

# 52nd

## ANNUAL WRITERS' FESTIVAL LITERARY MAGAZINE



Agnes Scott College 52nd Annual  
**Writers' Festival**

*March 30th-31st, 2023*



## **Writer's Festival Magazine Staff:**

Jediah Agbossoumonde '24

Llewelyn Aldrich '24

Autumn Darling '23

Rahquel Garcon '24

Sara Mackian '23

Hannah Wetmore '23

Camryn King '22, Designer

## **Selection Committee:**

Beth Marzoni, Poetry Judge

Kim O'Neil, Fiction Judge

Ashley Farmer, Creative Nonfiction Judge

Jen Beagin, Playwriting and Screenwriting Judge

All works printed in this magazine remain the property of the authors and may be submitted for publication elsewhere.

Send correspondence to Alan Grostefan, English Department, Agnes Scott College, Decatur, GA 30030, (agrostefan@agnesscott.edu)

© March 2023



## Letter from the Editors:

Dear Reader,

Thank you for joining us in celebration of the 52nd anniversary of the Agnes Scott College Writers' Festival. By picking up this magazine, you are joining a community of students, writers, and supporters of the arts, as we come together to celebrate creativity and expression. Throughout the process of editing and compiling this year's magazine, we wanted to highlight the theme of growth—blooming together through the art of the written word. Within these pages, as you read the words of students and writers from all across Georgia, we hope that you find inspiration to thrive and grow.

Happy reading,

Sara Mackian '23 and Hannah Wetmore '23

## History:

Building on a long tradition of inviting distinguished writers to campus to read their works, teach, and talk with students, the Writers' Festival began in the spring of 1972 with May Sarton as the headliner. A statewide writing contest for colleges and universities in poetry and fiction was the centerpiece of the event: the finalists' works were published in the festival magazine, and the visiting writers selected the prizewinners in each genre. Readings and workshops with the visiting writers rounded out the program, which was open to the public as well as to the campus community.

Today, the festival maintains these founding traditions along with some new features: creative nonfiction and dramatic writing were added to the contest in the 1990s, an alumna writer is on the program almost every year, and one of the visiting writers gives a one-credit workshop for ASC student writers.

The Steven R. Guthrie Memorial Writers' Festival Contest is open to anyone currently enrolled in a college or university in the state of Georgia. The works printed in this magazine have been selected as finalist entries in the competition. Final decisions are made by the visiting writers during the Writers' Festival, and a prize of \$500 is given to the winner in each contest category. The visiting writers for this year's festival are Elizabeth Acevedo, Caryl Phillips, and Samantha Jayne Allen '11. This event is made possible by the Emma May Laney Endowment Fund for Writing, the Margaret Guthrie Trotter Fund, and the Ellen White and William Wyeth Newman Writers' Festival Prize. We wish to thank President Leocadia I. Zak, Vice President for Academic Affairs Rachel A. Bowser, Eleanor Hutchens '40, and the estate of Margaret Trotter for their support. Special thanks to Bobby Meyer-Lee, chair, and other members of the English department at Agnes Scott College.

## **Table of Contents:**

### **Poetry**

Disassociation on the Pacific Ocean by Cynthia Salinas Cappellano, Emory University.....	10
landlord by Rebecca Robinson, Agnes Scott College.....	12
Blue Lines by Zachary Anderson, University of Georgia.....	12
Splinter by Noah Guthrie, Berry College.....	13
Southern Lepidoptera by Shana Jones, University of Georgia.....	13
Hysteria by Hailie Cochran, Mercer University.....	14
Poem with Heart by Scarlett Peterson, Georgia State University.....	15
Psyche and Her Sisters by Cindy Nguyen, Agnes Scott College.....	16
Alzheimer's poem #84 by Sarah Swiderski, Emory University.....	16
Tournesol by Zachary Anderson, University of Georgia.....	17
Nocturne with Dog Bite by Scarlett Peterson, Georgia State University.....	17
post-colonial traumatic stress disorder by Cynthia Salinas Cappellano, Emory University.....	18

### **Fiction**

Jane Doe is a Real Person Too by Charlotte Wunderlich, Agnes Scott College.....	22
Noah by Abbey Rosalie, Emory University.....	28
Six Stages of Grief by Drew Robertson, Mercer University.....	33
Lookie-Here by Arden Latham, Mercer University.....	38
The Girls and the Not-deer by Frances Taylor, Spelman College.....	46
The Good News by Nathan Dixon, University of Georgia.....	52
The Doctor's Declarations by Nathan Dixon, University of Georgia.....	55

## ***Nonfiction***

morning routine by Kai Robinson, Agnes Scott College.....	68
Neighbors by Daniel Fowler, Columbus State University.....	71
Spring, Devastating and Green by Scarlett Peterson, Georgia State University.....	79
In Translation by Genevieve Clark, Agnes Scott College.....	81
Field Notes by Nathan Dixon, University of Georgia.....	85
Destination Hometown by Rebecca Robinson, Agnes Scott College.....	92
Blepharoplastics Asian by Maggee Chang, Agnes Scott College.....	97

## ***Playwriting and Screenwriting***

Out of Mind by Tabitha Healey, Emory University.....	104
A Good Wife by Arden Latham, Mercer University.....	111
Until I Set Her Free by Julian Uhlman, Agnes Scott College.....	128

## ***Honorable Mentions.....***141



Poetry

## Poetry

### **Disassociation on the Pacific Ocean**

Cynthia Salinas Cappellano, Emory University

Chew the name chain on my lips...  
The older I am, the more I forget,  
the teachings the tias imparted in vain.  
Raised by Yasmina's braiding hands,  
then by abuela's gold 'n emerald rings,  
and fortified by rich mole.

At twenty, I still scratch at my chin's mole  
and swallow the skin off cracked lips.  
No more baptism rings  
to worry away. Yasmina instructed *¡protege tu energía!* but  
I forget  
this, as I let another *touch-me-not*'s hands  
slip into mine. I was too vain

to never not receive 'love' in vain.  
I never see beyond their warmth, like the mole  
which burrows to eat silver beetles with  
wide hands.  
My lips lick the soft and stubbled curve of her lips.  
In want for the comfort of Eve's weakness, I forget  
how to braid my hair or count gold pinky rings.

Instead I wait for the mobile phone's pings and rings.  
Waiting for the gratification of a two letter reply, I count worries on  
amethyst's veins.  
This is the part I want to forget:  
how our tongues bridged like the Alameda mole,  
fallen to the icy bay's watery lips.  
Sting of these cold, idle hands

like the slap of discipline's hands.  
Same as how my cheek rings  
when I slip on the Tecuanapa's  
turquoise lips.  
Blood loosens from my veins,  
pushes the uterine mole  
deeper inside. I think *Forget-*  
*Me-Not*. But abuela does not forget.

## 52nd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival

She drags me out with her jeweled hands  
and forces me to eat chicken mole.  
She lends me her coral rings  
to heal the broken veins.  
I kiss the ocean stone with split lips.

Feel the toothy coral bite my lips  
and let Yasmine's words flow in my veins.  
I count real love's unconditional rings.

## Poetry

### **landlord**

*Rebecca Robinson, Agnes Scott College*

fat bodied dragonflies  
devour the spoils of grass  
that has yet to be cut  
the wind passes through my holey hands  
turning the words of men long dead  
as i search for divine answers  
i remember their corpses  
nailed to my mother's wall  
does the cross of an atheist provide protection?  
my cries do not interest these angels  
when i look up they still frolic  
they already know  
there are no four-leaf clovers in this grass  
no luck is destroyed when living men  
with dead knives  
come to rob their kingdom  
one inch at a time

### **Blue Lines**

*Zachary Anderson, University of Georgia*

*Georgia O'Keeffe, Blue Lines (1968)*  
*Offset lithograph on wove paper*

Blue lines rising like radio masts on blue prairie. Blue megawatts, blue repeater for blue signals in a white waste. The exile circuit is shaded with static: antenna broken off at the root. I've read miles of telephone lines written on blue nothing. Keep a channel open. On clear nights, I'll be in contact.

**Splinter**

Noah Guthrie, Berry College

An oaken shard,  
born from fallen  
bough, its current

combs through  
white-blond  
grain, flowing

over freckles  
hued like hazelnut  
and deer hide

to split and swirl  
in twin brush strokes  
round a black oval,

coiling over and  
under, like storms  
of Jupiter's eye:

a splinter,  
a planet, a grove  
of dust mote mushrooms

aloft on  
eyelash stalks,  
fed on arbor's

lifeblood—pouring,  
orbiting  
without root.

**Southern Lepidoptera**

Shana Jones, University of Georgia

In the moth-rich Sandhills,  
The night stirs with soft, thick wings.  
A fringe-fusion of insects gather,  
Stuffing the dark, rubbing out sound.

The arched hooktip, masked, a stealth fighter,  
Stained like tobacco papers, dips south.  
He skirts his territory's edge, dry  
As the birch leaf he shows himself to be.

The afflicted dagger follows, unseeable.  
He feeds on the forest with sacred regret.  
The creature admires the woods' hunger,  
How the mule kept on walking,  
How the oak killed Absalom by his hair.

The grisatra underwing, camouflaged until scared,  
Flashes – a cat's glance – her hind, hidden wings.  
Predators, discovered, believe they are seen.  
Turns out, eyes that are not eyes  
Are revelations anyway, just in time to escape.

## Poetry

### Hysteria

*Hailie Cochran, Mercer University*

I don't clutch my keys anymore. The pinch  
of make-shift blade against cracked, dry skin, fists  
balled tight against cold, speeding hips—I don't  
carry pepper spray anymore, either.

The effort feels futile; why resist  
when the assaults are to be expected?  
Parking lot traffickers, enraged boyfriends,  
porn-fed catcallers, pedophilic cops—

once, a boy sitting behind me in psych class  
took my hand from me, placed it on his lap—  
wouldn't let me retract—and then slid my  
fingers back and forth, the bronze zipper teeth  
of his jeans getting caught on my knuckles  
cut me; blood drips—like sweat down my keychain.

### Poem with Heart

Scarlett Peterson, Georgia State University

My mother's pulls back blood with every beat.  
In high school I wore a monitor for weeks.  
Every woman in my family takes propranolol.  
I took it too. My insurance ran out. No more pills.  
I drink calendula blossoms to protect mine from disease.  
Traumatized children are prone to every illness as adults.  
In Atlanta, lamb's ear grows alongside an infant's grave.  
In a theory class I learn everything alive is in a state of becoming.  
When a bulb enjoys the climate it multiplies, naturalizes.  
During storms, I imagine the cyclone is looking for me.  
The wind's whirling so reminiscent of the beating.

## Poetry

### **Psyche and Her Sisters**

*Cindy Nguyen, Agnes Scott College*

The only reason she got the ivory manor with the iron-wrought fence was because she could weep gilded tears as she waited for birds to do the work for her. Her sisters, meanwhile, had to juggle mall trips, inattentive children, and hungry husbands, while making sure they still had that one hour left in the day to weep inside the safety of their minivans.

Eventually, we all got sick of tragedies and everyone wanted a reward for being pious. The biggest, shiniest trophy always had to go the girl who wanted it the least, the one whose eyes went glossy during the commencement speech and forgave the host for groping her ass while leading her onto the stage.

The rules remain the same, of course; the youngest daughter meets gods and monsters while having her greatest wishes granted while her older sisters—for the crime of being ugly and spoiled and distrustful of invisible men who lived in invisible castles—take nosedives off of cliffs and live the rest of their lives with plucked out eyeballs and empty hands.

### **Alzheimer's poem #84**

*Sarah Swiderski, Emory University*

I fold my grandmother's nightgown along its seam,  
careful to hide a jagged tear  
that gapes beneath  
the collar. Its satin teeth curl  
like limp flower  
petals against my fingertips,  
caressing faint  
papercuts and loosened flakes of  
skin as I drop  
the cloth into a thick, plastic  
trash bag. Inside,  
shirts stained with blackberry juice and  
cooking grease are  
held together with loose, looping  
threads woven by  
the same arthritic fingers that  
once pulled my frizzy  
tanglets into plaits during Mass.  
I pocket one  
white sock and tie the bag shut. There's  
a small hole in  
the toe, and it smells like nothing.

## 52nd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival

### Tournesol

Zachary Anderson, University of Georgia

In the tactical manual the sunflower is intended as a hailing device, pistil and stigma articulating instructions at a 15 degree emission angle. Pain thresholds, pain inscribes a hygienic map. Resistance in the medium translates a deterrent tone back into the law. Dispersal effects are incidental. Call it scatterable media, the decibels propagating in the field after a gentle rain.

### Nocturne with Dog Bite

Scarlett Peterson, Georgia State University

I.

What is the night without a fresh hole in my hand?

I have never seen this house empty—  
I didn't choose it from a listing.

They all look the same in the dark,  
which we run from like it's painful.

How often is the sky called a bruise—  
a deep pit in the skin, a tooth mark?

Night is blood in a burst vessel unspilled.

II.

You can see it in the black dog's eyes  
when she is sorry.

I have not learned to forgive.

## Poetry

### **post-colonial traumatic stress disorder**

*Cynthia Salinas Cappellano, Emory University*

the power goes out:  
the venerated generator  
whirs out a croak  
slow life in the village  
goes even slower  
without distraction  
maybe this is why  
Abuela Margarita  
stomps up dust in  
braided leather  
sandals, to announce,  
I WISH THE EARTH WOULD SWALLOW ME WHOLE  
and we do not say anything  
to comfort her  
in our discomfort  
or maybe  
all we know to say is,  
'Me too,'  
Because of you.'





# Fiction

## Fiction

### Jane Doe is a Real Person Too

*Charlotte Wunderlich, Agnes Scott College*

There was this girl, Jane Doe (real name). Jane Doe had this sleazebag boyfriend, we'll call him Piss (not his real name, but it rhymes). They started dating a few Augusts ago, when she was still in high school. Piss was this kinda wimpy guy, had a weird complexion and his tummy always hurt, but he was tall and he did cross country. Good enough for any teenage girl found lingering around school after the poetry club meeting. Jane Doe (from poetry club) was this sweet girl who had problems with her dad and had been on pills since she was thirteen. Piss and Jane Doe dated for six months. She really loved him, she believed she had just experienced true love for the first time. Of course, she didn't think it would last forever, but she was so suffocated by the Love feeling she didn't care. Piss wasn't as into it, Jane just couldn't tell, and it ended in tragedy. Jane had just experienced her first real heartbreak.

She was inconsolable. Her mother didn't know how to help. Her friends were clueless, they could never understand. After a Spring Break in Panama City full of vodka lemonade and Carly Simon, she had weaseled her way back into Piss's life. By May, they were back in full force and calling it "just friends." Their shared trauma of the breakup was the dramatic force pushing them back together. But it wasn't going well. The only time they could communicate effectively was during sex (slower, faster, turn over, put your foot here). He was manipulative and knew it, rewarding her with affection, so that all she wanted was to make him happy. He was her harshest critic. And she was so unsure at seventeen, she was only the sketch of a person then.

It finally ended after she left for college. He had become needy and desperate for her. Luckily, she was starting to accept the knowledge of who she was and decided enough was enough. It was when she started doing drugs again that she fully realized the vitality of being alone. When she was in high school, pre-Piss, she had done her fair share. At fifteen, she was pulling smoke out of a water bottle in someone's unfinished basement and giggling until her stomach hurt. Eventually, Piss didn't like the way Jane would get high and forget to answer his texts or stay out with her friends all night, and he politely asked her to stop. Her hiatus was guilt-induced, so naturally, there was some slipping up and covering up that followed.

But drugs in college were different. When she got high, she had real thoughts and feelings that she never experienced before. She would cry because of how green the trees were and laugh at the realism of roadkill and terrorist attacks. She understood things about herself that she couldn't shake loose: how she never seemed to be able to fold t-shirts correctly, how her hair would never look exactly right and probably wouldn't for as long as she lived, how she unintentionally flirted with everyone she ever talked to. In learning about herself, she found the ability to heal her heart little by little. She was falling out of love with Piss and in love with herself.

Healing was a hard process, and like they say, do you ever really get over your first love? Jane was beginning to think she could and that it might be easier than she thought. Piss had left such a sour taste in her mouth when they parted that it had become a real pleasure to be rid of him. She was lonely, though, and unsure how to reconcile that. There were plenty of people in the city, but they all seemed like ghosts, wandering around the

## 52nd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival

grocery stores and gas stations like they had their own lives which didn't revolve around her. She found it frustrating. She wanted their attention, but above all she wanted affection. She craved love in its simplest forms; someone to complain to, someone to cook dinner with, someone to drive her around the city, someone to smoke with, someone to fuck. It seemed obvious.

She was getting listless when she met Parker. The longer she went without sex, the more she felt like some sort of troll lady. In her mind, she was becoming this untouchable, undesirable, ugly thing. Then, all of the sudden, Parker shows up and he's talking about the bands he likes and the trauma of growing up Catholic, and then they were kissing. A lot. She forgot how good kissing could be, and she told him that in a substance-induced moment of honesty. He said something like, "I'm glad I could remind you."

Of course, Parker was the kind of guy to keep things casual. He didn't have the mental capacity to be in a "real relationship" and that was fine with Jane. She was busy with school and the restaurant and couldn't realistically be showering in some man's dirty bathroom every other night and co-parenting his cat. She liked their arrangement, it was mysterious to her. He would send her these cryptic and emo messages and she would say things like, "haha, come over" and he actually would. Their time together was completely off the record, calendar, solar system. They could just lay in her bed and do their best celebrity impressions and foreign accents and there were no stakes or consequences. She didn't have to tell him anything about herself, so she didn't really. And he didn't ask. He didn't know about the problems with her dad or the pills she was on. She just gave him enough to think she was cool and mystical, or so she hoped. The only issue was

that they had a propensity for getting stoned together and at that point, she was a loose cannon. He seemed to like it, though. He laughed at her jokes and that made her feel untouchable in a different, hot and sexy kind of way.

One night, he came over after work and she rolled them the most perfect joint of her life (at the time, of course). Not only was it picturesque, it was extremely functional and Parker was very impressed. Before she started, she said, "Do you want to do this?" and he said, "Oh, I can't roll." She just smiled at him, like she knew for a fact she was about to do the sexiest thing he'd ever seen. She must've really knocked his socks off because when they came back to her house and got in her bed, he only lasted about five or six minutes. She was fine with that, her boost in confidence was orgasmic enough. Afterwards, they laid in bed and listened to some depressing music, which she knew he liked, and he asked her, "Do you ever listen to that one Duster song?" She laughed and nodded into his armpit. She loved that song.

She was starting to feel better, more whole. The casual sex and drugs were stitching up a little thread in her heart which had come loose years ago. She wondered how long it would last, how long she would last, going on like this. She figured, at some point, she'd want something more serious, whether it was with Parker or not. But she sort of hoped it would be. She liked the way his bottom lip was really big and how he would say her name when they kissed. She liked how he made her feel better about smoking all the time because he drank all the time. She thought they could get along well if it came to that.

The drug thing was another story. She told herself it wasn't serious because she wasn't doing coke (very often) or Xanax (all that much) or anything that would really mess

## Fiction

her up (a ton). The only thing that provided a hint of concern was the sort of constant haze she found herself in whether she was high or not. The problem was that she liked it. She liked picking out silly outfits and not caring if they looked stupid or eating three plain tortillas for lunch because she couldn't afford real food. She liked going to the used book store blasted out of her mind and walking up and down the aisles for hours. She liked the sense of nonchalance it gave her. She felt cool. And wasn't that how you're supposed to feel in your twenties? All over the place, but also like the hottest, coolest, most interesting girl in the world?

~

Jane Doe had one of those dads who wasn't easy to pin down. His name was Ricky (or was it?), he worked as a freelance piano repair man, and he drove a silver 1969 Corvette. He wasn't the smartest guy, never finished college and fried a few brain cells by way of experimental drugs in the 80's. He had a thick head of almost white hair, piercing scars in his earlobes, terrible oral health from years of smoking, and an unruly hip. He was one of those guys to settle down late, didn't have his first kid until he was 40 and realizing the fun part of his life was way over. By the time he was 50, he routinely welcomed his ten-year-old and seven-year-old, Jane Doe herself, to stay with him every other weekend at his new bachelor pad (the smallest 840 square feet anyone had ever seen). And it was his, the little house in the back with the home-made wind chimes and invasive species eating up the yard. He was a homeowner, too proud to rent, but too poor for a place with decent sunlight and a bedroom for his daughters. Instead, they slept on the living room floor, a futon rolled out and patted down for dust.

He was a bitter man for about a decade after the divorce. His demented mother was

dying for the first half, then dead for the other. They say something happens to a man when his mom dies. Jane Doe and her older sister, we'll call her Sally because that feels right, usually stumbled around Ricky's house hoping not to make a wrong move. He'd never hit them or even threatened to, but he had a harsh way with words and in 2008, these two were the most impressionable they'd ever be. He tended to give the silent treatment when he was really ticked off, and that really does something to a pair of kids Jane and Sally's age. It made them feel a guilty sort of responsibility, like the eerie silence of the house, the brooding man in his lair, and the untouched cans of soup left out for dinner were haunting them for something they did in a past life. The house itself felt like a manifestation of Ricky's inner turmoil. The sour smell it gave off, like dust and stale weed, stained carpet that begged to be ripped up and the rotting drywall he covered with posters of Humphrey Bogart and Clint Eastwood. It felt to the girls like a cave, one tectonic shift could leave them crushed and oozing in an instant.

When they were finally old enough to legally stop living with Ricky, he hadn't made it a very hard decision to make. Sally, older and wiser, fled the scene long before Jane, who made it a habit to visit a couple of random Saturdays out of the year purely because she felt bad for the guy. She didn't like to admit that, sometimes, she missed him. He was primarily an absolute prick and she was almost positive he had NPD, but she liked the way he laughed absurdly at animal videos on YouTube and lent her his old records whenever she asked. She just couldn't stick around for too long or she'd find too many reasons for why missing him was stupid and she shouldn't come back again. That usually happened.

Jane spent a lot of time detaching Ricky from his role as Unreliable Father and reas-

## 52nd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival

signing him to Eccentric Nondescript Family Member. This way, it was easier to obligatorily listen to him rant about political conspiracies on the phone instead of asking her literally anything about herself. She trained herself to expect the way he'd say, "Crypto is up thirty percent this week," and, "The new guitar I'm working on is coming along, I just have to do some more sanding," and not get upset or deterred. She just had to remind herself to let about a month go by before they spoke again and it wasn't so bad.

Half the time they were on the phone, she suspected he was high. She didn't know what he was on, only that he told more jokes than usual. Or maybe it was the same amount of jokes as usual, he just laughed more. The older she got, the more she realized just how little Ricky knew her at all. For instance, he didn't know that she was a little (a little?) prone to drug abuse as well. She suspected that if he ever found out, he'd be a total hypocrite and tell her how disappointed he was. But it's not like sharing things with him was something she made a habit of doing. Every time she decided to go out on a limb and update him with a fun fact or two, she realized why she was so hesitant before. She'd say something like, "Well, it happened. I got my first speeding ticket," and he'd laugh and begin a fifteen-minute story about the time he tried to fight a ticket and ended up at the courthouse for five hours. She didn't like his stories much.

Though she swore she hated him as a father, she wasn't able to stop herself from respecting him, just a little, as a person. There's something to be said for disregarding everyone and everything around you and doing only what you want to do at all times. Jane envied him. Along with repairing pianos, Ricky was a musician (he could play any instrument), an artist (he liked glass work and watercolor),

a writer (short stories, mostly), and a novice inventor with a few non-disclosable projects in the works. Oh, and he was growing crops in his living room so that he wouldn't be as fucked as everyone else when the supply chain went down. She considered herself lucky that when the world was ending, she'd at least have the option to hunker down in The Cave with Ricky and eat raw potatoes until the fires of Hell turned them to ash. And then it won't have mattered that he was a terrible father, or that she was probably a terrible daughter, or that their relationship was as frail as an old piano string, about to snap.

~

When Jane dropped out of college, no one was all that surprised except for her mother, who could've been described as the very definition of female hysteria. Jane couldn't remember a day in her life she hadn't seen that one look on her mother's face, a look of pure exasperation at nothing but life itself, an exhausted and deeply unwell look. Even for just a moment, on a particularly good day, she'd see the corners of her mother's thin lips turn down as she stood over the sink staring blankly out the window. Every so often she seemed to be reminded of something, maybe, Jane thought, 9/11 or childhood cancer or the inevitability of death, something so depressing she had the right to ignore all of her responsibilities for a few hours and lay in bed, not sleeping, just lying down with her eyes closed. Whenever Jane knocked on her door during her mini hibernation, her heart raced with the intensity of five hundred little girls scared of disturbing their already disturbed mother. She'd ask to go to the neighbor's house to play and her mother would breathe, "Sure" with her eyes still closed.

Growing up, Jane and her mother seemed attached by a magical string of some kind. It tethered their hearts and made it so

## Fiction

that if one tugged on one end of the string, the other would feel a resounding yank and let out a painful cry. It happened once at a recital Jane had participated in after months of voice lessons. She messed up the words to "The Bare Necessities" (which, by the way, was a terrible choice of song) and started crying on the stage. When she looked out at the crowd, at her mother, and saw that she too had tears streaming down her face, she cried even harder and was unable to finish the song. Jane really fucking hated that song, and, for just a moment, she hated her mom, too. For putting her in voice lessons, for giving her the opportunity to make a fool of herself, for being such a blubbery mess all the time, for making her have these feelings of hatred at all, for giving birth to her in the first place.

She started stealing the pills out of her mother's bathroom when she was in middle school. She didn't really know what they were (Benzodiazepines), just that when her mother took them she seemed happier; that look on her face faded away as easily as her brows unfurrowed. She thought, since they were so similar, her mother's medications could help her, too. After all, lately, she'd been feeling this sort of dread build up inside her and she didn't understand why. After a few months, she was hooked, the only problem being that one day when she was a sophomore in high school her mother ate a handful of those pills, drank a bottle of tequila, and never woke up. It sure put a dent in things.

She was determined not to feel more than an ounce of loss or pain, which meant she was going to need to be high on a variation of different drugs at all times. A short while went by before she concluded she would need to get a job so that she could continue her habit without paying via blowjob, which she hated: that numb tingling pain in her jaw. She was

sixteen, fresh out of her first relationship (with Piss) and heading into her second relationship (with Piss, who never knew about the pills), and ready for her first, real, independent job. She got hired on the same day of her interview at a family-owned ice cream shop which would pay her 7.25 an hour plus tips. Virtually all of this money was spent on drugs. She had never been a saver.

~

"So, you never told me you were taking a semester off," Parker choked through some cigarette smoke. They sat on her front porch steps. It was August.

The reason she hadn't told him had mostly been due to the fact that they hadn't spoken in approximately two months. At the end of May, slowly and then most particularly after he left one morning (they hadn't even fucked, he'd just held her all night), she knew it had to end. She found that in the week(s) between their encounters, she felt as though she were waiting for something. In conjunction with her general lonesome nature and state of vulnerability, she realized she was waiting for him to text her. Waiting to see him again. Her heart lurched- and she snorted at herself- when she'd glanced at her bed frame, noticed it was crooked and pushed inches away from the wall and felt a deep sizzle, almost whip-like, in her abdomen. The same feeling she got when she saw him lying confidently on her bed, waiting for her to climb on top of him just so he could flip her over and make her gasp.

Anyway, she decided she had tortured herself long enough and told Parker she was interested in a more serious endeavor but that she knew he was not, so unless anything had changed (fingers crossed) with him (they hadn't), she was going to have to cut him loose. Later, she remembered mentioning something about trying not to "screw herself" (ironic,

## 52nd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival

as that's all she'd be doing for the following months). She thought about him often in the weeks that followed. Sometimes longing-ly, about songs they'd listened to or movies they'd watched and other times with a physical desperation, visions behind her eyelids of him pulling her body as close to his as it could possibly be. The sexual fantasies got worse after one particular night of terrible sex with a somewhat random guy who had taken her on several dates and been extremely nice to her. It only made her miss Parker obscenely: the way he used to kiss her so thoughtlessly and with instincts that seemed to know everything about her body. So, she texted him.

"Yeah, yeah, I decided I'd better give myself some time off and go back when I'm ready so I don't get burnt out. I do want to finish; a lot of people seem to think I won't. I'm just not in a rush." She never knew if she was telling the truth.

He did this thing during sex, this real dirty thing she'd thought on first impression. When he was really feeling it, he'd start laughing, like, from pleasure. She was a little concerned at first, especially because she was very insecure about her haircut at the time. She had a habit of feeling quite ugly sometimes and feared his laughter was an indicator that she had always been right. She'd say, "What?"

And he'd make some sort of indescribable noise with his eyes squeezed shut and say, "You're just... so... hot."

She always chose to accept it in the moment, she had no reason not to really, but the sound of his amusement lingered in her mind and she could only hope it had been true.

He said, "Why did we ever stop doing this?"

She said, "I don't know."

He, "I had a terrible summer."

She, "Me too, I missed this. I've been having to objectify you in my mind."

He didn't seem as shocked or amused at this as she had somewhat anticipated. Instead, he said, kind of earnestly, "Me too."

"Haha! It's funny if I say it but you're not allowed to."

He shook his head and called her an asshole.

The next day he slept in until 1 PM while she lay awake with her eyes closed and just breathed in his arms. He always held her so tightly, so purposefully. His physicality felt natural. She sometimes couldn't believe that a little part of him didn't want to fall in love with her even just a little bit.

When he woke they had sex for an hour, then he took a shower, got dressed, and left. They hugged goodbye and he said, "Thank you for having me."

She said, "anytime," because she meant it, though she knew she may never hear from him again. While there was no one to blame for the cyclical broken heart but herself, she knew realistically that she enjoyed feeling sorry for herself. It was easier to long for someone who doesn't want you than to wait patiently for someone who does.

## Fiction

### Noah

Abbey Rosalie, Emory University

Every nine days between the hours of 2:00 and 3:00 PM, Renea and I go to the grocery store.

Before that, I eat lunch. Lunch is every day at 12:30. We eat one turkey sandwich with mustard and an apple.

I then take my pills. I normally take one pill, but today I took two. One is to help me sleep. The other pill, the new one, is to help with the seizures. It was blue. Like cotton candy that is far too bright. Not like the ocean. It hurt my throat when I swallowed.

Exactly forty-seven minutes later, when I was sitting on the sofa, I threw up the blue pill. I did not know exactly what was happening, but I suddenly felt as if my stomach was trying to pull itself from my body. I stood up. I was sick. I sat back down on the sofa. I do not like the pill.

Renea runs up to me. "Oh my, Noah, you need to change." I stand up. She rushes into the kitchen to get a rag, and I trail behind her to help.

"Noah, you need to change. Your parents are going to kill me."

"No, they won't," I say.

Renea shakes her head, and I sigh. She is using a hyperbole.

Merriam-Webster defines a hyperbole as

1. An extravagant exaggeration

I hate hyperboles because I have found out that exaggeration is another word for a lie. When my parents described hyperboles, they told me to think of the phrase "fast as lightning." I told them lightning travels at 270,000 miles per hour and that no one could be that fast. Hyperboles make no sense to me.

Renea always tells me I need to eat more with the pills. I am sure today she is happy I did not.

I go upstairs and put on a T-Shirt with a blue stripe that runs horizontally across the front. I put my old shirt in the hamper. My hamper has exactly 3 other shirts in it, 6 individual socks, and 2 shorts. Renea brings me to the car, and we leave to go to the grocery store.

Renea cannot stop talking about the medication, but all I can think about is the fact that we are pulling up to the grocery store and it is 3:08. I push my head into the dashboard of the car. I count to 21 and try to erase the green LED light of the console's clock that now says 3:09.

As we pull into the parking lot of a Vons, I see a man out front with a sign. His sign says "The Statisicks Lie." He wears a sweater that has two small holes in the left cuff and one large tear in the right elbow. His shoes have a Nike check mark and the laces have frayed by his feet. As Renea comes out of the car, I walk up to him.

"I am sorry to bother you, but you spelled statistics wrong," I say.

I have started to say I am sorry to bother you in the beginning of my sentences ever since my father told me it is the polite thing to do. The man looks at me, and his face is full of skin that folds on top of itself. He reminds me of melted wax.

"What did you say?" he says, but I do not know how he did not understand.

I am very good at speaking. In third grade, my teacher wrote in my report card that I had the largest vocabulary of any third grader she had ever known. This made my mother very happy. I like it when she is happy, so I brought my family's Merriam-Webster dictionary into my room. I now can pronounce

168,763 of the words in current use. I also know all 9,500 derivatives.

"I said that you spelled statistics

## 52nd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival

wrong."

The man pushes his eyebrows together, and I can see glabellar lines form in his face.

"Look, kid, are you going to help me out?"

I do not like questions like this. They are very vague. I suppose he is asking something about his sign, but I do not know what the sign means or how to help.

"I do not think statistics lie. They are much more trustworthy than people."

He looks slowly at me, moving his eyes all the way from my shoes to my face. This statement makes him puff his chest out, and I think of a study done on reptiles that feel threatened. Renea has walked up by now and is pulling my arm.

As we walk away, she tries to speak under her breath. "Noah, you can't say things like that to strangers."

I nod, unsure of what exactly she meant by "things like that," but I understand enough.

I remember the first time that Renea said not to "say things like that." She was going on a date, and she was very excited. She told me that she was going to go do her makeup to look like Miranda Kerr. I told her I did not know who Miranda Kerr was. She showed me a picture. I then said that she looked nothing like Miranda Kerr, who was much younger than Renea was. I also said she was much taller and thinner than Renea. After this, Renea just looked at me for a minute very quietly, and her eyes looked like a glaze came over them. I realized I had made her upset.

I did not mean to make her sad. Renea looks like the type of person you would want to be around. She has wrinkles from smiling but also frowns when you are upset. She is someone I like to be around. I do not think I would like to be around Miranda Kerr. After we sat very quietly for a few minutes, I put my hand

on her shoulder. I do not like to touch other people, and so this is how I tell Renea I love her. She looked at my hand and smiled. Not in the way that makes her eyes go bright, but her mouth looked like she was smiling.

"Noah, don't say things like that to other people."

I did not understand what she meant, but I knew I should not ask her. I just nodded slowly. Later, I went through a drawer in the kitchen and took out a notebook. It had a red cover and was exactly 3.7" x 5.6."

That is why I write things down. I do not know everything I should or should not say, but no one has told me "not to write things like that," so I record everything I'm not supposed to say or do. I do not want to make someone feel the way Renea felt that day.

Isaac Asimov said, "Writing, to me, is simply thinking through my fingers." I like this very much. That is because I like the idea of thinking through my fingers. A lot of writing has to do with things that do not make a lot of sense, but thinking through my fingers makes sense.

Isaac Asimov died because he contracted HIV through a blood transfusion.

As Renea pulls me into Vons, I quietly remind her that it is past 3:00 PM.

"I know, Noah, this is going to be an adventure."

I do not really like adventures, but I do not want Renea to get upset again, so I nod.

I like Vons. There are 32 aisles, a produce section that also has a flower department, and 12 checkout counters. I first went two years ago, when I was in the eighth grade. It was two weeks before the end of the year. I did not like it then, it seemed loud and the lights made food look fake. Once I learned about the aisles and the music and the way the store

## Fiction

works, I found out I like Vons very much. Now we go every 9 days.

Every week Renea and I walk the same path. Starting at the produce, we weave our way to aisle 15. We only need to go to aisle 13, but I do not like that number. I also do not like multiples of 2, so we go to aisle 15 instead. Along the way, I like to calculate how much money we save in sales, and Renea picks out flowers for her to take home. This is my favorite time every 9 days.

When we walk to the produce section, I pick 9 apples and 9 oranges. I like to make sure that they all are ripe and look like they should be eaten. It takes me exactly 17 minutes to pick these out, and by that time Renea has a cart with other fruits and vegetables in it. We get the same produce every 9 days and in the same amounts.

One time I told this to my dad. I told him that we get 1 bunch of bananas and broccoli, 3 bunches of parsley, a 5-pound bag of carrots. By the time I got to the 5-pound bag of carrots, he told me to be quiet. His eyebrows did not bunch together like he was mad, and I do not think he meant for it to be mean. My dad and I are like two South Pole magnets. We are very similar, but we also do not fit together.

Renea always knows, though. She counts the produce with me every time. She manages to always get the right food. Never 13 of something and never multiples of 2. By the time we get to the flower counter, we are two-fifths of the way done with our shopping. Renea smells each bouquet. She then asks me if I want to pick out the flowers, and I say no. She always picks the prettiest bunch.

Sometimes it is hard to describe what I feel. If I think about it too long, my brain gets backlogged like a computer with too much information. When Renea and I go to Vons, it is different. I feel like I do when I swim in the

ocean. My head does not feel like it weighs me down so much, and I am able to look at the world when I look at Vons.

By the time we get to the checkout, we have everything we need. It was a very successful trip, and nothing that we wanted was out of stock. When things are out of stock, we find substitutes, which are things like what we wanted to buy but not as good. Sometimes, when too many things are out of stock, I put my head on the cart for a few minutes. Renea will put her hand on my shoulder, and I count to 21.

When things are good, like today, the total comes out to \$157.33. This is a very good number. It is not a multiple of 2. Sometimes, when there are substitutes or different sales, this changes.

The person putting our produce into bags has a gap between his teeth. He helps Renea put our bags in the cart.

Renea hums very quietly, and she pushes the cart out the door. I like it when she hums. She is not loud like the people who sing on the radio. When Renea hums, it is like reading a story. I can close my eyes when she is humming and other things do not bother me as much. There is just the dark and Renea's humming.

When she loads the bags into the cart, I stand by the back door with my eyes closed. However, this was not a good idea because I feel something wet hit my face.

When I open my eyes, I see the man with the misspelled sign outside of Vons.

He has a drop of saliva on his chin, and I realize he has spit at me. I do not like this at all. There are 20 million bacteria in your mouth which reproduce every 5 hours. This means every 5 hours you do not brush your teeth, you can have 100 million bacteria in your mouth. I look at him.

"When did you last brush your teeth?" I say.

## 52nd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival

He does not answer. Instead, he opens his mouth and wrinkles his nose. He looks more red than when I told him his sign was spelled incorrectly. He balls his hand into a fist.

"The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines statistics as

1. a branch of mathematics dealing with the collection, analysis, interpretation, and presentation of masses of numerical data
2. a collection of quantitative data.

Sometimes it's helpful to understand more about the word," I say.

He pulls back his hand and hits me.

One time I told Renea, I do not much have a problem with fighting when people do it well. When it is just two people who want to win.

She did not seem happy about this but did not say anything.

The thing about fighting is that it makes sense. It seems like mechanical actions when two people are fighting well or when it is orchestrated in a movie. There are actions and reactions and then there is an end.

However, when people fight in real life, more people come and yell. Also, if you are being fought you are being touched. I do not like yelling, and I do not like to be touched.

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines a fight as

1. a hostile encounter
2. a boxing match
3. a verbal disagreement
4. a struggle for a goal or an objective
5. a fight for justice

6. strength or disposition for fighting

I would say this was most like definition

1. I suppose an argument could be made for definition 5, but I do not understand the significance of this fight. I assume when you are in a fight like definition 5 both parties must know why you are fighting.

The man with the misspelled sign keeps hitting me. He does not hit very hard, but I do not like it.

I hit him back.

By this point, I hear Renea scream.

It is quick, and she quiets down. I realize this must be very bad because Renea knows I do not like screaming. However, her scream makes someone from Vons come outside. They start to yell, and I just want to put my head down and count to 21.

Do you know the feeling when you are underwater for a very long time? Not the part when your lungs hurt but the other symptoms of not having much air. Your eyesight fades to black and your heart accelerates. Some people have it when they are not in water.

That can be called a vasovagal syncope. Except, when you have a vasovagal syncope you normally faint. That is how it feels for me when someone touches me. Or when there are too many noises. Except, I do not faint. So instead, I put my head down and count to 21.

The average person will faint for 20 seconds, but that is a multiple of 2. I think about fainting for 20 seconds and my heart beats faster.

If I can press my head down, I think I may feel better. But the man with the misspelled sign keeps punching me, and I cannot do anything but hit him back and feel my vision turn into that of someone's who is drowning.

Someone must have called the police, and I hear a siren start to come. The noise is

## Fiction

so loud it fills my brain. I push the man with the misspelled sign very hard. He falls backwards. He does not hit me again. I push my head to the cement in the parking lot and count to 215 times.

People are talking so loudly. I see the shoes of a police officer and put my head sideways on the gravel, like I am laying on my side in bed. Renea grabs the police officer's arm. When she does this his face turns red like the man with the misspelled sign. She says something to him that looks like the word sorry. She is talking about me. She says I am under 18. I close my eyes.

Renea asks me to open my eyes and stand up, and I do. I realize I am crying and am not sure for how long this has been happening. It is like my body has processed what is happening before I do.

The police officer says I will need to fill out a report. I tell him that I normally write things down in my journal, but that is just for me. He says that this is something different.

I blink the tears away, and I know I will not come back in 9 days. The police officer says things are going to be okay, but this feels like more of a hyperbole than anything else. My trip to the grocery store has been changed, and it will never go back to the way it was.

I do not like that at all.

### Six Stages of Grief

Drew Robertson, Mercer University

When the police turned up our brick drive, saw the large homemade wreath on the door, and knocked to enter our soft blue home, they said our father was dead.

"We're sorry," they said. Father was supposed to be away on business.

"We tried to get a hold of you." The phone lines were out because of the storm.

"The truck driver must have been tired; he lost control." Father was driving back to surprise the youngest one for their birthday.

"Your husband's death was painless." It was an empty promise directed toward our mother's screams, "No, no, no." She sank into the floorboards.

Father wanted to surprise us.

We moved silently through the house, we tried to ignore the creaking and aching sounds, we tried to avoid the ringing doorbell as neighbors dropped off casseroles, we tried to pretend. But the house's foundation was crumbling beneath our feet, and we didn't know how to save it.

#### Denial

On the day of the funeral, we ate toast for breakfast. We spread jam and butter for each other – some of our hands were too small to trust with a knife. The house usually laid out the younger ones' clothes, but that morning the typical rustle in the closets was silent.

We dressed as best as we could, but the only nice clothes we had were from the time Grandma made us go to the Easter service at her church. We showed up to our father's funeral in pastels that were a size too small. We sat seven across in the front row, oldest to youngest, and tried to remain still as our uncle

read the eulogy. We did not understand what death meant. We tried to explain.

"Father isn't coming back."

"He's in a better place now."

"You'll see him again one day."

"He doesn't feel pain anymore." We used this line when the priest almost dropped Father's urn and the youngest one cried, "Don't hurt him!" Our father made it safely into our uncle's hands, and we marched back to the house.

There were two floors. Once, when we first moved here, our neighbor, a blonde woman who smiled with all of her teeth and called us sweet peas, dropped off some cookies and said she loved the Victorian style. Lots of potential. We only knew that there was something for each of us. We had a sweeping lawn and a shed full of tools for gardening. We had a room with PCs and headsets for gaming. We had a library on the bottom floor; it always had the books we wanted. When our interests shifted with age, the house would too. The house always provided.

The funeral was on a Saturday, and that night a pizza appeared in the oven and *Golden Girls* reruns were on the television. The house warmed when the fireplace started burning, and we thought we were happy. We just didn't know how to feel – none of us had experienced death.

There were five of us for this period. Two left. They stayed with us for a week after the funeral but decided they had to go back to their newer lives.

"We have to go."

"We have lives we have to go back to."

"We're adults, take care of each other."

"We're sorry to leave now." They said this when they were standing at the front door. The house had painted it red a long time ago – before the youngest was born – and it brought

## Fiction

out the blood shot in their eyes. There was a persistent leak in the house – it moved through rooms, never satisfied with its drip, never able to be repaired – and it appeared then. The splashes were loud against the brown runner carpet at the front door. We were huddled in the living room watching a movie, the characters' shapes on the screen, puppets in the story. It was meant to distract us, but we were always listening. We could hear when the older ones whispered about leaving, but we did not understand why they would want to. We were all we had left.

After this, the house could not stay the same.

### Anger

It was winter when our father died. During those months, the house was louder at night, the floorboards creaked behind our closed doors, and there were persistent thunderstorms that made it feel like the house was lifting from the foundation.

We were scared of storms; we didn't like the crack and whip of lightning or the vibrations that came with thunder. That night a few plates were broken because the house was shaking from the force of the rain pounding on our roof. The leak was in the dining room, soaking the spaghetti that we made.

When we went to sleep, the storm persisted. There was a tree branch that trailed a wooden finger down the window in our room. It was shadow and sound that burrowed with us beneath our mountain of quilted blankets. The floorboards creaked up and down the hall and descended the stairs. We cried from fear. We tried to comfort ourselves.

“We’re scared.”

“Why is the tree scraping our window?”

“Our blankets aren’t warm enough.”

“What is the crashing sound downstairs?” We started sleeping by the bedroom door – guards against the sorrow for the little ones. We thought it would be easier if we were together.

After that storm, we found shards of glass buried in the garden outside the living room. The house was missing a window and our father’s recliner was tipped through the pane. There was a frigid breeze that soaked into the furniture and pushed through the house. We bundled up and tugged old, knitted hats over each other’s heads. We didn’t know how to use the fireplace.

But we could use the oven. This came in handy when school started back. We perfected the frozen pizza and chicken nuggets and pot pie. We didn’t like much else. Sometimes the house would warm, and when the window was covered with a tarp, we started to shed a layer inside. Those of us who were younger would huddle in the living room to memorize our weekly vocabulary. Those of us who were older got adept at forging sick notes.

On the weekends, we went to the park or snuck into the movies. The house was loud during the day; it groaned too much. The rooms with entertainment were tainted by the dripping roof and still persistent draft.

### Bargaining

It was spring when the house repaired the window. During that time, the creaking lessened when we were home during the day. The cracked foundation was starting to settle, and the house occupied itself with repainting and rearranging. We didn’t like the new colors – bright canary yellow for the living room, true pink for the downstairs half bath, summer mint green for the kitchen, cantaloupe for the sunroom, sapphire blue for our rooms. We didn’t like the changes – a sunset painting above the

## 52nd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival

fireplace where we used to be, plates with pastel swirls for our daily pb&j – we'd sickened of the frozen items and moved to sandwiches –, library shelves rearranged by color, carpet added to the stairs – this muffled any creaking at night – yellow orchids to replace our lilies in the garden. We felt mimicked – a false joy to cover the grief.

The house adjusted the rooms. An old bedroom was turned into an artist's studio – two of the younger ones started painting daily. Those of us who were older – now oldest because the others left – thought the paintings were rudimentary, but we thought the house wanted us to express our feelings. We painted, we wrote lyric poetry – but not the kind that rhymed, this made us feel more mature – we took up crocheting. We made little animals for the younger ones.

Sometimes a painting would show up that none of us created. It would be a disgustingly bright depiction of our house. Father and Mother and all of us would be standing in the garden under a clear sky, and we would look like the stick figures we drew in pre-school. We would be pastel and neon versions of our souls, our grief buried under blinding desire for a future that would never arrive. On the back of the painting, the words "Next Time" or "What Would I Trade?" or "My Greatest Desire" would be written in delicate script. Sometimes, in the corner where these paintings leaned, the house would leave stacks of letters to whatever deity may have been listening. Pleas and curses on a makeshift altar. We did not understand. We continued to cry, we continued to hold the little ones. We continued to bury ourselves in each other's arms.

In the library, the house added a new section of religious books. Those of us who were younger started asking questions.

"Is Father in heaven?"

"Does God make death hurt?"

"Where is heaven?"

"Is God kind?" We did not know. Those of us who were older had our own questions.

"Would God ever abandon us?"

"Has He already?"

"What does it mean to love someone?"

"How do we get the youngest ones to do their math homework?" We never figured this one out. The teachers at school gave us a pass for the year and whispered our sad story to any who would listen. We hated it. They would never understand.

They couldn't understand, we reasoned. They could not know how it felt to have their house be a hollow shell of memories full of desperate begging for an impossible someday and intense waves of emotion we did not know how to respond to and a roof that leaked salty drops upon our heads and left us to fend for ourselves. They could not know what it was like for a house to stop being a home, for a mother to stop being a mom. They could never know what it was like to be terrified the house would crumble so completely that we would have nothing left but a disintegrating foundation on which to stand, clinging to each other in a despicable hope.

### Depression

It was summertime, and usually, during summer the house opens the swimming pool in the backyard, but this year the cover stayed. Those of us who were older invited outsiders over. We told the younger ones to play outside, and we opened our father's liquor cabinet. The house used to lock it. We drowned ourselves to escape. We did this only once because it made us sick.

Those of us who were younger played in the world behind the house – the trees became our enemies, casting a shadow on our

## Fiction

kingdom, and we hacked at their steady presence with the tools from the shed. There was a drought that summer, so the younger ones were not scared of potential storms. There was no more leaking from the roof or draft from the window, so it was easier to distract ourselves. There was creaking only on the longest of days when the house could not settle under the persistent sun. Mostly, the house was quiet.

During the final throes of summer, those of us who were younger took to climbing the trees in the backyard. We felt satisfied with evil's defeat and were determined to see the rest of the world from up high. On that day, those of us who were older had friends over to play a new video game, and we could not hear the real scream over the ones from the speakers. Those of us who were younger ran inside to get the older ones.

When we found the youngest one on the ground with a bloodied bone protruding through their skin, some of our friends threw up and all left. We were alone again. We looked to the oldest. We didn't know what to do, none of us. We exchanged a glance and nodded our heads. We marched back into the house and past the empty liquor cabinet and through the bright kitchen and up the carpeted stairs and down the silent hallway and next to the art room with paintings that still haunted us and stopped at our mother's room. We could hear ourselves breathing and we did not want to know the dark behind the door. We had survived together, and we had not needed her. But we were scared. We could hear the youngest's screams permeate through the floors. We wanted to know what Mother was doing and we asked questions we had stopped asking long ago.

"Are you sleeping?"

"Can you hear that?"

"Why haven't you helped us?"

"Please, please open the door. Why can't you be our mother?" We pounded on the door once, twice, together until there was a small crack. Her eyes were above us, peering down at the creatures who lived around her, interrupting her mourning. She fell to her knees and the leak started again. "Sorry, sorry, sorry," she grabbed our hands and faces and planted panicked kisses on our heads. We were crying because we were scared. When the youngest screamed again, Mother matched it with one of her own, and she flew down the stairs, the creaking becoming the pounding of her footsteps and the leaking roof transforming into her tears once again.

### Acceptance

She made us dinner that night after the hospital. The youngest wore a yellow cast, and we covered it in doodles. We watched a movie. All of us curled together, and we thought we could be happy again. It was like it used to be for a while – our mother made us dinner again and read to us before bed and we slept through more nights without fear of the sorrow creeping in and we put the picture of us all back on the living room mantle and sometimes, sometimes we laughed. And it was okay. And it only hurt a little. And we were together.

When there was a knock on our door that fall, we felt a small fissure run through the newly pieced-together foundation of the house. Our uncle was at the door, and he was holding Father – Father as ashes – in his hands. Our mother asked why he didn't spread the ashes; her knees were wobbling.

"I tried to do it."

"It's not what he would have wanted."

"He belongs here with all of you."

"I think he will be at peace here." At this, the front door slammed in our uncle's face.

Our mother was angry, we thought we heard thunder in the distance, and there was a crack in the roof she forgot to repair. Water fell on the foyer. It was a hardwood floor now; she had thrown out the brown runner carpet. She whispered, "It's okay, it's okay, *d.*" She thought we couldn't hear, but we were always listening. She took a deep breath, opened the door, and took the ashes with a nod. When she walked past us from where we peered on the sofa, her mouth smiled in our direction. She placed our father on the mantel, next to our smiling faces.

### Persistence

That night, we made spaghetti for dinner. The floorboards were creaking when we went to sleep, but it did not storm. Our mother made us oatmeal the next morning.

## Lookie-Here

Arden Latham, Mercer University

There was no space in Georgia for witch hunts. Not like the North, anyhow, with the damyankees and their big, public spectacles and announcements. Every damn thing that happened in any town in the North had to be seen by the whole world, but they wouldn't hardly talk about it among themselves like normal townsfolk. Not Mercy, Georgia—population exactly fifty-seven, counting Mr. and Mrs. Allen's new baby, and number fifty-eight on the way thanks to poor pregnant Mrs. Wilson, whose husband had just keeled over from a heart attack a month ago. Mercy, Georgia was a fine little *town*, because *village* sounded like a bunch of poor sunsabitches who lived in stone-and-thatch cottage houses and got the run-through by some kind of barbarian raiders in a storybook that you buy for kids at the two-cent store in the town down the river. *Village* doesn't sound right with a south-Georgia accent either, but *town* sure does: high in the throat with the *ow* going along the roof of your mouth, not quite through your nose. And in Mercy, Georgia, a fine little town such as it was, the word "witch" didn't sound quite right with the accent either, and the men, when deprived of the presence of their wives, would just as soon say "bitch" and have it mean quite the same thing.

Mercy moved at a slow pace, especially in the summer. Georgia folks tend to drift rather than walk, slowly and indirectly like a sun-shrunken leaf blowing across the grass. In Mercy, there was an unspoken law against too quick a pace, even in an emergency. The only things that went fast in the summer heat were gnats and good moods. If it was a real summer day, with the humidity thick enough

to make cold butter look thin as water, then fancy hairdos went pretty quick too. Folks died slowly, babies came slowly, and church service at Mercy Baptist dragged on even slower. It was almost slow enough to take Hank Hudson, town roster-keeper and sign-changer, out of a job, but not quite enough. He sat around most days with a painted wood tile in each hand, an eight in his right and a six in his left, just in case that fifty-seven on the welcome sign decided to change sometime.

Mercy had one sheriff, Wade Hill, but there was so little for him to do that he ran a peanut farm full-time and still had more than enough time to sit on his porch. The only time he was ever needed was when the drinking men had downed one too many beers, or when a horse got worked up. Most hours of the day, though, you could walk by his house and see him with his feet kicked up on the porch railing, spitting the shells of sunflower seeds into the yard. Folks in Mercy would tease that the man hated peanuts more than any man who ever lived. Wade Hill never disagreed. He just kept on with his sunflower seeds.

Sheriff Hill's least favorite recurring issue, as sheriff, happened about once every four months or so. It happened so often, and in such the same manner, that he knew that same feller was coming up his porch steps by the thump of boots and the creak of the boards. He hardly even turned to look anymore.

Whether he turned or not, he would always hear the boots shuffle as they came up to the porch and pivoted toward him, and from where the boots stopped, he would then hear, "Afternoon, Sheriff. Need you to come git this dog 'fore it rips my arm off."

Then, slower and more reluctant each time, Sheriff Hill would turn his head and wait for his eyes to follow until they lighted first on the revolver at the man's hip, and then finally

## 52nd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival

on Curtis Shackleford. Shackleford was a big sunnubitch, standing over six feet tall and brandishing big tough arms that came down from wide shoulders. It'd take a hell of a bear to rip his arm off, Sheriff Hill often thought, so it'd make pretty hard work for a dog. Hill noticed that his voice was never alarmed or frantic when he came to call. Just as calm as could be: *Afternoon, Sheriff. Those peanuts look like they're growin' good. My dog's gone wild again.*

Hill breathed deeply, or it might've been a sigh, and forced himself to grace Curtis with an acknowledging "ayup" as he rose from his rocking chair. He opened the front door and hollered, "Mabel, goin' to Curtis's," but didn't wait for a response before he let the door slam behind him as he walked across the porch and down the steps.

Shackleford had a small family plot and not much more. It could've fit a couple rows of corn, some cucumbers, some melons, some squash and beans; it surely could've fit enough to feed a family, if Shackleford gave half a damn about it and planted, watered, or hoed in it. The soil there was now dry and sandy, with weeds bursting from the dirt. Curtis kept his living in his chicken eggs, which was lucky because he barely had to feed the poor things for them to earn him a few dollars. These chickens were in a fence next to Shackleford's modest house. It was usually next to this fence, behind the house, where Hill was needed. Hill's job, usually, lie at the end of a chain nailed to the fence.

Curtis was a good man, in the opinion of most folks in Mercy. Maybe a little lazy with planting, but just about everybody's eggs were from inside his fence. He didn't drink too much, didn't smoke except when he was supposed to, didn't cause problems with anybody's daughters or wives. He wasn't mysterious, either--people in Mercy didn't care for mystery. The old ladies were happy enough with him

because they were well acquainted with his comings-and-goings, but he still had enough of them for them to talk about something. Their favorite subject regarding Curtis was his trip every few months to Macon. He always came back with a purebred coon dog, a pretty expensive one, that he intended to train up and make good money off of in coon furs.

Hill knew all too well about when Curtis went to Macon, and it was usually soon after Hill's house calls. The Sheriff hated that damn chain nailed to the fence. At the end of that chain, there would always be a bucking, snarling dog. The dog would hardly ever jump at them and try to rip their arms off, but rather would pull away from them just as violently and desperately. Curtis, cool as a cucumber, would spit into the grass and say any of a number of things:

"Must've been the damn possums bit him last night, gave him rabies."

"Dunno why. He jus' started buckin' when I went to undo his chain."

"Knew on the way home with this one that he'd be too wild."

"Part of the breed, I guess. Hard to train."

Hill would just grunt, not willing to argue. The dogs weren't rabid; he wasn't stupid. He knew that they only snapped because Shackleford beat them so damn much, and he didn't know why he did it. He wasn't a violent feller. But the dogs were always busted up and worse for wear by the time Sheriff Hill arrived. And it was the biggest crock of shit cooked on high he'd ever smelled anytime Curtis muttered something about rabies or bad nature. But Sheriff Wade Hill disliked confronting men who were otherwise not troublesome.

What Hill hated about this call was that the poor dogs were almost never better off for Hill's arrival. The dog would always end up

## Fiction

breaking its own neck on the chain, or Curtis would shoot it when he got bored of Hill's attempts to calm the dog down, or Hill would shoot it so Curtis would get off his ass. Once or twice, Hill missed on purpose and shot at the chain, and the dog ran so fast that it was far into the woods before Hill could cock the gun back. Curtis always railed him for this, asking why the hell the Sheriff was such a lousy shot, and Hill would apologize and say his finger slipped, due to sweat. It was hot out, after all.

~

It was about a month after poor pregnant Mrs. Wilson had ripped the cuff of Wade Hill's second-favorite pair of pants. She'd crawled on the ground behind Hill as he carried dead Mr. Wilson out of the Wilson house, and she'd suddenly wailed and grabbed hold of his pants leg. He hadn't meant to pull away from her so hard, but she'd frankly scared the living shit out of him and he yanked his leg forward so as not to drop Mr. Wilson, who was fat. And there went his pants.

"Mr. Wade! Don't leave me here, Mr. Wade!" Mrs. Wilson had screamed.

Wade, panting and sweating, had barely turned around to say "I'm taking Johnathan to the church, you wait here and I'll send one of the ladies to come help you. You'll be fine." But he knew then that was a lie, or at least a gross exaggeration. What is fine, anyhow?

So, a month after this, Sheriff Wade Hill sat on his porch with his feet on the banister, working on sunflower seeds as Mabel Hill sewed the cuff back on his pants inside. He was watching two mockingbirds fight bitterly, screeching and swooping, through glazed eyes. Just as one bird began diving at the other, he heard an unfortunately familiar creaking as two heavy boots made their way up the stairs.

"Afternoon, Sheriff."

"Ahuh." Hill continued to watch the birds.

"Better come git this dog for me, Sheriff. She's a live one."

Not for too long, Wade Hill thought.

"Ahuh," was all he said. One bird had hit the other one so hard that there was a loud thump on impact, and the other bird hit the ground and tried to flutter away with its freshly-broken wing.

"Y'alright, Mr. Hill?"

Wade Hill turned away from the squabble. "Ayup," he said, rising.

"Preciate yer help, Sheriff," Curtis Shackleford said, a piece of sourgrass bobbing from between his teeth. "Don't want nobody thinkin' I've gone plumb crazy, what with shoo-tin' at a dog without the law present."

"Ayup." Hill opened the screen door a crack and hollered, "Going to Curtis's!" He heard Mabel holler back, cut short by the door blowing closed. He was already down the first step.

When they got to the Shackleford house, the chickens were in a frenzy. A dog was sitting still, chained to the fence. It was a beautiful Bluetick Coonhound, something right out of a country postcard. The dog stood as they approached, but didn't so much as bark. It stared at Hill, looking him right in the eyes.

"Hell, Curtis, where's your problem, boy?"

Curtis chuckled. "You blind, Sheriff?"

"It's a dog, Curtis. Just a plain old coon dog."

"She don't let me touch her, Hill. Just watch."

Curtis approached the dog, hand out. The dog shrank back from him until she was wedged between the house and the fence. He kept after her, unrelenting. She dodged and shot out between his legs at an angle, pulling Curtis's feet out from under him. He landed flat on his ass in the dirt, and the dog hustled back

## 52nd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival

to where she'd been and sat down. Sheriff Hill laughed, but Curtis Shackleford turned red as he scrambled to his feet, winding his arm back at the dog. Before he could swing, the dog scrambled to the corner again, and Hill hollered.

"Curtis, the hell are you doing?"

Curtis turned, a little embarrassed, and spoke in a voice dripping with rationalization. "Hell, Sheriff, it's just a little discipline. You wouldn't let your kid run around acting the fool—"

Sheriff Hill bristled a bit.

"Aw, shit, I'm sorry, Wade. I didn't mean it no way. I'm just saying I gotta train the damn thing or it's got to go."

Hill approached the dog and looked down at her. She cowered beneath him, quaking from head to toe.

"Should've known better than to get a bitch," Shackleford said. "They never act right anyhow. She'll just go get herself knocked up by some stray in the woods if I let her loose."

"How much?" Hill said, like a fool.

"What, Wade?"

"I been wantin' a coon dog, but I can't take the trip to Macon in case somethin' happens. How much you want?"

Curtis laughed. "Hell, Sheriff, I dunno. I got her for about fifteen dollars, but she ain't worth that much. They cheated me out, said getting a bitch makes for an easier training. To hell with that. Give me ten and I'll call you even."

Wade Hill always carried a five dollar bill on him, but today he'd taken an extra ten to buy some steaks from Earl Powell, the cattle farmer. Earl had cut him a deal and gone half on it, for helping him get home the week before. So Wade now had eleven dollars and fifty cents.

"Give you ten-fifty if I can take some eggs home to Mabel."

Curtis grinned, a little wild around the eyes, and Hill knew he was probably being cheated, but it made him sick to think about Curtis whaling on that dog. Shackleford stuck out his hand.

Wade took it, but the second he grasped palms with Curtis, he got a horrible sinking at the pit of his stomach. He cringed and clutched his free hand at his gut.

"Sheriff?" Shackleford tightened his grip and clasped his other hand on Wade's shoulder. "Y'alright?"

"Ayup," the sheriff groaned. "Think maybe my coffee just ain't sitting right. I better get home quick. Here," he said. He tugged away from Curtis's grip, which took a little bit too long, and then plunged a hand in his trouser pocket and pulled all his money out into his fist. He handed Curtis all but a one-dollar bill.

Curtis stepped back, nodding, conspicuously fingering the new money in his pocket. "Well, Sheriff, I'd bring her to you, but she don't like me. You want to give her a try?"

Wade nodded. "Alright, then, girl, come on." He came at the dog sideways, crouching a little, reaching his hand out. Palm-down, fingers curled back just so. The dog stepped forward, reaching out to sniff his hand, but shrank back when Curtis started laughing. Wade turned.

"Hell's the matter with you, boy?" Wade was almost visibly annoyed, an unusual sight.

"Aw, Sheriff, I don't mean nothing by it. But I ain't never seen no real man make himself small like that in front of no dog. Especially not no bitch, neither."

"Oh, lay off it, Shackleford. It's my dog now, ain't it? I can make myself whatever size I damn well please."

"Well, in that talent, Sheriff, I might even envy you," Curtis said, and burst out laughing at his own joke, bending at the waist.

## Fiction

Wade ignored Shackleford, crouching and reaching at the dog again. "Here girl, come on."

The dog approached and sniffed Hill's hand, never breaking eye contact with him. Eerie, Hill thought. He'd never seen a dog stare into a man's eyes that way. She contemplated him, and then pushed her head under his hand. Carefully, he slipped his other hand to the chain looped around her neck, and he quickly found he couldn't even get his fingers under it. It was flush to the skin—no, biting into the skin.

"Hell, Curtis, why is this chain on here like this?" It made him feel ill. "I can't undo this. Get me some—you got some bolt cutters?" Shackleford hesitated. "Hell, Curtis, I'll buy you a new goddamn chain, but I can't get this dog the way you've got the chain on it. Come on."

Sheriff Wade Hill walked that dog straight back to his porch that day with nothing on her neck but a piece of haystring, and even that he dropped after he was halfway home. The hound followed him at the heel without a prompt. Anytime he looked down at her, she met his eyes with that stare, so he named her Lookie-Here. Plenty of folks in Mercy, Georgia saw Wade Hill with that dog on the way home, and anybody who didn't, saw the dog with him anytime in the following six months. After the first week, he didn't even keep the dog outside anymore—she lived in the house and sat beside him wherever he was. Mabel Hill seemed to love Lookie, too, and gave her chicken fat in the summer and ham bones at Christmas. Wade gave her a whole raw egg every morning with the rest of her breakfast. "Keeps her coat shiny," he told anyone who looked at him sideways. Both the Hills talked to that dog like she was one of their own, chatting with her in the house, buying her little presents when they could afford it. Mabel even made the dog little stuffed toys to chew on. The whole

town laughed at them over it, but no one disapproved too passionately. It was about time the Hills had some little joy, they said. Sure, they treated the dog like their child, but considering the Hills's previous trials—well, Lookie-Here was just as well their child as anything else.

Of course, it made Curtis Shackleford sick to his stomach, though he didn't say that to anybody. Why the hell that dog would mind Hill, that pansy, and not him, he didn't know. And Hill spoiled the hell out of that hound. That was a perfectly good coon hound, and he hadn't taken her cooning, not once. Waste of money. And, to make matters worse, the breeder Curtis liked up in Macon had told him last time he went up that he wouldn't sell him dogs anymore. Didn't like how often he came up to buy them, and didn't like the look of Curtis when he bought them, either. Curtis had shot the man in the gut with his revolver without a blink, but left without a dog. He did not stop to see whether the breeder had died. He just turned and started back down to Mercy, Georgia. That return trip was when he decided that Sheriff Wade Hill could not have that dog anymore.

Mabel Hill had started breakfast that February morning when she realized she could not find Lookie-Here. She had been sleeping inside during the winter, but Mabel couldn't remember whether she had gotten up during the night to let her out early like she sometimes did. She had had a restless night. The last week had been strangely warm for February, so all the wild animals had begun to creep back out into the fields. She'd heard rustling and thumping all night. Lookie-Here probably had gone out, then, because she would've wanted to chase the raccoons, the opossums, and the armadillos. Mabel just couldn't remember for the life of her, and as she stirred her grits and rolled out biscuit dough, she still kept having the most horrible feeling that something was

## 52nd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival

wrong. By the time she had laid the thick slices of pork belly into the cast-iron pan and Lookie had not come back, neither for Mabel's call nor the smell of frying meat, Mabel went to tell Wade.

He was awake and half-dressed. He turned with raised eyebrows when Mabel poked her head into the bedroom. "Breakfast already?"

"No, it's still cooking. I, um, I can't find Lookie. I can't remember if I let her out last night, and she ain't come to the door all morning. I called and called." Mabel looked at the floor. She loved that dog, and she knew Wade did too. It would break his heart all over again.

"She'll come back," said Wade. "I'm sure she will."

But she didn't come back. Two weeks went by, and with each passing day, heartache rooted itself more firmly into the lives of the Hills once again. Hope felt the same as worry, acceptance the same as despair. When Wade was on the porch, Mabel would slip back into their bedroom and weep silently over the tiny little dress she'd sewed with all her best cloth, all those years ago. The dress wasn't for Lookie, of course, but for the space she'd filled. Wade heard it when Mabel would make her way to the bedroom, and he'd take a long look around to make sure no one was coming up the road before he would start to weep, too. His handkerchief got dirty much faster than it used to, but he still didn't give it to Mabel to wash any more than he always had. He didn't want her to notice its new increase in use. She noticed.

Curtis Shackleford still made his trips up to Macon, because the flock of church ladies perched on their porches would not let any change to his movements go unnoticed. He just told them that the breeder didn't have any dogs yet—his best bitch had gotten snakebit. The ladies liked Curtis fine, so they nodded solemn-

ly and pitied his wasted effort. Really, he didn't dare show his face in Macon—he didn't know if the breeder had died—but, instead, he just took long rides along the roads, shooting wantonly at squirrels and rabbits with his revolver and leaving their tiny bodies to rot slowly in the pale winter sun.

It was on the return from one of these rides that he saw, in the middle of the road, a woman. She stood still, facing him directly, and didn't say so much as a word as he rode near her. He stopped his cart a bit before her, then glanced quickly into the treeline. Was he getting robbed? The woman still said nothing, just stared at him. She had striking dark hair and tan skin—such tan skin—in winter, freckled all over, and wore nothing but a dingy white slip. No shoes or socks. Curtis was oddly sickened by her.

"Hell, what's the matter with you?" Curtis finally said, croaking a bit. "What the hell are you doing in the road like that?"

"I'm lost," she said. Her voice was low, the tones of her words stretched long. "I need to get home."

"I..." Curtis didn't know what to say. "Well—Lord, I guess, get on over here then. Where are you headed?"

The woman climbed into the cart and said nothing. She did not stop staring at Curtis with her big, hazel-brown eyes. She looked young, maybe twenty or so, maybe younger.

"Listen, girl, where are you headed?" Curtis repeated. "I'm going to Mercy. Are you down that way?"

"Sure," said the woman. "Sure."

Curtis started the horses moving again. "What's your name, girl?" He glanced over, but she was still staring at him, so he quickly found a spot on the road to look at. She said something he couldn't quite hear. "What'd you say? Lucy?"

## Fiction

She paused, just for a second, then nodded. "Yes."

"Where are you from, Lucy?" Curtis asked, again. Lucy said nothing. "You from Georgia?" She nodded, haltingly. "Atlanta? Columbus? Augusta? Macon?" She nodded at Macon. "Do you live there now?"

She shook her head. "No, not there. The way home is down this road."

Curtis Shackleford took the cart and his odd cargo back to Mercy, Georgia, and got there before sunset. The girl irritated him. She was pretty, but in the wrong way, and he didn't like how she stared. Disrespectful-like. She didn't cower from his voice, either, and it made him mad. He couldn't find the right words for it. He wanted her away from him and away from everybody else. He took her to Sheriff Wade Hill's porch. The Sheriff stood as he approached.

All the other porch-sitters and road-walkers in Mercy had seen Curtis come through the main road in town with a strange girl in tow. So, of course, nearly the whole town had followed the cart at a distance that was an obvious, pitiful attempt at discretion. Now, all shame forgotten, they crowded in a writhing half-moon around Curtis's cart and the sheriff's porch. Mabel came outside and nearly dropped the bucket of water in her hands—not at the crowd, but at the sight of the girl in Curtis's cart, staring right into Mabel's eyes. An eerie feeling sank into her bones. Mabel set the bucket down inside and hurried to the porch, brushing her hands on her apron.

Curtis Shackleford stepped down from his cart and reached a hand up to Lucy. She clambered off the cart without taking it. The two walked up the porch steps toward the Hills.

The Sheriff took off his hat as they approached. "Curtis, I—who is this?"

"That's why I've brought her to you, Sheriff. She says she lives down this way from Macon but won't say quite where. Says her name is Lucy. I don't know, Sheriff." He leaned close to Wade Hill's ear. "I don't like the look she's got about her. Gives me a queer feeling like I don't know what."

The Sheriff pushed Curtis away and stepped toward Lucy. "Nice to meet you, young lady. Can I help you?"

"Yes, sir." Lucy said, and Curtis whirled to look at her after the sudden certainty in her voice. He looked even harder when Lucy leveled her index finger at his chest and said, plainly, "This man tried to kill me."

The townspeople of Mercy, Georgia reacted immediately. There were gasps and groans and murmurs of "Murder? Here? Curtis? Curtis Shackleford? In Mercy? Lord Almighty knows!"

"Settle!" Wade Hill said. He folded his hands behind his back. With one hand, he waved toward Mabel. Her eyebrows raised and she disappeared inside the house. "Curtis Shackleford, is this true?"

"God knows, Sheriff, this is the biggest load of—why would I bring a girl here, Sheriff, if I'd tried to kill her? I gave this girl a ride home! I did her a good Christian favor, Sheriff! You saw me!"

Mabel returned from the house with her hands wringing beneath her apron. She returned to her spot close behind Wade. Wade turned his head to the girl. "Young lady?"

The girl pointed, matter-of-factly, to the ground just beside the porch, in Mrs. Hill's winter-wrought empty flowerbed. "Right there. About two weeks ago, this man tried to kill me right there."

There was more gasping from the town, and the murmurs turned into clamoring now. The Sheriff kept his hands folded at his back,

## 52nd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival

but his eyes were wide. "I'm sorry, young lady—right here, on my property, Curtis Shackleford tried to murder you? Right there?"

The girl nodded curtly, and Curtis began hollering. "Sheriff, my God! You know me! None of this makes no sense at all! This girl shows up in the middle of the road—looking just like this—and I do the good Christian thing and now she says I've tried to kill her! I ain't never met this girl, Sheriff! God knows! God knows!"

Before Wade Hill could say a word, the girl stared right into the Sheriff's eyes. Like a flash of lightning, he was clammy all over, feverish, faint. "He has hurt me before, sir, and he never would've stopped. He kept me on a chain, 'round my neck, sir. He beat me and starved me. I got away and he came to kill me so I ran before he could."

The audience was roaring, pressing forward with every word, confused and shocked and raging—though at whom, no one could quite say. The Sheriff's eyebrows had nearly reached his hairline in a strange dawning. Curtis screamed like an animal and lunged at the girl. No one could understand the words he said, guttural as they were, and he tore into her. Several men rushed the porch and helped the Sheriff drag him off, but as they did there was a strange ripping sound, and Curtis came away with scraps of the dingy white slip in his hands. He looked at the girl, breath heaving, and then began to cackle wildly.

"A witch! A witch! A witch!" He was laughing with strange and angry eyes, teeth bared like an animal.

Several women of Mercy, Georgia fainted. The whole town shrieked a bit and cringed away, but could not tear away their eyes from the naked woman no matter how decent they wanted to be. Down her abdomen were two lines of three raised brownish dots each, lined up under her nipples. Like the belly of an animal.

No one could agree what happened next. Curtis lunged again and the Sheriff pulled his revolver—that Mabel had brought him from inside the house—from behind his back and fired twice. The town rushed the stage. There were more shots after, though no one could agree if they were the Sheriff's or Curtis's or anybody else's. The only part that remained true to every version was what everyone could see plain on Mercy, Georgia's welcome sign: population fifty-six. Curtis Shackleford was dead. Hank Hudson, roster-keeper and sign-changer, was just happy to have something to do for a few minutes. Lucy had slipped away, somehow, in the chaos, and the story remained a bizarre mystery that stirred Mercy's drowsy air for years. For a while, the porch-sitting church ladies were so occupied telling and re-telling that shocking story that they barely noticed when Lookie-Here reappeared on Wade Hill's porch a week later. Mercy, Georgia was just fine with telling that story with no end, even if it meant there might be a witch or something strange loose in the woods. After all, there is no space in Georgia for witch hunts.

### The Girls and the Not-deer

Frances Taylor, Spelman College

There's an unconscious silence after you lose a game. Everyone gets in their heads, distracted by the what-ifs of the day, and reality seems inconsequential. Maybe that was why we killed it. It was definitely dead. I'd been living in New Hampshire long enough to know what it felt like to kill an animal with a car. I knew the lurch of going over something with the full weight of a 5000-pound SUV. If it wasn't dead now, it would be soon. My headphones, as I pulled them off, got caught both in the links of my necklace and on my hair, heavy with copious amounts of hair gel. The slightly slimy puff was the closest I could get to the perky high ponytails that everyone else on the team sported, the uniformity of the Marauders' varsity basketball team thrown off by my lack of straight dirty blonde hair.

For a moment, the low purr of the engine was the loudest sound in the car. Each of us waited for someone else to say something, to do something. I pressed my lips together tightly, my tongue brushing the gap between my front teeth. I was a native to these woods, to these unknowable mountain roads. I had grown up splitting my time between the green and white mountains of the twin states and the aging coal giants of West Virginia. I knew what to do when you struck a deer, yet in this group, it wasn't my place to talk. Macy was the one to finally speak. It was her right as the newly appointed team captain.

"We should go check on it. Make sure, well...we should go and check on it."

I gripped my dying phone tighter as the girls filed out of the car. I sat in my seat for a moment, the warm air rushing out before I followed, closing the door behind me. I couldn't

let myself be the odd one out once again. The night was chilly, the year already promising a cold dark winter ahead. A stained and pock-marked half-moon hung in the sky above the tips of the pine trees. I brushed into Jasmine, my gooseflesh skin touching her gooseflesh skin. Emma, always kinder to me than the rest of the girls, half-caught me as I tripped on a stick after Jasmine and I reared away from each other. Emma didn't acknowledge me. She just stood me upright and continued forward, never making eye contact. We all went behind the car and stared at nothing, at the dark gray of the pavement and the lack of a deer. I felt something finger-like stroking the left side of the back of my neck. That light touch was a warning something was wrong. I batted it down, stopped my fingers from crossing, and prevented myself from pulling off my jersey and turning it inside out and backward. I would not be mocked for being superstitious on top of everything else.

"Maybe it got up and ran?" Jasmine said, tugging on a pale solitary wisp of a curl. No one acknowledged her. She knew nothing. She was from some city, maybe Fresno, or Phoenix, I could never remember. Emma, her driving glasses pushed high up into her newly dyed hair, made her way to the front of her car ostensibly to look at the damage left from the hit. She gasped loudly, the sound ricocheting off of the tree trunks around us. Laying in front of the car was the thing we had hit. We ringed it, drawing close to each other. The moonlight filtered down between the empty branches of trees to alight on the ground and cruelly illuminated the creature.

It lay outstretched, its every limb bent backward. The thing's fur was gray-brown and patchy, mossy, almost diseased looking, with bulging salmon bumps littering its underside. The worst part was its head: its glassy eyes

## 52nd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival

too far to the front, its mouth slit going too far back, its teeth, exposed by the slight opening of its jaw, far too numerous. I crossed my fingers, and if I had any moisture in my mouth, I would have spit over my left shoulder. My grandmother had taught me the knowledge that had been passed along since the first ancestor who had escaped into the mountains. All that education was telling me that this thing was not-of-this-world, wrong.

"How the fuck did it get in front of the car?" Macy said, her arms held tight around her torso.

"I-I felt it." Jasmine, once again at my side, took a step back from it. "We went over it twice."

I leaned closer, assuring myself that it was what I thought it was. The faint smell of an old well, slightly sour with hints of decomposition, met me. It was what I thought. Bryn, one of the twins on the team, leaned forward with me. AP bio must have desensitized her to dead things.

"Looks diseased." She reached forward, and I grabbed her wrist, pulling her back. Her slap stung the back of my hand, and I released her. She glared at me, but she wasn't important anymore. On any other day, I would have cowered, blushed invisibly, and braced myself against the snarky comments and delicate insults that I had become accustomed to. Now, nothing could pierce me. Verbal barbs were nothing compared to the thing in front of me. I froze, my stomach twisting and my bladder weakening. Yes, knowledge was power, but it was nothing compared to what this thing had.

"That's a Not-deer," I said, my voice hoarse and croaking.

"Wat the hell are you talking about, Harper? That's a fucking deer!" Macy had tucked her hands in her armpits and rocked slightly back and forth, dirtying her expensive Jordans.

"No, It's a *Not-deer*. They look like deer and even sometimes act like deer, but they're not. They are other."

Emma sighed and made her way back to the car. Pushing her glasses back down, she spoke over her shoulder, "Whatever it is, let's just get out of here."

I stared at the space right in front of us, right in front of where I knew the thing was, after I was in the car again. The car started, the engine stuttering to life, and I let out a breath. Perhaps I had thought that it wouldn't, and I let out another breath when we drove forward, veering widely around the corpse. It was all going to be fine. This was going to be just a weird thing that we never talked about. I sank back into the cushion, convinced that it was over, until I felt it.

Bump. Bump.

And again.

Bump. Bump.

Jasmine's quick breaths warmed my ear and got faster and faster after every bump. We screeched to a halt.

"Nah. No. Nope." Emma gripped the steering wheel and shook her head violently.

"Guys, guys, guys!" Jasmine's voice, naturally high, crept into the falsetto range, and she gripped my thigh, half-inch nails digging into my bare skin, leaving ashy white lines.

"That's not the same deer. Tell me that that's not the same deer." Macy twisted to look at us in the back seat.

"It's the same thing, but it's not a deer. It's older, the remnants of something that lived long before humans ever entered the mountains," I said, knowing, with the leaden way that each word felt in my mouth, that I was right.

"What the hell does that mean, Harper? Christ!" Macy snapped.

## Fiction

I gripped the seat belt slung across my chest. I saw my grandmother, wild fly-away wiry gray hair poking off in all directions across the table as we peeled apples. I heard her tell me, as I left West Virginia, of the mountains we share, the Appalachians that joined us together. She kissed my brown cheek before grasping my father's arm to remind him, once again, not to drive too late at night, not to stop, and not to gaze too long into the dark.

"It's a Not-deer, a piece of folklore, a creature. There's something wrong. They don't normally act like this. They leave us alone. We're nothing to them," I told my teammates.

Bryn's scoff was loud. "If this was all a myth, then it wouldn't be bothering us, would it."

"It's folklore, not a myth. They don't bother us unless," I paused, some of my grandmother's stories slowly came back to me, stories passed down in my family to ensure that we could survive in the often brutal and otherworldly mountains that we'd lived in for centuries. Even though I had moved north, away from my grandmother, into a modern New England town, I couldn't leave the respect and niggling fear that had been pressed into me at an early age. These creatures had a sense of order, and vengeance was part of that order. "-unless someone did something to hurt or offend them."

"Harp, it's dead. What can be more offensive than us killing it?" Emma said, turning off the engine and making sure the headlights were on bright.

"Us? Emma, you hit it," Macy hissed, the sound sharp through her whitened teeth.

Emma's lips curled into a scowl. "No, you don't get to wriggle out of this like you wriggle out of everything else. You are an accessory to this. You were in the car."

"I don't think that was it. Killing a deer that ran in front of the car is something natural, blameless, an eventuality. It's something else." I furrowed my brow, thinking.

Emma leaned her head back against the head cushion.

"So, we are back to figuring out what the hell we are going to do. I don't think I can drive over it again and again until we get home. It'll wreck my car."

"Why don't we just move the wretched thing? Shove it to the side of the road and get on our way," Bryn suggested.

"We shouldn't do that. We should leave the car here and walk away, empty our pockets of change, and hope that it appeases them." I grabbed my backpack and pulled it on, tightening the straps.

"That's insane, Harper. Like certifiable. We're going to move it and drive away, and when we get back to Etna, I think that you should probably talk to someone about what the hell got twisted in your head." Bryn got out of the car, slamming the door behind her, braver than me.

They went out again, and this time I followed without a pause. We were in this together, I guess. Bryn took off her jersey, underneath her black Nike sports bra was still damp with sweat from the game, and used it to grab a hoof.

"What are you all doing? Help me," she said as she began to drag the body towards the edge of the road. Emma, Macy, and Jasmine stripped out of their jerseys as well and used them to protect their hands from touching the beast as they tugged it over. I just stood there, my knees knocking together, watching them pull it away.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw something move. Well, there was movement, but when I squinted, there was nothing. I turned

## 52nd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival

back to the girls, their breaths making trails in the air. Macy lashed out with her leg and kicked the body down a little incline into the ditch at the edge of the dirt road. Wincing, I looked away, and there, I could finally see them. They were deer. Real deer, I thought, standing, ringed around us as we had stood around the Not-deer. There were bucks with towering headdresses of horn, does with fluffy fawns behind them, and wizened old deer, rare here with our mountain lions, their bellies sagging and their muzzles rounded. Backing up to the still-warm hood of the car, I pulled out my phone, the red of the battery bar shaking me, but I opened the flashlight app quickly, feeling the rush. I turned the light on the deer. The light only lasted for a second, cut off in battery-saving mode, but it was enough. In the strong light of the flashlight, only some of the deer's eyes reflected.

"Guys. There are more of them."

My teammates turned. Their jerseys dangling from numb fingers. Jasmine wailed. The deer and the Not-deer didn't leave. Without actually walking, they came closer, furry bodies and legs that bent the wrong way. Nearing us.

"What the fuck," Macy whispered into the air. She pulled out her phone and immediately put it back into her pocket like I knew she would. In these woods, nestled in the mountains with their potholes and tall trees, there was no service.

Jasmine sipped little shots of the air, squatting down into the dirt. I didn't go to her. She wasn't my friend.

"Should we run?" Emma asked one or all of us.

"We need to go," I replied, reaching out for her.

"Run where," Bryn responded, "into the woods where they are? No, we should get into th—"

The headlights cut out, dousing us in darkness. We were all blind for a moment. A chorus of shrieks rose up and then settled when Bryn turned on her phone flashlight.

"The battery." Emma, half of her face illuminated in the yellow light of Bryn's phone, was wan.

"We're dead. We're dead." Jasmine's panic was palpable.

Macy grabbed my shoulders, her face close to mine, her breath scented with the plastic and yeasty smell of a mouthguard, her eyes wild and wet.

"What are they going to do to us? How can we stop them?"

I grabbed her wrists. They sat heavy near my collarbones.

"We can't stop them. I don't know! They don't usually bother humans!" I knew what they did. I knew how hard they bit, with those wrong jaws of theirs, hard enough to break the tips of their teeth off. I knew they ate slowly as if it was a duty, grinding and tearing limbs first and only going for the heads at the very end, just like Grizzlies. I didn't tell Macy any of that.

Macy released me, and I stumbled backward a few steps.

"Did you guys do anything that could have offended the woods?" I remembered all of the straws that I had used. The times I had spit my yellow phlegm into moss, the moments when I had diverted streams in my backyard or had stolen squirrels' stashes to make woodsy jewelry.

The four girls said nothing. Jasmine, now holding onto Bryn's arm, piped up finally.

"Oh, guys, didn't we eat venison at the team party last Friday? I know we four did. I don't know about the rest of the team. Stella, Grace, and Ani are vegan, and Dia's veg—"

I stared at her. Team dinner. Of course, there was a team dinner. I remember sitting

## Fiction

at home reading a book, wondering why we hadn't had one yet. I wasn't sure what was worse, them purposely not inviting me to the dinner or just forgetting to tell me about it.

"Oh, get over it, Harper. You wouldn't have liked it anyways. You're not into stuff like that." Macy was somewhere to my right, half in the light.

I would have liked it. I was very much into stuff like that.

Macy continued, "We are dealing with bigger things than you not being invited to a stupid team dinner. Stop looking at us like that. Yes, Jasmine, we ate deer, but if Harper says that they don't care that deer sometimes get hit, why would they care that we ate a deer that was hunted and killed humanely during hunting season, for Christ's sake!"

The animals and things were coming closer, close enough that we could see their teeth shining in the moonlight, sharp and longer than they should be, not the teeth of a prey animal. I gripped my necklace, the cross comfortable and worn in my hand.

"Even if it was a young deer, people eat deer all the time!" Macy finished.

I stopped, looking away at the deer and Not-deer for a second. Macy turned away from me, her sandy hair half out of its ponytail, mascara smeared across her freckles. Even in the weak light of the flashlight app and the moon, the orange of Jergens fake tan was visible in a frayed line across her neck.

"How young?" I thought I knew, but I had to ask.

"There is nothing wrong with eating a fucking fawn." She was desperate. I knew it. She knew it too, and so did the deer-like things slowly moving closer. Grass was pushed aside. Hooves were placed silently on the road.

"You all ate it?" I turned, marking each of the girls' eyes. I didn't know if I could really

see them in the dark, but I knew them. Light brown, the color of sand at the bottom of a spring creek; blue-gray, the greenish hazel of cut saplings; and finally, Macy's piercing blue.

"Yes," Emma responded. I knew Emma. She wasn't really that bad. She went over plays with me when I didn't get them as quickly as the other girls. Emma would pass me team ribbons when they forgot to give me mine. Yet, she had eaten it too.

I pulled my necklace over my head. Its thick silver chain was heavy in my palm. It was an exact replica of the one my grandmother wore, the one that she clinked, throwing the links high in the air and catching them every time she walked in the woods. Hers had one rusty iron link soaked in the old blood of my family; it would be my only inheritance from her. The inheritance passed along from my great-great-great-grandmother. I realized I had been trying so hard to be part of the team that I hadn't noticed that the team wasn't worth being a part of. I didn't look at my teammates when I walked past them, throwing and catching the thick chain in the air over and over again. It tinkled, the loops coiling in between my fingers with each throw.

I stopped at Emma. I looked at her straight in her face. Her terror was obvious in the small bubbles of spit in the corners of her mouth. For the small kindnesses she did to me, I paused for her, but I couldn't stay long. The not-deer were impatient.

"Emma, come with me. Promise them something, anything, a silver coin, your hair, something, leave them and come with me." I gripped her hands tight in mine. Our fingers were clasped, joined around the chain, our eyes at the same level, our shoes touching. We were so similar, yet one of us fit, and the other didn't.

## 52nd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival

"No, Harp, no," Emma replied, taking her hands out of mine and shaking her head.

I walked onwards, beyond them.

"Where are you going, Harper? We are a team. We have to stick together!" Emma called after me as I walked past them.

"Let her go," Macy said.

I neared the line of Not-deer and deer all muddled together. My slides slapped in time with my catches, and I didn't stop in front of them. They looked at me, and their eyes were too intelligent, too human. I hoped my eyes were human too, human enough for them to know that I was not like my former teammates. They seemed to evaluate me for a second, and then, as one, they let me pass.

I didn't turn back. Not when they started shouting, not when shouting turned to screams, and not when the screams turned to gurgles. I looked back only once when I was about to crest a small hill. A phone must have landed face-up because it acted like a campfire illuminating the things that encircled it. They were tall, the Not-Deer, when they stood on their hind legs. They stood taller than any man, their jaws open and wet, their spines ridged and stark, their eyes too far to the front.

### The Good News

Nathan Dixon, University of Georgia

The words fell from his lips like dead birds. Plopping out, dead thumps. Piling up, bodies gray. Now, on the other side of the glass door, the day shines a burnished blue. I stand frozen—for just an instance perhaps. Perhaps longer, thinking about the talking time. I couldn't understand what he said. Still cannot.

There was no why, why, why? The whys I heard from my mother in the house that was hers before she died. From my father. There was only: what? A white coat and cold limp hands touching fingertip to fingertip. Composed. I am healthy, I am happy, there is nothing wrong with me. Yet, he said. Nothing wrong yet.

Look, I wanted to answer. You are slobbering dead birds onto your desk.

Instead, I nodded my head.

Now frozen. Faced with this spectral land, this sunny day on the other side of the pane glass door. Paused, for just an instance perhaps—perhaps longer—before the spreading green and blue. Entirely too bright out there, nature not giving a damn for decorum. Looks fake from this static side beneath the tube lights. Looks computer generated out there, animated for children. Do they look too, the faces behind me—the patients—look past me toward this sunshine land? Patience. Composed and pale, their faces like orbiting moons in the waiting room. Waiting. I can feel them looking at me, looking past me—to my future—their stares as blank and cool as cheese.

There was the tiny window in the wall afterward—just now, just behind me—the women in scrubs, their chairs rolling on casters. Dum-dums in a bowl on the desk as if this was a pediatrician's. I suppose children come

here too. So who am I to complain? I passed them a card with insurance information. They nodded their heads, they knew. It's all in the file that he opened—then closed. Now filed away with the others. Everything clean, everywhere. The ladies back there more decorous than the obscene sunshine. Quiet while the patient pays. Then beginning again their office talk as the patient moves through the wooden door toward the waiting room where the others wait—moon-faced. Do these others know about the dead birds falling from the cold clean lips? About the blue scrubs all around? The files opened and closed and filed away?

Yes, of course. They who roam the hallways of this place with their bald heads, or their hair growing back, with their bodies bloated in strange places. They know. Unnatural, out of proportion, sleeves of medical fabric squeezing them into shape. I remember my mother wearing a compression sleeve. Remember her padding one side of her bra after the surgery because her boobs were lopsided. Was she one of these patients? Answering questions in the hallways. Yes, I have had a good day so far. No, today has not been great. Stepping onto scales, letting doctors poke and prod. Of course she was. Tenderfooted along the carpets, afraid of breaking something, afraid of bouncing away weightless into nothingness. Tiptoeing on the moon. They trembling, they wearing painful smiles. Smiles that are not smiles at all, carved into the cheese flesh. Rictus. They know this place—their wings clipped, their beaks burned away—their knowledge shining on my back. Can they see themselves reflected in me? In this statue at the threshold, unable to take the necessary step. If they were able to stand they would pat my back, but they are not able. So they sit and stare. They wait.

## 52nd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival

Is there time to go back? I could have asked more questions. There was only: what? And him talking, and talking, and talking in the cold, clean room, teaching. After palpitating with long, precise fingers. Cold fingers, after palpitating, talking. About the discovery of the gene in the mid-1990s—I don't care. About the history of testing and my own genealogy—I don't care. My mother, my mother, the numbers, the numbers. His voice falling flat in heavy feathers. Don't interrupt, I thought to myself, there is only so much time. He keeps checking his watch. He's in charge—this towering man—excusing himself to view a text on his mobile phone. What? He's sorry, he says. It was very important, he says. He is very important. Then the dead birds cascading again. A single finger upraised to quiet me. A cold finger that probed my breast. There is only the procedure, the surgery, he says. There is only one option. I feel I am being held hostage. Of course all the testing beforehand, he says. Of course the MRIs and mammograms, the ovary ultrasounds, of course the meetings with genetic counselors, the subsequent visits to himself and his colleagues. Of course, his voice ringing with money. Together they will assemble a team. The best, he says—you will have some say, of course, he says—but they will be the best, there's no doubt about that.

There must be measures to take. Exercise, diet, a bottle of pills? Yes, yes, he says, of course. All of that, of course, but the answer lies in the percentages. Look at these charts, these numbers. Here, I have them here on my computer. It's very professional. Eighty-eight on one side, one and one-half on the other. If you want our "advice" you should be thinking in the time frame of six to thirty-six months.

Why put "advice" in physical quotation marks with fingers that have probed my

breasts? With fingers that itch to slice off my breasts?

Instead I say, I am twenty-six. Instead I say, there is nothing wrong with me.

Yet.

Sunshine. What if I never leave my post by the exit? Will everyone else be trapped inside? Will the cleaning crew come and vacuum around me? Feed me crackers and Coca-Cola from the vending machines? Perhaps let me listen to music? Will we dance until the break of day? Perhaps I will make love to one of them. Bear him beautiful children. And, if they are little girls, they will have a fifty-fifty chance of carrying the gene like me. Is this what inheritance looks like?

When the doctor said I should think about starting a family, could he see the disbelief in my face? Could he hear how ridiculous he sounded? My significant other is not sitting here beside me, doc. Is there someone on the surgery team who's DTF? A rich man with a better sense of humor than you? One with warmer hands? One who wants to start a family with me—right now? One who wants to cultivate DNA mutations for kicks? Forget it. I'll wait for the cleaning crew. Wait for one who will fondle my breasts as if they are not doomed to amputation. Fondle them fondly for six to thirty-six months. Cup them as we spoon on the carpeted floor.

Birds out there in the sunshine now. Chirping. A veritable Disney scene. Bright. Inviting me to play the part of Cinderella, they wish to prepare for the ball, these birds—six to thirty-six months away—undress me with their fluttering wings and drape over my nakedness a paper gown.

Out there in the sparkling parking lot, one of them tries to kiss itself in the side-view mirror of a pick-up truck, and I am suddenly sure that they have planted it there, one of the

## Fiction

nurses hiding in the bushes. Darting around in scrubs with blue latex gloves on her hands, planting good omens through the world like dum-dums. For moon-faced patients who can see spread deserts of vast eternity. A cascade of dead birds through space.

The best. They only want what's best for me, he kept saying. They are looking out for my best interest. Which they know intimately. Because they wear white jackets. Because their world is clean, their hands dry, cold, precise, their voices steady as they recite numbers. They know what's best.

We cannot tell you what to do, he said. But you remember your mother's struggle. Yes. I do. She's pictured here on this genealogy chart, he said. I see. Here on my computer, a pink pizza slice in her circle. I get it, that's cancer. A diagonal line bisecting. Yes, I know. She's dead. Ten years. There's a pile of dead birds on your desk. You want me to amputate part of myself though there's nothing at all wrong with me? Yet, he said. Nothing wrong yet, let's be clear about that. OK. You want me to amputate part of myself and start a family for the sake of starting a family? Well, there's only so much time, he said, before the ovaries have to go too. OK. You want me to get the surgery over with so I can get on with my life? Begin a new one? As if this is not part of my life at all? You want to catch me before I am moon-faced? Before I too become a dead bird? You say these are my best interests, and I believe that you believe. But in your mouth, I am just a percentage point, not yet come to fruition. The good news: not yet come to fruition.

A percentage point now rushing into the Disney day because I hear the footsteps of a scrub-suited nurse come to comfort me. A soothe-sayer who will coo as they put me under. Craft me into proof of their method. A witch who will plant me fluttering in a sparkling

parking lot to give hope to someone hearing the good news. A percentage point rushing into the Disney day because I know that her touch is a cage. The whys will do no good. A bird in the hand, worth two in the bush. The doctor yawns and yawns again, his mouth always full of feathers.

### The Doctor's Declarations

Nathan Dixon, University of Georgia

#### Let Music Swell the Breeze

The sun came back, and a bobwhite whistled behind the hedge. Shadows of sharp rose stems and lolling heads stretched across the doctor's shoes. He plucked a petal, soft as velvet on his manicured fingertips, and thought back to the interview with the radioman. It was the reason he was there in the rose garden—cool, clean, fingers rubbing rose petals—waiting on the governor.

A few weeks before, the radioman had asked him onto the show to generate buzz for the upcoming primaries. Still a few months out, already a dozen names thrown into the ring. They would be important, everyone said. Winner to challenge senate seat, senate seat to determine majority. National audience tuned in, listening for the call to arms. It's the 1770s all over again.

This garden might be 200 years old, he thought, looking at the bodyguard in the black suit and sunglasses leaning against a wrought iron arch. Old plantation architecture. Wide porches with rocking chairs. Corinthian columns propping up porticos.

The 1770s all over again. The video gone viral since. Quick, slick, conservative kids with computers in their pockets, watching, commenting. The radioman—radical—in his booth. Into the mic, onto the air—the mouthpiece of the conservative movement, confirming the doctor as the nation's future. The doctor—the would-be politician—projected onto a screen beside the booth. Silver-streaked hair, rugged face—wrinkled like a sheet of foil around the eyes—shaved close, scrubbed clean. An American face looking toward the country's future.

Twisting the petal to pulp, he smelled his perfumed fingertips and walked between the flowers. He heard the low hum of someone singing. Then someone answering far away. It sounded familiar, the song, the call and response. And although he couldn't quite catch the tune, he remembered something vague from his childhood. A low-slung, white-washed church throbbing, his grandfather pulling him away, jerking his hand down the dirt road. He strained to hear, motionless in the garden, but the voices were moving in the other direction.

Before the interview with the radioman—sitting behind his desk at home—he had sung arpeggios to warm up his voice. La-la-la-li-la-la-la. Ma-ma-ma-me-ma-ma-ma. You'll be fine, his wife said, stepping into the room with two bottles of water in her hands. It's a challenge you're ready to meet. A flower-print apron tied around her waist, mid-morning, the pot roast already in the oven. A dream. All the support he and the kids would ever need. But remember, she said, placing the bottles on the desk. You're a leader with God in his heart. Not a soldier. Make him know. She turned and whisked herself from the room, pulling closed the French doors behind her.

There was a framed facsimile of the Declaration on the wall behind him. Memorized in high school, retained ever since. The Laws of Nature and Nature's God. Along with the preamble and the articles. His ticket to the big leagues. Pictures of Jefferson, Washington, Jackson, Reagan on the walls around him. All eyes toward the future. The afternoon sunlight slanting through the wooden blinds. Crisp, the grandeur of God.

Warmer still today in the rose garden, and someone singing spirituals far away. He caught the song again, remembered dark faces sweating above purple robes in the little church—the whites of rolling eyes like car-

## Fiction

toons he had seen, the dark holes of wailing mouths—swaying in syncopation, doors wide open to the dirt road. His grandfather pulling him away. The memory seemed like some scene from a black and white film, or a post-card of gospel singers. All through the plantation literature of his childhood were the whites of black folks' eyeballs. He couldn't remember what was real. Who was that little boy? he wondered.

Smiling, he bowed his head toward the sundial at his feet. In the governor's rose garden, a slant shadow on slabbed stone. Cast from an angle pointing into the past. For the old man is a-waiting for to carry you to freedom. The bobwhite called again behind the hedge. We must save the country from tyranny, he told the radioman. Divine providence, in our hands now. Manifest, our destiny. He made him know, all right.

### When in the Course

It's the 1770s all over again, he said as the radio show opened. Back to the constitution's original intent. We're fighting for true individualism. True American conceptualism. Stars and stripes waving behind him. I remember a quote you used on this show, he told the radioman. Something Jefferson wrote to his nephew.

Let me have it, the radioman answered.

He told him to challenge everything. And that's exactly what we're doing. We're living in a less free America, the doctor said. We're fighting for liberty—for the foundational core beliefs upon which this country was founded—and I'm not sitting silent in the saddle anymore.

The radioman clapped. Hot dog, he said. Then welcome to the fight, my friend.

There are two questions of supreme importance, the doctor continued. The first is:

Who's sovereign? He held up his index finger—alone in his office at home—talking into the camera. The second, he said, is: What's the role of government? He held up his middle finger, paused. His wife nodded at him from behind the French doors. And Thomas Jefferson, he said, answered both of those questions in the second paragraph of the Declaration. He said that God is sovereign, that we are created in his image, and that we're therefore guaranteed life—from the moment of conception, let's be clear about that—life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. And that government only exists to secure these rights. That government derives its power from the people—not the other way around.

The radioman clapped again. You're speaking my language, he said. Really hittin' the nail on the head.

The hammer, his wife had called him when it was all over. Did you hear him? He called you the hammer.

Now he took his coat off and stepped into the grass. Dew-laden, sweet-smelling, away from the mansion on the hill. Just holler when he's ready, he said over his shoulder. Playing cool, as if he didn't know why he was there. The man in the black suit nodded. Black sunglasses, stone-faced, plugged in through his ear. The whole world listening. The sundial ticking.

You're speaking my language, the radioman said. But I speak Jefferson. I'm fluent in the founding fathers. What about these twenty-somethings who don't care two bits about our nation's history? What are you going to do about them?

They do care, the doctor answered, they do. But the country—and young people especially—are drifting away from traditional parties. Perhaps it's time for a third. One that

## 52nd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival

represents those true Americans out there who realize we need revolution, not reform.

Hot dog, the radioman laughed. Folks, I think we have a real contender.

The hammer, his wife said.

Yes sir, the doctor answered. I find myself thinking back to something Ronald Reagan said when he left the Democratic party.

What's that? the radioman asked.

I didn't leave them, the doctor said, pounding his desk. They left me.

The listeners eating it up. Fuzzy past with old granddad, country on the up and up then. A shining city on a hill. Still a dozen to beat before the big fight, but he was on his way. The crates of tea jettisoned, the harbor tinged with the blood to come.

### Pick-a-nick Patterns

He wandered down the slope, beneath the occasional shade of twisted live oaks and sprawling magnolias, past redbuds and tupelos and dogwood trees, his hands clasped behind his back, the sun on his face. Two black women in red gingham dresses walked in the opposite direction. One wore a turban on her head, and on top of the turban, a reed-woven basket, enormous and bleached white by the sun. He stopped and watched them—fluid bodies beneath thin fabric. Cut from the same cloth, as if costumed, stereotypes ambling barefoot over the grounds. The pale soles of their feet in languid unison over the red brick. Up toward the big house, doing what?

They didn't look back, disappearing behind a bed of holly and rhododendron. Thin branches to hide them. Were those the singers he had heard? He continued down the slope, wiping a bead of sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand. The governor would get in trouble if anyone saw those two. He had

cool hands even in the sun—even-tempered doctor's hands to bring babies into this world. The radioman had been called a hothead. But then again, so had Paul Revere. You don't rally troops with a calm voice. You do it with fire in your throat.

I can't think of a single thing working against you, the radioman had said. I don't understand why you're not running away with this thing.

I'm not hiding, he had said in the interview. I mean what I say, and I'm willing to back it up. Numbers on the tip of his tongue. Good standing with women, minorities, and college kids. Better than one would think. His opponents were out of touch with the constituents they wished to represent. We the people. Revolution not reform. No apologies—never—only truth and action.

The flowerbeds that flanked the bench on which he sat reminded him of his wife's apron. Bright. Smiling at him from behind the French doors. Someone's job to take care of these flowers, he thought. Good honest work! Those women in red gingham? Why were they dressed up that way? Barefoot! The press would have a field day.

His eyes drifted over the grass to the long hedge that walled in the yard, smoke rising from the pine trees behind them. A lot of forest back there, even in the heart of the city. The frail plumes of smoke looked like the cook fires of another time.

He stretched his legs in front of him and imagined soldiers supping in lulls of fighting. Far from home, scribbling love letters to wives, sending rag dolls to children. Thinking about death and the possibility of their babies growing up without them. Someone with a fiddle as the sun set. Men fighting a losing war. A lost cause. And yet they soldiered on. Shadow

# Fiction

men whispering to one another about lives left behind. Revolution, revolution, not reform.

He thought of his own wife and children—front and center—in his run for office. The image mattered, he had learned. The hammer, she said when the interview was over. Tap-tap-tapping away.

## Duty, to Throw Off

When he introduced the doctor—the would-be senator—the radioman made note of the man's numerous children. You're an OBGYN, he said, and you have seven kids, so I'm assuming you know what's causing that.

The doctor chuckled. I think I have an idea, he answered.

So why, asked the radioman, why in the world would you want to get involved in politics?

It's not political, the doctor answered. It's the act of a serving citizen. When duty calls, you must answer, he said. Our generation is going to pass on a less free America unless we stand up. And I'm not going to look into my child's face, into the faces of the 9,000 children I've delivered, and shrug my shoulders when they ask—fifteen years from now—where were you in the fight for liberty?

He imagined them on the grass below him. An army of the children he had delivered. Sitting in front of their pitched pup tents and campfires, looking up to their leader. Now galloping through camp on a white horse, his saber in the air. Their question would be—not, where were you?—but, how can we carry on?

I was raised by a single mother, he told the radioman. And she always talked about how this country was the land of opportunity. The opportunity to get up every time you fall down. That's the individual's right. And America is the only place in the world where the indi-

vidual trumps the collective. Our constitution, based on Judeo-Christian tenants, protects the individual—from the moment of his conception, until his dying breath—from the government.

Big government, the radioman chimed in. Progressivism, what they call it. He laughed. Before the progressive era, he said, we didn't have the problems we have today.

That's right, the doctor answered.

A welfare state, people hopping the borders. They wouldn't come if there wasn't free stuff.

No sir.

Don't get me wrong, the radioman continued. I'm for immigration. Legal immigration, that is.

Provided by the constitution, the doctor answered.

That's what this country's founded on—competition. I want people competing for my job. I want that. Let the best man win, I say.

He stood up from the bench and continued down the slope toward the hedge, wondering if the governor would endorse him. Strings of smoke above the trees, he heard running water from the forest. Watched as more black women in red gingham disappeared into the cut hedges below him. Too far to tell if they were the ones he had seen before. Now more—five, six—apparitions glancing back at him. Then gone.

Down the slope and over a brick path that ran along the square-cut hedge. Evergreen, ten feet tall, used to make mazes, he thought. Need a ball of string to get out like the Greek hero did. His future was a labyrinth, unknowable.

### With Freedom's Holy Light

You say you've seen my show, the radioman said. So you must know what I'm going to ask you next.

Oh yes, the doctor answered. You're going to ask me about my soul.

And how is it?

I'll tell you, the doctor answered. I'm here because I was born again. This is a spiritual battle we're fighting. Romans 12:9 says to hate evil and cling to good. Everyone knows that. But the first part of that verse is even more important. It calls for genuine love. And that's how we're going to change hearts and minds. I can hit the nail on the head all day, he said, but we're not going to change hearts with a hammer. This is what we do. We go to the people—the people who disagree with us—with loving and kindness, we go to them and discuss these things. As Americans.

Then back to dual federalism, tap-tap, ambassador of the sovereign state. As if there was no seventeenth amendment, he said. Tap-tap. You must understand that contract. If you can't, you cannot lead.

Quotes from the constitution. Quotes from the bible. Revolution. Tap-tapping away.

Wow, said the radioman. I've talked to a lot of politicians, and it usually takes me a while to warm up. But you, sir, he said. You are so well read, and you have taken the time to think out your platform. I believe you're the best candidate I've ever talked to the first time out of the chute. I mean it.

Thank you, the doctor answered. I'm so honored. I just believe that liberty is so simple. We're on the cusp of something big here. Our grandchildren are either going to look back and thank us or else they're going to ridicule us. And I want to be standing on the front lines with you. I want to be fighting the good fight.

Dark.

A deep green darkness on the other side of the hedge. He pulled his head back into the sunlight. What an effect. Following the brick pathway, he looked for the place where the women passed through. Black skin, red gingham, the sound of running water. No one at all on the green slope above him. A timeless landscape. Serene.

Where was the bodyguard in the black suit? Was there still time before the meeting with the governor? Just a peek, he told himself. How far back did the grounds go, anyway? Wild back there. In the middle of the capital city. Strange. People from another time wandering through the landscape.

Wind rushed through the hillside trees, shaking their limbs. The doctor felt small. Like a child crouched against the hedge, staring over his shoulder at the sky. Everything as bright as a Disney cartoon. Not a cloud in sight. These were the winds of change. Seven crows alighted from an oak tree on the hill. He counted them. Cawing. Talking together in black-beak code. He remembered sitting in front of a console television in his parents' living room. Rolling eyeballs. Jazz birds dancing in hiccup steps. Jive talking. Fat cigars smoking in their clapping beaks. His grandfather smoking cigarettes.

Black kites against the blue sky, their shadows sliding over the ground. Constellations bleeding into each other. As if chained together, into the woodland beyond.

### Light and Transient Causes

A break in the hedge farther down. Not a doorway, but a place where people might slip through. Big women, those black ladies, he thought. He looked up the sunny slope. He no longer heard running water. Or, rather, the sound had changed to something else. The

## Fiction

susurration of singing. Bodies sweating in a church. Murmur from the ground up. The wind dying as he ducked into the prickling. Sharp fingers scraping against him, nails biting his flesh, pulling his shirt. He squeezed into the dark.

Ten degrees cooler in the shade. Spring sprung, but winter still clutching to the shadows. Gash of light piercing the hedge where he stepped through. It would be easy to find his way back, he thought. The point where the gardener gave up. A wall between groomed nature and the real thing.

He turned, pine needles underfoot, and let his eyes adjust to the absence of light. The trees bigger than they should have been. Thick trunks standing straight and tall. Wild and empty beneath them. Sentinels for hundreds of years. He put his jacket back on, took tentative steps into the seeming forest, wondering how it could be. Orange fires glowing on the ground in the distance and animals spinning on spits. The smoke from the treetops, he thought. Antic shapes dancing around them, throwing shadows long and slant. He remembered the white-washed church again, the bright bodies roiling inside. Purple. What tricks back here in the dark?

There were voices like water all around him. Rushing. Crows cawing in the treetops and someone screaming. A woman in labor, he thought. On the forest floor? It couldn't be. Nighttime back here, a green nightmare. The screaming stopped, and he wondered if he had imagined it. He lost his balance and couldn't catch it again. Furtive movements between the trees made him look this way and that, dark shapes hurrying to and fro.

Fear welled up inside of him and he stopped cold. Leaned against a tree trunk to steady himself. Taking deep breaths, he tried to calm down by recounting his steps. What is

this? he said out loud, looking at the sunlight streaming through the hedge. A different day on the other side. Sunny springtime, falling bright. Smooth lawn, the smell of cut grass, men in black suits with sunglasses, plugged in through their ears. Calm down, doctor, he told himself, trying to smile. You're at the governor's mansion. Here by his request. You're about to be endorsed.

He turned again. Away from the light. Peered into the gloom of the woods. No mistake. There were fires burning and dark shapes dancing. Spindly through the low glow. A deep murmur from nowhere and everywhere welling up in his ears, a gathering. Someone yelled and someone answered. Preparations for something. An event at the mansion?

Hadn't he seen stacks of tables and chairs as he entered the gardens? Surely, they held functions on the governor's lawn. Fundraisers, pig pickings in the style of the Old South. Black waiters and waitresses to complete the scene? A bit old fashioned, he thought. Dressed in red gingham? Barefoot? Cook fires secreted away in the deep wood? He imagined dark men in black tuxedos, toting silver platters. If someone caught wind, the press would have a field day.

### Pastel-Painted Past

We've made mistakes, he told the radio-man. In regard to skin color and gender. And we've righted those wrongs. We've had the conversations that needed having, and we've fixed what needed fixing.

Animal shapes. Animal sounds. Plotting back here in the dark. Perhaps he should say something to the governor. Perhaps he should head back—

## 52nd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival

Someone screamed again—through the trees—and he began walking toward the fires in the distance, determined to figure out what was going on. His shoes sibilant in the pine needles. Unmistakable, that noise. A woman fully dilated and pushing. He'd heard it nine thousand times.

There are more conversations to be had, he said during the interview. The fight for life today is the same one we've fought before. During the Civil Rights era. During the suffrage movement. If a country can't protect the most innocent of innocents, how can it accomplish anything? He shrugged his shoulders in his office, alone. Shook his head while staring at framed pictures of his children. I'm talking from the heart here, he told the radioman. We must protect the rights of the individual against those of the collective. That's who we are.

He saw orange shine leaping on black skin. There. Then gone. Closer, between the trees, shining eyes. Blinking out of existence. He stopped and listened for the woman in labor, his mouth open to call out, to offer help, but something snagged his elbow.

Sudden. Holding tight as he tried to wrench free.

Let go! he screamed, surprised at his own voice.

But the hand pinched harder, a noose around his arm. Whirling him like a rag-doll—until he faced the opposite direction.

Let go! he screamed again. Adrenaline pumping through his veins. He threw his hands up to protect his face, his muscles tight, an animal on its haunches.

He opened his eyes. The man who had grabbed him held his hands up as if to show he meant no harm. A white man with white hair on his head, wearing a green suit embroidered

with bright green thread, pale stockings on his legs, and leather shoes with buckles.

Behind him, a group of white people with powdered faces in the get-up of some bygone era. Victorian? Pre-Victorian? He was no fashion buff. Bizarre. All eyes on him. Puffed pastels, gold embroidering, and layers of lace. A cache of Easter eggs spilled among the tree roots. The man in the white wig was smiling. No need to be frightened, sir, he said, raising his eyebrows. 'Tis but an animal passing her litter.

The women behind him giggled into their white-gloved hands.

What? the doctor asked.

We must keep the group together, the man continued. All of us. He half turned, speaking to the rest of them. The surprises of the evening, he said, will not be half as delightful if you peek behind the curtains like a sneak.

The ladies giggled again.

Come. He winked, holding out his hand. We mustn't keep Jefferson waiting.

The doctor stared at him. Jefferson? he asked.

Yes, nodded the other. Don't you know where you are? He laughed. The others behind him as well, taking their cue from him. Come, he said—waving them all forward—or else we'll be late.

His long coat tails whipped behind him as he turned and continued up the path between the trees. Pale figures, two-by-two, behind the bright-suited man. Through the woods, the doctor lagging. Looking behind him for the gap in the hedge, which he could no longer make out.

What of the women in gingham? Barefoot through the woods. The one screaming in the dark? Where was she?

He remembered the open mouths of those singers in the white-washed church.

## Fiction

And babies spilling from between their mothers' legs as if they had traveled some immeasurable distance. Into this world from another.

Was this some sort of reenactment? he wondered. The costumes were over the top. He stumbled up the path behind them, his feet sinking into the ground, until a woman caught his arm and buoyed him along.

### Among the Powers of Earth

Easily impressed, are you? she asked.

He stared at her face. Powdered skin, pink cheeks, red lips. Her body pulled tight at the waist. Corseted. The dress billowing below, hiding her lower half. What type of game is this? he asked.

Just you wait, she said, laughing. Good gracious. Have you never been before?

He turned away. Tried to see through the woods to the low burning fires. Something slick and fat twisting slowly on a spit. Tried to see back to the shadows dancing. But the woman pulled him along, up the path. He thought he could hear a deep moan from the forest floor. But it was farther away now. The sound of a thousand years—of time's beginning—down there. He couldn't see anything as they continued upward. Tree-tunneled, everything closing in.

Been where? he asked.

She turned toward him. Here, she said. To Monticello.

He laughed. Monticello? he asked. There were stone steps cut into the walkway now. He picked up a nail on the ground. Come along, the woman said.

Who made these nails? he wondered. Who cut these steps? Who swept the wooded walk? Who watered the flowers in the flower-pots? Who trimmed the long hedge? Who

tended the fire? Monticello? he whispered again.

But the woman didn't answer.

Long arms of white mist stretched between the trees. Upward, like monks to an altar. Shrouded. Disappearing. Up toward heaven. Then solid again, struggling up the grade in felt shoes—wood-bottomed—calves bulging through stockings. Black strings swinging at the bottoms of white braids. The women ridiculous in their dresses, stumbling along, clinging tightly to their pastel men. Faux elegance in dress-up clothes. Teetering beneath the thinning canopy. Fragile. Magnificent, said the woman holding onto his arm. A veil of smoke snaked between them. Her eyes shining, then fading, then gone.

What is this? the doctor asked. But she was dissolving into the cloud. The gloved hand vanishing. His perfumed fingers empty but for the nail he had found on the ground. The rest of them gone as well.

There was certainly no hill this big on the property. Feet scurried through the woods around him—unseen—different from the clip-clop of the actors. Furtive, quick feet over damp leaves. Barefoot. Invisible shapes toiling, eyeballs rolling through the mist. Glimpses, then blinking to nothing. He called out to them. Asked them for help. But there was never an answer. Only shadows.

### From Every Mountain Side

Onward and upward. No chance of descending into the green gloom, now. The 1770s all over again. Apparitions of a rolling landscape through the mist below. The moon silver up above him, a nickel shining in the sky. And the dipper pouring starlight onto the ground. But it had been morning in the rose garden, hadn't it? Bright, the pathway before

## 52nd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival

him, crisp, the air. The mist receding as if by command.

He heard someone whisper behind him and turned to watch. Quick from one side of the path to the other, a group of black boys in rags. One lagging behind, dragging a doll through the dirt, looking up at him for an instant, then gone. Grabbed by a long, dark arm and swallowed by the rhododendron. Afraid. The doctor called out. Stepped toward them. Stopped short when he heard them scurrying away. Then turned and kept on, the ground leveling beneath him.

The path widening. People talking up ahead, laughing. The shining rustle of glass on glass. Everything opening. The strong smell of mint and mustard seed. He saw the woman again. And the rest of them, beneath wrought iron chandeliers hanging from tree branches. Soft, the glow of candles. This was the guests' retreat. The doings down below out of sight, out of mind. Something greasy turning on the spit down there, dripping into the fire. The last fingers of mist snatched away by some unseen force. To reveal the mansion on the hilltop, the veil torn from his eyes. Impossible, he thought. He couldn't think.

Monticello brightly lit. Nickeled moonlight from the sky. For the old man is a-waiting for to carry you to freedom. Soft strands of violin strings singing melodies into the swift nighttime. People bowing, ladies laughing, a party. Silver brilliance flipped into the past. An apparition, richly clad. Real, unreal, real. Shining beacon to the world below. White on white on white. How could it be?

She waved to him, the woman, an amber glass of liquid pinched in her fingertips. Come, she motioned, come. Beneath a canvas tent-top, black men poured drinks from glass pitchers. Black waiters with silver platters walked between the white folks. It can't be, he

thought. Tiny below the big house, everyone. No. The architecture of the New World, built by the New World's architect.

Furtive figures quiet-trotting, between the house and trees. Working with averted eyes. Shadows of themselves. Blood pulsing hot. Something twisting above a fire down there. Antic shapes come tumbling from his head, dancing Africa into the lowlands. Down below this ethereal castle in the clouds. Slaves. Breathe. But his breath was hard to catch. Running from him now. Temple of a Grecian god. Lightheaded, he swayed back and forth, put a hand out to catch himself. It couldn't be. Speak in tongues before this night's over. Possessed. Progress. Freedom prophet, scripture speaker. Here on this nickel-plated platform, a vision. The acropolis of a nation. Come to dine with President Jefferson, thank you very much. Revolution. Ringing from the land. Revolution, not reform. He heard his voice echoing from the interview. It's the 1770s all over again.

Then the sound of bare feet hustling through the woods. Ring. White light framing the vision before him. Ring. Everything fuzzy, the woman with her glass up-tilted. Ring. Waving. Come, ring, come. His knees upon the ground, here to praise this holy land. Hives of activity all around, unseen. Ring, hustle, ring, bustle, bound. Ring. Blood on his hands, chained to freedom's champion, ring. Bound up in this place. A halo-headed man stepping proudly through the party's guests. Unalienable rights, he was shouting. Property, property, property. Ring. Square-shouldered. But when a long train of abuses. Straight as a gun-barrel. Ring. The savior of a nation, revolution on his lips. Absolute Despotism, he shouted. Patient sufferance. Absolute Tyranny. Ring. Blood on his hands. Ring. A history of repeated injuries and usurpations, he shouted. Everyone raised their glasses in the air and

## Fiction

cheered. He saw nine thousand babies on the forest floor. Ring. Throwing long shadows through the trees.

Jefferson come to baptize them with sticky fingers. Ring. Come to baptize them with perfumed hands. Ring. Come to baptize them where their fathers died. Ring. Sweet land of the pilgrim's pride. Ring. A woman screaming down there. The doctor could not breathe, his mind speared on a spit and sweating above the flames. Upon his knees on the packed earth. In penitence. A woman writhing on the ground. Jefferson approached, and the doctor noticed the buttons on his leather shoes were gold. Ring. Down below, the sound up-swelling. Ring, ring. Cackling through the phone line. Ring, America, ring. Phoned-in from the beginning. Hammering away. Ring. He heard her splayed upon the forest floor—alone. No one to guide her toward the light—ring—on the mountain top. Where one white man reached down to another. Ring. Trembling through time.

And for the support of this Declaration, Jefferson said, his hand upon the doctor's head. With a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence. The doctor mouthed the words. Sobbing. We mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor. Ring. The guests erupted in applause. Ring. The doctor cut his hands on the nail and wept.

Down below, a woman wailed in the wilderness, her voice ringing off the stars and stripes of the firmament. Splayed among the rocks and rills. Ring. Alone beneath the templed hills—ring—wishing her birthed child unborn. For the old man is a-waiting. Let freedom ring. Ring. Let freedom ring.





# Nonfiction

# Nonfiction

## morning routine

Kai Robinson, Agnes Scott College

i plop down in front of my dresser where i've created my makeshift vanity and stare at my un-made-up self in the mirror

    acne scars

    dark circles

        uneven skin tone

        messy edges

i go through the motions prep my skin with good molecules serum la roche-posay lotion and innisfree sunscreen prime with maybelline mattifying primer and add some e.l.f halo glow  
    i smile at my fabricated radiance

i brush out my eyebrows and remember how in eighth grade i plucked them into to threads because they were too much like my dad's and not like the other girls'

i look at my fading summer color as i mix my winter and summer shades on the back of my hand and think of how when i was younger all i wanted to do was look like the white girls i was constantly surrounded by fair skin bone straight hair everyone's ideal of beauty

    now i get disappointed when i revert back to my pale winter off-brown shade

i grab my \$14 mini NARS concealer that the makeup consultant at sephora set me up with  
i wonder how much money i've spent on makeup over the past 8 years repeatedly buying

    the wrong concealer

    the wrong foundation

        different mascaras

        various lipsticks

lip glosses

        eyeshadow palettes

everything i thought i needed to be pretty enough to be desired valued cared for  
    seen

my god i felt invisible for so long in that sea of white i spent 13 formative years being  
so different so ugly

my blush awaits my over-usage of it i squeeze the dark pink color out of the tube  
onto my pointer finger three dots on each cheek one dot on the tip of my nose

    i blend until i bring life into my face

as i apply a thin line of brown eyeliner onto my eye i wonder where my love for eyeshadow went  
    every day of eighth and ninth grade i rubbed gold sparkly eyeshadow over my lids of all things  
i don't know why i thought that would make me appealing maybe i thought it distracted from  
my eyebrows

i curl my lashes and decide if i want to wear mascara today i mean it's such a bitch to take off  
but it's kind of worth it last year at this stage in my makeup routine i'd be gluing false lashes  
to my lids a friend warned me that everyone has a phase after they start wearing lashes

## 52nd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival

where they think they look hideous without them and i'm just grateful that my laziness helped me combat that feeling after wearing them everyday for a month and a half i mean it took me almost 45 minutes to do my makeup every morning and that's a ridiculous amount of time to dedicate just to my face and for what?

for who?

at 14 it was for the white boys but then i realized that  
not just the white ones

none of the boys  
liked black girls so

at 15 the eyeshadow was for all of the boys and at 16 i realized the eyeshadow was not making me prettier so i thought the maybelline bb cream curled eyelashes and baby lips tinted lip balm would do it for them and at 17 i stopped giving a fuck and realized that they weren't even looking at me in the first place because it wasn't my face that wasn't pretty enough it was my skin color that

wasn't

good

enough

i save my favorite step for last lips

i apply my blistex then line my top lip with brown liner and apply my revlon lipstick of the day  
every morning i ask myself am i feeling extra spicy? is it a wine with everything day?

lately i've been feeling in need of a toast of new york

and lastly always top with a clear gloss

i grab my e.l.f. coconut setting spray and mist my face a sigh of relief leaves my mouth which is cut short when i realize my curls are wildin and my edges aren't laid but then i remind myself to be grateful that my curls can't be tamed and came back to life after they were scorched and neglected for eight years straight except for the swim units of course when auntie would have to cornrow my hair i would sit on top of a pillow in between her legs bracing myself for the comb scraping my scalp to make the crisp parts and wincing with every motion weaving my hair to my head

i always wonder what those eight years of straight hair did for me

did they strip me of years of knowledge about my own hair that i then had to learn in my late teenage years and am still learning now?

did they save me from more people asking me how my hair got like that and if they could touch it with their musty hands?

i mean at least i was able to feel like the white girls for a while because i could twirl my hair in between my fingers and change my hairstyle throughout the day but i had to be extremely cautious of any water i mean my mother practically made me fear the possibility of me revealing the true form of the hair that grows out of my scalp

and of course i always got more compliments when my hair was straightened especially at the bar and bat mitzvahs and on the first days of school and at my fourth and eighth grade graduation the white girls told me i looked prettier with straight hair so i felt prettier with straight hair and if they told me i was pretty then i was because

they knew best

## Nonfiction

as i refresh my curls with aunt jackie's leave-in i ponder my style options  
leave it down and deal with the tangles later  
basic high puff but spice it up with a head scarf  
if i'm feeling cute enough maybe some space buns or pigtails

god i wish i knew how to make my braid-out come out right and i wish i knew how to make my edges into those cute swirls but at least i love wearing my curls out now  
i remember the first time i wore my hair out after years of heat damage i of course had no idea what i was doing so i wet my hair in the shower combed it through and walked out the door i wandered through the morning rush of harlem and hopped across the street to the 125th street train station i passed through the crowd going up and down the stairs and entered with the swipers and the jumpers and the good samaritans who hold the emergency exit open so others can slide in i stood on the platform amongst the people who talk to themselves the homeless who sleep on the intentionally uncomfortable benches the tired going through the motions heading to work or taking their kids to school or both i hopped on the B train traveling downtown 116

110

103

96

86

i rose from the train station onto the stillness of 88th street and central park west and was judged by the white moms walking their dogs and passed the non-white babysitters taking the moms' kids to school

but nothing could break my stride into my new york city upper west side private school notorious for its prestige and the trinity to ivy league college pipeline

i cautiously stepped through the white halls and automatically got exoticizing looks paired with backhanded compliments

the first time i wore my hair out was the day before my 14th birthday i wanted to welcome the new age with something different natural

later that day zach schoberl would look at me with his ocean blue eyes and tell me he didn't like me back and he thought i was ugly

he liked the mixed black girl in our class who got keratin treatments done to permanently straighten her hair

i glance at the clock before taking one last look in the mirror to admire my work

my flourishing red curls my rosy cheeks accompanied by bright eyes and full lips and i smile from within at the fact that at 20 i do it for me i do it not to create beauty but to embrace what has always been

### Neighbors

Daniel Fowler, Columbus State University

### Alaska

I moved to Alaska when I was 8 years old. I lived in Kenai, which was about two hours away from Anchorage. The people there were very cold to outsiders, and it seemed like everyone knew everyone. One day, my mom, dad, and sister were driving home through the neighborhood where some young kid was using his car to kick up the gravel onto our van. He drove off and came back to do it again. My dad followed him to his house, where the kid's mom was out doing some work in the yard.

My dad went out to talk to the woman to tell her what her son had been doing. She became very aggressive and got up in my dad's face. My mother came out of the car to try and deescalate the situation while the woman's daughter had come out of the house yelling "What the fuck is going on?!" The mother picked a big rock up off the ground and threatened to hit my mom, but my mom, never afraid of anyone, stepped right up to her. My sister yelled at my mom, telling her to get inside the car, but the woman's daughter grabbed my sister's hair through the open window. My parents managed to pry the hippo sized woman off my sister, and they all got in the van, driving back to our house. They called the cops and the daughter had claimed that my sister scratched her, but it was obvious that she had scratched herself or had someone else do it.

### Bitcoin

I spent 3 years in Alaska before I moved back to Columbus with just my mother and my brother. We moved into an apartment complex and here was where I met Jonathan. He was a chubby, red-headed kid who was the same age

as me, 11. He lived right above us, and we would get together to play video games all the time. I guess my mother saw us as being very similar, both introverted kids without a lot of friends, so she encouraged me to hang out with him.

We used to be obsessed with Minecraft and watching YouTube videos about it. He had a desktop computer that he would play it on, and I was so jealous. One day, he was showing off some Pokémon he had recolored on his computer when he began telling me about Bitcoin and how it was a digital currency. We even tried to convince both of our parents to buy one, but they thought it was silly. At that time, one Bitcoin was around \$100. Just one is worth about \$17000 today. Fuck.

### Cheating

While I was in Orlando visiting Universal Studios with my mother and siblings, my dad was back at home, in Fort Benning. He was sleeping with one of the neighbors, and my mom found out because of her caller ID showing up on the house phone. My dad liked to think that he was as sneaky and smooth as James Bond, but he was more like Austin Powers and my mom was the Sherlock Fucking Holmes of catching him cheating.

### Dominoes

In our military housing on Fort Benning, there was an older man who lived just a few units down. He was in his earlier 60s, and he was quite tall. He always wore a bandana, and I always thought of him as a biker who had retired and became a hippie. The peace and love road warrior lived with his daughter who was in the military, and he would usually sit outside his front walkway playing Dominoes. He was nice enough to teach me how to play, and I would want to play with him any chance that I got. We eventually moved away, and I left

## Nonfiction

having never bested the old man. I guess the sting of constant defeat made me lose interest in the game, as I have not played it since.

### Enter at Your Own Risk

Halloween was always a fun time as a kid, stuffing my face with candy, hoping I might find a golden ticket and meet Willy Wonka. Every year for 3 or 4 years, I dressed up as Harry Potter with this year being no different. At the Fort Benning house, there was a house just down the road, right next to a giant tree that seemed to reach the clouds. Donning my Gryffindor robes and glasses, I made my way towards this house. Walking up to the house, it stood out like the razors in a Tootsie Roll. Has anyone ever even found a razor in their candy?

The house was lit with orange lights on the front lawn and there was ominous music playing to set the mood. Tombstones lined the grass with skeletons adorning each headstone. Smoke filled the grounds, so the grass was barely visible. But the worst of all was the front door. Decorated on the door was a cutout of Michael Myers from *Halloween*. My heart sank as I had always been terrified of him ever since catching glimpses of the film whenever the spookiest time of the year came around. I was paralyzed as my mother gasped and said, "Oh, it's Michael Myers!" The sidewalk leading to the house looked as long as the power lines through my neighborhood, of which no one has seen its end or beginning. I left the house with no candy. You could probably imagine how terrified I was considering that I, a 7-year-old kid, would not enter that hellish property for some candy. Although I might have considered the notion if there were Butterfingers, but alas I could not see the candy selection. From then on, it was a fact that Michael Myers lived in my neighborhood.

### Finders Keepers

My mother and I moved from our house in Midland to Columbus after getting kicked out in November 2020. Not long after we moved into our new house, our neighbors asked if we could look out for a package at our house that was for the previous family that lived there. About 2 weeks go by and the mom questions my mother about the package. The thing never showed up, but nevertheless, it was clear she assumed that we stole it for ourselves by the way that she was condescending toward my mother. "It says it arrived." "That's just really weird." "That doesn't make any sense." She definitely had too much faith in the postal service. That's fine lady and no, not waving at us when we wave at you is not hurting our feelings. I almost wish we did steal it at this point.

### Gun

Our crazy Alaskan neighbors wanted to send us a message. The father of that horrible clan decided he would come right up to our door and threaten us. He rang the doorbell and, unfortunately for him, my mom was the one who answered. He threatened to hurt us, and he asked whether we knew who his family were. His family was lucky enough to have been one of the first people to set up shop in Kenai when it was first being settled, so they could do whatever they wanted. Mom, being the ever badass that she is, stepped right up to him, asking him if he knew who she was. She then proceeded to tell him to "get the fuck off my property before I shoot your fucking ass!" There was a gun right next to the front door, and she told me she had no idea how to use it, but she would figure it out. No one messes with her family.

## 52nd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival

### Hostage

A few years after I moved back to Columbus, we heard more about that kid who had kicked those rocks up on our van. My grandparents had the scoop on the little bastard, as he and his sister had robbed gas stations around town. They also stole some cars, with one joyride ending in the car being sunk into a lake. Probably the funniest of all, his mother had helped him steal from people's houses in our neighborhood. His latest crime was by far his most outrageous, worthy of a "Florida man" article despite being in Alaska. I can see the headline now. "Alaska man arrested for taking girlfriend hostage at gunpoint after being released on bail for holding his girlfriend hostage the same day."

### Isaiah

There was a family that lived 2 units down from us in the Fort Benning quarters. They were originally from Guam, and I made friends with one of the boys named Isaiah. He was 3 years older than me, and he had two brothers, one older and one younger. I spent a lot of my time with the family as we would play video games and eat dinner together. I had fond memories of discovering games like *Mortal Kombat: Deadly Alliance* and *Onimusha 2: Samurai's Destiny*. My mom would surely have been horrified if she knew her 8-year-old son was playing rated M games. Dinners at their house were always a struggle because I did not like the rice, and I only wanted chicken fingers and French fries. My first ever motor accident came when a friend of their family brought some ATVs over, and I had flipped it over. As the ATV partially weighed me down, I saw the dad run over to come pull it off me, scolding me about it. I felt like a part of the family, and I was even there for the fights and drama.

One time I was hanging out at their house after school and my brother was there too. I was walking past the laundry room when I saw the older brother's girlfriend walking up to my brother, who was sitting on top of the dryer. She tried to kiss my brother and my brother avoided it, laughing about it. I always figured she did this to make her boyfriend jealous, but I do not think he ever found out about it. I remember another time Isaiah and his older brother were fighting because of some chores. They began yelling and pushing each other, and their mother had to step in and separate them. What I remembered most was how red Isaiah's face was. It looked like all the blood was trying to escape from the pores in his face, as if there was a blood magnet in the room. It baffled me how much two brothers could hate each other so much as they yelled and cursed at each other. It would be years later when I finally learned about this feeling with similar fights between my brother and me.

### Jeff

I sort of hate the name Jeff. Jeff was the name of my mom's boyfriend, who turned out to be a complete asshole, ghosting my mom after a few years of dating. There was a kid in high school named Jeff who had sex with my friend's girlfriend while they were still together. Jeff was also the name of my neighbor when I moved out into Midland, Georgia.

Jeff, or Mr. Jeff as I called him, worked for a tow company. He had that classic country accent with a bald head, goatee, and belly so big you'd think he was volunteering to take on the responsibility of being earth's second moon. Jeff also liked to ride his motorcycle around and smoke weed, such a cool guy. He liked drama and gossip, constantly talking behind people's backs. My brother would hang out with him sometimes, but once he left, he

## Nonfiction

would call my brother an asshole. He was not wrong, but only I get to call my brother an asshole.

He also had 3 dogs that would never shut the hell up, every day and night with those hounds. I could live with noise, but one of the dogs, Leroy, was very aggressive when it came to the backyard. Whenever I went to let my dogs out, he would ram into the fence with his head and chew off the planks of wood. Every time I opened the door to the backyard, I swear I could hear the theme music to Jaws start playing. This happened for all 7 years that we lived there. I remember one day when I was letting my dogs out, he had the audacity to ask me, "Are your dogs chewing up my fence?" "Nope. It's your goddamn dogs, you fucking asshole. It's your responsibility to fix the fence, not mine." That's what I wanted to say, but I was 14, so I replied with a simple "No sir."

### Kinky

When I was back in Fort Benning, my mom said there was a woman who lived a few houses down who ran a phone sex line. The lady would sit outside on her porch, making sure to "satisfy" her customers.

### Lawn

Jeff would mow our front lawn for us because we did not have a working lawn mower at the time. Mom would stop by the store to grab a case of Bud Light for him as thanks. Then he would drink that Bud Light and sit out on his back porch, cursing our dogs and wishing that he could shoot them.

### Mary Irene

We lived on a hill in Alaska. I always loved it because it felt like a movie where the haunted house was on the hill. It also made for great sledding in the wintertime, although I

was annoyed when random kids would show up just to sled down our hill without asking. Even farther up above us lived a woman named Mary Irene, a Filipino woman, with her husband and her 3 kids. Two of her kids were toddlers and one of them was a teenager, Albin. He was friends with my brother, and I used to hang out with him a bunch as he was a big gamer like myself.

They were always very nice, and we would sometimes invite them over when we had family get-togethers. When my mom told me about my real father, of whom I still have not met to this day, she said that Mary Irene had asked if I had known about my real father as she could tell I was different from the rest of my siblings. Everyone could tell if you put me and my dad next to each other, everyone but me, I guess. Both my siblings' biological dads were white, whereas mine was full-blooded Samoan.

### Ned Flanders

Ned Flanders is a character in the American animated sitcom *The Simpsons*. He is the neighbor of the Simpson family. Homer Simpson, the father, has a very complicated relationship with Ned, as Homer has been seen to genuinely care for Ned and consider him a friend despite his usual jealousy and annoyance with Ned's very existence. Ned is a "good, Christian neighbor" in that he is incredibly faithful to his religion, and he is always willing to help his neighbor, Homer, no matter how poorly Homer treats him.

### Over The Fence

There was a kid named Reggie that lived just a few houses down from me when I was living in Fort Benning. I was 7, and I was outside playing soccer with Reggie. He was 8 or 9 and I had just met him that day. We wanted to go in-

## 52nd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival

side and play some video games, but my mom wanted to know if it was okay with Reggie's parents, as we barely knew each other. I told Reggie to just sneak into the house, so he did not have to go all the way back to his house. He went along with it, and I had the bright idea of having him climb the fence in the backyard as my mom was out in the front. I went back into the house and waited outside in the backyard as Reggie began to climb the fence. It took him a couple of tries but he was able to get to the top. As he wrapped one leg around the top of the fence, my dog, Charlie, came outside barking like crazy at this poor little kid. I remember him screaming and crying as he had one leg on each side of the fence. At the time, it was terrifying thinking about if he fell and hurt himself. How was Mom going to punish me? Nowadays when I think back to it, I cannot help but laugh.

### **Put Those Toys Back!**

While living in Alaska, there was a family that moved into my uncle's old house when I was 9. The mom had a brother who was 12, and we would hang out sometimes, usually jumping around on the trampoline in my backyard. His name was Jacob, and he would bring his nephew over sometimes. His nephew was 4 and would always want to play with my toys. One time the two came over and raided my entire toy box, leaving all my toys all over the floor. It was almost comical as there were literal piles of toys that I would have confused for piles of scrap after Luke Skywalker decides to do some repairs on his X-Wing. Speaking of Luke and his ships, those were included in the pile along with a Power Rangers phone that would transform into an action figure, a Ninja Turtles car, and a bunch of Pirates of the Caribbean action figures. Those are just some of the toys that built these massive mounds. After I saw the mess they had made, I told them to clean it up,

but they refused, claiming that they had to "go eat dinner." That was the last time I played with them.

### **Quest for Matilda**

My sister would often bring her dog, Matilda, over for us to watch. Matilda looked like an Ewok from *Star Wars* with her fluffy brownish beige fur, and she was about the size of a Build-a-Bear teddy bear. One night at the Midland house, I let her out into the backyard to pee when she went running off to the neighbor's fence, where a German Shepard and Husky were barking loudly. Matilda decided to bark back at them and took it even further by crawling under the fence where my other dogs had been digging a hole. I yelled for her to come back while she yelped. Running over to the neighbor's house, I rang the doorbell repeatedly to no avail. He was not home. I decided to try and jump the fence, but I was not nearly athletic enough to do so. The only solution was to find a way to get the side gate open. There was a lock, but I ended up breaking part of the wood trying to open the gate which freed the door open. As I entered, the neighbor's dogs were calm as can be, not seeming to care for me at all. I found Matilda huddled up in a corner, shaking so much she looked like a giant electric toothbrush someone had covered in fur. I grabbed her and took her back home, making sure the man's gate was securely shut. I never said anything to him about it as I was 14 at the time and on top of that, he was a cop.

### **Robbed**

While living in Midland, one of our neighbors had been robbed at gunpoint. Someone had just walked up to them with a shotgun and threatened to blow their head off if they did not do as they say.

# Nonfiction

## Screaming

At least four times a day, no matter where I have lived, I hear people screaming in my neighborhood. Well, “people” is probably not the best term to use since it’s usually a child screaming, and we all know that children are not people. When I was a kid, I always assumed that the kids that were screaming were being kidnapped or beaten by their parents. Scenarios would play in my head such as me running to the rescue to stop the bad guy, or I would rescue the kids from the parents and bring them to Xavier’s School for Gifted Youngsters. Nowadays, I just get annoyed with the screaming, and I hope the kidnapper does his job quickly, so I don’t have to hear it anymore. I guess I’ve just grown to be grouchy in my old age.

## Tinker and Bella

When I lived in the apartment, we did not initially have dogs. We had neighbors who were always at work or out of town, Paula and Misha. They were a young couple in their late 20s who were always getting drunk and fighting. I remember Paula used to sit outside and tan so that other guys would see her, and Misha would get jealous. Misha was also very much about looking in tip-top shape. He seemed to be more in love with himself than anything. They had two dogs, Tinker and Bella. Both were tiny little things, about  $\frac{3}{4}$  the size of a loaf of bread. Tinker had white fur that was fluffy as a marshmallow you eat in the dark so no one can see your shame. Bella was brown with thinner, softer fur. We were always happy to see them and honestly, we were always much happier to see the dogs than we were the owners. They weren’t bad people, but they were always caught up in drama, and they were very self-centered.

I remember one night when I came back from a midnight screening of *The Avengers* with my sister’s boyfriend. As we were going back into the apartment, we saw Bella running around outside. Mind you, it was 3am. I picked her up and brought her to her door. I knocked on the door and waited there for about 5 minutes before Paula came and opened the door. “What the fuck?” she said in a groggy voice. We gave her Bella, and we went back to our apartment. I remember thinking as I was holding Bella, “Maybe I should just bring her to our house.” It didn’t seem like she would’ve been missed anyway.

## Uncle Jerry

My uncle Jerry used to live right across the street from us in Alaska. He was an alright neighbor when he wasn’t constantly stealing money from my grandparents or trying to start arguments with everyone in the family.

## Vacuum

My brother and I shared a room when we lived in our apartment. We each had a bed on either side of the room. He would often wake me up with the sound of the vacuum. He vacuumed every day.

## Weed

I remember the first time I smelled weed in my life. My mother and I had decided to go to a music festival in Atlanta, Music Midtown. Twenty One Pilots was playing one of the nights, and this was during my emo band phase, so I had to go. I later regretted going, as it seemed people were there just to get fucked up rather than listen to music, and I hate huge crowds anyway. We found a spot that seemed miles away, but the booming of G-Eazy’s performance made it seem like we were in the front row. “He’s a great entertainer, a great show-

## 52nd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival

man," I remember she said after his set was up. My mother has a tendency to say things that are blatantly obvious, and I can't help but get annoyed. The worst is when she explains why a joke is funny in a tv show. Maybe it is just because she is my mom, and my job is to always be annoyed with her.

As we were waiting for Twenty One Pilots, a group of friends came and sat beside us. They looked like they were in their mid-30s and had just gotten off work at a tech startup. "Did someone shit themselves?" my mom said unceremoniously. My mom is usually a pretty polite person, but that is not to say she does not curse because she definitely does, albeit usually not in public. There was a silence as my mom realized, "Oh, it's weed. It's a weed smell." I sat there thinking of two different things. "Oh god, weed smells horrible," and "What the fuck is going on right now?" It had just dawned on me that I was a 16-year-old kid at a music festival with my 51-year-old mom. We were probably not the demographic the organizers anticipated.

### Xbox

I was at my friend Kainoa's house which was next to the Michael Myers tree. We were playing *Halo* on his Xbox and after a while, Kainoa had to get off, and I had to go home. As his mom came in, she went to turn off the game as Kainoa begged to play some more. She went to push the button, ignoring his cries, but she was pushing the wrong button. Instead of the power button, she went to push the button to get the disk out. I tried to point to the actual power button, but she took it as me trying to stop her. "I'm sorry," she said, as I was completely embarrassed.

### Your Friend Was Hit By A Truck

Arie was my neighbor when I lived in the Midland house. We had been friends in middle school, and she was one of the first friends I had made when I began going back to school after 2 years of homeschooling. She was one of the nicest people I had ever met, always willing to help anyone with their problems, and her smile would melt even a stone golem's heart. Arie encouraged me to be more confident in myself and helped me become more social. If not for her, I don't think I would even be able to leave my house.

We lost contact after middle school as she moved away. I remember seeing on a friend's Instagram that she had been struck by a truck while visiting Columbus. After spending 3 days in a coma, she was gone. That was the first time I had experienced the death of a friend. I remember attending her funeral, where I wore a black shirt. Everyone else was wearing purple, her favorite color. I felt so stupid. I still remember seeing her in the coffin and I could not believe someone who had so much life was gone. We took her to the cemetery, where she was laid to rest.

Some days I can't stop thinking about her and why she was taken away from us. I often wonder whether I am honoring her memory. It has been 6 years since her death, and I have not visited her once. I hope that one day I can find the courage to see her once again and tell her how much she truly changed my life.

### Zasalamel

I got *Soulcalibur II* while on one of our yearly trips to Anchorage where we could go to the malls. Link from *The Legend of Zelda* was on the cover, which initially piqued my interest. I fell in love with the game as the gameplay was very arcade-like and there were plenty of different game modes to keep the game from

## Nonfiction

getting stale. My favorite character was Kilik, as he had a cool hairstyle and fun skillset with his long staff. After countless hours of kicking ass with Kilik, I stumbled upon the 3rd game in the series at a neighbor's house, right next to Mary Irene's house at the top of the hill.

Amanda and Cory were a young couple in their mid-20s. Amanda was very shy and introverted, while Cory was a bit more outgoing. What I loved the most about them was that they were gamers. I do not just mean that they had an Xbox with *Call of Duty* or *FIFA*. I am talking *Final Fantasy*, *Fallout*, *Legend of Zelda*, *Elder Scrolls* gamers. All throughout their house they had “nerd” stuff. There were pictures of anime and video game statues. There were shelves filled to the brim with video games. They had Gamecube, Wii, PS1, PS2, PS3, Xbox 360—you name it. I felt like Neo in *The Matrix* if he asked for video games instead of guns. As I perused the display of games I found it, *Soulcalibur III* for PS2. To my absolute delight, they let me borrow the game.

One of the new characters who stood out to me the most was Zasalamel. He wears a white hood and sports a yellow eye while wielding a giant death scythe. Did I mention he also turns into the final boss of the game? Yeah, he transforms into a demon called Abyss with horns on his head and a big magical orb inside his exposed rib cage. As a kid, that's all I needed to hear. I had the game for a while and as we were moving away, I completely forgot that I still had the game, so my parents packed it away in the box with all my other games.

As I grow older, I do not often meet any Corys or Amandas anymore. Hell, I don't think any of my neighbors would let me borrow some flour, let alone a video game. Most people might not even care about the death of the “good neighbor”, and I usually tell myself that I don't. When I really think about it, there

is a sadness there. Maybe it comes from the fact that my actual family is so messed up that I looked to the outside world for an escape. But just like my family there were bright spots but, in the end, I was mostly hurt. Maybe all this heartbreak will make me become like Zasalamel, a brooding warrior with no allegiances but to himself. I just hope that the transformation into a demon is not too painful.

### Spring, Devastating and Green

Scarlett Peterson, Georgia State University

It's hard to tell from my back patio that people are dying. All over the world, people lay in hospital beds gasping for air that their lungs don't have the capacity to deliver anymore. COVID-19 patients are struggling mere miles from my too-small backyard. To my left, marigolds, Roma tomatoes, a fig tree. In front of me, dozens of green things—onions, rosemary, basil, three kinds of squash, several peppers, a strawberry plant, more. I hate the house I live in but am grateful to be living. The dogs walk aimlessly through the yard, shedding drifts of fur onto the grass and red clay. We don't have good dirt, so I've bought bags of soil and pots, grown everything above ground. All night I was up looking for cheap pots, seeds I could sow and make a few bucks on—a way to turn this hobby into money.

I read recently that our economy shows its flaws through this constant cycle of gigs, that we shouldn't all be scrambling for a second or third source of income. My student loan debt is near the maximum, and though there is always talk of loan forgiveness, I know that it won't come soon enough. If it does come, I'll still have to find a way to pay my student fees, a way to afford health insurance.

This summer I was awarded the position of president of the Graduate English Association at my university—I'm one year into doctoral coursework, and I understand now how privileged I am to be here. I understand, too, that I shouldn't be here according to my economic status. The cost of three degrees with maximum student loan withdrawal per semester doesn't allow for a four, then three, then five-year degree. The model doesn't extend far enough for me, and no one let me

know this in time to plan for it. I should have checked for myself, yes, but I was busy with classes and teaching and second jobs where I waited tables, serving people who make more money per year than I owe the government, and who still tip less than twenty percent. I recognize my bitterness. I revel in it like I revel in any emotion I have time for.

Later today, I will take my bitterness and my debt, put a swath of fabric across the lower half of my face, and buy bread and envelopes, whatever paper products Dollar General's shelves hold. The stark yellow and black sign reminds me of my childhood, those struggles that are mirrored by my every day. Like my mother, I am bad with money. I'll walk down too many aisles, pick up useless things that bring me joy—more pots, maybe, more soil. Maybe by the time I return home, my mailbox will be full, have a letter or a book inside for me to open, another small gift to feed into my obsessions.

Money is a concept we created. It's a motivator, something most of us strive for. It's the root of nothing, the reward for most things, a balm for many problems. I believe that money could save the world. In the time of coronavirus, money is killing more people than ever. Doctors and nurses are dying trying to save patients, many of whom couldn't stay home like I do. Essentials. We use this adjective to describe things like toothpaste, bottled water, toilet paper—stock up on the essentials, stay home, wear a mask. This object idea is attributed to essential workers too. I know them. I came from some of them. My cousin is still fixing air conditioners most days, refrigeration units in the restaurants that won't close, those whose workers talk like me. A year ago I was one of them, soon I may be one again. Expendable, or at least worth putting at risk for the

## Nonfiction

reward of fried chicken, pizza delivered to our locked doors.

Most blooms that feed us are yellow—squash, zucchini, tomato blooms are all within my sight. Dandelions bloom yellow too, and are wild edible from root to green to yellow bloom. I saw a recipe for shortbread using the petals recently and thought about clipping them from my neighbor's yard. Dozens will be blooming in my own yard soon, then going to seed, which I plan to pluck and store for later. I remind myself often that I am above nothing. For the ones I love, I have cleaned excrement from carpets, chairs, beds. I have learned to love most people now, most animals.

Inside, my lover is still sleeping. I spend my weekend mornings with tea, writing for the sake of feeling. I've sent a dozen letters in the last week to people I've known for decades, years, months. All of them have shown me kindness, and many of them have shown me love. I type the letters so that I can remember what I've written. So much of my life is forgetting. Every day I forget, at least for a while, to be afraid. These are the peaceful hours, these hours are spent working toward something. I write or bake or put my hands in soil and hope that what I'm creating will feed whoever comes near it. Small wonders, this creation.

### In Translation

Genevieve Clark, Agnes Scott College

The first thing that people want to know when they find out that I study a dead language is, "Can you speak it?" The answer is complicated. I've been taking Latin since I was eleven, but even after a decade, I've spent very little time speaking it out loud. I've spent absolutely no time conversing. My study of Latin has been oriented around the goal of reading, writing, and translating ancient texts. I have memorized passages for recitation, but speaking them aloud still feels fraught. My pronunciation is garbled. I started taking Ecclesiastical Latin when I was a Christian homeschooler. Ecclesiastical Latin is a beautiful lie, removed from its original sound, designed to roll off of tongues and echo off of cathedral roofs. The closest language to it now is probably Spanish, which has the same musical quality. When I entered public school and started taking Classical Latin, I was struck by how much more guttural it was. Vs are pronounced like Ws, Js become Is, sometimes U and V are represented by the same character, and if the editor has not been kind to you and added it in, there is no punctuation. With these conflicting rules in my head, my spoken Latin is often clumsy. The liltingly fierce quality my Latin professor has when she speaks always evades me.

Sing to me of the man, Muse, the man of  
twists and turns  
driven time and again off course, once  
he had plundered  
the hallowed heights of Troy.  
Many cities of men he saw and learned  
their minds,  
many pains he suffered, heartsick on  
the open sea,

fighting to save his life and bringing his  
comrades home.

But he could not save them from  
disaster, hard as he strove  
the recklessness of their own ways  
destroyed them all,  
the blind fools, they devoured the cattle  
of the Sun  
and the Sungod blotted out the day of  
their return.

Launch out on his story, Muse, daughter  
of Zeus,  
start from where you will— sing for our  
time too.

—*The Odyssey*, translated by Robert Fagles

The first version of *The Odyssey* translated by a woman came out in 2017, when I was sixteen years old. Scholars estimate that the original text was written down sometime in the late 8th century. 2,800 years before a woman's voice could be heard, even faintly, in the story.

Tell me about a complicated man.  
Muse, tell me how he wandered and  
was lost  
when he had wrecked the holy town of Troy,  
and where he went, and who he met,  
the pain  
he suffered in the storms at sea, and how  
he worked to save his life and bring his  
men back home.

He failed to keep them safe; poor fools,  
they ate the Sun God's cattle, and the god  
kept them from home. Now goddess,  
child of Zeus,  
tell the old story for our modern times.  
Find the beginning.

—*The Odyssey*, translated by Emily Wilson

Emily Wilson writes about the feeling of  
"intimate alienation" in her translation of *The*

## Nonfiction

*Odyssey.* “Earlier translators are not as uncomfortable with the text as I am,” she said in a Vox article, “and I like that I’m uncomfortable.” She is the only person who calls the slaves in the story what they are: slaves. Every other translator has referred to them as servants, domestics, or maids. She is also the only one who acknowledges rape in the story. “Hack at them with long swords, eradicate / all life from them,” she translates Odysseus’ instruction to murder his slave women. “They will forget the things / the suitors made them do with them in secret.” I empathize with her feelings. How does it feel to dedicate her life to studying work that excludes her?

I’ve heard it said that a language is considered “dead” when it no longer changes.

Sometimes when people learn that I took Latin, they respond with derision. A friend of mine laughed at me once. “That’s the most useless language you could possibly study,” he said. “You could be doing something way more important with your time.”

“It’s not useless,” I protested. “People who study Latin score higher on the SAT, you get a really good foundation in grammar, and it’ll be easy for me to learn Romance languages later if I want to.”

“You could do that with any other language and be speaking something you could actually use.”

And then I got philosophical. “We’re keeping a language alive, though. Don’t you see the value in that? If no one studied Latin, it would disappear.” I still think of our minds as an archive. Maybe Latin no longer changes, but is it really dead if we hold it in us?

He just laughed.

He finally apologized when he realized that I was crying.

I have read the account of a woman martyred written *manu sua* (by her own hand), in her native language, along with all of the quirks and colloquial expressions and grammatical shortcuts that come with knowing a language well enough to take liberties.

I have read *The Aeneid* in the language Virgil composed it in.

I’ve read *The Life of Hannibal* and *Catullus* and *Cicero* and *Catiline*, all in their own words. Reading a translation is not lesser, but interpretive choices are made for you by the person translating, and these often reveal the translator’s personal opinions on the text. When you read the original, you get to form your own.

Is this useful? I don’t know, but does something have to be useful to be valuable?

Sappho is the only female poet that my classics classes have ever covered. This is not because my teachers didn’t care about including women, but because she’s really all we have from that time period.

Plato called her “the Tenth Muse.” Her contemporaries regarded her as Homer’s equal; they called him “the Poet” and her “the Poetess.”

Some scholars still want to argue that she was really a man. “Sappho” never existed at all; “Sappho” is the fictional creation of a straight man, putting on the persona of a queer woman.

We talked about Sappho in my class on gender in Rome and Greece. Someone in my class posted on a discussion board: “Why is this text taken as gospel for information? Why is it assumed that they were even a woman, as

## 52nd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival

writers assumed personas very different than their own?" I could offer a historical argument as to Sappho's womanhood, but they are not convincing to someone who wants to make you prove a negative. In the face of that, the only feeling I have is, "Why do you want to take this away from us?"

Latin is intensely gendered. Every noun takes on a gender—most can be determined by the ending; feminine first declension, masculine or neuter second declension. Third declension, is the nightmare declension where no rules apply. But something that has been made very clear to me is that neuter is not for people. Neuter is for objects. To refer to someone in the neuter is to objectify them.

There are several words that you could use to describe a writer in Latin. Poeta for poet. Auctor, for author, and also historian. Conditor, more vaguely, for creator. These words are all masculine. Writing is man's work.

When I thought I was a girl, at least I had a way to talk about myself, even if the words that best described who I was were only meant for men. Now, I don't know how to be self-referential at all.

How do I make myself at home in this language that didn't know I existed?

I was fourteen when I started reading the classics. Not the classics in the sense of all the great books, but classics from antiquity. My class started with *The Iliad*; Robert Fagles' translation. I fell in love with the opening lines: "Rage—goddess, sing the rage of Peleus' son Achilles." That year, we read *The Odyssey* ("Sing to me of the man, Muse") and *The Aeneid* ("Arms and a man I sing").

I know what translation of *The Odyssey* I should like better. Wilson appeals to all of my

feminist sensibilities. Her translation thrusts the ugly underbelly of Ancient Greece into the light, refusing to let you forget about the slavery or misogyny present in the text. And yet, I can't ignore the lyricism, the siren's call of Fagles' verse. When I first read his work in ninth grade, my teacher insisted on class read-alouds. "The original was performed orally," he'd say (there would be a chorus of snickering over "orally"), "I want you to experience it out loud."

What I remember best was memorizing the invocations. As part of our "experiencing the book out loud," we memorized the openings to all three books and performed them for the class. This portion was the invocation to the Muse—it's traditional in epic for the poet to call for divine guidance in telling the story before he begins. We all thought it was a pointless assignment, just rote memorization with no analysis or skill needed. And then I actually had to deliver my portion to the class. My presentation was the day that results for the National Latin Exam came out. My school had made a massive fanfare of the occasion, presenting the person who had scored the highest in their grade with a crown of laurels, a medal, and a purple sash. I presented immediately after the ceremony, laurels still balanced on my head. We had arranged the desks in a semi-circle to imitate an amphitheater, but even so, I had to fight against the air conditioning to be heard.

I know I must have looked like a kid playing dress-up, pouring my heart out to a classroom of bored ninth graders who all had to memorize the same thing, but during these moments, I did feel divinely inspired. Maybe it was a Muse, or maybe it was the awareness that the words I was saying had made it through thousands of years, first sung and then written, to reach our classroom.

## Nonfiction

Always present in classical epic is the idea of singing. This is because Homer never wrote down his work—according to legend, he was blind. Possibly, there was never really a Homer, but we don't know who finally wrote the stories down. Because these stories were traditionally sung, the poet invokes the Muse Calliope, goddess of epic poetry, to help them tell the story. Virgil then emulates this concept in *The Aeneid*.

Wilson's translation of this concept falls flat: "Tell the story for our modern time. Find the beginning." Fagles translates the same lines: "Start from where you will—sing for our time, too."

Every time I sit down to write, I remember Fagles' invocation.

*Sing for our time, too.*

I'll try my best.

### Field Notes

Nathan Dixon, University of Georgia

*For Ben and Phil*

I might begin with the idea of the rhizome: Walt Whitman rolling naked through the green flag of his disposition, Deleuze and Guattari's thousand intertwined tongues slithering among the fresh clippings, prayer flags fluttering in the kudzu along the field's fringe, imprinted with Robin Wall Kimmerer's note about Sweetgrass thriving "along disturbed edges," and Arthur Sze's affirmation that "In the circumference / of a circle the beginning and end have no end." I might begin with a photograph of a plain of grass on a clear spring day, a circular plateau above Georgia's classic city that contains within itself a thousand plateaus. Or with an epigraph by Jake Skeets: "Time doesn't pass, time builds. Time builds and leads to an open field."



I might begin with my finding this field during the spring in which the virus sprung. After Caroline and I flew to Miami and conceived a child in a stranger's bed, we came back home to a dog named Clover that we still thought we were only dog-sitting. I started taking long walks with this shaggy creature during the hollowed-out, stay-at-home days, telephoning the long-distance people I missed the most. On the bright day of discovery, I was talking with my mentor from my master's program, carefully probing after any potential jobs at the HBCU where he had trained me. He was not-so-carefully advising me to look elsewhere.

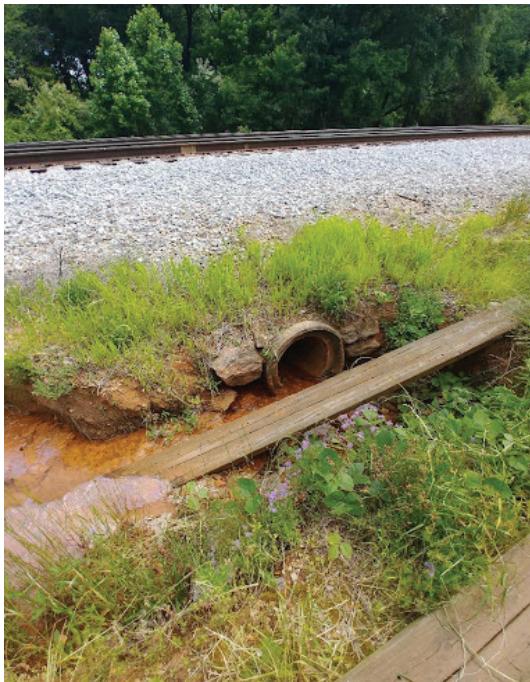
Beyond the dead-end of Satula Street stretches a footpath—a shallow canal between the banks of grass—that reminded me of my youth on Big Spring Mountain, beyond my grandparent's cabin, walking the woods with a stripped sapling in hand, picking with my grandmother, chasing cows down the valley toward the Calhoun's place, hunting arrowheads with my brother in the packed dirt of the mountain top.

Yes, I might begin with this trail that bent around the back of the buzzing electric substation, the transformers vibrating cancer into the afternoon, the kudzu-run-amok—choking the trees until their constricted fingers fell off, leaving monolithic giants rising phallic from the dirt to wave their amputated limbs at one another. We hadn't told anyone that Caroline was pregnant and wouldn't for a few months yet. The earth, though, was bursting at the seams. It felt providential. I lost reception immediately.

The path led downhill—through tunnels cut into the kudzu, past busted plastic buckets, syringes, and bundles of shredded clothing braided into the vines, half buried in the dirt—

## Nonfiction

to the train tracks where I found rainbow-colored water seeping from a silted concrete pipe. Puddles crystallized and shattered, witness to the passing of hobos along the tracks that continue up under the highway where teens declare their love for one another by spray-painting the pylons with hearts and obscenities. Their names in garish colors to prove they exist, survival itself become their *raison d'être*. They cannot choose but be ascetic, celebrating themselves only as they are excluded from society. Not "much reason to be cheery," writes Philip Roth, when "the American reality . . . is continually outdoing" the talent of fiction writers. I wonder if this essay is any more than me saying: I am.



I might begin instead with my turning back, retracing my steps, and hearing someone cursing and coughing behind the nodding purple thistle. Or sighting the almost-invisible trail leading straight up from the single track.

Clover the dog and I climbing up on all-fours to find the field like an embrace, swallows swooping through the golden air above the grass. We both took off running, though it felt like we were flying. I spread my arms like an airplane like a child.

I might begin with how I boasted about my discovery of the field to anyone who would listen. Or how the only friends willing to make the late-night trek from the viral front-porch drinking sessions were Ben and Phil. The three of us initiated into a brotherhood that first night as we groped our way through the darkness, clinging drunkenly to the vine that ate the South, the vine that has been used for millennia to treat hangovers and alcoholics on the other side of the world.

Or else I might begin with the field becoming a Thoreauvian holy land, every walk in that direction beginning as "a sort of crusade." We pilgrims go a-sauntering under the black cloak of inebriated nights toward our altar hunched like an owl above the neighborhood. Above the town, the state, the crumbling nation, the world always falling to pieces below us. With nothing but ourselves to offer, we spill into the grass. Then make our way to the stand of stunted lacebark elms, where we smoke and drink, then drift—blimp-like—back into the meadow, unburdening ourselves beneath the faltering milky way.

We have neither paid our debts, nor made our wills, nor settled all our affairs, yet we become free men after the last scud of day, coaxed to the vapor and the dust, beyond the runaway sun, to slide through the sleeping neighborhoods in lacy jags, to bequeath ourselves to the dirt as we escape into our field and grow. Grass-like.

## 52nd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival

I might begin with any of the long list of evenings that brothers Ben and Phil and I have lost together there. Forgetting is a part of the process, our memories mown like the grass. The weekends of the long pandemic blur through a cloud of smoke and snapping beer tabs. Aimless. Oblivious of any clock that might try to contain us, the family secrets come lumbering from the burrows of our mouths. The tribulations of a brand-new fatherhood. The fracturing of romantic relationships. The anxiety of our utter lack of funding. The inevitability that each of us will soon be flung farther afield as we fly from Georgia to embark on our so-called careers.

Do we become children again when we ascend the wall of kudzu, fetching the grass to one another with full hands? Secreting ourselves from our homes to gather in this pocket of suburban wilderness? Talking over each other about the blade of the future: job ads and benefits, the rhetoric of the cover letter, the decorum of the interview, the prohibitive cost of daycare.

Then—in the same breath—refusing to pander to expectations, we begin structuring utopian communes in the grass, insisting on refusing to settle. As if we were not already adults.

We find evidence of the night before in the treads of our tennis shoes.

I might begin with my recent worry that all my wandering has turned to walking. The days become a tight series of scheduled undertakings. Leisure: penciled into my calendar. Gratitude: an alarm on my phone. Like John Prine's lucky man, I am having trouble remembering things. Sitting in the parking lot of his favorite hot dog

stand, the thirty-something-year-old musician mulls over whether he wants to do for the latter half of his life what he's been doing for the former. These are the questions of which we construct the field. And I take solace in knowing the impossibility of telling a story the same way twice.

I might begin with my loping down Park Avenue one Sunday morning—a leashed dog leading the way toward the field—past Easy Street, toward Boulevard with an infant strapped to my chest, a shovel and a post-hole digger over my shoulder, a Styrofoam cooler balanced like a platter in my upturned palm. On my way to dig a hole in a pitiful attempt to domesticate the field. To bury a refrigerator-of-sorts beneath the lacebark elms.

Or else begin with the stranger emerging from the margin just after I cut into the ground and realized it would look to anyone else like I was burying my baby alive. Him squirming in the grass beside me like a little white worm as I stuck my shovel in the ground, raised my hand, and hollered a greeting to the silhouetted figure.

"I'm just walking," the boy answered, sounding afraid. Skinny jeans and sneakers, a pale waif with a head-full of Robert Plant hair, he had surely seen the new KEEP OUT sign posted at Satula's dead end, and I realized after our long encounter that he must have assumed that I was the owner of this field and that my joking about digging my baby's grave might not have sounded like such a joke. He helped me dig, this Jake, and told me about dropping out of high school during the pandemic, about not wanting to start back in the fall, about not knowing what to do with his life as we bludgeoned the earth with our blunt weapons,

## Nonfiction

bending the metal blades against the rocks.  
When he announced he had to hit the road, I  
swore him into secrecy.



I have seen inklings of him since: the Styrofoam cooler full of melted ice and crushed cans, the bottle of Goldschläger all but emptied, yet returned to the red-boned upper clutches of the lacebark branches where it was hidden, plastic figurines of horses prancing along the roots, a water-clogged lighter, an empty Ziplock bag, a cracked frisbee in the center of the field. He occupies another plateau. We work in shifts at this shared orogeny.

I might begin with the shoes I found on the slope leading down to the tracks, or the man in the rumpled red suit between the rails down there, spreading his arms like Jesus Christ, his cock hanging from his church pants. Or else with the whispered incantations I heard in the twilight brush or the shivering nylon tent top in

the far fringe that we felt necessitated privacy. The sound of the lawnmower always evaporates to nothing by the time I sneak up through the kudzu. Does the mower, like Marvell's, have a Juliana? Does he likewise sing a dirge of discord? Do the unhoused visitors see green hopes in the glass of the grass of the field?

Bataille: The true luxury and the real potlatch of our times falls to the poverty-stricken, that is, to the individual who lies down and scoffs. A genuine luxury requires the complete contempt for riches, the somber indifference of the individual who refuses work and makes his life on the one hand an infinitely ruined splendor, and on the other, a silent insult of the laborious lie of the rich.

I might begin with last weekend when we brought the two girls named Micaela up through the jungle and left them stranded beneath the elms as we wandered into the drunken openness of the field. Or with brother Ben stepping on a fire ant hill as he pissed over the edge, then stooping down and removing his socks as Phil and I shined our cellphone flashlights on his ankles and he bent closer and closer, making himself a pretzel before finally picking them off one-by-one. I pointed out how we must look like apes. The field refuses taming, we agreed. Half a football field away, huddled above the green votive candle that we lit but forgot to pray over, the Micaelas yelled at us from beneath the trees that they were being eaten alive.

## 52nd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival



The nights emerge like rogue ice cubes—un-blended—in a frozen margarita.

I remember the first time the train cut through the valley, and we rushed to the edge to watch the moon of the headlight approach. And how—as the engine disappeared into the roots of the mountain below us—we became lamps ourselves, the light projecting yellow from our open mouths as we ran in circles, singing barbaric yawps over the roofs of the world.

The nights emerge like forks and tin cans unearthed by a shovel in a stranger's hands.

I remember the tail end of our mushroom trip, the sunlight streaming through the saw-tooth leaves. Then slithering into the field. How Phil said “tripping picks you up”—plucking himself from the plane of his open palm—“and puts you down somewhere else”—leaving himself

dangling in the air. We talked again about the surface of things, watching the skin skate over our bones. Three dimensions become two, then three again, as we re-hashed our earlier conversation about the natural world's *reposoir*, remembering the way the willow branches framed the flycatcher curlicuing above the creek, laughing about the boy on the bike who skidded to a stop beside the river and demanded to know if we'd seen any snakes. We talked about *OK Computer*, watermelon slices, the Turkish rug. We talked about Ben tipping backward like a felled tree in the hallway and Phil nursing him back to consciousness from the other side. What was it like? I kept asking him. Where did you go? Why are you crying?

I pray for no shame between these boys that I love as we try to gather meaning in the grass. Which one the orchid? Which one the wasp? Which one the pink panther against the pink sky?

I might begin with one of us falling down the slope every time we descend in the dark. A gleeful tumbling, somersault, and slide. And though I have seen in the daytime the knees and elbows of brick and concrete jutting from the earth beneath the kudzu, we always come up unharmed and laughing.

In the living room, our baby Otis Bird refuses to stay on the spread quilt, rolling always toward the edges where he snatches tufts of dog hair and rug fiber to stuff into his drooling mouth. Where he pulls books from the shelves and leaves from the plants. Where he tips candles from the coffee table and bats at bottles of beer. Always babbling and smiling. Always remembering. Forgetting.

## Nonfiction

The nights emerge like clouds cutting through the moon, spilling aqueous humor upon the upturned faces of three hysterical men become boys. Become white ponies prancing in the grass.

I might begin by asserting that the field is a feeling. That lost and found coexist up there where we find ourselves grounded. Then un-earthed. Our bodies filling up with the helium of some unnamable nearness. Or instead, I might begin by asserting our shared ownership of the field. Then begin again, admitting the obvious: it is rather the field that owns us.

Skeets: We can see the field. We see the plants and maybe a few flowers. Depending on our experience, we may see a stream or river. We may see mountains. The field is both ours and not. There is a field, we know that for sure.

I might begin with my hope that the hole in the corner of the cornerless field one day harbors a time capsule beneath the cooler of warm beer, and that we eternally return here, entangled, ensnared, enamored, whispering that the time has come to wander into the night.

Or perhaps begin with yesterday when I found a Leviathan cross guarding the entrance to a refuge in the thicket beyond the field where unhoused Satanists ply their prayers of protection against predators who have done them wrong.



I pray along with them for vengeance. And likewise plan to cut up these field notes along with a thousand more and shake them in a rusted tin can, chanting "dada, dada, dada." Then remove them arbitrarily to make poems of our presence. I hope brothers Ben and Phil will do the same.

Olson: (We now enter, actually, the large area of the whole poem, into the FIELD, if you like, where all the syllables and all the lines must be managed in their relations to each other.) It is a matter, finally, of OBJECTS. . . . Objectism is the getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego, of the "subject" and his soul, that peculiar presumption by which western man has interposed himself between what he is as a creature of nature (with certain instructions to carry out) and those other creations of nature which we may, with no derogation, call objects. For man himself is an object . . . the

more likely to recognize himself as such, the greater his advantages, particularly at that moment that he achieves an humilitas sufficient to make him of use.

Although we try to balance the egg of our shared time in this holy place, I fear the field is already falling from our hands, and that—as we wander toward the fringe—we will never be able to put it together again. I wonder if this essay is anything more than me asking: Are we?

There is nothing in a field, writes J.D. Ho, if not the capacity for new life. Perhaps someone will find these scraps and tie them with string to the lacebark elms, and all our beginnings will drip with the rain to water the grass with our memories.

# Nonfiction

## Destination Hometown

Rebecca Robinson, Agnes Scott College

### 1732

The city of Savannah was chartered in 1732, establishing the British colony of Georgia. The founding principles: no drinking, no Catholics, no lawyers, and no slaves. No queers was implied.

### St. Patrick's Day

The biggest holiday of the year in Savannah. A holiday centered around the Irish, the Catholic, the drunk, and general promiscuity. The city hosts the 3rd largest parade in the country despite being the 188th largest city. The weekend-long festivities attract 400,000 people - more than two times the population of the city itself. My dad, who grew up in Savannah, always told me the downtown bars afford the highest rent in the city with what they make on March 17th.

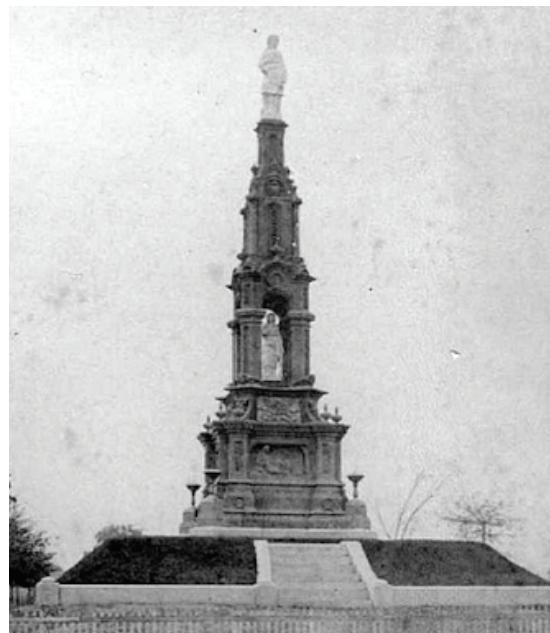
### 1776

"The first Robinsons came to America and settled in South Carolina about 1776 or around then. They were from Scotland. The only thing that is known has been handed down from generation to generation. It is said that Harriet was the first Robinson woman and as she was forced to fix breakfast for a Tory soldier she killed him with a long-handled fork."<sup>1</sup>

### Forsyth Park

At five, I stood at the edge of the fountain in Forsyth Park in a small green shamrock print dress between the feet of a man in a gaudy green suit and matching sash. I placed my miniature hand over my miniature heart for the pledge of allegiance and clasped both hands

obediently for the opening prayer. Then my hands were dwarfed by a large green watering can filled with green dye. The man in the green suit had to help me lift it to pour the dye into the fountain.



If you turn your back on the fountain and face south, you'll see this monument. The statues of the two women pictured here were replaced with a confederate soldier in 1879. He has watched over my friends and me playing in Forsyth Park my whole life. I never knew there were women who came before him.

### 1864

My family only has anecdotal knowledge of our ancestors because our genealogical records were burned in a courthouse by Union General William T. Sherman during his infamous March to the Sea. When he reached Savannah, he left it untouched and presented it to President Lincoln as a Christmas gift. It is often speculated that Sherman spared Savannah because it was too beautiful to burn. It is more

1 Excerpt from a family genealogical report.

## 52nd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival

likely that Savannah officials negotiated the city in exchange for food and housing for his soldiers. It was during this visit to Savannah that General Sherman proclaimed reparations of forty acres and a mule due to each of the newly freed families.

136 years later, my (Yankee) mother was invited by her mother-in-law to the reopening of Savannah's historic Lucas Theater, a screening of *Gone with the Wind*. After intermission, she heard everyone boo at his name hung in flames on the screen. In her schools, he was only ever a hero.

### **The Cathedral of St. John the Baptist**

My extended family attended St. Patrick's Day Mass at this Cathedral on Lafayette Square. My immediate family was uninvited from the mass portion of the festivities after I loudly replied to the organ, "What kind of music is this?"

Flannery O'Connor also attended The Cathedral of St. John the Baptist with her family. It has been speculated that she never came out of the closet because of her religious convictions.

Two of my cousins have been straight married at this Cathedral. I haven't asked if they do gay weddings.

At the attached Catholic girls' school, St. Vincent's Academy, the bathrooms are opened to the public on St. Patrick's Day for their Potty for a Price deal. Catholics charge \$1 per piss or \$10 for the day.

Despite the fact that all of my aunts and girl cousins on my father's side went to St. Vincent's Academy, I went to Savannah Arts Academy for Visual and Performing Arts.

### **Chatham Artillery Punch**

8 lemons  
1 lb sugar  
A fifth of brandy  
A fifth of bourbon  
A fifth of rum  
3 bottles of champagne

Recipe has been modified for modern times. Traditionally, Chatham Artillery Punch is made in a bathtub with an entire case of champagne, and members of the militia contribute the contents of their personal flasks until the bathtub is full.

Even when there isn't a holiday to celebrate, thousands of people visit Savannah to participate in our time-honored tradition of drinking in the streets. Savannah avoids involving lawyers in our daily lives by legalizing open containers.

### **St. Peter the Apostle Catholic School**

My father took me to this church to watch my best friend compete in his Cub Scout troop's pinewood derby. In the sweaty gym of the neighborhood Catholic school, we watched from the bleachers as the boys raced their painted blocks of wood. Afterward, we went to Ace Hardware so he could buy me a pinewood derby kit of my own.

When I later joined the Girl Scouts, it was no consolation. Our meetings consisted of far too much crafting and far too little scouting for my tastes.

Around the time of the pinewood derby race, I begged my mom to cut my hair short, "like a boy." When strangers addressed me as a boy, she said she held her breath waiting for me to

## Nonfiction

correct them. I never did. My mom said I was much more concerned that they would mistake me for a child than for a boy.

### 2007

My mom removed me from ballet classes and enrolled me in Irish dance. According to her, we fit in with the dance moms about as well as we fit in with the girl scouts, which is to say, not at all. Luckily, the Irish dance moms packed Fireball with their bobby pins. As I remember it, my hair was so curly that I was the only girl who didn't need to wear a wig. In pictures, my hair is wavy at best. In pictures, green, white, and orange balloons advertise a "real Irish" pint for \$4.



### Charles Ellis Montessori Academy<sup>2</sup>

When my 6th-grade class read *The Diary of a Young Girl*, the questions started.

"You look like Anne Frank, are you Jewish?"

I said "No, I am not Jewish," because it seemed

like something my mother would have mentioned. But I also knew we weren't Christians. So it was difficult to say exactly what I was.

### 2012

"Is Jesus a fictional character?"

"Depends who you ask."

This was the only conversation I had with my mother about Jesus. I might have been the only child raised in Georgia who was wholly unexposed to religion. As it happened, I heard that Jesus walked on water around the same time I was exposed to *Harry Potter*. I thought I understood very well the boundary between magic and real life. I was still surprised by the mention of Jesus Christ alongside real people like Isaac Newton by the time I took world history in high school.

### Halloween

of the same year. Upon discovering Catholicism, I dressed up as the pope for Halloween. My first encounter with cross-dressing and I wore a skirt and tied a dress around my shoulders. My neighborhood seemed to be swimming in guilt. I received a record-breaking amount of candy.

2 The public Montessori school my brother and I attended.

## 52nd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival



### 2013

"If a person is gay and seeks God and has good will, who am I to judge?"

- Pope Francis

### 2015

Gay marriage was legalized by the U.S. Supreme Court. I cried tiny "ally" tears that I couldn't explain to my mother. I was fourteen.

In 2015, I was in eighth grade, so I received the legally mandated year of Georgia History. Slavery was one part of my three-part thesis in my final essay, "What Caused the Civil War?" One summer later, as a freshman in high school, I received the legally mandated semester of sex education. During one of our abstinence-based classes, I asked the instructor if we would cover same-sex sex ed. She told me "we let them figure that out on their own." To this day, Georgia's sex ed curriculum is not legally required to include instruction on consent, sexuality, or gender identity. It is also not legally required for the instruction to be medically accurate.

### 2017

The Boy Scouts of America announced they would begin accepting girls as members. I was sixteen. It hadn't occurred to me until this point that I was not a boy.

### Holy Rosary Catholic Church<sup>3</sup>

I was expected to attend services every Sunday with my host family as an exchange student in Accra, Ghana. There, I participated in my first Ash Wednesday and learned to pray the rosary, like some sort of reverse mission.

When my grandfather died and I was 5,000 miles away, I prayed for the first time. I was seventeen.

I adopted a fake-it-till-you-make-it practice of Catholicism. I found the ritual of mass soothing. The repetition of the rosary lulled me to sleep the nights rain hammered on the aluminum roof.

During this time, my host family asked me what I was. When I told them I was Irish, they asked which of my parents were from Ireland. When I told them neither, they told me I was American. When I told them what happened to "real" Americans, they were horrified.



3 The first church I attended regularly.

## Nonfiction

When the exchange students took a field trip to a city called Cape Coast, it was my turn to be filled with horror. We toured the Cape Coast Castle, a robust cement fortress that was used to hold captured people before they would embark on the Middle Passage. In the basement, I felt the heaviest I've ever felt. The door pictured above is called the "door of no return." I stared into its light and considered for the first time that the destination thousands never made it to was the very same city I came from. The ones that did make it left their fingerprints on the bricks my city was built from and I had never considered they came from somewhere too.

Today, an individual in Ghana can be sentenced up to twenty-five years in prison for practicing homosexuality. For Thanksgiving in Accra, the American exchange students were invited to the U.S. ambassador's residence. Our Ghanaian parents had dressed us in traditional clothes, bright African prints draped in conservative silhouettes. We looked like confused foreigners amongst the real Americans in their dress shirts and starched khakis. I don't know why I was surprised to meet Mr. Ambassador's husband. If given the chance, I too would like to test the limits of diplomatic immunity.

## 2022

This year, when I turned 21, I had my first legal drink. A hard cider I bought from Trader Joe's. I joked it was my first sip of alcohol and my family laughed and laughed.

This year, Ancestry.com updated my "ethnicity estimate," demoting me from 74% Irish to 11%. A number of those percentages are reallocated to the green pie wedge that tells me I'm now 29% Scottish. Although he is known as the patron saint of Ireland, St. Patrick wasn't Irish either. He is thought to have been born in

Scotland and sold into slavery in Ireland. This year, for the first time, Ancestry.com added to the very bottom of my estimate, "1% Jewish Peoples of Europe."

This year is the fourth year of my life that I've lived anywhere other than my hometown. In one more year, upon graduating, I will have to choose a city to live in. The scariest thing about my hometown is not the confederates or the drunks but the possibility that I will one day choose to live there. Out of all the cities in the world, it is the only one I know. And it's one of the few where I can be legally married and take my beer to go.

This year, when someone asks me what I am I tell them I'm a queer Catholic witch. And maybe I do look Jewish.

## Blepharoplasty Asian

Maggee Chang, Agnes Scott College

*"The absence of the palpebral fold produces a passive expression which seems to epitomize the stoical and unemotional manner of the oriental."*

*-Dr. David Ralph Millard, for the 1964 issue of the "American Journal of Ophthalmology"*

I have my father's eyes. Old photographs living under plastic film remind me that I inherited the same full eyelids, as if silk was stretched above them, and the same dark brown gazes. His eyes remind me of river stones, eroded smooth by currents of time and space and a general reluctance to sit still. Whenever my mother is about to secure a business deal, she introduces the clients to my father. "He's a better judge of character than me," she explains.

Before, I used to call it Chinese superstition. When I wanted something to take responsibility for once, I said it was her low self-confidence. In hindsight, in regret, I inherited that too.

I was seventeen when an eye doctor first recommended a blepharoplasty. A plastic shard flew into my right eye when I was trying to pinch-curl my pin-straight eyelashes before school. Plastic was wedged into my inner canthal region, scraping against my eye every time I tried to blink and clear the teary double vision. My U.S. history teacher asked what I worked so hard to put in there as I cried out of only one eye. A sobbing freak of nature unsure what to do with herself, I was hardly able to be explained.

The doctor dropped fluorescein into my right eye, blurring my sight orange. She flipped my eyelid open, commenting that it was hard to keep it folded inside out as the plastic kept dragging against my cornea. *Up, down, up, down.* It was difficult peeling my skin back, to someone else's will. According to her, my eyelids were too heavy.

"This just happens," the doctor muttered, trying to reassure me as she observed the plastic shard held by tweezers. "It happens to people with your eye shape. We have a location in Marietta for aesthetics surgery to fix this, if you're interested."

To keep plastic out of my eye, I need to undergo plastic surgery. At seventeen, with parental permission, I could do what was originally a surgery for geriatrics. Someone could cut and trim excess eyelid fat and stitch a line across my eyelids for three thousand dollars. For the next six weeks after that, I could have black X's across my eyes with bruises purple, then red, then swollen shut. Side effects include sensitivity to light, bruising, and inflammation, but are generally temporary. One of the selling points is that a blepharoplasty is only skin deep. I could do what nearly two million people do every year, making the procedure one of the top five requested surgeries done in the United States. Four-hundred thousand of them come from Asian Americans.

I can't remember the doctor's face anymore. I recall her aftermath, my fixating on the lines around the eyes of my friends, teachers, strangers, and actors on television. When they blinked, the lines disappeared into a faint wrinkle as opposed to the scar I would have to keep.

## Nonfiction

(It's how to check if someone is "all-natural"). I saw eyeshadow collecting in the creases when their eyes closed, freckles disappearing in the folds when they opened.

As vivid as the eyelid-watching is in my memory, it's easier to hear schoolchildren pulling the skin of their temples away from their eyes, slanting them, and stretching out their folded eyelids. At the sight of me, dead in the eye, someone would catch my attention. "Look, I'm you!" Everybody knows: Chinese, *up*. Japanese, *back*. Korean, *down*. In a child's sing-song chant, *Chinese, Jap-a-nese, Kor-ee-an!* Up, back, down their fingers held their skin taut, their smiles bright. I was the sole audience to a twenty-first-century remix of a hundred years of children on the playground conflating the Chinese with dirty knees.

The pulling of eyelids and its accompanying chant was not baby fat; I was naive to think children grew out of it. What grows is the language, its articulation. It circulates over and over as we grow. Some words die, some regenerate over time, but the idea pumps and pumps to the surface until someone slices their eyelids open and it bursts out in bruises, staying as a scar.

American military surgeon Ralph David Millard was supposed to treat victims of American bomb and napalm burns in Korea. He was supposed to *put skin back*. Instead, he tested and perfected blepharoplasties on Korean sex workers. Once successful, his steady hand was dedicated to making Korean war brides more beautiful for their new GI husbands and in-laws. In the Philippines, another doctor reported that his male Chinese patient with "sleepy" eyes was assumed to also have a sleepy business. "Now that his eyes are wider, [...] his business, too, has picked up."

Facial physiognomy has roots of being favored by Ancient Greek philosophers, a pseudo-science that assesses personal characteristics on the basis of physical appearance. Criminology, a nineteenth-century derivation of physiognomy, primarily focused on how undesirables embodied crime through their noses, jaws, eyes, and ears. In Asia, Confucious is the pseudo-literal authority of some of the most ethnically homogenous countries in the world. What he says goes. And he goes so far as to say that outer beauty expresses inner virtue and talent. In which capitalism is a guest in Confucianism's home, physical beauty determines someone's proximity to wealth and affluence. To find a job in China, Japan, Korea, or Vietnam, job seekers must submit a professional headshot with their resume, no matter the position. Employers want someone easy on the eyes. Easy on the eyes, the easier the job will be. Might as well look good while doing it.

Pick up the fat and everything

ean will follow in a  
single  
file  
line.

Ten years after Americans cut a line through the Korean Peninsula and reached the rest of Asia, Millard called the growing popularity of cutting lines across Asian faces as a "deorientalizing problem." The blepharoplasty often has "Asian" before it, in which I am reduced to an adjective rather than the subject, the target, the prey. The deorientalizing is oriental; trying to be someone we are not is now who we are.

In 2007, Tyra Banks, former supermodel and host of *The Tyra Banks Show*, interviewed Liz, a twenty-five-year-old Korean American who had recently undergone a blepharoplasty. Liz came on national television to explain the procedure and why she did it. “I know I’m not thirty-five, forty-five, fifty-five, but my eyes were starting to sag and I was looking tired. I didn’t have that youthful look in my eyes.”

In front of a live audience that would grow to over a million views on the internet, Liz was accused of “ethnic tweaking,” or trying to be closer to whiteness. Banks equated Liz’s blepharoplasty to the blonde weave on her head. “We are the same, do you understand?” She says she takes responsibility for covering her natural hair, suggesting Liz do the same. Every time Liz tried defending herself, what was so “tricky” about her decision, Banks cut her off and talked over her.

No matter how many times I watch the eight-minute video clip of Liz getting cut off, I wonder what rectifying needs to be done when the excess fat was already cut out, ethnicky surface area of skin long gone. Stitches healed. Bruises faded. Liz survived mutilation. Banks didn’t ask the right questions. Because if she did, I wouldn’t still be here, nearly fifteen years later, still figuring out whose mutilation it was; hers, ours, or the surgeon who did it.

In return for the spice, oil, and slave labor, the Westminster system was the greatest British export in terms of magnitude and breadth—several formerly colonized countries followed once they gained independence. Korean American writer Cathy Park Hong writes that the worst export of the West is the “power to decide who our enemies are, turning us not only against our own people, like North and South Korea, but turning me against myself.”

And as we turn, we see the irresponsibility Banks fears the most. Fifteen years after schoolchildren’s and Liz’s alleged “ethnic tweaking,” white supermodels, pop stars, and influencers are pulling back the skin of their temples with tape, to pull the outer corners of their eyes *up*. They draw lines that go *down* in the inner corners, further slanting their once-round, formerly coveted, eyes. *Up, down, up, down*. Twenty-somethings are going so far as getting combinations of deep plane facelifts and brow lifts to lift their faces from “looking droopy,” per a *VICE* piece about the ‘fox eye lift’ craze. (I’ve heard this on television, maybe at a playground, before.)

Doe eyes are *fox* eyes now. Hunted becomes the hunter. No longer the adjective, I am only the subject if subjected to a phenotypic robbery. Foxes have been cunning, dishonest characters from as early as Aesop’s fables. Some Chinese, Korean, and Japanese folklore saw foxes as malevolent shapeshifters who represented both good and bad luck, hiding their tails to be women seducing married men. Every story is different, but today, *húlí-jīng*, fox-spirit, is a Chinese expletive for the ‘other’ women.

Hearing the song about slanted eyes and dirty knees in my line of sight fifteen years ago, yet still in my periphery, gave me the impression that there was no use in ethnic tweaking because tweaking was not fixing. Because if I wanted to fix my eyelids, I might as well tell the doctor to take a stab at giving me a nose bridge while we’re here (my mother certainly failed there). If my father’s eyes are such an issue, why not chisel his jaw too, so I can heal from the facial

## Nonfiction

scarring and swelling all at once? After all, it is a small price to pay for correcting the aesthetic failings of the Orient. Tweak by tweak, the best crimes committed are the ones we can't see.

There are also less permanent alternatives to surgery. Asians swear by eyelid tape, round strips of plastic maybe only an inch long with an adhesive side. With the tape comes a two-pronged plastic fork that pushes the excess fat into the eye socket, where the double eyelid is supposed to be. (Instead of a knife, use a fork. Test how well done it is.) The tape holds it down.

Bend to something else's will. Blink a couple of times, let it settle and situate and stay. Do it again on the other eye. If worn long enough—some say a few months to a year—the skin can be *trained* to fold over itself, wrinkled. What is temporary gives the false sense of permanent dignity that we can always change our minds, always quit. Yet, what if this is just another turn against the self? Does independence have double eyelids too?





# Playwriting and Screenwriting

# Playwriting and Screenwriting

## Out of Mind

Tabitha Healey, Emory University

FADE IN:

EXT. ST. THOMAS GENETIC COUNSELING

CLINIC- DAY

A small, faded brick building with a sign reading "ST. THOMAS GENETIC COUNSELING CLINIC" stands alone with a nearly empty parking lot. DAVID (45) exits his car and heads towards the building until he meets the sliding doors at the entrance. He hesitates before entering.

INT. ST. THOMAS GENETIC COUNSELING

CLINIC- DAY

David emerges into the interior of the facility. The carpet is gray and faded, the chairs are orange and stained. At the desk ahead, a woman slides open the plexiglass window, appearing slightly irritated. She's in her 40s, wears her hair in a messy updo, and chunks of her mascara have fallen below her eyes. She doesn't look up when she speaks.

RECEPTIONIST

Name?

DAVID

David.

She looks up and raises her eyebrows, signaling that she needs a last name.

DAVID

Oh, uh, David Cooper.

She nods and types something into the computer.

RECEPTIONIST

Dr. Ryan will be with you in a bit.

(gestures over to the empty chairs)

You can take a seat over there.

Receptionist picks up a crossword puzzle and begins filling it in. David walks over to a chair located next to a dirty fish tank. As he examines it, he notices a dead fish.

DAVID

(to Receptionist)

Excuse me.

She picks up her head.

DAVID

I believe one of the fish in here has passed away.

She goes back to filling in the crossword puzzle.

RECEPTIONIST

Sounds like someone else's job.

David goes silent. He sits and stares at his sneakers. Nervously, he unties a perfectly good knot and reties it.

DR. RYAN (45) opens a door to the side of David. She looks younger than she really is, with dyed dirty-blonde hair neatly pulled half-back and no makeup on besides lip gloss.

DR. RYAN

David Cooper?

David stands up and walks over. He smiles at her.

DR. RYAN

Nice to see you again.

## 52nd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival

DAVID

Nice until you break the news to me, I'm sure.

They both laugh nervously.

DR. RYAN

Just follow me back here, if you will.

David and Dr. Ryan walk down a drab hallway towards an exam room.

IN THE EXAM ROOM

Dr. Ryan picks up a manilla folder that is carefully placed on the counter. She holds it as she sits down.

DR. RYAN

You can take a seat in one of the chairs.

David sits. He speaks with false confidence.

DAVID

Just give it to me, please. No medical talk, just cut to it.

Dr. Ryan pauses, contemplating what to say and how to say it.

DR. RYAN

You have the Alzheimer's gene. I'm sorry, David. I really am.

David takes a deep breath, appearing defeated.

DAVID

Yeah, I expected that.

DR. RYAN

We can talk about options. Experimental treatments. There's been a lot of medical progress since your mom passed, you know.

DAVID

But not enough to cure it, right?

DR. RYAN

Right.

DAVID

Guess I should start to get my things in order.

DR. RYAN

I would look into the treatments, see your options for delaying the effects. But yeah, I'd start to get things in order sooner than later.

David looks down at his shoes. He reties his shoelace once again.

DR. RYAN

Have you heard of AfterLife?

DAVID

Like, Heaven? I'm not all that religious.

Dr. Ryan laughs.

DR. RYAN

No, no. The company. Seeing that you don't believe in a religious afterlife, perhaps you'd like to look into it. I'll give you their card.

Dr. Ryan goes over to the counter and opens a cabinet, carefully plucking a sleek business card. She hands it to David.

DAVID

Thank you.

## Playwriting and Screenwriting

DR. RYAN

I'd give them a call. See if you're interested.

David examines the business card, running his fingers over the textured letters that read AFTERLIFE.

### INT. DAVID'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

David sits on a distressed leather chair in front of an artificial fireplace in his ultra-modern home. He stares at the business card. After a while, he types the number into his phone. He hesitates before hitting CALL.

The voice on the other line is calm and almost robotic sounding.

AFTERLIFE REPRESENTATIVE (V.O.)

Hello. You've reached AfterLife Incorporations. This is Mary speaking.

David takes a deep breath, preparing himself to speak.

CUT TO:

### EXT. AFTERLIFE INCORPORATIONS - DAY

A large, modern, gray and black, sleek building sits amongst an expanse of trees. It's secluded and serene. AFTERLIFE is written in medium-sized, simple letters to the side of the door. An assortment of people come in and out - an elderly couple, a man in his 50s, a 30-year-old woman with a kid holding a bunny.

### INT. AFTERLIFE INCORPORATIONS - DAY

The inside of the facility matches the aesthetic of the outside - everything is clean, everything seems new. It looks nothing like the medical office from before. It's the epitome of a tech facility. Employees stand around with tablets, waiting for clients to enter.

David walks in. Immediately, he is greeted by someone with a tablet named MICHAEL (25).

MICHAEL

Good afternoon. David Cooper, correct?

DAVID

Yes, that's me.

MICHAEL

Nice to meet you. I'm Michael. Come with me.

Michael shows him to a black door and scans his fingerprint on a pad next to it. A large hallway with glass offices is on the other side, with the in-use offices digitally turned to peach-colored translucent glass, blurring out the activity inside. Michael shows him into an office, and once the door closes, the glass changes color. David looks around, fascinated and confused by all of this.

JANE (35) enters the room, dressed in a well-fitting pantsuit and fashionable glasses. It's clear that she is in a higher position than Michael. When she enters, Michael sits down.

JANE

Hello, I'm Jane. I'll be helping you today. Do you want to run me through why you're here today?

DAVID

Yes, uh, hello. I'm David. I'm trying to get my affairs in order, so I was interested in your, um, post-death services. I'm not sure, though, that I fully understand everything.

## 52nd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival

JANE

It's confusing at first, I know. Let me try to explain, and you can ask me any questions afterwards, okay?

David nods his head.

JANE

We'll scan your brain and digitalize all of the contents, placing everything into this chip.

Jane picks up a chip and hands it to David.

JANE

Once you pass away, the chip will be activated, and your existence will exclusively live in there. You'll think like yourself, feel like yourself, but it'll all come from the chip. Our job is to create the setting that the chip exists in. Your own personalized world. You can choose who's in it, where you are, just about everything.

DAVID

But it would all be fake, right? They wouldn't be real people?

JANE

We'd code them in. So no, technically not.

DAVID

So what's the point?

JANE

You won't end up in nothingness. Everything you've spent your life learning, it'll go somewhere. Some say it makes dying less scary, knowing there's something beyond this. But it's really up to you.

David sits, deep in thought, seemingly shocked from all of this information.

DAVID

That could be nice.

JANE

It's why we invented it. Would you like to talk pricing?

Jane looks towards Michael, who stands up and starts tapping his tablet.

DAVID

Sure.

MICHAEL

There are different packages that you can purchase. The Ultimate package allows you to store your entire memory. The others allow you to upload certain amounts of your memory for different prices.

Michael does one final tap on the tablet, and then hands it to David.

MICHAEL

Here's a spread of it all.

David looks shocked when he sees it.

DAVID

Jesus.

JANE

If the Ultimate doesn't work for you, we can run simulations to see what your world would look like without certain people and memories.

## Playwriting and Screenwriting

DAVID

Yeah, could we do that?

JANE

Sure thing.

Michael begins to open drawers, collecting patches and wires. Jane ushers David into a reclined seat in the middle of the room. Michael begins to hook him up to machines as one of the walls turns into a screen, and an image of his brain emerges on it. A montage of his memories plays in a box to the side of that image.

DAVID

Woah.

Jane and Michael laugh.

JANE

Everyone reacts like that.

A pie chart of names with faces appears on the screen. There is a percentage for each of them. David points at the screen.

DAVID

What does that mean?

JANE

Those are the people who take up the most space in your memories. The easiest way to manage memory storage is to cut out the entirety of a person. Or multiple people.

MICHAEL

Kind of like when you delete pictures on your phone to make room for other things.

JANE

Would you like to pick a person to delete, and we'll run a simulation of your AfterLife without them?

DAVID

Sure. Delete Ridley.

MICHAEL

No hesitation with that one.

DAVID

(uncomfortably)

He's an ex.

JANE

Alright then. Just sit back.

Jane presses a button, and David's eyes glaze over. A timer for five seconds appears on the screen. Next to it is another timer that reads DAYS instead of SECONDS, indicating that David is experiencing one day per second. When the timer ends, David wakes up. He looks distressed.

JANE

How was it?

DAVID

Not right. I didn't feel like...me.

JANE

That unfortunately happens sometimes. Want to try someone else? Do you have a current partner?

DAVID

Yeah. Charlie.

JANE

Let's try that.

## 52nd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival

David looks uneasy about this, but Jane goes ahead and runs the simulation. Once again, the timer runs through five seconds. When he wakes up, he seems happy.

JANE

Better?

DAVID

Yes, actually. I don't know why that would be. I love him more than I ever loved Ridley.

JANE

We often find that past relationships have more of an effect on what an AfterLife looks like.

David sits there, visibly upset. Jane recognizes this, and takes on a more comforting demeanor.

JANE

Sometimes, the end of a relationship teaches us the most about ourselves. You fall in and out of love with someone, you change with them, and then you change without them. You go through the stages of falling in love, and you grieve the living.

Jane pauses and thinks.

JANE

There's a whole world of pain you haven't felt with Charlie yet.

David stares at the pie chart on the screen, Ridley and Charlie's names both taking up the most space. Ridley's face is stern and almost sad-looking in his image. Charlie's is the opposite - a large smile stretches across his face.

DAVID

I - I don't want an AfterLife where Charlie doesn't exist. Even if I'm happy in ignorance, I don't think I want that.

MICHAEL

So you'd take the worse AfterLife with Charlie?

DAVID

I don't think I want that, either. I want all my memories, and if I can't have that, I'd rather not exist.

MICHAEL

And you're sure about this?

DAVID

Yeah, I think I am.

CUT TO:

INT. DAVID'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

David enters his apartment, appearing solemn. He looks around his kitchen, searching for something or someone.

DAVID

Charlie?

Looking puzzled, he moves into the living room area, peering around walls.

DAVID

Charlie?

David moves into the bedroom, still not finding him. He pulls out his phone, and finds Charlie's name in his contacts. He clicks on it. The phone rings.

## Playwriting and Screenwriting

INT. CHARLIE'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Charlie lives in a cozy, warm home, with dark wood and an abundance of indoor plants. He sits at the counter with a plate of food in front of him. His ringtone starts to sound, and he picks up the call.

CHARLIE

David. Hello.

INTERCUT - PHONE CONVERSATION

DAVID

Hi. When are you getting home?

CHARLIE

I am home. Why do you want to know?

DAVID

No, you're not. I just looked around the apartment.

CHARLIE

I'm at *my* house.

David looks confused. He takes a second to try to figure things out, but Charlie interrupts this.

CHARLIE

Dave, we haven't shared a home in three years. Is everything okay?

Suddenly David understands what's going on. His eyes widen, and a look of fear overcomes his face. He lays back on the bed, staring at the ceiling. He has no memory of the end of their relationship. He has Alzheimer's disease, and the memory loss has set in.

CHARLIE (V.O.)

Hello? David?

FADE OUT.

## 52nd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival

### A Good Wife

*A Play in One Act*

Arden Latham, Mercer University

#### CAST OF CHARACTERS

SHERIFF CAPTAIN LISA SANDERS: An assertive woman, late-20's to mid-30's.

MRS. SARAH WILKES: A quiet, nervous, frazzled woman in her mid-to-late 30's.

OFFICER JACK SIMMONS: A respectful, manly man about the same age as Mrs. Wilkes.

CORPORAL: A strict, no-nonsense man in his 40's to 50's.

911 OPERATOR: Voice only - can be male or female.

SERGEANT MITCHELL: A younger man, 20's or so, very shaken.

WILLIAM CARTER: Lisa's well-meaning but lax fiancé, about the same age as her.

OFFICERS: 2-5 assorted sheriff officers, mostly in uniform. Any gender, any logical age.

LIGHTS UP on SHERIFF CAPTAIN SANDERS, FRONT CENTER STAGE. She is sitting in a chair facing the audience, as if she is being interviewed. She is dressed smartly, in uniform—perhaps a suit—but looks exhausted, and a bit haggard and disheveled. When she speaks, she is not eager to tell, but not exactly reluctant, either—she speaks as a hardened professional, factual and calm, but the subject is obviously something that has affected her. The recount is not easy for her, and her collected demeanor is purposeful and practiced.

#### SHERIFF CAPTAIN

It began with what happened at Wagon Wheel Road. We didn't know much, at first, for sure. We knew that it was three in the morning when dispatch got that

call. The caller seemed to be in shock, which made it harder to know what had happened.

(DIM LIGHTS—not blackout. Over a speaker, phone audio between 911 OPERATOR and MRS. WILKES is played.)

911 OPERATOR

911, what's your emergency?

MRS. WILKES (shy and quiet, but oddly normal, in a conversational tone)

Hi, how are you?

911 OPERATOR

...I'm well, ma'am. What's your emergency?

MRS. WILKES (absentmindedly)

Well, there's... there's been some shots. Yes, someone's fired the gun. The rifle, I think... Yes, must've been the rifle. The one from the closet. There was a dog... barking...

911 OPERATOR (hurriedly)

What's your location, ma'am?

MRS. WILKES

Oh, my address? Wagon Wheel Road.

Yes ma'am... 667 Wagon Wheel Road.

(Distracted again)

It's out in the county. Lots of woods, and fresh air here. Not so much hustle... and bustle...

911 OPERATOR (pressing)

Is anyone injured, ma'am?

MRS. WILKES

Injured? Hurt... Oh, yes, I think so. I think some people are quite hurt. The

## Playwriting and Screenwriting

men... Yes, you'd better send someone.  
Please hurry. Thank you.  
(She hangs up.)

Full LIGHTS UP back on CENTER STAGE.

### SHERIFF CAPTAIN

Here's what we knew from that call. We knew that Wagon Wheel Road was out of city limits, so it was in the sheriff department's jurisdiction. We knew there were shots fired and potential injuries. And we knew *for sure* when we arrived that some people were hurt. Here's what you need to understand: out in the country, neighbors don't bump elbows; often, your nearest neighbor isn't even within view. The Wilkes household—that's 667—and the Harris household—665—were, from their porches, about a half acre apart. That's actually pretty close together for the woods where they were. It was raining that night, and Wagon Wheel was a dirt road—the ambulance got stuck on the way there and took an extra 10 minutes to dig out. But the officers had already arrived, and it didn't matter when the ambulance did get there anyway. Seven bodies—spread out—you know, strewn between the two houses. It's raining and they're sinking into the mud, the rain is just, you know... *plastering* their hair to their faces. 5 male and 2 female. It was definitely a bit gruesome, especially for some of the newer officers. Sergeant Mitchell lost his supper in the grass. I think Mrs. Harris was his great-aunt. And she was there, face down in the dirt. She had on this floral dress, and it was flipped up

over her back, and you could see her bloomers.

BLACKOUT. SHERIFF CAPTAIN exits. Her chair is removed.

LIGHTS UP on STAGE LEFT, the yard. Several OFFICERS are milling about: talking, taking pictures, looking around. MRS. WILKES, looking flustered and exhausted, is talking quietly to the CORPORAL, who looks frustrated. SERGEANT MITCHELL is the furthest left, vomiting. SHERIFF CAPTAIN, in the same outfit but looking much neater, enters from STAGE LEFT and sees him.

SERGEANT MITCHELL (Bent at the waist with hands on his knees, distressed. Looks up at the  
SHERIFF CAPTAIN)

Oh, Lord God. What's happened?  
Captain—

SHERIFF CAPTAIN  
Go sit in the car, Mitchell.

(SERGEANT MITCHELL nods and exits, stumbling, STAGE LEFT. The SHERIFF CAPTAIN approaches MRS. WILKES and the CORPORAL, who are still talking, audibly now.)

MRS. WILKES  
No... As I told the other one, I can hardly remember. Please... I'd like to lie down, it's getting late.

SHERIFF CAPTAIN  
That's enough, Corporal.

CORPORAL  
With all due respect, Captain, she's the primary suspect.

## 52nd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival

SHERIFF CAPTAIN

Suspect? We don't even know what's happened yet. All we've got is seven cadavers in the rain, and you're hounding my one live body.

CORPORAL

Alright, well, suspect or not, she's still a witness.

SHERIFF CAPTAIN

Thank you for your work, Corporal, but I'd like you to go help the rest of the team with the crime scene while I escort Mrs. Wilkes inside.

(CORPORAL leaves toward STAGE LEFT, visibly frustrated.)

MRS. WILKES

That's very kind of you, young lady, but I don't want you to get in trouble with your boss.

SHERIFF CAPTAIN

It's nice to meet you, Mrs. Wilkes. I'm the Captain of Criminal Investigation for the Aulweeta County Sheriff's Department. May I escort you inside?

(She moves toward CENTER STAGE, the adjoined kitchen and living room of the house.)

MRS. WILKES

Oh— well yes, but— the laundry's still all over the couches; I never finished the ironing earlier.

SHERIFF CAPTAIN

That's alright, Mrs. Wilkes.

(They step inside.)

MRS. WILKES

Just let me pick it up before you sit down.

SHERIFF CAPTAIN

No, Mrs. Wilkes, I'd like you to leave the laundry where it is, if that's alright with you.

MRS. WILKES

Well, I... Alright.

(Pauses for a moment, unsure what to do with herself.)

Can I get anything for you? A drink?

SHERIFF CAPTAIN

No, thank you, Mrs. Wilkes.

(She sits down on the couch. MRS. WILKES remains standing and keeps herself busy about the kitchen/living room area.)

MRS. WILKES

I'll just get you a water, and if you decide you'd like a beer, you just let me know.

SHERIFF CAPTAIN

Mrs. Wilkes—

MRS. WILKES

Can I get you something to eat? I think there's some chips in here.

SHERIFF CAPTAIN

No, thank you. Mrs. Wilkes, can you tell me a little bit about what the course of your evening was like?

MRS. WILKES

Do you like chili? I can heat you up some chili from the other night.

## Playwriting and Screenwriting

SHERIFF CAPTAIN

Mrs. Wilkes, will you tell me what's happened tonight?  
(She pulls out a pen and paper.)

MRS. WILKES (bustling about the kitchen, pulling out dishes from the cabinets and leftovers from the fridge, getting drinks, and so on)

Well, around 5 o'clock I got back from the grocery store and started on dinner. I was just making dip and wings and all that, 'cause Travis'd said he was having over Wade and Hank for the Georgia-Florida game at six-thirty.

SHERIFF CAPTAIN

Travis—that's Travis Wilkes, your husband? And is that Hank Wilkes, his brother, and his friend Wade Reynolds?

MRS. WILKES

That's right.

SHERIFF CAPTAIN (nodding and writing):

Thank you. Please go ahead.

MRS. WILKES

I finished up cooking around 6 and put out the drinks cooler on the deck. Travis just put up a TV out there, since it's not so hot anymore and he thought it'd be nice to watch TV outside. Then Travis and them got here around 7:00, I remember 'cause I was gonna ask why he was so late, but I didn't, 'cause him and Wade and Hank were already kinda drunk. He just gets in such a foul mood when he's all hooched, you know, so I just don't say anything to him 'cause it don't go nowhere. Then they watched the Georgia game, and Georgia lost. Did you want some cornbread with your chili?

SHERIFF CAPTAIN

I'm okay without anything, Mrs. Wilkes. What happened after they watched the game?

MRS. WILKES

I told you, Georgia lost.

SHERIFF CAPTAIN

Was Mr. Wilkes a Georgia fan? Travis, I mean.

MRS. WILKES

Oh, sure, we all are. I went there, you know. For a while.

SHERIFF CAPTAIN

To University of Georgia?

MRS. WILKES

Sure. Like I said, just for a while. But then Travis wanted—we wanted to settle down. He didn't want to have to drive up to Athens to see me no more. Long ways. I didn't never finish my fourth year.

SHERIFF CAPTAIN

What did you study?

MRS. WILKES

Oh, religion. You know. So we were big Georgia fans. The boys always watch the game.

SHERIFF CAPTAIN

And the Harrises? Georgia fans?

MRS. WILKES

Oh, no. They're real big Florida fans. Got big Gators stuff on their truck and all.

## 52nd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival

SHERIFF CAPTAIN

Big rivalry.

MRS. WILKES

Yeah, sure. I don't really care so much about it as Travis does, or Hank or Wade. They're real tied up in it, but I'm too busy for all that.

SHERIFF CAPTAIN

Why do you think that is? That they cared so much?

MRS. WILKES

Here's the thing, Miss— pardon me, what was your name again?

SHERIFF CAPTAIN

Oh, that's alright, I hadn't told you. It's Captain Lisa Sanders.

MRS. WILKES

Do you have a husband, Miss Sanders?

SHERIFF CAPTAIN

Captain. I have a fiancé.

MRS. WILKES

Oh, so you haven't lived with a man.

SHERIFF CAPTAIN

I live with him. My fiancé.

MRS. WILKES

Oh, alright. (Beat.) Well, then, you know how men are. They get real tied up in things like sports, and hunting, and all that. As you know.

SHERIFF CAPTAIN

...I guess so.

MRS. WILKES

Men do *big* things, Miss Sanders, you understand. They do the large and important things, and because of that they take lots of rest. While women do much smaller things, so we don't take any rest. That's what the Bible says.

SHERIFF CAPTAIN

Are you saying that women don't earn their rest the way men do?

MRS. WILKES

Well, I... (pause) Sure. Would you like that drink now?

SHERIFF CAPTAIN

That's okay, Mrs. Wilkes.

MRS. WILKES (pouring a glass of wine anyway)

Because men have all that resting time, they have to find something to get into. It's a game for them, Miss Sanders, the same way little boys play pretend. They think that they're a coach on the field, or the quarterback, or the linebacker. They care so much because they've done convinced themselves that it's life or death on their part.

SHERIFF CAPTAIN

And is it? Life or death?

MRS. WILKES (placing the wine on the table in front of the SHERIFF CAPTAIN)

Here's that drink for you. We had some wine in the cabinet. Figured it was more proper than a beer.

## Playwriting and Screenwriting

SHERIFF CAPTAIN

Oh— thank you. What happened after Georgia lost, Mrs. Wilkes?

MRS. WILKES

Well, Travis was real mad. Madder'n a hornet, sure. I always got to prayin' when he was like that.

(MRS. WILKES returns to the kitchen.)

SHERIFF CAPTAIN

Why is that, Mrs. Wilkes?

MRS. WILKES

Oh, well, I didn't want him to hurt— himself. Or break nothin'. He just kept on gettin' madder, 'cause the Harrises were cheerin' and had the TV up real loud. And their dog was barkin', probably 'cause it was so loud. So I told him maybe Hank and Wade ought to head home, 'fore the deer got out on the roads.

SHERIFF CAPTAIN

And what did he say to that?

MRS. WILKES

Well, that made him real mad, so after that I didn't say nothin' else 'till I... called the police...

SHERIFF CAPTAIN

Mrs. Wilkes, what happened *before* you called the police?

MRS. WILKES (beginning to sing quietly to herself, as though she did not hear the question)

"I hear the Savior say, "thy strength indeed is small..."

SHERIFF CAPTAIN

Mrs. Wilkes?

MRS. WILKES

"Child of weakness, watch and pray, find in Me thine all in all..."

SHERIFF CAPTAIN

Mrs. Wilkes, are you alright? Why don't you come sit down?

MRS. WILKES

Oh, Lordy, I'm sorry, did you say something? I couldn't hear you well in here.

SHERIFF CAPTAIN

I asked if you'd like to sit down for a moment.

MRS. WILKES

Well, Lord, maybe I should, just for a second. I've been up on my feet all night. I'm very tired. I'd like to get some sleep so that I can get to church Sunday morning.

SHERIFF CAPTAIN

Mrs. Wilkes, I'd be happy to let you go to bed, and the sooner I can get these questions answered, the sooner I can let you go. Is that okay?

MRS. WILKES

Well, sure.

SHERIFF CAPTAIN

Mrs. Wilkes, who...who killed all those people outside?

MRS. WILKES

What people?

## 52nd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival

SHERIFF CAPTAIN

Mr. Travis Wilkes, Mr. Hank Wilkes, and Mr. Wade Reynolds; and the Harris family: Mrs. Martha Harris, her son, Mr. Frank Harris, and his wife Mrs. Angie Harris, along with Mrs. Angie's brother, Mr. Jonathan Tucker.

MRS. WILKES

Travis...?

SHERIFF CAPTAIN

Your husband, Mrs. Wilkes. Who killed him, and who killed all those people?

MRS. WILKES (beginning to sing again, distracted):  
"Jesus paid it all..."

SHERIFF CAPTAIN

Mrs. Wilkes, what did you see?

MRS. WILKES

"All to him I owe..."

SHERIFF CAPTAIN

Who killed them? What happened?

MRS. WILKES

"Sin had left a crimson stain—"

SHERIFF CAPTAIN (raising voice slightly):  
Mrs. Wilkes! Please, what happened out there?

MRS. WILKES (jarred):

I'm... sorry. I don't remember. I didn't see... anything.

(She returns to the living room, placing a bowl and a glass of water on the coffee table in

front of the SHERIFF CAPTAIN. She sits on the couch, visibly stiff and awkward.)

SHERIFF CAPTAIN

Did you hear anything?

MRS. WILKES

That dog... just wouldn't stop barking. Travis hates when that dog barks.

SHERIFF CAPTAIN

What else?

MRS. WILKES

A shot. And then no more barking.

SHERIFF CAPTAIN

And then?

MRS. WILKES

Yelling, hollering. Like screams of hell, and... Lord, it's late. I really ought to start on the dishes.

(She stands.)

SHERIFF CAPTAIN

Sit down, please. And what, Mrs. Wilkes?

MRS. WILKES (lingering, but not sitting, wringing her hands)

Another shot. And then another one. And more hollering.

SHERIFF CAPTAIN

Where were you?

MRS. WILKES

I was sitting on the kitchen floor. But then I got up after that and went outside.

## Playwriting and Screenwriting

SHERIFF CAPTAIN

Why were you on the kitchen floor?

MRS. WILKES

He h—I hurt my head. But then I went outside. While I was going to the door there was another shot, and howling.

(She starts shaking, and through the next lines her panic rises gradually.)

Howling, Lord. Screaming like—like hell. And I was trying so hard to get outside, but my head hurt me real bad. Oh, God, help me!

(Her hands fly to her hair, brushing it back in repeated sweeping motions.)

SHERIFF CAPTAIN

It's okay, Mrs. Wilkes. What happened next?

MRS. WILKES

Just as soon as I'd opened the door, I could see Mrs. Martha running away, then there was another shot... and she fell down, but she didn't fall like they do in movies or in football. She kinda loosened up when she fell, like when you set down a bag of Vidalia onions on the counter. Lord, my head hurts.

SHERIFF CAPTAIN (pressing)  
Mrs. Wilkes, who shot them?

MRS. WILKES

It was so hard to see. I had blood in my eyes and they stung so bad.

(Collapses onto the couch, head in her hands.)  
My God, save me!

SHERIFF CAPTAIN  
Why did you have blood in your eyes?

MRS. WILKES

'Cause Travis hurt my head real bad when I told him to send everybody home.

SHERIFF CAPTAIN

Mr. Wilkes hit you?

MRS. WILKES

Maybe he was s'posed to, 'cause he's my husband. But it hurt like hell.

SHERIFF CAPTAIN

He shouldn't hit you, ma'am.

MRS. WILKES

"Likewise, ye wives, be in subjection to your own husbands." First Peter.

SHERIFF CAPTAIN

"Likewise, ye husbands, give honor unto the wife." The same. Right?

MRS. WILKES

No honor in a childless woman. (A pause.) Chips?

SHERIFF CAPTAIN

No, Mrs. Wilkes.

MRS. WILKES

Do you have children, Miss Sanders?

SHERIFF CAPTAIN

Captain. (Long pause.) No, I don't.

MRS. WILKES

Well.

(She stands back up.)  
We tried a whole lot. I never could keep ahold of them.

## 52nd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival

(She glances up as OFFICER SIMMONS enters, then quickly looks to the floor.)

OFFICER SIMMONS

Captain, you might wanna come take a look around.

SHERIFF CAPTAIN

Sure.

(She stands.)

Thanks, Simmons. Mrs. Wilkes, if you'll excuse me?

MRS. WILKES

Sure.

(As the SHERIFF CAPTAIN and OFFICER SIMMONS exit through a door to BACK STAGE RIGHT, a bedroom, MRS. WILKES picks up the untouched glass of water and bowl.)

SHERIFF CAPTAIN (lowered voice)

What is it, Simmons?

SIMMONS

In here, Captain.

(He nods toward the side room, and they step inside.)

I was just... taking a look around the house. See if our shooter is still around. Captain, what's happening with Mrs. Wilkes?

SHERIFF CAPTAIN

Oh— well. I... Do you know anybody here familiar with the Wilkes?

SIMMONS

Sure. Mrs. Wilkes— she's my cousin's wife's sister.

SHERIFF CAPTAIN

What's this she says about children? Did she ever have any?

SIMMONS

No ma'am. Sure did try, I heard. But no ma'am. Old Travis was, um... Well, I heard 'round that he was pretty stressed over it. Hurt his soul, you know, the way it does a man.

SHERIFF CAPTAIN

He was infertile?

SIMMONS (visibly embarrassed)

Well, dang, Captain. No ma'am, nothing like that. She got... Well, they started in the *family* way quite a few times. Once or twice it was a long time, too—I mean, Mrs. Wilkes got big as a watermelon at least one time I can remember. But it never worked out. None of 'em was... born alive.

SHERIFF CAPTAIN

Why is that?

SIMMONS

Oh, Lord, Captain, that I wouldn't know. That's their business, ain't it?

SHERIFF CAPTAIN

It seems like a lot of people know a lot of their business.

SIMMONS

Aw, no ma'am, it ain't like that. It's just the ladies, you know, they like to have their gossip. (Correcting) Not ladies like you, Captain. I mean real, regular—um. The more effeminate ladies. I wouldn't know none of that kind of stuff.

# Playwriting and Screenwriting

SHERIFF CAPTAIN

Alright, Simmons. The boys outside said anything yet?

SIMMONS

Yes ma'am. The rifle they found outside is probably our murder weapon. One of the boys said he recognized it, it's Travis's hunting rifle. Got his initials carved in the stock. It's real bloody around the trigger and the grip, like handprints. It was just dropped on the ground. Not near Travis neither. Either he dropped it and walked away to die, or...Well, or he wasn't the one shooting it, looks like.

SHERIFF CAPTAIN

And the bodies? Anybody get anything from them? Any miracles?

SIMMONS

Oh, no, no ma'am. I'm sorry to say it. Travis did have what might be some GSR on the hands, which they're gonna have Forensics check out. None of the rest had anything like that, that we've seen.

SHERIFF CAPTAIN

He had gunshot residue? So he's the shooter?

SIMMONS

Maybe, yeah. Probably. I don't know, Captain, it just didn't look right out there. The way the gun was, the way...he was. Just don't feel like...that's just it, you know?

SHERIFF CAPTAIN

Did you know Mrs. Wilkes went to college? UGA?

SIMMONS

Oh, yeah. Sometimes folks forget that, what with her being so quiet. No, she was real smart back in school. All A's, honor classes type of thing. Got a big scholarship to Georgia. Real smart. She quieted down a lot with Travis. He's—he was... strict on her. She didn't talk like she used to, either.

SHERIFF CAPTAIN

What do you mean?

SIMMONS

Well, she was never *real* talkative or anything, but she wasn't so quiet. And she used to talk real smart, even before she went to college. Proper. Kinda how you do. She sounded more Southern than you do, of course. But her grammar was good and she used these big words. Read a lot of books, I suppose. Knew the Bible like anybody, could recite verses off the top, knew all the stories. They'd let her teach the kids at church a lot when she was in school here. She really liked the kids. Gentle with 'em.

SHERIFF CAPTAIN

Was she always so... distracted?

SIMMONS

What do you mean?

## 52nd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival

SHERIFF CAPTAIN

I mean, I'm in here interviewing her and I'll ask a question and she'll start... singing. Hymns, I think. Just tunes out.

SIMMONS

Oh. (He thinks.) Lord, no, I don't think so. That's part of why I pulled you back here, Captain. I... she isn't acting like herself, Mrs. Wilkes.

SHERIFF CAPTAIN

She's in shock. And it sounds like Travis was beating the hell out of her. She's probably concussed from what it sounds like. What was he *doing* to her? Why hadn't anyone said anything?

SIMMONS

It ain't my business what a man does with his wife, Captain. That's domestic. It's private.

SHERIFF CAPTAIN

You're an officer of the law, Simmons. That's domestic abuse. That's a crime.

SIMMONS

It isn't the right Christian thing for me to do, ma'am, telling a man how to treat his wife. It's disrespectful. That's against the Bible.

SHERIFF CAPTAIN

What he was doing is against the *law*, Simmons, and you're loyal to the law first, Bible second. That's your job.

SIMMONS (unconvinced)

Yes ma'am.

(He pauses, fidgeting.)

SHERIFF CAPTAIN

Did you have something in particular?

SIMMONS

Well, I... Captain, you're the expert, so you do what's best. But, if she's still anything like she was in school, the best way to get her talking was to ask her about the Bible. She used to get so excited, it'd be hard to get her to stop.

(He laughs a little, sadly.)

SHERIFF CAPTAIN

Thank you, Simmons. I'll see. Take the corporal and some guys to look around at the Harrises', if they haven't already.

SIMMONS

Yes ma'am.

(The two return to the living room. SIMMONS nods at MRS. WILKES, who rises quickly from the couch, and he exits.)

MRS. WILKES

Jack's a nice boy.

SHERIFF CAPTAIN

He is. I heard you two went to school together.

MRS. WILKES

Oh, yes. We all did. Small town.

SHERIFF CAPTAIN

He mentioned something, the story of Sarah in the Old Testament. I'm a little rusty on that story. Do you remember it?

## Playwriting and Screenwriting

MRS. WILKES (perking up)

Oh, goodness, yes. It's one of the most important stories in the Old Testament. Sarah—my namesake, you know. Sarah Jones—well, Sarah Wilkes. Sarah, goodness, one of the greatest women in that great book. She had a child, you know, at *ninety*. She and Abraham—her husband, God's chosen one—never gave up. A son. Sarah nursed him herself. Ninety!

SHERIFF CAPTAIN

My goodness.

MRS. WILKES (sitting down in front of the SHERIFF CAPTAIN, excited)

Yes, very much so. And Sarah was always faithful. To God and to Abraham. She was a good wife. They went through many hardships, in Canaan and in Egypt. And to wait so many years for a child...

SHERIFF CAPTAIN

And this was their first child? At ninety?

MRS. WILKES

Well, hers. Isaac. But not his. Sarah was such a good wife that since she couldn't give Abraham a son herself—at least not for a long time—she let Abraham have a son with her handmaid. Isn't that something?

SHERIFF CAPTAIN

It's...something.

MRS. WILKES

First Peter—like I mentioned earlier—praises Sarah for her faithfulness. She's one of the greatest women in history. A good wife.

SHERIFF CAPTAIN

A good wife.

MRS. WILKES

I used to not like her story, you know, when I was young. I didn't understand the hardships of being a wife then. I used to get so upset at my own name!

(She laughs.)

SHERIFF CAPTAIN

Well, I can see why you wouldn't. Like her story, I mean. It's strange.

MRS. WILKES

Well, sure. The Old Testament stories are extreme, but she serves as an example to Christian women now on having faith even in our worst circumstances, on being good wives to our husbands.

SHERIFF CAPTAIN

But why would God put them through that? If they were his...chosen ones.

MRS. WILKES (chuckling)

It's one of those tests. The Lord works in mysterious ways.

SHERIFF CAPTAIN

But if her job was supposed to be giving Abraham a child...why put her through waiting for such a long time? I don't understand.

MRS. WILKES (stops chuckling, with eyebrows furrowed)

Well, it was a miracle. God gave her a miracle.

## 52nd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival

SHERIFF CAPTAIN (pressing)  
But why? They already believed in God.  
He didn't need to prove anything.

MRS. WILKES (frustrated)  
It's a test of faith, and a reward for that  
faith.

SHERIFF CAPTAIN  
But they already had faith. They had  
already been tested—that's what you  
said. In Canaan, in Egypt. They had  
already been tested. And they'd already  
been chosen. Why not give her a child?

MRS. WILKES (standing up abruptly)  
Maybe she didn't deserve a child yet.  
Maybe it wasn't the right time. We can't  
know the Lord's plans.

SHERIFF CAPTAIN  
She had already done so much. Why  
didn't she deserve a child? She always  
did what she was supposed to do. You  
said so. You said she was always faithful.

MRS. WILKES (putting hands to her head)  
I don't know. I don't know. That's not the  
point.

SHERIFF CAPTAIN  
Then what is the point? If the point is  
about her faith, her obedience—I don't  
understand why she had to wait so long.

MRS. WILKES (pacing, hands to her head)  
Lord, my head hurts.

SHERIFF CAPTAIN  
Do you understand what I'm asking  
you? What did she do wrong?

MRS. WILKES (rambling)  
She didn't do anything wrong. She was a  
good wife. She was a good wife. She was  
obedient. She had faith in the Lord.

SHERIFF CAPTAIN (standing up)  
Then why? Why did God give children to  
everyone else except his chosen one?  
Why is he punishing her for being  
obedient?

MRS. WILKES (Hands to her head, pacing,  
shakily singing—the CAPTAIN says her lines  
while Mrs. Wilkes continues to sing, stopping  
her song to cut off the CAPTAIN's lines.)

“Jesus paid it all,  
All to him I owe,  
Sin had left a crimson stain—”

SHERIFF CAPTAIN  
Mrs. Wilkes, why didn't God give Sarah  
a child? Why couldn't you have a child  
all those times? Did Travis hurt you  
when you were pregnant? Why didn't  
God give you—

MRS. WILKES (whirling to face the SHERIFF  
CAPTAIN, grabbing her by the arms, screaming)  
I don't know! I don't know! I was a good  
wife! I was a good wife to my husband!  
The Lord saw him—he hit me, he hit  
my baby—he pushed me down, he  
kicked my baby—God! God! Why! Tell  
me why, Lord! I have been a good wife! I  
have been faithful! I have served!

SHERIFF CAPTAIN (shrinking back)  
Mrs. Wilkes, let go of me!

## Playwriting and Screenwriting

MRS. WILKES (shaking the SHERIFF CAPTAIN,  
speaking rapidly)

I have seen their little still bodies! I have held them in my hands! I have seen them. I see them everywhere. I see them every time he hits me. Their little blue bodies—God! And that dog *just!*  
*Kept! Barking!*

SHERIFF CAPTAIN  
Mrs. Wilkes, I do not want to charge you—

MRS. WILKES  
God, why! I have been faithful!

SHERIFF CAPTAIN  
—for assaulting an officer—

MRS. WILKES  
And he went out there and shot that dog—

SHERIFF CAPTAIN  
What?

MRS. WILKES  
—to shut it up, God! And they started screaming—they all did—and he kept shooting—he kept shooting, God, and the men ran for him, and the women ran from him—

SHERIFF CAPTAIN (visibly shaken)  
Mrs. Wilkes!

MRS. WILKES  
—and I saw, Lord, as he shot little old Mrs. Harris and she crumpled, a bag of Vidalia onions, my God! But he didn't see me coming out—

SHERIFF CAPTAIN (shouting)  
What did you do, Mrs. Wilkes?

MRS. WILKES  
—and I hit him, God, I hit him, Lord have mercy, I took that beer bottle and I hit him, and I took that gun, God—

SHERIFF CAPTAIN (calling out)  
Backup! Backup!

MRS. WILKES  
And I shot him—just like he taught me how—I shot him, I shot him dead, and then everyone was looking at me, God, like the angels watching—

SHERIFF CAPTAIN (not moving)  
God—Sarah Wilkes, you are under arrest—

MRS. WILKES (shaking the SHERIFF CAPTAIN)  
So I shot Hank and I shot Wade, Lord, for all their sins of silence, God, when they watched him do what he did to me—

SHERIFF CAPTAIN  
—for the murders of Travis Wilkes, Hank Wilkes, and Wade Reynolds—

MRS. WILKES  
I shot them and I couldn't stop shooting, God! I couldn't stop shooting and You could have stopped me!

(SIMMONS, the CORPORAL, and several OFFICERS begin to run into the house)

SHERIFF CAPTAIN  
—you have the right to remain silent—

## 52nd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival

### MRS. WILKES

You could have stilled my hand, God, but  
You did not!

(SIMMONS, the CORPORAL, and other OFFICERS begin to pull MRS. WILKES away from the SHERIFF CAPTAIN. MRS. WILKES, now held by the arms, is writhing and still screaming.)

### SHERIFF CAPTAIN

—anything you say can—

### MRS. WILKES

(Screaming, pleading. Everyone else is stricken into shocked silence):

Oh, Merciful God, our Savior in Heaven above— have I not been your faithful and humble servant? Have I not shed my blood and my ichor upon the rock that sealed your tomb, and made its stain a holy artwork of my own hands? Oh! Yet you were silent, Lord, as I was cast against the stone again and again, and my masterpieces were, in Your name, bludgeoned from me by the unjust fist of man! Forgive me, my God, for though the Devil is not righteous, he is just, and he poured unto my head the oil which is wrath, which is rage, but which is peace. By *his* hand and *his* brush was I granted my own divinity, by which I learned to take sacrament not in the form of Christ, but the blood of my own veins and the body of the man who drew it from me. This is *his* body, which I have taken for me— and this is *my* blood, the newer covenant! Even if it should mean God does not forgive me— let Him not forget His own callousness that forced me to sin. Amen!

(She collapses.)

BLACKOUT.

LIGHTS UP on FRONT CENTER STAGE. The SHERIFF CAPTAIN is again in the lone chair, being interviewed. Like before, she looks exhausted and somewhat unkempt. She speaks, her voice shaking a bit from the recount of the story.

### SHERIFF CAPTAIN

I'm getting there. You had to hear that part so you could understand why... Why everything else happened, every thing that came next. We... we took Mrs. Wilkes back to the station. They sent me home after we got her booked. They thought I might be in distress. It was almost sunrise then. I went home, and William—my fiancé , William James Carter—was in bed; I thought he was asleep. I'm just going to tell you exactly what happened because I think—I hope—you'll understand what happened—*why* it happened. I am not going to explain my reasoning. It happened very fast, and there wasn't a lot of reasoning to begin with. And I don't want an insanity plea. I know what I did. I know it was morally and legally wrong. I am not insane.

(She takes a deep breath. Sighs.)

William came out to the kitchen when he heard me come home.

BLACKOUT. LIGHTS UP on CENTER STAGE. The chair has again been removed. The kitchen / living room setup of the Wilkes household can be reused, with enough changes of furniture/ decor that it looks like a different home. The kitchen area is a mess—dishes everywhere, trash overflowing. WILLIAM enters the kitchen from the living room, in pajamas, rubbing his eyes. There is a gaming headset around

## Playwriting and Screenwriting

his neck and a game console controller in his hand. The SHERIFF CAPTAIN, visibly shaken and fatigued, is entering the kitchen from a side door on STAGE RIGHT. She has taken off her shoes by the door, and is removing her belt, badge, gun, etc. while definitely noticing the state of the kitchen when WILLIAM comes in.

WILLIAM (sleepily)

Oh, hey, baby. You're back. How was your day?

SHERIFF CAPTAIN (glancing up momentarily, then goes back to removing equipment):  
Hey. Were you sleeping?

WILLIAM (yawning hugely)

Yeah.

SHERIFF CAPTAIN

I'm sorry.

(She looks up and actually sees him just as she places her gun on the counter.)  
You were... sleeping with your headset on?

WILLIAM

Well...

(He looks down coyly.)

I was sleeping *earlier*.

SHERIFF CAPTAIN (looking at the mess)  
I thought you said you were going to clean up today. It's... way worse than it was when I left.

WILLIAM

I meant to.

SHERIFF CAPTAIN

I...Okay. (Sighs.) I just...I've had a really long day at work, and... You said you were going to do this.

WILLIAM

Yeah, baby, I am. I'm gonna do it later.  
Chill.

SHERIFF CAPTAIN (rubbing bridge of nose)

I'm *chill*. I'm just saying that I just worked a ten-hour night shift, and it was really rough, and you... Well, baby, you don't... have a job. So I thought maybe you could...

WILLIAM

Listen, honey, I was tired today. I didn't get around to it. I knew you'd probably end up doing it anyway, so...

SHERIFF CAPTAIN

What does *that* mean, William?

WILLIAM

Baby. Nothing. Don't freak out. I lost track of time. I'll do it later. I will.

SHERIFF CAPTAIN

"Later" was supposed to be *today*.

WILLIAM

Babe, let's just go to bed. Please. I'll do it.

SHERIFF CAPTAIN

I—

(She puts her head in her hands. Sighs, exhausted.)

I am too tired for this. I had a really bad day.

WILLIAM

God, me too. I lost like ten ranked matches in a *row*.

## 52nd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival

(The SHERIFF CAPTAIN makes a sound like a quiet sob. WILLIAM puts a hand on her shoulder and she looks up at him.)

WILLIAM (continued)

Aw, baby. Come on. It's okay.

(He smiles and rubs her shoulder.)

I can't wait to marry you. You're gonna be such a good wife.

(The SHERIFF CAPTAIN's face visibly hardens, but he seems not to notice. His hand drops from her shoulder.)

Let's go to bed.

(He turns to leave.)

(The SHERIFF CAPTAIN pauses for a moment. She looks at her handgun lying on the table. In a smooth, calm motion, she picks it up, raises it with two hands—positioned in perfect form—aims it at WILLIAM's back, and fires twice.)

BLACKOUT. CURTAIN.

# Playwriting and Screenwriting

## Until I Set Her Free

Julian Uhlman, Agnes Scott College

### CAST OF CHARACTERS

In order of appearance:

JOANN LETO: Early 30s; sculptor living alone in the American southeast. A closeted lesbian.

RICHARD BECKETT: Late 40s; wealthy art collector and Joann's commissioner.

DIANA MOORE: Late 20s; Joann's live model and relatively new friend. A femme lesbian.

ELAINE BECKETT: Mid 40s; Richard's wife. Portrayed by the same actress as Diana Moore.

### SCENE ONE

SETTING: Late autumn; a sculptor's studio. The studio's back "wall" is composed by a framed curtain, lit from behind such that anything behind it is silhouetted to the audience. The area behind the curtain is raised on a one-step platform upon which stands a white stone statue of a seated woman. At present, its silhouette represents the clay model that will be used to create the "actual" statue.

At each side of the studio there are various tools, folded tarps, sculptures and busts, photographs, sketches, etc. The clutter feels intimate, though slightly off-putting as the faces of several statues gaze ahead lifelessly. Upstage right, there is a stool upon which a simple white dress lies folded. The center stage right entrance functions as the studio's doorway through which characters enter and exit.

AT RISE: JOANN LETO kneels on the floor, sketching on a large piece of paper spread out before her. She wears a button-down blouse,

wide-leg pants, and a toolbelt. Enter RICHARD BECKETT. He exudes the smug intensity and self-importance of a wealthy man. His gaze follows each of JOANN's movements closely as he approaches. She hears him, but does not turn around.

JOANN

I'll be just a moment. You can change in the back.

(RICHARD clears his throat and JOANN turns.)

JOANN

Oh—I was expecting someone else.

RICHARD

Your model?

JOANN (Standing)

Yes... sorry, who are you?

RICHARD

Richard Beckett. I'm Elaine's husband.

JOANN

Of course. Joann Leto.

(They shake hands.)

JOANN

I usually don't have my clients see the commission while it's still in progress.

(Ignoring her, RICHARD walks around and appraises the studio.)

RICHARD

Has Elaine shown you the grounds?

## 52nd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival

JOANN

Yes. She showed me around the sculpture gardens at the manor. You have some stunning works in your collection, I'm honored to be contributing.

RICHARD

Mm.

(Briefly, he touches the face of one of the statues/busts. JOANN steps forward as if to stop him, then stills.)

RICHARD

These are quite good. As pretty as the artist.

(A brief, uncomfortable silence)  
I guess you spend so much time cooped up alone in here, you've forgotten how to take a compliment.

(Laughs)

I shouldn't be surprised.

JOANN

If you take issue with my sex, then I assure you that I am an accomplished and qualified artist—

RICHARD

Oh, for God's sake, it's 1945, not the dark ages. Of course I don't take issue.

JOANN

(Beat)

Of course.

RICHARD

My wife spoke highly of you, naturally.

JOANN

How kind of her.

RICHARD

I thought I might come see what all the fuss was about.

(Continuing to examine the art)  
Do you know, the Greeks and Romans were the first to really refine marble sculpture into an art form. They primarily made icons of their gods, but even so, you can't discount the impact of the medium. I'm something of an art scholar myself. I could tell you about the history.

JOANN (Curtly)

Thank you, but I'm familiar with it.

(A knock. Enter DIANA MOORE.)

DIANA

Hello?

JOANN

Oh, Diana— You're here. This is Mr. Beckett. He and his wife are my commissioners.

RICHARD

You must be Miss Leto's lovely model.  
Delighted.

DIANA

Diana Moore. Good to meet you.

(They shake hands.)

JOANN

We should get started.

RICHARD

This must be my cue to leave. It's been lovely to meet you ladies.

## Playwriting and Screenwriting

(His gaze lingers on the women for a moment before he exits. There is a brief silence.)

DIANA

Was he—?

JOANN

It's fine.

(DIANA nods slowly before crossing the studio to the stool. She begins to undress.)

DIANA

So. How have you been, Jo?

JOANN

You know, nobody calls me that but you.

DIANA

Last I heard, you don't mind.

(Turning to smile at her, JOANN sees DIANA in her undergarments and becomes embarrassed. DIANA slips into the white dress and brings the stool towards center stage, barefoot. As JOANN gathers her sculpting tools, DIANA sits down, facing out towards the audience.)

DIANA

I don't think I ever asked you this. How long have you been an artist?

JOANN

Professionally, about seven years. But I've been making art all my life.

DIANA (Sighs)

I wish I had the talent for that kind of thing. I've always been better with logic, you know. Problems with fixed solutions. It makes more sense to me.

If you don't mind my asking, what drew you to sculpting?

JOANN

I don't mind. (beat) Well, I think that everybody has something they're meant to do. And when you find that thing, there's a sense of clarity, of knowing that you're right where you're supposed to be. Whether it's teaching or making art or raising a child or anything else, it just seems to fit. And it makes you better. Maybe that's cliché. But that's how I feel about sculpting.

DIANA (Pensive, quieter)  
I haven't found my "something" yet.

JOANN

There's more to life.

DIANA

You're lucky to have found yours.

JOANN

I haven't found much else.

DIANA (The tone lightens.)  
I wonder how I'll know, when I find whatever it is I'm meant to do.

JOANN

It's difficult to describe. When I first started sculpting—

DIANA

—you just knew?  
(Thinks for a second, then smiles)  
Kind of like falling in love, huh?

## 52nd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival

JOANN (Laughs softly)  
You're quite the romantic.

DIANA  
Let's get to work.

(DIANA poses to model. JOANN approaches and kneels at her feet.)

JOANN (Softly)  
Mind if I move you?

(DIANA nods. They have done this before; JOANN always asks. She begins to make slight adjustments to the drape of DIANA's skirt, the curve of her fingers, the tilt of her chin, the waterfall of her hair. It's startlingly intimate. JOANN's steady artist's hands fit against the curve of DIANA's calves, positioning her precisely. When she is satisfied with the pose, JOANN stands and rolls up her sleeves.)

JOANN  
There. My Venus.

(She retreats behind the curtain, her silhouette joining that of the statue, and begins to sculpt. Her hands move gracefully, sensually. All lights except those behind the curtain slowly dim.)

BLACKOUT

### SCENE TWO

SETTING: The studio. A few of the statues/busts have been removed. The space feels more sparse, more private—fewer watching eyes than before.

AT RISE: JOANN remains behind the lit curtain, sculpting. All other lights are down except for a spotlight downstage center, where DIANA stands, holding an envelope.

DIANA

November 3rd. Dear Joann, I hope that your work is going well. I'll be staying with my sister for the next month or so, maybe longer, to help with the new baby. She doesn't have a phone, so I thought it best to write. My apologies for the sudden unavailability. I promise that once I'm back in the city, you can have me for as long as you want. (beat) I'm glad this commission caused our paths to cross. I enjoy your company very much. I meant to say something the last time we worked together, but, as unlike me as it is, I got shy. When I'm back, would you like to get coffee sometime?

(A quiet laugh)

Being stared at gets unnerving after a while, no matter how comfortable I am with the artist. Maybe it's my turn to do the looking. Anyways, best of luck. I'll see you in a few weeks. Diana.

(While she finishes speaking, the backlight on the curtain goes down and JOANN approaches. DIANA hands her the envelope and retreats from the spotlight, turning away or perhaps sitting down to assume the statue's pose. JOANN steps into the light.)

JOANN

November 10th. Dear Diana, thank you for your letter. I hope that all is well with your sister and her baby. Stay as long as you need to. I'm satisfied with the clay model, so I'll be starting on the carving process soon. I'll pay you in full once you return—and I'd love to buy you coffee as well. All the best, Joann.

## Playwriting and Screenwriting

(Same transition, reversed. JOANN passes the envelope back to DIANA. The silhouettes of JOANN and the statue are once again visible, and DIANA stands under the spotlight.)

DIANA

November 15th. Dear Joann, that's wonderful news. I know you have a deadline in the spring, though I can't help but wish I could continue working with you for longer. I've modeled for quite a few artists—mostly men—before I settled down here and got a steady day job. I'm sure you can imagine the way that many of them considered me. With you, Jo, I remembered why I love modeling in the first place. Sending you my best wishes, Diana.

(Same transition.)

JOANN

November 28th. Dear Diana, I'm happy I could do that for you. This was my first time working with a live model, so I admit that it felt a little strange for me too. But it did make the clay modeling process feel a lot more... authentic, and fulfilling. As though the sculpture is coming from a place of vitality instead of just imitating it. Maybe that doesn't make any sense. I've found that when I tell others how I feel about my art, they tend to think I sound a bit crazy.

(Laughs)

But never mind that. I'm looking forward to seeing you once you return. Give my best to your sister. Joann.

(Same transition.)

DIANA

December 3rd. Dear Jo, what you said does make sense to me. Though I understand the feeling of people thinking you sound crazy—my mother always told me she'd never understand why I am the way I am, in her words. It can be very frustrating. I think that what you say about art is beautiful. All artists should let themselves fall a little in love with their creations, don't you think? (beat) I've been thinking about when I'll be back in the city. There's a place downtown I go some weekends—you'd like it there. If you don't drink, there's wonderful dancing. And it's safe there, if you know what I mean. Like what you said about authenticity and imitation... (beat) Goodness. I must be making no sense at all.

(A slightly uncomfortable pause)

Well, the offer stands. I'll be back in a week or two at most. Yours, Diana.

(This time, the light behind the curtain remains as JOANN approaches. DIANA presses a red-lipped kiss to the envelope, leaving a bright mark on its white surface. She passes it to JOANN once more. Their fingers brush together. Enchanted, JOANN steps into the light towards DIANA—but her gaze suddenly snaps towards the audience, as if she has noticed their presence, has realized that she's being watched. Clutching the envelope, she returns to the sculpture behind the curtain. She cups its face for just a moment—a brief indulgence—before throwing herself back into her work. There is something final about it, a harsh determination. Blood-deep frustration poured into single-minded creation.)

## 52nd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival

DIANA

I'm back in the city, Joann. When can I see you?

(Slowly, the light on the curtain dims until fully down. A pause. Uneasy tension grows.)

DIANA

Jo?

(No reply.)

DIANA

...Jo?

BLACKOUT

### SCENE THREE

SETTING: The studio.

AT RISE: JOANN remains sculpting behind the curtain. RICHARD is now center stage, taking DIANA's place.

RICHARD

April 15th. Dear Miss Leto, I understand that you are nearing the finish of your work. It's been some time since I've had the pleasure of speaking with you in person. Shall we arrange another meeting? I'd like an update on your progress. We will also discuss an estimated date of completion. I'd be lying if I said the reasons for my visit weren't a bit selfish—I do enjoy getting to know the artists that I work with. And you, my dear, have such a unique vision. Until then—Richard Beckett.

(Exit RICHARD. JOANN emerges from behind the curtain, walking slowly with a paper—RICHARD's letter—in her hands. After a mo-

ment spent reading it, she crumples it up and discards it on the floor.)

BLACKOUT

### SCENE FOUR

SETTING: Late spring; the studio. The statue is center stage, covered by a tarp. All other statues have been removed from the studio; JOANN is alone with her creation.

AT RISE: JOANN paces, continuously looking back at the statue, then tearing her eyes away.

(With a knock, DIANA enters tentatively.)

DIANA

Hi, Jo.

JOANN

Diana? What are you doing here?

DIANA

I thought you'd be working, and I wanted to check in.

JOANN

It doesn't look much different than when you came by yesterday.

DIANA

I wasn't here yesterday. I came on Thursday.

(Lightheartedly, with underlying concern)

And either way, you didn't let me see the piece then.

JOANN

...Today is...?

DIANA

Sunday.

## Playwriting and Screenwriting

JOANN

Oh.

DIANA

See, Jo?—You've been working yourself to the bone. I came to check on you. You didn't return my call yesterday, and I'm concerned. (beat) You must take some time for yourself.

JOANN

Diana, I have a deadline.

DIANA

And working without rest until you're too exhausted to think won't help you reach it.

JOANN (Sighs)

Maybe you're right.

DIANA

Goodness, I had better get going now. My brother is waiting outside; we just came from church. Please take care of yourself, Jo.

(She squeezes JOANN's hands in her own, then presses a quick kiss to JOANN's cheek and pulls away to give her a reassuring smile. Exit. JOANN is quiet for a moment. Then she sighs and places a hand on the tarp overtop of the statue.)

JOANN

Working on a Sunday morning. What would my family think of that? (Laughs bitterly, shaking her head) I'm not sleeping, not eating, all for a woman made of stone. I guess we're

alike that way. You don't eat, don't sleep. Aren't artists supposed to live their art?

(JOANN removes the tarp.)

JOANN

I've spent months learning and creating you, listening to your siren whispers in my ear. How can I be so ridiculous to long for depth in a creation I have every means to define? You're the one thing I can control. But like some restless bird you fly from my grip every time I come close. God knows my hands were never built to hold or be held, and yet I've crafted yours to fit mine perfectly. Carved each hollow of your body to mirror every swell of my own—my touch on your stony skin, as if we could fit together, like lovers—  
(with rising volume and emotion)  
Where did this obsession come from?  
I can't keep looking, but I won't stop.  
You're beautiful. You're a woman, the only woman I've ever seen, and you're mine. You're mine. Here I am on a Sunday morning, kneeling nowhere but at your feet. I never had to face this until the moment you came to life. Have I lent the stone of my heart to your build...? If that's true, am I selfish for it? For wanting so violently without name, that I should think myself God, molding a love for myself from nothing but my own prison-bar ribs? All of my stumbling and running from myself brought me to this—to you. I knew how to hide before I knew what hiding was. Now, I've found a way to love without danger or repercussions. A way to look. To be drunk on love, dizzy with the vision of your face, your lips, your body, as if it

## 52nd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival

were real, as if I could claw my own way out of the stone that suffocates me, just as I've freed you. Even to touch... (beat)  
And still.

(Her voice and demeanor grow tense, as if a sudden chill has blown through the room. She is frenzied, desperate, pained.)

JOANN

Still, this is a violation. With every touch of my chisel I'm dirtying you. Dirtying *her*. How can I delude myself into thinking I'm innocent, when I let myself look at you the way I do? It's filthy, it's wrong, everything about this is *wrong*—

(As she speaks, she grasps one of her nearby tools and raises it, ready to destroy the statue. Then—a knock at the door. JOANN freezes. For a moment, her breathing is the only sound. There is another knock. She slowly sets down the tool.)

JOANN

...Hello?

(RICHARD enters, walking slowly downstage as he speaks.)

RICHARD

Miss Leto. I had hoped that you would be here.

(JOANN moves between him and the statue, almost protectively.)

JOANN

I... I usually don't have clients see the commission while it's—

RICHARD

I'm not here to look at that.

JOANN

Mr. Beckett, I...

RICHARD

Please, Joann. Richard is fine.

JOANN

Can I help you with something?

(Slowly, he circles JOANN and the statue, his eyes sharp. JOANN's body is rigid. RICHARD pauses behind her, his gaze burning into the back of her head.)

RICHARD

Didn't I tell you we had things to discuss? I was hoping we could get to know each other a bit better.

(He finishes walking the circle around JOANN and her creation. Eyes locked on JOANN's face, he reaches out to touch the statue's face, tracing its curves.)

JOANN

I have work to do.

RICHARD

She looks finished to me. Almost like a real woman, like you could touch her and her skin would be warm. (beat) Though there's something about the eyes. I don't think I've ever seen a sculpture that gets the eyes quite right. Even the greats, they could transform marble into the tenderest blushing skin, but none could capture that spark of life... I often think of Mary of the Pietà.

## Playwriting and Screenwriting

Her empty eyes downcast. Where is her grief?

JOANN

One could argue that Michelangelo's Pietà isn't a lament. It's a revelation of connection.

RICHARD

Between man and God?

JOANN

Between woman and God.

(He regards her for a moment.)

RICHARD

In that case, where's her ecstasy? Divine love as the mystics spoke of it?

(An eerily invasive tone, chilling to something like a threat)

That's what should be held in the eyes, but just can't be replicated in stone. The raw and numinous. Purely human—love, desire... fear.

JOANN

I don't understand what you want from me.

RICHARD

Didn't I say? I just want us to get to know each other better. I feel that you and I have a connection.

JOANN

Your wife must wonder where you are.

RICHARD

Don't worry about her.

(A tense silence. RICHARD reaches forward and grasps JOANN's chin in his hand, pulling her slightly forward. She is frozen for a moment with shock and does not fight. With his other hand he clutches the collar of her button-down, dragging her forward, and roughly kissing her mouth. JOANN tears away.)

JOANN

Stop—I don't—

RICHARD

So now you want to play games?

(JOANN stumbles away, only for RICHARD to grab her again, pulling her in by the waist and trying to kiss her. A struggle ensues. JOANN is visibly tired from overworking herself but tries to fight back. RICHARD manages to unbutton her blouse about halfway before she hits him and stumbles backwards.)

JOANN

Get the fuck away from me—

(RICHARD lunges forward to grab her by the wrists. She hits him again. After another moment of struggle, he hits JOANN hard on the temple and she falls to the ground, unmoving. He freezes above her and stares at her body for a few silent, excruciating moments.)

RICHARD

Shit.

(He crouches to look at her face and immediately stands again, distressed.)

RICHARD

Shit, shit. Is she—?

## 52nd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival

(He paces. Presses his hands to his temples. Mutters under his breath. He crouches again, and touches her hand. It falls limply out of his grip.)

RICHARD

No.

(He backs away.)

RICHARD

No. Oh, God.

(He flees offstage. There is a gap of silence as JOANN lies motionless on the ground; the tension in the air is pulled taut enough to snap. JOANN shifts with a quiet, pained groan, and sits up slowly. Her face is streaked with blood. Managing to stand, she brings a hand to her face and looks at the blood that comes away on her fingers. Slowly, she turns to the statue behind her. She presses her bloody fingers against its lips, smearing them with red. JOANN turns with glassy eyes back towards the audience. She stumbles a few steps down-stage, then falls to her knees. The silence is piercing. In one unbroken, strangled sound, she screams, gut-wrenching and raw.)

BLACKOUT

### SCENE FIVE

SETTING: The studio. The statue is once again covered by a tarp.

AT RISE: JOANN sits with her back against one side of the covered statue, knees pulled up to her chest. She faces stage left. She is visibly exhausted, hair and clothing askew. There is a bandage on her face.

(A sharp knock. JOANN stands.)

JOANN

Come in.

(RICHARD and ELAINE BECKETT enter swiftly.)

JOANN

Good afternoon.

RICHARD

Hello, Miss Leto.

(The tension in the air is palpable. It is evident that the assault was never addressed between JOANN and RICHARD, nor does ELAINE have any knowledge of what happened.)

ELAINE (Gushing)

It's so lovely to meet you again.

(Upon taking in JOANN's appearance, she falters, but does not comment. She approaches and shakes JOANN's hand.)

ELAINE

I've been excited about this piece for months, Richard can tell you.

(She squeezes his hand and beams. She then steps past JOANN to admire the studio. JOANN's gaze burns into RICHARD.)

JOANN

I hope it lives up to your expectations

ELAINE

May we see it now?

JOANN

Of course.

## Playwriting and Screenwriting

(JOANN removes the tarp. The statue's lips are still smeared red with her blood, as well as other areas. Vivid streaks and hand prints adorn its stark white skin. Perhaps JOANN had cupped its face, coloring the cheek with a horrible rouge; perhaps she ran blood-sticky fingers down its arms, clutched its hands in her own, caressed the curve of its breasts. It is evident that JOANN has not attempted to clean the blood from the stone. Upon seeing this, RICHARD's body goes rigid. His face darkens with barely contained anger.)

ELAINE

Oh, my God—what is that?

(ELAINE clutches her chest. Confused, she turns to RICHARD.)

ELAINE

What's going on? Is that—it looks like blood—?

(JOANN's gaze never breaks from RICHARD's. As she speaks, she is not so much hysterical as she is unrestrained, or rather, gleefully inflamed by the ability to finally speak her mind.)

JOANN

"I saw the angel in the marble and carved until I set him free." Michelangelo. Well, I've set her free. Isn't that what you wanted?

(ELAINE is unsteady, horrified. Her voice shakes.)

ELAINE

Darling, what is she talking about?

(RICHARD is barely restraining himself. His chest heaves; one hand twitches into a fist at his side.)

JOANN

You fancy yourself an intellectual, don't you? With all of your high opinions on art, your money and your education. But you couldn't come close if you tried. You couldn't understand—creating art, it's a declaration of love. And I can't—

(Laughs wildly)

I can't even look at a woman. Yet I'm the one who's been buried alive by shame. I've sat here while you—while everyone has been shoveling dirt down onto me for so goddamn long, when it's men like you who deserve hell for what they do.

RICHARD (Seething)

I'll fucking kill you.

JOANN

No, you won't.

RICHARD

I swear to God, say one more word and I'll kill you!

JOANN

You won't.

(ELAINE's breathing is erratic. Suddenly, she faints. As she falls, JOANN lunges forward to catch her, and for one stark moment, with ELAINE's limp body draped in her arms, their silhouette is almost reminiscent of the Pietà—ELAINE, delicate and perfect, heavy in her arms, and JOANN, eyes suddenly serene as she gazes down, then forwards to the audience. In this moment, RICHARD is an afterthought.)

## 52nd Annual Agnes Scott Writers' Festival

RICHARD

Get your hands off my wife!

(RICHARD grabs ELAINE roughly, shaking her back to consciousness and pulling her away from JOANN. ELAINE is still out of sorts, shocked by both JOANN's and her husband's displays. She stumbles backwards away from him.)

RICHARD

How dare you put your hands on her.  
What are you, a fucking dyke?

(JOANN calmly reaches for her wallet, taking out an amount of cash and extending it to RICHARD.)

JOANN

Take your money. I don't want it.

RICHARD

You dirty fucking dyke!

(He pulls ELAINE with him towards the exit. JOANN starts to laugh. It escalates until she is doubled over in laughter, trying to catch her breath. RICHARD freezes by the door, turning to watch her.)

JOANN

Dirty?

(She laughs and laughs.)

JOANN

I've been born again.

(She is shouting her throat raw. She is grinning.)

JOANN

I've been born again!

(Exit RICHARD and ELAINE. JOANN drops the money. She takes up a nearby hammer and brings it above her head, ready to strike the sculpture. Blackout. In the darkness, the sound of stone smashing to pieces.)

END



## Honorable Mentions

### **Poetry**

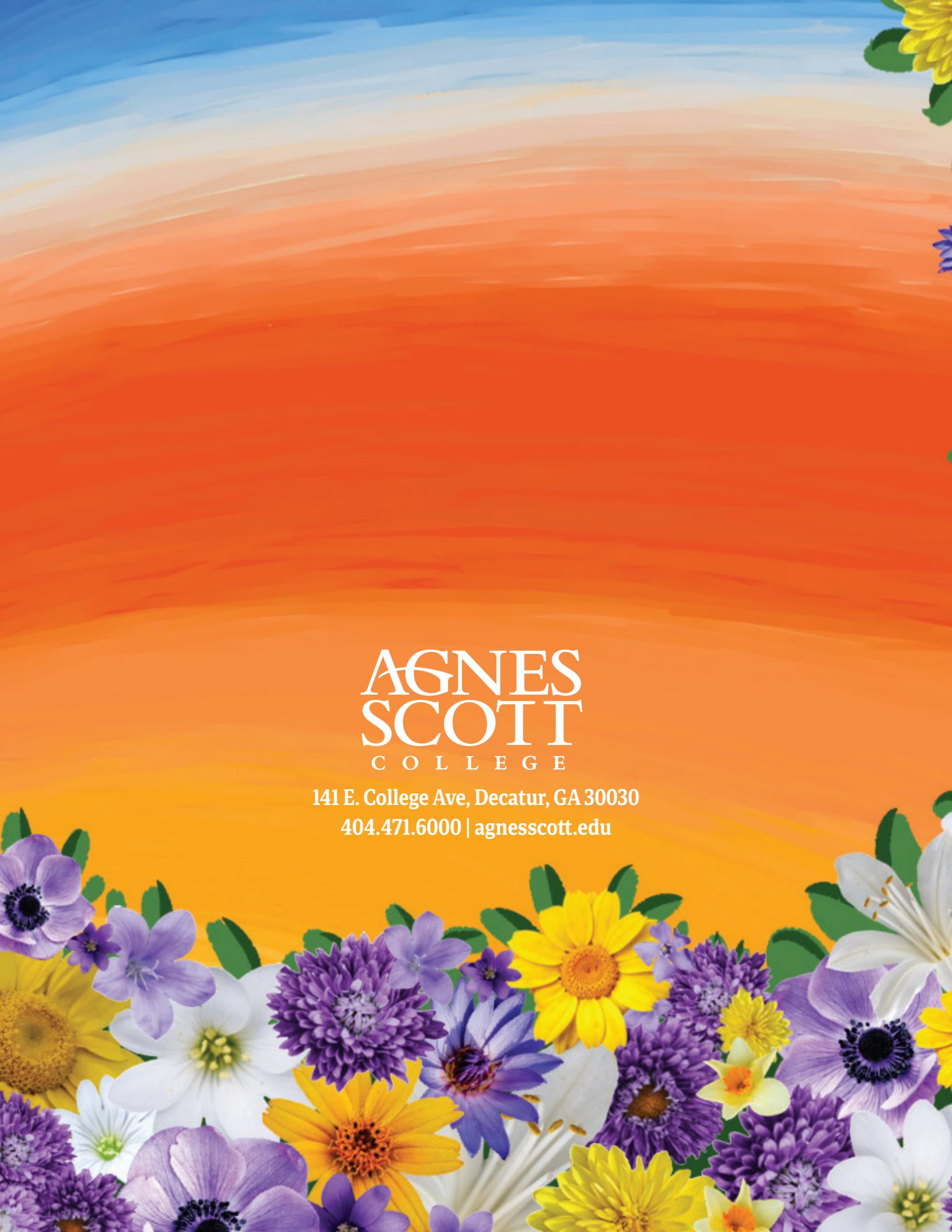
- The Dream by Leah Woldai, Emory University  
Exposure Therapy by Averette Hickey, Emory University  
The Universal Language by Hannah Eaton, Mercer University

### **Fiction**

- Blue Sky by Ines Prodanovic, Mercer University  
Abattoir by Eli Kuhn, Agnes Scott College  
The Substitute by Scarlett Peterson, Georgia State University  
Railroad Crossing by Charlotte Wunderlich, Agnes Scott College

### **Nonfiction**

- Diaries of My Mother by Sofia Leggett, Agnes Scott College  
Homeward Bound by Maddie Maschger, Agnes Scott College  
South of the Mackinac by Giovanna Hill, Agnes Scott College



# AGNES SCOTT

C O L L E G E

141 E. College Ave, Decatur, GA 30030

404.471.6000 | [agnesscott.edu](http://agnesscott.edu)