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Malcolm

AILEE YANAGISHITA

English 273 (Introduction to Literature: Creative Writing and Literature)

Mentor: Joseph Han



Malcolm is the first short story I have written in my undergraduate career. It has given me a glimpse into

the craft of writing and the labor one must pour into improving their skill. Malcolm is ultimately a story about youth and in this sense it is dated to this time in my youth as well. I hope you enjoy reading it.

“Malcolm” was a short story written for my Introduction to Literature: Creative Writing course. It was an expansion on a story I wrote in my senior year of high school. The original idea was to create something with time jumps similar to those in the film Pulp Fiction. I really enjoyed the idea that as a viewer, bits and pieces of the future, present, and past were given in a non-chronological order. I thought the challenge of applying this model to a written story was very exciting. My goal was to piece together these moments in a way that by the end, the audience had a complete narrative.

The Precise Moment

The woman looked into her rearview mirror and checked on her infant son in the backseat. She saw what appeared on first glance to be confetti flying out of a bright red vehicle. The convertible was approaching her quickly in the next lane. In the second that it passed, time appeared to warp, each millisecond stretched beyond capacity. She saw the blur of an Asian boy in the driver’s seat. The teenager had a serene expression on and was talking to the other one standing beside him on the passenger seat. He was tossing scraps of colorful paper out of the car by the handful. That boy, also Asian, had black hair, freckles, and a funny smile on his face. He was laughing as he threw the paper into the air, arms spread out as he did so, fingertips toward the sky. The moment was over and they whipped past her. 0.251 seconds later, one of the scraps smacked her windshield. A rectangular piece of paper—pastel orange, a bold **500** printed in the center. When their car reached the horizon and escaped her view, the woman pulled over. Once on the side of the road, she turned to look at the scene behind her. The money was littered along the freeway; a couple of bills still caught by the wind’s embrace, rocking back and forth like a carriage. Most however were scattered on the ground, charred black from being run over. She could hear her child crying for her in the backseat.

5 Years Ago

At thirteen years old my best friend was a boy named Malcolm Law; our friendship a consequence of living less than four blocks from one another. We often walked my dog. I watched Malcolm, leash in his hand, skinny frame being pulled forward by my mighty chihuahua. Malcolm’s parents never allowed him anything larger than fighting fish so he always wanted to hold the leash. He cried the day we found said fish floating belly up in the tank. His mom yelled at us for trying to send it down the drain. She told him in Chinese that we were going to fuck up the plumbing. In our minds, we were delivering him back home. We gave Sam a proper eulogy but he was ultimately laid to rest in the garbage, wrapped in newspaper his mother used for cooking dinner that night.

I had gotten over the initial excitement of pets years before. When we had first bought my chihuahua, my father told me that dogs originally lived in packs and that there was a strict hierarchy within their social group. He said that you had to show the dog who was boss; otherwise it would do whatever it wanted whenever it wanted. Malcolm wasn't aware of this fact, something my dog had cleverly picked up on. Whenever there was a bush the dog had to urinate on or a telephone pole he just had to sniff, Malcolm would go flying in whatever direction the dog was pulling him.

We were walking past my neighbor's orchid garden, the one they had angrily said the dog shouldn't be peeing on when Malcolm turned to me and suddenly asked if I sometimes felt lonely.

"Sometimes," I told him. The orchids we were standing over were such a deep shade of purple that they reminded me of the bruises that once bloomed on my mother's face. I was six when my father had given her a swollen eye. The colors left behind seeped into the surrounding skin. She hid this with dark sunglasses. When it had happened I was crouched in the other room, closing my eyes and covering my ears, trying hard not to listen and not to feel. I was clenching myself together as if the stiller I was, the sooner it would end. She lay on her side, legs curled towards her stomach, arms tucked in like a child in a mother's belly. I knew she was crying but she was so still and I couldn't move to her.

"Do you feel lonely, Malcolm?" I asked. He was watching the dog lift his leg and piss onto the flowers when he responded.

"Sometimes. When I think about things too much."

Malcolm was the only person I told. We were eleven and our whole grade had gone to camp for a week. The two of us shared a bunk bed and it was on those bed-bug-ridden mattresses that we exchanged two secrets. I didn't talk about that one time but using as few words as possible I told him that my dad hits my mom sometimes. In exchange, he told me that his dad had once cheated on his mom. She found out when the woman called their house. He said his mother was crying and his father was sorry. They're together to this day if you're wondering. The woman was someone from his workplace. I don't think she ever contacted them again. At the time, I thought

calling was the strangest thing she could've done. These days I think she wanted to be acknowledged. Thinking about it like that makes it easier to forgive her. I think Malcolm has.

1 Hour Ago

I was riding my skateboard in the hallway of my mother's office building. The carpet wasn't ideal for skating but if I had to be there, I wasn't going to spend my time in the office. My mother is the one who spends all of her day there. Even when they've shut off most of the lights, she stays. She sits behind her computer for hours, the paleness of her face emphasized by the glow of the screen. I look at her and am reminded of the ceaseless nature of time. The skin on her hands is loose, I could pinch my fingers and stretch it off her thin bones. I hear the noise of the elevator and stop. Mr. Chee, my mother's boss, steps out. Mr. Chee is a bald, old, grumpy Chinese man. He and the other businessmen pass me without a word. A few minutes later, I follow after them. My feet trace the familiar path and arrive at her cubicle. The nameplate reads "Anna Matsumoto." It's cheap plastic.

"I think Mr. Chee is down to his final hair."

She laughs. "Enough of that. Did you finish your homework?"

I take a seat at the chair in front of her desk. "Not yet."

"This is why Malcolm is going to the state university and you're going to community college."

"That was my—"

"Anna, Mr. Gunder is here so we need to finalize plans on the condominium, come to my office." Mr. Chee appears then quickly disappears from the doorway.

My mother stands up and begins collecting her things. "Dad's coming home tonight. I won't be done till after eight when he touches down. Can you get yourself something to eat?" California. My dad does business there and a week in California means a week without him. He doesn't hit her anymore. He needs her. She knows this, so she stays.

"I'll find something."

"Don't lean back in your chair like that." I pull my weight forward and the chair's wheels touch ground.

"I'll get a ride from Malcolm." She leaves. I push my weight to the back of the seat again. On her desk, a worn out mouse pad, a family photo from back when we took family photos, an assortment of freebie pens, and gleaming metal. Car keys. The Mustang. He's left her the keys.

3 Months Ago

It was late. The sky had darkened our neighborhood and the streetlights cast orange shadows here and there. Malcolm and I had agreed to meet at the community park. I stretched my legs and set off running at the end of my driveway. I had only been moving for a few minutes but already I felt the strain in my chest. When I finally reached the park I could see Malcolm leaning against the rock wall surrounding the basketball courts. He waved me over.

We didn't talk about much at first. I watched a fat cockroach scamper up the wall and crawl towards Malcolm's freckled hand.

"Do you want kids?" he asked me.

"No."

"Why not?"

"I guess I can understand why people would but I'm not sure it's for me."

"Figured you'd say that. It's selfish isn't it?" Malcolm moved his hand away, took a step from the wall. He looked mostly like his mother. They had the same dark hair, the same freckles spilled across their faces. When we were kids, he once added more with a brown marker.

Malcolm continued. "Any reason people use to have kids is selfish." I looked beyond him towards the pool. There were a couple of leaves in the water. "Have your parents ever yelled at you and said something like 'you should be grateful that I brought you into this world?'"

I nodded.

"I want to say to them, I didn't ask to be here. After all, you can't protect your kids from pain or suffering. Giving someone life almost ensures that they suffer. Even if the possibility existed that a person could live without going through any pain, why are people willing to take that chance?" Malcolm's body was still. The words were coming out of his mouth but his face was expressionless. It was hard to look at him.

"People have kids because they want to experience the happiness of raising a child or they want to create something that's half them, half the person they love," I said.

"What part of that isn't selfish?"

"I'm not saying it isn't."

9 Years Ago

When we were in third grade we had a teacher named Ms. Yanagawa. She was young and beautiful. Her hair was dark and long and she would let the girls in our class try their best at braiding it. It always ended up in knots by the end, but she would smile and tell them they had done a good job. Ms. Yanagawa always wore long-sleeve shirts or dresses in pastel. She never scolded anyone because she never had to. We all loved her, even the kids who weren't in her class.

She once lent Malcolm a *Magic Tree House* book from her own collection. It was hardcover. The one where the siblings go to Camelot. Malcolm read that entire book in one night. He made sure he returned it in perfect condition too. He wouldn't open the book too wide, scared that doing so would bend the spine. The next day he talked to Ms. Yanagawa for the entire recess recounting the people and places he had read about in the story. How Annie and Jack had embarked on King Arthur's quest to save his people. How they found help in the unlikeliest of places. How he wanted so badly to be like them, to go on a real, life-altering adventure. She was laughing and so was he. He told me after school that Ms. Yanagawa was the best person he knew.

I laughed. "Wait what about me?"

"You too! But Ms. Yanagawa is so nice and so smart and so pretty. She's the absolute best!" He ran the rest of the way to the bus stop and I tried to catch up.

One time Ms. Yanagawa asked me and some of the others to help her with the class garden. I sat next to her and we both poured dirt into tiny pots. Ms. Yanagawa rolled her sleeves up because the ends of the cloth were getting into the dirt. I saw scars zigzag up the soft skin of her arm. She didn't notice and I knew better than to ask. I told Malcolm about it and he didn't know what it was at the time either.

We still didn't understand, not even when she died. We weren't allowed to go to the funeral but we heard whispers about her.

Malcolm didn't want to hang out for a month. I know he was crying. When he finally met me he asked, "Why do good people die?" I didn't have an answer. We walked to the gas station and bought a 99¢ bag of plastic balloons. We took out two pink ones. It took us five minutes to blow two balloons. Malcolm closed his eyes and said a prayer. I didn't. When he was ready we let go, sending them into the air and hoping they'd reach her. Our breath weighed them down, and the balloons quickly sunk.

A few years later I learned what those whispers were about. Ms. Yanagawa's boyfriend had beaten her to death. My mom cried about it. I couldn't.

35 Minutes Ago

"So the plan is to steal your dad's car?" Malcolm asked. "Commit automobile theft, drive around until he catches us?" The two of us were making our way through the dimly lit parking garage of my dad's office building. Our heads swiveled left and right in search of a streak of red.

"We'll drive until we run out of gas. This is exactly the kind of shit we need to be doing more of. We're graduating in two weeks."

Malcolm paused tentatively. "That car is your dad's everything."

I thought back to eighth grade when my father had the two of us wash the Mustang in the driveway. I was embarrassed that he had even made Malcolm clean. After an hour, my father told us we could leave. I rushed to turn away from the car, swinging my arm in excitement, and hit the exterior with the window wiper I was using. He walked over and whipped me across the face.

"He's an asshole so if we bang it up a little, no harm done." I leaned against the car and slapped the side of it. "Besides we're due for a little fun."

"If you say so," Malcolm laughed. He walked over to the right side and jumped into the seat. "We need to make a stop at my house."

5 Months Ago

Malcolm hadn't been to school for three weeks now. He wasn't answering my phone calls so I ended up going to his house. I rang the doorbell. The locks clicked open and he stood in front of me. I could tell his hair was unwashed. His skin was pale. His hair had gotten long enough to reach his freckles. Malcolm would look at me but then avert his eyes towards the yard, towards the sky, towards anything else in the distance.

"You alright?" I asked.

"I'm fine," he answered. There was a long pause. He looked elsewhere.

"Where've you been, I wasn't sure what happened to you. Are you getting my calls?"

"Yeah. Sorry I worried you." Another long pause.

"Alright, I'm glad you're alive... I'll see you later." "Later."

It's not that I didn't want to know, it's that I didn't want to ask. Or I didn't know how to ask. Whatever the reason, I didn't say anything. After all I never told Malcolm all of the details about my parents. I didn't tell him why my mother wore sunglasses for a week. I didn't describe the way she looked on the floor. I didn't tell him because nobody tells anyone the saddest thing they've ever experienced. Malcolm and I try to be honest and we don't act as if our lives are perfect in front of each other either. But no one goes that far. No one wants anyone else to know how ugly those moments are.

Three years ago, we went to different schools for the first time. Malcolm applied to our state's best private academy and I went to a public high school with the rest of our classmates. Malcolm's parents expected him to captain the debate team, to be valedictorian, to get into Princeton. By junior year he was averaging 4 hours of sleep. We talked on the phone relatively often but I only saw him in person once every two months or so. In a weird sense his stress didn't seem to phase him. He was always tired but in his mind, he was just doing what he thought he had to. He was trying to compete. After all, the Ivies didn't accept losers.

Malcolm's the smartest guy I know but now he had to work twice as hard to keep up with the rest of them, to keep his head above water. And I thought he would go on like that, always treading, but he didn't go back to school and he ended up dropping all

of his classes. He had done well until now and had enough credits that he could still graduate but he didn't get into his first-choice college. We didn't talk very much about what he was going through. The school counselor met with him and his parents. I don't know the specifics but I'm pretty sure Malcolm didn't think he had a future at the time. I'm certain he hated himself more than anything.

12 Minutes Ago

Malcolm ran out of his house, black hair flopping against his forehead. Under his arm were two boxes of Monopoly. Classic and Star Wars Edition. The same ones we had played for hours as kids.

"We're doing this in style."

Four Days Ago

He was waiting for me outside of the gas station. We usually came here after school despite the fact that all of the snacks in there were at least five months past their expiration date and coated in a fine layer of dust. I walked out with a pack of Red Vines. "You know that stuff's been sitting there for like months. I doubt it's edible anymore," said Malcolm.

"It's fine dude."

"If you die because Mr. Lee never changes the old products out, I'm not coming to the funeral." Malcolm laughed as he grabbed his skateboard.

10 Days Ago

It was his idea: sneak into the community pool under the cover of night. The fence surrounding the pool is enormous and at least eight feet high. We came with only our swim trunks and towels. I went first. The thin metal of the fence cut into the flesh of my palm. When I got over, I looked at the raw skin, carved by red lines. Malcolm struggled but eventually got to the top.

"How the hell am I supposed to get over this part?"

"Just swing your leg over."

Malcolm did as I said but the fence shook

vigorously as he hoisted himself to the other side. The trees surrounding the fence looked ominous at night. The only light came from within the pool making the water glow an unnatural blue. The lifeguard stand was erected in the center. Malcolm climbed the short ladder and stood on the seat. His pale frame glowed against the dark. He paused for a second then jumped. The crash of body against water. I took several steps away from the edge of the pool until my back hit the fence. Then I ran until there was nowhere left to run, until my feet left ground, and there was only air. It was like jumping into an ice bath. I stayed under for as long as I could. When I couldn't stand the tightening in my chest, I kicked until my face broke water and I breathed like I was taking in air for the first time. I looked over at Malcolm whose back was coasting along the surface. His arms were spread out, making perpendicular lines to his torso, trying to keep his body afloat. He kicked once in a while but other than that he was still. Even his eyes seemed welded into place, glassy.

"What're you looking at?" I asked.

"The stars. Do you think the constellations could tell us about our futures?" He blinked.

"If they could, that would mean things like destiny and fate exist."

"You don't think they do?" Malcolm asked.

"You know I don't."

"You don't want to believe that someone out there is taking care of us? That there's reason to pain?"

"You of all people do?"

"It's a comforting idea," Malcolm replied. I watched as his body slowly rotated, sending little ripples outward across our ocean.

Malcolm didn't say anything for a few minutes. I didn't either. Cars passed periodically and I could hear the sound of gravel against tire. Their lights moved quickly across the fence.

"I don't think God's fair though. All the sad things people carry with them, how can they be expected to turn out okay? Everyone's trying to be less fucked up than their parents but I'm sure they thought the same things about their parents. Somehow we end up in the same place over and over again." The wind brushed through the trees and took with it a few leaves. A couple floated through the air and landed in the water. I looked up. Because of the

streetlights, only a few stars could be seen. They punctured the night sky.

4 Months Ago

Malcolm and I happened to see each other on the bus. He was sitting in the back, headphones around his neck, eyes looking out the window. I sat beside him. The opaque glass was scratched with illegible graffiti. We got off a couple blocks in the opposite direction of our houses and sat on the curb.

“Don’t your parents want you home?”

“It’s fine.” He looked straight ahead towards the house across the street. There was a large black dog chained to something in the garage. It barked at us incessantly.

“Tell that dog to shut up.”

Malcolm smiled slightly. “Shut up dog.”

The warm light of 4pm crept up the sidewalk as we sat. Malcolm didn’t really say anything after that so I just talked. I told him about how John, our friend from middle school, was dropping out and joining the military. I told him that the kids who pulled the senior prank this year were suspended for a week. They stuck gum in the doorknobs overnight. He was struggling to hold onto my words. Concentrating on being present, holding his arms out for each syllable to land in his hands. When I had said everything I could possibly think of, when all that remained was what was avoided, we stood up and left.

Ten Years Ago

Malcolm won an “academic excellence award” so his parents bought him a cheap remote controlled helicopter. It was stuck inside clear plastic packaging. Malcolm put it in his mouth, trying to rip it open with his back teeth. One end of the plastic was held by his hand, the other end gripped into place by his molars. He pulled but it wouldn’t tear. Eventually his mom saw us struggling and cut it open with a pair of scissors.

We ran outside, he jiggled the control stick and the helicopter took off. He began chasing it onto the sidewalk. The helicopter ducked and dove, narrowly missing trees and houses. Malcolm stopped

running and moved the control stick up so that the helicopter rose straight in the air. We tried to watch it climb higher and higher, raised our hands to our foreheads in an effort to block out the sun. I blinked several times until the spots disappeared from my vision and saw that the helicopter was a vague, black blob against the sky. It suddenly dropped onto the concrete. Malcolm tried the controls. It tentatively lifted off the ground. Its movements weren’t as smooth as before. Malcolm laughed. “It works!” He started moving again. I ran after him.

6 Months After

He was depressed they told me. Nothing could have been done. It’s a shame. A loss. He was a good boy. You’re in our prayers.

They can go fuck themselves. I’m closing my eyes, covering my ears. Squeezing myself together. My mother tries to touch me, tries to tell me it’s time. I force my body away from her. Please stop. Please don’t make me hate you too.

He had left me a letter in my mailbox. I imagine he walked through our neighborhood that night for the last time. The streets would have been quiet. The sounds dampened by darkness. Did he look for me? Did he look for my shadow moving in the window?

Everyone has left the room but my mother and me. “The funeral’s starting.”

I stand up.

It’s a sunny day. Has God made it so? Everyday people are born and everyday people die. An equal exchange. We approach the rest of the mourners. After the procession, his parents ask if I have anything I want to say. I want to say all of it. But I don’t want to tell them or any of the people here, I want him to hear it. I want the words to stir his bones. I want to talk about the orchids and the balloons and the pool and the convertible. I want to ask him if I can stop hating myself so I can stop hating him. I want to give him a proper eulogy. Does such a thing exist?

The Precise Moment

“You think they’ll put us on the news?” I asked laughing.

“Asian teenagers commit grand larceny. Aren’t even old enough to drink. Futures gone down the drain. Think they’ll use our yearbook photos?” Malcolm smiled back.

“Hope not.” I was pushing my foot against the pedal, weaving through traffic. Malcolm was getting the Monopoly money ready. He stood up, grabbed the first handful. I watched the corners of his lips travel upward, his cheeks seemed to reach for his eyes.

1 Year After

The day after Malcolm’s funeral I saw a dead bird on the sidewalk surrounding the park. It was still young, still tiny. If I picked it up, I could have crushed it between my fingers. The pressure between my index and thumb squeezing its brittle frame. I looked closer. Its head was already smashed in. The

weight of something had crushed him. Blood. Guts.

When Malcolm and I were six we had found a dead baby bird lying in my driveway. There was no visible reason to suggest why it had died. It looked like it was sleeping. Its tiny blue feathers were tucked into its side. Its feet were curled into its stomach. Malcolm picked it up gently, its body cupped in his hands. We ran to my mother hoping that she could fix it. She looked at us sadly and put the bird into a shoebox. We buried it in my backyard. Malcolm said a prayer. My mom washed our hands and played with us for the rest of the day. When she grabbed my hands she traced the ridges, ran her fingers across and said these were lines of destiny connecting us and the bird. Malcolm asked if we could see it again.

I looked at the dead bird on the concrete. I thought about my mom and Ms. Yanagawa and Malcolm and about the number of balloons we would need to save us all.