

Maia Siegel

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Interlochen Arts Academy, Interlochen, MI

Educators: Brittany Cavallaro, Maia Siegel

Category: Poetry

False Patrol

False Patrol

1

The lakes rusted over. I did not drip
from inside myself, no—you licked
two fingers. I tipped back
and then the fluorescent lights clicked
on and we flushed rubber down,
watched it circle like a half-baby
in an Arby's bathroom. You would drown
if you tried to swim out here, maybe, but
I could flash my breasts at any old boat
and they might slow in the marsh. That
is the difference between us, a vote
of confidence. When filling out our ballots
we argued over a proposition that would drop
wolves in the wild; you wanted to stop their landing.

2

I wanted wolves to land and prowl and eat
wooly creatures and so I voted yes, yes for
the sad rancher, his gun on his back. A bleak
bleat. Out in the open like an animal, I undress
and feel voted for. It is hunting season here
and we are dangerously low on vested orange. I want
to be mistaken for a doe, a wolf. In lights we stand like deer:
unaware, babyish. I think I see a bear and it is just a gaunt
skunk. A badger, maybe. I make you stand in front
and it scuttles away, and you make fun of me for being
afraid. I am more afraid of the lights, which I hunt
out every time we lie down, certain I am seeing
them move toward us, an army of blunt brights.
You claim that they have stayed still this whole
time. I shut my eyes and agree: *Yes, a false patrol.*

3

I shut my eyes and agree with you when you say
We are so much kinder than your friends. You
do not know I am the worst of them. One day a week
we all eat exorbitant amounts of pork fried rice, egg foo

young, fortune cookies with numbers listed on the back
in red ink. After you leave, my friends sit and stare at me,
expectant. Your small back lifts, disappears over the dirt tracks
and I say to them *The difference between us is that I am free
to be open, and choose not to be.* With you, I choose to open
my mouth and say nothing. My friends try, at least, to pick
apart their own vocal cords. To wet their tongues, to redden
dry skin. Your hands are red, too, but because you stick
into nails, shrug your paintings onto them. I painted your nails
a smooth, wet black; somehow the moons haven't paled.

4

Somehow your polish hasn't paled, yet. I tell a story
about a girl picking a fight for fun and laugh and you
don't. When you leave, my friend looks at me all blurry
and says *He knows nothing about you.* This is untrue,
I hope. I tell you I am scared of thunder like a dog
and it is as if a tail tucks underneath my legs, I am
ashamed. I have been blood-dry for months, in a smog
of clean underness. You have been drink-dry too damn long,
about the same as me. I do not tell you about my lack
of blood. Instead I say *I want to make sure my tear ducts still
work,* and so watch Good Will Hunting, lean back
with focus, try to make water come. I do not try to till
blood from inside me. We force warmth to sprout out
of pruno, but read: bad-soaked fruit can kill. I do not doubt this.

5

I do not doubt that important people soaking
in tubs are warm inside. I am talking about the vice
president's son, the video you showed me, a woman stroking
him between her feet. The video I forced you to find, twice,
once just to see if you could, and once to see it really,
in its orange, low-lighted glory. The video where he
leans back, lights a pipe. Where her feet slip on his domed belly,
where he holds up a camera, not knowing he is an animal detainee
of our camera's lightbox, the true watchers, the real feed.
I did not care if the video was real, if the photos
of cigarettes dangling out of his tan mouth and weed
ashes pooling into the lukewarm bath were composed
by Ukranian agents. I hoped he was warm inside. I told you
Really, we all want to be watched To lie still, to be peered into.

6

I peered into your still mouth, at that small tooth on the side
with the sulfur discoloring. The one you brush at three times
a day, like it's just a stamp that can fade with dioxide
and not bone itself. Before we kissed, you said enzymes
ruptured in that tooth's calcium when you were born. Or something
like that. Really, you were trying to tell me that you weren't
dirty. Or diseased. Or dying. I said that amount of brushing
sounded real tiring on the arms. To be transparent,
all my teeth are yellow and there are no birth
defects to blame. Coffee, a culprit. Summers

where days press into each other. A hot day on Earth
pasted by mint—too obvious. I stared at the colors
of your pointed wolftooth, touched your drying lip.
The lakes rusted over; nothing inside of me dripped.

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Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Office Politics

My mother was a finalist in a big writing contest, and people were speaking to her differently, like she was smart.

She had just quit her job at the university, and I had seen her cry a lot this past year. She had quit because the man who had hired her twelve years before turned to her and smiled tight and told her the graduate students were making more than her and did she know that? She did not know that, no.

My father tried to snub the people at work, the people who had wronged her, as much as possible; he'd close the door on them, eat all the donuts so none could be passed around, skip the company picnic. He described this at the kitchen table: how a box of Krispy Kreme was set in the middle of the table, how he grabbed each glazed ring after another, how he looked everyone in the meeting straight in the eye, sugar coating his chin. How he ate all twelve, even though he didn't like sweets that much. *But those, those were real sweet* he said. *Real sweet.*

I was disgusted by how petty my parents could be, how much they hated their coworkers. It also thrilled me a little; I hated the children of their co-workers as a debt to my family. I wanted their children to be unpopular in school, to get bad acne, to do something really wrong, so I could be justified in my hatred. Betrayal spread through blood, in this cosmic widening of office politics. I wanted to fight the department chair's children on the playground, for my family. I wanted all the adults to watch. I wanted to punch what my parents couldn't. I needed to redeem them in front of the faculty, on the lawn below all the offices.

It felt as if my mother being a finalist (and everything around it: the buying of the awards ceremony dress, the self-conscious tucking of the award into her desk, the inviting of plus-ones, the hushed applause for the other finalists) was all meant for my mother's old co-workers, a redemption arc of sorts. My father couldn't wait to return from the awards show, whisper to the guy next to him in a meeting how good the lobster was. The lobster was terrible. They didn't need to know that.

What really happened after my father returned from the awards ceremony: he sat silently before the department meeting, buzzing. Finally, someone huffed: *Alright, how was it, then?* When my father retells this, he looks intently into the square of my face, puts on an alien voice of smooth calm: *Well, actually, it was fucking fantastic.*

Once, I said I wanted to have a playdate with the child of the woman who had stolen my mother's job. The story of this job-stealing is complicated and bureaucratic and I love simplifying it into this, into a robbery of sorts. It doesn't matter if this is how it actually went. This is what I was told, what I, at twelve years old, felt in my bones was a great injustice: my mother was robbed of something, and the robber had been her friend. And the child of the robber was my friend from birth, one of those that parents put side-by-side as babies, so the children have no choice but to cleave onto each other. I felt a deep urge to see her now, even though I had never particularly liked watching *Martha Speaks!* with her, or how she always wanted to pretend to be wolves, roaming around her bedroom.

My mother would not allow this playdate, and so I suddenly cut all contact with her, my friend. I knew the girl's mother was the reason we had less money now. I knew my mother could barely speak her name out loud. The robber, the mother, wrote books with teenage girls' legs on the covers. They were frilly, fruity covers. The accomplice, the father, was an alcoholic. He wrote about birds.

My parents knew the father of my friend was an alcoholic, and that he smoked weed with his students. They held it

against him after his wife took my mother's job. Why did my parents let me sleep over? They knew all this long before they hated him. They always let him drive me home, in his Jeep with no doors.

There was always a vague sense of danger at the house of the woman that stole my mother's job. I loved that, how I always seemed like the sensible one, next to her daughter. Case in point: the first time I saw a real gun was in the hands of the seven-year-old neighbor of the woman who stole my mother's job.

Her daughter and I had been playing with the neighbor children; there was the boy with the gun, who was a little younger than us, and two girls, his sisters, who were four or five. We didn't see any adults in the house. The boy asked us if we would like to see his grandfather's pistol. Did we say yes? We climbed up the stairs, stood near the door of a bedroom with a large floral bedspread laying dead over a Queen bed. He dove under the bed, and got out a wooden box, inside which laid the gun, quiet. I didn't want him to pick it up. I pointed to his BB gun, lying close. I wanted to see him shoot *that one*.

We all went outside, where the girls ran around in the yard. The boy lined up a Fresca can on his porch, hoisted the BB gun up higher. We stepped back. He shot an orange pellet through the can. Metal flared around the edges of the hole. The girls were still running around in the background. *Stop*, I said, *stop. You're going to hit them*. He kept shooting at the can, losing his orange pellets, and I looked at the girls in the yard, just milling about. I don't know what happened that made him put the BB gun down. We had to go, maybe. Without an audience, there was no reason to shoot.

The daughter of the woman who stole my mother's job walked behind me, back to her house. While we were gone, her mother had made chocolate bark, with nuts and fruit sticking out like jewels. My mother never made anything like this. My mother baked pumpkin bread on Teacher Appreciation Day, and let the family eat the extra ones. Her pumpkin bread was flat, and disc-like. No jewels.

I moved away after my mom found a job in a new state, a better job, offered to her because of the new award shoved in her desk, but I still heard stories about the daughter of the job-stealing woman from my old friends. She left school because people spread rumors that she thought she was a wolf, and that she was attracted to them. She started running cross-country at her new school. She wore a bra outside on Halloween, with no shirt. She sat on a boy's lap and fed him grapes by hand at a school carnival. The boy was in a wheelchair and she wheeled him around, shaking her hips as she pushed the chair. The publicness of this stunt forced her to move schools again. I never wanted her to settle, the way I hadn't been allowed to, after my mother had been forced out by hers.

I also admired her in these stories, even though the reason for my move from my friends and my home was directly related to her mother. I wanted to strangle her in a dark alleyway, just like how I had wanted to fight her on the playground when her mother's betrayal first happened. But I also wanted to braid her hair, to lay down next to her and ask what it was like to pop grapes into that boy's mouth. This last feeling was forbidden, and so it made me want it even more.

I had hated this girl and her family so much that my hands buzzed when I thought of them. I had never talked to her about any of this, and she had never talked to me, and yet I hoped she held equally strong opinions about me. An unequal hatred scared me.

I wanted her to find out how terrible her parents were, how her father made a fool of himself at company events after a handful of drinks. I didn't want her to know what fools my parents had made of themselves, too, how silly my father must've looked in that meeting, reaching for yet another donut. I wanted to protect her from ever knowing all this, and I wanted to yell it at her. I wanted to tell her and then act like I had never seen her before in my life. I wanted to hurt her and heal it right after. I wanted to spin around with her, both of us equally off balance. I wanted to grab her hands while we spun. I wanted my fingernails to imprint into her palms, so she would be marked by me the same way I had been marked by her family. I wanted to spin in silence, become too dizzy to absorb the anger of my family. I didn't want to plan past the spinning.

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A Public Person

Jemima Wilkinson, a Rhode Island Quaker in the 1800s, fell ill with a fever. Wilkinson woke and claimed to have died during the illness, reborn now as The Public Universal Friend, a genderless evangelist. The Friend went on to lead their own religious sect, until dying their 'second death.'

1. Fever Wake

Heat melted *I* and *you* and *she*. Now
I was just *Public*. I was just *seen* and *thought*

of between bites of cucumber sandwiches
and *called* into the kitchen to stir the stew.

I woke up cold. Last dream and last Tuesday laid
next to each other, stuck their fingers in each other's

noses. Every crevice was empty. You could search mine
and I wouldn't even feel excavated, numb. I would feel

new. Because I was, I was shiny like that, I was crying embryonic
fluid. Squeaky. An umbilical cord protruded and I cut it myself,

with my old sewing scissors. Someone else had held these silver
scissors, someone gentler, with less arm hair. Someone who wouldn't

hump the air with the curtains open. Not me: I was Public Nuisance. I had left Time
at a fever pitch, and now I was Public Service. A utility. I was sexless;

I could lead people and they could look at my ass and I wouldn't feel
anything because I was their Friend. A Friend was universally accepting of shifting

buttocks and names. Jemima rolled over to Public Friend. Fingers connected,
privately. Smaller, more secret bones connected. But that was not a Public concern.

Thou sayest it.

That is what Jemima received, now. Dead on the carpet.

Jemima's tiny fingernails: *Thou sayest it.*

Jemima's pink nipples like pencil erasers: *Thou sayest it.*

Jemima's baby hairs, frizzed with light: Jemima's worried brows,
curving down at the edges: Jemima's lips receding into her small mouth:

Thou sayest it.

Jemima, with its clotted letters, was released. It buzzed away, through a hum of carpenter bees. I responded to universal publicness, airing laundry, a scrape of white

paint on a windowsill. I was to be used, a government subsidy, a program for repentance, with early admission. I was a welfare check, I was a hand-out,

I would be given to the world as an offering and everyone would stare and light would interrogate every corner of my being and I would be Public so all this would be seen, maybe even documented.

2. Before

A circle of silent people meet, curve outwards so air stretches, cat-like, in the middle. This is Public Worship, is Private Prayer. Speech

suppressed until it bubbles over, until fingers tingle with Word. Smooth stone passed around, thumbing raw. Thumbed numb, like a thigh. I speak, I stand. A performance

of humility, of God. I endure no meditation except: which monologue to try out this time. I snap rubber bands on my wrist, claw my initials

into the leg next to mine, draw flowers in inflammation. I store toys in socks. Anything, anything not to close eyes and feel static, to feel a false beat along my upperness, to become

Private and miss this Public world. Oh God I don't want to miss any of it: the boy rolling his ankle, the girl dozing in the corner, the one determined to pick her nose,

the new bangs, the new pimple, the new the new the new. Closing is the same every time. I will always be open in Public I will always press my tongue to the bottom of my teeth

and welcome and overfill and break hinges clean.

3. God-Cloth

Our God had already said no satin. No sequins no reds no tulle no emeralds no cashmeres no calfskin no, no.

I took it one step farther. I said no woman. The cloth makes Her and I wasn't Her, I was Public. I stripped

cloth and searched the scent of skin. An unashamed bare onion smell. I was left as discarded popcorn kernel, peach pit. Condensed.

Hard. Unadorned but handsome in that strange way we call old men. Shriveled behind a polished oak desk. I stroked

what wasn't there and let dandruff dapple the black shoulders of my suits. I spread my legs and didn't

feel a pinch. I spread my elbows on both armrests, pretended this was comfortable. God had never allowed me to wear pink,

I didn't miss it. God had never allowed me to dangle
ornate objects from my ears, stretching the lobe like

dough. God had never allowed me to rub red paint on my lips
and curl the color upwards so the flush never ended, only narrowed

up. I could govern myself now. I took over as Being. I covered my legs
separately, forbade them to rub up against each other. A partition

of black cloth, a blindfold between thighs. I forbade and felt dirty
when I touched my own skin. And you all followed, wrapped your thighs

the same way. We were all separate but that wasn't enough;
we partitioned off our bodies from ourselves. We meditated on each bone. I said:

Focus on each bony finger, each knuckle's dark hair follicles, each
warm pocket of fat, each blurry-edged birthmark, each fat speckled tongue, each—

4. The Followers Tell of the Second Death

The second time, we expected another new
name. A new personality, theology, outfit.

Instead, the Friend died. Well, first,
the Friend's legs swelled up like water

balloons. Well, first, the Friend emptied
out the cellar to fit the windowed coffin. Well,

first, the legs had to drain, simmer down.
A new type of weed popped up

around the town of Jerusalem,
the town of Universal Friends.

It was named *Jemima weed*.
An old name, dug up from the ground,

dead a long time ago. Commemorating
a time before fever, before followers,

before the Friend. There was no funeral,
only a meeting of people between space,

passing a stone to speak. This was according
to the Friend's wishes. The Friend

was transferred to a field where *Jemima weed*
grew over the grave. The Friend covered

by a thin layer of Jemima, the Friend resting
under alive Jemima. Yes, here is Jemima, reaching

into the wooden box, waving through the coffin
window as it rolls past. Yes, here Jemima comes back,

taunts decomposing Friend through random act of
flora naming. The Friend does not respond to Jemima's taps

on the glass. The Friend pulls away, flatulates. Yes, here
the Friend finally becomes Universal, becomes true Public,

becomes nameless dead.

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Chloe

Four years later, we still bullied Chloe. We still talked about Chloe, showed her pictures to our new friends, states away, schools apart. Four years later, none of us from junior high talked to each other except to inquire about the states of our virginities and, of course, Chloe. We tried to seem above it, sometimes, but we never were. Our new friends, people she had never met, started mimicking her facial expressions, too. We spread Chloe over states, over years, even over countries. No, not countries, except for one girl's church mission trips. We all stayed close to home. I went the farthest away, and it wasn't by choice, really. It just happened.

The text, four years later, that set us off, was from Helen. It just happened. She asked us to share stories about Chloe, and no one wanted to share the big ones. We said little things. A weird look. A strange thing she said. We didn't say what we were really thinking.

What we were really thinking: the ellipses that popped up and went back down.

Chloe looked different from us, and we never said the obvious of it. We called her hair greasy. We said she had pimples. But that wasn't a real difference; some of us didn't wash our hair for weeks, but that was, to us, a matter of small importance. That was natural hair care. Chloe's face drooped, her teeth jutted out. Chloe's back hunched, and she had a brace. The brace stretched out her torso, but her legs didn't grow, so she had tiny feet. She had some sort of sickness, something unknown. She had seizures, sometimes. After the seizures, we would be nice to her. We would remember her life was hard and we would feel a pang of something and then the next day we would forget.

It was cruel of the parents to do that, to refuse to tell us what was wrong with her. The parents once made her walk with her sister all the way back home from the pool, shivering in a swimsuit. Her sister linked hands with her and they walked the highway. I passed them in my mother's green Toyota Camry. Neither of us waved.

Her dad had oily hair and a thick Jersey accent. He worked for her grandfather, doing some bullshit job, and still, he complained about his employer-father all the time. The grandfather was a Holocaust survivor, and I was embarrassed when I would sometimes see Chloe at a Passover seder with him.

Chloe had clearly chosen her mother's Catholicism, since she wore a bejeweled cross necklace, but my place as one of the few Jews at the school was already tenuous. The only other one, Nathan, was also supremely uncool, and extremely short. His only redeeming factor was that his dad had a sports car. If Chloe was thought of as Jewish, I would be lumped in with her. I would be connected. Chloe started going only to church, and Nathan and I never mentioned her attendance at the rare seder. Nathan and I—our dislike of her was protective, maybe. We had to keep our domain clean of her.

That was an excuse; I am not going to be making any more excuses. I will just tell you how it was.

Once, the entire class was on a field trip, and we all were sleeping in bags on the floor. Chloe slept in an area all her own—no one wanted to get too close. I rolled in my sleep, across the room, across the carpeted floor. When I woke up, I was inches from Chloe's face. There was an intimacy, a secrecy in this. She was sleeping, and now I was awake, and I was so close I could see all the markings on her face, her tooth that jutted out, her wet blonde eyelashes. I felt an acute sense of danger. If I was seen this close to her, what would happen? It looked like we

might kiss. What if someone thought we were about to kiss? What if I wanted to?

That same trip, Chloe walked out of the bathroom in front of the entire class in nothing but her underwear and her back brace. She walked up to the math teacher, our trip's chaperone, and asked him to un-velcro her brace. We were all shocked by the brazenness of Chloe, how she wasn't disgusted by her body in the same way we thought she should be, how we were of our own.

Most girls in our class had an eating disorder, myself included. We nibbled on red peppers and apple slices at lunch. Chloe slid next to us, a hot pocket in front of her. Or Lunchables. Or McDonalds. It seemed like her eating of junk food fed something gross inside of her. Chloe was gnawing on junk food, and we were eating singular vegetable spring rolls for lunch. We were, fundamentally, cleaner, we thought. From the inside out.

Several years after this, I was diagnosed with scoliosis. Like Chloe. Our insides matched, our insides were wrong in the same way. I was scared I would have to get a brace, in some sort of divine retribution. The doctors talked about it, but I was insistent. I would rather let the improper growth continue, would rather let my spine contort itself, than become like Chloe. I never got a brace. The long-term effects on my spine, on my growth—I won't know them for years, probably. But I was not going to need the math teacher to unstrap me. I was not going to let the class see my pale legs in cotton underwear, a plastic tube pulling my torso up.

Several years after this, I realized that I was also attracted to girls. Again, this was like Chloe, who came out in high school, w

ho started posting heavily filtered images of her girlfriend on Instagram. I loathed this extra similarity between us. When Chloe came out, my eighth grade group chat exploded. I stayed quiet. I only told one person from middle school that I was like that too, and he wasn't even deemed cool enough to be in the group chat, not even after he became a D-list Netflix star. "I'm glad you thought you could tell me," he said. "I'll be filing away the image of you with a girl for the next time I need it."

Chloe was boy-crazy in middle school. Her biggest crush was on Nathan, but would willingly run through a list of the other boys, if asked. None of us did anything about our crushes. We sat with them, we waited beside them, we stared down at their socks. Chloe was the only one who did anything about them. She moved on from Nathan to Braeden, a boy with processing problems and a large, skeletal head, topped with small eyeglasses. Chloe slept in the same bed as Braeden at a sleepover. It was just them, in a bed.

When the class learned about this, we found it obscene. We didn't want to imagine them together, and we were infuriated how she could've gotten so close to another person before we did. Was her back brace laying in a corner, his small eyeglasses on the table? Did they kiss? Did they reach out their thin arms and touch one another?

The D-list Netflix celebrity I went to middle school with is named Carson. He was the one who saw Chloe's seizures start. Chloe started seizing, and Carson yelled, and my teacher reluctantly turned away from her ChromeBook. We all stood up, watching Chloe's muscles convulse, her head jerk back. A girl named Libby called 911 on the classroom phone, and the science teacher ran into the room. He set Chloe down from her blue plastic chair, and she flailed on the carpet. In the corner, Libby stood and laughed. Compulsively, she said. We all were quiet, except for the laughing. Libby started tearing up, her shoulders heaved, her laughs burned into croaks. Chloe was still, her small body stretched out on the floor. Libby turned away, her laughs pointed towards the corner of the retractable wall.

Later, the science teacher told us never to call 911 if Chloe started having a seizure. *The ambulance is too expensive*, he said. *Just grab me, I can handle it.*

Libby, the last day of eighth grade, wanted to make amends with Chloe. Wanted to help her, going into high school. *Let's take her shopping*, she said. We saw ourselves as saints, as charity workers, as some *Clueless* makeover gurus. We all wanted to be the Cher, the all-knowing creator of a correct appearance. An H&M had just opened up in our town. It was a huge event; girls went with beach bags and filled them to the brim with clothes. We invited Chloe to go to H&M with us, we who had been in class with her since first grade and never invited her anywhere. She accepted.

My mom drove us because no one else wanted Chloe to touch their seats. One girl said she had OCD, and so

Chloe's nose picking was detrimental to her mental health, her Mercedes-Benz seats. We nodded, we understood. We pulled up to Chloe's house in my Toyota Camry. The seats were already stained; I said I didn't mind. Chloe came out of her house wearing a crop top, her whole red-spotted back exposed. She was wearing caked-on makeup, smelled like Victoria's Secret. She must've sat in front of her older sister's closet that morning, thumbing through skimpy hot pink shirts. Her sister must've sat her down and sternly applied a smokey eye.

In H&M, we steered her towards the sections we thought were appropriate. She would hold up a hoodie with a slogan about video games, and we would shake our heads. She started compiling a pile of clothes we hated. We started whispering to each other through the racks. We silently removed items from her cart, stuffed them in drawers in the men's section. Was her back cold, exposed to the overzealous H&M air conditioning, to us? She brought three hoodies to the counter, and we bought them for her. We felt saintly for this, I know.

The three hoodies came out to about 70 bucks, which felt mountainous. It was as if, just because of the price, these three hoodies would be the difference between so much, would wipe our guilt, would remake her. We handed her the H&M bag. We said we hoped she would have fun at her new high school. She was the only one going to New Hanover, a public high school. I was districted for New Hanover, too. But, again, I had made sure that wasn't going to happen for me. I was leaving everyone here, everyone sitting primly in my stained seats, every small child returning from the pool that we passed on the road. I pretended to be very sad about it.

We drove Chloe back to her house, and I watched her bare back rise as she climbed her steps. We might have said goodbye. We might have just let the car run, its engine panting as she closed the door.

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Standing Dead

I watched old men croak on a video screen fed
by white wires. I watched old men die on live
feeds and I was connected to them
with thin, white wires. The old men seized.
The old men slurred. The old men shut off
their cameras but I still felt them pulsating
through the wires, even when the rubber started
to peel away, even when copper zapped my thumb
as I put it to my ear, trying to hear
a heartbeat, a hearing aid with feedback
loops, a talking point that rhymed three ways.
I talked with you in real time about the old men
gargling and dying and standing dead
like trees, standing for group pictures
like a forest stripped of bark. I talked
with you in real time and saw your icon
bubble up with word and felt far, yes,
I shouldn't have talked with you about men
standing dead some miles away, about how I pulled
the wires that connected me to their breath. I had no wires
that connected me to your breath. That was
the difference. When you coughed
in real time, I could not send you
anything of importance. There was no air
to be bought, to be wired from CitiBank.
You were not a public figure; you were
sitting in your bedroom playing me
a cello piece in real time, and the space
between our screens distorted the sound,
made your bow lift
and jumble itself. A private
composition. Your bow cut
through Real Time, peeled
back how absurd
those words looked
together. We could never
stand dead, we
were not people
who were afforded
that luxury. To stand
at all. To be stripped
and propped
up. And then

walked past
as if
living. A
woman said
trees talk
to each other
through underground
movements, and
I thought
of how we learned
to sign so we could talk
during religious services.
We sat like trees, maybe
more like shrubs,
slumped like that,
and we exchanged words
under the wooden table
about small needs, boredom
and bathrooms. Sometimes
we signed *hi* across the room
just to show we could talk
and understand and be
underneath, be blatant like
that. I've had lots of people try
to teach me their secret languages,
and I've forgotten every prefix, every condition. Trees
cannot forget because they are tied in with white wires,
bundled, hands forced to sign. At some point we were caught,
forced to sit on our hands, our wires to each other
folded in on themselves. Someone told me
the smell of freshly cut grass is a warning
to other grasses around it, and maybe that's not true
but I like it. I wanted to sign a warning to you
as perfect as that. No language can lift itself
into the air like that. No language can mark itself
on white jeans like that, can whistle between
its own scent. I was always going to lose.
I was always going to try
to stand dead like old men
and hope animals would walk
past like I was just
stripped of outerness.
I wasn't dead and
I wasn't standing.
I was lying
on the grass
with you,
signing
to each other
letters that stood
for some need
we understood
in the silence.
But speaking it
was bursting out
from underground,
sprouting up. When

I talk, I go over myself
like I'm tilling the ground
for more words. You do this,
too. I have made up lots of warning
words. They have never carried
much with them. I form my hand
into the words *cut grass*. You do not know
what this means. I have many white wires
that feed directly back to my mouth. A loop
of Real Time. When you cut the grass
it was a warning. A snake curled near
the wilting shed. When you cut the trees
it was a presidential conference, it was
a photoshoot. Standing dead looks solemn,
it's true. We cannot do it but we can watch,
we can talk about it under the table,
we can find the grass, surrounded
by cabinets of standing dead,
and feel the warnings released
around our bodies. We can lie
in it, we can form our fists
into letters, our fingers
into wires. And the trunks
will be dead quiet
and the ground
will be yelling.

Maia Siegel

Age: 17, Grade: 12

School Name: Interlochen Arts Academy, Interlochen, MI

Educators: Brittany Cavallaro, Maia Siegel

Category: Personal Essay & Memoir

Photo Roll Documentation of My Body

A photograph of my face at the height of my eating disorder became the picture my phone used to recognize me. This was a comedy of errors. My face did not remain that bony for very long. My phone had to sort my face into different folders: baby fat, thin layer of skin over skull, pointed jaw bone, disappearing cheekbones, neck fat.

I was twelve different people, varying layers of skin stretched over the bones of my face.

My phone always went back to the one picture I did not want to look at. *This is you*, it said. *Maia Siegel*, it said underneath. I won't delete the photo. I am holding a sign in it, proclaiming something useless. I want to witness the photo, to have it prove my vague memories of crying over cheese sticks. It feels historic in some overblown way. The light is yellow, it streaks my nose. My arms are out like chicken wings, like I am about to do a dance. My eyes are large, like I'm scared of the photographer. My eyes still do that thing.

I contorted the picture in my mind, after so many years of averting my eyes. I thought I looked monstrously thin, sickly, obvious. I thought I looked birdlike.

I am looking at The Photo now. It looks almost like it could be normal. No, I want it to be obvious so badly. It was not obvious. Was it?

There were children skinnier than me in every room. I know, I counted. I ate two small microwavable Trader Joe's spanakopita for dinner and spent an hour on the treadmill every day and was not the skinniest child in the room.

There were girls with legs like twigs. There were girls who ate McDonald's every day and had kneecaps that were wider than their calves. There were girls with mothers the size of houses who looked like they could slip between fence slits. I was always confused by the rationing of weight. There was no easy pattern.

I desperately try to find videos of myself during this time. I locate one downloaded from Facebook, of me doing the ALS ice bucket challenge. It is a few photos before The Photo. I pour a small metal bucket of ice water over my head in the shower. I run back to the camera. My shirt is grey and ribbed and soaked. You can start to see the outlines of my body. You can see in my face that I am checking myself out while speaking the necessary words of the challenge. I am pleased with my body in that video. I posted it on Facebook and some creep commented on it and I took it down. I never donated \$10 towards ALS research after posting the video.

A few photos after The Photo is a picture of what I traded in my Halloween candy for: a bag of chocolate-covered cherries and two dark chocolate bars, one with ginger, one with salted almonds. They sit on my yellowing kitchen table. My name is written on them, in a slanted, wilted font. Here is picture proof that my extreme generosity during candy sorting was not selfless. I wanted it all gone.

I loved my body some days, especially in the morning. When I ate, my belly would puff out in a comical balloon. I wanted to be smooth and exist on pea crisps or Honeycrisp apples or some other item sold at Whole Foods. I did not want a birthday cake. We got vegan fudge and everyone had a bite of it. I know the taste; I need no proof.

I don't think I even peeled the cheese stick. I bit into it and then I cried about it. I didn't want the calories, but I was so hungry, and it hurt to sleep. The fridge was like an art gallery. *Do not touch* signs were everywhere, and everything was gorgeous and not for me.

Is there any way to talk about feeding a body that isn't clichéd?

I wanted my body to look like Helen's. I would steal glances at her during math class, check off the body parts I wanted to have. Her legs, which were so dainty. How she would stretch them out in front of her. How she existed on a bell pepper at lunch. I knew she was doing the same thing I was. We offered up our lunches to the table like ascetic saints.

Camille went to a rehab center and the teachers told our entire class, even though she was in 7th grade, a year above us. I remember our friend group was disgusted. Ashamed for her, really. Mad. Probably at least three of us had one, too. We acted like we did not know what the disorder was. The teachers had to explain it and squirmed and sent us out to play.

I thought Camille looked pretty good before she left. She would wear these burgundy flowy shorts, with ruffles at the bottom. She never came back to our school. I remember her sister was very thin. She was Snow White in our school play. I remember digging through my yearbook to find a picture of Fat Camille.

I told my parents about my eating because I wanted to write a piece for some publication and I had a pitch about Beyonce helping me through my body "problems."

I hate how Eating Disorder Writing is practically its own teen girl genre. I hate how *Go Ask Alice* was sold at every Target and I'd read it for tips.

You can't make things up for a piece my parents said. We were walking on the beach.
I'm not, I said. *She helped me*.

I did not write about how Beyonce helped me through an eating disorder. I don't think it's really true, anyway.

I loved Beyonce because she was sexy and moved like she knew it and had hips. I saw her in concert and my mom said she looked like an anime character—her waist was so cinched, her hips so shaped. I knew this was not what genetics had in store for me. I wrapped an ACE bandage around my belly to make a corset.

I was scared of genetics. I was scared that twig-girls could turn into house-mothers. It felt like some kind of illegal shape-shifting. I hated how faces could change in a year. I didn't want to be unrecognizable to myself. I didn't know what I would recognize.

No one in my family had healthy eating habits and I wish I could draw it back to somewhere meaningful like the Holocaust but I can't. My therapist tried to draw it back to the Holocaust and I didn't have the heart to tell her that we weren't there. We were in North Dakota in sod houses. We were in New York existing on bananas. Our starvation period was before, in the pogroms. Can I trace it back to Russian pogroms?

I told myself the one plastic surgery procedure I would never get would be a nose job—that was too self-hating. Everything else was fair game. As long as my hair remained curly and my nose remained curved it wouldn't seem like I was trying to erase anything.

I learned about Anne Frank in 6th grade and everyone said I looked like her. I told this to my grandfather at dinner, and he said I was prettier than Anne Frank. My face turned red and I looked down at my napkin. I asked to be excused.

I don't know when the family joke started. It was about Kybella®, a chin-fat reducing injection that was supposed to 'get rid of what you don't want to inherit from your family.' I think I was twelve. We joked about getting it as a family, and then my brother started researching places that would do it. And then it was not a joke anymore; it was a plan. We planned for fatness and we planned for its removal and we waited for genetics to catch up with our appointment date.

How I judge my body in the photograph of a memory becomes part of every documented memory I have.

For instance: what do you do when every picture of you at age 10 also comes with the thoughts about that picture you had at age 10?

This is what happens: You do not exist at age 10. You send those photos to the Cloud and your phone stops recognizing those photos as you. And you follow the machine's lead.