

The lunatic, the lover, and the poet.

Are of imagination all compact:

One sees more devils than vast hell can hold,

That is, the madman: the lover, all as frantic,

Sees Helen's beauty in a brow of Egypt:

The poet's eye, in fine frenzy rolling,

Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;

And as imagination bodies forth

The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen

Turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing

A local habitation and a name.

A Midsummer Night's Dream, V.i. 7-17 William Shakespeare

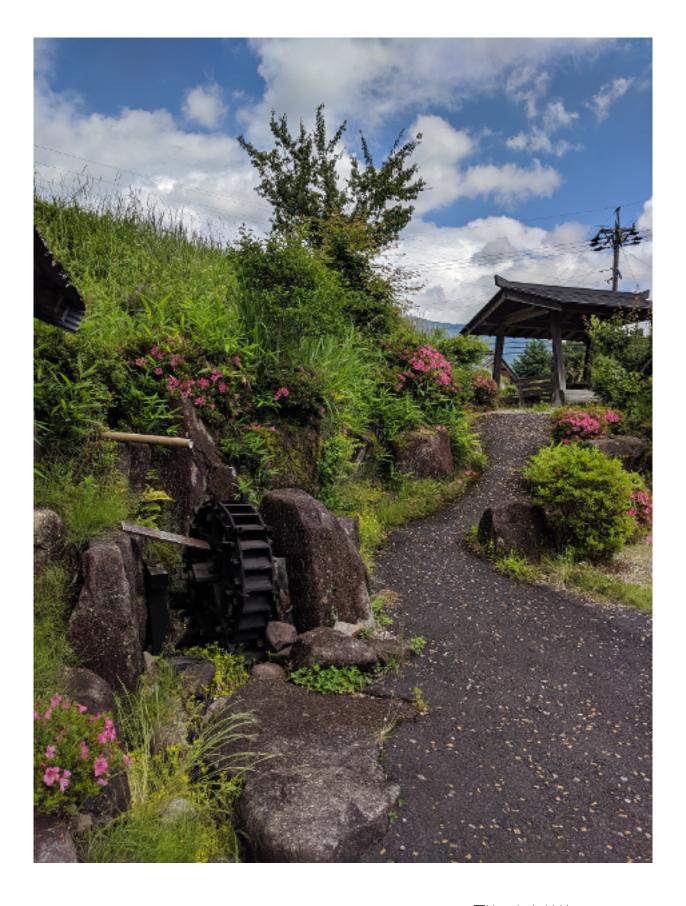
Table of Contents Written Pieces

Why Do I Write by Alex Oh	6
i'm not fine by Alexis Keeney	10
Charlotte by Ella Peters	15
I Hate the Sky by Madison Hall	15
Children by Charlotte Luke	17
Medical Medication by Alexandra Merrett	21
Regarding Your Baby Boy by Jessica Ford	26
Rainy Day Fund by Charlotte Luke	32
Ice-Breaker by Jessica Ford	35

Table of Contents

Images

Kate Klieber	Front Cover
Elliot Williamson	5
Chloe Sears	9
Logan Williamson	
Chloe Sears	14
Reese Trigleth	16
Brennan Smith	20
Maggie Edwards	25
Elliot Williamson	31
Lewis Scruggs	Back Cover



Elliot Williamson

Why Do I Write?

Alex Oh

I have always had confusing, ambivalent feelings towards writing. For me, writing can bring out my worst qualities as a student: lack of discipline, laziness, and procrastination. It also, however, manifests some of my best qualities: focus, effort, thought, and dedication. Usually, instead of being a week or month-long ordeal, writing for me is a Sunday filled with typing, researching, and thinking. To some, writing in this way would be unbearable. However, I relish the long writing sessions because I can think continuously with little to no disruptions and allow myself to fully formulate my ideas and opinions.

Until recently, I had never thought to consider myself as a writer. For the longest time, English was always my weakest subject. Knowing that I was better at math and science, I pushed English off to the side, simply accepting that it was "not for me." In middle school, essays gave me little to no interest, requiring me to discuss Kevin and Maxwell's relationship in *Freak the Mighty* or the symbolism of blackberries in *Walk Two Moons*. Being forced to write within such limited boundaries deterred me from exploring my own creative ideas. Unfortunately, because these were the only types of essays I wrote, my own perception of writing was confined to them. I never realized that writing could be so much more, that there is a form of writing for everyone, even me.

My perception of writing began to change during high school. Suddenly, my teachers were encouraging me to write about whatever I wanted, from how the text changed my opinions to how the text actually strengthened them. At first, I struggled to cope with such little direction given by my teachers, having had no prior experience working so freely. I was forced to formulate opinions, consider why my opinions were the way they were, and find how they were related to the text. As the boundaries of my writing expanded, it became something entirely different than what I had imagined. Writing became a way for me to flesh out my underdeveloped ideas, forcing them into existence.

The study of language itself also served to force me to realize the power of words. When I was studying for the SAT, my reading section was the weakest by far. In order to improve, I learned how to study passages, dissecting them into their component parts in order to fully understand them. When I was scrutinizing passages, however, I came to the realization that one word could change the whole tone of the passage. A passage could go from serious to sarcastic or informative to conversational with just a few words. After learning how powerful words were, I realized that they are what makes ideas and objects exist in our minds. For example, if the word for "cup" is forgotten, how could people express the idea of a "cup"? Without the word, it is as if it doesn't exist when communicating with others. Because words represent reality, I feel that writing represents my true feelings and ideas come to life. Writing is an intimate transfer of personal knowledge or emotions to others. It's the bridge between an idea or feeling and reality, just as any form of art is.

Coming to the realization of writing's importance has improved my performance in every school subject, whether that be history or chemistry. Because I value every word that I print, the quality of my writing has greatly improved. My interest in writing has also coincided with my growing devotion to films, especially script writing. I love film because it is the marriage of so many different arts, from writing, acting, fashion, set design, and more. Because it has shaped so much of the past few years of my life, I have come to see the value of writing. Writing is central to my understanding of the complexity of my own thoughts. It allows me to form my opinions based on these ideas, and therefore is essential to understanding myself.

As a teenager, finding my identity is critical to how I spend the rest of my life. Writing allows me to unlock parts of myself I didn't have access to previously. Because of writing, my ideals, self, and interests are more concrete than ever before, and that has improved every aspect of my life, especially when finding things that bring me fulfillment and fuel my innovation.

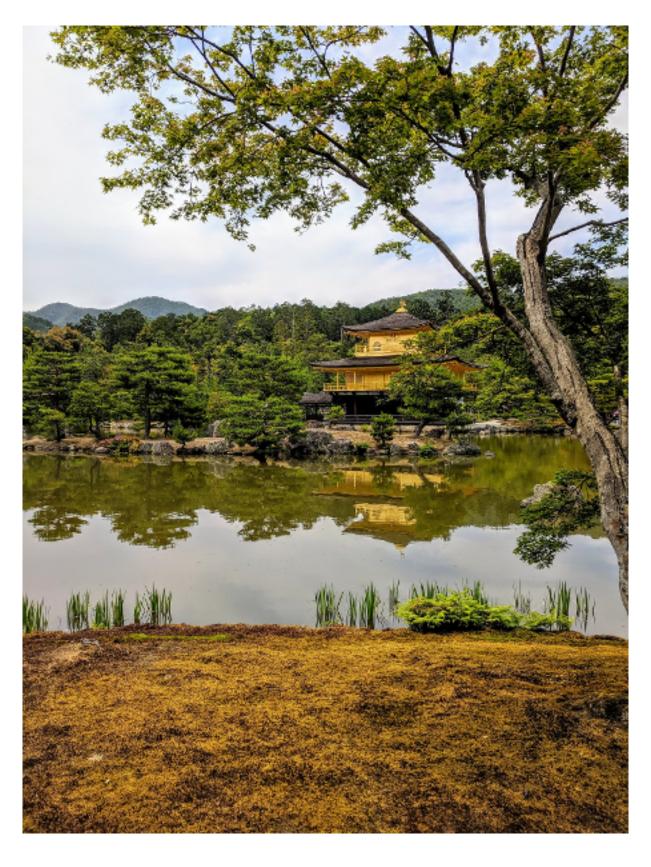


Chloe Sears

i'm not fine

Alexis Keeney

Get up in the morning; go to school; don't wear outfits that show off your body; you need to be focused on school; don't miss the bus; when someone hurts you do not show your emotions; **yes**, **I** remember now; very good; go to school; work hard; make us proud; **please**, **I need help**; go to class; focus only on school; study hard; could you drive your father to work? You have it good; are you even listening? keep moving; keep your head down; when I was your age I already had a boyfriend; do your chores; I went through so much more than you; my little girl is so strong; she is making us so proud; *I will be strong*; you are doing great; you could do whatever you want when you grow up; why be a nurse when you could be a doctor? push yourself; you are doing so well sweetie; my baby girl is hardworking; work, yes I know, I have to do work to get a job. I have to **be successful;** don't forget to make your bed; feed the dogs; I have to worry about your brother; *What about* me? it is not always about you; stop making yourself the victim; we are so proud; validation, I need that; could you run to the store? don't cry; don't be weak; study; don't slack off; push yourself; good girl; we love you; love, that's what I crave; you don't need help; I don't need help.



Logan Williamson

Charlotte

Ella Peters

Really, Charlotte had been sitting in the upstairs bathtub for days—she was unnaturally collapsing in on herself, keeping still whenever I looked at her. Brooding about something, I'm sure.

Sometimes, in the hours between my visits to the upstairs bathroom, she had moved. Maybe she had shifted her thin body to the other side of the tub, or moved in such a way that her weight rested upon the wall of the shower. Still, she never moved very far. I think—even to traverse small distances—it took all the energy she had.

I had begun to wonder if she stopped eating. I had never seen her eat. It's not as if there had ever been anything to eat in that bathroom, anyway. Of course, there was no real food—it was a bathroom. If there had been, I think she would have been desperate enough to eat it, just to get the energy to leave.

I drowned Charlotte today.

An unavoidable feeling of irritation at her stillness, combined with her seeming so despondent—my actions came from a sense of pity.

So, I turned on the water.

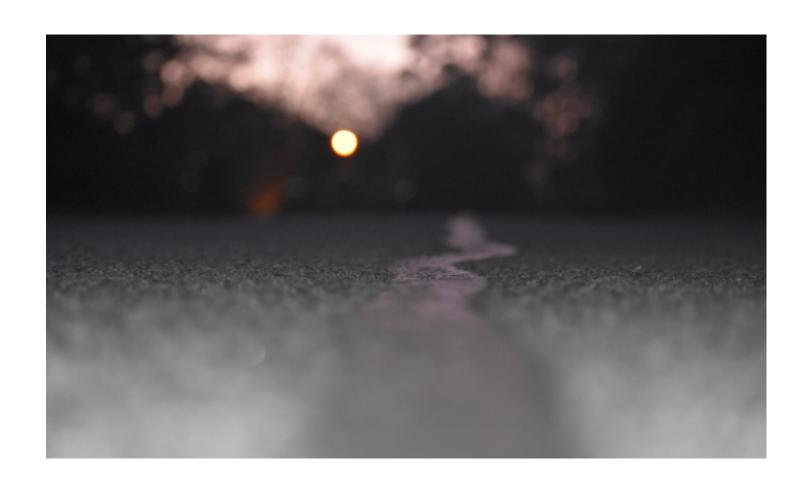
I watched her lose her footing, slip, grasp. I didn't touch her—edged her, maybe, shooed her towards the water. Gradually flailing more and more, one leg breached the event horizon of the drain and, soon enough, there were *eight legs*, reaching desperately for ground; *eight eyes*, looking everywhere and anywhere for safety, beyond.

I killed Charlotte today.

Literary Review Prize Honorable Mention

I especially admire how Peters sets up clues for the reader, letting us into the meaning-making of this piece bit by bit, not unlike how an arachnid might lure us into her trap. What impressed me early on was how easy it was to understand Charlotte as a sicker version of one's self-maybe a self lost to grief, depression or a mental health crisis-and how, following that reading, "kill[ing] Charlotte" might actually be a deeply self-affirming and resilient act.

Cait Weiss Orcutt, educator and award-winning author of VALLEYSPEAK (Zone 3 Press, 2018)

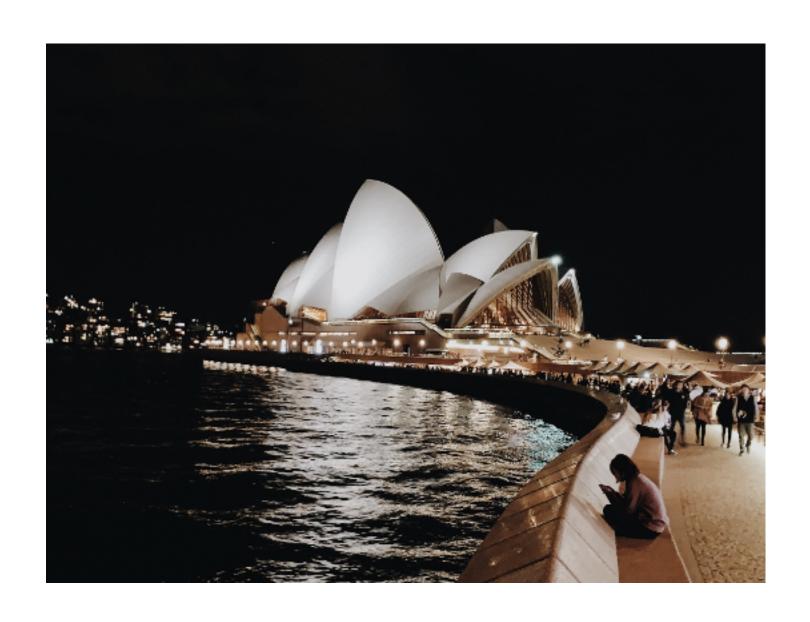


Chloe Sears

I Hate the Sky

Madison Hall

I always dream of unknown faces in the darkness. Whose eyes shine bright like the stars that taunt me from the sky above where I lie. On the ceiling of my room I see the eyes that shine bright like the stars. Some people say that the longer you stare at the sky the more stars you will see. But I don't know if I want to look at the eyes that shine brightly. But I don't even know if I need to look at them. But they want to look at me. But they won't go away and they are plastered to the ceiling and I try to close my eyes but they are still there and I try to fall asleep but it is as if I am in a painting and I am the eyes that follow the eyes around that shine brightly that are plastered to my sky. And I know that when the sun comes up, the eyes will be gone but will their voice be gone and will the thoughts that they make me have follow me around until the moon comes up and the stars come out again? Some people say that they love to watch the night sky as it passes by. But I don't know how long I can stare up at the sky until the eyes begin to form upon the ceiling as I lie.



Children

Charlotte Luke

I watched you play with the children all afternoon. You helped them with their homework (you, an academic, a mathematician) and, in the gym, you lifted them high above your head so they could dunk (you, an athlete, a marathoner). I watched you from the other room, where I helped the kids draw butterflies, and I watched you from cross-court, where I showed them how to dribble a soccer ball. I watched you smile and laugh, and I watched the children wiggle with glee when they solved a problem or shot a basket. You interacted so easily with them, so naturally. And the whole time I thought, you will be a great father someday. You will love your kids more than they will ever know; you will play with them, tickle them, read to them, hoist them onto your shoulders so they can see above crowds. And I thought, I would want you to be the father of my children.

I told you this in the parking lot when the kids had gone home. You said nothing but "Oh," and you smiled shyly so I wouldn't feel embarrassed. You said goodbye, that you'd see me tomorrow, and you got in your car and I got in mine and I followed you onto the highway until you took exit 8, and I still had three more miles to go before my exit. You humored my remark and did not question my verb tense; I broke my own heart. I want you want you want you to be the father of

my children, but I cannot have kids (me, an artist, a mercenary). I cannot let my body fill the role nature intended for it; I cannot sacrifice my money, my time, my sleep, my emotions, my work, my relationships for my children. I cannot cope with the burden of being their mother. So I waged war on myself when I told you I *would want* you to be the father of my children, and the war continues, always.

Someday, you will be a great father, and you will share your children with a woman who is smart, beautiful, and capable. She will bathe them and take them to school in the mornings and teach them how to tie their shoes, and even if she wonders what her life would be like without kids, she would do anything to keep things exactly how they are. She won't know about me, and you will forget me. When you are training with your children for their first 5K, I will be somewhere in the mountains in a large wooden house drinking wine, perhaps alone or with a friend or with a husband. I will be happy that I don't have kids needing health insurance and draining attention from my art, and I would do anything to keep things exactly how they are, but I will always want you.

I watched you again the next day, and when the kids had gone home, you walked with me to the parking lot. You asked if I wanted to get dinner, and I said yes. I left my car in the parking lot and rode with you to dinner, and after dinner, you drove me to your apartment, where you held me when I asked if you would hold me, and I cried because your chest was so warm. You took me back to the parking lot in the morning and then went to work. I unlocked my car and got in the driver's seat. As the sun rose higher and higher above the dash, I sat in my car and I prayed.



Brennan Smith

Medical Medication

Alexandra Merrett

She sticks her skin with staples like paper to pin together a point to make.

Paper and pens are across her bed; in her hand a piece of pink glass.

The fence,

the wall of pills,

circular structures unevenly placed,

the mote protecting the castle.

The paper is filled with chicken scratch, pink ink.

In the margins, the songs of her mother line an essay written in two hours.

Two hours of writing turns into two hours of her sewing lies, stitched with love into red eyes and ears, puffy from sound, puffy from tears.

Two hours of sewing turns into five years of careful embroidering.

Beyond the,

Pens,

and paper,

the needles,

and thread,

the rinds of an orange, her signature scent,

beyond the moats,

and walls,

the fence,

there lay a sea of eggshells, cracked, the yolks puddled at her throne.

When the winds came, the storms followed.

The rain pattered hard out in a starry sky but she kept dry by the awning of orange peels and the moat, the wall, the fence of pills.

Like her therapist said, the storms never stay and the clouds, they will part and the sun will shine again so take down your fence, stick a pill and a pen in your pocket and walk, run.

But she couldn't.

For as happy and safe and dry as she was, the eggshells never washed away with the yolk.

And she couldn't walk because their cracks made her cry.

She couldn't run because their sharp edges tore her down, her self-esteem.

The cracks would cut her, make her bleed, making her empty, telling her to go to her room and only sometimes apologize with an egg.

But the egg wasn't enough, for her feet had been abused by shells many times before.

Sweep them up, said her sisters whose own eggshells once lined their floors.

"But you had shoes," she said.

And the eggs, they are starting to rot.

And the oranges aren't growing.

And the pills, they help but the storm is still flowing.

There was, however, an escape.

An angel would appear and pull her through the storm clouds for days of dancing.

She smelled of peonies and sweet cherry pie.

But the eggshells had supreme authority and pulled her, down,

down,

down to her throne.

They would bruise her scarred feet

They would say they cared

"Don't you love us?" they cried

"You are eggshells, you have no feelings; I may love you but I am no yolk," she'd say.

The angel would tell her that yellow was a happy color and that the yolk was her favorite part.

Sometimes when the eggshells are sleeping she'll take the orange peels,

the piece of pink glass,

the pen,

and paper,

a pill,

and pink ink,

and dance out in a dark street in front of the dangerous world.

Sick of being behind a fence, a wall, a moat.

She loved the grass and the dirt and the pavement the monsters walked on.

The streets the eggshells warned about were the same she fell in love with.

The same she'd watch with her angel.

The same she'd once dreamed of on paper drawn up from pink pens.

But she'd never stay.

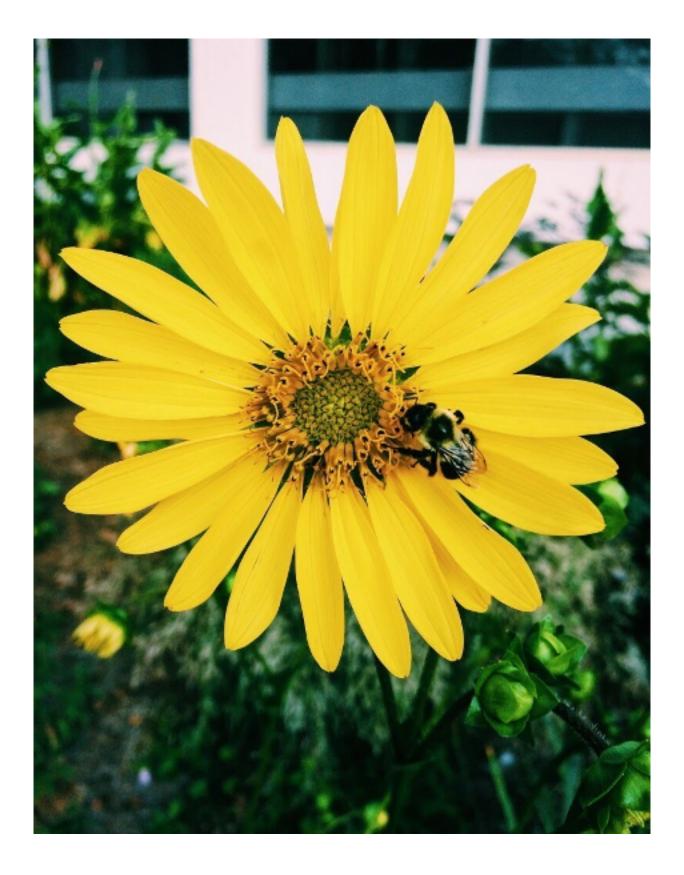
For she missed the,

Wall,

The moat,

The fence.

And she had run out of pills.



Maggie Edwards

Regarding Your Baby Boy

Jessica Ford

Dear Ms. Ocampo,

Regarding your baby boy.

Your stupid son and his stupid smile told me I shouldn't write to you but I have never been the listening type—you know this, ma'am, far too well—and I certainly never listen to him. Your son doesn't have enough *logical* ideas for me to listen to him. Not that they aren't good but... Your son's ideas aren't meant for this life, I'm sure you know. Your son isn't meant for this life.

This bears listening, however; this thing that we don't talk about. I wasn't meant to tell you but my tongue is frantic, spinning, and my fingers are hurried. I fear if I hold it in any longer, I will explode and my blood will be ink.

I can't sit another day beside him in this chair—I can't do it—knowing that you are under the impression he is fine. What a liar he is, your son, I hope you know.

I wish I could have sent this from somewhere nicer. Somewhere beautiful, perhaps, with rivers and flowers and sunshine. The gift shop only has staged photos of places that I've never been and they're all ugly. But your son is a liar, of course, so it's only fair that your letter here is a liar too.

To the point then. He is ill. Your boy is sick.

Dying is such a harsh word, don't you think? Who came up with *Dying?* God, I suppose. I wish I could have a word with him but I've yelled at God every night here and at this point I know he's too bored to listen. He's heard this song before. Knows the words by heart.

Your son asked me what I was doing one of those nights. *Praying*, I remember saying back, angry that he had interrupted, and your stupid son had the nerve to laugh at me. Like any of it was funny.

Do you remember when you first met me, Ms. Ocampo? You laughed at me then too, because I was too skinny, you said. Do you remember? I'm still skinny. You can keep laughing.

It was seventh grade and your son wore silver glasses and a bowtie back then. How stupid he looked. I can't believe you let him go out of the house looking like such a fool. But he never let it faze him. Not once. *The bowtie gives character*, he said.

Your son played Go-Fish with me. What a stupid game that is, don't you think? What's the point of Go-Fish? I can never find it. He wants to play it all the time these days, your stupid son. Wants to play cards and cards and cards, every waking moment. He has yet to win a single game.

The bleachers were where we went to play Go-Fish, I'm sure he's never told you before. I would postpone going home to sit beneath the bleachers with him and beat him at Go-Fish for hours. Did you know that your bowtie wearing

boy smoked cigarettes back then? Very few; he always choked. But sometimes. We'd play Go-Fish and Bowtie there would smoke secret cigarettes and I'd breathe in secondhand fumes.

The first time we kissed was beneath those bleachers.

I'll never know what he sees in me, Ms. Ocampo, your son. I'll never get it. I'm not even his type.

Has he ever told you? He likes blue eyes. When we broke up the first time—he was eighteen; I was nineteen. Do you remember that weekend? It was the weekend that Nancy lost her baby. We both cried a lot that week. Him more than me but he pretended it was the opposite. We fought frequently too... I can't even remember what about now, it's been years. Everything.

I yelled at him, I recall. And he just stood there, sputtering at me. You know how he does? Blubbers and flails like he can't remember what words are. Swaying on both feet. Bowtie crooked.

You should have seen the way your son was looking at me, Ms. Ocampo. These big, old, black eyes, all watery and red. So big I could see my reflection across the room.

He hadn't shaved in a while, I remember, but he was too young to grow a beard. Just looked messy. He had two buttons undone on his shirt—the red one. You know the red one, the button up? Neon, this shirt. Why did you ever let him buy it? Horrific, but he loved it.

Loves it.

Being a beacon.

He was my type, your son. My perfect type. And I acted like he wasn't. We were yelling at each other, back and forth, back and forth. The living room of my apartment, screaming—just really going at it—and I told him that he shouldn't even be dating me anyway, I remember, since he deserved someone prettier than me. Afterall, I'm too skinny.

And he said to me... he said—I won't forget it, not ever—Well, it's fine. It's fine that you don't want to hang with me anymore because you don't even have blue eyes anyway.

As if that was some kind of a reason. That I don't have blue eyes. Screw me, right? Screw me and my brown eyes.

I don't even have blue eyes.

Although you need to know, Ms. Ocampo, I am glad you can't see him. His eyes. They're hardly open. I can't see my reflection anymore.

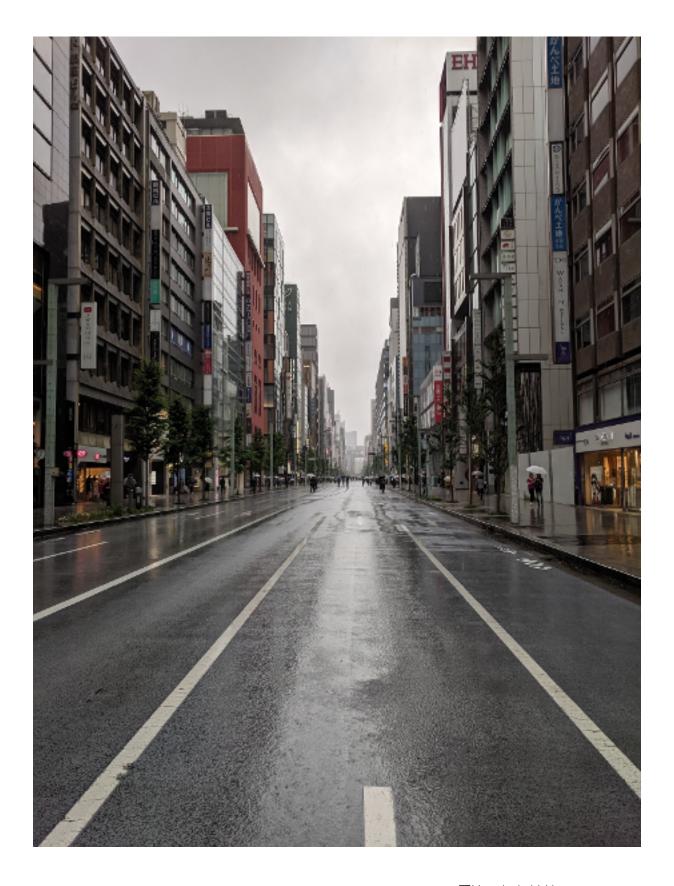
Did you know they don't let you wear bowties in the hospital, Ms. Ocampo?

I'm glad you can't see the way his skin has melted into an uncomfortable shade of white and the marks of color that have blossomed; periwinkle petals across his throat like fingerprints, choking.

He told me to call them by flowers' names. He's stupid that way, your son. Lilacs and periwinkle and roses if roses could be purple because roses are *romantic*, he tells me. He's always loved romance. You know your son. A dreamer, isn't he?

When I prayed and while he laughed at me, your son told me that he fears no death, only that the disease will make him ugly.

How stupid your baby boy is, Ms. Ocampo. How could anything possibly make him ugly?



Elliot Williamson

Rainy Day Fund

Charlotte Luke

On a nightlike day when water pounds from the sky / and claypeople shrink from the sloshy streets / to their shelters, drinking warm things, / the sound of the water pounding promises / to dissolve these drapings of false reality. So you unfurl your umbrella and step across the threshold/of your apartment into the world, where you are at last alone / with that lush, cold smell of constant rain. / (Does it smell like prehistory?) / You walk lamplit to the movie theater and buy a ticket with your rainy day fund / and sit shadowlike before the screen, laughing at the funny parts / and crying at the sad parts. / When you walk home you let the umbrella hang / by your side and let the rain / infuse your skin and let the emptiness / clear your nostrils / so that when you unlock your apartment, you collapse on the couch / and cry because it feels good to be whittled down to your reddest red meat / and then fall asleep for a long, long time.

Literary Review Prize Honorable Mention

"Rainy Day Fund" by Charlotte Luke utilizes an inventively self-conscious form (slash marks gesturing at line breaks in a prose poem) to amplify its underlying message of being and feelingeven when being and feeling hurts. Language throughout this piece is beautifully deployed and the one parenthetical moment where we're tucked into a question as big as the world"(Does it smell like prehistory?)" will forever change how I think about the smell of rain.

Cait Weiss Orcutt, educator and award-winning author of VALLEYSPEAK (Zone 3 Press, 2018)

Judge of the 2020 Athens Academy Literary Review on this year's winning entry, "Ice-Breaker" by Jessica Ford:

I'm impressed with how precisely Ford is able to develop her characters just by their dialogue—and by the friction their dialogue sparks. So much is communicated in this piece by the descriptions of body language, by the awkward pauses, by the repeated phrases and phonetic translations. Ford's piece is a delicate, insightful cultural commentary on how hard it is to connect with another human being, even in the moment, even as they are bending over the counter to break into our world.

Cait Weiss Orcutt, educator and award-winning author of VALLEYSPEAK (Zone 3 Press, 2018)

Ice-Breaker

Jessica Ford

"What's a pretty fella like yourself doin' here all alone?" the bartender asked—which, of all the opening lines, had to be the laziest. Matt didn't mind though. It was rather flattering getting open lines at all.

Pretty fella, she'd said. He'd take it.

The bartender fixed him with a wide, gap-toothed grin and he couldn't help but smile back at her. She had approached quietly to lean herself against the edge of the bar to watch him with darting eyes, as if committing his every tick to memory.

As silently as she had approached, Matt could safely say she would be a very good murderer if she ever found herself in that position. If she wanted to kill a man, she probably could. What with how quietly she approached.

Matt ran a finger along the rim of his daiquiri, thinking to himself that he should dump it out and get a different bartender to pour him one. She could have poisoned him for all he knew.

"Just here for a drink," he answered back, with only mild hesitation, blue eyes moving over her once while he absently toyed the top button of his coat between fidgeting fingers.

The bartender raised an eyebrow—Matt was jealous; he

couldn't do that—and reached out to tap the top of his daquari's tiny umbrella. Matt tried not to be offended. She shot him a curious smirk. "S'that why you're alone?"

He shook his head, laughing nervously, grasping on to what she was insinuating. "No, ma'am."

He waved a hand swiftly in the air to swat away suspicion like the pesky bug it proved itself to be.

"I'm no drunk."

And he wasn't. Proudly, he wasn't. A very sober man, Matt Lisowski was. Very sober indeed.

The bartender shook her head, rolling her eyes, reaching underneath the counter to retrieve a liquor bottle, but she maintained the grin. Her voice came out a teasing buzz, like that of a bee. "That's what all the drunks say, you know."

Matt shrugged, the thick fabric of his coat wrinkling with the movement of his shoulders. He was aware of what the drunks said. While he might not be one, that didn't mean he hadn't come into contact with some over the years. Ah, the drunks. How Matt loved the drunks.

"Maybe so," he decided, giving her a slight tilt of his head.

She gave a heavy sigh in thought. Skimmed her amber eyes over him. Amber like whiskey. Matt should have asked her if *she* was a drunk. Anyone that said 'pretty fella' in the twenty-first century was either a drunk or just very, very sad.

"Love?" she asked him.

The question caught him off guard and he paused his finger on his daiquiri.

"Love?" he chorused, crinkling his brow.

"Mhm," she hummed, turning away to snatch a musty rag from a shelf to clean out a glass on the counter. It probably would have been cleaner without the rag, if Matt was honest. She threw him a sideways glance. "Why you're drinking. Is it love?"

Matt scoffed and, using a gentle touch, pulled his daiquiri toward him to take a sip.

"Never really been in love," he answered, mouth half around his straw.

The woman couldn't stifle her laugh as she placed the dirty/clean glass on the shelf.

He sent her a confused smile, the most signature one he had. "What's so funny about that then?"

"Never been in love," she mimicked in a deep voice which Matt assumed was meant to sound like him—which it didn't—while shaking her head. "No one's 'never been in love."

Matt frowned. "Well I haven't."

"Yeah, darlin', you have." She supplied him with a wink. "You just won't admit it."

Taking this very confusing—and not very helpful—advice into consideration, Matt sucked at his daiquiri. He shook his head. "Isn't about love."

"Well, do tell then. If it isn't love or sin, what brings you here?" She gestured with both hands to the room. "To this den of iniquity?"

"Celebration," he told her, pulling off his daiquiri.

"Whatcha celebrating?" the bartender asked, appearing to be thoroughly interested in Matt by that point.

"Myself," Matt responded proudly, or as proud as one can be of one's self—not an easy task, self-pride.

She gave him a strange look. "What exactly did yourself do?"

"Future tense."

"Sorry?"

"It's not what I *did*. It's about what I'm *gonna* do." Matt grinned at her with that white-toothed, shiny smile that reached the corners of his blue eyes. He made sure to press himself against the counter, folding his arms on top of it. His bulky, high-collared coat bunched up around his tanned throat.

"And what exactly is that?" She too leaned against the wood to match his posture, head tilted to the side, messy curls falling across her hunched shoulders.

He leaned forward, as far as he could manage, so that coat buttons made a click sound as they hit the edge of the wooden bar. "I'm gonna climb it."

She choked on a laugh. "It?"

Matt paused, realizing it might not have been the best choice of words. "The mountain. Everest."

The bartender's eyes went wide and her jaw slacked visibly. "You... are gonna climb... Everest?"

Matt shifted in his seat to straighten his posture. The buttons clicked again. "I am."

"Why?" the bartender asked, as if genuinely curious as to why a man would risk his life to climb a big, snowy rock.

"My brother," Matt decided to admit after a second, his head perking. "Tadeusz."

The bartender made a strange face, obviously disgruntled by the strange name. She pronounced it, her tongue sounding thick in her mouth. "Ta-day-oosh?"

He nodded. "Tadeusz, yes."

"What is that, Russian?" she asked.

"Polish," Matt explained, tired of explaining. "My brother climbed Everest a month ago and I'm gonna climb it to meet him up at the top."

The bartender pursed her lips. "A meet on the peak? Didn't know you could do that."

"Ours'll be the first," Matt said.

"Tadeusz..." She hummed the name and then looked to Matt intently. "And *your* name is—"

"Mateusz," he answered.

"Ma-tay-oosh?" she stressed. Her smile had since

faltered and she was looking at him with nothing but a strange interest.

"Friends call me Matt," he said, and realized that must have been an invitation he hadn't meant to give.

The bartender's smile resurfaced. "So it's Matt then?"

"Sure," he agreed reluctantly, "it's Matt."

"What'd you do for a living, Matt?" She threw him a playful grin. "Other than not fall in love and climb mountains, o'course."

Matt's eyes shot down, away from her, and found themselves focused on the wood of the counter. "I work with my brother."

The bartender went back to dirtying glasses. "Well, what's your brother—Tadeusz, you said?"

Matt nodded. That was his little brother's name.

"What's he do?"

Matt said, "Taddy fixes cars."

"Cars, eh?" She set the glass down. "You like cars, Matt?"

He shrugged. "I like goin' places. Cars can take you there."

When she gave him an odd look, he realized that probably wasn't the best of answers.

"Uh yeah..." He swallowed. "Yeah, I like cars..."

"So why fix 'em? Why not drive 'em? If you like going

places so much. Gotta stay in one place to fix cars."

She watched him intently as he fiddled with the rim of his daiquiri glass again, running his finger along it.

"Can't go nowhere if you fix cars."

"Helps other people go places, I guess." He forced that thin, confused smile onto his face. "I mean, what's the point of driving alone? Why not fix a bunch of other people's cars so they can go places? You can live through them going places... I guess."

He fidgeted in his seat. He hated bars. He wished he was a drunk or that he could fall in love.

He said, "then you're not alone anymore."

The bartender raised an eyebrow. "You're not driving with 'em, though. They go alone on their own way. You don't follow."

Matt went quiet. Thought about his little brother on a snowy mountain.

A few more moments went by before he spoke up.

"Yeah, well... I can try."

