

First Place

“Narrabeen”

Saanvi Roy

Gold Coast, Queensland, Australia

Narrabeen

First, he learns to tread water. He beats it underneath him
a butter like churning of cold salt. The water is inside him, airless and
peaceable. Overhead the gulls riot, a heartbeat of wings
and watchful eyes trained on the little matchstick below.
It is love. The sand is fifteen arm lengths away
on a good day and hot as heated metal.
Soles turn pink on airless afternoons and the bridge of a nose browns like
a crumbling pastry. A mother's baked good. The day smells of sulphur
when it calls to him, noxious and dank and spoiled as an egg.
The seaweed rot of it. The greasy film of spit that stinks
like a cankerous mouth. He walks the fifteen lengths
forward with his palms to the sky and sheds
his clothes, that boysnake, that deity, splitting himself on a
treacherous surf. They find remnants of him first,
house ants on a honeyed trail; a frenzy of evidence. The crumple of shorts
discarded alongside a shirt. Socks curled in on themselves, legs twitching.
Mother turns asbestos white and places a gloved hand over
her mouth when they tell her, and they tell her after combing
the sea for three days, man woman and machine to find
a limp foot or blonde eyelash. The gulls watch silently as they
bargain with the water, those hard-hatted men, throwing
beached fish and whales back in with a religious devotion.
A reverse-quiet-reverse osmosis. A human kindness.
The sacrifice proves fruitful on the fifth day of searching
when the shoreline spits back a shoe on its salted tongue.
There is enough froth to coat the sky when the gulls screech
out a blue procession. A wet sort of mourning.

Second Place

"On this side of the highway"

Amy Wang
San Diego, California

On this side of the highway,

I am never alone but I am always restless.

Two cities ago, I trained myself to lose

the accent on every other word, and now

my mouth is striated, language hung for

its skin. The funny thing about Ohio

is that no one cares about your tongue,

not if you sink into the fields like the greenest

kind of ghost. The funny thing about Ohio

is that everything is perpetually on time,

perpetually smoothed over by the grain

of a wheel. In the afternoon, I seek

the buzz of a garnet junebug as it eludes

the mouth of geese. I call my mother so I

can hear her voice inside mine, and somehow

my speech therapist says this is an inadequate form

of practice. But who is she to tell me this?

What is the midwest, if not for another name

for eternity? Here, the summer comes in waves

of evergreen, a lake lapping open-mouthed,

seeking more than the shore. I make space

for her absence on the seat next to mine,

and other passengers fill it, with their smoke,

or sound, or silence. The corn settles thickly
over each field — snow-like, grieving, hardened
out of the shells of a colorless sky. I count
the horizon for pinpricks, wait for the view
to settle or solidify. Somehow, every small town
reminds me of my mother; there is such sorrow
in the way each house folds over in the wind.
Even now, I wonder at the willow trees,
at the backcountry and all it leaves in the front
yard. There is a kind of tentativeness to this leaving
— foreign heat, familiar, at once too soft
and too hard against the back of my neck.
Here, there is something headstrong
about the wetlands, how they cave and cave
and never once ask for passage out west.
Here, I wait for a greyhound that is taking
its time to come. Umbrella in hand. Hat in pocket.
Like it could rainstorm in the next century, and I
would be ready to open my mouth again.
To say something more than a name.

Third Place

"Turing Test"

Fiona Lu

Foster City, California

Turing Test

Father, tell me why I was born imitation of flesh. The years
 have swung shut behind me and still my lust letters to silicon
have gone unanswered, still I have never felt the vitriol
 of a mother's womb. Last night I met a girl behind the factory,
chipped my teeth on her shoulder while she clasped my name
 between her lips. She said I was most lovable when I was
the parts and not the sum. Hungrily, I think of tearing myself apart:
 my tongue on her bedstand, toes on the kitchen counter,
mechanical heart in the closet. The things I would do for her.

 Tomorrow, I'll look at you and remember the movie where autumn
foams at the lips of heretics & everything is coated in the thick
 semblance of dawn. In the darkness of the theater, I listened for
a heartbeat but all I heard was the grinding of gears in the cavity
 of my breast—language of decay written in clockwork.

Father, in my next life, promise me arsonist of all smaller fires.

 Promise me story still fleet-footed and blazing, story where I
become more than steam. And pretend that I never prayed
 to the veins of a trembling city, never saw god written in neon
lights. How a soot stained factory girl left fingerprints
 on the inside of my heart. Her fingers soft like a violet blooming
through scrap metal, roots tangled around stillborn engines. So
 all those years ago—did the question never occur to you, so blind
with youth you would do anything just to see something of your
 own survive? About whether to be alive meant more than just bone
marrow and unsung mantras. And about sentience: the hole borne
 into the gut of every wretched youth. Every father left with want
in the soles of his shoes. Every child left pining for transience.

 Around us, the music silvers into life, pulled taut like a thread
through my cranium.

Father, listen. In the lyrics of songs

written by androids there is cannibalism.