

Bianca Denise Layog

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Interlochen Arts Academy, Interlochen, MI

Educator: Joe Sacksteder

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

balloon skin

I don't learn how to bathe myself until I am eleven years old. Before then, my mother scrubs dead skin off my limbs and presses shampoo into my scalp before rinsing everything off with cold water.

Water is never warm enough. I always come out of the bathroom blue and shivering, waiting for someone to decide what I can wear that day.

Growing up, I am malleable. I learn dysfunctional interactions as I age. My mother teaches me that hangers against skin feel sharp. I learn that hedgehogs can eat one-third of their body weights in just one night.

I begin pressing hair against my mouth. I learn only to touch myself.

She pulls me out of school for years. At home my brother calls me crazy. I press hair against my mouth.

In the sunlight, my hair is a light brown from the chlorine at the swimming pool. I imagine I am elsewhere, maybe I become a perfect American girl in this vision: light brown hair, warm eyes, the kind of narrow face they like.

For the first few years of my life, everything is sharp. My mother prepares lemon drinks that burn the back of my throat. A few people call me "gifted" and I'm made to believe it until the hangers come again. They never leave marks.

My mother and I share the same hands; people call them piano fingers. I hate the piano. *It's less about the force and more about the bone*, my cousin says, when I try punching him. In pictures I can't tell whose hands are whose. I aim with my knuckles but my mother never teaches me self-defense. I'm craving something and I don't know what.

In vacation pictures, I am frowning, squinting at the camera. I can still feel my mother pinching my side, trying to get me to smile. I never post pictures of our trips because I never look like I'm having a good time. We always have arms slung around each other, all fake-casual, my mother stretching a smile across her face. My dad doesn't know how to smile and will never learn. My brother dresses differently so he doesn't look poor.

In hotel rooms we use hotel-room-shampoo and in one memory, I use the word "damn" for the first time when looking for my conditioner. I wake up with bruises.

When my dad leaves for Seattle I can't say goodbye because a typhoon hits Manila before we can make it home. We sit in the car and watch a fire starting across the street. Soy sauce softens a plastic bag of rice. My palms sweat, searching for warm chicken.

Or at least, in this version they're empty. In another the sauce is dribbling down from the corner of my mouth. My brother borrows my pink raincoat to go to the bathroom in the church across the street.

This is a time where we trust God, my mom likes to say when things go bad. At this point I'm still eight, still religious. I clasp my sweaty hands together and pray. We stay cooped up together in the car until dawn, taking extra care not to touch.

Over long car rides listening to American novels, I try to tie my hair up. I learn that hedgehogs anoint themselves

whenever they discover anything new or unusual. They foam at the mouth and coat themselves in spit. There are so many things I haven't yet been taught.

These days I am easily startled. At school my classmates throw things at me to watch me flinch involuntarily, even if I know it's coming. Sometimes I am reduced to begging until my knees burn red. I never know where to place myself.

Once, when I am young, I hug my mother and tell her it feels good because she is thin. She stands still before prying me off her body and tells me it's strange. This manufactured distance doesn't feel right; I am only following what I've been taught. I continue to touch myself and notice where different parts of my skin stick to each other.

In my family, I am taught that being thin is a rite of passage, that no boy will want to touch you. Boys only want girls that hardly exist, girls with floating arms and hands at their sides. I imagine all the girls' organs are dislocated from one another.

Sometimes I imagine my body this way: translucent, loose flaps of skin against bone.

There are somewhere between 5,000 to 7,000 spines on an average adult hedgehog.

Maybe in this version I'm sitting in a car in the middle of a typhoon. Outside of the car, my bones will thaw like snow when it comes into contact with the floodwater. My parents tell me it is made out of rat piss.

I'm so used to being a doll but I don't notice at first because my hair doesn't feel plasticky.

When my father comes back to Seattle after two months, I have two-week old bruises yellowing on my right arm. I don't remember the weapon of choice or the reason.

Throughout my childhood I master the art of using just the right amount of pressure on my scalp to test how big a bruise is.

One day I discover that bruises can merge together. The insides of my skull feel swollen. I imagine that the tissue is translucent, the fluorescent lights in the first-floor bathroom melting it all away.

In photos, my eyes are never red. I look it up: lacrimal glands are supposed to secrete fluid and the blood vessels that service them are supposed to dilate to supply them. My body fails to secrete, so my scleras stay clean. I'm always looking for markings. Of what, I'm not sure.

The dentist tells my mother I'm grinding my teeth to bits in my sleep.

Post-shower skin drapes, soggy: it is never enough.

I learn to hold people properly when I turn twelve. I'm not sure how long these things are supposed to last, so I try my best to overcome this learning curve. In family pictures I practice slinging my arm around my family members, practice stretching a smile across my face. In private, I hug myself.

My mother begs me to fix my teeth. I get retainers that she tightens up with a key at night.

In high school I wonder how transparent I have to become. I spend many nights glassy-eyed, intestines hollow.

I'm always aching for people now, everyone but my mother. Whenever I come home after spending time away, everything feels out of place.

These days my skin is clear: partly because of Adapalene gel, partly because I'm too tall to bruise now. Instead she makes me down lemons, apple cider vinegar, tonics to burn through my stomach lining. Hopefully after all of this, nothing of me will be left for boys to eat. No one knows what we want.

I pull back my thighs in the mirror; I have been doing this since the age of twelve. Before showers, I spend half-hours in front of my bathroom mirror, examining my body assembled into different forms. I want to make sure nothing

In my new house, hardly anyone speaks. We all operate on different time zones. I am oftentimes addressed sideways: my parents ask each other questions on why I am the way I am. Once, my grandfather asks my father why I'm not wearing slippers. On Sundays, my mother tells me to watch livestreamed church. In my spare time I allow myself to look back on my old life. I open folders and binders of photocopied music scores. My music teacher once drew a right hand on the corner of a score and wrote *curve pinky*. These days, time passes quickly. Most days, my mother tells me to fix my posture. I wake up every morning and hang onto the sunrise.

My father tells me that whatever goes up, goes down. Drinks appear on my desk like clockwork. There are periodic weigh-ins a few times a day. The stock market crashes but my mother tells me the stocks will go up again. I tell her I know this because of my father. We're a machine. In my private Instagram posts I don't use punctuation, especially towards the ends of the captions. I tell people on Instagram that I never had a Webkinz account to begin with and then at night I make a long emotional post on an Instagram account only my friends follow and type: "you think it can't get any worse & then god deletes your webkinz account" because sometimes I follow my father's advice: I keep moving. Who cares what's real? I take pictures of the sunrise, knowing things will pass. I gulp the squeezed lemons as fast as I can but they sit, stabbing sharply at the pit of my stomach for an hour after.

Bianca Denise Layog

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Interlochen Arts Academy, Interlochen, MI

Educator: Joe Sacksteder

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

lemon bleeding (ekphrasis)

SONATA IN G MINOR: HENRY ECCLES, II. ALLEGRO CON SPIRITO

Growing up, getting hot water was an extreme sport. I took many cold showers and had to make sure no one else was using the hot water.

Growing up, we collected water in basins and buckets, kept them in the corner of shower stalls. Whenever the water would come back on, someone would yell in joy.

When I was young, I couldn't speak Tagalog, but I always knew certain words: *tubig*, *batok*, *kuryente*. *Water*, *to strike on the nape*, *electricity*. We were always asking for these things. There was no need for a special occasion. Some days the water would go. Some days the electricity. Growing up, I wanted to be rich. When I was a child, my father would tell me that he only wanted me to be happy. Whenever my brother and I got in trouble he chose to look away. He likes to stay out of things. He is a good father.

Growing up, I drank squeezed lemons in the daytime instead of cow milk and practiced the piano by emergency flashlight.

Growing up, I learned that the foam settling on top of the apple juice was better than the juice itself. I learned not to twist the dimmers for the yellow lights because they made the electricity bills go up too high.

When I was young, we slept in one room and ran the electric fan through hot summer nights. Back then, I couldn't speak Hokkien as well as I wanted to, but I knew how to swear in it because my father liked to open the second story window of the master bedroom to yell at his secretary. These days he doesn't yell as much. He complains about the fact that I'm not Chinese enough. That I'm losing who I'm supposed to be. He clings onto his beliefs, like: a family that eats together, stays together.

In my new house I leave my air-conditioner on all day and I make a playlist called "shower in the dark" and fall asleep to it. Once, I even stand under the shower for nearly half an hour. The shower glass and mirrors steam until I can barely see. My mother yells at me from outside the door because it's time for lemon juice. The lights are all off because I want them to be. My father speaks to me in Hokkien and I respond in the English he hates so much. I choke on apple slices and the lemons make my jaw ache; they tear at my throat and stomach lining. The men of the house all eat lunch without me.

My father tells me that consistency is key but I can never tell when he'll come home for Christmas. My father also tells me that movement is essential, that you can't stop working because life is a race, that there is no time for yourself in the pursuit for success.

My brother tells me that hard work beats talent. I agree with him. At the dinner table, my mother decides how much rice I can eat and my father tells me that girls can't be fat. My brother opts for silence. We are good children.

My brother and I used to play. We made makeshift homes out of blankets and cardboard. We ran outside and talked to the neighborhood kids that played *patintero*. I wasn't cool enough for any of that, but I wanted to be. Some days I ran so much I'd get an asthma attack.

Bianca Denise Layog

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Interlochen Arts Academy, Interlochen, MI

Educator: Joe Sacksteder

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

litany in which my aunt is forced out of hospice care

My aunt's bedroom was always in a type of dream-state, curtains drawn and bathed in slits of pale yellow shadow. The walls were painted a dark pink, and I never touched them. For some reason, she usually kept her room uninhabited and chose to sleep outside. There was never any space to sit. She owned too many things.

When we move into my new house, everything is too intricate and planned out. I'm still waiting for another boot to drop somewhere.

For a very long time, she was obsessed with Build-a-Bears, hooked up on the way humans put little cloth hearts into their stuffed, organless bodies. She loved that they could be programmed to say "I love you! I love you!" They had birth certificates. Build-a-Bears came wrapped in plastic American packaging and dipped in human clothing.

I line stuffed animals across one of my cabinet shelves and stare at them before falling asleep. When I move to Michigan in 2017, I tuck a different set of stuffed animals into my covers.

She gave me a Hannah Montana bear. She was glittery, white, wore a denim jacket, and owned a necklace. She was everything I wanted to be. My aunt and I were close; we both liked books and bears. I sometimes wonder if she ever cradled her bears to sleep before she had children, if she ever told her Kenny bear "I love you" back.

I thrash in my sleep and the animals keep ending up on the floor. On days I oversleep, I step on their faces on my way out my dorm room, eyes still half-closed.

You had to press his feet for him to tell you he loved you. She called him her Kenny bear because she was dating a guy from the States who she had met in college. His name was Kenneth and he lived in New York and worked at TGI Fridays and best of all, brought me gifts whenever he came to visit. They married, but didn't have a wedding.

I've always moved around too much. I can't share, kick anyone I share a mattress with onto the floor. I'm asked "Are you still alive & kicking?" and the answer is always yes.

Once, my aunt showed me how well Build-a-Bear dressed up their bears' bodies, showing me Kenny bear's fluffy stomach and the strip of his white boxers above his pants. He never wore any shoes, or if he did, he took them off and I don't remember where they went. Uncle Kenneth visited as often as he could.

At school, it's easy to forget about my family. Popcorn burns in the microwave. Someone smokes weed through the vents in one of the other residence halls and another person sets off the fire alarm with vape.

Dominique Antoinette was born while Uncle Kenneth was in the US. The year was 2011 and I was eight years old. There was no Dominique bear, but the Kenny bear sat on my aunt's bed and continued to respond to his feet when pressed. I thought about my limbs elongating, becoming adult.

Maybe I want to purge myself of home. In my Notes app, I outline plans for a week-long detox. I imagine I'll be clean enough that I could lose my sense of smell. I write all my papers the night before. I drop a math class. I continue to watch Netflix shows through my classes.

Uncle Kenneth took Dominique and my aunt away in 2014. It turned out that he didn't live in the city. Instead, he

lived in West Nyack, a suburb of New York. My mother told me stories about the public libraries in America, about winter. I tried to picture snow, but failed.

My family is ever-supportive in my endeavors. My mother orders me a Vitamix blender off Amazon and I try to slice apples. I nearly slice my pinky clean off. Apple bits burst and wedge into the cracks in between my dorm room tile. My mother tells me which smoothies to blend. I give up.

I kept her St. Patrick's Day Build-a-Bear and inherited her hardcover Harry Potter boxed set. We didn't talk for three years. I never missed her birthday because she shared it with the Virgin Mary. It was enough. At night, I picked at St. Patrick's Day Bear's green clover skin.

I read a ton of Richard Siken. I read poems about boots dropping to floors. I read poems about sex. I read poems about things that get crossed out. Siken was born in New York City. New York is only a few states over and I've always wanted to go, so I plan it out: my first Christmas away from home.

Then, my aunt's body started stuffing the wrong things into the wrong places. My mother was on the phone. Spit collected in my mouth, waiting for her to react. *It's late-stage*, they said. Clumps of used paper lodged themselves into my mother's bag.

My mother tells me that I can't stay with my aunt over Christmas break because she's come down with pneumonia and the doctor got her sugar levels wrong and gave her the wrong medication. My mother asks, *what about Chicago?* At night, I kick more animals off my bed. I think about Richard Siken.

I tried not to think about it. We were in Europe. It was sunny, a lucky day. I tried not to think about her Build-a-Bear infested body bent over a toilet. She was heaving, tearing stuffing out of herself, becoming glassy.

I think: Dear So-and-So, toss everything out and start over. Throughout the day, my stomach burns. I wonder when you start to forget someone's body ever took up a space. I insist on New York. Bags are packed, tickets booked. Over a year later, when I start a flight logbook, I can't find my flight itinerary. It's almost as if I never went.

They stopped the chemo. *It's metastasized to the bone*, they said. She lost her hair. Uncle Kenneth bought her a wig, but she refused to wear it. She had started her vanishing and wouldn't stop, skin wrinkling until invisible.

In my aunt's house, she does not heave. Her two-year-old son, whose birth I missed, hurts her. He insists on playing, taking the stuffed donut I bought for my aunt at Universal Studios over Thanksgiving break and stumbles around their living room. She winces when he lands on her. Over the phone, my mother screams at me for not making my aunt go on a version of my fruit diet.

After I visited her over Christmas break, I didn't visit for a very long time. I avoided her, spending my breaks with friends in Detroit and Boston.

There are no more Build-a-Bears in their house and I don't have the heart to ask where they've gone. They feel bad for me and bring me out to the city. There, we take photographs. I try not to look at her too much. I don't know how they find the time; Uncle Kenneth is working three jobs. I □NY signs are plastered all over the postcards I buy. A tourist, I make all the right stops in the city to take pictures.

She had stabilized, and was going to Disneyland with her kids. She lived on the fringe of being transparent, and it was bearable that way.

I go back and try to forget it after that. It is 2018 now, and it breezes by and I almost forget. *It's metastasized to the brain*, they say, when the year after that I'm forced to remember. My friend Lily and I plan on going to New York City together for Thanksgiving. Lily gets crossfaded on our way to the concert. I channel Richard Siken. Dear So-and-So, 2020 better not be a shitshow. Everything smells like weed. Lily coughs often.

I visited her on Thanksgiving in my junior year. I don't remember if I kissed her on the cheek. I left early.

I am supposed to stay an extra day when I come visit her. She tries to get me food. She makes Uncle Kenneth get me food instead. I shower in her bathroom. I climb into their master bed, where they no longer sleep because she doesn't like to move from the couch. The next morning, I leave. I have Thanksgiving with people I barely know, and

I don't come back. I spend the rest of Thanksgiving in a McDonald's, waiting for Lily.

In February, I came to New York again. They had me write a eulogy for her the night I got there.

Months later, I read about Build-a-Bears and Harry Potter books. Everyone stares. While reading, I think about Kenny bear. Someone lives in her old room now. I don't know who. My mother sends me a video from a long time ago. The first thing I hear is her voice. We are playing a pool game, and I don't remember any of it. I see her. My stomach burns and I turn away. In my head, I paint the lining of my stomach dark pink. *Dear So-and-So*, I say, before it all evaporates.

I stuff unaddressed letters into my mouth.

Bianca Denise Layog

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Interlochen Arts Academy, Interlochen, MI

Educator: Brittany Cavallaro

Category: Poetry

Your Best (Non) American Girl

I am sitting in a little room, face bleeding
in several places. Newly injected and porous.
What I paid a few thousand pesos for, to look
brand new again. Shiny with whatever serum
they've decided to paint over my face, shiny
and pained. Throughout the procedure they played
music to put me to sleep, placed paper towels
over my eyes, painted me in cold paste. I inhaled
white smoke they put on to open my pores,
filled myself. The dermatologist is standing above
me in a white lab coat and clipboard. She does
not smile. My mother has pulled back the curtains
and stepped into the room. I am prescribed zero
point one percent of Adapalene, called Differin
Gel, called topical product to peel away your skin
and make you fresh baby again. I'm also assigned
sunscreen in a yellow bottle. I get too much
on myself the first time, coat myself in white
maybe half on purpose. My mother pulls my cheeks
and tells me I'm going to be good. My skin
absorbs. Soon I am regular again. I neglect
sunscreen most days, turn red burn but I'm growing
clean. So it's working. On the website I'm told
Know Your Enemy and *A Little Understanding*
About Your Big Troublemaker. Hyperkeratinization,
they say, is the reason I'm not raw and natural
yet. On Sundays I stop going to church. I lean
over my bathroom counter and imagine holes
closing, try not to pick away at the flakes
of my old body. Reconstructing myself
will only take 90 days, they say. I can't wait
to be neat. In my childhood bedroom, I fumble
with and smooth down my button-ups, slip
on a trench coat. Later I sweep stray baby hairs away
from my face, ready for pristine, ready to become.

Bianca Denise Layog

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Interlochen Arts Academy, Interlochen, MI

Educator: Joe Sacksteder

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

the right to grieve (not that i have it)

My grandfather died two days before my birthday in 2014. Mom said his heart just stopped working, and I never got the details of how it all happened. I only knew this: congestive heart failure. On September 14th, in a hospital somewhere in California, some 6000 miles away from home, Sun Hong Gaw died of congestive heart failure after a long battle. He was 94. In 2018, he will have been dead four years.

According to the web, Nearly 5 million Americans are currently living with CHF. Approximately 550,000 new cases are diagnosed in the U.S. each year.

My grandfather was not American. Fleetinglly, I sometimes wonder if those people that are in charge of statistics (are they called statisticians? I can't be sure. How do you know if statisticians are what they are? How do you ever know they exist? When did you learn this word? When did I? I have accepted the fact that the origins of my English are mysterious and I will never know how I know), those statisticians, did they count him in the 550,000?

On Sundays, my family would make the twenty-minute drive to my grandfather's house. The one that was alive after 2014, that is. That's how I know what day of the week September 14th is exactly. This is something my brain has informed me I should remember, and I have no recollection of my birthday that year, only the event two days before. My (living) grandfather's house was a condo, with two rooms branching to the left in one of the hallways. The first room was "*sa-ko* and *di-ko*'s room" and the second was "*a-ko*'s room." In English, this meant: the third aunt and the second aunt's room ; the first aunt's room. To me, this meant: the playroom ; the dining room.

In Hokkien kinship, family members are referred to differently depending on order of birth. You call your father *pa* and your mother *mama*, and then it gets confusing. Your father's sisters are *a-ko*, *di-ko*, *sa-ko*. His brother is *a-chak*, being the only brother. Your mother does not teach you these words for this side of the family correctly. Instead, you imitate what she calls them and uncomfortably find yourself in Santa Clarita, California in 2017, awkwardly calling your mother's eldest sister *achi*, which typically means eldest sister. Your aunt, who has breast cancer but who you chose not to visit, is called *dichi*, meaning second sister. You have made a mistake.

I can still see it in my head, oddly sharpened into focus. Everything happens so cinematically, in brief flashes of almost montage-like images. I remember racing past the dining room in an effort to make it as fast as possible to *sa-ko*'s room to play, taking a peek and seeing Mom on the phone leaning out the window. She could be crying.

According to the Linguistic Society of America, "Many linguists now say that a newborn's brain is already programmed to learn language, and in fact that when a baby is born he or she already instinctively knows a lot about language. This means that it's as natural for a human being to talk as it is for a bird to sing or for a spider to spin a web. In this sense, language may be like walking: The ability to walk is genetic, and children develop the ability to walk whether or not anybody tries to teach them to do so. In the same way, children develop the ability to talk whether or not anybody tries to teach them. For this reason, many linguists believe that language ability is genetic."

Sitting on a stool, I will be ignoring the world around me as I always have done, when my cousin Nicole will interrupt my session of *Sims*. She will say, "*Achi Champy*, your grandpa died." I will look up. "Okay," I'll say, and I'll look back down to resume my game. I never speak of this moment of indifference, and I am not so sure if Nicole remembers. I think, *so he's gone. Okay*. I don't quite internalize it until later. In the midst of my indifference, I will remember that this means things are not right. I stand up suddenly, walk out the room full of screaming children

watching television and throwing pillows at each other-- children whose lives will not be affected by this death.

I remember having my right arm wrapped around the iPad 2, staring up at Mom who gives me a shove and shakes her head without looking at me to tell me to move away. "Edwin," she will say, in a loud, broken voice, calling for my father. I will look at her stoic face, frozen somewhere in between emotionlessness and horror. I stand off to the side and follow them quietly to the balcony, where they yell at each other.

I do not hear any of the words.

We go home. Mom calls Nancy, whose life is also fucked up because she is not legally divorced and is jobless and almost homeless and goes ahead and gets a boyfriend and has a fifteen-year-old kid that will become suicidal in the next four years, although Nancy doesn't know this yet. She had another kid recently, a newer one, and she didn't- doesn't- know what to do with that one either, but my mother calls Nancy anyway. My brother stares out the window in silence. He is fourteen and sometimes I wonder what he was thinking then. Did he live in his head as much as I always have?

Hokkien is not a written language. It is a dialect, passed down from generation to generation. Once a generation loses the dialect, I suppose it is gone forever.

According to Medline Plus *Trusted Information For You*: "Heart failure is a condition in which the heart can't pump enough blood to meet the body's needs. Heart failure does not mean that your heart has stopped or is about to stop working. It means that your heart is not able to pump blood the way it should. It can affect one or both sides of the heart."

That day, at around 10 a.m., we are at the seafood market. Papa goes to buy shrimp. Just another Sunday. Mom has her last conversation with her father in the car. Later, I will learn that he said, "*Ayoko na, Jasmin. Sorry, hindi ko na kaya.*" Literally, this means, "I don't want this anymore, Jasmin. Sorry, I cannot handle this anymore." If I didn't know better, I'd have thought that it was a line out of a tragically romantic movie. In that moment, I only hear Mom offer feeble words of encouragement, clichéd enough that they fade into the background. The only thing I remember is her voice, sounding like seeing your reflection in a cracked mirror and realizing it looks exactly the same as you always have. Mom says, "Okay. I love you." She hangs up. I don't know if she knows it's the last time; maybe she doesn't quite realize it. Maybe she does.

Nancy used to buy me Christmas gifts, back when she had that money. I have seen her about two times, ever. Her ex-husband, Lot, is my father's best friend. She is my mother's. It is a story that, if it happened two thousand years ago, would be in the Bible. Or it would be a reality TV show in 2014. We'll never know.

My parents argue whose fault it was that Nancy and Lot separated. I used to worry that they would separate fighting about separation. Papa calls Nancy an idiot that gave up a perfectly good husband and life. Mom responds, "He was an alcoholic. Like you."

The first time I see a dead body, it is over Skype. Mom Skype calls her sister when we get home, and everyone sobs, but mostly my mother. I stare, and so does my brother, as my mother screams at the screen: "*Pa! Pa! Kumusta ka na Pa? Balik ka na! Ok ka lang, pa? Hindi naman masakit diba, pa?*" I could be wrong. It could be that my mother did not say these words. My brain blurred this into summary. I know she said *pa* several times, reminding herself she used to have a living father. My grandfather's face looks as if he is sleeping. "*Dumadaan parin dugo niya sa katawan niya,*" says my mother's sister- the blood is still flowing in his body: "*Shobe!*" my mother yells, even though we are right there. "Ahia! Look at him!" We look. She continues to speak to the screen. Mom has never cried this hard before, not even when my parents fight so bad you can hear them from the downstairs rooms.

The 2012 Newbery Medal was awarded to Jack Gantos's "Dead End in Norvelt." In the book, a kid named Jack Gantos gets grounded for life and is stuck doing chores for an old woman, who asks him to write obituaries.

My mother asks me to write his eulogy to be displayed at his wake. I have no idea if it is ever displayed or read and I have no idea what I actually wrote but I do know that I never want to write a eulogy ever again. I had to look it up in the Merriam-Webster dictionary: *a commendatory oration or writing especially in honor of one deceased.*

Deceased seems like the kind of word people use to avoid saying *dead*, but the kind of word people use to prove that they are not those people that say *passed* instead of dead.

I am not American, like my grandfather. If I get sick, will I be counted in the statistics? This is the type of information I do not have.

According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, grief is defined *as a deep and poignant distress caused by or as if by bereavement*.

My mother applies for a US Visa so that she can attend the wake. She is denied. I learn that she cried in front of that man, who simply said, "I am sorry for your loss."

We are on the road near McKinley hill when I tell my mother that her dress would go better with the gold flats. She had the same ones in gold and black, from a trip in Europe earlier that year. "Don't tell me what to do. I'm grieving," she snaps me into silence.

What Medline Plus does not tell you is how congestive heart failure is the kind of thing that is too big to say, so you just say that he died. What Medline Plus does not tell you is how you will die because of this disease, and that the fact that you die old does not change anything. What Medline Plus does not tell you is how it does not only affect two sides of the heart. It affects how long people remember you for. Eventually, you will be forgotten.

In Hokkien, I make jokes about wanting death: *Gua be si ki lo*. Literally, *I want to die already*. In Mandarin, 我要死了。 In Filipino, *Gusto ko na mamatay*. I don't suppose anyone else considers the reality of it until they are in a hospital room away from home, about to die. How lonely was he? I'll never know. As much as I have to write about the aftermath of his death, I never had a conversation long enough to find out who he was. To me, he was x-rays and phone calls and the right to grief. I do not hold this right but pretend I do.

Bianca Denise Layog

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Interlochen Arts Academy, Interlochen, MI

Educator: Brittany Cavallaro

Category: Poetry

In the Fish Aisle at SM Hypermarket

my brother and I compare noodle prices
and what I mean by that is we zig-zag, half-lost
through the aisles where all the noodle packets
glare up at us from their places on the shelves.
My brother gives a good one a slap and turns,
holds it up, drops it into the cart. He yells
when I run his foot over and over again. Rest
of the time my mother is screaming too
loud for us to hear at the guy in the fish section
minding his own business, all of them lined up
already dead and ready to die some more. *It's too
expensive and it just isn't fair*; she says, demands
to weigh them again and again. At the dinner
table my father asks for the prices of the fish,
the noodles an afterthought. He teaches me how
to eat shrimp, take their legs and rip them off
shell and all, chop the head up sideways. He teaches
me how to wash our hands in the dirty sink, slimy
with shrimp parts. I slip up and the drain clogs.
I'm thinking, now, of glazed fish eyes, synthetic,
staring up at you from the dinner table. And then
of that red-faced man in the fish section,
how he rolled them over each other, gutted and
peeled with plastic covered hands. Who taught him?
My mother isn't fair, peels my shrimp
for me, runs all of us over and over
until legs are falling all over the place. Rest
of the time we stand, postures straight, all eyes.

incorrect sticks out, that everything remains folded in like the way they want bodies to be.

My mother makes me stand on a platform, tells me which parts are left to crease. She's a master; she knows she can't touch me or I'll scream.

I've stopped playing the piano and now, my mother mourns the loss of my hands. She begs, but it's never enough.

My teeth aren't straight the way they're supposed to be, but I learn to smile a specific way. Stretched out like that, no one notices. I spend fifteen minutes in the shower, since I've mastered the art of scrubbing. I try to be slow enough for someone to see the translucence I've achieved. There's a bald spot on my head.

My friend tells me about the Hedgehog's Dilemma. In the winter, hedgehogs huddle close to each other for warmth, but the only way they can do this is by hurting the others through their spikes. They decide it's better for them to stay apart.