

***The Headstone with Three Names, by Max Arbo***  
**Student Nonfiction First Place**  
**Best in Show/ Literary**

Somewhere, along rocky beaches and swing sets, snaking trails through the forests littered around the small town I've resided in my whole life, a piece of me is buried. She lies with the future I imagined since I could dream, once for a house by the water with a daughter that morphed into a woman in STEM— an engineer— inventing the first whale toothbrush, to simply being happy, being content with myself.

Her grave has three names carved into her headstone. The first name is the one her birth parents gave her in China, Meng Ying, which means “crystal dream” or “beautiful.” She used to resent it, the expectations it held, the way someone could name their child with such hope and never see them grow up, but it was fitting. She was beautiful.

The second name was never her. Margaret, the name of two grandmothers she never met, and her mom, a legacy she'd never live up to because the women that held that name before me were just that; women, and the fourth Margaret was hardly a girl.

The final name was mine— not a dream, a fleeting hope of a future two parents would never see, a legacy I'd never fulfill— me.

There's no body buried beneath the upturned soil of her grave; there are no remains to mourn, and the girl of many names I grieve for is not at rest.

I used to think I haunted her body like a spirit displacing the soul of a girl with vivid hopes and dreams, thrashing about, screaming for attention, tarnishing her image until our body was just as little hers as it was mine.

Since I've grown into the space she occupied, I've realized it's the opposite. She lingers in the back of my head like a bad dream you can never quite shake, whispering, wondering why she wasn't good enough to stay.

My grief is bittersweet.

I was bitter that I had to grieve. That a girl who never died, merely changed and grew, had me sitting at an empty funeral. That the casket I carried was my body, spending years carving it in her image without realizing I was chipping away at myself. Bitter, knowing that my mourning was necessary to learn how to breathe again, but that first breath, a simple admission, following years of biting my tongue, lingered sweetly like honey.

"I'm not a girl."

One sentence, four words, ten letters were her eulogy.

I visit the grave in a clearing amongst my hopes and dreams daily, laying flowers where she should rest. I make bouquets of milkweed for remembrance, pink camellias, her favorite color, for longing—the longing that we could exist separately— matching carnations to say I will never forget her, and daisies for the innocence that years of never belonging, never fitting in, floating in a purgatory of identities, stripped from her. I sit by the cold stone that reflects the light of my future, our future, tell her stories about the person we've become, and remember who we were. When I pause, she tells me about the batteries she'll need to invent to power a toothbrush for whales, and we're at peace.

**Max Arbo** is a 17-year-old rising Senior at Marblehead High School. He enjoys writing, hanging out with his cat, and cooking.