



# Logo by Mckenna Haire Cover art by Emily Reinhold

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## Returning to the Tracks: Riding El Chepe with my Grandfather Regina Lankenau



It's just like his stories said it would be. The reliable weight of the wheels, furling and unfurling the sound of northern Mexico's heart-beat beneath the clunk of metal. Tasting it and spitting it back out again.

And again.

And again.

Outside, stippled blurs of green, brown, and yellow pines flitted by—a testament to the scorching temperatures and arid days that had plagued Chihuahua that summer. Even by the standards of a state with a desert named after it, it was undeniably hot.

Acutely aware of the baby hairs sticking desperately to the nape of my neck, I rearranged my limbs, savouring the second of cool reprieve on my thighs as I peeled them from the plastic cushion.

Across from me, on the other side of the booth, my grandpa seemed entirely unbothered by the heat. Dressed in a crisp, blue button-down with the sleeves rolled up, smelling of the same woody, citrusy Ferragamo cologne he starts and ends his days drenched in, there was not a silver hair out of place on his head. Lost in thought for the

moment, he nursed a Tecate beer in one hand, the other hand poised and ready as always to pontificate on something or other.

It's a running joke in my family that, if you take my grandpa's hands away, he'd lose his ability to speak and express himself. Right hand flat on the nearest available surface, he punctuates each idea using his left hand to lift one finger at a time, letting it drop stiffly back to the surface—the satisfying noise each finger makes when it hits the table is one of the three-to-five bullet points making up his argument.

When there's too many family members speaking at once and he wants to interject, my grandpa puts both hands in the air, high over the din of voices, creating a T-shape by driving an index finger into his outstretched palm to signify "time out—Buelo needs to say something."

I have countless memories of road-trips as a kid where, too far back in the van to catch more than a few phrases of the conversation between the adults up front, all I could see was the silhouette of my grandpa's arm shooting out between the seats, his finger wagging emphatically with the rhythm of his postulation.

It was our third day riding on the Ferrocarril Chihuahua-Pacífico, better known as El Chepe, Mexico's only passenger train. Starting in the city of Chihuahua and ending in Los Mochis, the 16-hour ride covers nearly 700 kilometres across the Sierra Madre mountains, passing through over a dozen towns, two states, 37 bridges, 86 tunnels, and Las Barrancas del Cobre, a cluster of canyons five times larger than its Grand cousin on the other side of the border.

The area is home to two reserved communities: Mennonites — descendants of Canadian Anabaptist emigrants who live in self-contained *campos*, or unnamed settlements — and the Rarámuri, or Tarahumara people, an indigenous tribe that lives in the secluded highlands of Chihuahua. Translated to mean "those with light feet," the Rarámuri are legendary for their athletic prowess and remarkable endurance, able to run many kilometres wearing only rawhide-soled *huaraches*, or sandals.

To my grandpa, however, the train-ride wasn't just a fun, cultural sightseeing activity for him and his family. It was a pilgrimage—a return to the places that had marked him as a young man. A chance to show his grandchildren what spaces had molded him, shaped him into the weatherworn, wise man we'd only ever known.

In 1966, Ricardo Ahumada Guzman, a freshly-licensed accountant, started his job as external auditor for El Chepe, a train that had only just inaugurated its service five years prior. After a year, he was invited to become a direct employee of the railway, applying his skills as the internal accountant in charge of the Department of Budget Control. Four years and a new manager later, Ricardo's tenure on the train came to a bittersweet end.

"Así es la vida," *that's life*, my grandpa told me matter-of-factly, shrugging his shoulders.

In that span of four short years, however, Buelo saw more of the world than he'd ever had the chance to explore before.

He hadn't been back in 47 years. Now, surrounded by the family he had helped create, on a multi-day journey across those familiar, unchanging landscapes where his own family had raised him and his fledgling career had taken off, my grandpa was filled with "beautiful nostalgia."

Staring out into the mountains, he recalled his years on the train as years preoccupied with "fighting for the future" —a battle filled with twists and turns to achieve financial security and stability.

After a second of pause, my grandpa raised his beer into the air and tapped the table to assert that this, *este momento* with his children and grandchildren is the only thing *really* worth much of anything.

words mach of any dime.
And the wheels kept turning.
And turning.
Again.
And again.
And again.

#### Where the Sky Meets the Sea Khanh Kim Vu

I leaned back in the lawn chair and closed my eyes. It was shady enough above my head, and the occasional breeze ran through my hair. Without seeing the dying pear tree my aunt planted three years ago or the backside of our house in Orange County, I could be anywhere. This shade, this dry heat barely kept at bay—this breeze, this faint smell of the ocean thirty miles away—and I was back in Vietnam, seven again. I could almost taste the salt in the air as the waves crashed against the dike upon which my family and I stood. I could feel the sand, caked in my hair and grainy between my teeth—the fine mud-brown sand of Vũng Tàu, the uneven caramel sand of Ninh Thuận, the coarse white sand of Nha Trang, all along the coast of southern Vietnam.

Before we had money for flights, before we even had money for a car, to go to the beach our family – my parents, sister, and I – would jump on a bus, sometimes through the middle of the night. Vietnam is fifty-percent coastal, which meant that from Ho Chi Minh City, one can find beaches anywhere between three and twenty-four hours away. When I was young, our family only had enough to get us to a two-person motel room in Vũng Tàu, the nearest beach city. That was the only beach I knew then. But as I grew, the coast seemed to grow with me: as the economy thrived, our family saved up until we could make twelve-hour drives to the coast of Nha Trang (beyond that is classified as "flight-distance" since my father, who had enlarged varicose veins, cannot sit for longer). The map of my summers expanded north as I drew up each new destination in the space of my mind where my country would be: Vũng Tàu, Mũi Né, Phan Thiết, Ninh Thuận, then Nha Trang, which was crowned one of the best beaches in the world. Every beach was different – not only the name of the town and the people, but the waves, the sand, the wind, the clouds—they were all different. But to see this distinction, it takes a familiarity that can only come from childhood: you must have tread in the sea's waters for hours under the afternoon sun; jumped above its foaming waves and ducked beneath its curling ones; ate its seafood fresh, still with sand in its shells; watched the kite your cousin flew rise against dark clouds of coming rain; stood with your toes buried in the cool sand at midnight; and listened to the pitch-black waves crash onto shore in the silence that the wind left behind. As you stand below the sky and before the sea, you are disoriented until you lose track of where your fingers end and the ocean begins. Only then will you understand.

Yet, as I grew up and the coast expanded before me, my family shrank, as, one by one, my cousins left and moved to America. My sister left when I was eleven, and my brother left when I was thirteen—left me for a land without our warm coasts. How would they survive? Family vacations were no longer truck-full of cousins and aunts and uncles, sleeping side by side on bamboo mats on the ground, rowdy meals at endlessly long tables—but were just my father, mother, and me. We now had enough to hire private drivers, sit at expensive seaside restaurants, but the sea became quieter with every summer, the waves smaller, and the sky no longer filled with kites.

I too moved to America at twenty-one. My sister took me to the beach the summer before — the summer Before Pandemic (B.P.) — and I stood under the bright but cool afternoon sun of America, with a tall pier on the left and clusters of American women sunbathing on the right. The pier's silhouette cut into the line on the horizon where the sky met the sea — interrupting something in my mind I didn't even know was there. The wind was soft — and the waves didn't roar the way they used to — like when we were kids, how they towered above us, gray and menacing, plunging me and my sister to the bottom, just like the heroes we read in adventure books. Instead, here, they rose timidly from the blanket of smooth blue, and fell soundlessly onto the sand — not too fine, not too coarse. The loudest sounds were of seagulls flying overhead, calling to one another — I couldn't hear the ocean, with its cold, dark blue waters shimmering monotonously underneath a cloudless sky, not a single person among its waves. We walked towards the water and dipped our toes — too cold. We didn't even think of going for a swim. Trapped on land, I stared out at the fuzzy blue line where the water blended into the sky — and understood that I had grown up.

I opened my eyes. The breeze had stopped, and the heat had crept into the shadows of where I sat. I was no longer dozing off underneath an umbrella, the breeze over my face, around my hair, in my ears and nose, overlooking a sea that was as erratic as the sky — pouring rain beside scorching sun.

To be young still, and stand in the darkness that enclosed the sky, the ocean, and myself—that is all I asked for, housebound in this chair underneath the longan tree in the backyard, dreaming of where I would be if there were no viruses in the world.



In Between Shifts (Riga, Latvia), by Emily Reinhold

#### Laps Marina Tinone

My fiction professor, at some point, tells us that stories about travel are never about where you're going. It's always about what you're leaving. And you gotta figure out what the character is leaving for the story to make sense. My therapist, on the phone, tells me to consider leaving home for my health. It's as easy as that, sometimes.

Mom tells me she wants to swim. It's too hot. We're walking around our neighborhood, the same lap we take every day. Makes me feel like I'm in a fishbowl, going round and round. The pavement absorbed the sunlight, now it's letting that heat go. It swirls around my ankles, round and round. Shackles.

I return home from the walk and fill the tub with cold water. In the water, I curl into a ball. I pretend the water covers my entire body. I shift and hold my breath in the dirty water. Sweat, dust, dirt. Lukewarm now. I soap and rinse, pull the stopper, watch the water spin down the drain. These days, I wish I could swim too. Walk in a line straight to the ocean. Just keep going out into the sea, Chopin-style. Fun. But I never liked that book, and the next day I wake up, wash my face, and take Mom on another walk.

Mom tells me that the pool at the park is open, but you have to make an appointment and can only stay for 45 minutes. She tells me that she doesn't like it, I ask if she wants me to drop her off and pick her up. Round trip. She laughs. I come home, shower, and go through the contacts in my phone, wondering which friend I can text and ask to move out of the house. Today I take Mom for another walk, and she asks me if she is my friend. She looks at me, and I wonder if she can tell I'm no longer beside her.

## Away Abby Spare

It wasn't a formal competition, more of drunken patriotism in the Amsterdam bar. Every time the collection of flat screens zoomed in on Megan Rapinoe, the Americans to my left blew out their vocal chords with chants of "AMERICA" and "FUCK YEAH," or maybe both if they were feeling into it. Next to me were a row of grouchy old Dutch men, ten beers deep into the afternoon, hissing every time an American came on screen. It was the Women's World Cup Final, and Amsterdam was buzzing with the hope of securing first place and the dread that the US Women's National Team would take it again.

When my new friend and I pushed our way into the bar, only having met that morning during a free walking tour of the city, the energy of the room was intense, but confusing to pin down. The Americans and the Dutch seemed like they were ready to share punches, just as ready as they were to share a drink. Even though both sides were fervent in their admiration or disdain for the US Women's team, there was a layer of pretend to it all, everyone playing their part as the angry fan arguing with the other side. Sure, everyone was passionate about their teams, but everyone acknowledged that it was a soccer game, not a life or death situation.

I shimmied my way through the bodies and sweat before the game started to order some beers for myself and my friend. There was no real line here, just crowds elbowing themselves to the front and all ordering pints of Heineken. It was only my third day in the city, and the only day not spent doing research, so I followed their lead. It took nearly half a quarter to push myself in and out of the bar area and back to the spot my friend had somehow managed to steal from two drunk Dutch women who left to go use the bathroom. The game began.

All of our eyes and hearts were connected to the ball on screen, as it was kicked and thrown between orange and white. Our cheers and our curses were not our own. They bore themselves from our stomachs, uncontrolled by our intellect or reason. Even though I was not a super fan of soccer, I was drawn towards the energy and towards the game.

Admittedly, soccer had always been a big part of my life, even though I was shit at playing it. I had intense exercise-induced asthma as a kid, and danced in the goal instead of being a good goalie. But the game was always around me, thanks to my grandfather. My grandfather, who we call Poppy for reasons I still don't know, was a minor league player in his twenties in Dublin and moved to the US when my mother was five and coached for a local college until retirement. My cousin put it best a few Thanksgivings ago: "You know it's our family when we're watching a Chelsea soccer game from 2002 instead of the actual Thanksgiving game." Even so, I never really

understood the game and only vaguely understood the rules. But here, here in the smelly and sticky Amsterdam bar, soccer was alive and pulsating through our pores as the US scored another point against the Netherlands.

The game ended and the bar immediately poured itself out onto the street, filling the cobblestones with every person who had crammed themselves into this row of bars and restaurants. Languages bounced through the bodies, celebrations and curses filling the air. As the rest of the crowd dissipated, heading back into a new bar for a new drink, my friend and I parted ways, deciding not to share any contact information, wanting the memory to sustain us, and not the meaningless Instagram likes.

I pulled myself onto the overground metro just as it was about to pull away and sped back to Amsterdam Centraal to catch the ferry to my hotel. Calling my Poppy, and listening as he gushed about the game, I watched the gingerbread city zoom past.



Latvian Architecture in Riga, by Emily Reinhold

#### My Mother's Wandering Heart Jessica Reed

You're not from the midwest if you don't have an opinion about the way you should travel. When I graduated from college, both sets of grandparents, my mother, and my best friend were all determined to enter New Jersey through the will and force of the turnpike. What's less intimidating than 1,000 miles to road-hardened veterans?

I, too, feel the need to drive when others want to fly, but unlike most of my family and friends from my hometown, I've always sought worlds beyond my reach and beyond the reach of a car. My mother, an enigma in most ways, and different than me in so many others, taught me one thing about travel: that it is to be done often. My earliest memories of my parents involve me strung across their laps on cross-country road trips, strung across laps on flights to places I struggle to remember, strung across waterways as I learned what it meant to "cruise."

By the time I was in 6th grade, I'd seen the ridges of Mount McKinley, the rolling plains of the Dakotas, my own turquoise reflection in the Gulf of Mexico. I'd gotten the signature braids of a young white girl whose mother, Susan, had taken her to the Caribbean not knowing she'd later get chastised for forcing that on her daughter.

There's a photo of me in Puerto Rico: there I am, leaned up against the statue of an everyday-man representing something unremembered, wearing a hand-me down American Eagle sweater, all navy blue and green striped, with pink f-ing hair. The problem with memory is that it can be porous; I had to text my mother while writing this to ask whether she could confirm it was actually Puerto Rico. With the memory of learning of my older sister's pregnancy wrapped up in the trip we were on when my mother got the call, I've recently begun questioning what gaps I've filled in with half-truths, and where else in my life the tendency spills over.

In truth, when my mother responded, she told me I was wrong. That photo was taken when we were on a northern cruise, somewhere in Maine. It was just her, my sister, and I and it's in recognizing that we were a trio that I realized what that trip was really about. My mother had just filed for a divorce, and there should have been a fourth.

As a child, of course I had no autonomy over where and how we lived our lives in the space of others. I grew, and growing meant getting left behind as my mother sought out the world, leaving me to seek my own new and uncharted space. The week Susan was in Rome was the same week the police were called to my home over and over again as my hooligan friends and I tested out gravity between my garage roof and the trampoline. It seemed that the more I became the ruler of my own being, the more I sought out the same adventures my mother had been searching for in herself. It's in the recognition of truth that I understand she may have been seeking more than adventure.

It's through her and for her that I've discovered my own un-feeling at the familiarity of my everyday, and accepted that I might be more comfortable with my own half-truths than I should be. When I've found myself in the same place for too long (and I feel the lack of movement, adventure, desire, hope, emptiness, haunting), I think of how rejuvenated I'll feel upon my return. I'll be made new, returned from a place or existence where I'm someone completely there for the things I can't experience in a home I'm currently suffering in.

Traveling, in some sense, has become a salve in the form of escapism. But it's unfair to say that the trips I've taken since haven't been full of healing and learning and tiring myself out on enough unprecedented experience that I finally forget what I'm refusing to experience in the day- to-day monotony of the aspects of life I don't yet have the bravery to face.

The Winter after I graduated from college, I found myself in one of those brief relationships that engulf you while you're busy looking for something to feel. Defined by how selfish it was, that relationship ended in March without fanfare: I didn't really care. I was one boyfriend down, and just a few weeks away from a trip to Portugal and Spain that was going to, like a close friend, help me over the lump in my throat at all of the emotions I was supposed to be processing. The beauty of Madrid, the liquid laziness of Porto, the strange feeling of seeing *Avengers: Endgame* in a cramped Spanish theatre, are firmly pressed into the edges of my hippocampus. Yet, the release of getting over an ex, and the shock at how little those months affected me, was as far away as ever.

Another 6 months later, October 2019, I was still seeking a reprieve from my discomfort. My own behavior and lack of feeling during and after that brief interlude of a relationship was sitting with me, and I couldn't shake it. This time, it was no Spain, but I found myself on a 10 mile hike in upstate New York, with over 80 oz of water strapped to my back, a set of directions that I had carefully written out getting sweaty and blurred in my pocket, going backwards on a trail because I happened to come in from the wrong entry. In the solitude of no phone service, no entertainment but my own brain, I finally had a conversation with myself about why I was still pondering the existence of a person who made little to no real impact on my life, other than overstaying their welcome in the back of my head for 8 months.

I realize now, like my mother, I still use the world beyond my own small existence as the Ambien I think I need to let go of all of the things that feel like too-tight jeans pressing into my stomach. She taught me to seek erasure in the vibrancy of other things and other places and other people, rather than to seek the quiet of sitting with oneself and simply saying out loud, "What's wrong?" It's not a critique, however, as it seems it might be.

There's something whimsical in that searching, that feeling of being haunted by your own sureness that if you were just to see more of the world, you'd feel more satisfied in your own small section of it. I think of the people who find themselves in space, the

mountaineers who can't stop until they hike Everest, those who're still seeking the bottom of the deepest darkest trenches in our oceans, and I ask myself, "what might they be feeling?"

My mother may have raised a woman like herself, one who needs 8 months, 10 miles, and open space to finally realize the depth of her own despair, but she also raised a woman who spends her days dreaming of what's out there waiting. While philosophers and psychologists contemplate the innermost unknowns of the mind, I think adventurers like my mom see the beauty in the unknown of the world around them and see that unknown as a place to know themselves. And maybe she raised a daughter who was more like her than the daughter could have ever really imagined.



Rocky Mountain National Park, by Annabelle Berghof

## Dreamwalking Reb Ngu

I was not in the mood for awe. Sarah and I were on a self-guided bike tour of the street art in Berlin. We were south of the river Spree, traipsing through unfamiliar neighborhoods and following a haphazardly compiled map. But mostly we were making wrong turns, losing our bearings, and retracing our steps. When we arrived at our destination, we would gaze at the art for a cool five minutes, banking it in our memory as if our minds were cameras, before moving on to the next one. We moved at a rushed and mechanical pace; while technically biking separately, I felt as if we were on tandem bikes, our bodies peddling out-of-sync.

Still, I was in love with the city, quite accidentally. I was not in Berlin to do a cool urbane activity, but rather to attend a Christian conference with my evangelical parents and sister, Sarah, six years my senior. It was the summer after my freshman year, and I was still recovering from what had been a brutal freshman spring. My parents were planning to go to Berlin to attend an annual conference for a network of evangelical churches that they belong to, and Sarah suggested that we tag along, ostensibly to worship God, but mostly to have an adventure through my first European city.

I do not remember a single thing that I learned from the sermons in that conference, but I do remember the marvelous feeling of flying down the streets of Berlin on a bicycle. I marveled at how I could streak across the city center through the lush verdant greenery of Tiergarten through the bustling neoclassical Brandenburg Gate past the solemn concrete Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe down to the Landwehr canal, where I would hug its watery sides and stream past cafés beckoning for me to stop for a bite.

There was a miscommunication. I crossed a busy commercial avenue, while Sarah stayed on the same side and kept biking ahead. I looked up and realized that I had lost sight of her. Damn her. Nervous but largely unafraid, I plodded ahead, going at a straight line so that she could find me if she turned back and retraced her steps. After some time, still unable to find her, I lashed out. On a complete whim, I turned at a street corner, striking out on my own.

My petulant flight was arrested by the sight of a massive, three-story, vaguely imperial weathered building emerging on my left. It looked like an old infirmary, yellowed brick soaring three stories high and spreading out wide as two large arms, lined with arched windows and a bell tower at the front. It looked old —not medieval but pre-war — aberrant from the more modern architecture of this neighborhood that had been flattened in the Second World War. I parked my bike and glanced at the bodies grazing around the lawn out front, admiring the relaxed and quotidian atmosphere and wondering about the building that appeared to oversee this human tableau. I gazed at the front doors, paused, and turned the doorknob and walked in.

No one stopped me and asked me who I was. No one asked for a ticket or identification. No one asked for money. No one even explained where I was. Later, when I looked up the name of the building, Google Maps said it had been closed for an hour by the time I had entered, but nothing had been locked.

I had no map of the building, physically or mentally. Instead, each step was generative, sketching one more line with each motion. The hallways were wide and spacious—comfortable enough for crowds of bodies to pass through or pause and mingle—yet I rarely saw another passerby. I glimpsed an eatery on the first floor, turned right and peered through the glass window of a door into what appeared to be a perfectly preserved interior of an antique apothecary. I opened another door and entered an eerie white box that I later realized was an art gallery. A dark room with a video playing inside. Thudding sounds. I walked past the gallery, further down the hallway, turning into what I realized was yet another gallery space, but one where the show was still in construction. Walking into a show mid-construction feels like peeping someone half-dressed. I left abruptly, embarrassed, but aroused.

Leaving, I turned at the stairwell — the staircases were all dark, so I used my phone as a flashlight. On the next floor, I realized that I was in another hallway – musical notes drifting through the air, *do-re-mi-fa-so-la-ti-do*. Band practice. I ducked into a bathroom — walls, ceilings, stalls, all graffitied. Not just tags, but real art in bright and morbid colors. I think that was the first time I had ever seen graffiti indoors. I opened every bathroom that I encountered – all of them were graffitied. The windows were pasted over with stickers.

The space was largely empty, the few sounds that you did hear (the fall of footsteps, slam of a door, whirring of a film) only sharpened the in-between silences. I expected every door to be locked and was shocked when they gave way, revealing practice rooms, art galleries, bathrooms, defunct elevators. I was constantly afraid of trespassing and overstepping my boundaries, but I never glimpsed a single guard.

The building was actively used for multiple purposes, but it still felt antiquated, shabby, its curative hallways capacious enough to hold different events and people without losing its old face. It was not visibly renovated or commercialized for a new purpose. Later, after leaving the building, I learned that the building was a former hospital, and its airy, echoing hallways with its wide windows suddenly made sense to me. Some days later, a tour guide who led us past the building noted that it still smelled like an old hospital.

Have you ever entered a space that welcomed but refused to sell itself to you? Where you were not just lost, literally, but where the space itself remained opaque to your categorizing impulses? That, instead of announcing what it was and what it wanted from you, opened itself like a blank outstretched palm whose etched wrinkles led you down an ever-extending labyrinth? I left the building later in the evening and

eventually met up with my sister, apologetic about disappearing. I tried to explain where I was but could not summon the appropriate words – what is the name of a place that does not emplace but displaces you?

I would later learn the name of the building as well as its superficial history. It was built to be a deaconess institute and central hospital, commissioned in the mid-nineteenth century by Friedrich Wilhem IV, the romantic of the Prussian throne. It was a massive venture – 500 beds – including an orphanage and training school for sisters. After the Second World War, it fell into disrepair and was scheduled for demolition but was saved in the mid-1970s by a coalition of preservation-minded citizens. After the fall of the Berlin Wall and amidst the widespread chaos of the '90s, its courtyard was squatted by artists and local residents, who eventually transformed the building into a thriving art, music, and residency space. Part of its outside compound is still squatted to this day.

I had intuited the vague outlines of the building's history from probing its interior organs. But mostly what I remember is the feeling of mystification — wandering through Bethanien's hallways, the air resonant with the sounds of trumpets and violins in the distance — as a memory of the essential freedom that I have come to associate with travel. The possibility of a place, even a familiar one, transforming into something strange is a freedom uncommonly remarked upon but still deeply cherished. It is a freedom of doors unlocking into unknown chambers, walls turning into portals, pulling one out of the cage of a bad mood into an open and indeterminate space.

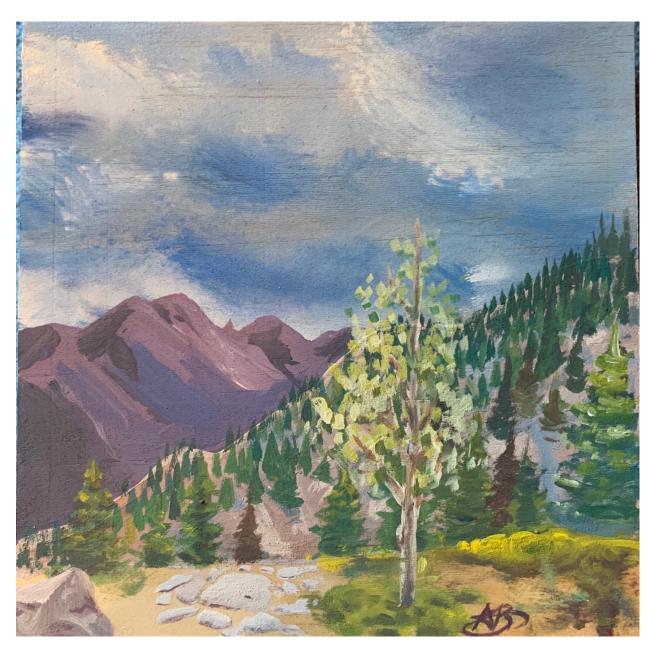
## I-91 Zoe Montague

I have spent at least 1,872 hours of my life on I-91.

Twelve years of driving to church on this road with my family every week, an hour and a half each way, have resulted in some vivid memories. I've seen countless deer and hawks and skunks, one moose, two black bears (one with its femur poking, gleaming white, out of its fur), twenty-six bald eagles, and hundreds of flattened squirrels. I've called 911 in a blizzard as we inched our way around a jackknifed trailer. I remember eating homemade Greek salad with my fingers--tomatoes, cucumbers, and kalamata olives slippery in vinegar and olive oil, feta cheese salty and solid--while sweating in the sun as we waited for a tow truck.

But the moments I don't specifically remember — all the family discussions, arguments, laughing fits, and sing-alongs I will never recall the beginnings or endings of — are the ones that have coalesced into my understanding of love and family and home. I don't remember the thousands of words my mother has read to us on that road, but I know, viscerally, how her voice mingles with the hum of wheels on pavement in a comforting, hypnotizing lullaby. I can't recall the names of the villages we pass, much less the mountains, but I know the piercing feeling in my heart when we reach a certain hill where the wind buffets our little fortress of a car, overlooking a massive mirror-smooth lake.

The nearly two thousand hours I've spent on this road with my family do not make up a large percentage of my eighteen years; the ratio will drop even lower as I leave my family to sojourn down I-91 without me. But, as drops of lifeblood in the branching, tangled rivers of my veins, these hours run straight to my heart.



Rocky Mountain National Park, by Annabelle Berghof

#### Layover Uma Menon

I am afraid of flight. I am afraid of my feet detaching from their roots and from the clinging ground. I am afraid of my breath leaving my mouth and landing in my stomach. I am afraid of turbulence pounding at the walls of my body. I am afraid of unfamiliarity: of bolting away from here, carrying only the optimism that any place can become familiar – someday. But I am also afraid of returning here, a place suddenly old and lonely. Everything takes time to become what it is. Everything takes distance.

It is sometime early in the last decade. 2012, maybe, and I am just over a dozen flights old. My mother and I sit motionless in the airport, with luggage lodged beneath our tongues. We take turns watching the luggage as my father and grandmother brush their teeth in the lonely airside bathrooms. Return trips are long and silent. Return trips mean suitcases packed more tightly than before. The zippers on our bags and the lips on our faces are stiff from weight. I press my fingers against a glass window until color drains from the tip and ask my mother whether the airplane parked outside will be the one to take us. She nods slowly, and then shakes her head. She can't be sure. I stare outside, only blinking because jetlag has salted my eyes. The nose of the plane is lifted from the ground in a majestic posture. I wonder if its smugness comes from knowing its immense power.

As we line up to have our tickets scanned, moving closer and closer to the jet bridge, I feel something pressing against the inside of my temples. Something balling up inside my stomach to counter the emptiness of flight. I try to distract myself and think of something nice, but all I can remember is the last time I switched off the lights after checking to see if we had forgotten to pack anything. Now, at our layover, I remember the deck of cards I left on the nightstand after a midnight game. I wonder if they'll be there to shuffle and divide the next time I come back.

We find our seats in the plane and shove our bags into the overhead compartment. I taste sourness in the corner of my jaws and suddenly want to leave. Where to, I do not know. I want to leave the airplane and the airport. I want to leave my tightening head and stomach. I want to leave for somewhere familiar, but I do not want to fly to get there. I consider unbuckling my seatbelt, running freely through the congested aisle, and disappearing into the air. But instead, I lean my head against my mother's shoulder and tug the hem of her sleeve. I ask her to turn the flight around, go back to the place we left. She looks at me with both amusement and pain at once. She never answers my question, but somehow, I know anyways. I want to, child, but I cannot.

#### How Far Can You Get? Aditi Desai

Each night, I empty myself to make room for sleep. I take my jewelry off and wipe my skin clean of oils and sweat from the day. I want sleep to fill my entire chest and hug my skin like slick rubber. I want to be intoxicated with sleep so I forget that I'm alone at night.

It takes two to tango, three to go on a week-long road trip, four to play a solid game of tennis, but only one to sleep. So many activities are made for couples and groups -- even throngs of people; yet, sleeping is made for one, for finding comfort within the confines of one's own body. Since sleeping is so intimate, I've come to notice my body's hidden subtleties which manifest at night: the snoring and drooling, finding my head resting on the far end of the pillow, and my arm hanging off the side rim of the mattress. Looking at my body's messy orientation each morning, I feel like the night was tumultuous -- like I was reaching for someone while dreaming.

Distancing myself from others at night is difficult. Having lived with a large, joint-family for most of my life, I experience very few moments in solitude. We work in pairs, trios, and herds. My family members are firm believers in filling a house with life, people, and perspective. A house with two people feels lonely, like the space exists in a quiet sphere void of conversation and surprise, they reason. Thus, my house is filled to the brim with cousins, grandparents, and siblings -- some of whom I have yet to grow close to. No room goes unused and no meal is eaten alone. Despite busy schedules and responsibilities, we all meet at the dinner table as evening draws to settle differences and talk about the monotony of work and excitement of nearing holidays. We lean on each other like ships do on ocean current, like trees do on air.

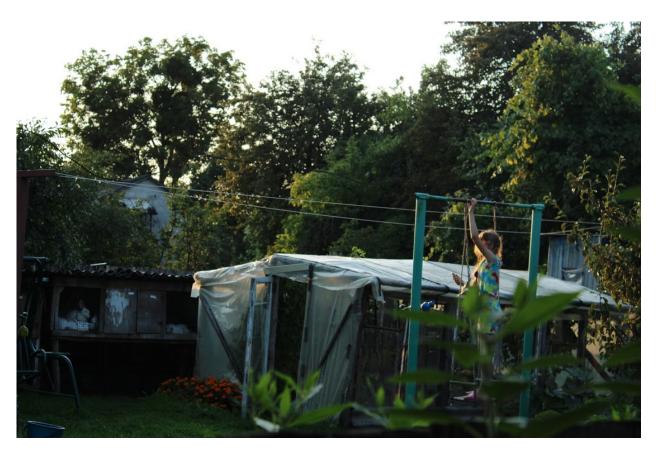
Living in such proximity to family members, I ponder on the meaning of distance. I've always viewed distance in its physical and mathematical states. In physics, distance is the amount of ground an object has covered over a period of time. In math, "A car travels at 20 miles per hour; how much distance does the car travel in 30 minutes?" For objects, distance is linked to traveling and separation; it's a quantity that increases linearly with time. What does distancing myself from family mean? What would it even look like? It feels odd to remove myself from the individuals who taught me how to use words, to lock the door after leaving the house, to put my car in park before walking into school. I am unfamiliar with the absence of familiarity.

Still, the idea of distance intrigues me. Sometimes, after school, I slip into the cafe at the intersection of Hampton Boulevard and Wiseman Street to see what distance feels like. Though I only go in to buy two shots of espresso (one for myself and one for my cousin), I linger around the barista's counter for a few more minutes after the drinks are made. I'm looking for some excuse, some reason to let time pass and lengthen my visit. I take in the lack of familiarity. I don't know anyone, but I still feel an electric energy

hanging in the air as I grab a seat to begin my schoolwork. The relentless rhythm of strangers conversing with baristas, of the door swinging like a pendulum, of dripping coffee captivates me. I enjoy the psychic pleasures of urban life: of being anonymous, of people watching, of being alone with my thoughts. There's something thrilling about being part of a community of strangers, of losing yourself in a crowd. In this environment, I find a striking balance between distance and proximity. My overwhelming desire to be part of a crowd and group is satisfied, yet I'm able to respect my own confines and keep distance from others.

When I want to be reminded of what it's like to experience distance and proximity working in perfect harmony, I slip into the cafe. Other times, I find myself rejoicing in the midst of a baseball game, surrounded by crowds of people who focus on analyzing the ball's motion, or a music concert, tuned with hundreds of people to the pulsating beats. I rejoice because I feel no pressure to make small talk with strangers, yet I'm calmed by their presence and the energy they radiate. And then, moments later, I catch myself in deep conversation with the kind woman at the baseball game who compliments the hot dogs and the young boy who is always sitting in the back of the cafe who asked for help with his English homework. So much for distance!

While distance can be maintained and calculated in a physics or math problem, it's strikingly different for humans. Distance is a temporary placeholder, a vacant blank space waiting to be filled. I don't discount the value of distance; rather, it reminds me of the value of proximity and reaffirms my craving for being around and with others, speaking to them, and listening to their stories.



Playtime in Bobruisk, Belarus, by Emily Reinhold

## 17 Hailey Colborn

When I was seventeen, I boarded a flight to New York and sat next to a man. It was the first time I'd traveled this far on my own, but I was excited, wearing my favorite miniskirt and actually doing my hair for the day.

I kept to myself, reading something by Hemingway I think, when the man spoke to me. I hadn't yet diluted the Kansan in me and thought it was perfectly normal to tell a stranger about yourself on a flight. So I explained why I was going to New York, I'm pretty sure I also mentioned that I'd just graduated high school. For the sake of all that's polite, I reciprocated some questions. He'd been gone for a bachelor party and worked in some industry I had no interest in. I continued to read my book.

Something was wrong with our plane. In hindsight, perhaps I should have taken this as some sign of the universe to just shut up. But we deplaned and I found a seat in our new gate and called my parents. Then the man came back, giving me a water bottle he'd bought -- Smart Water, not one of the cheap ones like Dasani -- I thought it was, paternal, something my father or brother would do in a heartbeat. So I smiled and thanked him.

We reboarded and for the duration of the flight, I politely answered questions, slept for an hour or two, and continued to read a book that I don't remember. Then it happened. I understood for the first time, that there's a certain age where men start to see your innocence as something to get under, something they can take from you and never give back.

As we deboarded the plane, he asked me if I'd like to go to dinner with him while I was in the city and held out his phone, waiting for my phone number. My face was warm and I choked on my words. I'd never had a real boyfriend, let alone been asked out by a middle-aged man. I stumbled, trying to come up with something, anything. I finally told him that my manager was making my schedule for the week and I could give him her email if that helps. He felt my embarrassment and said it was okay. I laugh thinking of this now, because the whole thing kind of makes me sound like some super shy call girl. But in the moment, standing next to a man I'd just rejected, I felt scared, realizing that I had crossed the threshold from something the world tried to keep safe into something it wanted to conquer.

# The Last Song Lillian Chen

There comes a time in the year when the wind picks up, blowing into the holes in my sweater. My entire stomach feels hollow and no matter how tightly I wrap my black parka around my waist, the feeling of empty space inside me expands. There are days when the construction men start looking like Snow White, their cheeks red from the huge gusts of winds that shake canoe-wide branches off their mother trees. The men stand out with their orange vests and hats, surrounded by the gray skies, gray buildings, and gray water. I used to pass by some of them on my runs along the Charles River, right around the corner where the Harvard buildings stood, and old veterans sat on benches, staring across the water. The workers' faces reminded me of my father's, the expression he had in the evenings sitting at his cello, eyes focused intently on the white and black notes that gave us our warm dinners and winter coats. My father always said, labor was the greatest action, because only through physical toil can a man feel like he is both at his best and his worst. After a warm meal of soondooboo and fiery kimchi, he'd played Vivaldi's Four Seasons Concerto No. 4, arm and wrist moving in harmony to a rhythm he knew by heart. Long notes flowed in and out of his cello, their crescendo moving through every vein of his body, and mine too.

That was ten years ago. I remember when my father worried everyday about his upcoming recital in Toronto. He was practicing double the amount, on top of working overtime. Luckily, the venue was paying for his flight, but he would be gone for a whole week. Tata's condition was getting worse. Who was going to pay for food and rent? I was only ten. Mama had a degree, but in education. Nobody wanted to hire a Chinese immigrant as an English teacher. As sick as she was, Tata still resented my father. She'd told my mother never to marry an artist, because he would care more about his work than anything else.

I didn't know if it was Tata's sickness, or my father's concert in Toronto, or maybe both were to blame. Without them, we might still be sitting at our apartment round table, eating my father's kimbap and my mother's nian gao, playing cards and talking about my father's favorite topics: how he was going to make enough money to buy a bigger house and a small white dog for our family, how the Red Sox is absolutely garbage compared to Korea's baseball teams, and how Vivaldi was a genius.

I don't recall our family being unhappy though. I don't remember accidentally knocking down his cello when I was eight. My mom said a bit of wood was chipped, but thankfully the only repair needed was to retune the strings. I don't remember him yelling at me for three hours straight, his whole body trembling more than any vibrato I've ever seen him play. I remember, as a little girl, riding my father's shoulders in the nearby park. I would clutch his head tightly and squeal every time he ran through the swings. I remember him plucking the "Happy Birthday" song every July and August, his baritone voice paired perfectly with his cello. I remember the days when I would come home after school to help Tata pick out the pods from the green bean stalks she'd

spent all year growing. I would spend the whole afternoon plucking hundreds of peas, waiting for my father to come home from his 9-5 job, set me on his lap, and play his favorite orchestral piece, Vivaldi's Summer, for me.

Summer. My mother wanted to name me it because she hoped I could become a bright and warm person, like Tata, before she got cancer. My father wanted me to be named for Vivaldi's most passionate, most intense, most promising piece. Two very different people, with the same high hopes for me.

I do love summer. Out of all the seasons, I love summer the most. Around November, I think about renting a car and driving down to Tennessee, or Virginia, or Florida, or just anywhere south of here. I used to wish for Boston winters, when the whole world would turn into a white playground and the longer nights meant more stargazing and the only worry in life was not getting hit by a snowball. That was before he left. Now, winter brings with it the eye-rolling words of Thanksgiving and overplayed tunes of Christmas. Occasions that make every American family remember they are loved and every non-American family feel unwanted and alone. Holidays means the end to another year, when it would just be the three of us at home, Mama, me, Tata. But Tata would leave at New Years back to Andong, and then it would just be me and my mother, silently eating rice congee and pork sung. I'd get up to wash the dishes, expecting someone to be next to me. But my father wasn't coming back. No, he left a month after the Toronto concert. He had caught the attention of someone in the crowd during his performance. That mister gave him an offer to perform for a month with the London Orchestra. A month turned into two. Two months turned into a year traveling the world. Paris, Belgium, Stockholm, Venice, Tel Aviv, Tokyo, Sydney. I lost track after that. Money was mailed to us every month from a new location. We got enough to pay for Tata's hospital bills and private school for me. The postcards eventually stopped coming. I used to hang them up on my wall, the way a kid would hang up gold medals. Now, my wall is bare except for a single photo of our family. It was taken the day my father returned from his week trip in Toronto - the longest time we'd been apart. We loaded his luggage and cello into the van and drove to an outdoor concert stage next to the Charles River, his favorite place in Boston. He wanted to go there first before we went home. We asked a young man walking by to take our picture. I wish I remembered what he looked like - was he with his family too? Did he have a family? We had been too busy huddling for warmth, giggling and wrapping ourselves in each other's arms to notice anyone else.

In the photo, the wind blew my mother's hair into a crow's nest, but for once she hadn't bothered to fix it. Next to her was my father, standing tall in his new, handsome black suit. My father's face was flushed pink and he looked ten years younger. That is the only picture I have from our last winter together. The last winter I heard his cello play.



Women Playing Medieval Instruments (Tallinn, Estonia), by Emily Reinhold

#### The Older Kids Called me Goldilocks Natalia Arbelaez Solano

The older kids called me Goldilocks. My hair wasn't blonde, but apparently it looked golden when it caught the light and color of the sun. Every day at recess, second graders would run after me and ask: "Goldilocks! Could we please have a lock of your hair?" I don't remember them now. In my fuzzy childhood memory, it wasn't a single person but rather an organism that looked like a bunch of children, except all had the same mouth, the same thoughts. Each day, I would take out a little piece of my curls – root and all – and hand it over to the kids (or creature).

My childlike sense of indestructibility conflicted with my fear of going bald. When recess came, I ran, as fast as I could, with my Velcro tennis shoes (couldn't tie knots quite yet), and my hair chaotically moving in every conceivable direction, and I would hide. My school was in the countryside, and so there was a lot of grass and outdoor spaces. Stray dogs roamed and were loved by the students (Sarah was the only dog whose name I remembered). Sarah was so old. I was fascinated by her, and terrified: terrified that she could die at any moment.

In my hiding spot, it was quiet. The birds sang and the kids played in the distance, but all was overpowered by my heartbeat which pounded both from running and from the excitement of hiding. This was as quiet as it could get.

An airplane glided through the air and I thought, as I often would, that my father was inside. He had left us all on an airplane a long time ago. A lifetime ago for a six year old like me. And yet, I remembered him. He would wake up super early every morning and watch Formula One. I would slide out of bed and join him.

One day, the second graders came and asked me for my hair.

"Tomorrow," I said. Or perhaps, I wish I had said it. At any rate, tomorrow never came: I was going to the United States.

My awareness of this was dim. My apartment was slowly filling up with boxes. Family members would come and leave sad, crying. I never cried for them. I thought I'd be back in two or three years. I never thought that I would be spending every holiday and birthday away: my losses became clearer every year that I grew up in the green forests of Pennsylvania.

I only cried for my dolls. Before travelling, I had to choose which ones to carry with me, and the memory that stands out the most from one of the most important moments of my life was the X-Ray image of my bag as it passed through security: a bunch of Barbie doll corpses packed together chaotically, my most tangible comfort.

## Road Trip Cassandra James

I am most likely a road trip. I go on for too long, like a cheap pop song, in every direction. Probably, I've spent half my life between minivans and U-Haul trucks, another piece of luggage. Consider it the Great American iteration: it's a family in a car with the kids and the dog, eating PB and Js out of a cooler and picking the crumbs off of their laps. It's missing the exit and taking a two-hour detour riddled with poison darts of passive-aggression. And then it's stumbling into a roadside hotel, sleeping between sheets that smell like bleach, groaning over the break-your-back mattress until someone puts a mandatory "shut up" order into place. Forgetting where you are at any given time is a natural side effect.

Are we in Virginia? One of two Carolinas?

Is that *still* the Gulf of Mexico?

Consider us the Great American Experiment: I'm learning math out of a used textbook in the backseat while we drive to Texas for the burial of a Colombian cousin I've never met; then Kentucky and Tennessee blur together in an ongoing monotone, a note held out into infinity, and I'm reading Ayn Rand with my head against the window. My mother calls it car-schooling; we laugh at our irreverence. I can recommend the best rest-stops on the Eastern Seaboard, if you'd like—do stop for roadside peaches in Georgia, and don't, in the name of all that's holy, stop in Jersey. I've seen almost every state, but never far-flung Alaska or Hawaii—and only because you can't get there by car.

In my dreams, I sometimes drive in montage, with Iowa corn sprouting from red Oklahoma dirt, and the distant roar of Atlantic waves tumbling inside my ears.

We tell time by the time we went here, or there—yes, that was Florida-to-Maine, so it must've been 2013. We don't think it's strange—to have been everywhere and yet be from nowhere. I don't consider it a perversion until I drop a "y'all" between my words and an eyebrow shoots up. And the sniggers: "Didn't you grow up in Jersey?"

I don't remember any of the houses we lived in before the third. And even then, there's only a kitchen in my mind, with a Spanish-style backsplash and yellow paint on the far wall. If you ask me where I'm from I'll tell you Florida—if someone asks you for the time, you don't tell them how to build a clock. Does it really matter if I can walk in Boston, from the North End to Newbury Street, without a map?

Sometimes I wish I was a plane trip, from here to there—a discount one-way ticket. I wouldn't have to explain the state of things in alternate edits, "long answer" and "short answer." But I'm a car on a highway, straddled between this place and that, with

memories of Where I've Been in the rearview and wild imaginings of Where I'm Going just far enough ahead to pull me on, on, a string tied around my ribs, and I'm straining toward the ache of belonging.

#### Meet the Contributors

**Regina Lankenau** is a member of the Class of 2021 and is majoring in the Princeton School of Public & International Affairs with certificates in Journalism and Latin American Studies. Though born in Monterrey, Mexico, she grew up all over the placefrom Europe, to the U.S., and back to Mexico--and she's very passionate about storytelling. This summer was her first real experience with the English Department, but the writing workshop she attended makes her wish she'd gotten to know the department sooner!

**Khanh Kim Vu** is a member of the Class of 2020 and concentrated in Computer Science with a certificate in Creative Writing. Her favorite English class was ENG387: "Writing about Family" with Professor Rebecca Rainof.

**Emily Reinhold** is a rising senior in the Class of 2021, majoring in the School of Public and International Affairs and pursuing a certificate in Environmental Studies. She was born in Belarus, where several of her photos were taken, and immigrated to the US with her family when she was seven.

**Marina Tinone** is a Connecticut resident who graduated with a degree in English from Yale College in 2020. Their writing focuses on language, identity, and voice. They create the things they wish they could have held when they were growing up. You can visit them online at mtinone.com.

**Abby Spare** just graduated as Class of 2020 in the English Department, with minors in European Cultural Studies, Theater, and Music Theater. Over the summer before she starts working at a hedge fund administration firm, she's been catching up with all of the books sitting on her bookshelf and participating in the English Department's book club and the Writing About Family workshop. It's really given her the opportunity to return to fiction writing, after solely writing plays over the past few years. She thanks everyone for reading her work!

**Jessica Reed:** Since graduating in 2018, Jessica has spent the past few years working in the education nonprofit sector, dreaming of ways to incorporate more writing into her life.

**Annabelle Berghof** '23 studies Art History at Princeton. She highly recommends the HUM sequence to all incoming students! Outside of academics, she spends her time playing squash and drawing.

**Uma Menon** is a student in Princeton's Class of 2024 who participated in the English Department's Writing Workshops over the summer. Her debut poetry book, *Hands for Language*, was published by Mawenzi House in 2020.

**Aditi Desai** is a first-year student (Class of 2024) hoping to pursue Neuroscience and Creative Writing. She loved participating in the English Department's Summer Outreach programs and finding a community of writers, listeners, and communicators! She's looking forward to taking Creative Writing and English courses at Princeton.

**Hailey Colborn** is a junior in the English department pursuing certificates in African American Studies and Gender and Sexuality Studies. She loves spending time with her three dogs and sharing the books that she reads on her bookstagram (@hailsreads). She especially loves Russian literature and is on a quest to read every Nabakov book she can get her hands on.

**Lillian Chen** is an Economics major with East Asian Studies and Creative Writing certificates. She's set to graduate in 2021 and is currently living at home in Houston with her parents and black cat, Zoe, who looks like Toothless from *How To Train Your Dragon*. She loves traveling, hiking at sunrise, dancing to RnB music, reading children's novels, listening to podcasts on HP/being human/spirituality, and writing everything from poetry to memoir reflections to fictional film scripts.

**Natalia Arbelaez Solano** is a junior in the Comparative Literature Department. Over the summer, she participated in the English Department's Writing about Family workshops, and she is so excited to share that work with you!

Cassandra James '23 is a prospective English major from Celebration, Florida. She grew up in a family of Greeks, Italians, and Colombians, which means she had to tell stories to survive. Her dream life involves writing novels and traveling the world, preferably at the same time.