

East Fork: A Journal of the Arts

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High School Writing Contest

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1st Place

Riley Courtney:
Dear Esther, Love Shelby

2nd Place

Maira Faisal:
On and Of Hyphens

3rd Place

Rachel Luhn:
Perceptions of Fame

Honorable Mention

Addison Maloney:
Theomachy

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Dear Esther, Love Shelby By: Riley Courtney

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Ink stained the floor where Miriam Kildare's desk once sat. The room remained vacant for years following her passing, as the nearby buildings began remodeling, and the apartment building prices soared. Only the upper floors had been retouched on her particular building, and minimally at that. A complete deconstruction would be necessary to truly fix the apartment fixture, and the stubborn owner of the building remained insistent upon keeping it the same. To her, the building felt like history.

For lease, signs littered the building's entrance and coated the exterior walls in the plastic film like material. In such a pleasant neighborhood, the type who could afford the rent wasn't the type attracted to Miriam's former apartment. A couple of people would tour it from time to time, yet were never able to get past the piercing metallic odor and haunting sense they were greeted upon stepping into Miriam's room.

The room had been uninhabited for nearly 43 years before the owner thought it necessary to lower the price. As the expenses of owning the complex continued to rise, she was losing money by leaving it empty and cutting her losses.

Almost overnight, the signs surrounding the building doubled, announcing the room's price drop, though she wasn't flooded with desperate offers for it as she thought she would be. She only got one over the three-week period it was listed, and she was forced to accept the young girl's offer.

Shelby Clive moved into Miriam's old apartment at the young age of 17. With her, she had only a single cardboard box, wrinkled from her time on the streets, and a backpack with nothing more than a sleeping bag, a tattered sweater, and a waterlogged journal. To the owner, offering her the apartment felt more like a charity case than a sale.

It didn't take long for her to move in, she carried all her belongings in with her on her first visit to the apartment. The room was on the first floor. The walls were coated with a thick layer of primer, in attempt to resemble the minimalistist modern look some of the other apartments had, but it was chipping away in multiple areas to reveal Miriam's floral wallpaper. Shelby preferred the flowers to the sickly white paint and admired the small pieces that were showing. They were bright red carnations – the same type of flower she would give her past lover on special occasions. Never in large bunches, but she would discreetly hide one for her to find, leaving everyone else at wonder who it was from. Neither of them ever acknowledged the gesture, they never had time to.

She was left to her own devices, having the entire room to herself. For the first time in nearly a year, she had a roof over her head, running water, and an actual floor to sleep on. She wasn't a religious person, but if she had been, she would have considered the apartment an act of God. She was safe.

Night fell and because of the age and the extensive vacancy of her apartment, electricity hadn't been installed. The chill of night fell over her room as darkness swept away any warmth the sunlight offered. With only the moonlight as her guide, Shelby unpacked her sleeping bag into the closet in an attempt to preserve her body heat within an enclosed area.

Old records and boxes sat at her feet throughout the entire night, holding remnants of Miriam's time there, and she made a mental note to herself to explore those in the morning, hoping to find warmer clothing. Winter was approaching, and the sweater in her bag was her only remnant of last winter's protection. She would also need a job to make the apartment payments, and her current garb wouldn't let her pass an interview at even the lowest entry-level jobs. Exhausted from the day's excitement, and from built-up sleep deprivation, Shelby blacked out within seconds of getting into her sleeping bag and didn't wake until late afternoon the following morning.

Miriam's boxes were heavy and falling apart with age. The cardboard felt so painfully dry, and the wooden crates threatened to splinter Shelby's hands with their weight. She forages around them, finding primarily tax papers, old family photographs, and a couple of letters between her family and her. Situationally, the two of them were nearly identical. In the letters, there was never an expression of love, simply reminders that she wasn't allowed back, and direct quotes from family gatherings expressing everyone's hatred towards her. It wasn't clear what it was she did to deserve the treatment, but Shelby sought comfort in their similarities. She continued to dig, setting the letters off to the side. She hadn't heard from her family since she had to leave, and while the letters weren't anything near kind, she missed her mother's contact and her father's guidance. Small tears wet her under the eyes, though her soft sobs remained silent as she filled through the boxes.

There were a few sleeping gowns, and while they were thinner than anything that could bring her warmth, they appeared to be of real silk and it had been a while since she had gotten to own something so genuinely nice. There were a few pens at the bottom of one crate, with a filled notebook next to them. She set the pens aside, eager to pick back up on her journaling, and explores the notebook with increasing curiosity about Miriam's life. Each page dates back nearly 62 years. Ink pools coat most pages, placing themselves in between words, resembling those staining the floor. Her handwriting is a soft, legible cursive, and every entry starts with some form of a greeting. *Dear Esther,* most read.

*They have done what I feared most. They found us, and I am being forced to leave. All my family has been notified, and I am left with nowhere to go. Tonight is my last night here, and I write this in secret for fear they will take this too from me. If this somehow returns to you, know that you are not the reason I left. You were always my reason to stay, but now I have no choice. We will meet again in another life, my love, and in that life, we will be infinitely accepted. Now, I must get to packing or they won't let me take anything. Yours,
Miriam Kildare*

Tears flooded helplessly from Shelby's eyes. Over the past year, she has been careful not to cry. She has been careful to keep her story to herself. She has been careful to keep her guard up, but now she sits alone in her new apartment building with no one around to hurt her and lets the past year's worth of grief fill the pages of Miriam's notebook. Her mind races though remains empty at the same time. All she can think about is Eden, left alone with no explanation, no goodbye. Eden was her Esther, whoever that was to Miriam, and she has silently ached in her absence since the day she was forced to leave. She flips a few pages forward, moving years forward into Miriam's life. She spent her time on the streets, begging for food, money, and any hospitality people could offer before she found an apartment willing to let her stay. Situationally, Miriam and Shelby were identical. The initial entries comprised a single line, letting Esther know where she was that day, how she was doing, or simply a reminder of her love for her. Outside of the journal, Miriam never mentioned Esther. She tells her frequently how she wishes she could shout her name in the streets and find pride in their love the way her male counterparts do their wives. *Dear Esther,* Shelby flips between the longer entries, the exhaustion from the day's emotions already tugging her back to sleep, but insistent on finding more. She had met others like her before, most of the other teens she met on the streets were homeless for similar reasons, but she made it a point to keep her secret to herself.

I wish to marry, and I wish to marry you. If I die, I want you there by my side. I want you to be the last thing I see, and I want you to be here with me now. There is an apartment for sale in the city, I can afford it working as a secretary at a realtors firm, but it doesn't feel right to settle. We are old enough now, we could find each other and our families can't have a say. I will find you, Esther. I promise you, I will. We will live together in my new apartment, and all I own will be yours too. There isn't a thing that could stand between us anymore, darling. These are the days we have waited for.

*Love,
Miriam.*

The tears had stopped out of necessity; there wasn't anything left to cry. Every sleepless night, her only comfort had been the thought of an eventual reunion with Eden. At the moment, this journal felt more like a prophetic retelling of her experiences so far. She needed to find her – she needed Miriam to find her.

Dear Esther,
Today I'm taking a sick day. I don't have many left, but need to return home. I'm heading towards our hometown for the first time since I left. My parents have passed, and my brother notified me to the funeral. A lot of me feels like I should be sad, but they are the cause for so much of my misery. They are the reason we were forced apart. I know what we were doing was wrong, we were the town's biggest sin, and I prayed every day for us to be cured, but after a certain point we must accept our damnation. As must those around us. I'm afraid of how they will treat me when I return. I'll be back before dark, so the meeting won't be too prolonged. I know you won't be there, but part of me is praying for your presence. I grieved the loss of my parents the moment they asked me to leave, and I am simply returning for my brother's sake. Today will be a hard day, and I wish you could be here with me.

*With Love,
Miriam K.*

Dark was once again approaching, casting its ever-deepening shadow across the apartment. Daylight diminishes, and the strain to read the entries increased the longer she tried. Desperate to continue, Shelby rummaged around through the crates until she found a candle and two matches. Only one was completely intact. She delicately presses the first head against the striker, letting it erupt into a short-lived, smoky flame. Her body shakes with urgency, as she attempts to light the wick of the candle, but the flame dissipates before the wick even resembles a flame. With the remaining match, she holds the candle in one hand, the match in the other, and the strike between her knees. The tip of the wick rests in her shaky, nimble grasp, as close as she can get to the striker. When this flame lights, Shelby lets out a soft sigh of relief, expelling both the nerves from the candle and what she's about to discover. The more she reads, the more she's convinced she is reading her life play out on paper.

Dear Miriam,
I was all for nothing. The entry dates are just a few days from the last. I saw her. Not 'you'. Standing, watching the burial from a safe distance, out of my family's sight. She had aged, she was much taller than she was when we were younger, and even from a distance, I could see the way the world had shaped her physique. She was looking for me, and I couldn't take my eyes off of her. When she spotted me, it wasn't a look of eagerness, it was the longing temptation we once held in private. It wasn't anything but remorse. Her body fell with a sudden disappointment. I found her after. She lingered, waiting for me despite her apparent lack of interest. Tears welled in my eyes, but it felt repelling to be around her. Any attraction, any connection we once shared, had vanished. She yelled at me, sobbing, screaming my name. I had ruined her and left her to pick up the pieces. I ruined her life in the way my parents ruined mine; she told me.

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I was all for nothing. The entry dates are just a few days from the last. I saw her. Not 'you'. Standing, watching the burial from a safe distance, out of my family's sight. She had aged, she was much taller than she was when we were younger, and even from a distance, I could see the way the world had shaped her physique. She was looking for me, and I couldn't take my eyes off of her. When she spotted me, it wasn't a look of eagerness, it was the longing temptation we once held in private. It wasn't anything but remorse. Her body fell with a sudden disappointment. I found her after. She lingered, waiting for me despite her apparent lack of interest. Tears welled in my eyes, but it felt repelling to be around her. Any attraction, any connection we once shared, had vanished. She yelled at me, sobbing, screaming my name. I had ruined her and left her to pick up the pieces. I ruined her life in the way my parents ruined mine; she told me.

The ink runs off the page and pools up in small watery bolts on the paper, making it increasingly more difficult to read. Shelby studies Esther's words as if they were Eden's, letting each one of them strike her over and over. She hated me as much as I loved her. She set the notebook down, not being able to take any more, and blew the candle out. It had open, with only a couple of pages left, as she shoved her belongings back into her box and bag. With a sudden sense of urgency, she knew she had to go. She had to find Eden. Taking that month's rent, she left behind the journal, letters, and ink-stained floors, and headed towards the bus. She was going home, she was going to Eden.

Dear Esther,
Read the last entry.
In another lifetime, my love.
Burnt red taints this page, laying open on the cold apartment floor as she heads towards Esther in her other lifetime.

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On and Of Hyphens By: Maira Faisal

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Like stomps on concrete,
I follow the plunges and pushes of English,
how it arches, pierces through words,
my tongue-tied touch stammering
the skims and hugs of Urdu,
its careful footfalls on thawing dirt.

The curve of consonants sour
like a vibrant candy staling,
potential left in a gleaming wrapper,
lost in the swirling Atlantic
of my hybrid, hyphenated existence.

In graphology, it's said
a crossed out signature
is desire to cross out one's life,
distance between names
is distance between identities,
how high the slash of a t
or far out the dot of an i is –
it *means* something.

The uptick or downturn
of Pakistani-American,
what does that mean?
Is the hyphen pointing to true north,
an arrow on the compass of latitudes
of the borders I claim as home?
How can such a small space hold
so much subconscious meaning?
Or is this the overanalyzing
of the non-native, non-tourist,
forever foreigner, desperate cartographer
mapping the intangibility of belonging?

If I mapped my own body,
I feel I'd find a "Made in Pakistan" label
sown onto an American soul.

I'm an emigrant and immigrant,
export and import easily
exhaled and inhaled,
breathed into assimilation,
into newness that never wears off.
Dogearred novels and creased sneakers
become dreams when your skin speaks
stuttered syllables in one country,
your tongue is washed white in the other.

How many hyphens am I of,
how many will come after?
Fractions and dashes of beginnings,
counted even in Spanish before the Urdu
I can recall but twenty-two numbers of.

If you do ever count my starts,
count them with the ends of dulled pencils
and the ink drops of a pen
homogenized into a stroke
of diasporic intent.

And, for once,
count me in.

Why not tell Maira what you thought of their award-winning poem?! Be sure to put their name, your email, "On and Of Hyphens" in the subject, and your message so they can see your comment!

Name: *

Email: *

 Check here to receive email updates

Subject: *

Message: *

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Rachel Luhn

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Perceptions of Fame

The stage lights brightened and the surrounding room darkened, ushering a brief silence across the room. Two black chamois chairs showed themselves. One sat empty whilst the other was occupied by a short middle-aged man with a humorously large red bowtie. He sat straight up with his hands clenched tightly around a small stack of papers. He anxiously shuffled through them as he constantly shot glances between the people staring at him and off into an unseen space behind the curtains, expecting someone. A bead of sweat could be seen atop his brow. The hypnotizing hum of the bright lights was now as loud as ever. The quiet tension only continued to grow and so the crowd began to murmur, pondering and speculating about what was to unfold before them. Many had simply wandered into the theater as the sign outside had encouraged an audience free of charge. But there was no indication about what was to transpire here. Who were they going to see? Was it a famous celebrity? A world-renowned chef? The President? Several small whispers could be heard from the left...later to the right...to the center...and to the left again. Those who didn't speak were on the edges of their seats, waiting with bated breath. Nothing happened for several long moments.

And then the footsteps came. They were a thunderous click-clacking sound, reverberating off the hardwood and into the ears of the restless crowd, stealing away the whispers and murmurs. They were slow and with purpose, emerging from the unknowing darkness of the curtains-the exact place the man with the bowtie had been staring at prior. Emerging from the shadows was a very tall man whose suit was dyed a rich navy blue and dotted with gold buttons that gleamed in the spotlights. He had the shiniest of black hair that was slicked back at the top and delicately fell behind his ears. His face appeared freshly shaved, the tan skin glowing in the stage lights. The straight nose, narrow eyes, and straight mouth pulled into the slightest ounce of a smile harmoniously created what many would simply dream of: a work of art. He was what women praised and what men envied. A perfect, flawless human being that drew the attention of anyone who gazed at him without fail.

Everyone watched as he glided over to the empty chair, his long limbs neatly folding together into a tentative position as he sat down. The man with the bowtie's voice squeaked as he introduced himself to be the host of tonight's showing. There was still no clear explanation for what they were about to view. He paused and cleared his throat as if expecting the audience to applaud. However, they were still entranced by the man in the navy blue suit, who suddenly turned his head to look upon them. With this, the audience erupted in whistles, shouts, and cheers. The man said nothing and continued to smile.

As the noise began to falter, he reached out for the pitcher of water placed between him and the host. Everyone watched in awe as he poured a glass and placed it to his lips. More outrageous cheers exploded. And silence again as he set the glass down. The host rubbed his hands together nervously, a wavering smile plastered on his face as he did so. After praising the man for his glory and receiving more cheers, the host asked him how he reached great success.

With this, the man suddenly stood up and stuck his arms out. The gold buttons on his suit were glowing now due to the direct beam of light from the stage. The audience's eyes shone with wonder. There were no words that followed. The host asked for no elaboration of this display and could only stare now as if he had lost all sense of self and could only devote every ounce of attention to this perfect man, who could win a thousand hearts just by breathing. His eyes flooded with tears of joy as he stared up at the man standing so tall and grand, with elegant shadows cast beneath his cheekbones and along his jaw and perfect arms that fit snugly inside his sleeves. He needed to know who he was. There was more roaring applause as the man sat back down and refolded his limbs together. The host then asked the man in a timorous voice the question they were all desperate to ask: who was he?

The entire theater went quiet once more. The people in their seats didn't shuffle or mutter at all. This driving question so desperately wanted to be answered that the weight of anticipation stood heavily on everyone's minds.

The man said nothing. Still smiling, he stood up once more. On instinct, they cheered again, but it didn't last as long, as with one swift motion the man ripped away the sleek navy-blue fabric from himself, tousled his black hair, and wiped the makeup off of his face. When all was taken away, everyone was staring now at an abnormally thin, unkempt man dressed in torn clothes that were graying with age. The host stopped writhing with anxiety and was still. The audience sat dumbfounded in their chairs, some open-mouthed in wonder, and others rising in anger. They had been fooled by a man who otherwise would have been given no thought or value. To them, he was nothing now.

Despite the dissatisfaction, the man flashed a toothless grin, gave a generous bow, leaped off the stage, and calmly vanished out into the night.

Are you fan of Rachel's work? Then let them know! Be sure to put their name, your email, title of their work in the subject, and your message so they can see your comment!

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Addison Maloney Theomachy

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A piercing thud split through the orchestra's enchanting performance. The corner of the grand piano cleaved through wooden panes, jagged lines separating varnished wood. Splinters clicked as they bounced off of immaculate white keys, either that or getting caught between the cracks. Nimble strings that had produced a grievous concerto just moments prior now cried out against their abuser, hanging vainly onto the breaking pieces of their exoskeleton.

The conductor blanched, hands suspended in air with strings of disturbance. He looked like a villainous puppet, dressed in a black tuxedo with thin white hair that resembled corn silk combed over a satiny bald spot. The orchestra stopped in cacophonous confusion, bows still on their strings as their eyes darted from the rogue soloist to the unsettled crowd.

The soloist heaved, slicked back hair falling over crazed brown eyes. His skin glittered in the harsh orange light with a thin sheen of sweat as he glared at the unmoving audience; they stared back, as if watching a lion in a zoo behind cracking glass. Observed. As he always had been.

Bred and groomed to be a prodigy up until he stepped through the doors of Juilliard, his name thrown around the ivy halls like an unpinned grenade. To them, he was a rival; he was the common enemy even the most passionate of nemeses united against. Armed with only a below-average violin and a gift he had never asked for, one he quite frankly didn't deserve, he became the victim of orchestral terror; the grand staff had been torn off the page and ploughed through his chest like a wooden spike.

Here, in the harsh spotlight of Carnegie Hall, he turned to the appalled first chair violinist, the concertmaster, who met his gaze with unwavering provocation. He extended a slender, calloused finger; wordlessly, the concertmaster placed the violin onto his shoulder, slotting it perfectly onto the purple marks the instrument had sucked into his neck like a pestilent lover.

The concerto started once more, a single man carrying the piece to a close; the orchestra looked from the frozen conductor to the concertmaster, who played a discordant excuse of a concerto. His fingers dashed across the fingerboard with little regard for the piece itself; he pressed out each note without letting the uneven bow strokes catch up to him. It was enough to make Shostakovich roll in his grave, make him dance in all of his Saint-Saëns glory; he murdered the piece, pulling note from horrid note with reckless abandon.

He played like death. It sounded like a flatline; the music had been killed, assassinated in its hospital bed, overdosed on morphine, smothered by the nurse with a pillow.

The soloist raised calloused hands, plucking in the air in an uneven rhythm. He was conducting, driving the train descending into hell off of the tracks it had laid.

He played for every scar on his hands. He played for every tear dripped onto ink-mutilated sheet music. He played for every skipped meal. He played for every dollar spent towards his own inevitable demise, only to be damned to second best. His bridge was falling, crumbling beneath his feet into the boiling water.

But he knew this wasn't the end. It was never the end. He knew, as he played to the rogue soloist's volatile cadence, that he and the strings scoring his hardened fingertips would never part with him. A toxic love. He was trapped; the music owned him and he was doomed to it's bidding.

Everyone in the room was its slave.

A slave to the tempo, the once beautiful, even cadance the soloist had shot and killed like a fawn in the wrong side of the forest. A doe weeped for it, but the hunter did not; he only saw a dinner menu scrawled across the spotted fur. He dragged it by the ears through the Carnegie, allowing each eye to gaze upon it, to weep for what they had lost – something that had never been theirs to begin with.

They were two sides of the same coin, concertmaster and soloist; they both wanted to be one another. One striving for the validation he never got, and the other forced to live a dream that was never his own. The concertmaster played to become what he never was: number zero. Higher than first. He wanted to pull the wooden spike from the soloist's heart and pierce it through his own; only he was deserving of it. Maybe then his sisters would embrace him; maybe then they would turn away from their own stifling vainglory and smile at him. Maybe they would consider loving him.

Don't be daft. Their own wealth blinded them; piles of glittering gold reflected the sunlight tenfold, permanently leaving their own brother unseen, unacknowledged. He was well acquainted with the feeling; every one of his achievements had been disregarded since he was a child. By the time he had made it into Juilliard, both of his sisters had been well into their careers; identical twins sharing an identical fortune. One a beloved actress, the other on the executive board of a pediatric hospital she had co-founded (ironic, really, seeing as she had not an ounce of compassion in her blackened heart). He was third place in his own family, and that was without his numerous cousins and young aunts and uncles filling in the gaps.

The conductor dropped his arms. The orchestra began to whisper. The hall was erupting into noise again. They were looking away from him. Their attention was diverting. This wasn't what he wanted. He needed it back. He needed it all back; he needed every eye on him, every heart beating in sync with his own as it had been just seconds prior. He needed their validation, no matter how superficial it may be.

His bow hit the edge of the wood. There was no string to catch it's fall. Rosin left a juxtaposing white streak across the darkly varnished wood.

The G string curled around the scroll – an untimely ending.

The concertmaster's hand froze; a red line appeared just above the knuckle of his thumb. It looked as though he had been whipped – god forbid he find it comforting, the only familiar thing he had felt in months. It reminded him of home.

The soloist retracted his hands. He glanced over at the conductor, who stared at him with both hands leaned on the music stand in front of him. He was an ugly man; the soloist almost felt bad for him, and judging by the golden band suffocating his purple finger, so did some poor woman. He waited for a harsh scolding accusing him of throwing his gift away.

Except now it wouldn't be accusatory.

The concertmaster left the violin slotted between his jaw and shoulder, staring at his hand as if petrified; he did not blink, breath did not escape his lungs. Blood beaded on the surface of his skin, threatening to paint the fingerboard of his violin.

It wouldn't be the first time, he thought with a sardonic grin.

The soloist glanced back at the stunned crowd, taking this moment to slip behind the marble and into safety, a place where hundreds of eyes weren't looking down on him from high balconies through opera glasses, sitting in their velvet chairs and tailored suits. A place where no one around him knew who he was, what he was running from.

A deserter to the war he had started. He had injured the enemy, left him on the battlefield to rot. Left him for the sea of vultures to pick at his bones, his flesh the main course of their lavish full-course dinner.

They could have been something. The concertmaster knew that as he shrugged off his suit jacket, the pristinely ironed fabric crumpling against the marble like a crushed soda can. They could have made millions together, a perfect dichotomy. But their time was already up. The final grain of sand in their hourglass had funneled into the bottom half. There would be no words shared, no apologies, nothing to end their feud – and this is how it would remain. Star-crossed strangers.

Varnish glittered in the same harsh lights that had run a prodigy off of his stage. The concertmaster laid his violin in a bed of wooden shards, in the nest it had created.

He placed an arm across his abdomen, his hand leaving behind a red stain on his silken white shirt. He flashed his bleached teeth, folding his body 90 degrees. Scattered applause echoed through the hall.

This was his spotlight.