

The background image is a photograph of a steep, rocky hillside. The rocks are layered and have a mix of grey, brown, and tan colors. Some green bushes and small trees are growing on the slope. In the upper right, sunlight is filtering through the trees, creating a bright, hazy effect with some lens flare. The title text is overlaid on this image in the top right corner.

The Blue Route

Issue 17

The Blue Route, Issue 17 (December 2016)

Staff:

Editor-in-Chief: Emma Irving

Blog Manager: Carlie Sisco

Blog Team Members: Jennifer Rohrbach, Carlie Sisco, and Kelsey Styles

Social Media Manager: Jennifer Rohrbach

Staff Readers: Gabe Armando, Emma Irving, Katherine Rogan, Jennifer Rohrbach, Nicole Gray, Carlie Sisco, Kelsey Styles, and Jasmine Kouyate

Faculty Advisors: Michael Cocchiarale, James Esch

Widener University's online journal of undergraduate writing takes its name from the Blue Route (I-476), a north-south highway running through the suburbs of Philadelphia.

Cover photo by Joseph Rogan

CONTENTS

| | |
|---|----|
| ghost in girl costume..... | 4 |
| <i>Manuela Williams, University of Nevada, Las Vegas</i> | |
| Ascent of The Blind: Climbing in Guilin..... | 5 |
| <i>Elisa Ip, University of British Columbia</i> | |
| small and tasteful | 6 |
| <i>Abby Johnson, Vassar College</i> | |
| Grandma Velma | 12 |
| <i>Arah Ko, Wheaton College</i> | |
| American Vintage | 13 |
| <i>Colin Lubner, Villanova University</i> | |
| Before the Show Began | 19 |
| <i>Maxwell Stenson, California State University, Sacramento</i> | |
| The Yellow Bucket | 20 |
| <i>Christine Nguyen, Stephen F. Austin State University</i> | |
| Circles | 21 |
| <i>Claire Brennan, Ohio University</i> | |
| CONTRIBUTORS | 22 |

ghost in girl costume

Manuela Williams, University of Nevada, Las Vegas

she is allowed
to cut two eyes out of a pale sheet
and slip it over her solid body, as if there is nothing
in being substantial, of having skin to pinch

she is allowed to wander
musty corridors at night making “ooooo” sounds
and everyone will be terrified at first
but then giggle because, silly, *spirits aren’t real*

but the minute I try to be something other than
a slinking pastel ectoplasm, suddenly, *I’m* a jerk
my sad songs are ear sores and to brush an icy
tendrill across a blood-warmed cheek, unimaginable

I tried, a long time ago, the most odd shade
of murder red lipstick
but when I pressed the color to my lips,
my non-flesh swallowed it whole

for eight years I existed with random
bits of makeup floating around in my body:
the strange lipstick, a clumpy mascara wand,
and a whole palette of plum eyeshadow

I try to be a little more than
what I am on a daily basis: irrelevant fog
tapping on a girl’s windshield or dust
living under a sagging bed

I like to think, one year, one century
I will walk into a trendy craft store and
use all my collected coupons to buy pretty felt
and hair-colored yarn

I will make myself a costume
and then I, too, will make “ooooo” sounds
and everyone will wonder who the ghost girl is
and where they can get one and how they can be one

Ascent of The Blind: Climbing in Guilin

Elisa Ip, University of British Columbia

Body flush against the slick cool face, I lunge
in hopes of a hidden lip of rock
a kiss between finger tips.
Jagged limestone bites
into my palms.

The rhythmic cry of a great cuckoo
presses against my ears.
The soft click and woven threads,
between my legs,
holding my life.

The rock has been inscrutable,
but I climb higher.
The wind welcomes my lone form.
And twists
me around, so I struggle to regain the ladder

of lichen and moss,
the scent of sweet metal,
spongy lichen
mixed with dried earth.
I swing free

take in the gurgle of a tiny waterfall.
To my left, crystal cool droplets
mist my skin.
Fingers follow hidden fissures,
a labyrinth of hollows and cracks.

The rock whispers secrets through each finger.
Clatter.
A rock spins free into space.
I don't hear the thud.
Still I climb, intoxicated.

The great cuckoo clocks the last few meters
before fingers close around cool steel,
the apex of the pitch.
The wind has ceased.
Now, I face only the cliff.

small and tasteful

Abby Johnson, Vassar College

On the thirty-first day of my parent's divorce, my mother went to the grocery store and came back in love. His name was Jeff and he was five foot six, which according to Mom wasn't ideal but it was workable and also at her age it was really the personality that mattered, plus she was only five foot four so pictures would be fine and she never wore heels that were more than an inch anyways. He was a Gemini and worked in a hospital, not as a doctor but in upper level management so it was fine. Jeff had two kids—one from a previous marriage and one from a previous one night stand. He was close to the boy, Nate, but not so much to the girl, Angela. He told my mother that they should go out because he knew a great little Italian place and she agreed because she loved fresh pasta.

Mom came home in a tizzy and leaned down on the counter and said, it's just been *so* long, Eliza, since I talked to a *nice* man. I mean your father, he was nice but he was also always so dark. Like would it kill the man to smile once in a while? But, she sighed, Jeff is nice.

She held out her finger and sighed again, this time clearly imagining the engagement ring that a nice man would pick out.

She didn't have to imagine for too long. Four months later, at the same dumb Italian place (which had great free bread which made up for that one bout of food poisoning, Mom said), Jeff got down on his one *nice* knee and proposed with a ring that was small but in a tasteful way. Mom said yes, of course. Jeff smiled and said, I've never been happier. They agreed to get married as soon as they could put together a wedding (small and tasteful, just like the ring) and they agreed that they would invite their ex spouses because weren't they all grown ups. That night I heard them having sex and it sounded small and tasteful.

Mom and Jeff were engaged for six months and decided to get married on July 4th.

There'll be fireworks, Jeff said, and I won't even have to pay the bill!

He slapped his knee really hard because it was funny how much he wanted to avoid spending money on this thing. Every time Mom gave him an estimate, he would ask but could it be lower? But then he would say please and my mom just could be a sucker for a man who said please.

She started saying please a lot more too. Please, she said, watch Nate and Angela so Jeff and I can have a night off. Please, she said, don't tell your father that Jeff and I called off the engagement. It was only for two days. Please, she said, don't let me find any more condoms in your room, Eliza.

It had just been the one box of condoms and I hadn't even used them. Jacob Morrison had given them to me because we had been dating for a while (at least as long as Mom and Jeff) and he wanted us to have materials for whenever we did decide we were ready. Some people kept extra plastic water bottles around in case of emergency; Jacob Morrison kept extra condoms around in case of sexual emergency. I hadn't used them yet and the box was unopened because I liked kissing Jacob Morrison but he had very cold palms and I didn't think he was the kind of guy I wanted to have sex with. But still, I wasn't sure if I was the kind of girl who got to tell boys she didn't want to have sex with them.

Either way, Mom flipped a major shit when she found the box.

You're too young to be having sex, she said, you're only fifteen.

You lost your virginity at fourteen in a baseball dugout, I said back and she said, Your father needs to keep his mouth shut.

My parents were highschool sweethearts, hence the divorce.

I'm your mother and I say no, she said.

It's my body. You're pro choice! I said, because she was or at least she was until Jeff because Jeff was a Republican and she didn't want to make a fuss about something as icky as politics.

Eliza, keep your legs crossed, she said. End of discussion.

Later that night I ran into Jeff in the kitchen and he tried to start to say something about a woman's gift being her virginity and my entire body squirmed.

Jeff, mind your own business, I said.

My mom had two bridal showers and I was expected to go to both of them even though we didn't really like each other all that much at that moment.

Can't you wear something a little nicer, Mom said.

She was wearing a hot pink gauzy veil and it made her look old and sad.

I told her so and she told me that if I didn't shape up my attitude that I wouldn't get to come and I said, fine.

Because it was fine.

But then she realized that I didn't want to come so she said I had to come and then she sighed and said, I just don't know why you have to be so mean to me.

And I said, because I don't even know who you are anymore.

You know what, she said, right back at you.

Then she broke a nail and called her therapist and cried and possibly called me some not so nice names but I went upstairs to give her her privacy so I couldn't exactly hear.

She called me back downstairs right before the bridal shower started and said, I understand being a teenager is hard and I'm here for you.

Her words were stiff and I knew her therapist, who had a very nasal voice, had told her to say that because she sounded especially nasally.

Mom's sister, Beth came and she was very excited. Beth had gained a lot of weight and then lost all of it as part of a local competition and then gained a lot of it back. That was mostly what Mom and Beth talked about.

Beth and Mom used to fight a lot but then both their mom and dad died in a car accident so Mom decided she wouldn't argue anymore.

I have Jeff, Mom said, but Beth just has me.

Beth liked to call me at random times on my phone and a lot of the time I didn't pick up and then I felt guilty but I still didn't want to call back because I was never really sure what to say.

The thing that nobody talked about with Beth was that she had this one boyfriend and they had been dating for a long time and then they had a baby but the baby died really soon after he was born and then the boyfriend left and Beth said her stomach never stopped hurting.

At the end of the bridal shower, my mom went upstairs to take a nap because Beth insisted that she and I could handle cleaning up. I threw everything on my side of the room to clean in the trash but Beth took each piece of wrapping paper and folded them out very carefully.

You never know what you wished you had saved, Beth said, handing the pieces to me.

I rolled my eyes and reached my hand out onto the paper, smoothing a wrinkle against my palm.

The night before the rehearsal dinner I had sex with Samson who worked at the pizza place. I had thought Samson was cute and he was really smart because he was only seventeen but he took classes at the community college. I was there with my friend Lila and he came over and at first I thought he was into Lila because everyone said she was amazing at blow jobs but then he gave me his number. So I texted him and he invited me over to his house.

Where are your parents? I asked.

They go away a lot, he said.

Wow, I said. They must really trust you.

He didn't say anything. Instead, he gave me a beer and I took a very small sip so I wouldn't cough. Mom didn't like beer but Jeff did and she drank it and told me she just took very small sips like it was medicine.

What's it like taking college classes?

It's cool. A lot longer papers. Like I can write a paper so fast compared to all the jerks from my high school and I'll probably be making like twice as much as they are in a couple years.

Wow, I said.

Yeah, he said. Do you want to watch a movie?

I said okay and we watched Planet of the Apes, the old one. Samson laughed at parts that I didn't think were funny but I didn't want to say anything just in case they were funny and I didn't get the joke.

During the movie, Samson put his arm around me and I liked it, even when I could kind of feel the sweat from his armpit. It felt nice and grownup and I took a few more small sips of beer.

After the movie Samson and I talked and it wasn't anything that interesting but it was interesting that he wanted to keep talking because Jacob and I always ran out of things to say to one another.

Samson kept moving his head closer to mine until finally he kissed me. That was nice too and somehow I knew that Samson had done this before even though I couldn't tell exactly how I knew. But I knew.

We kissed for a while and then did some other stuff.

All of a sudden, Samson stopped and walked over to his backpack. He pulled out a condom.

You wanna? He said and held the silver packet up.

Um, I said. I don't know.

It's really fun, he said.

He wiggled his eyebrows and it made my stomach turn but I thought, when would someone smart and cute want to have sex with me again?

Will it hurt? I said.

It did hurt but not like I expected it to.

Afterwards, Samson asked me if I wanted to watch another Planet of the Apes movie.

Okay, I said.

This time he didn't put his arm around me and I thought about going home, but it didn't occur to me that I could just get up and walk out until after the movie was over and he showed me the door.

The rehearsal dinner was in the basement of the JCC even though Jeff wasn't Jewish. Mom kept calling him a reverse Shiksa until Jeff told Mom to shut up. My mom had gone to highschool with the public relations associate at the JCC so she got it on a discount and she told Jeff that. She also said, Jeff I gave up a lot in this wedding because you asked me to. And he shrugged because, as I noticed a while ago, Jeff actually isn't that nice. But Mom still wanted to marry him. Go figure.

Mom had invited Dad to the rehearsal dinner. Dad came because he wanted to support me.

I can't believe she's getting married already, he said but he didn't say it like he was jealous. He said it like he moved out of a building the day before it burned down.

Yeah, I said.

Jeff came over and shook my dad's hand really vigorously even though they had met before.

We've got quite a girl here, Jeff said, which was as creepy and weird as it sounded.

My dad nodded and for a second I thought that they were both going to try and hug me or something but Jeff got called away by his nephew and my dad decided he needed another drink so I just stood there by myself for a couple of minutes and wondered if anyone thought my dress was too short.

I wish I had a date but it would have been too weird to invite Samson and it would have been too mean to invite Jacob. I should have brought a friend at least, I thought. Then we could have stood together and whispered about how noticeably drunk Jeff was and also so was his family but it was a party so I couldn't tell if it was bad or not.

My mom stood up and gave a toast which was very nice. She said she loved Jeff and was very grateful for him. Then she also said some very nice things about me.

Eliza, she said, I love Jeff but you are the love of my life and I'm so glad you're here to share my special day. I would do anything for you.

Everyone said aw and they clapped and they looked at me and I mouthed I love you and I felt good but also kind of sad because I didn't know if I would do anything for her.

Jeff stood up, very drunk, and said something dumb about how having a rehearsal dinner was a waste of money because they had both already done this before so what did they have to rehearse for? Then he said I love you to my mom but it was too late.

It was kind of awkward after and then my mom asked Jeff to go outside with her and I snuck out because I wanted to know if the wedding was still happening and also because I was bored.

You can't embarrass me like that, Mom said.

Jeff said, okay, okay. I love you and you look very hot.

I grimaced.

Mom said, you can't get drunk like this.

I know, Jeff said.

You've been very nice to me, Mom said.

She repeated it twice and then I went inside.

The day of the wedding I woke up late because I had stayed at my dad's house and he had these really intense noise machines that always kept me up late but then I usually didn't wake up on time either. It was pointless but it seemed mean to tell him that.

When I got to the church Mom had already changed into her dress. It wasn't white exactly, but it was in the neighborhood of white. It went to her knees and it had lace and it kind of squished her boobs but not in an entirely bad way.

It was just me and Mom and Beth. I hadn't seen Jeff at all and I was glad.

Mom, I said, you don't have to do this. We can just leave and it'll be fine. Jeff will understand.

Oh, honey, she said. I know this must seem confusing but I'll be happy with Jeff.

He makes you happy? I said.

He makes me secure.

She paused.

When you're a woman past a certain age, it's very hard to feel heard if you don't have a someone.

Mom.

I know, she said. It's sad but it's true and Jeff loves me.

I don't think he does, I thought but I didn't say it out loud because she was wearing the dress already.

Then my mom took my hand and fat Beth's hand and she squeezed them both and she walked out to marry not-so-nice nice Jeff. We watched her go and then, because it didn't really seem like we had a choice, we followed.

Grandma Velma

Arah Ko, Wheaton College

This is what she remembers: primary school,
when the children called her white trash,
the shanties across the river where the colored
people lived, the scorch of the Arkansas earth
beneath her bare feet, hunger.

She keeps these even as she forgets
my name, forgets hers.

On good days, she tells me about that time
she crossed the creek, dirty feet chilled in the bend
where a cottonmouth kissed her thigh,
how the old man found her there, nursed
the venom from the slit with his dark lips.

Now on bad days, when she trembles, I brush
her hair, press my lips to her temple, just above
the twisted puzzle of her brain, and she tells me
about the church where the old man was lynched:

the night it burned was hotter than an afternoon
on her grandpa's farm, even from where she stood,
soft ash falling in her hair while she watched the steeple;
its skeleton glowed all white in the darkness.

American Vintage

Colin Lubner, Villanova University

Uncle Boris had begun to snore, which meant dinner was just about ready.

It wasn't. Nana, who weighed slightly less than a rain-soaked umbrella, chewed everyone out. Food was out on the dining room table, all the normal American things like turkey and cranberry sauce on one side, antipasta and black-skinned fish on the other. Apparently something was missing, though, some quality of air detectable only by angry old Sicilian ladies, so Nana rapped Kev's knuckles with the flat of the turkey knife when he reached for a roll. Kev laughed, but Mom got worked up. Nana was always doing stuff like that—parenting for her. She was going to fucking kill one of us, one of these days.

"Better dead than fat," the little woman muttered, molars grinding the pit of an olive. Her hands performed some witchcraft involving the arrangement of the potatoes. "Christ, look at him, Paula."

"He plays *football*, Mom—"

"He'd be better at real football, block up the whole net—*no*."

Kev had reached, laughing, for another roll. He recoiled, wringing his hand, still laughing, dancing an erratic circle.

"How's the season going?" Aunt Kathy, my mom's younger sister, asked. She lived in Colorado with three identical-looking black cats. She'd been slowly destroying our guest bedroom since flying in a week ago.

It was addressed to my mom, but my dad answered.

"Eight-and-oh, Kath, big one at Merton this Friday—" he paused to tilt down the last of his wine "—go on, Kev, take a roll."

Nana inspected the fish as if preparing it for its viewing. "Taps" played in my head; Mr. Fish wore a sleeveless tux. "Boy's just like his father," she whispered. I was unsure if she was talking to me or the fish. "Thinks everything's a handout—" she raised her voice "—would you like some more Syrah, John?"

"You know, I *would*."

Nana went back to muttering. "Get your father some wine, Alyse. God knows he can't get it himself."

I made for the kitchen, stopping only to collect wine glasses, a bit resentful at having to act as waitress on my day off. Only a bit, though. I enjoyed serving, and was glad for the excuse to duck questions about nonexistent boyfriends, equally elusive jobs. My mom shook her head when I offered, even though her glass was nearly empty, and glanced meaningfully at my father.

As I slipped sideways into the kitchen (necessary, for Poppop filled most of the door frame), Nana called out, “And check on that uncle of yours, sorry sack of—”

“*Mom.*”

Nana’s house.

There was the kitchen; then, where a mudroom might have been, there was the wine room.

My mom’s family had run the Delaware vineyard as far back as Nana’s nana. They’d been winemakers before that, too, when they’d lived in Sicily. I imagined Nana must have enjoyed her childhood, the way she went on about it—a little girl with a suspicious face, I pictured, stomping grapes like they were the eyeballs of her enemies.

She grew three varietals: bruised-skinned Syrah, pine cone-bunched Pinot Noir, and, in the field closest to the turnpike, sour Riesling. Her mother had grown more. As vintners began to bop around in golf carts, though, and wineries themselves serve as backdrop to Gatsby-esque constructions of white and air, Nana had to cut back. She’d won awards in Delaware’s small corner of the wine-making world—for her Syrah, in particular, although she was fondest of her Riesling. But the D’Antonios would never host weddings, as she told my mom. And God forbid they install a koi pond.

I set the glasses on the knife-nicked block of wood at the center of the wine room, paused to breathe in its mix of balsa, and oak, and casked wine, then rummaged in a drawer for a waiter’s corkscrew. This was Nana’s third bottle of Syrah they were starting on, a 2012 vintage. Uncle Boris had drunk most—

Uncle Boris.

The cork bent. Like I was some green hand, waiting tables less than a week.

I poured, spilled some, took a swig. Hesitated.

I could attempt atmospheric reentry to the dining room—

—like a five-foot-four, recently-graduated, well-read rocket—

—or I could check on Uncle Boris.

I left the glasses. As I passed the dining room, I heard Nana call Kev fat again, dipping into her native Italian—*grasso!*—because English, this time, apparently hadn’t been enough. Poppop rumbled something about his wife watching her language.

Uncle Boris was asleep. At first I thought he wasn’t breathing, but then his stomach slowly, hugely ballooned. Deflated. A possible repeat of last year, then, when he’d slept through dinner, waking in time only for dessert and another glass of my grandmother’s wine. He was my father’s brother, a Zolosky. A family whose primary character trait was to never pass up what God saw fit in all his Slavic cruelty to give them. And that included dessert.

And my grandmother's wine.

Next to Uncle Boris, on the end table, a phone vibrated.

I thought it was Uncle Boris's. But he didn't have a phone. (He was convinced that the Government or Aliens or simply They tracked you through your cellphone. Once, when I told him about Google, he told me about G.O.O.G.L.E.: God's Omnipotent Oligarchy, Guiding Losers' Existences. Dot com.)

My father's phone, forgotten on the end table, vibrated.

I normally wouldn't have looked. But he'd been pissing me off most of the day, first by making my mom drive down to Delaware, saying he'd drive home, even though we both knew he'd be way too drunk by then. It had rained the night before, and my mom hated driving on wet roads. And he'd been getting on me even more about applying to jobs I knew I'd hate, where you typed out memos announcing Brenda From Accounting's 40th Surprise Party, or how to properly insult babies. So I picked it up, and I looked.

His passcode was 1999, the year Kev was born. The first message was from a woman named Leila Russo. Her son played on Kev's football team. It read, "You going to the game tomorrow."

Another came through as I was reading this. It popped up, simply, "?"

I wasn't angry, not really, as I scrolled through the rest of the messages. They were innocent enough: "Kev's knee feeling any better?" or "You gonna be at the fundraiser?" It was their frequency that bothered me, and the way she didn't mention my mother's name. I felt kind of sick, mostly, years' worth of recognition settling into my chest like a summer cold. That was the worst part: I'd seen something like this coming. The Zolosky brothers were victims, victims since their potato-digging ancestors, but in my dad that particular genetic strain had mutated. He'd worked his way up. Worked to the point where he could marry a Paula D'Antonio, the well-off latest in a history of well-off winemakers, a woman who wanted desperately to be anything else. And maybe he wanted to keep working up. Find a woman who had the good grace to accept her easier birthright. Because why wouldn't you want that, Paula? Why work, when you've got it so damn good?

Everyone had finally sat down. Nana had stopped fussing over the settings; she'd settled for a verbal sort of silence, damning with her eyes first daughter then grandson then fish, because that bastard just had to die like he had.

"I thought you'd died, Alyse," she said.

"Nope," I said. My voice was too loud, huge. Pachydermic.

I'd had rather a lot when I'd gone back for the wine.

"How's Uncle Boris?" my mom asked. Everyone heard the other questions, the ones buried underneath: *Is he still breathing? Did you hear a little pop, like a liver giving out?*

"Off in dreamland." I sat next to Poppop, who was beaming, silent, massive, probably reciting grace in that gleaming head of his. "Oh." I reached into my pocket. "Your phone was in there, Dad."

“Mm.” He swallowed too fast, coughed a bit, bumped a candleholder as he reached across. “Thanks, Al.”

It was the name that did it. He’d called me that when I was little and had worn my hair short, like a boy’s.

“You know what?” I said. “We should all go to Kev’s game tomorrow. As a family. That’d be fun.”

“I’m not driving up,” Nana said. “Please, your grandfather’s saying grace.”

“I’m in the lab tomorrow, anyway,” my mom said. “We have a protein culture that’s nearly ready—”

“Paula, for Christ’s sake—” Nana said.

Poppop shifted tectonically.

“Okay, for your grandfather’s sake—”

My dad had been fiddling with his phone under the table. Something he saw—his opened texts, I guessed—sent him thumping his chest, managing a strained sort of smile.

“Still driving home?” my mom asked drily.

“No, I just—” more coughing “—I was just thinking—you know how something, sometimes, just hits you? That’s what happened. I was thinking how one day you’ll be done at the lab, and I’ll be out of the office, and we can both go to Kev’s college games, then come back to our vineyard—and maybe, maybe Al could be in on it, run advertising or something with that degree of hers. But it’d just be the two of us, in the house. And we’d share a glass in the kitchen, you know, the sun just going down, an autumn breeze, how beautiful you’d look in the light—”

“You can’t wait for me to die,” Nana said. “How sweet. Grace.”

I kept my eyes open for grace. I’ve always done so, ever since I was little and didn’t really get what the hell everyone was closing theirs for. It seemed silly. Something could show up, or someone—Santa, Uncle Boris, a particularly cunning food thief. And no one would know, except for God, who’d probably be having a good laugh Up There.

About halfway through, as Poppop’s tenor trembled over some bit from Luke, my dad opened his eyes. He squinted into his lap, where his phone was, where I assumed another text had just buzzed rather close to its eventual goal.

“Dad’s talking to someone,” I said.

Then I giggled. It was so stupid, all of it. Mr. Fish, being dead ain’t so bad.

My mom’s eyes didn’t open; they were closed, one second, and then they weren’t. She stared at the table cloth. She looked like she was working at one of her DNA problems, thinking very hard. She still held my father’s hand.

“Just talking,” I added. “It’s all very innocent. With that Italian woman—Kev’s friend. His mom.”

Kev looked mortified. In a flash, I realized that he'd known, and that sick feeling resettled—this time higher, liked I'd swallowed alcohol too fast.

"I talk to a lot of people," my dad said, too quickly. "Al—I'm talking to you right now."

Nana wasn't cackling, as I'd expected her to. She was looking at my mother, waiting for her reaction. Her hand reached out as if feeling for a stovetop's heat.

My mom pushed her chair back. She was shaking her head slowly, with a little up-down to her chin, staring at the tablecloth.

"I *talk* all the time—"

"Is this true?" Poppop said. He rose like some eastern, dome-headed god.

"Can we please *talk*, Paula, this isn't healthy, not here—"

"Finished eating?" another voice said.

Uncle Boris stood in the doorway, swaying slightly. He was smiling, I thought, though his beard confused the issue. He rephrased the question. "Anything left?"

"Boris," my dad said, quietly. "Please go back to sleep."

But Uncle Boris moseyed his way around the table, pulled out the empty chair next to my Aunt Kathy. She'd stayed silent and wide-eyed throughout—observing the married life, perhaps, and deciding she was just fine.

"This fish," my uncle said, "looks divine."

"Paula," Nana said. Her hand made another unsteady advance at my mom's elbow.

I got up and went to the wine room. My throat felt stuck in some middle hysteria, caught between a sob and a laugh.

The wine room wasn't silent—no rooms, I'd realized, were truly silent, what with air conditioning and plumbing, and I could hear Poppop thundering about God and loyalty from further in the house—but its relative quiet was enough. Oak, and fermented grapes. My own sweat.

I went to the door, pushed into the November evening, and sat on the back steps, looking down the asphalt path leading back into Nana's acreage. To either side, her vineyard's rows tracked into the distance, rising to meet opposite woodlines. Trellises meandered, not quite parallel. The scant remaining grape leaves answered the day's last light—russet and gold flecks against the damp black of the frames. It was cold, and the air smelled like earth. A turkey crooned from somewhere in the trees. Rushing noises drifted in from the turnpike, where trucks were turning headlights on against the encroaching gloom.

I could see it, I realized. This life: rising in the morning, crunching over mulch, pruning and clipping, expanding my vernacular to include terms like *veraison* and *loess*. Nana would set me on the deck,

bottles of Syrah and Pinot before me, and liken the former's tannicity to putting a teabag on your tongue, and explain the barnyard nose on the latter as the smell of wet hay in summer. And scold me when I mixed them up. I'd ask after her Riesling, and she'd tell me I wasn't ready. I could write in the winters, chop wood, be a real Thoreau. My mom would visit sometimes, I thought, while I slotted easily into her birthright, her brain humming with ribosomes and protein cultures, whatever mysteries of life to which she still couldn't find answers. But maybe my dad wouldn't visit. And maybe Kev wouldn't, either.

Around the side of Nana's house, the storm door rattled. Poppop's voice boomed out, a second of godly fury. Then Uncle Boris emerged onto the driveway. His left hand pinched a plate of cannoli like a collection cap; his right brandished a bottle by its neck. He began on a swaying, winding journey into the vineyard, avoiding by accident or luck the leaf-rimmed puddles of autumn, humming a song I couldn't place. I watched him for a while, until my cheeks and fingers and toes started to grow hard and numb. Then I went back inside.

Before the Show Began

Maxwell Stenson, California State University, Sacramento

BEFORE THE SHOW BEGAN he said, I just noticed my shoes are white, yours black, and I'm black and you're—yes, something lighter. Back in our trailer after the show, shedding our white face powder and multicolored wigs, stowing red noses in drawers, his observation is confirmed. And all these years together, shoveling elephant shit and making passes at the bearded lady, I never noticed this fact about our shoes. Once, we spent a whole night locked in the tiger's cage—a prank courtesy of her tamer. While I threw empty peanut shells at Jocko (passed out nearby with a key—the clown drunk) my companion wielded a footstool should the beast awaken. I didn't notice it then either. Even when our comically-sized cloppers needed a spit-shine, the shoe and skin connection eluded me.

I fell asleep that night to his steady breaths coming from the top bunk. In my dream, we balanced atop the tightrope locking arms, bracing for a fall. No one ringleader, but thousands crowded into the stands under the big top: a clamoring of stomping feet, the din reaching a thunderous climax. Multitudes of stars seemed to light the tent, presence of the sky unreal and too real, and when I looked down, our feet were four black and white rats gnawing away at the rope.

The Yellow Bucket

Christine Nguyen, Stephen F. Austin State University

When I was little, my broken Vietnamese was “cute.” Not anymore.

My grandparents say I am an apple that has fallen
too far from the tree. They cry, what a pity I have sawed my roots
off for the American dream. When I was five,

we took a vacation to Vietnam and stayed in my grandma’s house
of thirteen people and one toilet. The day I desperately
needed its company was the day my dad decided to lock himself in the bite-
sized bathroom with three, thick books and no watch.

Forced to stand outside, I crossed my legs in confusion
until my aunt took pity. She gave me a yellow bucket
and a corner of the kitchen to do my duty in shame. In the midday
humidity, I sat on my golden throne, a red-faced imp, and shook

chunky fists and hissed hexes in *Viet-glish* at people who didn’t understand
little girls had dignity, too. They thought my screeches
were adorable, *rất dễ thương*, like a duckling that squawks in shallow
waters because she cannot swim. Now that my skin

has stretched to fit my twenty-year skeleton, my stuttering Vietnamese
croaks glued together with English fillers are no longer
“cute” — they are laughable. I don’t know when I consciously
understood that Vietnamese is not my first language,

even though I was born *Ngọc-Anh* before Christine ever opened
her eyes. These days, I smile briskly and say little
in Viet. I gossip in soft, southern flavors to cover
my aunts’ and uncles’ accented drawls. I no longer

tell my grandparents *con không đói* but rather *I am not hungry*.
And when I am told to greet the strangers
visiting from Vietnam, with their haughty eyes and muffled smirks,
I bow with American indignation, I snatch their tittering

mouths, I toss them out into that backyard, into that murky trench
where I had dumped the yellow bucket years before.

Circles

Claire Brennan, Ohio University

Mom tells dad to put down his drink for the night,
and he calls her a broken record –
I guess like the time we were listening to the Rolling Stones when the needle
dragged too far and Mr. Jagger sounded like the devil, and dad told me it's because
I slap my feet too hard when I walk.

In the kitchen,
I ask mom what he means,
and she tells me to always take my dad's words
with a grain of salt,
which she puts around the rim of her glass.

CONTRIBUTORS

Claire Brennan was born in Chicago, Illinois. She is now in her third year at Ohio University, studying English and Film.

Elisa Ip is in her second year of University. She is equally passionate about literature, biology, and writing. A glimpse of her bookshelf would reveal titles from the romantic poets, Orwell, Conrad, and the latest biology research. Elisa is a self-professed walking contradiction, for despite her physical and visual impairments, she enjoys rock climbing, football/soccer, and painting. She believes in living with intensity, to live every moment to the fullest and to find beauty in peace and adversity. For as Keats says: “beauty is truth, truth beauty/ That is all ye know on earth and all ye need to know.”

Abby Johnson hails from Rochester, NY and is currently a student at Vassar College where she studies English and women’s studies. She is one of the fiction editors of the Vassar Review and her work has appeared in *Glass Mountain* and been featured in Geva Theatre’s Young Writers Festival.

Arah Ko is a rising junior at Wheaton College, but she hails originally from Hawai’i. Her work has appeared in *Kodon*, *The Pub*, *Sub-Creation Journal*, *Teen Ink*, *BRICKrhetoric*, *Crashtest*, and the Scholastic Art & Writing Awards. When not writing, she can be found explaining her name pronunciation to coffee shop baristas, frequenting open mic nights, and searching for the meaning of life, other than 42.

Colin Lubner is a senior at Villanova University, where he studies math and English in the time left over from his writing. His flash fiction has been published on *100wordstory.org*. He hates identifying his credentials, and doubts if he will ever get over the discomfort of writing about himself in third person.

Christine Nguyen is a student working toward her BFA at Stephen F. Austin State University where she lives with her three opinionated cats. She has her work previously published in *Humid* and a forthcoming poem in *Sundog Lit*.

Maxwell Stenson is currently pursuing his B.A. at California State University, Sacramento. To say Maxwell is passionate about literature—and more specifically, poetry—is perhaps an understatement. A devout student both in and out of academic environments, Maxwell enjoys expanding upon an ever-growing, eclectic literary education; recently, he has taken great interest in form and theory regarding prose poetry. Outside of these literary pursuits, Maxwell loves hiking, high-brow (pretentious) conversation, and black cats.

Manuela Bowers is a Vegas native who is currently working on her English degree at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. She was awarded the Lance and Elena Calvert Award for her research on Margaret Atwood and the romantic love plot in Western literature. Her work has appeared in *300 Days of Sun*, *Sun & Sandstone*, and *The Opiate Magazine*.