ABOUT
Equinox is the student-run literary and arts magazine exclusive to the Campus Honors Program of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. The mission of Equinox is to share the creative work of CHP students, whose academic and artistic talents complement and inspire each other in the same way that night and day, balanced on the equinoxes, beautify each other.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
We want to thank the Campus Honors Program students and staff for their help and encouragement throughout this process. Your dedication, time, and contributions were invaluable in the making of this issue. This magazine could not have been created without you!

A special thank you to Julie Woolsey, who supported Equinox like nobody else. We love you and miss you, Julie.

Thanks also to the staff at Illini Document Services for their help and advice.
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LETTER FROM THE EDITORS
Equinox is brought to you by the letter j.

Many CHP students make creative work, but it takes some courage to be willing to share it. With this in mind, the goal of Equinox is to give CHP students an opportunity to let their creativity be shown. We have ourselves been inspired and pushed to create even more so after seeing what our CHPeers have made. What amazing stories, photographs, and art we see every year!

One of the layout designers this year asked us if we were going to continue working on literary magazines after graduation. It’s hard to think about this—CHP is like a family to us, and sharing our work with anyone else seems so much more challenging. But we hope that just as future generations of CHP students will find a family in CHP and Equinox, we too can move forward to create families and communities where we can share our creativity and maybe inspire others to do so too.

And just as we thank our previous generations of Equinox staff for all their support and hard work, we wish luck to the generations to come.

Sam Walder and Charlotte Hunt, Editors-in-Chief
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ART
RAJASI RASTOGI

Longing Freshman Year
CHARLOTTE HUNT

Sailing Ship
Face on Fire
Squid
POETRY
theres a man waiting for me underneath the light
he stands there waiting staring at my soul forever
he looks at me trying to hold my gaze
i can look at him but barely turn away
his eyes are alluring and his body is but a mist
but theres a man waiting for me underneath the light
barely visible underneath the shadows

theres a man waiting for me underneath the light
in my mind i know him
he was there when i broke to tears
and he was there when it was all finished
but my body sees him as a threat looming too close
and coming too near so he returns back
underneath the light piercing the shadows

theres a man waiting for me underneath the light
and my spirit tells me he is nothing
but an apparition of the past trying to
push me forward where he could not i
want to reach for him and hold him and
tell him itll be alright but i know if i go
near that light the shadows will pounce
so he continues to wait underneath the light

theres a man waiting for me underneath the light
and i know that even though my body will wilt
only for a short while his gaze keeps beckoning me
to look deeper fall further and escape that light
and into finality of the shadows
but he stays underneath that light surrounded by darkness
waiting there's a man waiting for me underneath the light
and this cycle knows I am to survive but he tries to hold my gaze
and try to make me remember a past that is forgotten here forever
even though he still lingers waiting
underneath the light meters from where he landed

there's a man waiting underneath the light
and he is not waiting for me but for the friend
that failed to come when he needed him
and failed to help him when he was ensnared by someone else
underneath that light because someone always needs to be in that light

there's something underneath the light
all the doubts pushed forward by generations
before him and generations after me
and will linger in eternity no matter
if that light moves because that light
follows the gasping air that is the fragility of the mind
RIA GREER

Wretched

There are

w...
SAM WALDER

Midnight, Main Stacks

Each book pleaded with me to be read, of course, due to the intense isolation. They all live in the mute library brooding with blinders on, staring into the darkness, their contact with the world blocked by opaque binding, waiting for a hero to bridge them together and finally release into the world ideas held prisoner by inaction. I took away all the binding and piled pure unrestricted pages in a heap and let them fly down the stairs. Their pent-up energy flared and they rose on their own intellectual wind, swirling and dipping as one, as many, like starlings.
**Geography Lesson!!**

*X marks the spot*

Let’s draw a map from a water bottle to petroleum to Nigerian oil pirates to the ensuing disaster through which a Nikon-wielding Ms. P can open up a new gallery in Marfa

*Now you can see*

That Nalgene in the Lost and Found box is the disaster photographer’s bread and butter
The putrid meat in Russian prisons is the bicycle in your garage
Guacamole is a Card Carrying Communist

*But don’t forget*

The grim crimes we see strangers commit are not our fault
We cannot all afford the luxury of self-disgust
Things I Miss About the Future:

Playground monks who pray and chant on the swings as children push them
The smell of strong coffee from cafes that never close in cups so small you might be drinking midnight
The streetlamps whose light flows like music over wet cobblestones
Gangs of cats who race along the lower streets from market to market
The low thoom of boats heading out in the morning
Waking up to find a new view from my window each morning
The little one-room libraries where the entrance fee is a smile but overdue fees might see you lose a finger, flute players on the steep narrow sidewalks, the view of the sea that never gets worse, come! Our feet crave the cool streets after it rains and soft grass in the parks, we long for the musty darkness of the academic buildings, the food and drink so readily available—this city always cooking a new secret stew, dancing, silent on winter afternoons during the big rains—this city that bellows, life is more undefeatable than…!!!
MAHIR MORSHED

Untitled

If you’d only look up to them
See the clouds, oh so high
Now the air will open to you
Why not look at the sky?
See them tower, over our heads
See them with your own eyes
Now the air will open to you
Why not look at the sky?

They’ll come and say ‘Look ye yonder!
See the clouds standing there!’
Get a glimpse before they choose to
Rush away, smooth and fair
Just like them, we’ll walk together
Take my hand and we’ll fly
Now the air will open to you
Why not look at the sky?

Let’s go find those wonderful dreams
Taking in all the light
What today holds in our minds we’ll
Seize it, knowing it’s right
Just as I do, open your heart
Why not give it a try?
Now the air will open to you
Why not look at the sky?
**RAJASI RASTOJI**

**Pantone Man**

Pantone 712 man in a Pantone 284 blazer,
greets every stranger
as they get on the bus,

been single for over forty-four years,
no parents, no family,
he retired alone.

“People, we just tolerate each other, you know”,
smoking his cigarette on the way to the public library, he says,
and goes on to greet every single person
that he meets on the road,

exclaiming, he thinks, “I thought I would be richer after retirement!”
but retiring too early was a crime
“I sold carpet, rugs and food supplies
to a store that doesn’t even exist anymore”.

This man, white hair, a pastel blue blazer,
was married to a white woman for a mere five years,
his clothes bright and ironed, hair neat and combed,
but this marriage he says, “seems like it was such a long time ago”.

No money, no car, rotten teeth and a broken bike later,
he takes the bus from Urbana to Champaign,
to go to the library on a sunny Saturday morning,
all the way from his one-man home.

“I don’t come here to read books,
for I got plenty of my own,
It’s the newspapers I come for, so I don’t have to pay for them,
and to check spellings for all the words that I don’t know”.

11 Feb 2017
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RAJASI RASTOGI

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Gondoliers
Kangaroo
Bent Bark
Jellyfish
Flower
RASAJI RASTOGI & SAM WALDER

Mud, Nuts
Wait, I think I got the story wrong. Was it five nuts, or did the sixth fall out of her hand? Could you hear the leaves of the trees behind her rustle? Each child has two dreams—the one they have and the one their mother has for them. Where did these conflict? And what did the nuts taste like?

They sucked. They were...so...they were basically just bitter nuts. They just have a lot of caffeine in them. It’s really bitter. I thought it was a fruit. They did tell me it was bitter. But how bitter can a fruit really be?

How did you try to eat it?

You just eat it raw. It’s not a nut. It’s...called a cocoa nut. No, a Kola nut!

How many did you buy?

Two. My friend said that some of them are bitter, but some of them are not. So that’s why I got two.

They look green in the photo.

Those are not kola nuts. I was leaving. She shouted out to me, and I walked away. And then I met her again and she took me to her house. She said, Hey, you’re my friend now. I’ll walk with you. My name is...Mami—Mamisoma. I’m the only Mamisoma there is in this village!

What was her house like?

Mud. It was...part concrete, part mud. Small. There were kids outside, but I couldn’t imagine how all of them fit inside.

Was that a pretty typical place?

Yeah. So.

There was another place that was outside, it was a poor house. Not even a house, a room. Part mud, part concrete. But I saw at least 30 pairs of shoes in there.
SAM WALDER

Thirst Gamblers

Minnesota, summer 2016

The freighthoppers were playing dice in the dark. It was bright outside from the moon but very little light filtered in through the open side of the train car. They said they could tell the dicefalls anyways, even with six dice clicking around on the steel floor. ‘You don’t focus on each die,’ a girl with earrings in unique places told Ogre. ‘You listen to them all at once like an orchestra.’

Ogre nodded in the dark. He found all of this super mystical and hunched behind the little smelly hexagon of freighthoppers, ignoring the aches in his tiny old haunches, straining to pick out the subtle differences in the ways the dice landed. Sometimes he was right. Sometimes he looked up through the open car door and saw miles of dark nothing cruising by.

The freighthoppers chain-smoked the tobacco Ogre shared to ingratiate himself. He smoked his cigarettes in timid puffs, the leaves falling out of the crumpled and soggy paper, exhaling through his nose like he saw them doing but sometimes blowing through his mouth too in case they thought he was being a copycat or a wannabe. He had picked up smoking recently, twenty hours ago in fact, in a series of events that Ogre was not going to mentally get into because A) they went back like all the way to the Reagan administration and B) he wasn’t about to start pitying himself, a victim of an abusive relationship at the age of fifty fucking three.

And so a puffed up eye and a chipped tooth and Regaining Control Of His Life and the train ride.

Ogre was pretending to nod off when a loud grating sound startled him. The clicking of the dice stopped, replaced by rapid shuffling in all directions. A knee made contact with Ogre’s shoulder and knocked him onto the dirty floor that he had so diligently failed to touch until then. His hands were probably covered in all sorts of germs. The person attached to the knee didn’t say excuse me or anything polite.

The person walked back past Ogre carrying a big empty plastic bottle. Ogre licked his lips and yearned for a final sip of someone’s water.

He thought he looked disinterested and apathetic in the thing he
craved. And though Ogre had made a very strong decision eight hours ago to not give a fuck he found himself giving very much of a fuck right now as he was dying, possibly actually really dying, of thirst. His last drink was eight hours ago. He was not In Control.

Unexpectedly climbing into a car that already had five other hoppers might have been a boon to Ogre if they weren’t such assholes. He knew he was resented and so he resented them.

Which was okay because these were hobos, Ogre reminded himself. He knew two of their names—not their real names of course—and didn’t even know what most of them really looked like or even how old they were. It was too dark. Only the earrings girl stood out because the majority of her body sparkled with some sort of protruding metal or glass. And Kansas, who had just stood up and was wobbling toward Ogre, had the type of face Ogre wouldn’t forget. It was mean and scarred and said Don’t Fuck With Me. His bare chest that receded shallowly into a pair of jeans was equally scarred. He leaned forward constantly like he was getting ready for a fight, and was leaning over Ogre now. Ogre tried to stay still and not make any quick movements. He clenched his hands tight to stop himself from nervously rubbing them together.

‘Gawsh, arnt’cha thirsty?’ Kansas drawled.

Ogre put his hands up to say no thanks. Kansas shrugged and tilted his whole body way back. He drained the rest of his bottle, spilling water over his face and chest. Ogre felt like maybe he was being punished. I’m getting taught a lesson in social skills by a hobo, Ogre thought. A hobo thirty years younger than me.

Kansas shook the bottle over his mouth, freeing the last few drops. He turned to Ogre and made his eyes wide. ‘Just tryin to halp ya,’ he said.

The train stopped. They were in an expansive farmland with no buildings at all in eyesight. Wheat country. The field was lined with rows of dormant irrigation wheels. The train tracks were set on a raised gravel mound about two feet high. They sloped down to a ditch where there was a small fence about Ogre’s height. Beyond that was the wheat. The whole scene was illuminated from the side with a bright light coming from somewhere outside of Ogre’s field of vision.

Earrings girl nudged Ogre and pointed her finger (stuck with a metal stud), out the open door. Ogre peeked his head out. There was
another train in the distance coming down the tracks in the opposite direction. Its huge light made Ogre squint and pull his head back, even from far away.

‘We stop while the faster train passes,’ Earrings said. ‘It’ll probably take ten minutes. Get’em boys!’ The other freighthoppers had already bounded across the other tracks and were heading for the irrigation wheels. They pushed their way through the waist-high crops. As the huge headlight illuminated them on one side, they ducked in the wheat, waiting for the train to pass so the conductor didn’t see them.

Earrings and Ogre followed the others’ progress towards the wheels. Ogre strained for something to say.

‘Why aren’t you going out there?’ Ogre finally asked.

Earrings laughed and snorted. ‘Goll-ee, the old man talks!’

Ogre looked out into the field, feeling murderous. The other freighthoppers had seemed so serious just a second ago, like they were performing a solemn ritual. But now they almost looked pathetic, lifting their legs high to run through the wheat like their feet were being stung by bees.

Ogre found it hard to concentrate on the other hoppers. He rubbed his hands together, wishing he had some soap or Purell or, oh man, a shower. He thanked the darkness that hid his nervously twitching from Earrings. And his puffy messed up face.

‘Stop that wiggling shit,’ Earrings snapped at him.

Ogre flushed. It was remarkable how quickly the anger came: about the last few days, then the years, and suddenly it all became a manure pile of regret that would take a flood to clean from his mind. He wanted to jump into the oncoming train and considered that Earrings would probably be happy for it.

I am Letting Myself Get Angry, he thought. I know, he responded, and I don’t care.

Suddenly the air was sucked out of Ogre’s car. The second train rushed by.

Kansas and the other hoppers now moved in jerky strobed motions through the view in between each train car. Ogre could only get a slight glimpse every second. They were huddled around an irrigation wheel, almost invisible in the dark but for the slight moonlight. A man who wore a pair of tan Burlington North-Santa Fe overalls over several
layers of long johns stepped forward as the others stepped back, half hidden in the wheat.

It was Ogre’s thirst that kept him from remembering something from his old farmhand days, the days when he first interacted with the pseudonymed freighthoppers who would show up some mornings in the barn and ask for cigarettes: that those irrigation wheels can each water something like eighty thousand square feet and the water pressure inside them is something like nine thousand kPa. So when you release just one latch while the others are off...

This is what Ogre saw: Overalls pulled the latch on the faucet and the next second he disappeared.

The passing train and the darkness made everything difficult to see and hear. Ogre strained to follow what was going on in the field frame by frame in the sliver he could see between each passing car. The other hoppers scrambled towards a patch of land that Ogre couldn’t see, ten feet away from where Overalls stood before. They struggled in the wheat, buffeted by a tremendous jet of water. Ogre looked to his right at Earrings, who was hidden in darkness. Earrings didn’t turn.

Ogre continued to stare back and forth between Kansas and Earrings to elicit some reaction, too scared to say anything. Earrings tilted her head slightly and scrunched up her lips to one side.

‘Well,’ she said.

Ogre stared at her. She looked back at him and he dropped his gaze. He was learning valuable lessons here, he thought. He was learning that Taking Control maybe meant sometimes Letting Go.

‘We-elll,’ she repeated.

All of a sudden, Ogre’s train shuddered. The air brakes hissed as they were released. Ogre lost his balance and took a wild step to control himself. He fell anyways but quickly scrambled to his feet. His joints ached and he nearly collapsed again. Suddenly he felt very awake. He did not want to Let Go of anything, actually. No, he would very much like to be in a situation where he was In Control.

‘Well shit.’ Earrings said. ‘Looks-a-like we’re fucked.’

The last car of the passing train whizzed by, dragging the darkness behind it like a blanket.

The train got moving remarkably quickly. Ogre only knew freight trains from old movies and from when they passed through the outskirts
of St. Paul, hulking along slowly and never ending. He never realized how fast they could accelerate until this moment.

Earrings stood at the edge of the train in a queenly position—straight back, hands on her hips. The men in the field had turned to look back at the train. They all moved at the same time, raising their legs wildly again, pushing their way back towards the tracks. They carried heavy water bottles that they hugged to their chests like babies, bouncing up and down and throwing them off balance. There were three of them and they kept falling over, disappearing into the wheat and then popping up again like prairie dogs.

It could have been funny.

Overalls was still missing. The other three men were honing in on the train at varying speeds and angles. Two of them ran perpendicular to the tracks while Kansas sprinted towards the car where Ogre and Earrings stood, watching but unable to help. Earrings didn’t try to direct him or give him any encouragement. She was simply interested in the entertainment.

Kansas cleared the wheat field and scrambled over the first set of tracks. The way the two sets of tracks were raised on beds meant there was a ditch between them covered with the same crushed rock that was impossible to run on. Kansas began to run along the opposing train ties. The gap between the two tracks was too big to jump across. To get on the train, Kansas would have to go down into the ditch between the tracks and grab hold of the floor of the car before lifting himself into the car bed. Ogre didn’t see how this was possible. Kansas seemed to sense the same problem. He was still running fast enough to keep pace with the train, even while holding the plastic gallon jug to his chest. He looked at Earrings and yelled, ‘I’m gonna throw the water!’

The train picked up speed.

Earrings planted her feet on the edge of the car and held her hands out into the open air. Ogre stood next to her in the same way. Farther down the track, in the ditch next to the moving train, Ogre faintly saw another figure running. He got a hand on a railing that connected two cars together. But as he made to jump on the train, his foot slipped on the gravel, his left hand still holding on to the side of the car. His legs still moved like he was running but for a few strides they didn’t make contact with anything, were just cycling in the air. Then his hand slipped, his foot made contact with
the ground, and he was propelled face-first into the gravel embankment. The darkness swallowed him. Ogre felt his knees go weak and his stomach drop. Dry bile burned his throat.

Kansas looked down at the jug he was holding. He had the handle in his right hand, opposite his body from the train. He cradled the bottom of the jug with his left. Without breaking stride he let go of the bottom with his left hand and swung the jug behind him. Then he twisted his body and flung the water to Earrings. It sailed across the gap, past her, and hit Ogre in the chest. The jug knocked him back and he fell hard on his tailbone. Earrings yelled in relief and Ogre bellowed in pain.

Ogre pushed the jug off his chest and rolled over onto his stomach. The pain radiating from his back was unreal. He gasped for breath but his throat was so dry that it just hurt more. He thought, I am an old man. I have no business here. He thought, FUUUUCK FUCK FUCK GODDAMNIT. He moved his legs and arms around on the floor. He yelled again.

Earrings yelled something awful like ‘Come on!’ to Kansas. Ogre didn’t know if he was passing out or it was just the darkness. The rumble of the train grew louder.

He pushed himself around, still lying down, until he could see Kansas’s head bobbing next to the train at floor level. Kansas had dropped into the ditch. Earrings put her hand out but took it back quickly. Kansas grabbed on to the floor of the car, took two steps up the gravel embankment, and with a movement so fluid it looked like someone was pushing him, he swung himself on the train. He landed on his side and rolled away from the open side of the car, gasping.

Earrings was crying. She blanketed Kansas and hugged him tight. ‘Oh my God oh my God,’ Earrings blubbered. She let out the air in her lungs and went limp on top of Kansas.

‘Shit Sarah, ah’m all right,’ Kansas said, muffled. He patted her on the back and brushed her hair aside so he could spit.

Nobody spoke for several minutes. Kansas and Earrings and Ogre lay on the dirty floor, breathing deeply. Ogre decided that he was definitely not going to pass out. He crawled over to the water jug and poured sweet water down his throat, not caring if he spilled and not caring if he had or hadn’t a right to even drink.

Kansas and Earrings were looking at him. Ogre drank again.
‘I am my own man,’ said Ogre.
‘Yes y’are,’ said Kansas.
‘I am in control of my life.’
‘Ya sure are,’ said Kansas.
‘I want to tell you my story,’ said Ogre.
Kansas scrunched his cheeks together and narrowed his eyes like he was thinking. ‘Naaaw.’
Earrings was still sobbing on top of Kansas, her fists balled on top of his bare chest. His ribs shone in the moonlight. He gently rolled Earrings off of him and nodded at Ogre.
“Toss me that water, will ya?”
Ogre casually threw the water bottle towards him, over his head, and through the open door into a land flowing with rivers and lakes that passed by, one by one, at eighty miles an hour.
Mother loves my brother Wyatt more than me. I think she pretends not to, but she does, not that it bothers me. Wyatt is perfectly nice, and he is always able to make Mother laugh when I never can, so that is probably why she likes him. And it’s why she’s so sad with him being gone a lot.

Wyatt never used to be gone so much. Now that he is, it’s emptier in the house with just Mother and I. We were used to Wyatt being gone during the day, but he was always home for dinner, and usually for afternoon snack. When he does come home these days, I’m always in bed, pretending to sleep, and Mother never seems happy about their conversation like she used to be when they would talk. All I can hear are the tears in her voice when she talks to him. He never stays overnight, and I would know—we share a room. But I’m taking his absence better than Mother is, because I can play by myself, and it’s almost better without him because he doesn’t mess up my toy soldiers. Even so, I look up to check them to make sure they are all in order, from largest to smallest. All of them are there, but two are in the wrong order, just barely, so I switch them and admire the row before taking them down.

“Barnaby?” I barely get the chance to sit down before Mother calls me from the kitchen. She sounds hesitant because she’s still not used to only having me in the house instead of Wyatt and me both. “Come to dinner, please.”

I don’t go right away. Instead, I collect my toys again and line them up, wondering why my row of knights has a hole in it. It must be because one fell behind the dresser. I rearrange the line of toys so that at least there is no gap, then reach behind the row I’ve made for a few smooth stones the size of my palms, which I put into my pockets. I arrive in the kitchen, and Mother is hunched over the stove as if she’s busy, sniffing. She must have a cold, because it’s a loud sort of sniffing, and when she turns around her face is twisted like it can’t decide what expression it will make. It may be disappointment, or sadness.

“I made corn casserole,” she tells me, making herself smile. “Your favorite.”

And Wyatt’s, I think about saying. But I just look at her instead, and blink, because saying something may make her upset. She pauses,
unsure, then takes a plate and shovels casserole onto it. It passes to my hands with her vague caution of, “Careful, it’s hot.” I seat myself and start eating.

Mother joins me after a minute; we fill the air with the sound of metal scraping glass. She starts talking to me, and all I make out is a tangle of sounds that fall into a buzz of noise. I can feel her looking at me and can hear the constant chatter of her voice, only I can’t tell a sentence apart from the echo of previous words. All of them hang clumped in the air. Normally Wyatt would answer her, and I would just have to listen, but he is never home for dinner these days. I continue eating, and even when I can’t avoid her any longer, I don’t look up; instead, I take my stones out of my pockets and line them up in front of my plate of half-eaten casserole.

“Barnaby.” She has the same sound of strained despair in her voice that has accompanied me around the house since Wyatt left. The words are directed straight at me, and they punch through the clouds of meaningless babble surrounding us. “Barnaby, sweetheart, look at me.” I do.

“What’s wrong?”
“Nothing.”
“Honey, tell me what’s wrong.”
“You’ve been sad since Wyatt left,” I say, because she’s been acting more strangely than I have, and if anything is wrong, it’s that. I know she wasn’t expecting my answer, because she doesn’t respond right away.

“Wyatt…?” She finally manages, and her face twists again.
“Barnaby, what do you mean ‘since he left?’”
“He’s gone a lot. And when you talk to him you aren’t happy.”
“When I…talk to him…” Her voice breaks a bit.
“At night.”

She seems more distressed than before, and I rearrange my stones, then put them in my pocket and leave the table. Mother’s sadness is a kind of contagion, and it makes me upset, so I escape to my room and the comfort of my toys in rows. The second bed in the room still has dimples in it where Wyatt sat weeks before. They could be mine, but I know they aren’t. Seeing it makes my eyes sting with memories—for a moment, I feel my face twist into the same confused anguish as Mother’s. I stay up to see if she is going to come and be mad at me because I don’t think
she was happy to talk about Wyatt, but after fifteen minutes I give up waiting. At only seven o’clock, it’s too early to go to bed, but it’s too late to do much else. I crawl into bed. The buzz of unanswered words has followed me from the kitchen; I am instantly uncomfortable, and it sounds like the creaks of the house are screaming in my ears, and my brain twists up whatever thoughts I had into an irreversible knot. I run to my dresser and scoop up larger stones that I’ve collected, and put them on top of me. The pressure constricts my fear, gently crushing my lungs into a steady rhythm, compressing the screams into silence. Sleep sneaks into the room, quietly taking advantage of the settling peace, and overtakes me as the familiar weight of the earth holds me to the ground.

I wake up to sunlight and the sound of Mother’s voice, calling through the deep sleepy haze, hugging me with her words. My eyes open, and she stands next to my bed, not touching me. She does not even look at the stones on my chest. Shoulders slumped in the faint regret of a mother who does not know how to comfort her child, Mother breathes out carefully and tells me it is time to get up, and that we are going somewhere, so I need to dress for the autumn chill.

I exit my room with the mute rattle of stones hidden in my coat. There is a silent breakfast on the table, and a silent picture of Wyatt accompanies it, and I look at him smiling, wondering. We really aren’t that different, surely. Over my cereal I can see his smile, and it is the same as my mouth, if I smile, and the same nose, and the same eyes except for the sparkle that was always in his. And is not in mine. The room stretches, and my eyes are hot again, because I have forgotten Wyatt’s face in his absence even though it is my face and the picture is almost the same as the one I see in the mirror. I suddenly miss my brother for myself, and for Mother, and for the house in all its quiet screaming, because there is confusion in being alone: a binding weight that ties me to Mother’s puzzlement in all of her not being sure of how to love me. And so, she loves the ghost of a picture now instead of me because it is easier than learning how to deal with the uncertainty.

“Are you ready to go?” Mother is perched across the room, holding her keys too tightly, and looking at the frame in front of me as if she is trying to talk to the person she wishes I were.

I put my dishes in the sink, lining up all the jumbled utensils that had already been tossed there before lowering my feet into my shoes and
pausing as Mother swoops on them, tying the laces with shaking hands.

We drive until I am lost, and the crisscross of roads thins into longer strips of gravel cutting across green hills. The car slows to a crawl, and the landscape becomes dotted with cows on one side, and a neighborhood of stones on the other. My hands twitch to straighten them into lines instead of fractals and jumbles and clumps. Up close the stone village is a mix of big stones and small; some reaching to the sky and others crouching to the ground, but all standing with a crushing weight upon their shoulders.

The car stops.

I follow Mother through the maze of monuments, memorizing the names they bear: big, long, important names which sound like the rustle of mothballs and new names with a sting of modern rebellion, and numbers, numbers, numbers, numbers, that always go from smallest to largest in the order that they should be. The unorganized oppression is somewhat lessened by the reliability of the numbers.

Mother stops, and there is a humble rectangle of marble reflected in her eyes that is the same as the other stones, and different, because it is not cold, unfeeling stone but warm, comfortable normalcy. Its numbers do not have much difference between them—only seven. I know seven. I’m seven. The stone bears the name of Brother to me, and Son to Mother, and Wyatt to the other stones that loom over it. Mother is sniffing again, and her voice is watery.

“This is where Wyatt has gone,” she says to me. “He won’t come back, Barnaby, not even to talk to me.”

“Have you knocked?” I ask. I feel watched as if the other stone neighbors are peeking out of their doors, and there is hesitation in my voice in believing that Wyatt would have run off to such a place where the sun was so cold.

Mother does not answer me for a long time, as if the weighty clouds are choking the air from her lungs. “No, Barnaby, sweetheart,” the word breaks in two, as if sweetness could not be likened to what was in her heart, or mine. “Wyatt can’t come back. Do you understand? He was taken from me—from us, and he has to stay here, but he watches over us and wants to make sure we are happy.” She continues to talk, with some difficulty, and in the waterfall of sound I pick out the word “dead,” which Mother has been using a lot lately. I don’t ask what it means, because she
expects me to know what it means. It seems to make her cry more than usual, so it must have something to do with Wyatt, but the word itself seems fine to me; it doesn’t have any strange syllables or odd sounds, it’s just, dead. I don’t think a simple word should weigh so much.

I don’t say anything, and Mother knows that I don’t understand. She bites her lip and a tear rolls down her face, as if I should have understood long ago; the distance between my words and hers suddenly seems as far away as the stars, and I consider how different I must be than Wyatt. The same clock face with a different arrangement of gears, so that one ticks forward, and the other ticks a little bit backwards, like walking up too slowly on the down escalator. Wyatt stands on one side of a canyon with Mother; I am on the opposite side, and they only have to whisper their love to one another, yet they have to shout the same to me if I am to hear it. Loneliness amplifies the sound of Mother’s tears, and I feel weightless. The stones in my pockets reassure me that I am safely anchored.

“I’m sure he’ll be back,” I tell Mother, and I hope my words are true because I cannot build a bridge across the canyon alone, and I don’t want her to talk to herself when I pretend to sleep. “He will come back.” I turn to Wyatt’s stone door where he must be sleeping to not hear Mother’s thunderously soft crying. “Won’t you?”

He can’t answer. He must be sleeping.

The conversation is over. Wyatt would understand Mother’s sadness, and he will come back because he loves her just as she loves him. So, I return to the car and climb in. Mother’s shoulders shake, silhouetted in the gray sky. She walks over to touch the stone door to the underground house where my brother is sleeping, and she talks to him, so maybe he will hear the words in his dreams.

Memories prick at my eyes and fall in big salty puddles, escaping the backwards-ticking gears in desperation to make sense of the impossible aloneness, and the stone houses quiver.

I clear my vision and carefully line up my stones on my leg.
Hidden by a crescent coastline and tucked in by the rolling blanket of the ocean, Arromanches dreams. The stone of its houses collects the sun’s warmth, huddling to escape the chilling breath of the English Channel; among the cobbled streets sleepwalkers exchange French over bags of groceries. The town stretches and yawns as summer crawls into the sky, blearily opening its ice cream parlors long enough to serve the annual round of tourists.

But there are times when Arromanches is awake. When I walked its streets it was a jumble of people and languages, a reincarnated Tower of Babel; roads were swollen with the homecoming of veterans, their uniforms ranging from the slouch hats of Australia to the kilts of Scotland. The men had flown, bussed, and driven from the corners of the world to return to Arromanches and the surrounding cliffs and beaches: Omaha, Gold, Utah, Sword, Juno.

“Most people don’t realize it,” a chaperone said as we entered the museum, “but Arromanches was the most important piece in the D-Day invasion.” The museum elaborated through diagrams that showed how the Normandy landings of 70 years ago diverted Germany away from the harbor while the Allies brought provisions into France.

It seemed like a story from another Arromanches, far removed from the worn streets and flowers nodding off in the breeze, but the graves of the pillboxes still stood dark against the ocean as an unyielding reminder. As I overlooked sand and sea I found two veterans—strangers—standing shoulder to shoulder, remembering their own stories. I wanted to ask what they were thinking, or of whom, or where they were from. I wanted to thank them. But in what language? With what words? My voice stuck in my throat; a Scottish soldier turned to his bagpipes to play “Amazing Grace.”

Turning my back to the water, memories melted under the vivacity of the main square: toddlers waved flags, dogs strained against leashes, conversation spread between locals and tourists. Outside a souvenir shop, two veterans noticed a similar badge on the chest of the other and began to tell stories in a jumble of languages. Old men and new soldiers compared hats; a girl stumbled over her French as she offered a flower to a man who could have been her grandfather. In those moments,
alliances of the past and countries of the present had no place in the world. From the highlands the bustle seemed muted; the crosses and stars of the American Cemetery held a weighty silence on their shoulders, and on the slopes of Omaha sat a man looking into the past. Farther down the beach, people were bottling sand that may have been stained with the blood of his comrades—collectable memories silenced by the passage of time.

But Arromanches had gathered to remember. Those who had returned were not just guests to be saluted by dignitaries or tourists collecting souvenirs but storytellers, and in their faces was the spirit of Normandy: the weight of the past was reflected in eyes and windows, looking towards the sea. Among the bustle of the main square their silence spoke the loudest.

The town is asleep again, but even when its stories are lost Arromanches will stand—worn and mild and forgiving—as a memorial to those who wrote its name in history.
My mother once told me when I was little that when the day comes that I am in danger, a mysterious force will come to my aid. She said her seahorse only came to her when father turned violent. She told me the story years later when I was going to middle school, terrified at the prospect of going to a public school rather than learning at home.

My father had turned into an alcoholic when I was a baby, filled with rage and grief over the loss of his mother and the loss of his job because of his initial grief. He was angry for my mother telling me stories of her seahorse, telling stories of magic and things unreal. I was barely 2 when our family went out to a local beach on a weekday, the sands empty and the waves lonesome. I think I remember my father yelling that he didn’t want to go to the beach, but mother said he couldn’t resist the pleading eyes of a 2-year-old. Mother told me that we had gone to the beach almost every single morning when the beach was empty and my father was on a job search. That day was the day he had decided he didn’t care anymore, and was trying to force my mother to use her own body to bring the family some income. But while my mother was willowy, she was also strong and resistant like the waves that pounded into the beach every day. Father didn’t like the ocean and the wet water, and mother would whisper to me that father was made of fire and the water makes him feel weak, but this time father heard and he got angry for hearing that. He threw my toddler self into the ocean even though he knew I couldn’t swim and screamed at mother, asking her where her magical forces were now. I don’t ever remember drowning or trying to swim, but I remember sitting on the water near the shoreline on top of a beautiful seahorse, whose tail was wrapped around my father. I remember my mother picking me up and cradling me as the seahorse dragged my struggling father back into the depths of the ocean.

The seahorse helped at home sometimes when I was taking a bath, helped teach me to swim when I got older at the beach, and helped my mother with money by dragging up old treasures from the deep sea. My mother would tell me every day that one day
something will come to my aide as it has done for all of my mother’s mothers, but she hopes I will never have to learn to use it.

But she was wrong. And I knew she was wrong when I stood over the broken lab glass and the lab benches covered in blood. And I knew she was wrong when I felt the presence of the jealous classmate who could not take the fact that someone had finally gotten higher scores than him, higher awards than him, and more attention than him. And I knew she was wrong when I first touched the silvery liquid that is mercury pouring down my throat and into my body. Because when I realized that this boy was going to try to take my life in order to make himself look better, stage it like a suicide, I simply felt that tug like my mother described whenever she called upon her seahorse. From my mouth came out a silvery snake, silky silver and flowing like water. I could see his horror as metals melted and joined my large serpent, and could see his regret as he backed into a wall. I didn’t need to hear his screams to know my snake defended me and killed the one who tried to kill me, melting down his bones to join its own body.

My mother once told me when I was little that when the day comes that I am in danger, a mysterious force will come to my aid. She also told me on her own deathbed that we must be careful to not let our animals be seen because as much as they are our own angels, they are others’ demons.

But I’m sure that no one will know about the snake that lives within me until it’s too late.
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