forth, children screamed and yelled, dogs howled and barked. The fathers and uncles and husbands drank and smoked and sweated on the “men’s table”, gobbling down meat and fish as cigarette smoke filled the air and blurred their figures. Aunt moved swiftly through the veils of smoke, sending freshly cooked dishes to the men and retrieving the leftover with a large pot, which was to be dumped later into their family farm compost.

Mother was seated among other mothers at the “women’s table”, which was located closer to the kitchen. My sister and I sat by her side, clenching her hands tightly. Among their chatters regarding children and housework, we felt completely out of place. Then, as if they had planned it all, everyone on the table suddenly turned their attention

to Mother.

“You are the daughter-in-law of my uncle, right?”

“Why aren’t you tending your father-in-law at the hospital?”

“We heard that you have to ask for a leave from your office, is that going to affect your employment status?”

“What do you know, a long-term leave means demission.”

“How does it feel to take care of the family?”

“Better than working in the office, no?”

14 The relatives’ every word to Mother was like plucking feathers away from a chicken, and soon the chicken was ready to be butchered. Mother began to crumble down like the wall paint. Her eyes became dull and exhausted, so much duller than the times when she worked late into the night or when she traveled for business. There was something that the air was making of her, I thought, because her eyes now looked like the yellow Ningbo sky.

She began doing house chores. And as Chinese New Year’s Eve approached, Mother finally decided to make dinner for us. It was almost the first time I saw Mother cook, carefully handling old casseroles and ceramic dishes. As I watched her moving hastily around the kitchen like Aunt, I saw a different part of Mother coming out — the somber and well-behaved image of a traditional housewife, a startling contrast with the assertive, outspoken image of a working woman.

Finally dinner was ready, and we hurried to the hospital. With the radio humming cheerful songs for the Spring Festival, we seated ourselves around Grandfather’s bed, and Mother began to prepare for dinner from the food con-

tainers she brought — a box of fish, a tin of “lion heads”, a can of chicken broth. Just as the fourth container popped open with a crisp click, Grandfather suddenly jerked and moaned. The infusion bag hanger fell with his movement, the IV needle twisted and fell off, leaving a scary opening on his arm, dark red fluid trickling down his arm. All at once, the siren began to scream, and so did my parents. Fear and chaos spread across the tiny patient room. As nurses came rushing in, Grandfather was still jerking and rolling on the bed, as if he was trying to break free from the tubes connected to his body.

In the chaos Father was stunned, his eyes locked on Grandfather. Emotions roared across the landscape of his face; I couldn't tell if it was fear or anger or regret. Then he turned towards Mother.

“Why are you so rude to my father?” He hissed, in a voice I have never heard before. “You could've handled the containers with more care!”

Mother fell silent. I took a quick glimpse into her eyes and saw helplessness. I suddenly recalled the time when she dusted grandfather's old books, she showed me the pile of mathematics textbooks Grandfather used to teach. It was then that I learned that Grandfather used to be a math professor at a university. Born in the chaotic 30's, he was one of the few people who managed to receive university education. “How can someone so well-educated be so unreasonable?” Perhaps this place is just unreasonable, I thought as I wrapped my arms around her. As if my arms drew away the last straw that was keeping her back straight, Mother bent down and leaned her head against the metal bars of the window.

“You know how your father’s relatives thought of me, for giving birth to two girls.” She said monotonically. “You know how much I’ve born the presence of your grandfather, and it’s already a huge responsibility for me to take care of you and your sister. In the past I would’ve made it through, but now I am not sure...”

Her words pierced into my heart like blades. No, please.

“Your father’s got money, at a good, handsome age. Your grandfather’s also reputable, and I am so worried that, if something happened to me, they’ll immediately make him marry some other woman, which I am sure they already have a handful of choices in mind.”

No, no, please stop.

“Oh, they will eat you up... who is to protect you and your sister, then?”

16

With the siren screaming in my ears, chills ran down my spine and through my body. In the cold incandescent light, I looked at the two people in front of me as if they were strangers.

The third time I saw Grandfather wanting to escape was when Father brought in two monks from a local temple. It was still in early February, and the air smelled like chilled chlorine solution. Grandfather was so weak that he could not talk anymore, and even rolling his eyes would extract all the strength from him. It could be any moment now, the doctor told us, so we had already been staying in the cubicle for four consecutive days, sleeping on the floor and guarding Grandfather at his bedside.

On the fifth day, I woke up in the morning to find Father missing. When he returned, two monks wearing dark yellow cassock entered the patient room with him. The two bounced to Grandfather's bedside as though they were two hydrogen-inflated balloons, their fat dangling from their chins, forming rings on their necks. With hums and mumbles, they sprinkled their so-called "sacred water" onto Grandfather's bony figure, promising that vitality will come back after their action; Father was mimicking their movements. After a while, they fell silent, as though they were praying. In the solemn space of waiting for an action or answer, the silence was deafening.

Then, all of a sudden, Grandfather's eyes went wide open, his pupils rolling back, the whites of his eyes glaring at the two intruders. He began to roll, messing up the cords and tubes that ran across his body. His calves banged on the metal bed protection bar, froths around his mouth. Then he raised his bony hand and began to tear the tubes away from his arm. All at once siren began screaming again, nurses rushed in checking the electrocardiograph, the breathing machine, the IV.

In the chaos I heard Father say, "I'll do anything to make you stay."

The air was screaming at me: Go away! Go away! Mother hurriedly blocked my sight with a blanket, but I could not remove my eyes from the jerking figure on the patient's bed. The fading color on Grandfather's face contrasted with the dark, red cheeks in my memory, and it suddenly made the image of him being a completely live person amicable. I recalled the moment he entered the apartment after his everyday jog, his bamboo mattress on the living room floor, his red plastic bag containing crackers; the way he yelled at

me with his neck stretched, the way he squeezed his eyes to make a dissatisfactory humph... Two months ago he was still standing before me and giving his speech about masculinity. Two months! – I realized how quickly and smoothly cancer had drained the vigor out from the old man, and how quickly life could slip away, even for someone so stubborn, someone who deemed himself a mighty man.

Could he be seeking relief? Oh, how I missed the old man who could jog at sunset.

18 But the next moment his vivid figure faded into darkness, and all that was left was this pale, distorted face rocking violently behind the shadows of the nurses. Thoughts erupted in my stomach, blasted through my chest and exploded in my head. I hated him, hated him so much for taking my parents away from me, for torturing all of us, dragging all of us into a puddle of his world and his wills. Why did he torture Mother? Why did he make Father desperate? Why did he make my family turn into what he expected? Like a whispering curse his words crept to my ear: “One day you’ll learn that what I said was the right way.” No. No. To hell with his “way”, his stubbornness, his prejudice, his everlasting yearning for a grandson. I hated him, hated the Aunt, hated the monks and the patient room and the New Year dinner, hated the yellow Ningbo sky. I desperately wanted this all to stop. I wanted my parents back, I wanted my family back, I wanted my normal life back. If only, if only —

And since then, he has been unconscious for six days.

Now, in his patient room, I study Grandfather’s figure as the numeral on the electrocardiograph monitor begin to

drop. The word “Help!” is at my tongue, rolling like a candy ball, but I swallow it with all my strength. In this space with just the two of us, I stare at this old man with whom simply “love” or “hate” cannot describe my relationship until the siren breaks the still air and nurses rush in. “Why didn’t you call for help? This is an emergency!” One of them demands.

“...I just walked in.” I reply.

2022–2023

The Casey Shearer Memorial Award

SECOND PRIZE

CAELYN PENDER

for Excellence in Creative
Nonfiction

Mary Elizabeth's Box

Chapter I: Photographs

I've constructed a life out of photographs and census records.

I've spent hours staring at images of people I've never met, imagining what they may be thinking in the moment the flash triggers and the shutter clicks. I've looked into their eyes, seeking some spark of connection to tell me what I am missing. It never comes, of course. Though I strain to hear their stories — hope to see their lips move and a voice emerge — the figures in the photos don't speak back.

I've rifled through records upon records, zooming in to stare at handwriting and decipher job titles. I've tracked addresses from year to year, vigorously searched for missing census records. How does a name change in ten years? How does someone fall off the record books? The yellowed papers refused to tell me.

I've rifled through the box of books and photos at my grandparent's house so many times that I eventually convinced them to let me bring it home with me. I told them I would scan the photographs, digitize them to ensure they would survive every future move and California fire season.

I met my great-grandmother only briefly in encounters I will never remember. I've been told she used to hold me, 80-something years old and in a wheelchair, and not want to let me go. "Can I keep her?" she once asked my mom. There's a photograph of us together somewhere — she,

looking at infant me, and me, staring right back. I'm not sure if I've seen it or if it's only been described to me.

I've heard a few anecdotes, here and there, but only those that scratch the surface. A vignette, or a memory —

Our dog was named Clancy, and he would beat up the other neighborhood dogs, my grandpa has told me.

She used to make Christmas cookies every year. It's the same recipe we use during the holidays, my mom has said.

I think she once told me her last name was C_____ , my aunt has tried to recall.

22 I never had the chance to get to know my great-grandmother when she was alive. She passed away when I was not yet a year old. So I have come to know her through her photographs, her newspaper clippings, her college sorority letters and football programs. I've been drawn back to the blue and white box, time and time again, where I can explore years of her life, neatly categorized into yellow manila folders and crumpled white envelopes. Some are labeled with years and dates, others have no indication of what's inside.

Her life, though well documented from the time she was a teenager when she was able to do the documenting herself, was largely a mystery. A mystery that, since I was eight years old, I have been trying to solve. I began compiling my records in a pink binder that is still tucked in the closet of my childhood bedroom. I printed off documents I could have easily saved online. I wrote notes in the margins and copied dates into my notebook. I wrote out possible spellings, possible places. The notebook filled, quickly, over years, with unanswered questions.

Questions that were, until less than a year ago, unanswerable.

Chapter II: An Incomplete Biography of Mary Elizabeth

Mary Elizabeth was born in 1916. Or 1917. Or 1918. She was born in Chicago, Illinois. That's what she wrote in every census, every personal record. She has no birth records, or at least ones I can find. She never knew the month or day of her birth, so she celebrated on Christmas. My mom once told me she liked the attention of her birthday being on a holiday. I sometimes wonder what hole that was filling. In one photo, her birthday cake has a question mark candle where the age should be.



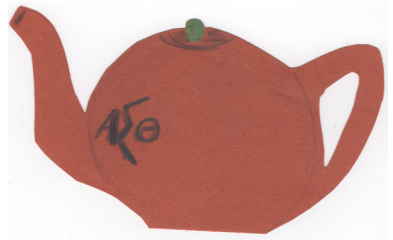
Mary did not know the names of her parents, and neither do the records. Her father was Chris, she thought, or maybe Christopher. His last name was Coro—. Her mother was a blank space. She left when Mary was a toddler, leaving her with her father. I have a photograph of Mary and her mother—the only one I know exists. The woman in the photograph, holding a toddler in a white dress, has been nameless for most of my life.

Mary was “given” to a family friend. That’s the word that’s always been used. There are no adoption papers, nor records of any sort. Her adoptive mother was named Marie Purchase, a severe looking woman with grown children of her own and a husband long dead. I’m not sure how Mary’s father knew her. She may have been officially adopted after turning 18, but Michigan has no record of it.

24 They once searched and wrote me a letter back — another dead end. By 1935, when Mary was a teenager, she was living in Detroit, Michigan.



Photos make up the beginning of Mary’s life. She went to college at Wayne State University in Detroit, Michigan. She kept a Freshman Days program from February 1938, and a Commencement program from June 1940. She joined Alpha Sigma Tau sorority after being invited to join with a handwritten letter. She attended dinners and banquets, tucking invitations and wine lists into her envelopes for safekeeping. She kept a 1936 football schedule and photos of who I assume were boy-





friends or formal dates.

She was a swimmer with at least three ribbons to her name. She once raced while holding a candle as part of a “splash party” that was featured in a newspaper clipping. She has dozens of photos of friends whose names I will never know, and stories about them I can never hear.

I assume Mary graduated in 1940, which means she must have started around 1936. Perhaps she helped with Freshman Orientation in 1938; perhaps that’s why

25

she kept the pamphlet. She has several graduation photos — both of herself, and of herself with her friends.

She does not appear in the public record until 1939 — her wedding. On May 29, 1939, Mary Elizabeth Purchase married Harry M. Brittenham in Toledo, Ohio, a military man born in Florida and raised in Texas. She wrote on the mar-



riage license that she was 22, that her birthday was Dec. 25. She wrote that her father was George Purchase, though I know she never met him.

I cannot find Mary in the 1920 or 1930 census. Perhaps she had a different name.

In the 1940 census, Mary and Harry are living in Port Hu-



26

ron, Michigan. Marie lives with them, now 72 years old. The only information about Mary besides her 1935 residence (Detroit) and her age (22) is that her relation to the head of household is “wife.”

Mary had her first son on September 6, 1941 — Harry “Skip” Montague Brittenham. He pronounced his middle name wrong until he was in his 70s. On April 22, 1944, she had her second son — my grandfather — John Charles Brittenham. They called him “Bud” instead. I have not collected this information from records; these are dates I have grown up with.

By 1948, Mary lived in Los Angeles, at 8100 Grimsby Ave. She and Harry are both registered to vote. She’s a Republican, Harry is a Democrat.

In the 1950 census — released to the public in 2022— Mary is first listed beneath Harry as his “wife.” But Harry



is crossed out, wife is crossed out and Mary is listed as “head.” She is a social caseworker for the Los Angeles County Department of Public

Assistance, living at the same Grimsby address in Los Angeles. Her sons are eight and five. I have scoured document after document, and I have never seen a name crossed out. I am not sure what it means.

In 1956, Harry and Mary lived in Cornwall, New York. They are listed in the city directory.

Harry and Mary get divorced in the mid-1960s. I have not been able to find the record, but I have heard the story. Harry was stationed in Germany sometime mid-century. He owned a clock shop, and he fell in love with Doris — ten years younger, and the only great-grandparent who was alive in memories I can easily recall. 27

Mary remarried Floyd Smith, but only for a year and a half. They divorced in 1968. This is in the records, and that’s all I know about him.

From 1970 until her death in 2001, Mary lived in Newbury Park, California. She resided in the same house, still owned by my grandparents, until she passed away on October 17, 2001. I was five months old.

Chapter III: Discovery

Nearly a year ago now — white, fluffy snow falls in an incessant rhythm outside the room of windows, blanketing the already-quiet campus in an eerie silence. A few students, early back from break, wander the halls, searching for entertainment on a quiet January evening.

I've started unpacking my suitcase from the day before, running load after load of laundry. My neighbors are playing Minecraft in the lounge, projecting their screens on the TV, as I walk back and forth past them.

28 More people come to the lounge. I begin talking to my friend, Jake. I had told him this family mystery in December, when I met him only a few days before we all left campus for winter break. His passion is genealogy — he does it both as a hobby and a job to make some money on the side.

We come back to the topic of my great-grandma on this snowy day. He asks to see my 23andMe DNA results again, to look more in depth than the cursory glance he took that December night on the floor. Jake goes upstairs to his room and returns with his laptop and a bottle of wine. Our neighbors continue their games as I show him the records I have found, tell him the few leads I have remaining.

He studies the breakdown of my DNA test, and of my grandfather's. The tests, I already knew, indicated that Mary was part Slovakian, part Greek and part Ashkenazi Jewish. I showed him the emails and family trees I had from a DNA relative whose relation I had yet to figure out, but who could serve as a connection. His relatives were all Slovakian; I just couldn't figure out which of several siblings or cousins

Mary was descended from.

We spent the next few hours searching — Jake laser focused, my mind hazy with wine. I kept glancing at Jake as he jumped from record to record, making connections I couldn't have made even clear headed.

I told him the name “Corogan” — the hypothesized, distorted name I had heard bounced around my whole life. With that small bit of information, it clicked. He was able to conduct a few searches, referencing neighbors and DNA results, and find a Christos Corrougenis. A few searches later, we had a mother: Tercia Rafacz.

I was in shock that night, and called my family the next morning. Mary had been almost right all along, though perhaps her father told her an Americanized version of his name, or perhaps it had been Americanized in her memory as she grew up away from him. Perhaps that's why we could never find him.

29

There it was — a 100 year old mystery, solved by two wine-drunk 20 year olds at 4 a.m. on a Sunday night.

Chapter IV: Mary's Wallet

Mary's box has an accordion wallet tucked inside. Deep brown with plastic sleeves spilling out of the inside, it holds nothing but photos. I assume there was once money, maybe cards tucked into the side pockets. Now, the wallet holds eight photographs:

1 - A portrait of my grandparents when they were young, my grandpa's arm wrapped around my grandma's back. I first thought it was a wedding picture, but my grandma is

not wearing white; it is a navy event, perhaps. My grandma wears a blue and white dress that sweeps down to her white heels. The blue of her dress's bodice is the same color as the carpet. My grandpa wears his navy uniform, crisp and white with gold buttons down the front.

2 - A school picture, labeled "School Days 55-56." I cannot tell if it is my grandpa or his brother. They looked remarkably similar as children. The boy stares right into the camera, hair cropped close, collared shirt button all the way to the top. His military father buttoned it, perhaps, or maybe his mother paid attention to small details.

3 - A baby. She wears a blue and white dress with miniature people embroidered across the front. She holds a fabric doll. No one I've asked has known who she is.

30 4 - Four children pile together for a portrait. A blond girl holds a baby, with who I assume are her siblings next to and above her. No one I've asked has known who they are.

5 - A man. No one I've asked has known who he is.

6 - Mary's beloved siamese cat. The "kids' room" at my grandparents house had a stuffed animal who looked nearly identical. I'm not sure where it is now.

7 - A portrait of my grandpa and his brother as toddlers. Skip looks tolerant, Bud looks euphoric.

8 - A portrait of my grandpa and his brother, older this time. They look nearly identical this time, with no height to differentiate them. I think my grandfather is the one on the left.

Chapter V: An Incomplete Biography of Mary Elizabeth (Revised and Updated)

Mary Elizabeth was born in 1916. Or 1917. Or 1918. She was born in Chicago, Illinois. That's all the same.

She was born to father Christos Corrougenis — or Coragin, or Corangines — and mother Tercia Rafacz. The names are spelled differently in various records, reflecting various attempts to Americanize them, or remnants of the census workers who did not know how to string together the sounds of other languages.

Christos was born in 1888 in Kavasila, Greece, a small village that today has less than 1,300 inhabitants. He arrived in the United States in 1909 or 1910.

Tercia was born in 1898 in Slovakia or Hungary. She was an illegitimate child — likely of a Slovakian woman and a Jewish man. Her mom married shortly after she was born and had several more children. I likely will never know who Tercia's Jewish father was; the union would have been forbidden, Jake told me.

Tercia and Christos married in 1916. After 1920, both of their lives are murky. I have yet to explore them in depth, but I know I will at some point.

Because I want to learn why Tercia left. What drove her to it? Where did she go? Did she ever remarry? Have more children? And for Christos — I know he did have more children, but where are they? Is my family bigger than I previously thought?

I have been told that Mary Elizabeth once took the bus

to visit her father and his new life. He had a new wife and more children. She stayed for a few days before returning to Marie. What must that have been like — to return to a place that by definition should have been home but in reality is nowhere to be found.

But I'm sure Mary Elizabeth was used to it.

She lived without a birth certificate, without a name. She lived as a child picked back up after being forgotten. She went right from college to marriage. She lovingly raised two children, even when her husband left her. She baked, tucked her recipes into boxes that we now keep at our house. She went on trips, documented in the many photographs she kept.

32 She loved — I know that for sure. Among her own life relics, she collected those of her family, her sons, her friends. She kept Christmas cards and craft projects. Photos of her favorite siamese cats. My sister inherited her baking abilities, and my cousin inherited her facial features.

I inherited her tendency to collect; I keep everything from plane tickets and brochures to the cards I've been given and polaroid photos I take of my friends, tucked away into folders and boxes and drawers. I document my own life the same way she documented hers, though I have far less of a need to. I've never stopped to wonder why I do it.

In Mary Elizabeth's obituary, my name is listed: "survived by ... great-granddaughter Caelyn Elizabeth Pender." I also inherited part of her name — Elizabeth. It's fitting, I think, because I sit here and wonder if in 100 years some great-granddaughter will rifle through my collections and ask these same questions about me.

URSA

The David Rome

FIRST PRIZE

DYLAN INES

33

Prize

body

Form and structure inspired by Maggie Nelson's "Bluets"

1. When I sit across a table with someone for too long, I often worry that they may fall apart. That they may decompose into some fundamental, organic unit of life and seep into the earth. Of course, this has never happened.
2. There is no textbook, no collection of works that can nearly describe all aspects of a human body and its resulting consciousness. Of course, the same could be said about the universe. How scary it is, to inhabit a structure so discrete and insignificant, yet which embodies a complexity comparable to an infinite universe.
3. Traditions of dualisms – of mind and body, of full and empty, of phallic and yonic, of self and non-self, of black and white – used to paint my mental picture of the body. However, I think mental shortcuts like these are rarely an accurate representation of the world. Aren't most things spectral? Perhaps binaries ease the compulsive part of me that seeks wholeness, or completion. But binaries rely on a singular contrast and an inevitable negation of points of overlap and peace and unity. To have a body is to exist in the fuzzy warmth of a perpetual in-between.
4. I acknowledge the hypocrisy I have invoked, as I am currently engaged in an attempt to paint a picture of the human body. My decision to assemble numbered entries is an attempt at acknowledging the futility of my effort – ideas conceived of in independent environments, and

as the product of varying thought processes initiated by random events. In theory, my numbered entries would continue on forever. Perhaps, some would be empty. Some would outline logical proofs. But, they would be infinite, winding through a conceptual, patchwork collage of the human body.

5. Descriptions based in summation, in universal totality are often fitting for the physical world. For physical objects and phenomena, aims at summarization and completeness provide a way for us to interpret our world and the interactions we have with it. But here, it is important to acknowledge that our pure being contaminates our physical world and leaves a slimy residue wherever a point of entanglement, of organic decomposition into the physical world, exists.

6. Several months ago, I had a spinal tap procedure done in the emergency room. A young resident doctor, who had just graduated medical school, told me about the procedure with a surprising confidence and calm demeanor. “Essentially, we will poke a needle into your lower back and draw out your Cerebrospinal fluid. Then we’ll run tests to see if there are any markers of infection in it.” Typically, spinal fluid should be free of most foreign substances, so markers of infection are salient. If blood is the Hudson River, contaminated with trash bags and industrial waste, then Cerebrospinal fluid is Icelandic glacial spring water – free of any contaminants or exogenous body.

7. The procedure felt invasive. The needle punctured my lower back, and though I couldn’t feel it, the idea of this foreign body puncturing my skin felt violating – it felt

dirty. Part of me was floating around in a vial out in the physical world. I was left feeling empty, as if a fundamental part of me was gone and never to be replaced. My skin, usually a reliable barrier wherein I keep the rest of my contents, had been violently punctured and part of me had been forced out. I felt as though the slightest force would rupture my skin and deflate me. I could feel my skin dissolving, and my body melting into the itchy fitted sheet that covered the gurney where I lay. For more than a week after the procedure I could not stand for longer than a few minutes due to an excruciating pain that pierced the back of my head, reminding me with a violent force of the part of my body I had left behind.

- 36
8. I am my environment. Eight percent of the human genome is derived from viruses. Every day, I ingest substances that were synthesized in the physical world, and they mold my physiology every so slightly. In every place I exist, I simultaneously leave traces of a genetic fingerprint behind, and with it, a part of my body.
 9. The body is ever-changing, it is as transient as the passing of time, as the infinite number of extreme present moments that the second hand of a clock leaves between each tick. The present moment does not exist. Which moment do I choose? I feel as though I am being forced through time, unable to exist in a present moment that escapes me faster than the speed of light moves through a vacuum. My body exists under the inescapable force of time and changes constantly in small ways, leaving my sense of self confused. I am unable to find a foothold in this spectral, amorphous body that exists on the perpetual event horizon central to the universal force of time

that leaches through my pores.

10. I struggle to justify that my body is the same entity that was created decades ago, or the same one that existed minutes ago. Perhaps, it is a linear gradient of ever-changing substance that can be traced, without interruption, that defines a single body. Perhaps, though, it is a lineage of psychological states that defines who I am. This distinction infringes upon the distinction between mind and body, between spatial and non-spatial, between consciousness and physical matter. These dualisms often leave me spiraling into unsolvable identity crises. In these times, I find that Descartes's *cogito, ergo sum* is forcefully grounding, comforting. I think, therefore I am. Even if I doubt my existence, even if my identity gets lost in the blizzard of time, there must still be something doing the doubting. Perhaps, this is why any emotion, no matter how visceral, is often a refreshing reminder that *I exist* and can be acted on by its violence.
11. His hands were weathered, as a boulder on an exposed mountaintop – a boulder, proudly deformed from years of erosion, each indentation an unmistakable record of the geological patterns that shaped its environment through time, a boulder that still stands tall and reaches towards the heavens, despite the weighted futility of its effort. The boulder stands, exposed and vulnerable, just as his hands acted as the brush with which he painted the expansive, blank canvas of his non-self. There are deformities in the form of calluses that developed from years of frequent high pressure and strain, an unmistakable record of his lifelong factory

work and manual labor. A record of the context that his physical body was placed in, and a record of the way his body danced with his surroundings and shaped his local world. Most apparent when using his index finger to point somewhere on a map – an action he does often when exploring his atlas in great detail – the sound of his finger on the decaying paper creates a hard, staccato tone, as if pointing to this location is so resolute and assured that his finger exclaims its finding.

- 38
12. In *Windows: Of Vulnerability*, Thomas Keenan illustrates a “violent opening between inside and outside, private and public, self and other.” Are my eyes my body’s windows of vulnerability? Of course, there is comfort and status in gazing, in looking out, in casting an invisible force of sight from the high ground established by hiding behind the window and within my discrete self. But there is no looking out, there is no unidirectional path with which I can observe (dominate) my non-self, without direct submission to the light that enters my window and establishes the fuel source for my gaze. The temporal pattern requires that my body be dominated first – who does the window belong to? Keenan asks this question of the directionality of a window: “Does a window belong to the inside or outside?” My eyes are no longer mine; they are at the mercy of, and nothing without, a physical context.
 13. I hesitantly walk into the post-anesthesia care unit, my shoes squeaking with each step on the pale green linoleum floor. I pass an endless line of beds pushed against the wall, each inhabited by a different sleeping face. Most patients have a nasal cannula strapped

around their face, providing a constant flow of oxygen and conferring an eerie similarity to all of the gowned patients.

I walk past an exceptionally pale woman in a deep sleep. She has dark bruises on the back of her left hand, and she snores softly. I walk past, but quickly turn around, realizing I have just misidentified my grandmother as an elderly woman whose life hangs on to a feeble tube that sits on her upper lip. I pull up a chair and sit down, just close enough that I can reach out and rest my hand on top of her bruised one. Her eyes open, but she does not wake up.

“Do I have to die?” she whispers, almost inaudibly.

“You’ll be okay. You fell yesterday and broke your hip. They gave you a total hip replacement and you’re recovering now.”

39

She responds with a dull silence.

Several minutes later, she rolls her head to the side, radiating a blank stare that pulses through me and out of the back of my head.

14. My grandmother had a portion of her hip removed and a titanium prosthetic placed in its stead. Of course, she and most people would agree that she still maintains the same body that she did before the surgery, even if a portion of it was replaced. But where is the point at which her body would no longer be hers? Perhaps after several organ transplants? What is as interesting as it is deeply saddening to me is that my grandmother lost a large portion of her memory and cognitive abilities due

to the anesthesia. Perhaps compounded by the early stages of a neurodegenerative disease, she seemed to be a different person after her fall. For weeks, she would stay up late watching television, fearful of getting into bed with her husband of sixty years because she did not recognize him.

“I need to run away from here. I don’t belong here.”

15. Not only had her body been fundamentally altered and manipulated, but much of her memories and sense of self had been erased. I would stay up with her at night, reassuring her that she belonged here, that she was loved, that we would take care of her. She would cry, softly, and I put my hand on her shoulder, unsure if she knew that the gesture came from her grandson, or a stranger. I would repeat comforting mantras to her, desperately trying to convince her of her lost identity, of the woman she once was.

He is your husband ... we want to help you ... you belong here ... you belong here ... you belong here ...

.
.

.

.

- X. I often live outside of myself. I will assume a third person’s perspective, or I attempt to live through the people in my local realm. I will often look through someone else’s lens and neglect my own values, desires, and motivations. Is this empathy? Or is this just anxiety?

Ego? Whatever it is, the sentiment sketches a leaky, incomplete, puzzle piece concept of the human entity. If we were discrete, individual structures, I do not think it would be possible to live outside of oneself.

But isn't the human condition defined by our ability to live beyond our own bodies? Aren't empathy, and love, and giving, and sacrifice, and regret, those distinct qualities that drive our human experience? To be human is to step out, even if just for a moment, and breathe in that sweet substance that has touched the flame of our collective humanity.

2022–2023

The David Rome

SECOND PRIZE

ALLISON CHANG

42

Prize

The Water Lilies

1. I remember stepping into a white, oblong room when I am fifteen. Never before have I seen a room like this, wrapped in panoramic painting. *The Nymphéas [Water Lilies]*. Claude Monet. A series of eight compositions are mounted on the curved walls.
2. Monet designed the space himself. Two elliptical rooms, creating the “illusion of an endless whole, of a wave without horizon and without shore.” I find a certain tranquility in infiniteness.
3. In infinite space, I can breathe deeply. Tree trunks grow out of their reflections in the pond, a continuous extension into reality. Unclear where one ends and the other begins. The sky is in the water. The water becomes the sky. Wispy in the wind, the clouds meander along the edge of the shore, tickled by the caress of the weeping willows. The air is cool, tasting of the sweet grass beginning to grow in thickets by the water’s edge. As twilight seeps into the sky, the water lilies begin to curl into themselves, as a hand closes into a fist. Pink and white buds fold inwards as the shadows of the water deepen and blur.
4. As I write on serenity, the face of The Meditation Man floats in my mind.
5. Our van pulls to halt in a narrow alley somewhere in Bangkok. Along with the rest of the tired high school teens, I reluctantly step out from the crisp air conditioned van into the humid, heaviness of July.

My t-shirt is limp with sweat and sticks to the small of my back as I attempt to straighten it out. We collect outside the entrance of a nondescript white stucco building, whereupon an older man with closely cut salt and pepper hair arrives to greet us. The Meditation Man, as our community service trip leaders dubbed him, wears a solemn expression and simple white linens. His feet are bare on the red tile.

6. Hartanto Gunawan is the real name of the Meditation Man. He sits on the ground at the front of the room, lotus pose. In a smooth, quiet voice, he tells us his story. Previously a CEO at a multi-industry holding company in Indonesia, he found his life filled with stress and impatience during the 1997 Asian financial crisis. Disillusioned, he quit his job and moved to Thailand to become a Buddhist monk.
7. In Buddhism, the water lily is a symbol of resurrection. A flower which closes at night and blooms in the morning. Opens and closes. A cycle on and on, endless.
8. Hartanto teaches us that there is serenity in cyclic breath. One form of meditation is to focus solely on the physicality of the motion. Inhale, stomach expands, lungs fill. Exhale, stomach shrinks, lungs compress. Think about the movement of the air. The push and the pull. Let the breath flow. Let your mind be empty.
9. In calmness, it seems, there is infiniteness. There is also emptiness. I must allow all thoughts to drain out of me. Release the tension within my body. Let go of the anger. The excitement. The sadness. What, then, remains?

10. In many of Monet's paintings, all you can see is water. In the water, all you can see is the sky. In the sky, all you can see is color. Shapes melt into strokes, a pastel fog. All that is left in the blur of color are the small, distinct dots of water lilies.
11. In color psychology theory, certain colors can be associated with a person's emotions. Anger is red. Happiness is yellow. Serenity, then, must be a blend of The Water Lilies. Soft lavender, sky blue, pale pink, deep green. This is the color of the breath as it flows into the lungs and seeps out through the nose.
12. According to the Musée de l'Orangerie, Monet wanted the paintings to provide a "haven of peaceful meditation," believing that the images would soothe the "overworked nerves" of visitors.
13. Years later and thousands of miles away, I Google "meditation school bangkok" and miraculously find Hartanto's website. I discover that during his training, the monastery ordered him to live in complete isolation on an uninhabited jungle island infested with snakes, scorpions, and spiders. Left with nothing but his Buddhist scriptures, Hartanto was to wait there until the head monk called him back.

He figured this period would last a few weeks. Hartanto built himself a shelter, which I imagine was probably poorly constructed given his prior cushy businessman life. Some days he would travel with local fishermen to the mainland to beg for food from the villagers. On the ride back to the island, he would pay for his fare with a portion of his meal.

Weeks blend into months. Months into years. Still, the head monk did not call him back.

14. For two years, Hartanto lived on the island. On the days when the weather was bad, the fisherman would not come and there was nothing to eat. The snakes, scorpions, and spiders had to be fended off on the daily. There was hunger. Fear. Loneliness.

In the dreadfulness of it all, Hartanto meditated. Within his mind, he created an oasis. “I couldn’t stand the snakes and the spiders. But you learn to live with them,” he says in a recent interview on his training.

15. Because of distress, we desire serenity. The snakes and spiders made the Meditation Man.

46

16. I, too, have my own snakes and spiders. I decide to move on campus instead of taking a gap semester or “going virtual.” Because of this, I am lying on my bed on the fifth floor of Grad Center A. I stare at the white cinder block walls. The blank nothingness. It is only the beginning of Quiet Period, and it is already suffocating. I watch a Youtube video recently uploaded by my favorite vlogger, who mentions how often she goes the entire day without speaking to a single human. I think about my only in-person interaction of the day, which was picking up a bag of cold chili for dinner from the Ratty.

Can it get worse than this? Will this be my next two years? What can I change? Glancing up from my phone, I survey the bleak austerity of my room.

17. In 1914, Monet was mourning the loss of his son to

illness. From his anguish and despair, he developed a renewed desire to “undertake something on a grand scale.”

18. The garden of water lilies was constructed by Monet himself in his backyard. He converted the boggy land into lakes and filled the area with weeping willows, wisteria, and hundreds of water lilies. Following its completion, Monet spent years in the garden immersing himself in the beauty. Observing its evolution. Eternalizing it on canvas.
19. A full time gardener was hired to oversee the maintenance of the garden. He removed each dead leaf from the water to preserve the perfect beauty of the pond.
20. Serenity can be a constructed space. In my Grad Center dorm, I became obsessed with decorating my room. In particular, I fixated on obtaining an art poster of Monet’s *Water Lilies*. Researching all the options, I spent hours on society6 and Pinterest and CVS Photo Prints comparing formats, contemplating color schemes, and calculating shipping costs. It had to be perfect. With this poster, I could create the ultimate relaxing space. My home. My sanctuary.
21. Two years later, sitting in the front row of my Persuasive Communication class, I am cursing myself for deciding “it’s time I conquer my fears.” The next in line to give a Speech of Introduction, I feel like my heart is about to pound right out of my chest. I’m breathing too fast. I’m breathing so fast I can’t breathe. I can’t breathe and I can’t think and I can’t

Mind racing, I know I have to slow my breath. *Okay. In, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7. Hold. Out, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7. In... Hold. Out... Hold. In...* It's my turn now. I'm walking up. I'm standing in front of everyone.

22. The professor tells us that if we act confident, people will think we're confident. When they treat us like we're confident, we then feel confident.

"It can go from the outside in," she says.

If I act calm, people will think I'm calm, and then I'll feel calm. I search for the smiling faces in the classroom, hoping their warmth will penetrate the blanket of nerves wrapped around me. In a way, calmness is a belief. A hope.

- 48 23. It is an idea, a place, a feeling we so desperately hold onto, throughout life and into death. Because how else can we make peace with the snakes and the spiders?
24. *The Water Lilies Series* was Monet's final work. In a letter to a friend, he wrote, "These landscapes of water and reflection have become an obsession for me. It is beyond my strength as an old man, and yet I want to render what I feel."

As Monet's health declined, he developed cataracts that left him nearly blind. Reds began to look muddy. His paintings were gradually growing darker and darker. To ensure that he was choosing the right colors, he started to label his paint tubes and maintain a strict order on his palette.

Driven by his need to finish his work, to make his peace,

he eventually consented to surgery despite his fears.

25. When I am training as a volunteer at the hospice center, I am taught that there are many routes to accepting the end of life, to finding serenity. For some, it is spending time with family and friends, looking at old photographs, and remembering fond memories. For others, it is silence, a dark room, and a hand to hold.

I will never forget the first patient I met. A guttural inhalation of breath, almost like snoring. A long pause. Then a sigh of exhalation. The feel of her hand in mine, bony and frail and soft and warm. Her eyes closed, white hair askew on its pillow. The hushed voice of the other volunteer, "We're here for you, Thelma...you can rest now,"

26. When we fade away, we want to go in peace.

49

27. Death, I learn, is a slow process.

Over the weeks, your appetite wanes as your body requires less energy. The feet become swollen. There are fewer moments between sleep when you are conscious.

Over days, mucus accumulates in the airway, causing a raspy sound called the death rattle.

In those final moments, the breath goes last.

28. How does one write tranquility? How it rises from the murky waters, blooming and beautiful, both the antithesis and the result of the filthy pond mud below. Opening and closing, inhaling and exhaling through the seasons of our lives.

29. I never ended up buying a poster of *The Waterlilies*. In my obsession with finding the perfect poster, nothing ever lived up to the expectations of my imagination.

Instead, I learned to live with the uncertainty.

30. I began writing to master the beauty of serenity, unfurl its petals and paint its leaves. And now as I conclude, I find myself just as fascinated with the muck that nourishes. The water that quenches its thirst. With the chaos and the ugly and the resilience that feeds such a water lily.

URSA

The Barbara Banks

ELIZA BERMAN

51

Prize

Inertia

52

The stones feel cold to the touch due to their high thermal inertia. Thermal inertia measures the speed at which the surface temperature of an object increases when heat is applied. When my mom holds the stone in the upper palm of her hand and wraps her fingers around its smooth, flat face, it cools her. Her hands are dry, the skin slightly cracked. Veins pop out of her fingers and the back of her hand, varicose and beautifully blue. When I rest my hand on hers, I feel the paths of veins sliding down from her fingertips to her wrists and then arms. The result of blood pooling. Our hands have fourteen knuckles, three on each finger and two on the thumb. Each of my mom's knuckles bulges to some degree. They are inflamed, swollen, stiff, filled with excess chemicals released by a damaged immune system and damaged tissue. These chemicals contaminate the hands, the knees, the hips, spine, and each of the fourteen knuckles on each hand, and saturate them with tissue. There is simply no room for all that tissue. The small pocket of the knuckle wrapped around the stone cannot handle the amount of excess inflammatory chemicals, which begin to push on the nerve endings, which signal to her brain to cause pain. Bodies are intensely unforgiving. The pain is hot and constant: the first side effect. The stone cools her knuckles, with its high thermal inertia, weighted body, and smooth face.

There are twenty-nine bones in the hand and wrists, each bonded together through joints. Twenty-nine bones in the hands and wrists are coated with a layer of cartilage, protecting them. In my mom's hand, the cartilage has broken down, faded, degenerated, and the bones rub against

each other. It is constant, disorderly friction; she feels this pain all the time. One winter when I was ten, my parents brought my brother and me to a house near the mountains to enjoy the snow. When we arrived, in the middle of the night, the heat in the house had not yet been turned on, and the house was freezing. My dad began to make a fire in a black steel fireplace as my mom gathered all the blankets in the house and, one by one, wrapped them around my brother and me, enveloping us. But our hands shook with coldness, and our breath hung, cloudy and white in front of us, growing more opaque with every shallow breath. My mom pressed my two hands together, palm to palm, finger pad pressed against finger pad, and pushed her hands around mine. Her palms pushed firmly on the back of my smooth, soft hands. This was before her disease; this was when the pockets of her knuckles breathed. She slid her hands up and down my hands, quickly and then slowly, dragging her palms from the base of my wrists to the tip of my fingers and back. The molecules on our hands gained energy through the friction that she generated, and she warmed my hands. I stopped shaking. I felt okay. Now, the rubbing bones in her hand produce their own friction, and her hands are always hot: the second side effect. But stone cools them: the thermal inertia of the stone keeps her joints from further bulging.

53

An object in motion will stay in motion until acted upon by an external force. Her inflammatory polyarthropathy continues to progress because of this principle of inertia, swelling her body, joint by joint. The stone continues to stay cool because of this inertia, refusing to be dramatically altered by the surrounding temperature of her hot hand. The law of the world that relieves her pain drives her pain.

My mom has collected over a hundred rocks this month. On beaches, in the driveways of her friends' houses, in the community garden. She bends slowly to pick them up as her hips and knees heat up, bones rubbing bones. A medical leave followed immediately by a sabbatical has given her the first extended break from a stressful 30-year profession as a physician and leader of a research program focused on addiction and chronic medical illness in the South Bronx of New York City. The research came before this chronic medical illness entered her home. The studies on pain rolled off the papers in her office into her body, without regard for the doors made to separate the office from the sidewalk and the sidewalk from her home. Her time off has lent itself well to a supreme rock collection. At any moment, stones fill her purse, her pockets, and cover the kitchen table. Grains of minerals compose stones; they are atoms bonded together in orderly structures. Stones are nondynamic, unmoving, unable to burst or break. Next to the stones on her kitchen table sits paint markers and sharpies of all different colors and thicknesses. My mom sits at the kitchen table, takes the black thin sharpie, and in-grains designs on the faces of her stones. She may work for thirty minutes, or maybe two hours, and then stand, extend her fingers to a locked-knuckle position so tight that they shake, and walk away. She may come back later and pick up the same rock, choose a different colored paint marker, and continue folding design into the face of the rock. Or she may pick up a rock weeks later and layer it with new color. Or she may never come back to the stone again. My mom has taken hundreds of rocks, and intricately coated them with ink, adding the protective layer to their faces that is missing on her bones.

Though an object in motion remains in motion, a body at rest remains at rest, and this scares us because slipping into rest is easy and slipping out is hard, and we can try so hard to stay moving, but Latin defined inertia on the lives of the still, not on the lives of the moving, and the word's root means *want* of art or skill, and *unskillfulness*, and *inactivity*, and so our desire to make art can will us to break our inertia, but our bodies forbid it, and I yell to my mom to stop, taking the kitchen knife from her hand, because her hand is weak and shaking and there is no need to be cutting onions right now, but she wants to keep cutting onions, because she used to cut onions so finely, but I worry she will slice her other hand by accident, which grips the onion, and she knows this, so she puts the knife down and leaves the kitchen, and this hurts because this is loss of skill until a time we cannot know, and I took that away, and inertia keeps it, and that is pain, and the onion stays sitting on the cutting board, half of it sliced, half whole, at rest, until I pick up the knife and continue to make our dinner- the third side effect. 55

Zentangle is a method of drawing based on the premise of promoting intense concentration, creativity, and mindfulness. A combination of meditation and art, Zentangle is made of a collection of carefully constructed patterns that fold over one another to form an abstract design. The word stems from zen, the Buddhist meditative philosophy of balancing the mind, and tangle, the word for the patterns, which consist of dots, lines and curves. The word tangle comes from the large seaweeds, which become intertwined and indecipherable as individual units of the Fucus species. Zentangle is a deceptively simple practice to generate intricate designs, art, and doodles out of overlapping repeated dots and lines. Patterns bond

together in orderly structures. The process intends to be relaxing, forcing the mind to reduce its bandwidth to pattern construction and repetition. Art therapists use Zentangle to promote motor skills, peace, motivation, focus, mood, pride, and self-concept. Thin lines emerge from the canvas; details reveal themselves as the pen conducts stroke after stroke. With hands that had to give up on gardening because squeezing a pair of clippers caused too much pain, tangles are produced in bursts of dozens.

56 When sleep seems unreachable (the fourth side effect) and joints seem twice their normal size, my mom holds her sharpie. Some days the tangles are more detailed than others. Other days, the brush marks are wider, shakier, and waver as her hand shakes. When her disease spurs in her hands, my mom picks up a sharpie, and begins to tangle. Despite losing gardening (the fifth side effect), losing her daily Pilates practice (the sixth side effect), the ability to twist a can opener to open a can (the seventh side effect), walking without a cane (the eighth side effect), getting eight-consecutive-hours of a good night's sleep, her hands have never refused her tangling. When the knuckles swell and the nerves tell her brain to send pain coursing through her body, she tangles, and the pain gets number. She dulls her pain through the meditative practice of repetitive pattern production. My mom generates order and harmony using hands of friction and disorder.

My mom has filled notebooks with her tangles. Some have colors, others are black and white. Some have shading and others are two-dimensional. But lately, with hundreds of stones piling up around her house, her canvas has shifted to the cold, rounded surface. She sits at the kitchen table, holding the stone in the upper palm of her left hand and

the sharpie between her right index finger and thumb. An audiobook or a soft tune plays quietly. Perhaps NPR radio news hour, or Belinda Carlisle's *Heaven is a Place on Earth*, or Audible's reading of *Rodham* by Curtis Sittenfeld. She covers the stone in dots, lines, and curves. The stones are asymmetrical, and the designs are off-centered. Once the dots and lines have been implanted on the face of the rock, she puts down the sharpie. Her fingers resume their tremor, which was temporarily paused by the intense concentration of her mind on the rock, forcing even an involuntary shake of her fingers to subside. She picks up a pink marker next and adds another protecting layer to the stone. Cartilage protecting the rubbing of one bone on another.

Once my mom begins a project, she will not stop. An object in motion stays in motion. Her medium complements her craft, and orderly bonds layer orderly bonds. Products of moments where there was less pain, hundreds of rocks coated with design sit on the kitchen table. A few weeks ago, my mom gave me one of her rocks for the first time. It was a gift, a symbol of love, affection, of gratitude, of what she has overcome and continues to endure, an acknowledgment of the strain it creates in and around her life, and above all, a product of a painless moment in a painful, painful day, week, year, and years to come. It is a message in a language I cannot speak, a language of a suffering no one chooses to understand. It sits next to me as I write these words. I hold it between my fingers, and it cools my hands as the design pushes into my smooth, pink skin, which has been warmed by the writing of this story.



*The rock my mom gave me
a few weeks ago*

58



*A bowl of my mom's rocks
in her apartment*

URSA

The Betsy Amanda Lehman

FIRST PRIZE

GAYA GUPTA

59

Memorial Award
for Excellence in Journalism

Behind every statistic, there is a story. And whether it's through interactive graphics or compelling features, I strive to tell that story. After chasing leads on *The Washington Post's* Metro desk and reporting deeply on Virginia's Black and Indigenous communities, I've found that the stories that most excite me break down numbers to explain complex issues and illuminate injustices.

60 What I've loved most about studying journalism at Brown is how I've been able to define much of my own curriculum, particularly by combining my computer science background with the narrative skills I've learned through nonfiction writing courses. I owe my start in journalism to Brown's Open Curriculum —without it, I likely never would've taken Journalistic Writing on a whim my freshman fall, and thus may never have discovered my deep passion for reporting and storytelling. The data reporting I've done at publications such as *The Washington Post*, *The Virginia Gazette* and soon, *The New York Times*, has all been acutely informed by what I've learned as a computer science and English concentrator and as a senior editor of *The Brown Daily Herald*.

Studying computer science with a focus on data has sharpened my instinct for data-driven stories, and so all the stories I've included in this portfolio started with a seemingly simple statistic. While I was on the transportation beat during my summer with *The Washington Post*, I noticed how noise complaints for airports around the D.C. region skyrocketed after the pandemic. Two summers ago, while writing for *The Virginia Gazette*, I was perusing Virginia's Department of Health website for a routine story on COVID vaccination numbers when I noticed that Native Americans were the most vaccinated racial group in the state. Later

that summer, I organized, cleaned and cross-tabulated data on opioid deaths, and a clear trend emerged: Black Virginians were fatally overdosing on opioids at record-high rates following the start of the pandemic.

These stories all started with numbers. But what makes data-driven journalism so powerful, as I've learned over my time here at Brown, is how they reflect people's lived experiences. For the airport noise story, I spent hours at the community myself, hearing the planes rocket overhead myself and talking to dozens of angry residents. I interviewed Native American chiefs on tribal land or at their health clinics.

There, I learned that for their tribes, vaccinations weren't just about individual health, but the survival of their tribe's legacy and history. I also shared my opioid data findings with leaders in local addiction recovery programs, as well as leaders of Black churches. Many of them weren't aware of the trends or the data I found and took action to increase their outreach to vulnerable communities.

Our world is teeming with data — about ourselves, about our most influential leaders, about the most powerful corporations. As our world becomes increasingly digital, understanding and sharing this data in accessible, interesting ways is crucial to ensuring that journalism can make a lasting impact and continue to be relevant in the future. Combining narratives with numbers is how we can keep power to account. It's how we can discover overlooked injustices. And it's how we can unearth untold stories.

Thank you for your consideration.

Selected Portfolio

THE WASHINGTON POST

[A neighborhood fights to be heard as Dulles planes drown out daily life](#)

THE VIRGINIA PILOT

[During the pandemic, the rate of Black people in Hampton Roads dying from opioid overdoses more than doubled](#)

62 [90% of eligible tribe members in Virginia have had at least one coronavirus vaccine dose; Upper Mattaponi, Chickahominy tribes say for their tribes, it's a matter of survival](#)

URSA

The Betsy Amanda Lehman

SECOND PRIZE

BENJAMIN GLICKMAN

63

Memorial Award
for Excellence in Journalism

AVON

Richard Dulgarian can tell when a newcomer to the Avon Cinema walks in the doors. Usually they stare up at the vaulted ceiling or the old-fashioned popcorn machine with a look of wonderment. He knows they've already seen the distinctive neon marquee outside.

"I've got a live one," he thinks to himself.

He strolls over to the customer. "We've been in business since 1938," he used to tell them. "It's been a continuous operation." The wonder of the cinema is part of why Dulgarian, who operates and owns the theater with his brother Kenneth, loves this business so much.

64 The theater's closure was the first extended halt of operations in its history. Dulgarian is ashamed that it happened under his watch — he thinks his grandfather, who founded the theater, might have been disappointed.

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted Dulgarian's life's work and passion for the cinema, at least for the time being. In March, the theater had to shut down. After reopening in September, the theater had to shut down again on Nov. 30 because of skyrocketing cases in Rhode Island.

Wonder of the cinema

Dulgarian says that with every step inside the Avon, an art-house movie theater on Providence's east side, customers are meant to become immersed in the cinema experience. He says the devil is in the details.

The walls of the entryway of the theater are painted in a faux-marble pattern. The gray flowery carpet looks like something you might find in a retro bowling alley. Now,

small red decals, six feet apart from each other, line the floor, telling customers “Thank you for practicing social distancing.” (Dulgarian struggled to find decals for the theater that were not too pushy — he didn’t like that some of them commanded people to “stay back.”)

Cardboard cutouts of Marilyn Monroe, the three stooges, Marlon Brando, and Charlie Chaplin are perched on a ledge above the doorway. They all wear masks.

A concessions stand sits to one side of the entryway, fit with a refrigerator from decades ago filled with glass soda bottles; a worn-looking popcorn machine topped with multiple sizes of bright yellow cups; and a polished steel sign reading “Snacks.” A large sheet of plexiglass guards now stands between the customer and theater employees, flanked by two bottles of hand sanitizer.

Dulgarian has gone to painstaking lengths to ensure that the theater remains as it was decades ago. He paid extra to have the old refrigerator repaired because the model’s parts were not produced anymore. The theater has custom glass exit signs in a warped gothic font, and when one shattered, he used tracing paper to recreate the design and spray painted a new sign on a sheet of glass using a stencil.

65

In the screening room, most rows of maroon velvet cushioned seats are off limits, marked with strips of yellow masking tape across them. In rows that are available, only some seats are open to ensure social distancing for moviegoers.

Rhode Island shuts down

Rhode Island Governor Gina Raimondo announced an executive order mandating that non essential businesses shut down in late March. Dulgarian had no choice but to

close the theater. Dulgarian had never had so much time off in his life — he has hardly taken a vacation since he has managed the Avon.

Even during the blizzard of 1978, during which Providence saw a record 27.6 inches of snow, Dulgarian trekked to work. It took him three hours to trudge through the snow from the other side of the city to the Avon’s spot on Thayer Street. He likes to say that the theater has still never closed voluntarily.

Though unable to provide the cinema experience to casual movie watchers and film buffs, Dulgarian did what he’d done most days for decades: he went to work.

66 Dulgarian tried to keep himself busy with small tasks around the theater. He reorganized a storage closet. He hadn’t cleaned it out in years — there were still backup motors for projectors that the theater doesn’t use anymore.

Dulgarian replaced some torn velvet seats in the screening room. When the theater installed the velvet seats in the 1970s, they bought extra covers that could act as replacements. 50 years later, he is still using them.

“It’s just labor. It’s time consuming,” Dulgarian said.

He thought the entryway of the theater could be spruced up, so he tracked down the artist who painted the faux-marble walls in the 1980s. She was still painting, so Dulgarian paid her to repaint the walls in the same pattern as she had decades prior.

Dulgarian knew that if the public didn’t feel safe in the theater, they wouldn’t come back when it eventually reopened. So, he got to work researching where to buy sneeze guards and what other precautions the theater should take.

Rhode Island entered Phase 3 of reopening at the end of June, meaning that movie theaters could open with some restrictions. Dulgarian delayed opening the Avon until September — he wanted to make sure the theater “had all our ducks in order,” and that the customer could feel as comfortable as possible.

Reopening the Avon

When the cinema did reopen, things were not quite the same.

Business was slow. At first, very few people saw shows. As time went on, customers became more comfortable and began to come to the Avon more.

When two policemen came in to check if the theater was in compliance with COVID-19 rules, they took one look at the nearly empty theater and laughed. “Yeah, you’re definitely in compliance” one said.

Still many of the regulars at the theater have not returned. Before the pandemic, there were customers who would come every Friday 6:20 show. Dulgarian became friendly with them.

“I hope it’s just a matter of time before they find that they miss us,” Dulgarian said. He’s confident that all of the regulars will eventually return. “We’ll be ready for them when they do,” he added.

Most of Dulgarian’s fond memories from the Avon are from the people. He loves to find out that the Avon has impacted other peoples’ lives like it has his. Several years ago, a married couple came to the theater with their two children and told Dulgarian that their first date was at the Avon while students at Brown. They come back to the theater every

alumni weekend.

“It’s nice to know that the Avon has a history with people,” Dulgarian said.

To some degree, Dulgarian said, it’s harder to feel the magic of the cinema with COVID-19 precautions. The buttery smell of popcorn doesn’t waft into people’s nostrils when they’re wearing masks. In fact, the theater started covering containers of popcorn with a plastic sheet — in case someone in the theater decides to sneeze in your direction while you walk to your seat, Dulgarian said.

68 Before the movie starts, 1920s music rings on the auditorium speakers. Dulgarian hopes it “transports you to a fantasy experience for a couple hours.” Now, a message plays before the movie begins reminding moviegoers to keep their masks on at all times (unless eating their popcorn, of course).

Dulgarian hates to pull the reader out of the fantasy — to show them the wizard behind the curtain, as he says (*The Wizard of Oz* is one of his favorite movies) — but certain things are necessary in the time of coronavirus.

A life around movies

Dulgarian has been captivated by film since he was young. He has always loved movies, partially because it provided “a little bit of escapism.” He imagined himself as the hero in every movie. Notably, Dulgarian’s early experiences in cinemas were not in the Avon, even though his grandfather and father ran the business when he was growing up. The theater showed foreign films that his father thought were too racy for a child, so Dulgarian would go to a different movie theater downtown.

His father would tell him that he could only see movies rated G (for general audiences). G, he was told, stood for “good,” while PG (parental guidance suggested) stood for “pretty good.” “Why see a movie that’s pretty good when you could see one that’s good?” his father would ask him.

When he was old enough, Dulgarian started working at the Avon as a doorman — ripping tickets, changing the marquee and doing other small tasks. He wanted to learn everything he could about the theater. He took on any task he could.

His ultimate goal was to learn how to work the projector. Up a narrow staircase near the back of the theater, the Avon has a projection room fit with two hulking film projectors. Until seven years ago, the projectors were still in use, despite being decades old (the Avon switched over to a digital projector because movie studios stopped distributing film copies of their movies).

69

The two projectors sit side by side in a cramped room. There is hardly any space to walk from one end of the room to the other without squeezing by the projectors. Film canisters line the shelves on one side of the room. The projectors are huge hunks of metal, complete with faded exterior, red levers and chromium handles. Dulgarian speaks about the projectors, which are still operational, with a reverence for the artistry of the machines.

“Styling and design went into it,” Dulgarian said. “There are chrome pieces, there are curves to it. Older stuff just looks more interesting.”

When he was a young man working in the Avon, Dulgarian dreamed of operating these sleek machines, but he knew that the veteran projectionists would not be happy about

the owner's son taking their jobs. So, he slyly watched when projectionists would change over film reels, learning which knobs to pull and buttons to press. During the blizzard of 1978, he put his knowledge to the test (because no projectionists would trek through the snow storm). "It was not the smoothest show you'd ever seen," he said.

When a manager of the theater quit, Dulgarian pitched himself for the position to his father, who was the owner at the time. His father agreed to give him the position.

Dulgarian is glad he's been able to spend his life running a movie theater. "Everyone is always happy to come here," he said. It's better than a job at the DMV, he added with a chuckle.

A struggling industry

70

Financially, the pandemic has been challenging for Dulgarian and the Avon. Though the cinema was closed from March to September, the bills continue to pile up. Dulgarian shut off the compressor (for the sound system) and the digital projector, but his electrical bill was still close to \$700. Dulgarian and his brother own the building that the theater is in, so they still have to pay property taxes. Insurance bills kept coming as well.

"We had to dip into some savings," Dulgarian said, "so that we were here and ready for when the state decided that we could reopen."

The Avon is not the only cinema struggling. Movie theaters around the country have seen diminishing returns from the pandemic — even chain theaters have had to temporarily shutter. Regal theater chain, which has 536 theaters around the country, announced it would temporarily close all of its locations because of the pandemic in October.

Movie studios have postponed the majority of their films, meaning that theaters have had to operate without many new releases to show. Theaters have coped by playing old films. Dulgarian doesn't mind rewatching old films — "I can't tell you how many times I went to Showcase Cinema and watched *Back to the Future* and *ET*," he said — but he recognizes how troubling this is for the theater industry.

"How do you pay the bills? How do you pay staff?" he said. "Studios need to release this product so that theaters can survive." Besides the lack of film releases, theaters are grappling with a customer base that is worried about contracting the coronavirus.

Dulgarian insists that going to movie theaters is low risk, considering how no one is talking and viewers are spread out in the theater. One study by website Celluloid Junkie agrees with him — their study found that no cases of COVID-19 have been linked back to theaters.

71

Still, Dulgarian knows that the public perception is what matters, and public perception differs from his view. A Morning Consult poll in September found that just 18 percent of consumers feel comfortable going to movie theaters. The issue may be compounded for the Avon, which has a customer base that tends to be older.

The poor box office performances of blockbusters like "Tenet" may cause a shift in the industry — Warner Bros., a large movie studio, announced on Dec. 3 that it would send all of its 2021 film releases to the streaming service HBO Max at the same time that the films are in theaters.

The Avon is closed again until mid-December. Dulgarian hopes that this will be the last mandatory shut down because of COVID-19.

Still, Dulgarian believes that the pandemic will not be the end of movie theaters. He hopes that a vaccine for the coronavirus will raise people's confidence in going to the movies again, and things will return to normal. He was quick to point out that when the polio virus was spreading in the mid-20th century, movie theaters struggled.

He added that streaming services cannot replicate the cinema experience. "Movies are meant to be a public experience," he said. "When something is funny, you hear people laughing around you. When something is tragic, you can sense that as well."

Dulgarian knows that some people will not feel the same magic from movie theaters because of COVID-19 restrictions. But whatever others feel, he knows that he will still find cinemas magical. That isn't all that matters in running a theater, he said, but it helps.

"I'm a big fan of this place. Can you tell?"

Additional Publications

THE PROVIENCETOWN INDEPENDENT

[Mosquito Boom Was Caused by Duck Harbor Overwash](#)

THE FINANCIAL TIMES

[Americans stay away from great outdoors amid rising petrol costs](#)

2022-2023