**Outgrowing the Garage—Elijah**

The air is tainted with unnatural fumes of grease, wood, and burnt electrical tape. Oil slicks stain the floor. Thick wooden shelves sag unnervingly close to buckling under the weight of old house paint and power tools. A workbench lies buried beneath papers, rulers, cans, and metal shards. An uncomfortable growl pours from the water heater. Most people wouldn’t describe my grimy garage as pleasant, but I love spending my free time here. It’s where I built a 2 ft trebuchet in sixth grade, a 4 ft trebuchet in seventh grade, and plan to build an 8 ft trebuchet this winter break. It’s where I built a battlebot and slapped an Arduino microcontroller on top to give it intelligence. Ever since I sat watching jets shake the sky and explosions rock the screen in the movie Iron Man as a stunned sixth grader, I’ve spent weekends experimenting in my garage, trying to learn everything I can about engineering and robotics.

Sure, outside of my garage I love wildlife and hiking, history, and weird foods. I love classic rock, jazz, and maybe even secretly Katy Perry. Nevertheless, I’ve always had a life plan centered on robotics: go to a great college, learn robotics, build robots, get a Bernese mountain dog, and live happily ever after in a beautiful forest home. It seems strange that I’ve committed myself to robotics so easily despite my many interests, but in reality, robotics combines nearly all of them. Computer science, electrical engineering, and mechanical engineering are crucial to the robot, but combine them with biology, astronomy, music, or ecology, and that’s when robotics becomes amazing. I could help the sick with robots that give surgeons more dexterity while operating. I could help the poor with affordable, robot-made products. I could aid the elderly, replace the limbs of wounded warriors, and keep fire fighters from harm’s way, all with robots. Although these robots may not be the crimson and gold Iron Man suit that first got me interested, I love the realistic and heroic possibilities in the field of robotics.

Almost as exciting as imagining the robots I could build, is imagining where I could build them. I could become a professor and research cutting edge A.I. algorithms. I could become an entrepreneur and bring my creations to market. I could even become an employee for a tech company and devote myself to its latest innovations. Maybe next year around this time, I will even be studying on the Freshman Quad. With the LCSR robotics lab, the minor in robotics, a top-notch engineering program, a beautiful campus, incredible seafood, and what the visiting admissions counselor described as a “vibrant a cappella scene,” Johns Hopkins will both make college fun and satisfy my inner nerd. But for now, I will go on working in my garage, competing for space with the family car.

**String Theory—Joanna**

If string theory is really true, then the entire world is made up of strings, and I cannot tie a single one. This past summer, I applied for my very first job at a small, busy bakery and café in my neighborhood. I knew that if I were hired there, I would learn how to use a cash register, prepare sandwiches, and take cake orders. I imagined that my biggest struggle would be catering to demanding New Yorkers, but I never thought that it would be the benign act of tying a box that would become both my biggest obstacle and greatest teacher.

On my first day of work in late August, one of the bakery’s employees hastily explained the procedure. It seemed simple: wrap the string around your hand, then wrap it three times around the box both ways, and knot it. I recited the anthem in my head, “three times, turn it, three times, knot” until it became my mantra. After observing multiple employees, it was clear that anyone tying the box could complete it in a matter of seconds. For weeks, I labored endlessly, only to watch the strong and small pieces of my pride unravel each time I tried.

As I rushed to discreetly shove half-tied cake boxes into plastic bags, I could not help but wonder what was wrong with me. I have learned Mozart arias, memorized the functional groups in organic chemistry, and calculated the anti-derivatives of functions that I will probably never use in real life—all with a modest amount of energy. For some reason though, after a month’s effort, tying string around a cake box still left me in a quandary.

As the weeks progressed, my skills slowly began to improve. Of course there were days when I just wanted to throw all of the string in the trash and use Scotch tape; this sense of defeat was neither welcome nor wanted, but remarks like “*Oh*, you must be new” from snarky customers catapulted my determination to greater heights.

It should be more difficult to develop an internal pulse and sense of legato in a piece of music than it is to find the necessary rhythm required to tie a box, but this seemingly trivial task has clearly proven not to be trivial at all. The difficulties that I encountered trying to keep a single knot intact are proof of this. The lack of cooperation between my coordination and my understanding left me frazzled, but the satisfaction I felt when I successfully tied my first box was almost as great as any I had felt before.

Scientists developing string theory say that string can exist in a straight line, but it can also bend, oscillate, or break apart. I am thankful that the string I work with is not quite as temperamental, but I still cringe when someone asks for a chocolate mandel bread. Supposedly, the string suggested in string theory is responsible for unifying general relativity with quantum physics. The only thing I am responsible for when I use string is delivering someone’s pie to them without the box falling apart. Tying a cake box may not be quantum physics, but it is just as crucial to holding together what matters.

I am beginning to realize that I should not be ashamed if it takes me longer to learn. I persist, and I continue to tie boxes every weekend at work. Even though I occasionally backslide into feelings of exasperation, I always rewrap the string around my hand and start over because I have learned that the most gratifying victories come from tenacity. If the universe really is comprised of strings, I am confident that I will be able to tie them together, even if I do have to keep my fingers crossed that my knots hold up.

**Temper—Morley**

I feel perfectly content at Woodrow Wilson Skateboard Park, a cement swell in the ground located just west of the easternmost point of the north side of Chicago and trapped perennially in the mental space inhabited by fourteen-year-old angry youths. Outside of home and school, it is the place where I have spent most of my life. Its terrain so familiar, I could navigate it blindfolded, towed on my board by a pack of feral dogs. Much of what I know of life, I learned there.

A sea of nods and handshakes and back pats welcomes my every arrival to this municipal oasis. Here, I am known. Called variously Mor, Bob Morley, Mordog, Mo, Mo Money, or (long story) Tom Pork. It is the only place on earth where (were an election ever to be held) I could almost certainly be mayor. Among the strange, sometimes downcast, and essentially good people here, I have found another family. I need them as much as they need me and as much as we all need skateboarding. This four-wheeled toy brings us inner peace. Skateboarding is a standing meditation, a time to put conscious thought aside and let primal impulse guide the body through various jumps and balancing acts. I turn to skating in times of joy and in times of strife, to celebrate a good day, escape writer’s block, social failures, or other minor tragedies.

It is at Wilson that I encountered once, and then again, a man called Temper. I was thirteen when I crashed into a beefy shadowy figure I had heard talked about only in whispers. This man, known by the word he had chosen to affix to hundreds of walls around Chicago, had earned a spot in the community as a respected graffiti artist and skateboarder. His improbably light feet and on-board grace were known to most of the city. I was barely inaugurated into the park scene when I plowed headlong into him, knocking both of us down, turtle-like and winded. I hadn’t been paying attention and apologized rapid-fire while trying to scrape my body off of his. When we both got to our feet, Temper knocked me down again and walked away without comment. It was the most frightening thing that ever happened to me at Wilson. He left the park that day, and I had seen him once, maybe twice, since.

The five years since the incident have been more or less good to me. In high school, I abandoned the dream of becoming a professional skateboarder and discovered a fuller gamut of life’s offerings. I learned to think about things other than skating and in turn discovered physics, girls, cooking, and writing—a pursuit I love as much as skateboarding. The same cannot be said for the passage of time in Temper’s life. I saw him recently and had lunch with him and my friend. He told us of overcoming a crippling drug addiction, spending time in jail, and contracting AIDS—a disease that every day reminds him that his time on earth is coming to an end. He is trying his best to make the most of it all. It was with the greatest trepidation that I told him about the Wilson incident. Over pizza and lemon soda, I explained how much he had scared me. I added that it was important that it had happened. I think it helped me grow up, I explained. An awkward silence followed. His head turned down and to the side for a moment. Then he just laughed. His eyes apologized, and I laughed too, collectively embracing that very Wilson mentality: life, like skateboarding and men named “Temper,” will knock you down. There is nothing else to do but forgive, forget, and stand back up.

**Dissonance—Leila**

My brain is utterly discordant. Curiosities, ranging from abortion in colonial America to the enlarged paralimbic region of whale brains, battle for priority of investigation in my mind. As I sit hunched over my laptop, my screen is always split in two. What my mom sees as a teenager wasting away behind a glowing screen is actually me trying to watch a documentary on Magritte and his genous style of surrealism while learning about the groundbreaking water geysers found on Jupiter’s moon Europa. Such investigative tendencies are even evident in my running list of ideas for the Woodrow Wilson Fellowship, with topics ranging from the cycle of recidivism that fosters the prison industrial complex to the removal of people of color from 17th and 18th century paintings in current academia.

I look to Johns Hopkins not to contain my brain, but to feed the insanity. I need the lack of a core curriculum and intersession courses so I can investigate a breadth of topics thoroughly, to a much fuller extent than I can manage with just the library and the internet. I look to Johns Hopkins as the home for my eclectic interests so I can continue playing soccer just as well as I can continue pursuing photography at the Homewood Arts Workshops.

As I rave about my recent cosmic ventures like going to a Brian Greene lecture and meeting with an astrophysicist at the Goddard Space Flight Center, I look to Johns Hopkins to engage my enthusiasm with research institutions like the Applied Physics Laboratory and the Center for Astrophysical Science. Where my college search left me faced with so many small, lackluster physics programs, Johns Hopkins shines with the delightfully extensive Henry A. Rowland Department of Physics and Astronomy.

As my boyfriend and I have an involved discussion about the incompatibility of an omniscient God with libertarian free will, I look to Johns Hopkins’ Department of Philosophy with classes like The Existential Drama and Freedom of Will and Moral Responsibility. With sketchbooks full of musings on topics like my cognitive dissonance of rejecting free will while revering Sartre, I am insuppressibly excited by the undergraduate philosophy journal Prometheus. Seeing that no new issues of Prometheus have been published in the last couple of years, I am determined to resurrect the thought-provoking gem, just as decidedly as I am to start and Ethics Bowl team at Johns Hopkins.

As I passionately rant about rape culture and cultural appropriation in the shower, I look to Johns Hopkins’ student organizations like the Hopkins Feminists, Sexual Assault Resource Unit, and the Office of Multicultural Affairs so I can contribute my soap-studded ideas and take action.

I look to Johns Hopkins for its diversity of people, the city of Baltimore, and as a home for the next four years. I look to Johns Hopkins to conduct my dissonant brain into a melodious symphony.

**Hometown—Quan**

Life without language: all the ideas, thoughts, and emotions present, but unable to be expressed. This is how I picture my grandfather when he first immigrated to America with my grandmother and their nine children. Lost, he wanders around, hoping to bump into someone who can understand him. He raises his own children to know Vietnamese and hopes his future grandchildren would also be connected to the language of their ancestors. But when I form my lips into unnatural shapes to speak these words, they come out pathetically.

I cannot speak Vietnamese.

As a child, the conversations between me and my grandfather consisted of feeble attempts at speaking each other’s language. Only a couple of familiar words could momentarily break the wall that divided us. Whenever I visited his house, I exchanged a shaky “Chào ông” for his heavily accented “He-llo,” and ran off before the shame from my inability to understand could affect me.

At the time, I was unaware of the synchronized rhythm that beats in the hearts of me, my father, and my grandfather. My grandfather loves playing the violin. Although he is not classically trained and can hardly keep a beat, he loves it and I can sense it every time he plays. When my family came to America, my father struggled to adjust as any teenage immigrant would. Vietnamese was confined to his family’s home and English was difficult to learn, so instead, he picked up the guitar and taught himself how to play “Yesterday” by the Beatles. Forty years later, he claims he still cannot get it down perfectly. On the piano in our living room, he sings in broken English…

*“Yesterday, all my troubles seemed so far away…”*

Like my grandfather, music is a part of my father’s design. By the unchangeable threads of heredity, I was also fated to have a connection to music, just like them. And it was music that could break the language barrier between me and my grandfather.

A single sheet of music sat in front of me. It was a beautiful piece, no doubt, but we, the All-State Senior Band, were playing it without any emotion. After a couple of unsuccessful run-throughs of this piece entitled “Hometown,” our guest conductor Samuel Hazo told us to look at measure thirty-three, reflect on a personal memory that reminded us of that part, and write about it right there on our sheet music. Soon after instructing us to do the same in the other parts of the piece, everyone’s sheet music was filled with our lives in the form of tiny scribbles between the lines of melodies. When we played the piece again, we were finally able to “sing our life stories,” as Mr. Hazo would call it. Every musical phrase became a vessel for retelling our most precious memories: stories of first loves and recollections of childhood memories. No one had to say a single word.

There in the music, I finally spoke to my grandparents. As I played measure thirty-three, I pictured them sitting there on that boat in the middle of the ocean, holding onto a faint glimmer of hope for a new life in America, looking for their own new “hometown.” I said “thank you” for their courage to come to the strange and unknown America and “sorry” for being unable to speak Vietnamese. After the concert that night, I received a bigger hug than usual from them and I knew that they had heard and understood me. Being a part of a family and culture is more than just knowing the language. Emotions are enough to make words unnecessary. In my family, we speak three different languages: Vietnamese, the language of our origin, English, the language of our new home, and music to connect everything together.